# Theology  

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## Portrait of a Leader

> Russell H. BOWERS, Jr.

Pol Pot, Mother Teresa, Hun Sen, Heng Cheng, George Bush, Yassir Arafat, Gautama Buddha, Osama bin Laden. What do all these people have in common?
They are leaders. For good or for ill, with evil intent or noble, they have stood at the front and rallied compatriots to follow. The fortunes of millions have been shaped by these few.

A good leader is beyond price. Where would people be without his or her inspiration, courage, determination, and wisdom? Would not their hopes have evaporated? By contrast, an evil leader can cause unspeakable woe or embarrassment to his followers. Examples are too many and too painful to recite.

How can we find the one and avoid the other? How can we become the one and not the other? In Cambodia where the church is growing at warp speed, we labor to train a new generation of leaders. For what shall we aim? What qualities should we seek to find and produce?

This article cannot fully answer those questions. But let me suggest five characteristics for starters. These qualities may be useful for many kinds of leaders. But particularly in the church, a good leader is someone who:

- follows
- serves
- builds
- leads
- passes on the baton.


## A Good Leader Follows

It may seem an inversion to talk about a leader being a follower. Leaders, we are told. stand at the front, point the way, and issue commands. But the best leaders started out as good followers. How can a leader know how the chain of command works unless he has experience in the lower links of that chain?

Therefore the best leaders have started low. They have learned how to obey directions before they are entrusted with the responsibility of giving them.

For example, early in his ministry Jesus chose twelve men who would lead the church when he was gone. He called them "apostles"-a word signifying "those authorized to act in the sender's name." They were not volunteers but draftees, and Jesus was going to send them out to preach and cast out demons. So this was a responsible calling. But what was the first part of their job? Mark 3:14 reads. "He appointed twelve-naming them apostles-that they might be with him...." The first part of their call as leaders was simply to be with Jesus. They watched him. listened to him, observed his character. and learned his objectives and principles of ministry. Yes, they were going to lead, and in time they did. But their first task was to follow. Good Christian leaders were once good followers.

Joshua was a great leader. He commanded Israel in her campaign to conquer Canaan. But for long years before he served as leader he served as follower and aide to Moses. ${ }^{1}$ Before becoming a great prophet Elisha "poured water on the hands of Elijah." Timothy was fully aware of Paul's teaching and doctrine, ${ }^{3}$ and had served the

[^0]great apostle as a son with his father. ${ }^{4}$ That is why later he led so well.

Not only were biblical leaders good followers before they started to lead, they continued to be good followers while they led. Paul urged the Corinthians, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." Paul was still following-day by day and hour by hour-the example of Christ. His following made him an effective leader. The minute we stop following Christ is the minute we stop effectively leading.

So good biblical leaders are good followers, as have been many secular business, political, and military chiefs.

How can we apply this principle? First, we ourselves should not rush into leadership. A wiser attitude is that of Solomon and Jeremiah. ${ }^{6}$ Leadership is a great responsibility; those who point the way (and especially teach) will be judged more strictly. ${ }^{7}$

Second, we should therefore devote much energy to our own discipleship, preparation, and learning. Time spent in Bible studyboth formal and personal-is an investment, not a luxury. "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way." ${ }^{\prime \prime}$ Zeal without knowledge was Israel's problem; hence she missed her messiah. ${ }^{9}$ True prophets excoriated their false counterparts who rushed to speak without stopping to hear Yahweh's council. ${ }^{10} \mathrm{~A}$ hurried leader may plunge into battle only to discover that he has engaged the wrong enemy or is using inappropriate weapons and tactics. Further, a theological degree does not mean that its owner can relax and coast through serving and sermonizing. Following, learning, and growing are lifelong pursuits; it may thus be wise to choose a ministry where peers can continuously evaluate and correct us.
${ }^{4}$ Phil 2:22.
${ }^{5} 1$ Cor 11:1.
${ }^{6} 1$ Ki 3:7; Jer 1:6.
'Jas 3:1.
${ }^{8}$ Prov 19:2.
${ }^{9}$ Rom 10:2.
${ }^{10}$ e.g., Jer 23:16-32.

Third, we should not be too quick to promote others to leadership. Hence the wamings in the pastorals against new converts and hasty ordinations. ${ }^{11}$ In our rapidly-growing Cambodian churches and NGOs we scrounge and pray for leaders, but before we appoint them let us be sure they are true followers of Jesus Christ and accomplished in whatever technical and people skills the position we envision requires. Ecclesiastical and organizational horror stories abound of aspiring young leaders who have assumed major responsibilities too quickly, only to succumb to pride, corruption, or temptation. "They must first be tested" 12 is a wise caution for all kinds of positions. It is not enough that a candidate be enthusiastic, personable, liked, and able to repeat catch phrases. We must also determine whether he or she is a skilled and proven follower.

## A Good Leader Serves

There has never been a stronger or more deserving leader than Jesus. He was always right. He is Immanuel-God with usand hence savior and lord. He is worthy not only of obedience but also of worship, which we should render to no other. But how did Jesus lead? Did he parade his authority, forcing his subordinates to bow the knee and pamper him? Did he use his position to enrich himself? No. Jesus' leadership was characterized by service. In a key verse of Mark Jesus explained why he had come-" "not ... to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."13 Jesus was and is the world's greatest and most deserving leader. But as leader he came to serve, and to serve in the most profound wayby giving his life. If we wish to follow his example, then we will lead by serving, not by exploiting our positions to make ourselves comfortable, powerful, or rich.

A leader who ignores this counsel may find himself without followers. That is what happened to Rehoboam. At the beginning of his reign Rehoboam's prospective subjects petitioned him for relief

[^1]from the heavy tax burden his father had imposed. The elders counseled, "If today you will be a servant to these people and serve them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants." But Rehoboam rejected that sage advice and heeded the young men who urged that he show the people who was boss. The result? He lost ten of the twelve tribes he should have ruled. ${ }^{14}$ Heavyhanded leaders tend to lose their followers-certainly in their affections, often in their allegiance.

Paul, by contrast, led by serving, as did his Lord whom he followed. Instead of polishing his own reputation vis-à-vis Apollos he taught that both were merely servants, of no importance when compared with God, and not competing with but rather complementing one another. ${ }^{15}$ As a servant he was willing to suffer for the church, which he often did. ${ }^{16}$ In this way he became a great leader whom Christians still respect and follow today.

Similarly, if we today wish to be remembered as Pauls and not as Rehoboams, we must recall and practice Jesus' advice-"If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." ${ }^{17}$

## A Good Leader Builds

Some leaders think that the best way they can use their position is to secure their own wealth, power, and reputation. Their job is certainly not to help others. They are interested in the welfare or advancement of constituents and subordinates only to the extent that these are encouraged to continue to support them. If another leader in the organization begins to rise in power or popularity, he or she is considered a threat that must be put down.

Leaders who think this way are consequently afraid of allowing those who work under them to succeed. They don't want associates to acquire skills they themselves lack, or to be seen too

[^2]often in highly visible ministries. They fear that if others gain too many skills or too much recognition, their own status will be threatened. Nervous self-seekers then harass, publicly disgrace, demote, or fire rising stars. They may assign them to peripheral posts, or to jobs impossible to accomplish and certain to lead to criticism. Some sink to making scandalous innuendos or threats, or to inflicting physical harm.

By contrast, great leaders build their subordinates up and rejoice when they succeed.

Ephesians 4:11-16 tells why Christ gives spiritual gifts to individuals. It is not to make the recipients proud or powerful. No, spiritual gifts are given "to prepare God's people for works of service" (v. 12). My giftedness is not so that people will think I am great, but to equip me to help others so that they will be able to serve. A good leader does not try to do everything himself so that he keeps all the power and no one else develops ministry skills. Rather, a good leader works to build others up-to empower and enable them-and rejoices when they succeed. It is only when everybody in the church is working-not just the pastor-that "the body of Christ [is] built up" and "we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature" (v. 13).

So a good church leader continually asks himself, "Am I trying to do everything myself and to limit the opportunities of others so that all power remains with me? Or am I working to build others up so that they also may succeed?" Do we show others how to study the Bible for themselves? Do we show others how to care for the church's finances so that they are wisely spent and accounted for in an honest, open manner? Do we teach others how to teach and preach, and give them opportunities to do so? These are things that good leaders do-they build others up so that they can succeed.

Some leaders are afraid to do this because they fear that in time their disciples will do better than they themselves, and hence become more powerful and better known. It is true; that may happen. But that is O.K. The disciples of John the Baptist became jealous for John when Jesus started his ministry, because people were leaving John and following Jesus. But John replied, "He must become greater;

I must become less. ${ }^{118}$ Andrew brought his brother Simon Peter to Jesus, ${ }^{19}$ and soon Peter was better known than Andrew. When Saul of Tarsus came to faith, the early church thought his conversion was a ruse. But Barnabas believed Saul and introduced him to the church. ${ }^{20}$ Before long Saul-the Apostle Paul-became stronger and better known than Barnabas. But if our love is for Jesus, and our deepest desire that he be honored and known, then it should be O.K. with us if God uses those we train even more than he uses us. After all, ministry is about the success of the church and the honor of Jesus' name, not our success and the honor of our name.

In the nineteenth century a nervous Sunday School teacher in the United States visited a shoe store to share the gospel with one of its salesmen. Most of us do not know the name of that Sunday School teacher, but many have heard of the shoe salesman. His name was Dwight L. Moody, and God used him as a great evangelist. Today a school, a radio ministry, and a publishing house bear his name. The follower surpassed the leader, but I'm sure that nervous Sunday School teacher thinks that is just fine.

We must conclude, therefore, that a good Christian leader is someone who does not focus on protecting or promoting himself. Rather he edifies others so that they can succeed.

## A Good Leader Leads

So far we have said that a leader is someone who follows, who serves, and who builds others. If that were all that the Bible says on this subject, we might conclude that a leader should never be strong or decisive. If a leader is a good follower, and one who serves and builds up others, then is it ever right that he should stand at the front and give bold, firm directions?

The answer to that question is an enthusiastic "Yes!" While it is true that a Christian leader, like Jesus, seeks to serve rather than be served, and, like Paul, to build up others' ministries rather than

[^3]focusing attention on himself, that does not mean that he does not act decisively. On the contrary, by definition a leader is someone who leads! He takes the initiative, points the way, and warns of dangers. He does not sit back and wait for others, or even for God, to do something. A good leader serves by leading.

Sometimes people bear the title of leader, but leave the actual work of leading to others. For example, Saul was Israel's first king. As king he was Israel's leader. So when the giant Goliath challenged Israel to battle, Saul should have been the one to accept that challenge. Rather than sitting in his tent with the title of leader, he should have stood up in God's strength and led. Instead it was the shepherd lad David who, although he had no title, stood strong in God's strength and led Israel that fateful day against her enemy. It was Saul's own fault that when the army returned from battle the women who came out to meet them celebrated David more than they did the king by singing, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands!"

This was not the first time that Saul, who bore the title of king and leader, failed to actually lead. In 1 Samuel 14:1 Saul's son Jonathan took the initiative to trust God and lead in an attack against Israel's enemies. Verse 2 shows us what the king was doing-sitting under a pomegranate tree with his six hundred men. Later in chapter 15 he let the people talk him into disobeying the LORD's commandhe didn't take a stand and lead against their wishes. It is no wonder then that Saul's kingship did not last, and God found someone else who would lead his people as he should.

Leading means we will sometimes have to take a strong stand, and sometimes a lonely stand. Sometimes others may be afraid or asleep or ignorant, and be walking down the wrong path. That is when a leader stands tall and speaks strongly about what should be done, even if what he advocates is unpopular. He does this not to build his own status, but for the sake of the truth. Elijah was a strong leader who stood alone against Jezebel's four hundred prophets of Baal. He did this not for himself but for the sake of the truth. Jeremiah and other Old Testament prophets often took unpopular stands. Paul opposed Peter to his face in Galatians 2. He did this not to enhance his power or reputation at Peter's expense, but simply
because Peter was wrong. Peter needed to be corrected before he led a large segment of the church into error.

So even though a good leader first follows, and does not deprive others of training or opportunities in order to keep everybody's attention on himself, at times he serves them best by taking a strong stand to show them the way to go. A good leader serves by leading.

Because a leader has to actually lead his people, he must first be certain of the direction to take. That is why he must first have been a good follower. Leaders have to lead, but if they are unsure where they are going because they are not closely following the Lord, they may lead their flocks into disaster. That is what Jesus was talking about when he said of the Pharisees, "Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit. ${ }^{י 21}$ The Pharisees were not following the Lord. So although they were doing their job as leaders to lead, they did not know where they should be going and led their flocks into a pit. A good leader knows the way he should be going, and then boldly strikes out and leads his people down that path.

## A Good Leader Passes On the Baton

Footraces are popular athletic events. Runners crouch behind the starting line, and when the gun is fired all take off for the finish line. Many races are individual events. Each racer in an individual event is his own "team"-how she does and whether she wins depends solely upon herself. She has no teammates. But other races are relays. A relay team may consist of four members. As the race is ready to start, an official gives the first member of each team a small stick or baton to carry. When the gun is fired, this first member runs around the track carrying this baton. Then as each returns to the starting point the second member of his team is waiting. This second member starts to run alongside the first, and the first hands over the baton to him. The first member, having completed his lap, drops out and the second carries the baton and runs around the track. As he completes his circuit and approaches the starting line the third member

[^4]of the team is waiting. Again the baton must be handed off, and the second retires and the third takes over. This process continues until all team members have run with the baton around the course. The winner of the race is not any individual, but the team that runs together the best and can execute smooth and efficient handovers of the baton. If any individual team member does not work well with the othersracing alongside the one in front to take the baton from him,' and making sure he firmly places the baton in the grasp of the one who follows him-his team will not win. Even if that individual runs the fastest lap of all the runners in that race, if he does not take and hand over the baton efficiently, his team will lose. A relay race is not about individual performance but about team performance.

Christian leadership is like that. We are not in leadership to draw attention to how well we lead, or evangelize, or teach, or preach. We are part of a team where we are called upon to do our part as best we can, and then hand on the baton to someone else.

Christian ministry started with Jesus. When the time came for him to finish his ministry by dying for us, being raised, and returning to heaven, he passed on the baton of ministry to his apostles. He told them, "Now I am going to him who sent me, . . . [and] you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." ${ }^{22}$ Later he said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. ${ }^{{ }^{2} 3}$ Jesus was leaving; he was handing over his ministry to them; and he would send the Holy Spirit to enable them to fulfill it.

So the apostles took over where Jesus personally had stopped. The New Testament talks about Jesus' apostles laying the foundation of the church. ${ }^{24}$ But the apostles did not minister forever, though some of them did well and their ministries started the church. The time came when they had to hand over their work to others. Paul, for example, was personally commissioned by Christ, did his job well,

[^5]and then handed over his work to Timothy. Paul gave important instructions to his follower by commanding, "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." ${ }^{25}$ Timothy was to take the baton from Paul, run his own lap, and then pass the baton on "to reliable men" who would run their laps and then "be qualified to teach others." Christian ministry is not an individual race, designed to draw attention to individual stars or heros. It is a relay race where we take over message and commission first given to others, and after running our brief lap find someone to whom we can entrust the work.

As leaders, then, we should be always on the lookout for a few good people with whom we can invest extra energy so that some day they can take over smoothly and run well. Just as a relay race cannot be won if one team drops the baton or does not hand it over smoothly, so our Christian ministries will suffer if we do not have people trained and ready to take over when we move on.

Because Jesus knew he would soon be crucified and leave this earth, he spent much time in the latter part of his ministry training his disciples. After Peter came to the conclusion that Jesus was Israel's messiah, Jesus "began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer. . . .2 ${ }^{26}$ It seems he spent more time with them and a smaller percentage with the crowds. Instead of doing all the preaching himself he sent out the Twelve, and later seventy others, to preach and teach. Rather than standing up himself and teaching, he gave others the opportunity to learn the skill, even though he could have done it better. He was preparing them to take the baton.

So if we are to be good leaders, not only must we do our own job well, we must constantly be training another to take our place. Are you doing this? Do you have someone with whom you meet for study and prayer? Do you take others with you as you minister, so that they can observe . . . and then share . . . and then take over?

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    ${ }^{2} \mathrm{Ki}$ 3:11.
    ${ }^{3} 2$ Tim 3:10-11.

[^1]:    ${ }^{11} 1 \operatorname{Tim}$ 3:6; 5:22.
    ${ }^{12} 1$ Tim 3:10.
    ${ }^{13} \mathrm{Mk}$ 10:45.

[^2]:    ${ }^{14} 1 \mathrm{Ki}$ 12:1-19.
    ${ }^{13} 1$ Cor 3:5-8.
    ${ }^{16} 2$ Cor 3:8-10; 6:3-10; Phil 2:17; Col 1:24-25; etc.
    ${ }^{17}$ Mark 9:35.

[^3]:    ${ }^{18}$ John 3:30.
    ${ }^{19}$ John 1:40-41.
    ${ }^{20}$ Acts 9:26-28.

[^4]:    ${ }^{21}$ Matt 15:14.

[^5]:    ${ }^{22}$ John 16:5-7.
    ${ }^{23}$ John 20:21.
    ${ }^{24} 1$ Cor 3:10-12; Eph 2:2; Rev 21:14.

[^6]:    ${ }^{25} 2$ Tim 2:2.
    ${ }^{26}$ Matt 16:21.

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