



## THE CALL OF CHRIST TO LEADERSHIP • John Stott

There is a serious dearth of genuine leaders in the contemporary world. Massive problems confront us. Many people are warning us that the world is heading for disaster; few are offering us advice on how to avert it. To borrow the metaphors of Jesus, we seem to be like “sheep without a shepherd,” while our leaders often appear to be “blind leaders of the blind.”

Leadership is not restricted to a small minority of world statesmen, or to the national top brass. There is a great need in many situations for more clear-sighted, courageous, and dedicated leaders. What, then are the marks of leadership in general, and of leaders seeking to follow Jesus Christ, in particular? What is needed to blaze a trail which others will follow? Although different analyses of leadership have been made, I want to suggest that it has five essential ingredients.

### Vision

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” is a proverb taken from the King James Version of the Bible. This is a true statement. Indeed, it has been a characteristic of the post-Pentecost era that “your young men will see visions” and “your old men will dream dreams” (Acts 2:17).

So what is vision? It is an aspect of seeing, of course, and imaginative perception of things, combining insight and foresight. But more particularly in the sense in which I am using the word, it is compounded of a deep dissatisfaction with what is, and a clear grasp of what could be. It begins with indignation over the status quo and it grows into the earnest quest for an alternative. Both are quite clear in the public ministry of Jesus. He was indignant over disease and death, and the hunger of the people, for He perceived these things as being alien to the purpose of God. Hence, His compassion for their victims. Indignation and compassion form a powerful combination. They are indispensable to vision, and therefore to leadership.

There is a great need today for more righteous indignation, anger, and outrage over those evils which are an offense to God. How can we tolerate what He finds intolerable? But anger is sterile if it does not provoke us to positive action to remedy what has aroused our anger. In the words of George Bernard Shaw, “You see things as they are and ask ‘why?’ But I dream things that never were, and ask, ‘why not?’” In the Bible, Moses was appalled by the cruel oppression of his fellow Israelites by Egypt, remembered God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and was sustained throughout his long life by the vision of the “Promised Land.” Saul of Tarsus had been brought up to accept as unbridgeable the chasm between Jews and Gentiles. But Jesus commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentile world, and he was “not disobedient to the heavenly vision.” Indeed, the vision of a new reconciled humanity so captured his heart and mind, that he labored, suffered, and died in its cause. In our own generation, Martin Luther King, Jr., incensed by the injustices of segregation, had a dream of dignity for blacks in a free, multiracial America. He both lived and died that his dream might come true. Where are the followers of Christ today who see the status quo, who do not like what they see (because there are things in it which are unacceptable to God), who therefore refuse to come to terms with it, who dream dreams of an alternative society which would be more acceptable to God, and who determine to do something about it? We see with our mind’s eye the three thousand million peoples of the world, who have had no real opportunity to hear or respond to the message of Christ; the



poor, the hungry, and the disadvantaged; people crushed by political, economic, or racial oppression; the millions of babies aborted and incinerated; and the so-called “balance” of nuclear terror. We see these things; do we not care? We see what is; do we not see what could be? Things could be different. The peoples of the world could be reached with the good news of Jesus; the hungry could be fed, the oppressed liberated, the alienated brought home. We need a vision of the purpose and power of God.

### Industry

Yet the world has always been scornful of dreamers. So dreamers have to become in turn thinkers, planners, and workers, that demand industry or hard labor. It was Thomas Alva Edison, the inventor of electrical devices, who defined genius as “1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.” All great leaders find this to be true.

It was not enough for Moses to dream of the land flowing with milk and honey; he had to organize the Israelite rabble into at least the semblance of a nation and lead them through the dangers and hardships of the desert before they could take possession of the Promised Land. Similarity, Winston Churchill loathed the Nazi tyranny and dreamed of Europe’s liberation. But he was under no illusions about the cost of the enterprise.

Thus dream and the reality, passion and practicalities, must go together. Without the dream, the campaign loses its direction and its fire; but without hard work and practical projects, the dream vanishes into thin air.

### Perseverance

It is one thing to dream dreams and see visions. It is another to convert a dream into a plan of action. It is yet a third to persevere with it when opposition comes. For opposition is bound to arise. But a true work of God thrives on opposition. Its silver is refined and its steel hardened. Of course, those without the vision, who are merely being carried along by the momentum of the campaign, will soon capitulate. So it is that protesting young rebels lapse into middle-class, middle-aged, middle-of-the-road mediocrity. But the real leader has the resilience to take setbacks in his stride, the tenacity to overcome fatigue and discouragement, and the wisdom (in a favorite phrase of John Mott’s) to turn stumbling-blocks into stepping-stones. For the real leader adds to vision and industry, the grace of perseverance.

In the Old Testament Moses is again the outstanding example. On about a dozen distinct occasions the people “murmured” against him, and he had the beginnings of a mutiny on his hands. A lesser man would have given up and abandoned them to their own pettiness. But not Moses. He never forgot that these were God’s people by God’s covenant, who by God’s promise would inherit the land.

In the New Testament, the man who came to the end of his life with his ideals intact and his standards uncompromised, was the apostle Paul. He, too, faced bitter and violent opposition. Yet he never lost his vision of God’s new, redeemed society, and he never gave up proclaiming it. In his underground dungeon, from which there was to be no escape but death, he could write: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). He persevered to the end.

In recent centuries perhaps nobody has exemplified perseverance more than William Wilberforce. It was in 1787 that he first decided to put down a motion in the House of Commons about the slave trade. Yet it was not until July 1833 that the Abolition of Slavery Bill was passed in both houses of Parliament. Three days later William Wilberforce died, after more than forty-five years of persevering struggle on behalf of African slaves.

Mind you, perseverance is not a synonym for pigheadedness. The true leader is not impervious to criticism, but listens to it, weighs it, and modifies his program accordingly. But he does not waver in his basic conviction of what God has called him to do. Whatever the opposition aroused or the sacrifice entailed, he perseveres.



### Service

A note of caution needs to be added at this point. “Leadership is a concept shared by people who seek to follow Christ and those who do not. We must not assume, however, that their understandings of it are identical. For Jesus introduced into the world an altogether new style of leadership. He expressed the difference between the old and the new in these terms:

“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 1:42-45).

Among the followers of Jesus, therefore, leadership is not a synonym for lordship. Our calling is to be servants, not bosses, slaves, not masters. True, a certain authority attaches to all leaders, and leadership would be impossible without it. Yet the authority by which the leader who follows Christ operates, is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.

What is the reason for Jesus’ stress on the leader’s service? Partly, no doubt, because the chief occupational hazard of leadership is pride. But Jesus’ main reason, however, was surely that the service of others is tacit recognition of their value. The intrinsic worth of human beings was the presupposition underlying Jesus’ own ministry of self-giving love, and is an essential element in the Christ centered mind. If human beings are Godlike beings, then they must be served—not exploited, respected—not manipulated. Herein also lies the peril of seeing leadership in terms of projects and programs. Leadership will inevitably involve the development of these, but people take precedence over projects and people must be neither “manipulated” nor even “managed.” Though the latter is less demanding to human beings than the former, yet both words are derived from “manus,” a hand, and both express a “handling” of people as if they were commodities rather than persons.

So Godly leaders serve, indeed serve not their own interests but rather the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). This simple principle should deliver the leader from excessive individualism, extreme isolation, and self-centered empire-building. For those who serve others serve best in a team. Leadership teams are more healthy than solo leadership for several reasons. First, team members supplement one another, building on one another’s strengths and compensating for one another’s weaknesses. Second, team members encourage one another, identifying each other’s gifts and motivating each other to develop and use them. Third, team members are accountable to one another. Shared work means shared responsibility. Then we listen to one another and learn from one another. Both the human family and the divine family (the Body of Christ) are contexts of solidarity in which any incipient illusions of grandeur are rapidly dispelled.

In all this emphasis on service, the disciple is only seeking to follow and reflect his teacher. For though He was Lord of all, Jesus became the servant of all. Putting on the apron of servitude, He got down on his knees to wash the apostles’ feet. Now He tells us to do as He did, to clothe ourselves with humanity, and in love to serve one another. No leadership is authentically Christ-like which is not marked by the spirit of humble and joyful service.

### Discipline

The final mark of leaders seeking to follow Christ is discipline, not only self-discipline in general (in the master of their passions, their time and their energies), but in particular the discipline with which they wait on God. They know their weakness. They know the greatness of their task and the strength of the opposition. But they also know the inexhaustible riches of God’s grace.

Many biblical examples could be given. But our supreme exemplar is our Lord Jesus Himself. It is often said that He was always available to people. This is not true. He was not. There were times when He sent the crowds away. He refused to allow the urgent to displace the important. Regularly He withdrew from the pressures and the glare of His public ministry, in order to seek His Father in solitude and replenish His reserves of strength.



It is only God who “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. For even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall. But those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:29-31). It is only those who discipline themselves to seek God’s face, who keep their vision bright. It is only those who live before Christ’s cross, whose inner fires are constantly rekindled and never go out. Those leaders who think they are strong in their own strength are the most pathetically weak of all people. Only those who know and acknowledge their weakness can become strong with the strength of Christ.

In conclusion, it seems to be that we need to repent of two particularly horrid sins. The first is pessimism, which is dishonoring to God and incompatible with faith in Christ. To be sure, we do not forget the fallenness of human beings, or the pervasiveness of evil. We are not so foolish as to imagine that society will ever become perfect before Christ comes and establishes the fullness of His rule. Nevertheless, we also believe in the power of God—in the power of God’s people (working like salt and light) to change society.

The second sin of which we need to repent is mediocrity, and the acceptance of it. I find myself wanting to say, especially to young people: “Don’t be content with the mediocre! Don’t settle for anything less than your full God-given potential! Be ambitious and adventurous for God! God has made you a unique person by your genetic endowment, upbringing and education. He means you to be fulfilled, not frustrated. His purpose is that everything you have and are should be stretched in His service and in the service of others.”

This means that God has a leadership role of some degree and kind for each of us. We need then to seek His will with all our hearts, to cry to Him to give us a vision of what He is calling us to do with our lives, and to pray for grace to be faithful (not necessarily successful) in obedience to the heavenly vision.

For then at the end of our life we shall be able to say with Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith,” and we shall hear Christ say to us those most coveted of all words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

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