

LEADERS WHO FOLLOW

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Introduction

So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and *followed* him (Luke 5:11, my emphasis).

This is a book all about how to follow Jesus in Christian ministry. In my previous book, *God's Leader*, I focused on a wide number of different biblical passages and applied them to ministry. There I explored a whole range of issues connected to spiritual leadership. This book has a narrower focus: it centres on the relationship between spiritual leaders and the Lord Jesus. All the Gospels present the command 'follow me' as the starting point for discipleship and ministry (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:27; John 1:43). We are followers before we ever lead others, and that following is key to everything that we do. We lead out of following.

We mustn't miss, though, that the real issue at hand isn't simply our following, but the Person we are following. When Jesus says 'follow me', the 'me' refers to the infinite, glorious, loving Alpha and Omega of the universe. He is the One who defines us and shapes us in life and ministry.

Life and leadership is all about him. Thus, our relationship with Jesus has to be the clear starting point for all we do. Without him, we have nothing to say and nothing to offer to the world. Jesus is the heart of all ministry.

That said, it is also true that our walk with the Lord Jesus can easily be neglected as we become distracted and diverted in our spiritual responsibilities. Our leading can subsume our following, and we can become neglectful of the very One who brings us life. Such neglect, though easy to drift into, will always lead to dramatic and tragic consequences for both the leader and those he or she leads. This book is written to help us fight that neglect. I've tried to write a book that would strengthen me in my ministry, therefore much of it arises out of my own heart struggles, as well as addressing the heart struggles of other leaders I know. My goal is to strengthen our following of Jesus and to ensure that it is at the heart of our ministry. I want to keep calling us back to the One who our ministry is all about.

In *God's Leader*, I followed an expository method in looking at spiritual leadership, and I do the same here. So, again, this book isn't a systematic approach to spiritual leadership, but is focused on a number of texts from the Gospels of Luke and John. Systematic and expository methods both have their strengths and weaknesses, but it seems to me that much that is written on leadership is only systematic, and so getting our noses into specific texts is a really healthy thing to do. The simple meditation on God's word in the middle of ministry is very powerful and sustaining. As we do this,

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we meet Jesus afresh and directly experience his presence. This is how we commune with the One we are following. I hope the approach of this book will enable that.

I have consciously used Luke (one of the three synoptic Gospels that share many similarities) as well as John's Gospel so as to give a rounded flavour of all that it means to know and follow Jesus. However, this book doesn't aim to say everything about what it means to follow Jesus, nor everything about ministry. There are plenty of other passages that could be included, but hopefully major themes have been covered properly. The book can easily be used as part of daily devotions, read together in staff teams or simply read through as any other book. My hope is simply that we get a better view of Jesus and what it means to know him.

Following Jesus

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, the people were crowding round him and listening to the word of God. He saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, 'Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.'

Simon answered, 'Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.'

When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to

break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.

Then Jesus said to Simon, 'Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people.' So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him (Luke 5:1-11).

True spiritual leadership doesn't start with leading, but with following. We have to follow Jesus before we can ever lead for Jesus. If we have any authority, influence or power, it is all derived from the Lord, and not inherent to us. Accordingly, every leader must continually return to Jesus, as a living, nourishing relationship with him is the foundation for all that we do.

Surprised by the power of Jesus

Thankfully, Scripture has given us a great example of a leader who has, in the midst of weakness and sins, lived out a life of following Jesus: Peter. His story is a demonstration of the power and grace of Jesus Christ to transform and

raise up an unlikely man to be a spiritual leader. In Luke 5:1–11, we meet Peter the fisherman, rather than Peter the apostle. As the story starts, we see that he has been out doing his job all night, but rather unsuccessfully. Through meeting Jesus, though, his life is about to be turned upside down and inside out. Jesus approaches Peter, gets into his boat and performs an amazing miracle. Beforehand, Peter's fishing had resulted only in empty nets. Now, through the power of Jesus, the nets become completely overloaded with wriggling fish. The shock is palpable.

Yet, while the catch is striking, it's not the most spectacular of Jesus' signs and wonders. After all, if Jesus really wanted to get attention, he could have done something much more breathtaking – such as parting the Sea of Galilee and walking through it! Further, in comparison with Jesus' other miracles, it isn't obviously altruistic. In other words, it's not a healing, a raising of the dead or an exorcism. So, while striking, it is in many ways also strange and inconsequential. We might ask ourselves, 'What's the point of this miracle?'

It seems that this sign is best understood as a personalised miracle for Simon. Fishing is, obviously, not a hobby for Peter, but his livelihood, and this is, by any standard, a dream catch for him. The irony with the miracle is that Peter, an experienced fisherman who knows the local waters, had caught nothing that day. Jesus, on the other hand, proves himself to be the best fisherman in Galilee for a hundred years – and without even having a fishing rod or getting

himself wet! Jesus is clearly getting Simon's attention here. He's showing Simon (and us) that he is the One who gives, or withdraws, ultimate success. It's all in his hands.

As a result, this changes our perspective on everything that we do in life or ministry. The reality is that while we can do everything that we might think of, using all our powers and gifts, and working all day and night, we might yet still come up with nothing. We need to know that our greatest effort to build our churches, our greatest dreams for ministry and our every success are all under the authority of Jesus. Our 'fishing' is submitted to his purpose and plan, and the filling of our nets is controlled by him. He's Lord over everything, and dwarves all our efforts and hard work. The Lord Jesus can choose to give us our dreams with a snap of his fingers, or withhold if that is best. Maybe he'll bless us with everything we desire, or maybe he won't, but the truth is that he decides.

Humbled before Jesus

We know that Peter respected Jesus before the miracle. After all, Jesus had already healed his mother-in-law (4:38–39), and Peter calls Jesus 'Master' (5:5) and follows Jesus' directions about his boat! Yet now, through this miracle, Peter is granted a whole new insight into who Jesus is, and it completely changes his life. Peter's words say it all: 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' (v. 8).

It doesn't seem that Peter is confessing a particular kind of sin here, but rather that he is recognising Jesus'

identity. In 4:34, an unclean spirit who Jesus is exorcising cries out in terror, 'Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!' There is a striking echo of these words in Peter. Of course, unlike the spirit, Peter isn't fighting Jesus here, but he does fall before him in self-humiliation. The sign of the full net has pointed him to the ultimate power, glory and holiness of Jesus. He understands that he's in the presence of the Holy One.

Yet, the really striking thing in this story is what has led Peter into this confession. Notice that it isn't a rebuke from Jesus. There's no indication in the passage that Jesus has told him off, or confronted him about sin in his life. On the contrary, Peter's eyes have been opened by the generous power of Jesus through this sign. The Lord has shown him his goodness in this miracle, and it's that very goodness that has convicted Peter of his unworthiness. We might wonder how goodness could be so convicting, but one of C. S. Lewis's science fiction trilogy helps explain the power of infinite goodness. In this scene, the main character finds himself before a kind of angelic presence. The passage is remarkable for the way it describes what it's like to encounter true goodness:

My fear was now of another kind. I felt sure that the creature was what we call 'good', but I wasn't sure whether I liked 'goodness' so much as I had supposed. This is a very terrible experience. As long as what you are afraid of