

Leading Like Jesus for a Change

Leadership Advance Online – Issue XIV, Fall 2008

by Jon Bylor

Leadership in any context is demanding. Leading in a way that produces personal change is more difficult. Leading in a way that transforms society is a goal to which few leaders even aspire. Yet, Jesus led in a way that produced profound systemic changes in His world, changes that still influence us today after many centuries. How did a simple Galilean Rabbi begin a movement among common folk that rose to be perceived as a threat to the mighty Roman Empire? What can we learn from Jesus' leadership that can help us lead others to change that is more than cosmetic? This article attempts to answer these questions by looking at the leadership of Jesus in the context of His time.

The Need for Change

It is easy to look at the life and teachings of Jesus from our perspective in the 21st century, without comprehending the depth of change His message proposed to His followers. From our perspective, much of His teaching can be dismissed as pithy sayings that make better wall hangings than life mottos. Unless we grasp the political, social, economic, and religious realities of the times in which He led, we will not comprehend His timeless lessons on leading revolutionary change.

Horsley and Silberman (1997) point out that the political realities of life in the first century were radically different from our long-held stereotypes of a peaceful Galilean countryside. Instead, the world in which Jesus lived was harshly ruled by an oppressive Roman government represented by local political leaders with their own selfish agendas. Leaders such as Pontius Pilate:

“had ambitions like every other civil servant who dreamed of being back in the Roman forum, a rising to acknowledge the adulation of

the crowd and — who knows — perhaps even sitting at the right hand of his patron ... Judea, the Jews, and Jerusalem were not important in themselves but only as stepping stones to greater glory.” (Horsley & Silberman 1997, p. 66)

The political system extracted harsh taxes from people barely able to survive on their family land. While the oppression caused untold suffering, the price of resistance was commonly thought to be too high. First century Galilee was primarily an agrarian society marked by small villages where little had changed for centuries. Peasant farmers eked out a living from the soil or the nearby lake of Galilee. Political and religious realities often forced them to be hopelessly in debt. The establishment of tax collectors who collaborated with the ruling authorities, further broke down any remaining sense of community stability.

The religious milieu focused on Herod’s temple, a magnificent monument that symbolized the Jewish faith and rituals. Yet, Horsley and Silberman (1997) posit that the temple and its accompanying hierarchy had become an oppressive burden on the people. They state:

“thus we come to the great paradox of the Temple: in order to enshrine the idea of the covenant directly between the people and God, a huge bureaucratic organization had arisen at the central cult place, maintained by a vast civil service of scribes, administrators, accountants, service personnel, Temple officers, and high priestly families who are all dependent on the Temple revenues for their support.” (p. 75)

This oppressive situation called for change and Jesus could feel the cross currents as He walked the roads of Galilee. Many were hoping for the renewal of Israel and were impatient for radical change. Jesus was aware of the Maccabean revolt, which had occurred in B.C.E. 167 (Gary, 2008). He rubbed shoulders with revolutionary zealots who were ready to overthrow the Romans and reestablish God’s rule on earth. He saw the suffering of the common man and the legalism of the religious leaders. He was keenly aware of the biblical prophecies for a coming king and of His role in fulfilling them. He was a change agent living in changing times. He also recognized that He lived in a world that was about to change in such a radical way that little would remain of the life His

followers knew in Galilee. He predicted the fall of the temple and all that it represented and His strategy for change charted a way through that future (Luke 19: 42-44; Mark 13:2).

Jesus looked ahead at the impending changes that were on the horizon and realized that the world in which He grew up would be short lived. He spoke about the destruction of the temple and intuitively recognized the social, religious and political upheaval this would cause in His homeland. He realized that His role was to initiate a movement that would not only weather the storm, but thrive on the other side. As Gary (2005) states: “This prophetic vision grew out of an intuitive understanding of his fate related to Israel’s greatest historical crisis” (p. 22).

Against this backdrop, His leadership called for radical change that would ripple throughout His world and reach forward 21 centuries into ours. How did Jesus lead and what implications does it have for leaders today? How would Jesus lead change? What would He do that could bring about radical transformation? How would He prepare His followers to not only survive the coming changes but create a movement that would shake the ruling political, economic and religious powers?

Jesus Led with a Long-Range Vision

The followers of Jesus, including the twelve disciples, eagerly anticipated quick and radical change. The crowds that wanted to crown Him king when He fed the multitudes (John 6:15) and the ones who shouted ‘Hosanna’ on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9), expected immediate solutions to their problems. Peter was more than ready to take up his sword for the cause when the guards came to arrest Jesus. Jesus steadfastly refused to focus on short-term solutions. He had a long-range vision of what He wanted to accomplish and was not willing to sacrifice His calling for immediate popularity.

Gary (2006) observes that Jesus saw the future as a dynamic of three paths: conventional, counter and creative. He recognized that the conventional path was maintaining the *status quo* of Roman occupation and that the temple system would soon fall. The counter path of revolution and armed resistance would likewise be short-lived. Jesus instead focused His energy on creating a creative third way. This path would not be immediately obvious to His followers, but would unfold with time. It was a risky plan. It involved the establishment of the kingdom of God that embraced not only the Jewish nation, but Gentiles as well. In it, He “invited his contemporaries to die to the old order

before its external collapse. If they did, they would survive to the end of the age” (Gary, 2008, p. 4). As a result of this long-range vision, Jesus did not focus on quick fixes to the problems facing His followers. Other revolutionaries tried to bring about immediate changes, some through exclusion from society (the Essenes) or by revolt (the Maccabeans). Their leadership is scarcely remembered. In contrast, the leadership of Jesus continues to impact the world. Although He offered practical advice to soldiers and peasants, His strategy focused on long-term change that would ultimately, but not quickly, transform society.

Leaders today who want to lead change as Jesus did, will need to readjust their horizons to look far beyond short-term changes in the lives of individuals to societal transformation. Gary (2005) calls this a generational vision. He sees in the leadership of Jesus a convergence of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. He posits that Jesus brings both together in “The Great Work,” a “macro-story of new creation and faith for world transformation” (p. 26).

To understand how Jesus produced this change we must look carefully at the specific actions He took to accomplish His goal of covenantal transformation.

Jesus Impacted the Macro by Changing the Micro

Jesus’ strategy for change was radical. He faced the realities of the cruel Roman Empire and observed the abuses of the temple system. Yet, He did not call His followers to armed rebellion. With few exceptions, He did not openly confront the ruling authorities. Nor would He accept the *status quo*. His goal was not solely individual transformation, but also societal change. However, His method focused primarily on the micro level of change, in seeing individual lives transformed and brought into new communities. He focused on transforming the lives of His followers in ways that would ultimately survive His society’s collapse and lead the way towards a new society envisioned by the prophets. What did He do specifically to introduce these changes at the micro level?

1. Jesus called people to a covenantal relationship with God

Jesus preached and taught that the Kingdom of God was at hand. He urged people to repent and renew their age-old covenant with God (Mark 1:15). In the context of the first century, this call to put God first defied the call to acknowledge Caesar as lord and thus was

seen as seditious by the Roman authorities. The early communities of believers refused to bow to the demands of the emperor. They did not take up armed resistance to the power of Rome, they just quietly pledged their allegiance to a greater God. While they respected the authority of Rome, they refused to allow the government to take the place of God in their lives. It was this threat that Rome could not conquer and which produced systemic change.

Leaders in the 21st century, who want to produce widespread systemic change, should model for their followers their highest allegiance to God rather than the state. How have we allowed the state to become “Caesar” in our lives? Do we see ourselves first as citizens of a heavenly kingdom or of belonging first, to the country of our passport? When is the last time we have deliberately chosen to obey God rather than men?

2. Jesus called people to community

Jesus’ message was not only a message of reconciliation with God, but also one of reestablishing relationships with each other in a community of believers. Communities that were shattered by mistrust and fear were reestablished by Jesus.

These communities were characterized by service and sacrifice. This was expressed in acts of service and in the sharing of material possessions. This action, especially when practiced by overtaxed peasant farmers, directly undermined the economic power of Rome and the oppressive temple bureaucracy.

A dominant characteristic of the community which Jesus established was love. His own life demonstrated a love that extended to giving His own life for His followers. He insisted that the characteristic of His followers would be the love they had for each other (John 13:35). His love would be expressed in forgiveness, love for enemies, giving, and caring for others (Matthew 6:14, Luke 6:27, Matthew 5:42). With time, this love broke down the barriers that existed between Jews and Gentiles as well and created a revolutionary community that powerfully shook the established social order. Social barriers between rich and poor, slave and free, male and female were broken down in this fellowship (Colossians 3:11). This call to community deliberately broke down the social barriers in the society and created a powerful community that was stronger than the religious rituals or the edicts of the emperor.

Contemporary leaders who want to produce lasting change in our society must work intentionally so that their fellowships strategically confront social barriers and express the love of Jesus in ways that answer difficult questions. In what tangible ways are we expressing love for our enemies? Is our bond of love deep enough to bring us together across racial, ethnic, economic, and cultural barriers? Have we learned to share material possessions with brothers and sisters in the church next door? What about members of this community who live in other cultures far away? Sadly, I submit that these things happen far too little to really make an impact in our world. Instead, the modern church often reflects the cultural norms of division and ethnocentrism.

A second implication of this call to community is to recognize that lasting and systemic change will not come outside of committed relationships expressed in the body of believers. While the promotion of many social agendas can be a commendable thing and sometimes produce dramatic short-term results, Jesus' strategy to change the world always centered on transformed lives living together in obedience to His call.

The combination of calling people back into a genuine covenant relationship with God and into loving relationships with each other, could look short sighted at first glance. It certainly did not create the radical macro-level changes Peter wanted to accomplish with his sword. But, what did it do?

The message of Jesus conveyed the reality that the villager in first-century Judea was not simply a powerless pawn at the mercy of the current world power. His message called for immediate actions in the lives of the followers. He called them to "turn the other cheek" and to "go the second mile." His message brought people back into close-knit communities that had been fragmented by political and social pressure. His message also ignited the vision for restoration held dear by every faithful Jew. They recognized in Jesus' prophetic actions that God had come to set them free. Jesus gave their lives meaning and a sense of destiny. They began to live and relate to each other in different ways. Even when the anticipated earthly kingdom was not established, they continued to embody the simple but profound message of Jesus in their daily lives and actions. By doing so, they survived the fall of the temple and grew to be a groundswell of change with effects that continue to be felt around the world 21 centuries later.

Leaders today can learn from Jesus to be agents of hope. By affirming the worth of those who are on the edge of society, the dignity of all is assured. Leaders also point the way to the future, giving followers a sense of destiny and hope that their present actions will impact the future.

Conclusion

Jesus initiated a movement that outlived His own life on earth and which produced change on a scale that few other leaders have produced. He did this in the context of 1st century Galilee in a rural and impoverished world, much different from our own. However, as we examine the context of His leadership and the methods He used, we find valuable nuggets of leadership wisdom for the 21st century. Jesus impacted the macro level by introducing powerful change in the micro level as He called people to a covenantal relationship with God that was above all loyalties. From there He called people into relationship with each other to express the powerful life of His kingdom principles in their everyday lives. In doing so, He led for change and calls contemporary leaders today to follow His leadership for a change.

About the Author

Jon Bylor has been involved in leadership development for more than 15 years, primarily in Africa and India. He currently serves as the international coordinator for Global LEAD Alliance and is pursuing his master's degree in organizational leadership at Regent University.

E-mail: Jon@Leadersserve.com

References

- Gary, J. E. (2006). [The future of business as mission: An inquiry into macro-strategy](#). In T. Steffen & M. Barrett (Eds.), *Business as mission: From impoverishment to empowered* (pp. 253-273). Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
- Gary, J. E. (in press). The future according to Jesus: A Galilean model of foresight. *Futures*.
- Horsley, R. A. & Silberman, N. A. (1997). *The message and the kingdom*. Minneapolis, MN.: Fortress Press.