



Servant Leadership Through Selfless Sacrifice: An Examination of John 10:7-18, 13:1-20, and 21:15-19

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Leadership is essential in the church of Jesus Christ, however the term itself is ambiguous. This paper will argue that leadership should be understood through the agency of a vice-regent to the Lord Jesus, and thus subject to His power, truth, and authority, such that the leader is merely subject to what Christ has commanded. A careful examination of John 10:7-18, 13:1-20, and 21:15-19 demonstrates that leaders should adopt a slave mentality and submit to Christ's commands, love their Lord, and express their love to Christ through shepherding His sheep as they themselves follow Him.

Keywords: Vice-regency; leadership; followership; Christian leadership; John; shepherd; slave; servant leadership; feet-washing; sacrifice; sacrificial leadership

Leadership is essential. The church of Jesus Christ has been given a distinct identity (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 1:2) and a clear mission (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). But to effectively execute her calling depends upon both "the renewing power of God's Spirit and the development of godly and well-equipped leaders." (Dockery, 2011, p. 1). Christian leadership in the church, then, is dependent upon God's empowering leadership in the church (Pratt, 2020, pp. 186-214).

Still, greater clarity would be useful for determining a more precise definition of Christian leadership. The *concept* of leadership is not lacking in Christianity; the same cannot be said of the *quality* of leadership found in many churches today. Christian leadership is often synthesized through the lens of the secular domain, and its "horizon of leadership is often no more distant than the next quarterly report or board meeting" (Wilder and Jones, 2018). In other words, leadership in the church often looks no different than leadership in the world. A secular leader does not capture the posture nor

the nuance of leading within a framework of the biblical metanarrative. Leaders should account for efficiency in the execution of tasks, but also be “more deeply shaped by the comforts and calls of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Tripp, 2020). Simply put, the Christian leader is not merely a professional (Piper, 2002, p. 1).

This paper will argue that leadership should be understood through the agency of a vice-regent to the Lord Jesus, and thus subject to His power, truth, and authority (Tsumura, 2007, p. 249).¹ Wilder and Jones note, “The power that a leader exercises is not the leader’s but Christ’s; the truth that the leader is called to proclaim is not the leader’s vision but God’s revelation; and the position to which the leader is called is not sovereignty over the community but stewardship within the community, submitted to the leadership of Christ” (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 3). The leader is merely subject to what Christ has commanded.

The positional significance of vice-regency is derived from a robust understanding of and submission to the Scriptures. Wilder and Jones continue, “Unless our foundational vision for leadership is grounded in the metanarrative of Scripture that culminates in the kingdom inaugurated through Jesus Christ, we will not be able to separate the wisdom of the world from the wisdom of Christ” (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 8). This means that Scripture not only lays out the role of vice-regency, but also provides helpful instruction for the posture of its positional significance. It is the foundation for a Christocentric view of leadership laden with humility, sacrifice, and servitude.

Though there are a myriad of examples in both the Old and New Testaments that demonstrate a leadership model through the role of vice-regency, this paper will be limited to examples from the gospel according to John. John’s gospel differs from the synoptic gospels in that John does not seem as interested in the general miracles and teachings of Jesus, but instead focuses on proclaiming Jesus as the divine Logos (Carson, 1991, p. 119). Because of this, many of the passages in John’s Gospel are not adequate examples for Christians to live by since there is only one divine Logos. There are, however, three passages that advance compatible examples of Christian leadership that are helpful for the ordinary leader in the church.

¹ A vice-regent acts in the place of a ruler, and thus in the strictly Christian leadership sense, a vice-regent acts on behalf of God. This was true even of kings in the Old Testament. Tsumura points out that “Regardless of the terms, however, the human king in the biblical conception was simply a (vice-) regent or deputy of the heavenly King; see “Introduction” (Section IX, A).” Vice-regency is an implication of the doctrine of the Imago Dei. As image bearers charged “to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28), humanity can be seen as vice-regents for God. The role of vice-regency provides a foundation for the leader to exhibit authority through humility, a disposition of power limited by subjugation.

First, a shepherding motif arises out of John 10:7-18 which demonstrates the responsibilities of a leader.² Leaders act as under-shepherds to the Good Shepherd and tend to the flock according to His standards, not their own. Second, a slave motif is formed in John 13:1-20 and explains the nature of a leader. Leaders are to imitate Christ and take on the form of a slave as they carry out their work as under-shepherds. In other words, the slave motif informs how the shepherding is performed. Finally, a synthesis of these two motifs is present in Jesus' interaction with Peter in John 21:15-19. Peter is to become a slave to Christ by means of shepherding and feeding His sheep. Considering these three passages, Christian leaders should act as vice-regents who embody the sacrificial and selfless nature of Christ by imitating His example of a slave and operating as a shepherd to His people.

Leaders as Shepherds

John chapter 10 introduces the importance of sacrificial leadership by means of a shepherding motif. The role of the shepherd was well-known to the ancient Near Eastern audience. Laniak writes that "pastoralism was a widely visible and significant sector of all Near Eastern societies from the very beginning of human civilization" (Laniak, 2006, p. 42). Given the prevalence of the shepherding practice, it is not difficult to understand why it would soon come to be used metaphorically for positions of leadership. Stephen Dempster employs the shepherding metaphor for leadership to King David: "Later, this 'David' who will come to power is remembered for his humble origins as a shepherd (Ez. 34:23); he will provide true leadership, as opposed to past leaders, who are symbolized as corrupt and destructive shepherds" (Dempster, 2003, p. 170). Given the significance of pastoralism, it makes sense that Jesus would also utilize the role of shepherd as a metaphor for how He leads His sheep. Throughout this passage elements of protection, sacrifice, and provision stand out that provide clarity for the role of a Christian leader as a shepherd.

The Shepherd as Protector

In verse 7, Jesus first identifies Himself as "the door of the sheep."³ This indicates something about the nature of what a shepherd does for the safety and security of the sheep. Borchert writes, "Jesus assumes the role of protector. He likens himself to a

² It is worthy of note that John the Baptist introduces the shepherding motif in the Johannine account by declaring Jesus to be "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29).

³ This is the third of seven "I am" statements that Jesus makes in the Gospel According to John which assigns a special amount of significance to Jesus' role as the Shepherd. This is not merely a Divine directive but a Divine duty as the incarnate God-Son. The door of the sheep was a marked and secured entrance into where the sheep were kept and protected. This singular entrance made it easier to monitor who came in and who went out, apart from someone jumping the fence.

guardian (gate) that provides salvation or safe haven to sheep who pass through it (10:9)” (Borchert, 1996, p. 333). The security of the sheep is needed given what Jesus has already said in verse 1 regarding “the thief and the robber” (Jn. 10:1). The lives and livelihood of the sheep are threatened by outside, nefarious forces and thus, they require a passage into safety; Jesus provides the way (Carson, 1991, p. 385).⁴ Klink adds one additional layer of complexity to the ‘shepherd as protector’ role: “Jesus declares himself to be ‘the door’ of the sheep, that is, not only the primary or only point of access but also the one who mediates all access to the sheep” (Klink, 2016, p. 462). This means the role of Jesus as ‘the door’ is both a passage towards protection against outside threats, but also a mediator for anyone who approaches the sheep (Klink, 2016, p. 459).⁵

There are two implications for Christian leadership. First, Christian leaders must be familiar with “the door of the sheep” because they themselves should have also entered it. Leadership through followership entails that leaders will have traversed the rough plains of life and come into pasture through the door of Jesus before they lead anyone else to Him. Second, Christian leaders, acting both as imitators of the Good Shepherd and as vice-regents, will be inherently protective over those they have been entrusted with because Jesus is protective over His sheep (Jn. 17:12). Christian leaders will thus be cognizant of the real danger posed by thieves and robbers, metaphorically speaking. As vice-regents seeking to imitate the Lord as a shepherd, leaders should recognize the need for safety for those they lead and act to protect them from both outside harm and actions that would bring harm to themselves.

The Shepherd as an Abundant Provider

In verse 10, Jesus draws yet another contrast between Himself and the threat of the robbers and thieves: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Thus, the shepherd motif entails both a

⁴ Carson wonders if this ‘Door’ analogy is one that could be likened to John 14:6. He interprets ‘the door’ and the ‘the only way’ similarly in that both illustrations lead to the same conclusion that there are no alternative routes to Jesus and the salvation He promises. He alone is the door and the path.

⁵ The verbiage of sheepfold (αυλή) suggests a private place of pasture, not a public one. That, in conjunction with the gate (θύρα) imagines a place for sheep that is well-protected. Klink surmises, “The private and personal nature of this sheep pen helps explain the stated concern regarding who enters and the nature of their access. There is only one access point—the door” (Klink). Jesus stands a protector of the sheep in an intimate manner. This means that leaders acting as vice regents will lead as both protectors from those who mean harm to the body, and will also be discerningly skeptical of any unknown individuals who could bring potential harm.

responsibility to protect the sheep from outside threats⁶ and to provide for the sheep as well. This responsibility supplies the sheep with the means necessary for survival and abundant provision. The usage of περισσοῦς indicates something that is extraordinary in amount or not ordinarily encountered (BDAG, p. 805.). The idea here is that what Jesus provides His sheep is far more than necessary. It eclipses the minimal requirement.

This abundance is juxtaposed with what the thief does: “steal, kill, and destroy” (Jn. 10:10). While one of these terms attributed to the thief is not surprising, the other two are a bit out of place unless they are being understood metaphorically. J. Ramsey Michaels (2010) adds:

That a thief ‘steals’ is a truism, but ‘slaughter’ and ‘destroy’ are more surprising. These words are part of the metaphor, because “slaughter” has to do with the killing of animals (in this instance, sheep). The supposition is that sheep are stolen not in order to be added to someone else’s flock, but to be slaughtered for food, and thus “destroyed” (pp. 586-587).

It is also possible that John chooses to highlight the usage of the word destroy (Gk., ἀπόλλυμι) to draw out both the love of God and the sacrificial nature of Jesus as the Shepherd who will bring salvation to those who believe in Him, and in return “shall not perish (ἀπόλλυμι), but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16).⁷ Jesus will continue to draw out this sacrificial tone in verses 17 and 18 in His discourse on “laying down” and “taking up” His life. Rainbow notes that the language used by Jesus “requires not only that the sheep benefit from the shepherd’s protective action, but also that the shepherd interpose himself between them and the threat, so that the shepherd takes the brunt of it on their behalf, in their stead” (Rainbow, 2014, p. 204).

There are two implications for Christian leaders acting as vice-regents in the role of shepherd as abundant provider. For one, Christian leaders are to care for the flock in a way that does not just meet the minimum requirements but leaves the sheep fully satisfied and not wanting. The abundant life imagined here is one that is plentiful: “‘Life’ corresponds to ‘pasture’ within the metaphor, except that the ‘life’ Jesus gives is ‘in abundance,’ that is, more than mere survival or safety (v. 9), more than ‘pasture’ (v. 9) in the sense of basic sustenance for a sheep or a human” (Michaels, 2010, p. 587). The point is that Christian leaders provide for the sheep maximally, not minimally.

⁶ In the traditional sense of the term shepherd, the outside threats might include thieves that come to unlawfully take someone else’s livestock. To make the spiritual connection that Jesus is making, this would entail anyone of the world that seeks to lead Christian astray as well as false teachers who mean to take advantage of the sheep for their own personal gain.

⁷ John 3:16 and John 10:10 both envision the same destruction for those who do not believe in Jesus and those who would be victimized by the thief.

Secondly, this means that there likely will be a point at which the Christian leader must sacrifice his or her own desires or needs for the sake of radically providing for the sheep. Vice-regency demands the same commitment to sacrifice to which the Son is committed.

The Ezekiel Connection

This sacrificial posture is further solidified in Jesus' words in verses 14 and 15: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." The element of self-sacrifice is foundational to the shepherding motif in the Johannine account. Jesus is, by way of prophetic allusion, connecting Himself to the shepherd of Ezekiel 34. Brown notes, "In particular, Ezekiel 34 is important background for John 10. There God denounces the shepherds or rulers who have not cared for the flock (His people) and have plundered it, neglecting the weak, the sick, and the straying" (Brown, 1974, p. 397). Accordingly, not only is Jesus the good shepherd who brings fulfillment to Ezekiel 34, but the other religious leaders of Jesus' day represent the shepherds of Israel whom God spoke harshly against because of their lack of sacrificial love and abundant provision for God's sheep.

Ezekiel 34:2 reveals at least two harsh realities regarding these wicked shepherds of Israel: "First, they did not seek to meet the needs of the people but only used the people for their own selfish ends (vv. 2-3). Second, they did not take special care of those in need, the helpless members of society. Rather, they met weakness and injury with callous cruelty (v. 4)" (Cooper, 1994, p. 300). In other words, they not only failed in their primary objective to care for those entrusted to them, but even worse, they met the hurting and the lost with a kind of selfish harshness that ultimately made them "a prey to idolatry and immorality" (Cooper, 1994, p. 300). The wicked shepherds provided a specific kind of leadership, but in the wrong direction. Jesus' connection to the good shepherd of Ezekiel 34 in contrast to the wicked shepherds of Israel (represented by the Pharisees in the Johannine account) presents a powerful juxtaposition between individuals who imitate the Chief Shepherd through sacrificial service, and those who imitate the wicked shepherds of Israel through selfish negligence.

Beyond the obvious allusion to Ezekiel 34 with the "good shepherd" language, Ezekiel 34:23-24 serves as a clear Messianic promise fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That God will "set up over them one shepherd," and that this shepherd will be God's "servant David," is predictive of a shepherd ruler who will descend from the Davidic line, which is precisely the emphasis of both the Gospel according to Matthew (Matt. 1:1) and the Gospel according to Luke (Lk. 1:27; 32) (Greenberg, 1974, pp. 758-

760)⁸. Jesus, as the Davidic heir has become the shepherd who stands in contrast to the prior shepherds of Israel who only served themselves: “He shall feed them: He shall feed them and be their shepherd” (Ez. 34:23). He is not only a good shepherd in general terms, but the fulfillment of the Good Shepherd promised by God through the prophet Ezekiel.

Imitation of the Chief Shepherd

As vice-regents, Christian leaders act in the place of their ruler, or in this specific case, in the place of the Shepherd. To rule in the stead of Jesus with shepherding motif in mind, then, means to rule with a protective disposition and a sacrificial love towards His flock. This sacrificial posture is to be imitated by the Christian leader. This will require a deep commitment to protect against those who mean to take advantage of or destroy the sheep. This could be physically (Ja. 1:27; Prv. 19:17; Acts 20:35; Gal. 2:10), but more than likely spiritually (1 Tim. 1:19-20; Col. 2:8; Matt. 7:15; 2 Tim. 3:5). Imitation demands a kind of provision that goes well above the minimal standards, requiring a sacrificial disposition that moves the leader to place his or her needs and, quite possibly, even his or her life on the altar for the sake of those they have been entrusted to lead (Phil. 2:3; Gal. 5:26; Prov. 15:33).

Leaders as Slaves

As vice-regents, Christian leaders often express their service to God through their service to God’s people. The Johannine account highlights the selfless nature of Christian leadership, most vividly demonstrated in the washing of the disciples’ feet. The importance of this act cannot be overstated, for it reveals a great deal regarding Jesus’ character, His leadership, and His expectations for His followers. John 13:1-20 presents Jesus as both *κύριος* and *δούλος*, Lord and slave, exercising His authority through selfless and humiliating service to those He loved. The gospel writer reveals this act to be an “act of service, yet also an act of love...an act of self-abasement, yet also an act of glorification...the act of a slave, yet performed by a master upon his disciples” (Clarke, 2013, p. 872). While modern audiences rightly recoil at the thought of slavery, the truth is that the historical, fictional, and metaphorical examples of slavery are present throughout all of the New Testament (Clarke, 2013, p. 871). It is important to note that the scriptures do not promote or embrace slavery, particularly the institution

⁸ Greenberg does not make the explicit connection between Jesus and the Davidic shepherd and gets lost in the minutiae of Old Testament dynastic history, but both Cooper and Delitzsch acknowledge the Messianic connection clearly.

of Chattel Slavery.⁹ Instead, since slavery was a part of first-century A.D. Roman culture,¹⁰ the New Testament writers treat it as a normal and accepted part of society (Clarke, 2013, p. 871). Yet it is this common practice that provides a powerful metaphor that serves to illustrate some important doctrinal truths. Harris (1999) explains:

The New Testament does not hesitate to use slavery imagery in a positive sense to depict the Christian life as a whole or in some specific aspect. Thus Christians are called the slaves of God (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:16) or Christ (1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:6) or of one another (2 Cor. 4:5; cf. Gal. 5:13). Referring, in general, to their total availability and devotion to a person (Harris, p. 51).

In John 13, Jesus takes on the role of slave to vividly demonstrate the selfless nature of His leadership. This humble act of service offers a powerful example for Christian leaders to imitate.

Authority for Service

Jesus did not use His authority for His own personal gain, nor did He use His status or influence to coerce others to accomplish His purposes. Instead, Jesus served those that He led. While this is obviously demonstrated in the physical act of foot washing, it is also apparent in Jesus' timing: John 13 describes some of Jesus' final moments before his betrayal and crucifixion. Jesus could have spent this time performing miracles, healing the sick, or preaching to the multitudes. Jesus could have leveraged His divine power to enact lasting social change or expel the Roman occupation. However, Jesus does

⁹ There are several key differences between Chattel Slavery and the slavery seen in scripture. First, Chattel Slavery involved the kidnapping and relocation of persons in order to sell them into permanent slavery. On the other hand, Ex. 21:16 forbids the stealing of a person with the intent of selling them into slavery (a similar command is seen in Deut. 24:7). Secondly, Chattel Slavery was largely defined by race and ethnicity. Slaves were viewed purely as property, thus justifying their unethical, demeaning, and often violent treatment. While the Mosaic Law does list stipulations for slave ownership (Ex. 21:2-11, 20-21; Deut. 15:12-18; Lev. 25:39-55), Hebrew slaves were understood to be "brothers," fellow members of the Israelite community worthy of dignity and respect. The Israelites would have also respected their brethren, even slaves, as fellow image bearers. Further, Chattel Slavery was a life-long condition. In contrast, Hebrew slaves had to be released after six years of service. Moreover, their former master was instructed to bless them financially upon their release (Deut. 15:13-14). It is noteworthy that 1 Tim. 1:10 condemns enslavers as unlawful and sinful.

¹⁰ Slavery in first-century Rome was largely a consequence of war and Roman occupation. While there were those who sold themselves into slavery out of necessity, the vast majority of slaves in the Roman Empire were prisoners of war or people from conquered lands. The condition and occupation of slaves varied greatly and was largely dependent on the status and wealth of their master. In *Slaves of Christ*, Harris explains that although slaves in the Roman Empire were "objects devoid of rights, in practice their personhood was not denied" (37). Slaves could hold property, skilled and/or educated slaves were allowed to earn their own money, and slaves could ultimately buy their freedom.

something rather unusual – He spends the final moments of His earthy ministry privately performing a humiliating act of service for His disciples.¹¹ This fact is incredibly important, for it demonstrates the prioritization that God places on service. Jesus, both fully God and fully man, understood that authority and leadership are to be used in the service of others. This is revealed in John 13:3: “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God...” This verse reveals that Jesus was able to serve His disciples because He properly understood his identity, His purpose, and His future. In other words, He did not serve in spite of His leadership – He served *because* of it. Yet this reality should not be unique to Jesus. John 13:13-17 makes it clear that Jesus expected His followers to imitate His example. Jesus offers a similar command in Matt 20:25-28,

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

It is worthy of note that Jesus served everyone under His care and not just those that were completely devoted to Him. This is seen in the fact that Jesus was aware of Judas’ impending betrayal (John 13:10-11). Nevertheless, Jesus did not refuse to wash Judas’ feet, nor did He display a condescending or negative attitude towards Judas. Instead, Jesus extended Judas the same humble and loving service that He extended to the other disciples.

Like Jesus, Christian leaders must be servants who lovingly and willingly humble themselves by serving those that they lead. While certain burdens and decisions rest squarely on the shoulders of the leader, these executive qualities do not exempt the leader from the responsibility of service. Servanthood, at its very core, is “part of the identity that we share as the people of God, and leaders are not exempt from this calling” (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 146). Moreover, Christian leaders must be steadfast in their service to everyone in their teams. While it would be simple or convenient to favor those that are the most faithful, Christian leaders must follow Christ’s example by shepherding and serving the entire flock equally. They must understand that their humble service to others flows out of their followership and their biblical responsibility

¹¹ It is important to understand that the washing of the disciples’ feet was rooted in the covenantal love Jesus had for His disciples (Jn. 13:1). Love is a defining characteristic of Jesus’ earthly ministry, particularly in the Johannine account: God’s love for humanity is the reason for the incarnation (Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:9-10), Jesus shepherds His own with loving care and selfless devotion (Jn. 10:1-16), Jesus commands His disciples to be known for their love toward one another (Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12; 1 Jn. 3:11), and Jesus lays down His life because of His sacrificial love (Jn. 10:11, 15, 17; 15:13; 1 Jn. 3:16). Jesus’ sacrificial love stands in stark contrast to Judas, how was mere moments away from betraying Jesus.

as leaders. Ultimately, Christian leaders are vice-regents that use their God-given authority in the service of others. Wilder summarizes the matter, “No matter how high Christian leaders may rise in an organization, we never cease to be servants. Any power we possess is delegated to us by someone, and all power ultimately derives from God” (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 29).

A Disposition of Humility

John 13 reveals that Jesus possessed a genuinely humble disposition. His humility and His service to His disciples were not a façade or a temporary subordination for future gain. While Jesus could have used His divine status and power to lead in an authoritarian manner, the Johannine account presents Jesus as a loving shepherd and humble servant. Not only did Jesus humble Himself by submitting Himself to the will of His Father (John 6:38), but He also showed great humility in the physical act of foot washing. This act, though common and necessary in the first century A.D., was “considered so degrading that a Hebrew slave could not be compelled to perform it...washing feet and untying sandals were jointly considered the exclusive domain of a Gentile slave because the task was so humiliating” (Cochrell, 2015, p. 135). Yet Jesus embraced this task in service to His disciples.

Wilder and Jones explain, “By performing this task, Jesus willingly chose for himself the role of the lowest and least-honored slave. The theme of servanthood that is present throughout John’s Gospel comes through powerfully in this passage” (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 144). Jesus’ actions are so surprising and counter-cultural that Peter initially refuses his Master (John 13:6-8). Indeed, Jesus’ humble leadership is truly astounding: the Son of God and Lord of all voluntarily took on the role of a slave in order to demonstrate the importance of humility and service in Christian leadership. “Through this act of self-sacrificial service, Jesus modeled leadership that was grounded in an unprecedented expression of service. In this way, he corrected his disciples’ desire to exalt themselves” (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 145).

The New Testament clearly expects all Christian leaders to embody this same humility. The apostle Paul points to Jesus’ example when commanding the Philippian church to live in humble unity with one another (Phil. 2:1-8). Likewise, Peter exhorts church leaders to lovingly and willingly shepherd the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:1-3), while Titus 1:7 and 1 Tim. 3:3 highlight the importance of humility and gentleness in church leaders. Perhaps this expectation is best summed up in Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, “This is how one should regard us, as slaves of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:1-2). Followers of Christ do not seek their own glory nor do they pridefully assert themselves over others. Neither do they advance their own agendas or promote their own ideologies. Rather, they belong wholly to Christ and therefore devote themselves to fulfilling His purposes. Christian leaders should be defined by humility for they

understand that, as vice-regents, they are servants of God called to submit to His divine authority, take on the characteristics of their Master, and lovingly shepherd His flock.

Before moving on, we must make an important distinction: While Jesus took on the form of a slave (Phil. 2:7) and humbled Himself by performing acts of service reserved for slaves (John 13:1-11), Jesus never ceased being Lord. Beeley (2012) notes:

This is a paradox that lies at the very heart of the gospel and one that we see embodied in Christ Himself. Only the all-powerful Son of God, the co-creator of the universe, could save us from sin and death by humbling himself and dying on the Cross; and only the one who willing to love his friends to the point of death could make available the saving power that he possessed by nature from eternity. In the kingdom of God authority and service, power and humility are two sides of the same coin (Beeley, p. 13).

To state the matter differently, Jesus acted as a slave in order to obey the Father and model Christian leadership. His followers, on the other hand, should properly understand their identity as slaves of Christ. It is true that “whoever the Son sets free is free indeed” (John 8:36) and “it is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Gal. 5:1). Yet we were set free from the bondage of sin to become slaves of Christ (1 Pet. 2:16). Harris (2001) summarizes the matter:

In every sense believers are his special possession, a people of his very own, because he purchased them as his slaves (1 Cor. 6:19-20; 7:22-23) along with their freedom from all iniquity (Titus 2:14). As a result of that purchase they belong to him totally, and only to him, a comprehensive ownership that his slaves voluntarily embrace. He is their absolute and exclusive Master (Harris, p. 125).

This truth lies at the heart of vice-regency. Christian leaders are slaves of Christ who humbly exercise His authority in order to devote themselves to His purposes.

An Example to Imitate

Not only does Jesus explain His actions (John 13:12), but He clearly expresses His expectation that His followers imitate His example (John 13:13-17). As previously stated, Jesus explains that true greatness is demonstrated in genuine service to others (Matt. 20:25-28). In contrast to Jesus’ prideful contemporaries, Jesus powerfully models servant leadership and commands His followers to do the same, “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:13-15). John presents Jesus as a loving Lord and Teacher who

delicately interweaves teaching and modeling...Here is the Master Teacher posing a question that starts the disciples on a journey of learning, "Do you understand what I have done?" Explanations give meaning, invite appreciation, and ultimately bid love towards action. As their Teacher and Lord, he has given them an example. Now, they, as His disciples, should do likewise (Sosler, 2017, p. 15).

This is not unique to John 13, for Jesus' expresses His desire to be imitated several times in the Johannine account (John 13:14-17; 34; 15:10, 14; 17:11, 18, 21-22; 21:15-19). Thus, Jesus reveals that it is not enough for His followers to understand Christian principles - they must be transformed by them and embody them in their relationship with others.

Ultimately, imitating Christ fulfills the responsibility of vice-regency. As vice-regents, followers of Christ die to themselves and submit themselves to God's plan for all believers - to become conformed to the image of Christ.¹² Being conformed to His image involves being inwardly transformed and filled with the Holy Spirit, in order that His followers become empowered to imitate Christ and live their lives by the Spirit (Gal. 2:20, 5:24-25; Col. 3:5-10). In other words, followers of Christ submit to their Lord by forsaking themselves and taking on the image of their Lord through the imitation of their Lord - all through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Further, the command to imitate God is seen throughout all of scripture. God's people are to reflect God's holiness (Lev. 19:2; 20:7; 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:16), love as He loves (John 13:34), forgive as He forgives (Luke 6:37; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13), show mercy (Prov. 14:31; Micah 6:8; Luke 6:36), and live in unity (John 17:21-23; Rom. 15:5-6; Eph. 4:3-6; Phil. 2:2; 1 Pet. 3:8). Imitating God is accomplished in imitating Jesus, for "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). He is God made flesh (John 1:14), and "in Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19). Paul sums up this command in Ephesians 5:1-2, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

John 13 reveals this love to be selfless and sacrificial - the Teacher and Lord who lovingly humbles Himself in service to those He leads. Followers of Christ must embody the same sacrificial and humble posture that Jesus demonstrated in the washing of the disciples' feet. As His followers and His slaves, Christian leaders acting as vice-regents must take on the identity of Jesus: their lives revolve around His will and their "individuality is subsumed in the personality of the master" (Harris, 2001, p. 96).

¹² This call is clearly articulated in Rom. 8:29 and is also echoed in other New Testament passages (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:48-49 and Eph. 4:12-13, 22-24). While all humanity is created in the Image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), all have become tainted by the effects of sin. Thus, God's redemptive plan not only involves the forgiveness of sin, but also the regeneration, sanctification, and transformation of His followers.

A Synthesis of Motifs

As stated previously, Jesus' interaction with Peter in John 21 synthesizes the shepherding and slave motifs and provides a powerful example of vice-regency. While two main themes emerge throughout the entire chapter,¹³ the words of Jesus in 21:15-19 articulate a simple yet profound message: submission to Christ and devotion to Christ are demonstrated in shepherding the flock of Christ. Peter is therefore to demonstrate his subservience to Christ through shepherding and feeding His sheep. Not only does this slave mentality impact Peter's life and ministry, but it will impact even His death (Jn. 21:18-19). Jesus makes no apologies to Peter for the high price of vice-regency and followership, nor does He express any condolences. Instead, He offers a simple command, "Follow me" (Jn. 21:19).

Followers of Christ must follow Peter's example: they must adopt a slave mentality and submit to Christ's commands, they must love their Lord, and they must express their love to Christ through shepherding His sheep. As previously mentioned, shepherding is to be done in a selfless, sacrificial, and caring manner. Christian leaders, as vice-regents and undershepherds, must submit themselves to Christ's calling and lovingly devote themselves to the shepherding of the flock - even when it is humiliating and uncomfortable. And like Peter, followers of Christ must be prepared to suffer, and even die, in service to Christ. "For Christ-following leaders, suffering is not to be avoided; it is to be recognized as a participation in the same patterns that characterized the life of Jesus Christ" (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 158).

Conclusion

The shepherding motif (Jn. 10:7-18), the slave motif (Jn. 13:3-20), and Jesus' dialogue with Peter (Jn. 21:15-19) provide a helpful example of the function and disposition of a Christian leader seeking to honor Christ. Christian leaders should act as vice-regents who embody the sacrificial and selfless nature of Christ by imitating His example of a

¹³ First, there is a general refocusing and restoration of the disciples. While their intentions are not clear, the disciples returned to their home region of Galilee and were fishing again (21:3). Jesus' appearance to His disciples is strikingly similar to the fishing episode that led to their ministry calling (Lk. 5:1-11) and the result is the same: they recognized Jesus as Lord (Lk. 5:8-11; Jn. 21:12). Secondly, there is the specific restoration of Peter. One can speculate that Peter was ashamed, demoralized, disappointed, and struggling with feelings of inadequacy after his denial of Jesus (Jn. 18:25-27). Yet Jesus lovingly restores Peter to followership and prepares him for future leadership. It is worthy of note that the breakfast scene in John 21 mirrors aspects of Peter's denial of Jesus: there is a charcoal fire, Peter denies Jesus publicly and is restored publicly, and there is a threefold repetition in each dialogue (Lk. 22:54-62; Jn. 21:15-19). Finally, the shepherding motif is present in Jesus' responses to Peter ("feed me lambs," "tend my sheep," and "feed my sheep"). In *The God Who Goes Before You*, Wilder and Jones point out that this shepherding motif provides a framework for the entire Johannine account: Jn. 1:29; John 10:1-30; and John 21:15-17 (156).

slave and operating as a shepherd to His people. Leadership requires a means of protection over the sheep and provision for the sheep that far exceeds the minimal standard. This selfless shepherding will necessitate a sacrificial posture as exemplified in Jesus' life and ultimately in His death, burial, and resurrection (Jn. 10:17-18). And a leader cannot embody such a posture unless they adopt the disposition of a slave and are conformed to the image of Christ through the transformational work of the Holy Spirit, as exemplified in the apostle Peter. To sum up the matter, "Jesus, the model Shepherd, knew His sheep, led His sheep, and suffered for His sheep. Shepherd leaders who follow the example of Jesus are commissioned to follow, feed, and die as they nourish the sheep, guard the sheep, and follow the model shepherd (Wilder and Jones, 2018, p. 155).

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