

REVIEWS

Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership

Arthur Boers

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In his Foreword to *Servants and Fools*, Eugene Peterson captures the heart of the book in two simple sentences “But for Christians, the first priority is followership.... Since we are followers, it can faithfully and truthfully be said that only Jesus is the leader” (p. xi). As the subtitle of the book is dubbed *A Biblical Theology of Leadership*, Arthur Boers reviews both Old Testament and New Testament to discover “particular scriptural themes – especially countercultural strains and the ongoing experimental and improvisational nature of Christian leadership on behalf of God’s priorities of justice and compassion” (p. xx).

Boers holds the R. J. Bernardo Family Chair of Leadership at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto. An ordained minister and Benedictine oblate, he served for over 16 years as a pastor in rural, urban and church-planting settings in the USA and Canada.

In *Servants and Fools*, he offers three parts. Part One covers Christians and contemporary leadership fascinations and delusions about leadership. He makes a valid point about how a great deal of leadership literature only bolsters “the interest and perspectives of the status quo” (p. 6). He advocates for the need of an “appreciative” and “critical” approach to leadership (p. 10), since many Christians and Christian organizations buy into what successful individuals or organizations present as principles for or keys to success, which are only a partial treatment of leadership. Boers also lays out his desire to produce saints who are “faithful and fruitful Christian leaders” (p. 21).

Part Two takes up the majority of the book and reflects biblically on leadership. The author laments the current leadership educational trends, be they character studies or best leadership practices, which treat Scriptures in ways that do not do justice. He alerts the readers to the fact that the Bible does not view human leaders favorably; no human leader meets the standards of God. Quoting Jonathan Sacks, Boers argues that “the Hebrew Bible is deliberately structured not as a consistent system of thought but as a field of tensions” (p. 44). He then makes a strong case

for the three themes that run throughout the Scriptures: “suspicion about leadership, ongoing leadership innovation and leadership devolving in unexpected directions, and prioritizing the goals and means of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God (Mic. 6:8)” (pp. 44, 156).

Highlighting the Scriptures’ cautionary or negative view of human leaders and their leadership, Boers notes and emphasizes the political nature of leadership and the Christian faith and how God’s kingdom and His leadership contrast with the kingdom of the world and its leadership (pp. 40-63). The author analyzes the kings, judges, and prophets of Israel and how they failed so miserably in comparison to God as the Lord and Leader. This failure of human leaders in biblical times also has implications for leaders of today. Thus, Boers contends that any biblical Christian leadership programs must center on eschewing “leadership deformations, pitfalls, dangers, and temptations” rather than on “glorifying positive possibilities of leadership” (p. 77). To put it positively, leadership emphasizes discipleship or following. According to Boers, this following is to be “an all-consuming following” (p. 127). Boers quotes John Stott as saying “The Christian leads by example, not by force, and is to be a model who invites a following, not a boss who compels one” (p. 128).

Based on a review of the Old and New Testaments regarding human leaders and their leadership, Part Three constructs a contemporary theology of leadership, which is the highlight of the book. Picking up the definition of prayer by Stanley Hauwas and William Willimon, which is “bending our lives toward God” or “bending our wants toward what God wants,” Boers directs the attention of the readers to the rightful place: God and God’s kingdom (p. 159). He observes that the primacy of Christian leadership must be over directing attention to God and God’s kingdom. He views Christian leadership as “spiritual orienting or orientation” and leaders as “spiritual orienteers” (pp. 159-160). That is, the primary role of leaders is spiritual formation, not credentialing (p. 196). He then provides his own definition of leadership, which is “inspiring, challenging, or empowering people or groups to join God’s mission of redemption and healing” (p. 161).

In conclusion, reflecting biblically on leadership, Boers unearthed three dominant themes in both Testaments— that is, suspicion about leadership, ongoing leadership innovation and leadership devolving in unexpected directions, and prioritizing the goals and means of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Within these three themes, he interweaves his own leadership experiences, which makes reading the book more personable and enjoyable. At the same time, Boers does not hesitate to reveal his strong dissatisfaction about the currently misplaced emphasis on leadership, and uses strong words such as “leadership porn” (p. 195), as he deplores and disabuses the current emphasis on personality rather than on character (pp. 195-196). The book has a broad appeal to all Christians, but particularly, it will be of great help to current leaders, would-be leaders, and all followers who know that leadership is about orienting attention to God, who alone deserves to be called the True Lord and Leader.