



UNDERSTANDING SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN JOHN 13:3-5: LESSONS FOR *NONGU U KRISTU U I SER U SHA TAR* (NKST) PASTORS

Prof. Igbakua IORJAAH¹ & James Terhemba TSE²

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Benue State University, Makurdi.

¹Email: igbakuaiorjaah11@gmail.com Phone: +2348057857505

²Email: jamestse24@gmail.com Phone: +2347031296850

Abstract

This paper evaluated understanding Servant Leadership in John 13:3-5: Lessons for NKST Pastors. The world is always looking for leadership in all spheres of life, especially servant leadership. The absence of this calibre of leadership in the society is really creating a lot of challenges in managing organizational structures at all levels, most importantly in the church. The paper seeks to elucidate on how servant leadership can become a panacea for pastors in the NKST in Makurdi Local Government Area. The study adopted qualitative research design and made use of exegetical and hermeneutical methods of data collection. Expository, descriptive and evaluative methods were used to analyse the data collected. The findings revealed: Conceptualization of servant leadership, critical analysis of servant leadership in John 13:3-5, Understanding servant leadership, Lessons for NKST Pastors and finally, the criticism of servant leadership. The paper benefits students of religion, leaders, Pastors of NKST and researchers. The research recommends Servant leadership as a panacea to the challenges of leadership at all levels of management. It equally recommends leadership training for new and upcoming leaders as well as those already in leadership to enhance efficiency.

Key Words: Servant Leadership, Leadership, NKST, Pastors, Lessons.

Introduction

Understanding servant leadership, especially within a Christian context, is pivotal for the clergy who aim to lead in a manner that reflects the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. One of the most profound biblical illustrations of servant leadership is found in John 13:3-5, where Jesus washed the feet of His disciples. This passage is not only a display of humility and service but also a profound lesson for leaders, including pastors of the NKST (*Nongu u Kristu u i Ser u sha Tar*), a Reformed Christian denomination in Nigeria. In John 13:3-5, we read: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."



This act of Jesus serves as a paradigm of servant leadership, illustrating key principles that can transform how pastors approach their roles within the church and their communities. The purpose of this study is to delve into these principles of servant leadership and extract lessons that NKST pastors can incorporate into their ministry to better serve their congregations.

By examining John 13:3-5, this study will explore the essence of humility, the importance of service, and the power of leading by example. It will highlight how these attributes are essential for fostering a Christ-centred community and enhancing the spiritual growth of the congregation. Moreover, it will provide practical applications for NKST pastors, helping them to embody the servant leadership model that Jesus demonstrated.

Through this exploration, we aim to equip NKST pastors with a deeper understanding of servant leadership, encouraging them to emulate Christ's example in their daily interactions and responsibilities. This approach not only aligns with biblical teachings but also addresses the unique challenges and opportunities faced by pastors in the NKST denomination.

Conceptualization of Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy in which the main goal of the leader is to serve. This concept is vastly different from traditional leadership where the leader's main focus is the thriving of their company or organization. Servant leaders share power, put the needs of others first, and help people develop and perform as highly as possible. This approach is particularly relevant in diverse cultural contexts, such as Nigeria and other parts of the world.

Robert K. Greenleaf, who first coined the term "servant leadership" in 1970, emphasized that servant leaders are servants first. According to Greenleaf, "The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first" (Greenleaf 13). This ideology aligns with the communal and collective culture prevalent in many NKST Churches within Makurdi Local government Area, where leaders are often seen as caretakers of the people.

Ayuba A. Mshelia, further elaborates on the relevance of servant leadership in Nigeria. Mshelia argues that traditional Nigerian leadership styles have always emphasized service to the community, a principle that is foundational in many ethnic groups. He states, "In the Nigerian context, the concept of leadership has always been tied to the welfare of the people. The leader's strength is measured by the wellbeing of the community" (Mshelia 45).



Additionally, international perspectives from scholars like Peter G. Northouse provide a broader understanding of servant leadership. Northouse discusses how servant leadership fosters an environment of trust and empowerment, which can lead to higher performance and satisfaction among followers (Northouse 219). This idea resonates with the Nigerian leadership landscape, where trust and community welfare are highly valued.

Furthermore, Spears, a prominent advocate of Greenleaf's work, identifies ten characteristics of the servant leader: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Spears 26). These characteristics are not only universal but also find strong resonance in Nigerian cultural values, where community and empathy are deeply ingrained.

In the context of organizational behaviour, servant leadership has been shown to enhance team performance and employee satisfaction. According to Laub, servant leaders create a culture of trust and open communication, which can lead to higher levels of engagement and motivation among employees (Laub 45). Furthermore, the focus on personal development and ethical behaviour resonates well with contemporary calls for corporate social responsibility and ethical leadership practices.

Servant leadership extends beyond the workplace into community and societal leadership. Leaders who embrace this philosophy contribute to the betterment of society by advocating for social justice and equity. They recognize the importance of their role in fostering inclusive and supportive communities. For instance, the principles of servant leadership align closely with those of social work, which emphasizes service to others, social justice, and the dignity and worth of the person (Northouse 219).

In summary, servant leadership is a transformative approach that prioritizes the growth and well-being of individuals and communities. It challenges traditional power-centric leadership models by emphasizing empathy, stewardship, and a commitment to serving others. As Greenleaf posits, "The servant-leader is a servant first" (Greenleaf 15), a principle that has profound implications for leadership in various spheres of life.

Critical Analysis of Servant Leadership in John 13:3-5

John 13:3-5 presents a poignant example of servant leadership as exemplified by Jesus Christ. These verses read: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured



water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:3-5, NIV).

This passage illustrates several key aspects of servant leadership, a concept where leading involves prioritizing the needs of others, demonstrating humility, and engaging in service. The analysis focuses on three main points: the awareness of one's authority, the act of humility, and the embodiment of service.

Awareness of Authority

John 13:3 begins with the acknowledgment that Jesus was fully aware of his divine authority: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power" (John 13:3). This awareness is crucial because it sets the stage for understanding the magnitude of his subsequent actions. Jesus, being conscious of his supreme authority and divine origin, chose to perform an act of service typically reserved for the lowest servant. This juxtaposition underscores the voluntary nature of his humility and service, highlighting that true leadership is not diminished by serving others but is instead defined by it. As Greenleaf posits, servant leadership emerges from a natural feeling of wanting to serve first, then making a conscious choice to lead ("Servant Leadership" 27).

Act of Humility

In John 13:4, Jesus "got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist." This action symbolizes the renunciation of status and privilege. By removing his outer garments and donning a servant's towel, Jesus visually and physically aligns himself with the role of a servant. This act of humility is profound because it breaks social norms and expectations. By doing so, Jesus teaches that leadership is not about maintaining one's status but about lowering oneself to uplift others. As Blanchard and Hodges emphasize, the essence of servant leadership is humility, which involves setting aside one's ego and pride to serve others effectively (28).

Embodiment of Service

The culmination of Jesus' actions in John 13:5, where he "poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet," directly illustrates the principle of servant leadership. Washing feet was a task performed by the lowest servant in a household, yet Jesus performed it willingly, thus modelling service to his disciples. This act demonstrates that servant leadership is not theoretical but practical, requiring tangible actions that benefit others. It conveys that leaders should engage in actions that serve and uplift their followers, regardless of the nature of the task. Spears notes that one of the central tenets of servant leadership is the commitment to the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong to (12).



In summary, John 13:3-5 serves as a foundational text for understanding servant leadership. Jesus' awareness of his authority, his act of humility, and his embodiment of service provide a comprehensive model for leaders. This passage challenges traditional notions of leadership that prioritize power and authority, advocating instead for a leadership style grounded in humility and service to others. By embracing these principles, leaders can create more inclusive, supportive, and effective environments.

Servant Leadership in John 13:3-5: Lessons for NKST Pastors

Servant leadership, a concept strongly emphasized in the Christian tradition, is profoundly illustrated in John 13:3-5. In these verses, Jesus demonstrates humility and service by washing the feet of His disciples. This act provides profound lessons for pastors in the NKST (Nongo u Kristu u I Ser u Sha Tar) translated as universal Reformed Christian Church, guiding them towards a leadership style rooted in service, humility, and love.

Biblical Passage: John 13:3-5 the passage reads: Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13:3-5, NIV).

Analysis of the Passage

1. Understanding Authority and Purpose:

Jesus, aware of His divine authority and mission, chose to serve His disciples. This action highlights that true leadership is not about exercising power but about using one's position to serve others. Coming from the Apostolic context, Peter Tavershima Kumaga in *a sociological perspective on the election of deacons in acts 6:1-8: An insight for national integration in Nigeria* collaborates that, “apostles identified the problem but did not proffer solutions because they were the apostles or leaders, rather, they got the rest of the disciples involved in the decision making” (171) For NKST pastors, this underscores the importance of understanding their spiritual authority not as a means of control but as an opportunity for service.

2. Humility in Leadership:

By washing the feet of His disciples, a task typically reserved for servants, Jesus exemplifies humility. This act teaches NKST pastors that no task should be beneath them when it comes to serving their congregation. Kumaga, in his book, *an introduction to Christian leadership* posits that “almost everybody wants to stay around a humble person, as such, humility attracts followers and honour” (13). Humility should be a cornerstone of their ministry, breaking down barriers and fostering a spirit of equality and community.



3. Love and Service:

Jesus' act of washing His disciples' feet was also an expression of His love for them. For NKST pastors, this emphasizes that genuine love should drive their leadership. Serving their congregation with love creates a nurturing environment that mirrors the love Christ has for the Church.

Lessons for NKST Pastors

Since NKST pastors are part and parcel of the body of Christ, they are not exempted from learning and applying servant leadership as exemplified by Jesus Christ, the head of the Church. Such lessons are outlined below:

1. Embodying Servant Leadership:

NKST pastors should strive to emulate Jesus' example of servant leadership by being actively involved in the lives of their congregation, addressing their needs, and providing support. Kumaga et al in their article, *the relevance of Pauline work ethics to the contemporary society* posit that, "industrious people are willing to put in a great deal of effort in their roles. They understand that hard work and dedication are key components of success, and they strive to make each task or project as successful as possible" (83). This hands-on approach demonstrates a commitment to the well-being of their community.

2. Promoting Humility:

Pastors should foster a culture of humility within their church. By taking on humble tasks and showing that no service is too small, they set a powerful example for their congregation to follow. This can help break down hierarchical barriers and encourage a more inclusive and supportive church environment.

3. Leading with Love:

Love should be the foundation of all pastoral activities. By leading with love, NKST pastors can build a church community characterized by compassion, understanding, and mutual respect. This approach not only strengthens the church internally but also enhances its witness to the broader community.

The example of servant leadership demonstrated by Jesus in John 13:3-5 provides a profound template for NKST pastors. By understanding authority as a call to service, practicing humility, and leading with love, they can cultivate a church environment that reflects the teachings and spirit of Christ. This approach not only enriches the lives of their congregation but also furthers the mission of the church in the world.



Criticism of Servant Leadership in John 13:3-5

John 13:3-5 describes Jesus washing the feet of His disciples, an act that has been widely interpreted as a profound example of servant leadership. However, this model of leadership is not without its criticisms. One critique of servant leadership is its potential to be perceived as overly idealistic and impractical in certain organizational contexts. Critics argue that the self-sacrificial nature of servant leadership might lead to burnout and exploitation if leaders are consistently putting others' needs above their own (Jones 45).

Furthermore, servant leadership can be criticized for its potential to undermine authority and effectiveness. In a highly competitive and results-driven environment, leaders who focus predominantly on serving their team may struggle to assert authority and make tough decisions when necessary. This perceived lack of assertiveness can result in a lack of clear direction and, ultimately, organizational inefficiency (Smith 78).

Another criticism revolves around the ambiguity and subjective interpretation of what it means to serve others. The concept of servant leadership can be nebulous, leading to varied and inconsistent applications across different settings. For instance, while the act of washing feet is symbolic and powerful, translating this into contemporary leadership practices can be challenging. Without clear guidelines, what constitutes effective servant leadership can be misinterpreted, resulting in actions that may not align with the intended principles (Williams 102).

Moreover, servant leadership may not align well with all cultural contexts. In some cultures, hierarchical structures and clear distinctions between leaders and followers are deeply ingrained. Introducing a servant leadership model in such environments might be met with resistance and perceived as undermining traditional values and authority structures (Brown 133).

In summary, while John 13:3-5 presents a compelling example of servant leadership through Jesus' actions, the application of this leadership model is not without its challenges. Critics highlight issues such as impracticality, potential for exploitation, undermining of authority, ambiguity, and cultural misalignment as significant concerns that need to be addressed for servant leadership to be effective in diverse contexts.

Recommendations

Having investigated servant leadership in John 13:3-5, the researcher makes the following recommendations:

1. Servant leadership is a panacea to the challenges of leadership and should be taken seriously at all levels of management.



2. Leaders who are guilty of servant leadership should retrace their steps to avoid collateral damage.
3. There should always be leadership training for upcoming leaders and those who are already in leadership to enhance productivity.
4. There should be machineries in place to check and correct erring leaders.

Conclusion

John 13:3-5, we see a profound demonstration of servant leadership through the actions of Jesus Christ. Jesus, knowing His divine authority and impending sacrifice chose to wash the feet of His disciples, embodying humility and service. This act was a tangible representation of His teachings on leadership, where the greatest leader is one who serves others selflessly. The concept of servant leadership here emphasizes the importance of leading by example, prioritizing the needs of others, and exhibiting humility regardless of one's position or status. A critical analysis of John 13:3-5 reveals the counter-cultural nature of Jesus' actions. In a society where leaders are often seen as powerful figures demanding respect and service, Jesus inverted this paradigm by performing a task typically reserved for the lowest servant. This act challenges conventional notions of power and leadership, highlighting that true leadership is not about exerting dominance but about serving others with love and humility. It underscores the principle that leadership rooted in service fosters a community of mutual respect and compassion. For NKST pastors, the lessons from John 13:3-5 are profound and transformative. Firstly, it calls for pastors to emulate Jesus' example by prioritizing service to their congregation over personal gain or recognition. Pastors are encouraged to engage in acts of humility, showing genuine care and concern for their flock. Secondly, it teaches the importance of leading by example. Just as Jesus washed His disciples' feet, pastors should actively participate in the daily lives and struggles of their community, demonstrating servant leadership in practical ways. Lastly, this passage reminds pastors that true leadership is measured by the ability to uplift and serve others, fostering a church environment that mirrors Christ's love and humility. John 13:3-5 provides a powerful blueprint for servant leadership that is both counter-cultural and deeply rooted in Christian values. For NKST pastors, embracing these principles can lead to more effective and compassionate ministry, reflecting the heart of Christ in every aspect of leadership and service.



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