

# **BECOMING A STUDENT LEADER**

LEADING YOURSELF AND OTHERS

BY DAN BOAL AND LEN KAGELER

# BECOMING A STUDENT LEADER

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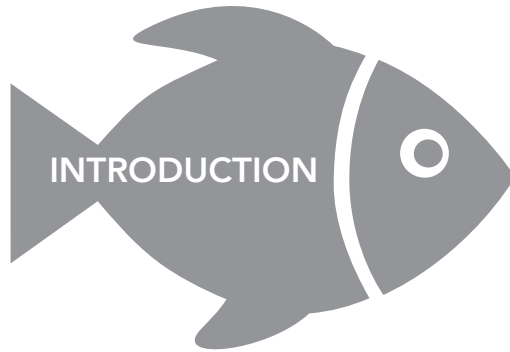
To my children: Everett, Arayla, Betsy, Lael, and CeCe, and the next generation of leaders, who will create new and meaningful spaces where everyone belongs.

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If you are reading this book then my assumption is that you are a student leader! My hope is that a pastor, adult leader, or parent handed you this book with a desire to develop your leadership style and grow in your heart a rich understanding of what it means to follow Jesus imperfectly, and influence others to do the same.

At this moment you are awesome and full of potential. The day the foundations of the earth were spoken into existence, God also created the future possibility of you. And with you come all of the good things only you can bring into this world. The whole human race is better off because you exist. Jesus himself looks at you and is proud to call you his son or daughter. God is pleased that you are in this world, exactly as you are today. He can't wait to see who you become and the beautiful impact you will have on the world.

As the Director of Alliance Youth, the national youth ministry of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, I serve 38,000 teenagers and more than 5,000 youth workers. In my years of ministry I have spent time all over the United States and other parts of the world. I am one hundred percent convinced that each of these teenagers will have a meaningful effect on the lives of the people they encounter. However, I often hear the same story. A teenager reads the Bible and sees how

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God used really messed up and broken people to do amazing things but then thinks, “I know God did it for them, but he doesn’t want to do it for me.” Adults have these same thoughts. Time and again I have seen this line of thinking breed doubt.

Why is it hard to believe that God could use you just like he used them? Primarily, it’s because young people often believe they are disqualified from receiving the awesomeness Jesus is trying to give them. They believe the lies of the evil one. *You aren’t worthy. You couldn’t possibly. What makes you think you deserve this? What do you think you have to offer?*

I wrote this book to help you understand that you are loved and chosen by God. This book will help you to have a better sense of your identity and to learn how to use your gifts to do awesome things for his kingdom and glory.

When you read the Bible, you’ll spend time with stories of God pursuing and using broken people, and you will begin to understand that Jesus wants to pursue and use you too. Their stories are your story. There is no difference between the Old Testament prophet Elijah and you. His story starts in 1 Kings 17. Elijah performed incredible miracles. He prayed for a drought and it lasted three years. He caused fire to come down from the sky and he once raised a child from the dead. Yet, he suffered intense bouts of loneliness and possible depression. Elijah was often prideful, yet he showed a significant capacity for humility. He was often brave, and then immediately afterward was a coward. This is why James 5:17 says, “Elijah was a human being, even as we are.” Yet he is also considered one of the most amazing prophets in the Old Testament.

And then there’s Rahab (her story starts in Joshua 2), another character from the Old Testament. She had been a prostitute—and she was a gentile. This was not a desired pedigree in her time and place, especially among the Israelites. And yet she and her family were the only survivors of Israel’s conquest of Jericho. During the conflict, Rahab trusted God and protected Israelite spies in her home from the king of Jericho. After trusting God, saving their lives and



risking her own, she cut a deal that protected her life and the lineage of her whole family. After the fall of Jericho, she was integrated into Israel and married Salmon. She became King David's great-great-grandmother, and part of Jesus's family tree. Yup, one of Jesus's grandmothers was a prostitute!

As these examples show, God is in the business of using people who are disqualified and transforming them with his love and grace.

I'm the father of five amazing kids, and I want them to be anchored to their role in the world as followers of Jesus. They are called to be people of influence—witnesses—and so are you. Acts 1:8 says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Witnesses testify to the truth of their experiences. They speak about what they see, hear, and do with the hope of influencing others to believe what they believe, or to have the same kinds of experiences they have had. As a Christian, Jesus gives you the power to be an influencer.

I will never forget the first time my son, Everett, came home from parkour lessons. He spent fifteen minutes explaining how he got to jump off a fourteen-foot wall. He told me all about trying to climb up the wall with limited grips, then jump off and land safely in a pile of foam blocks. His heart was pounding, his feet and hands were sweating, and he was nervous, scared, and elated all at the same time. When he finally jumped he felt like he was flying. After telling me all of this he said, “Dad, you should totally come with me and try it!” At six years old he was being a witness, testifying to his life-changing experience, in hopes that I would join him. He wasn't being coercive or manipulative; he wanted to share his joy with me.

As a young follower of Jesus, my hope is that you would find real joy in being a powerful influencer for him. That does not mean you will become an evangelist in the Billy Graham sense, but in your everyday words and actions you will be influencing the way people see Jesus. Everett had great joy in sharing his experience with me, but imagine if I had joined him the next week at parkour. The two of us

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together, fourteen feet in the air, ready to jump! He would be standing there, even more joyous than the first time, because someone he loved deeply was jumping with him. We would have forged a shared experience that drew us closer to each other.

You have been given unique talents, spiritual gifts, and a network of relationships that no one else possesses, all so that people might experience a part of Jesus through you, one that they would not be able to encounter anywhere else. As they experience Jesus the way you do, it will overwhelmingly increase your own joy in being a Jesus follower and draw you, and them, deeper into friendship with Jesus.

### HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The first section of this book will help you understand your identity. Finding identity is one of the biggest issues facing teenagers today. Often, the voices of the world tell you to simply adopt whatever behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs you like the best. But as a follower of Jesus, understanding your identity starts with thinking about “whose” you are. This section will invite you to look at your friendship with Jesus and how that friendship changes everything. You will discover the core elements of being a follower of Jesus, elements that you share in common with every believer, as well as the unique gifts he has given you.

The second section will focus on belonging. You will have the opportunity to think about how you belong, and how you have a mission set before you to help others belong in relationship with Jesus. One thing is true of all people: we desperately want to belong. We are creatures of community who fear nothing more than isolation and aloneness. Jesus talks directly about the unity of all believers, and the Bible is full of stories conveying the welcoming nature of Jesus toward all people—no matter who they are or what they have done. Everyone and anyone can be friends with Jesus, and his friends are all supposed to be friends with one another.

My son once said, “Dad, if we didn’t love those we disagreed with, we wouldn’t have any friends.” He was right. Belonging is about more than liking people. It’s about loving them beyond the differences.

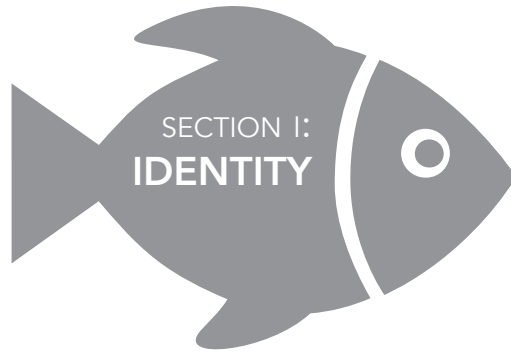
Student leaders are given the opportunity to display the level of unity that Jesus prayed for in John 17. Hopefully, you'll finish this section knowing your gifts, understanding your role in the church, and relying on the Holy Spirit to use all of that to create communities of belonging where everyone can be friends with Jesus.

The third section focuses on creating. As a student leader you will be given the opportunity to lead something or someone. Leaders are creators by necessity. Leaders create systems, projects, plans, spaces, and opportunities. You will learn how you can help create the culture around you, one that leads to life transformation.

The only prerequisites to growing as a student leader are being willing to learn, keeping an open mind, and allowing Jesus to do something significant in your life and your community. As you learn and reflect, I think this book is best read alongside a few other people. Each chapter has reflection questions at the end added by my good friend Len Kageler. These questions are designed to help you process the information for personal application, but are best reflected on in an open, trusting conversation with your peers and pastor. If you can, I'd recommend going through them together in your student leadership meetings. Through others you will encounter different spiritual gifts, and therefore different aspects of Jesus himself. All of this will help you to solidify your identity, belong more fully to your community, and create opportunities for others to encounter Jesus meaningfully.

Dan Boal





### **Life's a Learning Curve**

*Student leaders are growing in knowing themselves and how God made them.*

Have you ever found yourself asking these questions? *Who am I? Why do I exist? What is my purpose in life? Why do certain people like me when others do not? Does God love me? Does anyone love me? Why am I even asking these questions?* And the list goes on.

Your impulse to ask these questions is evidence of your desire to better understand your identity. As you learn more about your true self, it will provide you with purpose in your friendships, family, communities, and Jesus's greater plan for your life.

Let's think about identity in another context: your social media profile. Based on your viewing or clicking habits, social media sites make recommendations of videos for you to watch or product links for you to click on. They know how many cat videos you watch, and if you are more likely to watch those for fifteen minutes than a Twitch feed of epic fails, or vice versa. They want you to engage—to like, up-vote, share, comment, swipe, etc. Eventually, these sites know you

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well enough to recommend only the things that are likely to connect with you—and get you to spend more time on the site.

This type of profiling happens in real-world relationships and communities as well. Essentially, people create a profile on you in their minds based on your actions, statements, clothing, friendships, and factors such as race, gender, and where you live. These profiles can give you access, or restrict your access, to different groups. Often, your behaviors may shift, to greater or lesser degrees, from group to group as you go through your day. Let's say you love to sing. Your music class in public high school wouldn't expect you to stand up and sing worship songs on a Tuesday morning. On the other hand, your youth group might on Wednesday night. While singing is something you do in both groups, the person to whom the singing is directed is different. Your high school musical or choir concert is for an audience, and worship songs are for God. The question that's important to ask yourself is what things about you remain true in all settings and relationships? What is true of you in all contexts is your true identity. The true thing here is that you are a singer, and whether you're singing musicals or worship songs you view all acts of singing as part of your identity and worshipful to Jesus. After all, creating beautiful melodies and using this natural talent is a testimony to God's craftsmanship in your life.

I first began to struggle with my own identity in sixth grade. From kindergarten through fifth grade I attended a small private school in the suburbs of Philadelphia. I grew up with the same twenty-three kids in my class for my first six formative school years. I had three best friends and a certain sense of group belonging. When sixth grade came I had to make the transition to public middle school. All of the sudden I was thrust into an environment with 200 other sixth graders who were coming from multiple elementary schools. Each person was now charting a new identity course, trying to understand themselves in a new context among different people. In this maelstrom of transition, I lost a strong sense of who I was.

At the time there was a brand of clothing that was taking the middle school world by storm, FUBU. If you were a sixth grader and you

could afford FUBU, you clearly had some social standing that others did not. FUBU stood for For Us, By Us, a brand of clothing popularized in urban black communities and idolized by my black friends. I remember going home and begging my parents to buy me a FUBU shirt, explaining to them how I wouldn't fit in without it. I was starting to make some friends who loved the brand, and I thought it would be a great "in." Thankfully my parents understood how I was feeling and took me out shopping that night. When I went to school the next day peacocking my new gear, I was astounded when one kid immediately made fun of me for wearing it. This guy wasn't part of the group I was trying to impress, he was one of the kids I used to be friends with the year before. He was making fun of me for wearing the clothes. On top of that, the group I was trying to impress didn't think it was anything special. I was discouraged, and later that day I went home reeling in despair. Why didn't I seem to fit in, despite my best efforts?

What I didn't understand at the time was that 200 other preteens were trying to find their place, just like I was. As I tried to find where I belonged, I was being pushed out of some circles and invited into others. Every other student was going through the same thing. We were all trying on new behaviors, attitudes, clothing, language, and friendships. I eventually did find a group that accepted me as part of their tribe. When I did it wasn't based on clothing, but on our ability to connect over shared values and experiences.

As a person you will always be in a state of emotional, cognitive, and spiritual formation. As a teenager, this state is heightened. There is greater change in a shorter period because you are part of so many friend groups, sports teams, workplaces, and other communities. Because of this, it's common to try on new behaviors until you find the ones that fit best.

Think about how many friends you have had in the past few years who seemed to change overnight into someone else, with new friends or attitudes or behaviors. Similar to going shopping and trying on clothes, we try on behaviors, practices, and belief systems for seasons of time, trying to understand who we really are. This is a very normal

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part of adolescence that each person experiences differently. It can be fun, exciting, possibly traumatizing, and can make you feel downright crazy, but if walked through wisely it is an important part of discovering a solid identity.

Throughout your life you will be discovering your true identity—the things that are true about you in all contexts and relationships. At the end of your life you will be as unique as a unicorn. There will be things that are true of you no matter what. The Latin word for that is *ipseity*, which means being the true you in all circumstances. The opposite of this is hypocrisy, which means being one thing in one context and something else in another. Part of becoming a spiritually mature follower of Jesus is living a life of *ipseity*.

Even unicorns have some universal truths they share in common with other unicorns. For starters, they all have a single horn. In the same way, there are some foundational parts of the identity of every follower of Jesus.





## Know Who You Are and Whose You Are

### YOU ARE FRIENDS WITH JESUS

In early elementary school it's common to find your first “best” friend. Usually around first or second grade you have that one close friend who would be heartbroken if you couldn't make it to her birthday party. Together you had your first overnight and stayed up as late as you could, sharing secrets you were sure—at seven years old—were incredibly deep and dark. You knew her favorite color and who her first big crush was, and you sat with each other as much as possible in school. At recess, you always played the same game and tried to be on the same team. Then one day, you got in a lot of trouble together. That is when you knew this was special. This person wasn't just any friend. This was your *best* friend.

This was your first experience of choosing to know someone and be known by them. Unlike a relationship with your parents, where you had no say in it, you chose this person and this person chose you back, out of all the kids in all the classes in all the schools.

Every day we are in process of making choices. Our most significant choices are the people we spend time with, and the types of relationships we have with them. The author of the book of Proverbs