

THE
LEADERSHIP
STYLE
— OF —
JESUS

MICHAEL YOUSSEF



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*To my wife, Elizabeth,
and my children, Sarah, Natasha,
Joshua, and Jonathan*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wrote an abbreviated version of this book back in 1986. Since then it has been read by millions around the world in twelve of the world's most spoken languages.

I am confident that this expanded and much enlarged book will help many leaders and aspiring leaders to follow in the leadership style of Jesus, the greatest leader who ever lived.

For this I want to thank Harvest House Publishers for their vision and the diligence of Wolgemuth and Associates. Above all, I want to thank my very able compiler and editor, Jim Denney.

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— PART 1 —

THE
BEGINNINGS
OF LEADERSHIP

A friend once gave a talk to a group of children. Robed like a character from Bible times, he said, “I have something to tell you—something I’ve never told anyone else before.” He pulled open the robe to reveal a big *S* on his T-shirt. “Kids,” he said, “I’m Superman!”

The children laughed. One child called out, “If you’re Superman, fly up to the ceiling!”

My friend went on to explain that many people make claims about who they are, but not everyone can offer proof. “The problem,” he said, “is that once I tell you I’m Superman, I have to prove it.”

Leadership works the same way. Whenever anyone says “I’m a leader,” that person will be put to the test. He or she must back that claim with proof. What kind of proof? Well, the most obvious kind of proof that a person is a leader is that he or she has *followers*. If you don’t have followers, you are not a leader.

Followers are people who believe in you and trust you enough to follow in your footsteps. They endorse your leadership by saying to you, “I recognize your leadership ability. I trust you. I want to be like you. I want to learn from you. I want to go where you lead me.”

A leader is, by definition, a person who works through other people to achieve a goal or a vision. A president sets a vision or direction for the nation, then commissions his staff and his cabinet to achieve that vision, works with Congress to enact that vision, and

inspires the citizenry to embrace that vision. A corporate CEO casts a vision for the company, works through the management team to implement that vision, and motivates the workforce to fulfill that vision at every level. A pastor articulates a biblically based vision for the church, and works through the church board, the elders and deacons, the teachers and youth workers and volunteers, and all the members to transform that vision into Christ-centered ministry.

The ultimate role model of effective leadership is Jesus Christ. During his earthly ministry, Jesus worked through people to achieve the vision called “the kingdom of heaven.” He began by calling to himself a circle of twelve people from assorted temperaments and backgrounds, including fishermen (Simon, Andrew, James, and John), antigovernment political extremists (Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot), and a pro-government collaborator (Matthew the tax collector). Jesus mentored these followers, taught them and challenged them, and united them into a unified force focused on a single goal. Then he pushed them out of their comfort zones and delegated important tasks to them, and ultimately founded his church through them.

Jesus worked through the Twelve to establish a church that has endured for two millennia and now circles the globe. Jesus inspired trust and followership in the people he met. As they followed and watched his life, they became witnesses, confirming that he truly was the Messiah—the leader promised in the Old Testament, anointed by God, descended from David, and sent to save his people.

Jesus also shared his vision with a wider circle of disciples and with the masses, and he inspired confidence and enthusiasm about his vision of a coming kingdom. In the process of casting his kingdom vision and teaching in parables, he enabled people to see his vision for themselves, and he drew many people to his vision. Jesus the Messiah created a community of people who were focused on his kingdom vision, and by leading, teaching, motivating, and inspiring those people, he changed the world.

As we see in John's gospel, Jesus offered seven basic proofs, seven distinct confirmations that he was truly the Messiah, God's anointed leader. After we examine those seven proofs, we will see how to apply the lessons of the leadership style of Jesus to every leadership arena—governments and corporations, churches and schools, military units and sports teams, and the most intimate leadership arena of all, the home.

First Witness: The Father

The first proof Jesus offers to confirm his leadership role is the witness of God the Father. He told his hearers, "And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me" (John 5:37a). What did Jesus mean? He was speaking about the Father's stamp of approval—an affirmation that God issued publicly, immediately after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. In Matthew's gospel we read:

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17).

In the presence of John the Baptist and many other witnesses, God the Father openly announced his eternal relationship between himself and Jesus of Nazareth. Here we see a stark contrast between Jesus and every other so-called "messiah" who claims to come in the name of God. For example, Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, claimed he was all alone at night on a wooded hill when he was visited by an angel; that angel, he said, revealed a new religion to him out of a book of golden plates. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, supposedly entered Jerusalem by night and claimed to hear the voice of God speak to him while he was alone.

Go through the history of various religions and you hear repeated claims of “in the middle of the night, when no one else was around, God spoke to me.” But Jesus did not have to make unverified claims of a revelation by night. God the Father openly confirmed his Son as the anointed Messiah.

On a less public occasion, Jesus took his three closest disciples, his executive committee as it were, to a mountain (later known as the Mount of Transfiguration). What these three disciples witnessed that night is recorded in Mark’s gospel:

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only (Mark 9:2-8).

The messiahship of Jesus was confirmed as Jesus conversed with Elijah and Moses, and as the voice of God said, “This is my beloved Son.” Jesus was not a self-proclaimed, self-anointed leader. His right to be called Jesus the Messiah was proclaimed by God the Father, and that proclamation was heard by many witnesses.

Second Witness: John the Baptist

The opening chapter of John’s gospel reveals the testimony of a second witness, John the Baptist:

And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God” (John 1:32-34).

As Jesus later said of John the Baptist, “You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth” (John 5:33). John the Baptist, who called himself “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,” was a forerunner and a witness for Jesus, a man sent by God with a unique ministry to confirm to the world the identity of Jesus the Messiah.

Third Witness: Jesus Himself

It may seem strange that Jesus called himself to the witness stand to testify to his own ministry as God’s anointed Messiah. But after referring to the confirming witness of his Father and John the Baptist, Jesus said, “But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36).

Later, Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). His hearers understood exactly what he was saying, and they picked up stones to stone him to death. They justified their intention to kill him, saying, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God” (John 10:33). On another occasion, Jesus told the people that because they had seen him, they had seen God the Father (see John 14:7).

Jesus didn’t merely *claim* to have a unique and eternal relationship with God. Everything about his life backed up this claim. Through the evidence of his life, Jesus made it clear that he was a leader to be followed.

Fourth Witness: The Holy Spirit

As we have already noted, the Holy Spirit gave his blessing and confirmation at the baptism of Jesus by descending on him like a dove and remaining on him. Even though the story is presented to us beautifully, in symbolic language, there are undoubtedly depths to the witness of the Spirit in the life of Jesus that we don't fully comprehend. But we do know that the Holy Spirit confirmed the ministry and leadership of the Lord Jesus. The presence of the Spirit gave Jesus the authority to preach the gospel and perform a variety of miracles.

Fifth Witness: Scripture

The Old Testament confirmed the leadership of Jesus. Prophets foretold his coming, his messianic ministry, and his death. Some of the most explicit prophecies about Jesus were written by the prophet Isaiah. He pictured the birth of Jesus (Isaiah 9:6), the suffering of Jesus (Isaiah 53:4-10), the servanthood of Jesus (Isaiah 42:1-4), and even the announcement of Jesus by John the Baptist (Isaiah 40:3). Many other messianic passages, such as Psalms 22, 69, 110, and 118, speak vividly of Jesus's life, ministry, lordship, rejection by Israel, death, and resurrection.

As the Lord Jesus told the corrupt religious leaders who persecuted him, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39-40).

Sixth Witness: Miracles

The ministry of Jesus was confirmed by the miracles he performed. John's gospel refers to them as "signs." Though John cites fewer miracles than any of the other gospel writers, the signs he mentions bear witness to the purpose, power, and leadership authority of Jesus.

It's important to understand that Jesus did not perform these signs as an act of showmanship. An attention-seeking showman would have performed magic tricks to amaze and attract the crowds. Jesus often performed his most amazing miracles quietly, out of public view, and he frequently told witnesses to tell no one. His reluctance to perform miracles in order to play to the crowd confirms his words, "I do not receive glory from people" (John 5:41).

Seventh Witness: The Disciples

The disciples traveled with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry. They saw what he did, heard his teachings, and believed. When the religious leaders persecuted Jesus and he spoke openly of the hardship of following him, many would-be disciples turned away. Only a few continued to follow him.

Those who persevered with Christ included Simon Peter, who said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). In saying that, Peter didn't merely mean that Jesus knew the rules of life or could explain how life should be lived; he meant that Jesus himself was the Source and Giver of eternal life.

The author of the gospel of John was himself a follower of Jesus. In the next to last verse of his gospel, John says, "This is the disciple who is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things, and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24).

Today's Leaders

We who are involved in leadership today can hardly claim to possess the unique qualifications of Jesus the Messiah. But by observing his life, we learn this important leadership principle: *The call to leadership must be confirmed.*

What if someone walked into your office and said, "I have come to lead you into truth"? First, such an approach would be so strange that you'd probably call security to have that person removed.

But suppose something about this person's manner made you want to examine his claims. How would you know who he was? How would you test the validity of his claim? How would you know if this person could lead you to the truth or not? You would undoubtedly ask a few reasonable questions: "By what right or authority do you speak? What are your qualifications or credentials? Could I see your résumé? Do you have any references?"

A person cannot simply come out of nowhere and expect to be followed as a leader. A leader must prove himself or herself competent to lead. This is true whether one is a leader in the religious realm or the secular realm.

A pastor of a church must overcome a number of hurdles to achieve a position of leadership. Normally, a pastor is first trained, then ordained (formally recognized as someone called by God as a spiritual leader). Anyone can *train* for leadership, but only God *calls* people to spiritual leadership. Pastors generally serve apprenticeships that allow them to grow into leadership, to become intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually more mature. Throughout this process, church leaders and members have an opportunity to observe and recognize the pastor's unique gifts and abilities.

Authentic spiritual leaders are also confirmed by people outside the church. The apostle Paul, when giving instructions to his protégé, Timothy, on the subject of ordination, said that an authentic spiritual leader "must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:7).

This rule of confirmation applies in secular leadership settings as well. Whether in business, government, the military, academia, or even the home, people must earn the right to lead. I may believe that I have been divinely appointed to head Apple Computer, but if I walked into Apple headquarters in Cupertino, California, and announced, "I'm here to take over," I assure you they would not usher me into the CEO's office. Most likely, I would be ushered to the parking lot.

If I would like to become the CEO of a major corporation, I will have to go through a process of confirmation. I will have to start at the bottom and be patient. I'll have to listen, learn, be mentored and instructed, demonstrate initiative and creativity, acquire skills, make friends and influential connections, and gradually move up the corporate ladder. At each level of my career, some individual—or more likely, a group of individuals—will have to examine my work, assess my character, and say, “Yes, he’s ready. He has earned a chance to move up to the next level.”

Many would-be leaders lack the patience to climb that ladder. Full of hubris and the arrogance of youth, they don't even know how much they don't know. So they vainly insist that they have what it takes to lead.

I have learned over the years how to separate in the interview stage the leadership contenders from the pretenders. The most obvious sign of a pretender is a candidate who tells you that your organization is desperate for someone with his ability and he will save your organization. That kind of arrogance is always a red light.

I remember one candidate for ministry who was turned down by a church and told to wait until he had gained more experience and maturity. His embittered response: “You are going against God's will.” The people on the committee were all friends of his. They wanted the best for him. But they were also committed to confirming God's call on his life, and at that point, they simply could not do so in good conscience. They saw too many character flaws in this man, and his impatient and prideful reply only confirmed that they were right about him.

I have also seen, in both the Christian and secular worlds, people who looked great on paper, who had impressive résumés, but who proved incapable of leading once they were hired and placed in the hot seat. They didn't have the aptitude to lead, and they lacked the confirmation of other people.

All authentic leaders must be confirmed in order to lead. This brings us to the first leadership principle we learn from the life of Jesus:

PRINCIPLE 1

Even Jesus received confirmation as a leader.
We too must be confirmed as leaders.