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Jesus the servant leader: A model to all teachers and school administrators

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Abstract

The article brings out the qualities of Jesus as a servant leader who; teachers and school administrators should emulate. According to the article, Jesus is not only a servant leader; he is also a teacher ‘par excellence.’ In order to prove that these qualities and characteristics of Jesus are necessary for teachers to emulate for their professional improvement, the article discussed these sub-headings: Servant-Leadership, Jesus as Servant Leader, The Role of a teacher as a Leader, the School Administrator and the Pupils and Jesus as Model. The target groups are the primary and secondary/high schools. The article attributes the moral decadence in schools partly to the teachers’ inability to be exemplary models to students and partly to the poor upbringing of pupils at home. In order to correct these anomalies in our schools, the article recommends that teachers and school administrators should take Jesus as their teacher and their model.

Keywords: Administrator, Jesus, Model, Pupils/Students, Servant-Leader, School, Teacher

Introduction

In life, it is advisable as well as helpful to have someone others will look up to as model and Jesus is that model ‘par excellence.’ If there is a time such a model as Jesus is needed in our educational system, it is now when the school system is losing its bearing in our century. It is becoming common news to hear from the media about the anomalies going on in secondary/high schools as well as in tertiary institutions throughout the world. This article examines the servant leadership of Jesus in order to determine what the teachers and school administrators could learn from him. This article also understudies the role of Jesus as a servant leader in relation to the roles the teachers and school administrators play as ‘mentors’ to their pupils and students alike. The target groups are primary and secondary/high schools because good pupils make good students and good students are the possible, reliable and trust-worthy products of tertiary institutions. However, from time to time, references are made to the educational system in Africa specifically in Nigeria. The term frequently used in this article is “Servant Leadership.”

Servant Leadership

Before we proceed to discuss Jesus as ‘servant leader,’ let us examine briefly the qualities of a servant leader. D’Souza (2009:20) outlines the functions and characteristics of a servant leader thus:

Servant leadership empowers people through example, guidance, caring, understanding, trust, appreciation, encouragement, reinforcement and shared vision. Servant-leadership is much more than a mere leadership style or behavior that we can learn to act out. It begins with our mind and heart—with our attitude.

In itemized form, Oforchukwu (2011:35) presents the characteristics of servant-leadership in this order: “vision, credibility, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment.” In the two texts cited above, words such as vision, trust, appreciation and empowerment are common. A servant leader must have vision to be able to know where he/she is going and also be able to guide the followers on the right track. The bible tells us that a blind cannot lead a blind (Matt. 15:14).

Oforchukwu (2011:35) agrees with some authors who affirm that “Trust provides the foundation for people to follow their leaders with confidence and enthusiasm. However, trust must be earned. Trust grows when people see leaders translate their personal integrity into organizational fidelity.” It is only when a leader shows his worthiness will others trust him. The ability to appreciate the efforts of others so as to commend and encourage them is an indispensable quality of a servant-leader. A servant leader must be unbiased to be able to appreciate peoples’ efforts. This unbiased mind enables servant-leaders to trust their followers in return. This trust leads to empowerment. Oforchukwu (2011:36) gives in a sentence the core of empowerment in these words: “Servant-leaders multiply their leadership by empowering others to lead.” Describing what makes effective leaders, D’Souza (2009:35) has this to say: “Empowering their people by giving them clear responsibilities, communicating the significance of the job to be done, providing the opportunity for personal growth and skill development, recognizing the value and importance of each member of the team.” Servant-leaders, therefore, should empower their followers rather than seek power over them. Servant-leaders are not extraordinary people. Instead they are ordinary people that do things extraordinarily well and in a different way. Let us now examine Jesus to determine how he lived this servant leadership to the full.

Jesus as Servant Leader

When a person is born into a poverty stricken family, that situation forces the person to accept the condition without a choice; that is the condition of a servant. This was not the same as Jesus who Paul in Philippians 2:6-7 describes his nature thus: “Though being divine in nature, he did not claim equality with God, but emptied himself taking on the nature of a servant, made in human likeness...” Supporting this point raised by St. Paul, D’Souza (2009:18) in the following lines argues that Jesus did not allow his authority to overshadow his servant-leadership:

The servant motif, having a servant’s attitude and a servant’s heart, is given great prominence in the New Testament. No one doubts the authoritative position held by Jesus among his disciples. Yet he said to them: ‘I am among you as one who serves’ (Luke 22:27). He gave a vivid example of this on the night before his death by washing the feet of his disciples. This was considered by all to be the humblest of actions. But in no way did it diminish the authority of Jesus.

It is evident that from these biblical passages that Jesus had authority and power over the wind, the sea, even over death (Mark 4:31-41, Matthew 9:18-28. He healed the sick Mark 4:31-37, drove out demons with a word Mark 5:1-20. Both Matthew 7:29 and Mark 1:22 recognized Jesus as one who taught with authority. Those who listened to Jesus were amazed that he taught and spoke with

authority and not like teachers of law. In spite of these, Jesus humbled himself to wash the feet of his apostles in order to teach them the importance of humility and service. This action of Jesus—the washing of their feet confirms his words: “I am here among you as one who serves (Luke 22:27), I came to serve not to be served” (Mark 10:45). D’Souza carefully presents the lists of these qualities and masterfully pairs them up with the servant leader. The qualities of a servant are: “exhibits a humble spirit, places service to others above personal gains, builds rather than tears down, suffers and makes sacrifices for others and understands mutual relationship of caring.” Aligning these qualities of Jesus to the examples he gave his disciples through his teaching and action, D’Souza (2009:23) comments:

The characteristics of servant-leadership given above form the very essence of the leadership Jesus taught his disciples. The reason servant-leaders are empowering leaders is that they anchor their attitudes, values and behaviors in the fertile soil of service to God first and then service to others. Hence, they lead not to gain anything from their followers and to inspire and encourage them to serve others.

Let us now examine how Jesus as servant-leader fulfilled these qualities. In the quality of exhibiting a humble spirit, Jesus in John 13:14 saw no work as servile or degrading. In Luke 22:2-6, Jesus saw service as first priority thereby fulfilling the servant quality of ‘placing service to others above personal gain.’ In John 13:1-5, Jesus was more of an inspirator than a director hence like a servant, he builds rather than destroys. In his teaching to the disciples in Matthew 20:25-26; 28, Jesus showed that through service, they win respect and autonomy under God hence he was ready to suffer in order to make sacrifices for others. Over and above, Jesus’ masterpiece teaching was his Sermon on the Mount (Matt chapters 5-7). Now that we have examined the qualities of a servant-leader in relation to Jesus, let also consider the role of a teacher as a leader.

The Role of a Teacher as a Leader

The analogy Farrant made is so captivating that I have adopted it as an introduction to this section. In this analogy, Farrant (1991:210) observes:

It is almost certain that you remember the teachers who taught you at school better than the lessons they taught. This is because no person can work as a teacher without something of himself rubbing off on his pupils. As a teacher, therefore, you should aim to develop those qualities of personality and character that will provide a lasting and inspiring example to your pupils.

The last part of Farrant’s observation is important. That is a teacher must develop and possess the qualities and

character that will provide a lasting and inspiring example to the pupils. If our present teachers will bear this advice in mind, the impact they will have on their pupils will be great. Farrant outlines sixteen qualities considered necessary for every teacher. These qualities are arranged alphabetically thus: authority, competence, decisiveness, drama, energy, enthusiasm, humility, humour, imagination, initiative, integrity, loyalty, perseverance, responsibility, self-control, and single-mindedness. It is interesting and informative how Farrant applies these qualities to a teacher who is also a leader. Farrant agrees that by virtue of their profession, teachers automatically have authority. In his advice, he suggests that teachers should maintain this authority by earning the respect of their pupils than by insisting on it by right. This advice is very important to prevent any teacher from falling into the grip of power thereby becoming an autocratic leader. Farrant admits that no one person can claim complete mastery of everything. Even at that, he suggests that teachers require a general competence, to save them from embarrassing failure in the skills their pupils will perform. The implication, therefore, is any teacher that does not meet up the expectations of the students loses their respect and trust. In order to show their competence, teachers must be decisive in the decisions. Any delay invites students' reactions namely an outward expression of disappointment. Farrant is of the opinion that teachers must have a sense of drama in order to act out a role play that carries some conviction with the pupils. A teacher is expected to have energy to work fruitfully to achieve success as well as be enthusiastic so as to arouse enthusiasm and participation among the students. His commentary on humility is in line with the theme of this article. Thus, I have decided to quote him verbatim. This is his reflection and commentary on humility (1991:210):

Truly great men recognize their limitations and their failings. They do not force themselves on others even though their personalities do often have magnetic quality. Their greatness, not something they themselves claim, is what their followers recognize and acknowledge.

This is an important observation which calls for more reflection and commentary. However, we shall come back to this when we come to the section dealing with Jesus as a role model to teachers. The components of humour which Farrant outlines are suitable for adaptability. They include: 'pleasantness, cheerfulness, friendliness, being sympathetic and understanding.' He recommends a balanced attitude towards events both good and bad. Imagination; Farrant argues is necessary because it enables teachers to overflow with fresh ideas every time. In the same way, teachers need initiative that helps them know when an important action is required so that they rise up to the occasion and implement it accordingly. Teachers must be known for their integrity so that they will be able to inspire trust among their students. Loyalty, Farrant admits is reciprocal because teachers not only expect loyalty from their students, they also give loyalty to

them. For example when there is a conflict between personnel and group loyalties, Farrant is of the opinion that an understanding teacher gives precedence to the latter. Perseverance is a characteristic of successful teachers and leaders who do not give up when they face difficulties. Thus, for teachers to succeed, they must persevere. On his part, Chinawa (1984:75) prefers 'patience.' Recommending patience, Chinawa has this to say: "When we are dealing with young people, no quality is of great importance than patience. If we wish to be of help, we must wait until an opportunity is offered to us." This opportunity is important because it is a mark of patience when teachers are dealing with pupils of different upbringing and environment. Farrant reminds good teachers and leaders to be always mindful of the responsibility they carry by reason of their position. His conviction on 'self-control' is worth emphasizing when he insists: "A person who lacks self-control is not fit for leadership. It is a characteristic that has to be learned and practiced until it becomes a habit." Finally, Farrant concludes by saying: "No person can act as a leader who is easily distracted from his policy or chosen course of action." These qualities which are properly articulated and presented challenge all teachers and leaders. The impact they have on teachers can only be assessed when teachers imbibe and implement them.

Speaking about the relationship between teachers and pupils, NC Kay (1977:22) has this to say: "If he is a dedicated teacher with a good knowledge of his subjects and the ability to make the learning process effective and pleasant for his pupils, they will be quick to realize this and respect him for it." With this sentiment expressed by NC Kay, he endorses what Farrant says about competence, decisiveness and integrity. In order to confirm the important roles teachers play in the lives of their pupils; another 'Kay' named William Kay (1975:298-299) has this to say:

It needs no empirical confirmation to be convinced that a teacher cannot avoid affecting the conduct of his pupils. Official reports throughout the present century confirm this view. They all sustain the 1904 view that teachers: can endeavor by example and influence to implant in the children habits of industry, self-control and courageous perseverance in the face of difficulties, they can teach them to reverence what is noble, to be ready for self-sacrifice, and strive their utmost after purity and truth; they can foster a strong sense of duty and instill in them that consideration and respect for others which must be the foundation of unselfishness and the true basis of all good manners.

William Kay's views are very important and teachers are encouraged to pay heed to them. Looking at these responsibilities that are entrusted to teachers in relation to the students at their custody, it becomes clear why Jesus in Matthew 19:14 said: "allow children come to me." Jesus said this not only because children are important to him

and to God the Father but also because they are safe in his hands. The safety of the children we talk about here is the unpolluted morals expected from the teachers. That is; the moral teachings and examples that will not be harmful to the students at the custody of their teachers. For teachers to rise up to these expectations, they must allow Jesus—the great teacher to be not only their teacher but also their model. Since the school administrators deal with students they also deserve our consideration in this article.

The School Administrator and the Pupils

Ozigi (1981:35) has a beautiful opening remark on this theme when he observes: “One of your primary responsibilities as an administrator is concern with the development of each and every pupil. The pupil is at the center of educational process and all activities in the school should aim at developing his total personality to the fullest.” With this background, Ozigi has stated the roles and responsibilities of school administrators. Though the aim of this section is to highlight the roles administrators play in schools, Musaazi (1982:24) gives us a broad view of administration in this context: “Administration is an integral part of any organization. It is crucial for maintaining and expanding the relevance, effectiveness and productivity of complex institutions such as government departments, prisons, school systems, colleges, universities and so on.” Musaazi has brought the functions of the school administrators to a focus by reminding them of the need to bring about expansion, effectiveness and production in the school system. Let us now examine the areas Ozigi considers very important for school administrators. It is not the scope of this article to examine all the areas highlighted by Ozigi. However, the areas that are relevant to this theme include: training in good manners, maintaining discipline, Concern for pupils’ health and school hygiene, accidents, emergencies and safety precautions. Concerning training in good manners, Ozigi (1981:38) advises school administrators thus:

Your position requires that you and your staff make a conscious effort to inculcate in the pupils some good manners to support and reinforce whatever good habits they have learnt at home. This is one of the important formative stages in the development of pupils’ character. The manners he learns now he will carry the rest of his life... These manners are better taught by example than by theory. You and your staff should try always to set good example for the pupils to copy. Learning good manners will also come directly or indirectly through the pupils’ participation in social and extra-curricular activities, and through formal teaching, religious instruction and organized lectures.

It is important that Ozigi (1981) reminds school administrators these essential duties they have to perform as molders of character. This is where Jesus challenges

these administrators. As Jesus taught with his whole life style, are school administrators ready to lead with good examples? Ozigi admits that it is not easy to maintain discipline in schools because we are dealing with human beings who have different character because of different upbringing. However, he has some suggestions that might act as guidelines to school administrators. 1) The administrator and staff are expected to be self-disciplined to be able to set good example to the pupils. 2) Members of staff as a team must work purposefully to teach and inculcate virtues of discipline in and outside the classroom. 3) Efforts must be made to investigate thoroughly cases of indiscipline as well as taking proper and adequate measures that will bring about expected correction. 4) School administrators are reminded to follow the regulations and procedures laid down by the proprietors. 5) There is need to maintain constant communication with pupils and staff through the effect use of prefectural and committee system. 5) You should establish a clear discipline policy based on principles of fairness, justice and firmness aimed at the achievement of self-discipline as a necessary objective of education. This last suggestion is the bed-rock on which every effort to instill self-discipline rests. Being concerned about the pupils’ health and school hygiene, Ozigi (1981:42) has this to say: “The physical, mental and emotional health of the pupils is very important; for sound health is the very basis of life. The pupils have to be physically strong and healthy, and every effort should be made to promote their mental and emotional wellbeing.” In order to implement these important objectives, Ozigi has the following suggestions to school administrators. a) Pupils should be educated on the importance of sound health and encouraged to form good health habits. b) Medical personnel should be invited occasionally to the school to speak to the pupils on various health topics. c) Action must be taken at once in the case of outbreak of an infectious disease. d) The school should have a first aid box and pupils must be taught how to use it. e) Good food is essential for the maintenance of good health. f) To encourage regular physical exercises, recreational facilities must be provided. These measures are necessary especially this time when the world is threatened by the outbreak of ‘Ebola disease.’

Here in Nigeria, parents are very concerned about their children going back to school when they are not sure if the government has provided adequate equipment to check and prevent the Ebola disease in schools. It is left to the school administrators to assure parents of the safety of their children. Ozigi is very much aware of the need for proper security in schools. In order to be cautious about accidents and other emergencies, Ozigi (1981:43) has this advice to school administrators.

In school, accidents can happen at any time. Some accidents can be serious even fatal; others may lead to destruction of valuable property. Some accidents are caused by carelessness or negligence, so that no matter what precautions are taken, they will still occur. You should

nevertheless take maximum precautions to avoid preventable accidents... Cases of emergency which will occur from time to time should be promptly dealt with... All such emergency cases demand prompt action and a common sense approach to the solution of the problem.

Ozigi is correct to suggest these precautionary measures that will help to keep in check some of the emergency cases as well as security threats at schools. The situation in Nigeria where members of Boko Haram—the Islamic fundamentalists could go to schools to abduct girls is of great security issue and concern. Having outlined the qualities of teachers and the roles of school administrators, we now examine how Jesus could be a model to them.

Jesus as Model

It is appropriate to begin this section with these words from D'Souza (2009:20) who affirms: "The world is in need of servant-leaders who will lead as Jesus led and serve as Jesus served. By word and example, Jesus modeled servant-leadership and commanded his followers to do likewise. He radically established the servant attitude and style, as the way in which his leaders are to lead others." In the previous sections, we outlined, analyzed and discussed those characteristics that qualified Jesus as a servant-leader. For purposes of recapitulation in this section, we repeat some of these characteristics in order to determine how they bring out Jesus as real model. When the disciples of Jesus were struggling over position specifically who among them should be the first, Jesus in Mark 10:45 taught them a lesson on servant-leadership. Beginning with himself, Jesus said: "The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and to give his life to redeem many." In Matthew 20:26-27, Jesus insists: "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave." Finally, referring specifically to the duty of leadership and service while using himself always as example, Jesus (Luke 22:26-27) concludes: "Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. Yet I am among you as the one who serves." By washing the feet of his disciples; in John 13:5-15, Jesus not only fulfills what he teaches; but he also becomes a model to all his followers. Jesus follows his action with a very strong message when he insists: If I, then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also must wash one another's feet. I have just given you an example that as I have done, you also must do."

Recognizing the example Jesus gave as a true model, D'Souza (2009:21) comments:

The concept of a servant-leader may be difficult to grasp and live up to. Jesus is the best model. He was the great leader and yet a truly self-sacrificing servant. He rendered service to all in need, and people hung on his every word. He truly served

but he did so from a powerful position of strength, confidence and personal authority.

Going back to the qualities of a teacher by Farrant, let us examine how Jesus could be a model to our present teachers in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. Farrant is convinced that a teacher is given authority by virtue of his position but it is better he maintains it by earning the respect of the pupils than by insisting on it by right. Commenting on humility, Farrant argues: "Their greatness, not something they themselves claim, is what their followers recognize and acknowledge."

Jesus fulfilled these observations in practical terms in his dealing with people. That is why people were able to testify based on what they saw and witnessed. For example when Jesus had finished his discourse, the crowd was amazed at his teaching because he taught with authority unlike their teachers of the law (Matt.7:28-29). Again after healing the deaf and dumb man, the people were completely astonished and they began to say: He has done all things well; he makes the deaf hear and the dumb speak (Mark 7:37). Because Jesus did not use his authority as teachers and school administrators do, he was able to touch the lives of his listeners by his compassion, humility and love. Jesus was patient. He was just. He had a good heart to welcome and accommodate all and listened to all. He did not look for personal gain or human praises.

Our teachers in Africa especially in Nigeria are never satisfied with their salaries. This explains why there are frequent and long strikes which cripple the educational system in the country. In tertiary institutions; especially government owned ones, lecturers prepare handouts and sell them to students. Buying these handouts becomes a gateway to passing that course. Some lecturers go to the extent of demanding extra money from students in order to pass them. The corrupt government officials share also the blame because instead of using the oil money to improve the lives of the people through education, they use it to enrich themselves. Consequently, the teachers who are supposed to be the moral conscience of the society become even more corrupt. The students, who have seen and experienced these corrupt practices, replicate them when it is their turn to do so. Thus, it is true that: 'evil begets' evil.

Regretting the low performance of teachers in South Africa, Catitz et al (2000:240) lament: "Teachers today have lost their professionalism in the sense that some lack commitment and do not acknowledge their teaching responsibilities. Nowadays, teaching is no longer viewed as a calling—a profession in which teachers commit themselves to the education of learners." Being driven by greed and corruption, some teachers do private businesses before going to school when they are tired or even drunk. This is the core of the problem. Teachers have lost the dignity of teaching profession and dignity of work. If teachers and school administrators could learn from Jesus who said: "I came not to be served but to serve and to lay down my life for the salvation of the people," then they will regain that motivation which they

have lost. When teachers become humble, diligent and committed teachers, they win back respect from their students and the students will learn those good qualities from their teachers. When teachers model their lives according to that of Jesus, the society begins to improve. When this happens, their own students will equally say: "our own teachers have done all things well because they love us, teach us with patience and with good examples, listen so as to understand us, appreciate our efforts and correct us when we falter." The lives of students will change for good seeing their teachers reflecting the qualities of Jesus which in turn will attract them to be like their teachers in the right sense. For teachers and school administrators, D'Souza has this admonition:

The way you serve and treat your people they will in turn serve and treat other people. This is servant-leadership by example. Everything you do is an example to your co-workers. Your service is the most appealing example and the most motivating factor that others will follow. But service is an attitude and a behavior.

Since education is a process that leads to new knowledge and experience; education, therefore, is an essential process of human development. We must not forget to mention that schooling is one form by which education is provided. Thus, every teacher and school administrator should go through that school where Jesus is the only teacher and the true model.

Conclusion

The article focused on the role of leadership in the school system. It tried to outline and examine the qualities of servant-leadership in order to determine how Jesus fulfilled these qualities. It argued that since Jesus was a great teacher as well as a servant-leader, he had all the qualities to be the model of teachers and school administrators. The role of a teacher as a leader was also examined as well as the duties and obligations of the school administrator to their pupils. It became evident that teachers and school administrators do not always measure up the title of 'servant-leadership.' Many teachers in Africa especially in Nigeria do not see their teaching profession as a 'calling' and they are not prepared to serve. The article, therefore, made a passionate appeal by way of calling and encouraging teachers and school administrators to re-appreciate their noble profession as character formators and leaders of our future leaders by allowing Jesus to be their true teacher, their model and their servant-leader. This is the only way our society will become a committed, peaceful and God-fearing society.

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