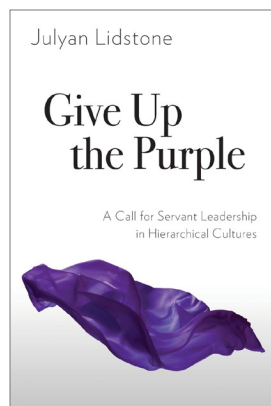


Give Up the Purple: A Call for Servant Leadership in Hierarchical Cultures

By Julyan Lidstone. Langham Global Library, 2019. 107 pages.

Reviewed by Gene Major

Gene Major (pseudonym) is an American who grew up in Africa and Southeast Asia and holds a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary. Gene and his wife, Dawn, have been church planting among Muslims in South Asia since 2014, where they currently lead a multicultural team of 11 adults.



Give Up the Purple, written especially for practitioners in hierarchical cultures, is a call for Christian leaders to surrender the pursuit of titles, prestige, and power and to embrace countercultural servant leadership.

Julyan Lidstone writes with more than four decades of experience in the Muslim world. Joining OM in 1973, he spent 15 years in Turkey, four years in India, and served as the leader of OM ministries in Western and Central Asia for 12 years. Julyan and his wife, Lenna, currently serve as ambassadors for OM's Muslim ministries, training international teams in discipleship and church planting.

Summary

In this concise book divided into eight chapters, Lidstone advances his argument through true stories, biblical exegesis, and theological

reflections from church history. The author's comfortable integration of scholarly research with a storytelling tone was a pleasure to read. He asserts that poor leadership is a foundational barrier to the progress of the gospel among the world's least-reached peoples. He defines poor leadership as:

Domineering, controlling leaders, who take offence when questioned and refuse to delegate authority, cause division, disappointment, defections and burnout. Their actions betray a fundamental misconception that the church belongs to them and is the means for them to gain honour and status. (Lidstone 2019, preface)

Lidstone asserts that the globally-applicable solution can be found in the examples set forth by Jesus and the Apostle Paul (ibid).

Lidstone begins by describing the problematic leadership paradigm. Painting a picture of first-century leadership, he connects this to the story of Constantine and explains the concept of "giving up the purple" as symbolic of laying aside one's prestige and personal glory.

The phrase "patron-client" describes a relationship between two people in which one provides personal resources (usually wealth or influence) in exchange for the other's loyalty and honor. Lidstone posits that *unhealthy* patronage is a key reason churches fail, but that the system's *healthy* expression is also possible. This leads the author into an examination of the ways both Paul and Jesus operated within a patron-client context.

The author looks at Paul's leadership within the patron-client dynamics in Corinth and Philippi. In 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul uses shame and weakness to dismantle the church's corrupted system of honor and power. His poetic retelling of Christ's crucifixion through the lens of his exaltation in Philippians 2 would have shocked his audience into accepting a humility-based lifestyle rather than the power-based cultural standard.

Readers are then introduced to Jesus' life within the patron-client system. Lidstone points out that God is the ultimate patron, and since Jesus is the incarnation of God, it makes perfect sense that the New Testament applies patronage language to him. Jesus operated within this worldview; yet, his interactions with people exemplified his rejection of the very premise upon which the world's patronage system was founded.

The author then discusses the relationship between God and authority. According to Lidstone, since God is our ultimate authority, our view of God will shape our understanding of how authority should play out (Lidstone 2019, 61). For example, leaders who view God as loving and faithful will reflect those traits in their own leadership, while leaders who view God as capricious and controlling will express such traits. Lidstone then juxtaposes Trinitarian Monotheism and Absolute Monotheism. Drawing on the work of theologian Jürgen Moltmann, he argues that a non-Trinitarian understanding of God develops leaders who are self-sufficient, relationally disconnected from those they lead, independent in decision-making, and potentially dictatorial. The Trinitarian view of God, however, by virtue of the interrelatedness between the members of the Godhead, produces a paradigm in which "true leadership happens in relational communities, where individuals come together in profound sharing and mutual submission" (69–70).

Finally, Lidstone presents a vision of redeemed leadership by considering how Trinitarian theology is worked out practically through leaders' attitudes of personal care toward those they lead. It is displayed through self-disclosure, humility, and a desire to see followers excel. Lidstone then makes a notable assertion: Trinitarian theology is the only way to see church-planting movements happen. Its idea of servant-leadership that desires the flourishing of others is similar to how the three persons of the Trinity each love and glorify the others. Church-planting movements will only happen, asserts Lidstone, when leaders are developed, trained, and sent out to form groups themselves (Lidstone 2019, 79). A Trinitarian theology produces this emphasis on

empowerment. Lidstone rounds out this discussion by challenging Westerners' uncomfortable relationship to submission, and by offering a sobering reminder that those who lead like Jesus will also suffer as He did, though they will also share in His ultimate vindication.

Evaluation

One of the strengths of this book is its writing style and readability. The author explains his points without sacrificing robust argumentation. He does not resort to saving space by proof-texting his way through his biblical arguments, but instead, he faithfully offers the readers an in-depth look at the biblical context before asserting a given point. His thoroughness is commendable. On multiple occasions, I found myself asking questions about one of his points only to turn the page and discover the answer was already there.

Another strength of this book was how well it illustrated the patron-client paradigm through endless examples, rather than simply describing it factually. It allowed me to gain a better feel for the worldview in question than I have from other books and articles that seek to define it anthropologically or missiologically.

Finally, an assertion that Lidstone made well was that absolute power is intrinsic to leadership within Islam. In most discussions I have encountered of leadership within a patron-client context, the topic is handled anthropologically or culturally; Lidstone shows it to be a theological reality as well. He explains that in Islam the attributes of God are not part of his nature; He is unknowable. Because the only thing one can know of God is his will, submission is heavily emphasized. Additionally, within an Islamic framework of leadership, submission to the leader is part of submission to God. Therefore, Lidstone boldly claims, "Muslim societies are more likely to suffer from overbearing leaders who see themselves as being above the law, and who are willing to use any and all means to hang on to their position and privileges" (66).

While I did not think there were many major weaknesses in this book, there are a few worth noting. First, Lidstone argues that our leadership will reflect our understanding of God (whether Absolute or Trinitarian Monotheism). What surprised me was that although a dominant feature of this book was the author's well-supported assertions through stout biblical evidence, his Scriptural backing was uncharacteristically absent on this particular point. My disappointment was not that I disagreed, but that I had grown used to such well-supported argumentation that I was thrown off by its absence in this case. It also would have been helpful to have some clear examples or applications of leadership flowing from a Trinitarian view of God. Although packed full of excellent stories, the book did not do much to suggest how to proactively develop leadership in a ministry context, and I found myself left with more questions than answers.

A second issue that occasionally reared its head was the author's absolute statements about the centrality of good leadership to success. For example, the very first statement in the preface is, "Healthy, life-giving leadership is the single most important factor for the success of any organization or movement" (Lidstone 2019, preface). Later, he says that leaders who lead for their own glory at the expense of others "may gather a group around them, but it will never be a true church that is filled with the power, life, and love of the Spirit of Christ" (35). To me, this seemed a bit overstated. Is not the world full of examples of how God shows his grace to a body of believers *in spite of* a leader? Does the lack of godly character in a group's leader disqualify the entire body?

The Practitioner's Angle

As I worked my way through this book, it was difficult to think of a context in which its message would *not* be relevant. Following are a few of my thoughts in light of the South Asian Muslim context in which I serve.

As an American leading a multicultural team, one of the first questions that came to mind was, "How can I apply Lidstone's servant-leadership paradigm to a multicultural team?" Some team members from high power-distance cultures might expect leadership to be quite directive, while other team members from low power-distance cultures might desire a more consultative approach. Does the leader need to customize their leadership approach to each cultural background so that one group receives its marching orders, while the other has its menu of possibilities?

There is not a one-size-fits-all answer, but on our team, two principles have been helpful to remember. First, *we talk about it as a team*. If our cultural differences are never acknowledged, the ground is fertile for hurt. Dialogue is the place where grace makes up for misunderstanding. Second, every team has its own "team culture," which is a blend of the team members and their cultural backgrounds. For example, a team might consist of an American family, a Nepali family, and a Brazilian Team Leader. But, it is not that simple. No other team consists of those *specific* families and leaders. We try to get to know our team members as who they are. Learning their culture is *one way* to get to know them as individuals, but it is not the end in itself. As relationships deepen, trust grows, and there is a more grace-filled environment in which leaders can try to do their Spirit-empowered best.

Another area I gave some thought to was the models of church planting that emphasize rapid multiplication and minimize direct outsider involvement. I was struck by how long it could take for Lidstone's paradigm of leadership to take root in a hierarchical culture such as the one I serve in. This is especially true in contexts where there are not many (or any) national believers to model it. If it is true that a paradigm shift will be a slow change, it is important for ministry workers to take a good look at some of these church-planting models and ask two questions. First, does the model allow time for this type of shift, or will it cause new leaders to resort to their cultural default? Second, does

the model allow for the development of a biblically-faithful, indigenous expression of servant leadership directed by the Spirit, or does the model itself possess intrinsically-Western aspects such as a hands-off approach (i.e., democratic and consultative)? These are important questions that need to be asked.

A final implication I urge readers to consider is based on Lidstone's words that, "leaders of new churches that are located in profoundly non-Christian cultures must understand that they will only see these cultures transformed by living countercultural lives" (26). Lidstone points out that *this will mean walking down the path of suffering* (Lidstone 2019, 26). Those of us operating in these contexts must develop a strong theology of suffering and persecution and ensure that it is transmitted to others as part of discipleship.

Recommendation

Because the need for a renewed vision of servant leadership is not limited to hierarchical, unreached contexts, leaders and ministry workers anywhere in the world could benefit from and be challenged by this book. I wholeheartedly recommend it to anyone who has even a passing interest in the topic of servant leadership. Its reader-friendly writing style, biblically-strong arguments, challenging conclusions, and accessible length make it well worth the read.