

Always a Follower First

by Leonard Sweet

The first words Jesus' disciples heard?

"Follow Me."

The first words Jesus spoke to Peter?

"Follow Me"

The last words Jesus spoke to Peter?

"Follow Me."



Over the last three decades, there has been a seismic shift across the landscape of the church. The advent of the church-growth theory, coupled with exponential advances in technology, has created a hyperpursuit for leadership muscle that has never been seen before. Seminars and conferences have become trendy leadership fitness centers. Titans of business and megachurch pastors serve as leadership fitness trainers, while books and periodicals deliver leadership steroids and growth hormones.

The goal of such industry? To create better leaders, stronger leaders, to make and multiply leaders.

This is where we are today. I want to explore a different issue: How can we become better followers?

Jesus didn't recruit leaders for his ministry. He didn't go to the local synagogue and place a notice on the bulletin board, announcing that he was taking resumes and setting up interviews for potential leaders. (Only the best and the brightest need apply.)

Nor did Jesus, as a pastor of a well-known church unabashedly brags, cultivate the skill of raiding other ministries for top-notch leaders. (Only those who would make me look good should feel good about their chances).

Jesus wasn't looking for leaders at all. Jesus was looking for followers.

There may be more to being a Christian than followership. There certainly cannot be less. The life story of all Christians should be "they left all and followed Jesus." From there on, the workings of the Holy Spirit in us to manifest and make room for Christ

determine our path and destiny.

But when I stand before a crowd and say, "I do not stand here today as a leader. I make no pretense to leadership. My fundamental identity is not as a leader. My fundamental identity is this: I am a follower," the arena gasps, and you can hear a pin drop. The only way I can sometimes bring them back is to have them sing with me the old gospel song I introduce as "my leadership anthem":

I have decided to follow Jesus:

I have decided to follow Jesus;

I have decided to follow Jesus;

No turning back, no turning back.

This is the great tragedy of the church in the last fifty years: We have changed Paul's words, "Follow me as I follow Christ," to "Follow me as I lead for Christ." Over and over we hear, "What the church needs is more and better leaders," or "Training leaders is job one."

Really?

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples." We stopped and built worship warehouses.

**"Follow me
as I follow
Christ."**

1 Cor. 11:1

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Jesus said, “Follow me.” We heard, “Be a leader.”

Paul said, “Do the work of an evangelist.” We’ve done the work of a marketer.

Somewhere back in the past half century, we diagnosed the church’s problem as a crisis of leading, not a crisis of following. It’s as if we read Bonhoeffer’s **Cost of Discipleship** and decided we’d rather talk about something else entirely.

In the past decade (or more), I bet you’ve attended your share of leadership conferences. Ever attend a followership conference?

In the past decade (or more), I bet you’ve put your arm around more than one person and complemented his or her leadership abilities. Ever encourage someone with “You’ve got great followership skills”? Ever read the Bible and focus not on leadership skills and lessons but on relational skills and followership lessons?

The blue collar Messiah who moved along the margins and among the common folk has been pushed aside by personal assistants, green rooms, bodyguards, valet parking, and reserved seats. Would we rather have a church filled with high-level leaders or a church filled with lowly, humble followers a la Brother Francis and Mama T (Mother Teresa)?

The cry for leadership is deafening amid our social disintegration, our moral disorientation. We have come to believe that we have a leadership crisis while all along we have been in a drought of discipleship. The Jesus paradox is that only Christians lead by following.

I hope to convince you to quit defining yourself as a leader, stop aspiring after leadership, and instead set your sights on being a “Jesus follower” or “fellow follower” or “first follower.” I hope to convince you, instead of inviting others to come under your leadership, to invite them into a fellowship of followers, a fellowship of followership, a ragtag band of pilgrims bound for the Promised Land.

The Leadership Myth

The leadership myth pervades our structures, our personalities, and our language—in terms like senior pastor, lead pastor, and executive pastor. We have created entire categories of titles to enforce the leadership diversion at best, the leadership perversion at worst.

To emphasize followership is not to eliminate the notion that we need leaders. It is to flush the definitions, concepts and practices of flesh-based leadership down the sewer they came from. Leadership within

a followership culture is a totally different animal than leadership within a leadership culture. It comes from the kingdom of God, with one and only one, Lord. No flesh glories in his presence. And all stand before him as children of the heavenly Father, as we become like little children to follow Jesus into the kingdom way, truth, and life. Just as little kids follow their moms and dads, so we follow Jesus as he leads the way.

When leaders shuck their follower identity for something more glamorous, dichotomies and hierarchical positioning rear their ugly heads. Hierarchical positions bend upward while relational postures bend downward. Leadership is a functional position of power and authority. Followership is a relational posture of love and trust.

Not So Among You

So Jesus called them together and said, “*You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.*”

Jesus says, “Among you it will be different.”

You want to be first? Be last!

You want to be greatest? Be least!

You want to find yourself? Lose yourself!

You want to be exalted? Be humble.

The first question in a followership culture is this; Is it different among us? Jesus points to the surrounding culture and its way of leading. The surrounding culture dominates and in many cases oppresses those under it. In fact, it celebrates that domination, that hierarchy, and esteems the rights and privileges that come from being on top. Jesus calls us instead to follow the model of the house servant and the bond slave, to give up our rights and privileges in order to serve the interest of another.

And even when we must lead, he calls us to lead in a different way—from behind. Nelson Mandela explains



“...become like little children to follow Jesus into the kingdom way, truth, and life.”

it like this: "A leader.... is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed by behind."

Can you see the difference between the familiar leadership model and the followership we are called to as Christians?

It is time we owned up to the false category of leader and its idolatry. Leadership is function. Followership is an identity. If we don't recognize this, we are no different from the ancient Israelites in this exchange with God in I Samuel 8:

People: *"We want a king [leader]. Give a king [leader] like the other nations have."*

God: *"They have rejected me as their King [Leader]."*

Fundamental to biblical faith are two categorical imperatives:

1. Jesus is the Leader.
2. We are his followers.

In this article I have assigned the word Leader to Jesus singly and only. You and I are never leaders, only followers. The best we can

aspire to is to become first followers, not followers who then go on to be leaders. We are always followers—followers first and then first followers. Even when we are summoned to the front of the line, we still are behind our Leader.

This is not to say that a follower does not have tremendous influence. Followers often like to follow other followers as much as they like to follow the Leader. By the way we live, we influence others to follow Jesus one way or another. But first followers are always trying to get out of the way and make others first followers of Jesus as well.

Excerpt taken from **I am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus.**

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Leonard Sweet will be speaking at the August 7-10, 2013, Holy Spirit Conference, "Come, Follow Me." He is the author of more than two hundred articles, over twelve hundred published sermons, and dozens of books. He is currently the E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University, Madison, NJ and a Visiting Distinguished Professor at George Fox University, Portland, Oregon. See: LeonardSweet.com

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