



The role of the church in the public space in Zimbabwe (2017–2023): Lessons drawn from Johannine Jesus in John 21:15–18

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The New Testament presents Jesus as a transformational leader whose ministry had a holistic approach to challenges that were prevalent in his contemporary world. This article is a theological reflection of the role of the church in the public space in Zimbabwe as we draw lessons from servant leadership which is derived from Johannine Jesus' message in John 21:15–18 with special focus on the Zimbabwean socio-political context (2017–2023). It is imperative for the Zimbabwean church to draw lessons from the socio-historical interpretation of Johannine Jesus' message in John 21:15–18 because the Bible has to speak to our context in the here and now. The article concludes that the Zimbabwean church is compromised because of divisions among ecumenical Christian organisations on how to deal with socio-political issues in Zimbabwe such that an effective application of Jesus' political ethics is problematic. The article recommends that church should be more proactive by empowering her members and the community at large on how Jesus' ethics on servant leadership are useful in socio-political context in Zimbabwe. This will help the church to remain relevant and transformative in the public space.

Contribution: The article contributes towards the scope of the special collection on the contextual reading of New Testament in the socio-political landscape in Zimbabwe as it focuses on the lessons drawn from the socio-historical interpretation of the Johannine Jesus' message in John 21:15–18 towards the role of the church in the public space in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: Church; Johannine Jesus; public space; servant leadership; socio-political; Zimbabwe.

Introduction

This article is a socio-historical analysis of the lessons that can be drawn from servant leadership, which is exhibited or taught by the Johannine Jesus' message in John 21:15–18 by the church in Zimbabwe in her critical role in the public space. This Johannine text is essential in this study because it is the beacon of servant leadership, which has influenced many church leaders in their approach to the public space, especially in politics. The period under review is 2017–2023 primarily because this period is characterised as a new dispensation or the new republic in Zimbabwe, which makes it topical in scholarship.

The public space in the Zimbabwean socio-political milieu (2017–2023) is characterised with competition, 'bullying', exclusion, intimidation and survival of the fittest. Some Zimbabwean politicians have a tendency of attempting to silence and muzzle the church so that she 'sees no evil or hears no evil'. The common political mantra by some political players is that 'the church must concentrate only on the pulpit and leave politics to politicians'. This context is a fertile ground for the Church to show her role as a shepherd who cares or tend the sheep against wolves of our time. Jesus' message in John 21:15–18 becomes relevant to the Zimbabwean Church as she is called to be a voice of the voiceless. On the other hand, the Johannine corpus is broad in its nature and scope, hence, for purposes of narrowing this research, the main focus of this article is based on a theological reflection of the epilogue of the gospel of John (21:1–25) with special focus on John 21:15–18. Firstly, the method to be used to interpret John 21:15–18 will be defined. Secondly, a brief socio-historical exegetical analysis of John 21 will be presented, and finally, its relevance to the involvement of the church in the public space in Zimbabwean politics will be

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explored. The key questions are: What lessons can the Zimbabwean church learn from the Johannine Jesus' message in John 21:15–18? How can the Johannine Jesus impart transformation in the manner in which the church in Zimbabwe relates with the public space?

Definition of socio-historical analysis/criticism

According to Ehrman (1997:145), socio-historical criticism is an exegetical method that focuses on the social context of the world behind the text, whether this is the world referred to in the text or the world in which the text was actually written. Ehrman (1997:145) asserts that by closely reading a text, one can uncover phases of a community's history. Socio-historical criticism is an extension of a focus on the *Sitz im Leben*, that is, the 'situation in life' the form that the critics have traditionally spoken about. Perrin and Duling (1994:24) argue that socio-historical criticism is interested in describing specific historical conditions and early Christian responses to them. This method also explains how traditions developed and changed over time. Therefore, the method is vital in tracing the socio-historical context of the Johannine Jesus' teaching in John 21:15–18 in unravelling how the text reflects the Johannine worldview on servant leadership. Moreover, the method will be employed in giving a brief socio-historical exegetical analysis of John 21:1–25, which embodies our main text (Jn 21:15–18).

A brief socio-historical analysis of John 21:1–25

It is important to note that this article will not focus much on the literary integrity of the text because our main focus rests upon a theological reflection of the socio-historical context or intention of John 21:15–18. Haenchen (1984:229) argues that the 21st chapter of the Gospel of John poses an especially difficult puzzle. If one reads chapter 20 through to the end, one is then convinced that 20:30f forms a good conclusion. And yet the story continues, but in what a curious way (Haenchen 1984:229). It is interesting to note that the disciples are no longer in Jerusalem (as presupposed by the narrative in Jn 20); we find them again on the Sea of Galilee although we are not told how they came to be in this new situation. In essence, there are two schools of thought associated with John 21 in the history of Johannine scholarship. Keener (2003:1263) asserts that the first school of thought perceives John 21 as a later addition to the Gospel from a different hand, and the second school of thought considers this passage as a product from the same author as the rest of the Gospel. Essentially, some scholars are of the view that John 21 is a work of a later ecclesiastical redactor, whereas some consider it as an epilogue or an appendix following an observation that John 20:30–31 is presented as a conclusion of the gospel. Carson (1991:523) and Moody Smith (2007) contend that the fact that 20:30–31 has the ring of a conclusion, while a new scene, in a different setting, begins abruptly in chapter 21 suggesting that this

chapter has been appended to the Gospel later, perhaps by another hand.

However, Lindars (1972) argues that John 21 is included in all manuscripts (MSS), it is certainly not a late addition. He opines that the epilogue 'has been added soon after the rest was written, possibly at the time of publication to a wider audience than the immediate circle for whom the Gospel was written' Lindars (1972:618). This has been the traditional view that advocates for a single authorship of John 21 and the rest of the Gospel. According to Shin (2019:171), the prologue implies the sending of Jesus by the Father (1:18; cf. 3:17), Jesus' reinstating and commissioning of Peter as shepherd in John 21 implies Jesus sending of his disciples to the world.

Theological reflection of John 21:15–18

It is imperative to have a theological reflection of John 21:15–18 following the brief exegetical analysis above. This will give us an appreciation of the lesson that can be drawn from this passage. It is worth noting that there are several lessons that have been derived from a careful study of this passage; however, this article will concentrate on the traits of servant leadership that can be deduced from this passage. We concur with Shin (2019:198) in his assertion that though John's Gospel may not contain many explicit ethical rules, the absence of such concrete directives ironically makes John's ethics timeless. It is timeless because instead of giving a set of specific behavioural guidelines, John's ethics first focuses on fundamental human qualities that draw readers' attention to the more profound questions that deal with one's being, worldview and identity (Shin 2019:198).

Poon (2006:69) contends that in the context of Jesus call to abide in and model his love as depicted in John 21:15–18, Christian leadership must also take a similar holistic approach to guide and facilitate change in repressive/toxic political contexts and other spheres of life. The development of capacity and willingness are more than just cognitive processes. In most circumstances, there is a restorative nature to our dealings with others. Broken trust, disappointment, misplaced expectations and failures are all examples of impediments to an authentic nurturing and growth dynamic between leaders and followers.

It is evident that John 21:15–18 is anchored on a shepherd and sheep analogy. Resane (2014:2) stresses that the New Testament has 16 references to 'shepherds'. The shepherds were among the first to receive the message of Jesus' birth and visit him (Lk 2:8–20). The shepherd and the sheep relationship are used to illustrate Christ's relationship to his followers who referred to him as 'our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep' (Heb 13:20). Jesus spoke of himself as 'the good shepherd who knew his sheep and would lay down his life for them' (Jn 10:7–18). After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned Peter to feed his sheep (Jn 21:1) (Resane 2014:2).

Shepherding is a complex task that is involving and needs special skills and a calling. Resane (2014:7) observes that shepherd leaders are the *oikonomos* [caretakers], tasked to manage and administer the welfare of the sheep that belong to the Master. The point is shepherd leaders are to move beyond feeding the lambs *gala* [milk] to feeding the sheep *broma* [solid food]. A reflection on John 21:15–18 shows that Peter is presented as a shepherd, which do not belong to him in person. In essence, he is presented as a steward whose duty is to take care of the sheep whose owner is Jesus. Before Peter is instructed to tend the sheep, Jesus asked him three times whether he loved him. This is implying that Peter has to tend the sheep in a manner, which clearly demonstrate his love for Jesus. The rhetorical art in this text is well structured to illustrate this servant-master relationship. The shepherd who is Peter is mandate to execute his duties diligently, effectively and with agape love. It is unquestionable that Peter is answerable to the master (Jesus) who is unlike Palestinian lords/masters who were absentee landlords. Peter's master (Jesus) is omnipresent as portrayed in the post-resurrection appearances where the resurrected Christ is no longer subject to space and time. Hence, being contracted by such a master means that it is a high calling that needs precision and sense of vocation.

On the other hand, the sheep should not go hungry at any time. They must be led to good pastures and must be protected from any potential harm from the environment. Essentially, they must be guarded jealously from predators. Verse 18 presupposes that the shepherd must be willing to sacrifice even to the point of martyrdom. This implies that the shepherd is being called to sacrifice everything for the sake of the sheep's safety. Indeed, this is not an easy task. Resane (2014:7) reiterates that the shepherd-leader directs the flock in the world, helping them not to be of the world. They are protected from wolves and beasts (pseudo-leaders) in the world with the rod and staff (Resane 2014:7). This is the provision of good leadership that Wright (2001:277) refers to as 'the necessary work of justice and protection of the weak that needed to go on'. With the above theological reflection of John 21:15–18, we now move on to an analysis of the role of the church in the public space in Zimbabwe (2017–2023) from a Johannine Jesus perspective as depicted in John 21:15–18.

The role of the church in the public space in Zimbabwe 2017–2023 from a Johannine Jesus perspective

According to Taylor (2007:87), for one to comprehend the dynamics of the public space, he or she ought to consider a number of aspects because it is self-consciously founded by the common action of those acting within. Public space manifests in several forms, which include but not limited to a public sphere 'in which people conceive of themselves as participating directly in issues associated with national development' (Taylor 2007:87). Furthermore, public space involves issues of civil society, where everyone has rights to give and receive public information (Mendoza 2016:7).

Moreover, public space is closely related to socio-economic and political discourses and processes within a nation. Therefore, topics like the rule of law, democracy during pre-election, election and post-election period are imperative as we talk of public space. Hence, the role of the church in the public space should not be underestimated. This article will make reflections on how the church has fared in her role in transforming socio-political constructs that have been dominant in Zimbabwean politics during the Second Republic.

This section focuses on the role of the church in the public space in Zimbabwe during the period 2018–2023. The choice of this era is deliberate because it marks the dawn of a new government in Zimbabwe, which is commonly referred to as the Second Republic or the New Dispensation under the leadership of President E.D. Mnangagwa. The new government came into power following a military coup, which overthrew the late President R.G. Mugabe in power in September 2017. Therefore, the role of the church in this period is critical in ascertaining the church and State relations. Moreover, we are interested to investigate how Jesus' message in John 21:1–19 can be applied in the Zimbabwean context as the church embarks in the public space. It is important to note that the church has significantly contributed towards the development of Zimbabwe in the area of education, economic, health and social sectors. For instance, some Mainline and Pentecostal churches administer hospitals, schools, vocational colleges and universities. However, the arena of politics has posed challenges as will be discussed in the discussion below.

Magezi and Tagwirei (2022) attest that a close analysis of the history of church and politics in Zimbabwe indicates that the two tend to cleave together and discard each other when it is convenient. Other scholars such as Paradza (2019:5) and Chitando (2009:96) argue that the prophetic voices became inaudible after independence, when the political elite disregarded the prophetic role of the church in political processes and public spaces and relegated it to spiritual matters. The post-independence Zimbabwe has been characterised with corruption, alleged vote rigging, politically motivated violence, hyperinflation, moral decadence and other societal ills. Jesus' message in John 21:15–18 becomes relevant to the Zimbabwean church as she is called to be a voice of the voiceless. Magezi and Tagwirei (2022) argue that the audibility of the ecclesial voice in Zimbabwe has been somewhat high, while co-opted members tirelessly attempted to neutralise the entire Church and cow her into submission. It has been observed that the Zimbabwean political context is associated with state-schemed polarisation, co-option and pampering of the ruling elite with praises camouflaged in labels of patriotism (Dube 2021:7–8).

Magezi and Tagwirei (2022) contend that the nature of church and political engagement in Zimbabwe has forced countless pastors and congregants into conformity. Most Christian leaders have opted to go into a mute mode or hiding in matters to do with politics. As shepherds they watch

helplessly when the sheep are being devoured by political and economic predators. One pastor who was interviewed said that, *zvepolitics zvinouraisa* (if you are involved in politics you can be killed/die). Therefore, poor citizens are like sheep without shepherds. They are left without pastures and freedom to exist without brutality or injustices. That has left the state to relentlessly violate the rights of the citizens without censure. However, in a case of history repeating itself, the few pastors who have commendably developed the courage to raise their prophetic voices have been misunderstood, misjudged and mistaken as enemies of the state (Hove & Chenzi 2017:3). Most Christian leaders are not willing to accept responsibility of tending the sheep (flock) for the fear of being misconstrued as agents of the opposition (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022). The sheep in this instance are not only adherents of a particular church or denomination but its inclusive of all citizens because the church must open her doors to outsiders regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, race or economic status.

John 21:15–18 does not define the category of the sheep that presupposes that Christian leaders or the church should not discriminate. Hence, the role of the church must not be underestimated. What is interesting is that most politicians are adherents of different Christian denominations. For instance, Robert Mugabe was Catholic, Emmerson Mnangagwa is a Methodist Church in Zimbabwe and Nelson Chamisa is an Apostolic Faith of Zimbabwe. Hence, as political leaders are affiliated to the church by conversion or by default, they belong to the flock that needs shepherds. They need similar pastoral care as any other member of the church. What baffles the mind is why some politicians openly claim that pastors who are shepherd should leave politics to politicians. The rationale is that when the church is proactive in politics, her involvement must sanitise the ills of politics because politicians usually claim that politics is a dirty game. If the claim by politicians is something to ring bells about, then it justifies the need of shepherds who nurture them in the area of morality or ethics. In the history of Zimbabwe, we have had renowned clerics who were politicians in their own right. These include the likes of Rev Ndaningi Sithole (founder of Zimbabwe African National Union [ZANU]), Bishop Abel Tendekayi Muzorewa (founder of Union of African National Congress [UANC]) and Professor Canaan Sodindo Banana (the first President of Zimbabwe). These Christian leaders face criticism from within and outside the church for their active participation in politics but whether Zimbabwean politicians like it or not, their role in bringing independence to Zimbabwe is irrevocable and inerasable. In their own right, they were good shepherds to the flock of their time.

Magezi and Tagwirei (2022) and Chitando (2011:46) rightly observe that the church in Zimbabwe has been hit by factionalism, which is purported to be masterminded by government divisions by deliberately upholding the partisan and denigrating independent members, in order to divide, weaken and silence the church and keep a continued grip on

power. It is evident that eisegesis of biblical texts such as Romans 13:1–7 has contributed immensely to the docile nature and passiveness of the Church in issues that involve politics. The general layman's view on Romans 13:1–7 is that because the political leaders are ordained by God, therefore, whatever they do or say cannot be criticised or condemned. This has led some politicians to openly say that pastors should concentrate only on the pulpit and not politics. Hence, the church has been blindfolded and forced to not to hear or see evil, especially that which is paddled by politicians. In other words, the church has been whipped into total submission (Gusha 2020:1). Misinterpretation of the Bible contributes to confusing and coercing religious ministers the pro-ruling party to blindly and unquestioningly submit to the government of the day and at the same time denigrating anti-ruling party ministers for allegedly not indicating contextual interpretation and appropriation (Togarasei 2004:76–77).

Meanwhile, we also note that the church has not only been struggling with the notion of whether she can engage in politics but also with the modalities and the extent thereof (Goronga & Dimingu 2019:420–421). Some church leaders think that ecumenical bodies such as Zimbabwe Council of Churches, Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe and Catholic Bishops of Zimbabwe should engage the state on behalf of the church, while others value strength in numbers and see the need for denominational grassroots voices to complement representative bodies. On the other hand, there is a clique that include Jehovah's Witness and Seventh Day Adventists that believes that the church must totally focus on salvific missionary work and not get involved in secular politics. As if such a dilemma is not challenging enough, poverty and corruptibility have dogged the church and weakened her capacity to engage in politics effectively (Magezi & Tagwirei 2022).

In order to pacify the church, the ruling government has roped in court prophets who speak what is favourable to the state. Some of them are allegedly beneficiaries of the land reform programme and other economic benefits. Magezi and Tagwirei (2022) assert that examples of clerics who got co-opted by the state include the deposed Anglican Bishop Nolbert Kunonga, Reverend Obadiah Musindo of the Destiny for Africa Network (DFAN), which was formed in 2000, Prophet Andrew Wutawunashe, the founder and leader of Family of God, and Samuel Mutendi of the Zion Christian Church. Today, Andrew Wutawunashe runs the partisan Zimbabwe Independent Indigenous Council of Churches (ZIIICC) with Samuel Mutendi. Of late, a new crop of Pentecostal prophets has joined the band of court prophets, these include Prophet Emmanuel Makandiwa, Prophet Passion Java and Prophet Uebert Angel. Makandiwa was not much involved in politics until the advent of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), when he publicly denounced vaccination against the pandemic. It is not clear why he changed goal posts and revoked his earlier utterance against vaccination. It is alleged that he had to appease the government by inviting President Mnangagwa and his entourage to his

church service in Chitungwiza during an Easter conference in 2022. The service was a typical political rally. One would say: what is wrong in inviting the president to an Easter conference? This move is problematic because the politicians, wherever they are invited, they are soliciting for votes (in this the forthcoming general elections to be held in July/August 2023); hence they turn a church service into a political rally. Moreover, the prophet as a shepherd compromises his role to effectively tend the sheep if he openly supports a political party because the members who are the flock belong to various political parties. It is impossible to force all members to support one part in a modern society, which is associated with democracy. Doing so is tantamount to infringing the rights of the members; in fact, it is a form of injustice.

The government of Zimbabwe under President Mnangagwa broke world news with the appointment of Prophet Uebert Angel as a presidential envoy and an Ambassador-At-large to Europe and Americas in March 2021 to seek trade and investment for the country. We do not deny that on a surface value this was regarded as a positive move in line with the roping in of a prophet in state business. However, the recent release of a documentary on gold mafia by Al Jazeera's investigative unit has triggered outrage among Zimbabweans (Muronzi 2023). Prophet Uebert Angel is fingered in alleged elicit gold smuggling every month from Zimbabwe to Dubai. This has tarnished the image of the prophet and the government at large. Based on John 21:15–18, the prophet is depicted as a wolf instead of a good shepherd who is supposed to protect the interests of the poor and be a good ambassador.

Dube and Nkoane (2018:229–235) depicted the rise of partisan ministers of religion to active politics as a means to maintain the status quo and advance their political endeavours. For example, the Johannes Ndanga-led Apostolic Christian Council of Zimbabwe (ACCZ), commonly known as Mapostori, claims that it promotes the interests of indigenous religious churches in Zimbabwe and affirms its support for the ruling party. The ACCZ discerns the victimisation and shushing of dissenting religious voices by the state as justified (Dube & Nkoane 2018:229–235).

Bearing in mind that historically Zimbabwean politics have been tragically militarised, intolerant and violent (as indicated by numerous scholars such as Beardsworth, Cheeseman & Tinhu 2019:593; Dzimiri et al. 2014:231–235; Helliiker & Murisa 2020:9; Maringira 2021:105), the majority of Christians in Zimbabwe no longer reflect what is good in the presence of evil because of fear of intolerant Zimbabwean politics.

While Niringiye (2020) finds the question of responsible Christian political engagement problematic, as Africa has been a playhouse of violence, intolerance and victimisation of dissenting voices since the colonial era, Jesus Christ challenges believers to 'let their light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (Mt 5:16). The church is consequently expected to be exemplary in everything and should contribute

towards curbing the injustice, oppression, exclusion, gross inequalities and corruption that are bedevilling Zimbabwe. We concur with Mujinga (2018:248) that church and politics are as 'Siamese twins', meaning that the two are inseparable; thus, for the church, political involvement is necessary and unavoidable (Tshaka & Senokoane 2016). The church should provide effective shepherding role to politicians at all levels of political administration. The government of Zimbabwe must be encouraged to accept that economic development is not possible without the role of the church in influencing servant leadership from within and without. The church is a key stakeholder in curbing corruption, political violence, all sorts of injustice and nepotism. By so doing, the church will offer a shepherding role that transforms communities and brings change of political attitudes that have caused politically motivated violence, intimidation and in extreme case they has resulted in death of innocent souls.

Conclusion

The article managed to present the key arguments associated with the socio-historical context of John 21:15–18 by expounding the two main schools of thought associated with the text. A theological reflect of the text was drawn and it emerged that the symbolism of the role of the shepherd and the sheep (flock) is essential in understanding the meaning of John 21:15–18. It is imperative for the shepherd to tend the sheep with agape love, diligence and sacrifice. These are key tenets of servant leadership that the church must exhibit in the public space especially in politics. It has emerged that the Zimbabwean context is volatile because it is characterised with political corruption, political intolerance and attempts to dividing the church on political grounds. We have seen the rise of court prophets who are now becoming parrots in blindly supporting the government. The fact that the church is divided, it has weakened her in the political front. The application of the servant leadership as portrayed by John 21:15–18 is hamstrung because of lack of unity in the church. Political engagement is relegated to ecumenical bodies, but this approach is not effective because the politicians belong to specific denominations where they are part of the sheep. Hence, the shepherds in various denominations should take the mandate to enforce Christian ethics on these politicians. If they commit political ills, they must be rebuked and corrected. Hence, the church must not leave politics to politicians alone because doing so is tantamount to leaving the sheep without a shepherd.

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Author's contributions

P.M.C. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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