The Paradox of Christian Leadership:

Reflections on Followership

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This paper considers the paradox of Christian leadership by suggesting that the Christian leader is a fellow follower with recognized responsibility. That the Christian leader is a fellow follower entails a democratized organizational structure where all members stand on equal footing. That the Christian leader has recognized responsibility, however, entails a certain level of hierarchical structure. Toward this end, trends in followership theory are considered and developed along with key Scriptural passages (e.g., 1 Tim 3:1–7; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 2:5–11). For Christian leaders, the aim of this study is to offer a brief reflection that might stir our hearts to better appreciate Jesus Christ, who as our Leader exemplifies what it means to be a follower.

Keywords: Leadership, followership, paradox, responsibility

Christian leadership is a paradox, an enigma, just shy of a contradiction of terms. To be *Christian* entails a certain death to self: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20; cf. 5:24; 6:14; Rom 6:6). To be a *leader* in American society, whether in business, politics, or culture, demands a unique skill set yet entails a certain level of decadence. The contrast between how leaders and followers are valued in an organization is stark.[1] The terms themselves are replete with connotations: leaders *lead*; followers *follow*.[2] To be a leader is to have arrived. Followers are at best, leaders in training, leaders in waiting.

This dichotomy between leaders and followers has seeped into American Christian ministry (though of course, no culture is exempt, e.g., Phil 1:15–17; 1 Cor 3:1–9; 2 Cor 11:5). It is found in the pay discrepancies at large churches,[3] as well as non-profit organizations including Christian colleges and universities.[4] It is evident in the countless leadership programs and books that often repackage secular business ideas, effective though they may be, for Christian ministry.[5] Paul House comments forcefully on this issue:

> It is hard to find biblical passages that call for "leadership" in anything approximating what the term implies in American life. Models for pastors as chief executive officers or community activists do not exist in the Bible. . . . Pastors whose goal is to brand their ministries, build their reputations, manage a complex organization, become popular enough or singular enough to have off-site video churches, command six-figure book contracts for products mainly ghostwritten, and have thousands of followers on social media outlets do not match anything in

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[1] In 2021, the average CEO salary at S&P 500 companies stood at $18.3 million—with many making over $100 million per year—while the average U.S. worker earned $58,260. "Executive Pay Watch," accessed 11 May, 2023, https://aflcio.org/paywatch/highest-paid-ceos.

[2] Barbara Kellerman observes, "Since the word *follower* is considered something of an insult, certainly in the United States, it has been shunned by those in the leadership field," *Followership: How Followers Are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* (Cambridge: Harvard Business School, 2008), 6.

[3] A quick search online reveals numerous instances where pastors make close to—or over—$1 million in yearly salary. The names of these churches and these pastors intentionally have been omitted. This is, of course, far and away the anomaly. The vast majority of pastors give sacrificially, work bi-vocationally, and accept far less than a livable wage to continue their ministry.

[4] Top salaries for non-profit organizations (including colleges and universities) are publicly available on IRS Form 990. "Non-Profit Explorer," accessed 11 May, 2023, https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/. A quick search of major evangelical universities indicates that numerous administrative and athletic staff (typically head coaches) earn over $1 million and even in some instances $2 million in yearly salary. This is the case of several well-known and reputable evangelical non-profit organizations as well.

[5] Benjamin K. Forrest and Chet Roden state it well, "Much of the research in Christian leadership has come from translated models of leadership imputed from governmental or business research, and then given over to the church," *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 23.

the Pastoral Epistles. They match the "super apostles" who opposed Paul in Corinth.[6]

The difficulty, of course, is that many of the "Pastors whose goal is to brand their ministries, build their reputations . . ." are simply following what they were taught as best practice in seminary leadership courses as well as in the leadership books they read. Success and ministry growth are often synonymous with building a reputation. These pastors have embraced the American vision of leadership. It has in turn defined them, in many cases, destroyed them.[7]

The aim of this paper is to critique this common approach by considering the paradox of Christian leadership. Toward this end, I would like to offer a simple—though hopefully not simplistic—definition: *The Christian leader is a fellow follower with recognized responsibility*. The careful reader will notice that this definition and many observations in this paper align closely with recent trends related to followership.[8] I have, however, intentionally sought to work first from the text (Scripture) to theory (practical observations).[9] If nothing else, my hope is that this brief reflection might stir our hearts to better appreciate our Leader, Jesus Christ, who exemplified what it meant to be a follower.

The Christian Leader

Christian leadership, correctly understood, is a viable and important category. Although it is true that, as Robert Stacy comments, "In the New Testament 'leadership

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[6] Paul R. House, *Bonhoeffer's Seminary Vision: A Case for Costly Discipleship and Life Together* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 139.

[7] I keep a copy of Paul David Tripp's insightful book *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012) on my bookshelf as a reminder. Three of the five endorsers on the back cover of this particular edition—well-known pastors and once highly sought after conference speakers—have been disqualified from the office of pastor for moral failings. *Three of the five!* Pastoral ministry is a dangerous calling, indeed.

[8] From a secular perspective, see among many others, Barbara Kellerman, *Followership*; Robert E. Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," *Harvard Business Review* 66 (1988): reprint 1–8; Robert E. Kelley, "Rethinking Followership," in *The Art of Followership: How Great Followers Create Great Leaders and Organizations*, edited by Ronald E. Riggio, Ira Chaleff, and Jean Lipman-Blumen (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2008); and Mary Uhl-Bien, Ronald E. Riggio, Kevin B. Lowe, and Melissa K. Carsten, "Followership Theory: A Review and Research Agenda," *The Leadership Quarterly* 25 (2014): 83–104. From a Christian perspective, see Michael S. Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You: Pastoral Leadership as Christ-Centered Followership* (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2018); and Rusty Ricketson, *Follower First: Rethinking Leading in the Church* (Cumming, GA: Heartworks, 2009).

[9] In this way, this study follows the approach advocated by John David Trentham in "Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 1): Approaching and Qualifying Models of Human Development," *Christian Education Journal* 16, no. 3 (December 2019): 458–75; and "Reading the Social Sciences Theologically (Part 2): Engaging and Appropriating Models of Human Development," *Christian Education Journal* 16, no. 3 (December 2019): 476–94. Trentham proposes the Inverse Consistency Protocol, which "attempts to identify a faithful and discerning ethic of reading for Christians, so that they may interpret the social sciences with theological fidelity," 474.

is rarely treated *as a subject itself*,"[10] there are several key passages that inform an understanding on the topic. One such passage is 1 Timothy 3:1–7. Although specific to pastoral ministry in a church context (to the "overseer," *episkopos*), this passage offers insights applicable to Christian leadership in general. The characteristics required for pastors include: desire to lead (v. 1), above reproach (v. 2), Husband of one wife / morally pure (v. 2), sober-minded (v. 2), self-controlled (v. 2), respectable (v. 2), hospitable (v. 2), able to teach (v. 2), not a drunkard (v. 3), not violent but gentle (v. 3), not quarrelsome (v. 3), not a lover of money (v. 3), good manager of his household (v. 4), not be a recent convert (v. 6), good reputation from outsiders (v. 7). Titus 1:6–9 provides a comparable list, much of which can be summarized with the statement that the overseer "must be above reproach" (Titus 1:7; cf. 1 Tim 3:2).

About this, Thomas Schreiner aptly comments, "What stands out in the list is the emphasis on character qualities instead of skills. The fundamental requirement for elders is that they lead a godly life."[11] The requirements for the primary office of leadership in the church depend not on an exhaustive list of talents and skills such as communicative excellence, managerial expertise, and business acumen, but rather on quiet, often unnoticeable virtues. Schreiner continues, "Some have even complained that the requirements here are rather banal and even dull."[12] Luke Timothy Johnson is worth quoting at length in his response to the topic:

> Fidelity to one spouse, sobriety, and hospitality may seem trivial virtues to those who identify authentic faith with momentary conversion or a single spasm of heroism. But to those who have lived longer and who recognize how the administration of a community can erode even the strongest of characters and the best of intentions, finding a leader who is truly a lover of peace and not a lover of money can be downright exciting.[13]

In this way, these often-unseen qualities may be rarer than the noticeable skills often equated with leadership prowess. Indeed, beyond this list of character qualities (1 Tim 3:1–7), only two skills are required for pastoral ministry: to be able to lead (5:1, 17; cf. 3:4–5) and to be able to teach (3:2; 5:17). Although these skills should not be overlooked, the clear emphasis in 1 Timothy 3 is on personal virtues.

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[10] Robert Wayne Stacy, "A Concept Study: Leadership in New Testament Greek," in *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader*, edited by Benjamin K. Forrest and Chet Roden (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2017), 304. Stacy continues, "Leadership is not the subject of the New Testament; Jesus is. Indeed, there is only *one* place in the Gospels where 'leadership' is treated *as a subject*—Mark 10:35–45," 304.

[11] Thomas R. Schreiner, "Overseeing and Serving the Church in the Pastoral and General Epistles," in *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, edited by Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel Ministry, 2014), 95.

[12] Schreiner, "Overseeing and Serving the Church," 95.

[13] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 148–49.

Perhaps what is most pointed about this list, though, is that many of the qualities found here should be characteristic of *all* Christians, not just those in church leadership roles. Consider the same list below, with reference both to 1 Timothy 3 and passages regarding all Christians:

Table 1

Qualities of Overseers and Christians in General

Qualities	Specific to Overseers	General to Christians
Desire to lead	1 Tim 3:1	
Above reproach	1 Tim 3:2	Col 1:22; Phil 2:15
Husband of one wife / morally pure	1 Tim 3:2	1 Thess 4:3; 1 Cor 6:18
Sober-minded	1 Tim 3:2	1 Pet 4:7; 5:8
Self-controlled	1 Tim 3:2	Eph 5:15–18; Titus 2:4–5
Respectable	1 Tim 3:2	Eph 4:1; Phil 4:8
Hospitable	1 Tim 3:2	1 Pet 4:9; Rom 12:13
Able to teach	1 Tim 3:2	
Not a drunkard	1 Tim 3:3	Eph 5:18; Gal 5:21
Not violent but gentle	1 Tim 3:3	Eph 4:2; Jas 3:17
Not quarrelsome	1 Tim 3:3	2 Tim 2:24–25; Jas 4:1
Not a lover of money	1 Tim 3:3	Heb 13:5; 1 Tim 6:10
Good manager of household	1 Tim 3:4	Eph 6:4; Col 3:21; Titus 2:4–5
Not a recent convert	1 Tim 3:6	
Good reputation from outsiders	1 Tim 3:7	2 Pet 2:12; Matt 5:16

The only characteristics not demanded of all Christians are the two skills mentioned above (desire to lead, v. 1, and ability to teach, v. 2) as well as length of experience in Christian living (not be a recent convert, v. 6).[14] About all the others, Schreiner comments, "the character qualities noted here are *expected of all Christians*."[15] The similarity of characteristics indicates that the leader is to be the prototypical follower (first among equals).[16] In the church context, the pastor—as a fellow member of the group—is to exemplify virtues that the entire community—the group of followers—also ought to exhibit.

In this way, what *ought* to be true of the group (all Christians), *must* be true of the leader (overseer). This is characteristic of Paul himself, when he writes, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1, NIV). This concept of following others as they follow Christ is found throughout the New Testament (Phil 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess 1:6; 2 Thess 3:9). Of course, the ultimate example one is to follow is none other than Jesus Christ himself, the follower par excellence.

Is a Fellow Follower

About his mission, Jesus states, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38; cf. 5:30; 7:17–18; 12:49–50; 14:10–11). His purpose was not to seek his own glory (8:50), but the glory of the Father (17:1). This is articulated with pointed clarity in what is referred to as the *kenosis* passage, Philippians 2:5–11. Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (2:6–7). Jesus willingly humbled himself as he followed the plan and purpose of the Father.

The implications of Jesus as a follower have been discussed by several theologians and authors. Michael Wilder and Timothy Paul Jones comment, "What Jesus modeled for us was . . . a way of life that reshapes every aspect of leadership."[17] Rusty Ricketson likewise draws the application to Christian ministry, specifically in the church:

> The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, operate based on an accepted role and responsibility. . . . The same is true organizationally in the church. No one is better or more important because he or she is deemed the leader. No one is a

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[14] The "husband of one wife" (1 Tim 3:2) requirement is specific to men as per the context of overseer (cf. 1 Tim 2:12). The implication demands one's moral purity (cf. the inverse in 1 Tim 5:9, "wife of one man").

[15] Schreiner, "Overseeing and Serving the Church," 96. Schreiner continues, "Paul does not have one set of expectations for ordinary believers and a second set for pastors. Pastors, of course, must meet the requirements noted here, but it does not follow from this that the obligations are extraordinary," 96.

[16] We might define prototypical as the first, original, or quintessential form of something. This aligns well with the study of followership. Uhl-Bien, et al., "Followership Theory," comment, "Within a group, hierarchy becomes a reward bestowed by the group on one member ('leader') by the other group members ('followers') for being the most prototypical," 87.

[17] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 195.

failure or less important because he or she is deemed a follower. . . . Thus, the beginning point of the effective functioning of the Body is an understanding that, under the leading of the Lord, we are all followers. . . . Jesus was looking for followers.[18]

Ricketson's point is that if Jesus himself was a follower, those who follow him are best characterized as *followers*. This concept is certainly found throughout the New Testament, where Jesus often commands individuals, "Follow me" (John 1:43; Matt 8:22; 9:9; 16:24–27; 19:21) and proclaims, "If anyone serves me, he must follow me" (John 12:26).

In this way, the conclusion of Wilder and Jones rings true: "A Christian leader is, first and foremost, a follower."[19] They continue, "Followership means that everyone, even the leader, is always being led."[20] The Christian leader is, therefore, characterized by a commitment and devotion to Christ. This leader is to be a prototypical follower in that, as above, what *ought* to be true of all Christ followers *must* be true of him.

That Christian leaders are fellow followers with those they lead necessitates a certain democratized understanding of leadership. The effective Christian leader is less demanding and authoritative and more personally encouraging. Stacy comments, "In the New Testament, leadership as *guiding* is normative. A leader is a 'guide,' a 'shepherd,' a 'helper,' a 'coach,' to use a more contemporary metaphor."[21] The Christian leader is a fellow follower (one of many, on equal standing), yet still bears a specific and recognized responsibility.

With Recognized Responsibility

When considering Christian leadership, perhaps it can be said that although not all followers are leaders, all leaders are followers. Christian leaders are—first and foremost—followers of the sovereign God who providentially leads and guides (Ps 23:1–6; Rom 8:28; Gen 50:20; Prov 16:9). Nonetheless, the Christian leader is one who has been entrusted with recognized responsibility; the leader is one who is accountable and answerable for a particular burden or obligation.

In church ministry, for instance, the pastor is responsible to shepherd the flock (1 Pet 5:2–3) and keep watch over the congregation's souls (Heb 13:17). For these tasks, he receives "double honor" (1 Tim 5:17; cf. 1 Pet 5:4). In this way, Christian leadership is hierarchical; there is real leading to be done, real responsibility to be had.[22] The Christian leadership role, therefore, involves responsibility, yet a responsibility that ought never lead to domineering (cf. 1 Pet 5:3).

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[18] Ricketson, *Follower First*, 20, 21, 22, 23.

[19] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 21.

[20] Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, 21.

[21] Stacy, "Concept Study," 305.

[22] About this, Wilder and Jones, *The God Who Goes Before You*, comment, "Our understanding of power is relativized because any power we possess is recognized as an undeserved gift delegated by God," 195–96.

The implications for this type of Christian leadership (a follower with recognized responsibility) in non-church contexts are considerable. This is especially so in ministry settings including Christian non-profit organizations, colleges and universities, as well as mission agencies. In his discussion on followership, Kelley draws a distinction between leaders[23] and followers.[24] He comments that although "the leadership role has the glamour and attention . . . the reality is that most of us are more often followers than leaders. Even when we have subordinates, we still have bosses. For every committee we chair, we sit as members on several others."[25] Mary Uhl-Bien, et al., comment that in this respect, followers are understood as "causal agents,"[26] in that every formal leadership role entails a certain back-and-forth between the leader and the follower.[27] Still, though, the leader is entrusted with a certain task for which he or she is responsible.

Take, for example, the Christian university. Those in administrative roles have a very real responsibility to steward the institution as a whole. From student disciplinary measures to large-scale financial matters, the president, deans, and board of trustees are responsible to maintain the integrity of the institution. Followers do not bear this burden. Although it is true that, as Kelley notes, "Many effective followers see leaders merely as coadventurers on a worthy crusade,"[28] and "self-confident followers see colleagues as allies and leaders as equals,"[29] this does not negate the reality that followers have significantly less high level institutional responsibility. It is, therefore, fellow followers who assign and recognize the responsibility of leaders. In such a case as the Christian university, faculty follow a specific mission (often along the lines of equipping and training young men and women for a lifetime of Christian service), the institutional administration (president, deans, and trustees), and ultimately their conviction of how the Lord God has led.

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[23] "People who are effective in the leader role have the vision to set corporate goals and strategies, the interpersonal skills to achieve consensus, the verbal capacity to communicate enthusiasm to large and diverse groups of individuals, the organizational talent to coordinate disparate efforts, and above all, the desire to lead," Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," 7.

[24] "People who are effective in the follower role have the vision to see both the forest and the trees, the social capacity to work well with others, the strength of character to flourish without heroic status, the moral and psychological balance to pursue personal and corporate goals at no cost to either, and, above all, the desire to participate in a team effort for the accomplishment of some greater common purpose," Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," 7.

[25] Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," 3.

[26] Uhl-Bien, et al., "Followership Theory," 84. Uhl-Bien, et al. comment that followership views "followers to be active participants with leaders in co-constructing leadership, followership, and outcomes," 84.

[27] Uhl-Bien, et al., comment, "The 'leadership process' approach . . . is interested in understanding how leaders and followers interact together in context to co-create leadership and its outcomes," 99. Uhl-Bien, et al. continue, "It does not assume that leading and following are equated with one's hierarchical position in an organization. Rather, it acknowledges that managers can also follow (and might not lead), and subordinates can also lead (and might not follow)," 99.

[28] Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," 4. Kelley notes, "Effective followers see themselves—except in terms of line responsibility—as the equals of the leaders they follow. They are more apt to openly and unapologetically disagree with leadership and less likely to be intimidated by hierarchy and organizational structure," 4.

[29] Kelley, "In Praise of Followers," 4.

Conclusion

This brief essay has considered the paradoxical nature of Christian leadership in the following definition: *The Christian leader is a fellow follower with recognized responsibility*.

That the Christian leader is a fellow follower entails a democratized organizational structure where all members stand on equal footing. In a society where leadership is often viewed as the pinnacle of Christian service and success, this idea pushes back. Given the example of Jesus Christ as the follower par excellence, the Christian leader is to follow his example of sacrificial and humble service. Just as Jesus willingly humbled himself to follow the plan and purpose of the Father, so too must the Christian leader follow Jesus.

That the Christian leader has recognized responsibility, however, entails a certain level of hierarchical structure. In a society that often seeks to cast off levels of authority, this idea pushes back. Given the tasks entrusted to leaders by those in their organization, the Christian leader does not shy away from responsibility. In this way, the leader is intricately involved with leading and directing an organization to seek to achieve specific and attainable objectives. In a ministry context (church or Christian organization), the idea of the leader as the prototypical follower with real responsibility—the first among equals—demands that what is true of the followers also be true of the leader. It demands both high moral integrity as well as high relational capability.

Christian leadership ought to be fundamentally distinct from that of the world. In the well-known book of Puritan prayers, *The Valley of Vision*, the introductory prayer reads:

Let me learn by paradox

that the way down is the way up,

that to be low is to be high,

that the broken heart is the healed heart,

that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,

that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,

that to have nothing is to possess all,

that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,

that to give is to receive,

that the valley is the place of vision.[30]

In this regard, perhaps we might add one more line: "that to lead is to follow."

About the Author

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[30] "The Valley of Vision," in *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions*, edited by Arthur Bennett (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), *xxiv*.