The Gospels and Educational Leadership: Still Fascinating?

Dr. Robert Vella
The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST Gozo Campus), Malta

Abstract:

This exploration was inspired by the fact of the various studies both on the gospels and educational leadership, as well as the researcher’s interest in educational leadership. The study did not explore these concepts from a theological or biblical perspectives of leadership in the gospels, but rather takes an explanatory stance on how the researcher interprets different leadership events in the gospels when compared with contemporary educational leadership theories. In particular, taking into consideration the models of educational leadership as suggested by Bush and Glover (2003, 2014) as valuable contemporary typologies. The study delves in the role of Jesus as a leader and the role of leadership in the New Testament, leadership in general with further emphasis on educational leadership. The study was explored using desk research by gathering information and insights from various scholars and analysing them to interpret the correlation between leadership, in particular leadership in the gospels with contemporary educational leadership concepts. The study suggests that there is much more to be explored but there is much in common with leadership theories dating back around 2000 years with today’s typologies.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, The Gospels, Lead/s, Master, Shepherd.

Introduction

This study explores the notion of contemporary educational leadership as compared with leadership concepts found in the four gospels of the New Testament. The exploration was not done from theological or biblical perspectives, but rather from a social science perspective in comparison with concepts of contemporary educational leadership, particularly but not exclusively, those typologies and models suggested by Bush and Glover (2003, 2014) and classifications of leadership in general. These were taken as models since they were founded on previous studies by other scholars, and the researcher believes that they are very valuable for today’s educational leadership viewpoints.

To carry out this research, the researcher delved into five main keywords in the four gospels, namely leader/s; leadership; lead(s)/leading/leadeth; shepherd; and master – no leadership terms are found in any of the four gospels. Other keywords, which might also refer to leader, leadership or persons in authority, such as ‘Christ’, ‘Messiah’, ‘apostle’, ‘teacher’, ‘prophet’, ‘evangelist’, ‘elder’ (Aitken, 2009) and others, were not particularly investigated in this exploration. Furthermore, the main version of reference when it comes to gospel quotes – unless otherwise cited – were from ‘The Holy Bible: Douay Rheims version’ (Challoner, 1989), which may also be found at www.catholicspiritualdirection.org.

While leadership will be considered from a generic perspective, with particular influence on educational leadership, the main ‘actor’ will be Jesus as a leader. The principal research question for this study is ‘Is leadership in the four gospels
still attractive and appealing?” This question will be explored in correlation between leadership in the gospels and contemporary leadership, with specific emphasis on educational leadership traits, styles and models.

In research, the positionality of the person/s conducting the study sometimes becomes a must, as this may show the readers the reasoning behind some interpretations, these are even more important in particular topics of interest such as this one. Although care will be taken in my interpretations, some biases still might surface. So, my Christian values, beliefs, and faith might play some part in my interpretations, even though I acknowledge that many values of various religions are inherently very similar. But, bearing all this in my mind, still I believe that this research will make a difference in the social sciences.

As will be discussed further, the Bible describes Jesus as the ultimate example leader who served, loved, and sacrificed himself for others, and instructed his disciples to do the same. He taught his followers to avoid the worldly model of leadership, that which is based on power, domination, and selfishness. Some core leadership teachings of Jesus were servanthood, humility, love, truth, compassion, and vision. And as pointed out by Camilleri (2018, p. 18), “we should keep in mind that the founder of Christianity is Jesus Christ who was an extraordinary leader as well as an outstanding teacher.”

The gospels are four books found in the New Testament – all of them narrating the story of Jesus Christ, his life and teachings, his death and resurrection. The four gospels are of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptics because they are very similar while John, who wrote much later, has a more theological perspective. Matthew was a Jewish tax collector for the Romans who became an apostle (Luke 5:27). His gospel was written for the Jewish audience, with great emphasis on how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament. He wrote about six years after Jesus’ ascension (Challoner, 1989). Mark was a disciple and interpreter of St Peter. He wrote for a Roman audience, portraying Jesus as a powerful compassionate miracle worker who suffered and died for humanity (Challoner, 1989).

Luke was a physician and historian from Antioch who was converted by St Paul. He wrote for the Greek audience, presenting Jesus as the universal Saviour who came to bring salvation to all people, especially the marginalized. He wrote the gospel around twenty-four years after Jesus’ ascension (Challoner, 1989). The last gospel is of John, also one of the twelve apostles, and the beloved of Jesus (John 19:26). His gospel was written for an early Christian audience, revealing Jesus as the eternal Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. John supplied many interpretations which were omitted by the others. He wrote the gospel around sixty-three years after Jesus’ ascension (Challoner, 1989).

This study also examined the perspective that there is no one established definition of leadership, and leadership is very complex and still evolving (Bass & Bass, 2008; Vella, 2021). Leadership can assume different formats, but many scholars still link it to “terms like values, vision and mission” (Gibson, Shanks & Dick, 2017, p. 173), and as Knights (2012, p. 19) declared, “leadership is all about people”. In the early 2000s there was a shift in how educational leadership in UK and many other countries was looked at, in fact in many countries the term leadership was the preferred term instead of management for administration posts (NCLS, 2001). But, as asserted by Glatter (2009) whether educational leadership or educational management, the most important aspect should be the interactive social process involving relationships.

Methodology

As mentioned, the keywords searched in the gospels for this study were: leader/s, leadership, lead(s)/leading/leadeth, shepherd, and master. In addition, the gospels used for this search were from ‘The Holy Bible: Douay Rheims version’ (Challoner, 1989). However, the reader must bear in mind that there are different versions of
the New Testament available, and while they all narrate Jesus’ life, still they contain different variations of the texts, in particular because of the multitude of translations over the years. As stated in Phillips (1960, p. 184), “almost any utterance in any language carries with it a set of assumptions, feelings, and values that the speaker may or may not be aware of but that the field worker, as an outsider, usually is not”.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the major ideas of literature on Jesus and leadership and leadership in the New Testament, and leadership in general with specific attention to educational leadership typologies and models as suggested by Bush and Glover (2003, 2014). Taking into account any text that is studied and interpreted, as Aitken (2009, p. 37) asserts, “these texts [Biblical] provide neither eyewitness accounts nor direct reflection of life in the ancient communities from which they derive. Rather than mirrors of social reality, our texts are refractions of what happens on the ground, as it were.” As light is bent through a prism, social phenomena and life are ‘bent’ through experiences, perspectives, cultures, interests, and many more factors, including the time and location. Likewise, the reader should bear in mind that “our own ideas about leadership and our theologies of leadership could then not only draw upon these resources, but also be in honest conversation with them” (Aitken, 2006, p. 39).

Desk Research

Desk research focuses on utilising existing data and information retrieved from previous studies and published material. As Martins, Cunha, and Serra (2018, p. 1) asserted, “secondary data is every dataset not obtained by the author, or the analysis of data gathered by someone else”. Concurring with Vartanian (2011), when using desk research, the researcher gains access to volumes of information covering a wide horizon of data and topics. The main theoretical areas were used as the main keywords for the search. As for leadership keywords in the gospels the researcher focused on leader/s, leadership, lead(s)/leading/leadeth, shepherd, and master - Table 1 summarises the counts found in the four gospels (version: ‘The Holy Bible: Douay Rheims version’ (Challoner, 1989)) - no counts of the keyword ‘leadership’ is found in this version.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leader/s</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Lead/s Leading Leadeth</th>
<th>Shepherd</th>
<th>Master</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Validity and Reliability

As with every research, the main goal is to answer the research question/s the researcher puts forward, and thus one needs to find a methodology and method/s which answer the research question/s. As Irgens and McGillivray (2021, p. 18) explain, there are situations where “researchers may choose to conduct a research project using previously collected data”, and still their research is very valid and reliable. This is the intention of this exploration.
Limitations of Desk Research

Agreeing with Smith (2008), while desk research is an excellent tool to analyse and interpret already published information, one must take care when interpreting results, especially in terms of precision and timeliness of information. The researcher must be very cautious about the use of published material. So, for this reason as much as possible I used scholarly published material from trusted journals which are peer-reviewed, and books of renowned authors. Peer review is designed to assess validity and quality, a major purpose is to sustain the integrity of the area of research by filtering out invalid or poor-quality articles (Vos, 2014).

Interpretation and Analysis

Reference to Table 1 – these were the quotes which were explored and some of which were interpreted and compared with existing literature and to remain within the theoretical framework.

I focused on the keywords used in the gospels. According to Bush and Glover (2003, 2014), the best six typologies are those identified by Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach (1999), who Bush and Glover extended to eight. Analysis involves describing the events to which the data refers, and following Dey (1993, p. 31), with my data - the focused quotes – I made the best “to interpret, to explain, to understand–perhaps even to predict” my data.

According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), interpretation is an art relating different skills including one’s perceptions. Thus, the interpretations of the focused biblical quotes were grounded along the literature explored along the Literature Review section and my perceptions and experiences. As McCormack (2004) asserted, narratives give the possibility to readers to interpret them differently, but concurring with Lather (1991), this widens the perspectives rather than limiting them.

Ethical Implications

Since this study was based on desk research, and made use of already available data, no direct human beings were involved. So, no specific ethical issues were at stake such as data protection, confidentiality, and data ownership.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature which influenced my way of thinking for this exploration.

Jesus and Leadership in the New Testament

In this section literature on leadership with regards the authority or better leadership styles found about Jesus and the New Testament will be explored. As mentioned before different versions of the New Testament exist. So, I endorse Aitken (2009, p. 33), that, “A word of caution is also in order in order at the outset. To explore what the New Testament – or indeed any other set of texts – has to say about leadership ... that we have some idea of how we would recognize leadership”. Aitken (2009) further states that to identify how leadership works in text, one must also be aware of the community at the time, and the role of individuals, including cultural understandings. From this perspective, Bury (2007, p. 7) adds, that during Jesus’ time “there were a few rich and powerful people at the top of the social structure, it was a monopoly that left many others poor and powerless”. Literature implies that the most leadership style commended and taught by Jesus and in the Gospels was the servant leadership, but other styles are also suggested (Agosto, 2005; Bury, 2007; Brown, 2010; Addo & Dube, 2020).

Bury (2007) asserted, that during Jesus’ time different types of leadership existed, but three main types of authority dominated. The charismatic type was based on devotion and normative patterns. The traditional authority was based on belief and order, while the legal depended on legality and prescribed rules. But, according to Bury (2007) the most respected type by the communities was the charismatic leader, since they led by example, promised a better life, and believed in action. The latter was exercised by Jesus, and as Nott (1986) in Brown (2010, p. 65) asserted for Christians, “The importance of the model of the body lies in its focus on Christ Himself... the fundamental task of Christian Leadership is through its practice, to allow the leadership of Christ to be made real effective”.
Many contemporary educational leadership theories agree with the importance of relationships and social cooperation, which according to Addo and Dube (2020, p. 1) was the same for Jesus, as his leadership style was the “product of social interaction derived from the manner one interacts with various people.” Addo and Dube (2020) add that Jesus spent a lot of his time interacting with people, and they asserted that social interaction is exceedingly tied up with leadership and the success of the leader. They add that the service paradigm predated Jesus, making him a perfect and effective servant leader. Adding to this, referring to Mark 7:27, Addo and Dude (2020) claim that Jesus was a good decider, and was fully aware of his rights and responsibilities as a gatekeeper.

Henson’s and Hemby’s (2023) work dealt with Authentic Credible Leadership from the view of Jesus’ Leadership in the farewell discourses, specifically of John: 13-17. According to them organizations need ‘leader credibility’ and this help the followers since it fills them with “hope and promise” (p. 514). Credibility is critical to create a trustful atmosphere, and it is also essential to organisations to be effective and productive. This concurs with the study of Rego et al. (2013, p. 76) where they asserted that an authentic leader “must act in a respectful, honest, trustful, courteous, and compassionate way, cultivating their credibility”. Likewise, Wright (2021) declared that Jesus exemplified credibility and insisted that credibility is a crucial aspect of leadership.

Many scholars have also explored Jesus’ leadership through different disciplines. Henson and Hemby (2023) asserted that credible leaders need to explore their inner self to identify and clarify their values. According to them, Jesus embodied such discipline, his activities were grounded on self-awareness, and served to confirm and advise Jesus’ position and mission. Another discipline explored by Henson and Hemby (2023) appreciates the followers by fostering their trust and furthering diversity and good communication.

Jesus endorsed such values, his message reached people from different social backgrounds such as his apostles, Jews and gentiles, for him everyone was “children of God” (1 John 3:1). Another important aspect for a credible leader involves integrating together the diverse followers to agree on shared values. And this was clearly administered by Jesus through his ministry, by creating a synergy and carefully and precisely preaching the Kingdom of God, he clearly declared that “My kingdom is not of this world” (English Standard Version, 2001/2016, John 18:36), and challenged his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (English Standard Version, 2001/2016, Matthew 6:33); thus proclaiming shared Christian values.

Another important aspect for a credible leader is personal growth and empowering others – this involves shared communication, continuous encouragement, and a climate where one learns through mistakes. All these aspects can be seen in Jesus, for example Luke 8 and Mark 6. Another important discipline is sustaining hope by maintaining a positive attitude, exhibit compassion and empowerment during difficult times. These aspects were Jesus’ priority, he was continually present with his disciples, teaching love and sustaining hope: “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me” (English Standard Version, 2001/2016, John 14:1).

Mabey et al. (2016) argued for the courageous traits of Jesus. They asserted that Jesus’ leadership styles were exposed by his courage and humility, by breaking the cultural taboos and monocultural mind-set of his times. Jesus listened to and respected the marginalized, and referring to Matthew 20:28, Jesus “re-defined themselves [leaders] as servants at the bottom of the pyramid rather than above reproach at the top” (Mabey et al., 2016, p. 759). They further claim that Jesus is clear that humility is an important quality for persons in power and ethical leadership, whether in church or in the world, “he that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is the leader, as he that serveth.” (Luke 22:26).

Peters, Ricks, and Doval (2017, p. 589) emphasise the importance of spirituality in leadership, and assert that “Spirituality, both as a
concept and characteristic, has distinctively informed contemporary management.” They further added that Jesus ignored existing religious leaders when he chose his disciples, and admitted all types of persons from fishermen, tax collectors, and ordinary secular people, even though these people initially were drawn to material leadership rather than spiritual. Likewise, Reu (2019) argues that leadership and discipleship are two complementary elements, in the sense that Jesus asked his disciples to do as he does. This was also acknowledged by López and López (2012) in Reu (2019, p. 753): “We do not only need leaders of leaders, but leaders of leaders of leaders who themselves educate more leaders”.

According to Bury (2007, p. 7), in the New Testament “leadership seems to be that which spoke out against the abuse of power, was able to function in a time of crisis, developed potential in others, and offered praxis of faith that consolidated the community the means by which it expresses it.” Similarly, Agosto (2005), declared that the major leadership model found in the New Testament, endorsed by Jesus, and early Jesus movement was servant leadership. Agosto (2005) added that leaders at that time, had a group of followers, that were considered at the bottom of the social structure, and preached to them the message to encourage others to follow them, not by provocation, but by serving others especially the suffering and the poor, and challenging the entrenched powers that did not care for the peasant society.

Likewise, Crowther (2018), gave a list of biblical persons and declared that the most leadership model which dominates the New Testament is the servant leader, and these persons embraced such leadership. For example, the apostle John focuses on love, and James on compassion, both components of servant leadership. Peter, a servant leader, “calls himself a fellow elder rather than the one in charge” (Crowther, 2018, p. 100). But apart from servant leadership, the transformational and authentic models are also found in the New Testament. For example, Jesus as a transformational leader, “was effective in inspirational motivation … Jesus was the ultimate leader in using idealized influence in that He is the ultimate example to follow.” (Crowther, 2018, p. 127, p. 6). This concurs with what Addo and Dube (2020, p. 6) asserted about Jesus being transformational: “his interactions is giving himself to reforming the social and traditional value system, traditional thinking and social action… We can deduce that for Jesus, leadership is making a difference in the lives of those who the social system rejects or alienates”.

Staton (2019) asserted that in the New Testament we can see a diversity of leadership, but the predominant one is the charismatic style. Interestingly, Staton (2019, p. 11) explores the idea of teacher leadership. In fact, he declared that “Paul also appears to have been a teacher (1 Corinthians 4: 17, Colossians 1: 28 alongside Acts 13: 2, 1 Timothy 2: 7, 2 Timothy 1: 11). This is understandable, as a teacher is charged with passing on the tradition and an apostle is a witness to the tradition.” According to Crowther (2018) the leadership lessons in the New Testament are too much and deep in understanding, but issues of humility, love, and compassion are predominant. From these perspectives, Brown (2010, p. 67) emphasised that the “leadership style of the church must come from angle of recognizing the inherent value of the individual, as well as recognizing the worth of human relations and the vision and design of God for servant leadership.”

This section briefly explored leadership traits found in the New Testament with particular emphasis on Jesus’ leadership. The dominant leadership style of Jesus is servant leadership and as found in Matthew 20:28, “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Bible gateway). In building his leadership team, Jesus explicitly asserted that his team should not seek materialism and manipulate others, but he “said to his disciples: If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). According to Mabey et al. (2016), these values are compatible with the concept of contemporary effective leadership.
**Leadership**

“Defining leadership is like defining love: [...] the words on paper [...] never seem to quite capture the experience.” (Lashway, 1999, p. 22). Apart from mission, there is a consensus amongst different scholars that leadership is about influence (Tannenbaum, Wiescher & Massarik, 1961; Hollander, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), as well as about values and visions (Richards & Engle, 1986; Bennis, 1989; Harris & Chapman, 2010). Nevertheless, different scholars utilised different meanings in their interpretation of influence, vision, and values (Yukl, 2013). Influence, vision, and values are not the only characteristics for leadership—justice, accountability, and consistency (Knights, 2016) are also a few other characteristics for effective leadership. In tandem with these characteristics, a leader should always bear in mind that leadership is about people; it is a process occurring in dyadic, in threes or bigger groups (Bhatti, Matto, Shaikh, Hashmi & Shaikh, 2012; Steffens et al., 2014).

Research related to leadership definitions is very vast and wealthy, with different scholars offering divergent interpretations with no single interpretation emerging as the best one (Luft, 2012). Stogdill (1950) defined leadership as that influencing process to achieve specific aims and objectives, quite aligned with contemporary perspectives of distributed leadership. Fiedler (1967) described leadership as task oriented, while for Dubin (1968) leadership involved exercising authority and making decisions, both descriptions more aligned with current management ideas. In their definition of leadership, many post-war scholars referred to the influential process engaged in by leaders to direct followers to arrive at the required destination—it is the process which directs activities towards shared goals (Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Tannenbaum et al., 1961; Hollander, 1978; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Rauch & Behling, 1984; Donnelly, Ivancevich, & Gibson, 1985).

From the 1980s onwards, many scholars still used the term ‘influence’ (Yukl, 2013), many of them also embraced the idea of leadership revolving and articulating visions, creating healthy environments, and inspiring people to achieve a purpose (Richards & Engle, 1986; Bennis, 1989; Jacobs & Jacques, 1990; House et al., 1999; Northouse, 2007). Other recent definitions showed the importance of motivation, together with influence (Paterson, 2013), a process of involving all stakeholders, where “leadership involves goal attainment and these goals are shared by leaders and their followers” (Knights, 2016, p. 4).

Most definitions, rather than contradicting each other, complement each other by refining and strengthening the process of leadership, and the fact that there is no unique accepted definition (Gregory, 2005) makes leadership more interesting and embracing of diversity. While the definitions differ in many respects, “what matters most is how useful the definition is for increasing our understanding of effective leadership” (Yukl, 2013, p. 20).

**Educational Leadership**

As leadership in general, there is no unique definition which describes and defines educational leadership. But concurring with Bush and Glover (2003, 2014), the best educational leadership typologies are those offered by Leithwood et al. (1999), which Bush and Glover extended from six to eight. Educational leadership typologies refer to styles and behaviours leaders adopt in their work environments. According to Silins and Murray-Harvey (1999), models of leadership might not directly affect students’ learning outcomes, but also assert that they certainly have an impact on the teachers, who in turn directly influence the students’ performance. The eight typologies presented by Bush and Glover (2003) are: instructional, transformational, moral, participative, managerial, postmodern, interpersonal, and contingent leadership, and they have been very influential and beneficial in educational environments (Amanchukwu, Stanley & Oloolube, 2015).

The focus in instructional leadership is that of leaders watching the behaviour of teachers attentively and giving instructions that will affect
students’ growth. Southworth (2002) asserted that this is an approach which centred on modelling, monitoring, and professional dialogue of the leader with teachers.

In adopting transformational leadership, followers achieve beyond their experience level of performance due to the influence of their leaders (Bass, 1985). Bass (1995) claimed that this leadership style follows idealised influence and inspires motivation towards individualised considerations and intellectual stimulation. Many scholars promoted transformational leadership as one of the best leadership styles (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Leithwood, 1994; Bush & Glover, 2003) and, consequently, for many years this model gave way to widespread leadership research (Northouse, 2013; Dinh et al., 2014; Meuser et al., 2016).

Leithwood et al. (1999) described this moral leadership as being focused on values and ethics, with the leaders’ authority derived from what is good or bad. Sergiovanni (2001) argued that outstanding schools need leaders endorsing both values and beliefs, and that moral leadership is required to develop a learning community. Fullan (2003, p. 29) argued that moral leadership can remake school leadership and lead to school improvement, and such leadership will help students to be good “citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society”.

Participative leadership emphasises the importance of democratic decision-making in schools (Leithwood et al., 1999), in fact some scholars compared it to democratic leadership (Yukl, 2013; Khan et al., 2015; Meuser et al., 2016) - since both styles motivate followers who share responsibilities with leaders and contribute to decision-making (Bhatti et al., 2012; Paterson, 2013).

Managerial leadership focuses on tasks, functions, and behaviours of leaders, and competence in this approach ensures that the goals of the institution are effectively met (Leithwood et al., 1999). Many scholars like Leithwood et al. (1999), Bush and Glover (2003), Sharma and Jain (2013), Witzel (2013), and others concur that both leadership and management are needed to run an organisation, including educational entities. The connection between them is intimate and interwoven, and the overlap is so deep, particularly in motivating people and running an organisation, that it is hard to clearly distinguish between leadership and management (Fidler, 1997; Nienaber, 2010).

Postmodern Leadership is about considering different views for a solution and considering different options before taking decisions. The postmodern leader respects and gives attention to diversity and considers the perspectives of different stakeholders (Bush & Glover, 2003). Sackney and Mitchell (2001) argued that postmodern theories give rise to multiple voices and different cultures rather than those articulated solely by leaders.

Leithwood et al. (1999) described interpersonal leadership as focusing on the relationships leaders establish with stakeholders in the school. Interpersonal leaders have refined personal skills, and according to West-Burnham (2001) interpersonal intelligence is required for the interpersonal leader, and it is not possible to conceptualise any leadership model without interpersonal intelligence.

Contingent leadership provides an alternative approach with the assumption that every school is different, and requires leaders to adapt themselves to particular contexts. Effective leaders are endlessly reading and reflecting on a given situation and act accordingly (Yukl, 2002). Leithwood (1994) considered this leadership as the extent to which a leader is capable of responding to changes and providing the necessary measures for that circumstance. According to Bush (2007), while many models are limited and deal with just one aspect, the contingency style considers different aspects.

In 2014, Bush and Glover further added scholarship to school leadership models. From the start they emphasise that these models “are subject to fashion but often serve to reflect, and to inform, changes in school leadership practice” (p. 553 – my emphasis). Bush’s and Glover’s (2014) pursue on the educational leadership typologies, some of which already discussed in 2003, like instructional, managerial – adding ‘managerialism’ as “the shift in the language of
school organisation to favour ‘leadership’” (p. 557), transformational, and contingent. As for moral leadership, they included authentic. They also added distributed, and teacher leadership to the list. Bush and Glover (2014) assert that moral leadership is different from transformational as its emphasis is on integrity, and the focus is on values, beliefs and ethics of the leaders. They declared that other scholars use other terms for this leadership such as ethical, authentic, and spiritual. They argue that concept of authentic leadership is like moral leadership, where both focus on the leaders’ values. Citing Wood (2007, p. 295), it is “essentially about the conduct and character of the individual leader.”

Bush and Glover (2014) claim that while collegial and participative leadership were popular shared leadership approaches some years ago, the preferred model in the twenty-first century is distributed leadership. According to Harris (2004) this leadership style focuses on engaging expertise in an organisation rather than coming formally form a person/s of position. Harris argues that “successful heads recognise the limitations of a singular approach” and they excel when they embrace a leadership which is “Distributed through collaborative and joint working” (2004, p. 16).

It is very interesting and beneficial to include teacher leadership in educational leadership. Although there are different views of teacher leadership, it seems that three key dimensions of teacher leadership are supported by literature (Harris & Jones, 2019). Firstly, the importance of this model demonstrates influence rather than a role or post. Secondly, teacher leaders are those going beyond their normal teaching duties in the classroom but share good practices and initiate changes. And finally, in their classroom they develop pedagogical excellence and go beyond to influence their actions to others (Harris & Jones, 2019). Agreeing with Bush and Glover (2014), it is difficult to imagine distributed leadership in schools without teacher leaders, and both models are underpinned by the notion of shared values.

The research of leadership models shows that while some focus on the processes by which leadership is applied, the focus of others is more one-dimensional. I would argue that there is no one theory that gives a comprehensive picture of leadership. There is no one that a leader can apply on a day-to-day basis in taking decisions but then again, all theories provide essential practices which can be used in different contexts. Although there are numerous definitions of leadership and a substantial number of models, there is no agreement on which one might be the most effective on a daily basis (Bush & Glover, 2003).

Even though there is no unique model that leaders apply on a daily basis, the transformational style is the model mostly applied on a day-to-day basis (Day et al., 2000; Northouse, 2013; Meuser et al., 2016), probably because it applies both for leaders and followers by raising “one another to higher levels of morality and motivation” (Burns, 1978, p. 20). The skill of a leader is that of knowing which style of leadership is best in a particular situation, and eventually adapting to the circumstances by applying the most appropriate model to take the necessary decisions. This also means that when necessary for the effectiveness of the organisation, the leader applies more than one style concurrently, according to the desired outcomes.

Findings and Discussion

In 2013 referring on his book ‘The Pope’s Leadership style’, Lowney declared,

Great leaders know themselves very deeply: they’ve come to grips with who they are, their strengths but also their inner demons. But even though they reflect deeply on themselves, leaders don’t get stuck inside themselves: they get over themselves, and live to serve others. So those would be the first two commitments that great leaders make: to confront themselves deeply, but then to serve others. (dotMagis Editor, 2013)

This section reaffirms that the predominant leadership style in the New Testament is servant leadership, but while various scholars agree with
this when it comes to educational leadership, other studies have shown different ideas—as discussed above.

The disciplines described by Henson and Hemby (2023) showed the importance and positive sides of authentic credible leadership, according to Einola and Alvesson (2021), a limitation of such leadership is that it focuses on who is the leader without really showing what they do. Also, Henson and Hemby (2023, p. 522) added, “The authentic leadership development process develops leaders and followers.” Then, Luthans and Avolio (2003) asserted that the authentic leader stimulates the growth and development of the followers such that the followers eventually turn into leaders themselves. This can be seen in Jesus during his prayer: “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word” (English Standard Version, 2001/2016, John 17:20). Henson and Hemby (2023, p. 526) concluded that “authentic, credible leaders create an atmosphere of trust, hope, and empowerment that helps followers discover their divine design.” while the teachings from Jesus in his ministry, provided a wealth of information of how leaders can be authentic and credible.

The main keywords searched in the gospels were leader/s, leadership, lead(s)/leading, leadeth, shepherd, and master, with leadership showing no results in the used version. This section is divided in these keywords and compared and interpreted according to the literature which inspired this study. Due to the amount of some keywords found in the gospels, mainly but not exclusively ‘Master’ and ‘Shepherd’, not all found quotes were interpreted and discussed in this exploration. Also, others were ignored since they were not specifically in the context of this study – leadership.

The gospel quotes chosen for analysis followed two main criteria: first I tried to find a quote from each evangelist – when it was available, was in the leadership context, and was not the same from another evangelist, since this gave me the opportunity to view leadership perspectives for different audiences; secondly, I limited myself to one quote per evangelist on each keyword and I chose that one which I thought is most relevant for this exploration.

**Leader/s**

As shown in Table 1, the number of counts for this keyword/s were two, one each in gospel of Matthew and Luke.

Matthew 15:14 – “Let them alone: they are blind, and leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into the pit.” One must keep in mind that Matthew is writing for the Jewish audience. The incident of this phrase happened after the disciples informed Jesus that the Pharisees were offended by something he said - that what goes in a person’s mouth does not defile the person, but rather what comes out defiles people. The Pharisees were the religious leaders representing Judaism at that time, these were entrusted with studying the scriptures and guiding God’s people. In this incident, they were offended and alarmed that the disciples were breaking the tradition of ceremonial handwashing before meals. Jesus tells the disciples to leave the Pharisees alone, and do not debate with them. He uses ‘blind’ guides, using terminology used by Jews at that time to indicate lack of understanding. Here Jesus is implying about spiritual blindness, and their leadership drag other ‘blind’ people, people of Israel, towards disaster. Here Jesus is not telling his followers to avoid debates with all people, but rather he is teaching them to know when to stop wasting energy with the unwilling.

Luke 22:26 - “But you not so: but he that is the greater among you, let him become as the younger; and he that is the leader, as he that serveth.” The audience of Luke the physician were the Greek. This discourse of Jesus was pronounced to his apostles few hours before he was accused to death. “Become as the younger” carried with it, as in the old monastic rule, “juniores ad labores, the idea of service” (Ellicott in Bible Hub, n.d.). Also, “He that is the leader” from the Greek text gives the equivalent to bishop or presbyter (Ellicott in Bible Hub, n.d.). In this text we see Jesus taking the form of a servant and humbled himself even though it led
to the death on the cross. These words see Jesus talking in two parallel prepositions, the greater to become the younger, and the leader to become the server. This confirming that a leader from this perspective should endorse servant leadership by being humble and serve the followers. This text, apart from being said to his disciples, the followers, was even more expressed to Peter who would be taking his place. While some scholars appropriate such model to ‘Christian sovereign’ (Pope Pius XI, 1930), others find its relevance for educational leadership.

Lead(s) - Leading – Leadeth

As shown in Table 1, the number of counts for this keyword/s were nine; one in the gospel of Matthew, three of Mark, three of Luke, and two of John.

Mark 9:1 – “And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter and James and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves, and was transfigured before them.” Mark wrote for the Roman audience. This passage is about the transfiguration of Jesus, and according to Christian teachings, it is a way where people should deny themselves and follow him. It is also the teaching where Jesus is shown as the bridge between Heaven and Earth. This episode occurred when Jesus had already chosen his twelve apostles. It is not known why these three were chosen, but they were among the earliest of Jesus’ disciples who had been with him longest. These three were present with Jesus in several other occasions e.g. witnessing Jesus raise Jairus’ daughter from the dead (Luke 8), and accompanying him while he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26). A reason could be that Jesus was preparing these three for leadership roles that would later occupy in the church. Not from a biblical perspective, one can conclude that these three had total confidence and trust in their leader, which is a very important aspect in leadership.

John 10:3 – “To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.” The analogy of the shepherd is used many times referring to the leader. As a good shepherd-leader, the followers recognise their leader, the one who ‘feeds’ them, guides them and protects them. The ‘sheep’ accept and trust their ‘shepherd’, and the shepherd makes sure that the sheep are kept safe. The shepherd is such an effective leader that they know their sheep by their names and leads them. The narrative continues that when the sheep are all out in the open, and while the shepherd walks before them leading them, they would never follow a stranger since they recognise the shepherd.

Shepherd

As shown in Table 1, the number of counts for this keyword/s were fourteen; three in the gospel of Matthew, two of Mark, four of Luke (in the same chapter), and five of John (in the same chapter). While reference to a shepherd in the Bible carries the commonplace connotation of the person who tends sheep, there are several occasions in the New Testament where shepherd is used in a leadership sense. Resane (2014) asserts that there are three main shepherd-leaders responsibilities in the New Testament; those of caring, courage, and guiding. The idea of caring, proistēmi (Greek) has the meaning of leading, directing, protecting, or even sponsoring (Resane, 2014). In Wright’s (2001, p. 277) words, “it would involve caring for them properly, by tending their needs and providing good pasture. The New Testament variably and interchangeably attaches the ideas 'to lead' and 'to care for'. ” As for courage, Resane (2014) declared that this is a leadership quality where a leader is expected to assume responsibilities with courage, and has the courage to serve the followers. By guidance, it is meant that the leader-shepherd gives direction and helpful suggestions regarding future decisions and course of action. The leader guides and show the way to followers.

Matthew 9:36 - “And seeing the multitudes, he had compassion on them: because they were distressed, and lying like sheep that have no shepherd.” In this verse one can see the humanity of Jesus. As the good shepherd, he was concerned for them both for their comfort, but also for their everlasting happiness. The narrative suggests that they were exhausted,
burdened and weary of the various traditions. The scribes and Pharisees were also considered as ‘shepherds’, but they fed themselves rather than the flock. They did not take care of the diseased, sick, or broken, they did not seek for the lost ones, but rather let them astray. On the contrary, Jesus as a shepherd-leader, was the servant leader who gathered the flock, and the followers had trust in him.

Mark 14:27 - “And Jesus saith to them: You will all be scandalized in my regard this night; for it is written, I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep shall be dispersed.” This episode occurred in the last moments before Jesus was condemned to death. Although the disciples trusted Jesus - their leader – unconditionally, after a time under the influence of terror, they lost confidence and hope and eventually denounced him. At times, the disciples fled when they saw him in the hands of the enemies. Here we can see that Jesus would bear the hatred, embrace the shame and pain while he endured betrayal, and was completely alone. This can be compared with how sometimes an educational leader feels lonely (Vella, 2021), but eventually faithful followers will give their trust and help.

John 10:11 - “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd giveth his life for his sheep.” According to Ellicott (Bible Hub, n.d.), the word ‘good’ here is used for fair, in a physical sense it means excellency, and morally it means beautiful and noble. Here Jesus is presented as the ideal shepherd, fulfilling every thought of guidance and support. In addition, Ellicott asserts, that the image of Christ in this episode is the most deeply impressed in the church, and found in the earliest Christian literature, art, and paintings. Here one finds the responsibilities of the good shepherd-leader. Good has different connotations like ‘true’ and ‘veritable’. The shepherd dies so that the sheep may live. A very strong assertion, which can be interpreted as one of the highest effective properties a leader can offer to the followers. This title is used to help people that Jesus, or otherwise a leader, needs to be loving, caring, and trustworthy, while the followers appreciate these abilities.

Master

As shown in Table 1, the number of counts for this keyword/s were sixty; sixteen in the gospel of Matthew, thirteen of Mark, twenty-three of Luke, and eight of John. According to Walker (in Bible Definition and Scripture References), master is often translated from ἀδημος (Greek) meaning lord, which denotes the owner or master of a servant or a slave. Also, there are other variations for master, for example κυριος (Greek) also translates to master, lord, or sir and frequently used for Christ; καθηγητής (Hebrew) is leader and sometimes translated as master. In addition, this translates to guide and sometimes to teacher. All this suggests that master is often referred to contemporary leader translation.

From these perspectives of leadership, Brown (2010) asserts that there are two views, either one sticks with biblical leadership principles only, or using biblical leadership principles with the skills of management science. I agreed with the latter for this exploration, and discussed that the gospels have values which are quite relevant today for educational leadership. There are leadership styles found in the gospels which correlate deeply with contemporary educational leadership styles and can be endorsed by educational leaders throughout the globe.

Matthew 22:16 - “And they sent to him their disciples with the Herodians, saying: Master, we know that thou art a true speaker, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest thou for any man: for thou dost not regard the person of men.” An interesting episode mentioning the Herodians, these are only mentioned in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. These were followers of the house of Herods. They were partisans of the Herods, they were looking to them to restore independence of the nation, and though they differed a lot from the Pharisees, on this point they agreed. Although with a sense of dishonesty, they referred to Jesus as Master and teacher, thus holding him with teaching authority. Moreover, even though there is an admission of hypocrisy, one can still argue on different styles of leadership like teacher-leadership, transformational, and others.
Mark 4:38 - “And he was in the hinder part of the ship, sleeping upon a pillow; and they awake him, and say to him: Master, doth it not concern thee that we perish?” An interesting episode showing both the humanity of Jesus and also the spiritual side. The question put to Jesus showed impatience but a time of untrust to their leader when in difficulty, even though they still recognise him as their master. One may ask was it reasonable for the apostles to be afraid? They had seen Jesus cure the sick, cast out demons, and do much more, but still they doubted him.

Luke 5:5 - “And Simon answering said to him: Master, we have labored all the night, and have taken nothing: but at thy word I will let down the net.” A good example opposing the previous event were Simon puts his whole trust in his master. According to Ellicott (Bible Hub, n.d.), the word translated master, epistates (Greek) is not the same as didaskalos (Greek) meaning teacher. Here it implies a less distinct recognition to Jesus, and it is more used as a general respect. This episode occurred in the beginning of Jesus’ life, meaning that the disciples did not yet know him. But, Jesus knew the importance of the daily catch for fishermen. The story continues that they believed in him and trusted him so much that they left everything and followed him.

John 13:13-14 – “You call me Master, and Lord; and you say well, for so I am. If then I being your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” This incident happened in the last supper, a few hours before Jesus was condemned to death, so by now the apostles were supposed to have known him well. Here we see Jesus recognising and acknowledging his leadership traits. But the leadership he is presenting to his disciples is one representing service and charity, one who came ‘not to be served, but to serve’. It is a leadership teaching – to serve through humbleness. From a Christian leadership perspective this suggests the purpose of Jesus’ leadership and how Christian leaders should behave and follow. Here Jesus clearly advises Christian leaders that they should lead by humility and put aside selfish ambition and serve their community.

Conclusion

Servant Leadership is the most predominant and contemplated type of leadership in the Gospels when compared with contemporary educational leadership. From a spiritual perspective, concurring with Pope Francis one must endorse this style from Jesus’ teaching and not the perspectives of power and materialism. From an educational perspective, servant leadership helps the leaders to serve the stakeholders for their benefit and the interest of the organisation, mainly educational settings. Servant leadership, as in moral leadership, focuses on values and ethics (Leithwood et al., 1999; Sergiovanni, 2001), which are essential elements for effective leadership to communicate clear educational values (Day et al., 2001).

While a servant-moral leader might be effective and important in an educational setting, one must be very careful and not impose morality and other values. They might not be values that the followers endorse in particular when it comes to religion – values endorsed, while most religions endorse them, should be common good shared values, like trust, honesty, love, and others. As explored, apart from servant leadership, there are different styles in the gospels which are similar to contemporary educational leadership descriptions. Concurring with Camilleri (2018, p. 19), “Leaders have the obligation to be effective in their role thereby enabling others to reach their potentials and abilities, both personally and institutionally. Consequently, they need to celebrate the talents and potentials of others.”

As above-mentioned interpretation of leadership including educational leadership in the New Testament is not that straightforward, and depends on many factors and factions of life, described above. In Aitken (2009, pp. 43-44) words, “A full discussion of the theological dimensions of leadership understood in these terms would require a detailed exploration of how theological meaning is articulated in each case and how this making of meanings contributes to the constitution of leadership.”

My final reflection and question is: Are the gospels and leadership models compared with
contemporary educational leadership styles still fascinating? While this is very subjective and interpretative according to different people, I would say that some contemporary educational leadership traits still follow and are appropriate for today’s educational system.

I end this article by appropriating one of Pope’s Francis quotes, taken from the Video conference by CNN, 17 September 2015, and applying it to my exploration: “Be leaders wherever it behooves you to be. Leaders of thought, leaders of action, leaders of joy, leaders of hope, leaders of the construction of a better world.” (Faith, 2020).

References


Bible Hub: Search, read, study the Bible in many languages. (n.d.). https://biblehub.com/


Casti Connubii (December 31, 1930) | PIUS XI. (1930, December 30). Retrieved from https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html


Mabey, C., Conroy, M., Blakeley, K., & De Marco, S. (2016). Having Burned the Straw Man


Witzel, M. (2013, June 3). Leaders and managers should be one and the same. *Financial Times*. Retrieved from https://www.ft.com/content/0f0eeee0-9891-11e2-867f-00144feabdc0


