



# THE FOURFOLD LEADERSHIP OF JESUS

‘The most refreshing and  
illuminating leadership book  
I have read in years’

J JOHN

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Foreword by Graham Cray, Bishop of Maidstone

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## Introduction

# COME, FOLLOW, WAIT, GO

‘Don’t follow me. Follow Jesus!’

It was a sticker attached to the rear window of the car in front; and as I sat in an interminable London traffic jam, I had plenty of time for the message to sink in.

At first sight it seemed humble, gracious, eminently reasonable. ‘I’m a Christian,’ the driver in front was proclaiming, ‘but not much of a Christian, I’m afraid. I’m all too aware of my faults and failings. Perhaps you’ll be aware of them, too, as driving isn’t always my strong point. Jesus—now he’s the perfect driver. Follow him and you won’t go wrong. That’s all I wanted to say, actually. Thanks for listening.’ A gentle, straightforward piece of Christian witnessing, it seemed, and certainly somewhat clearer to the average secularist than the ubiquitous *ichthys* fish.

Yet as I reflected further, the message of the sticker began to trouble me. It was partly that it seemed to assume a culture in which ‘following Jesus’ was common currency, a society well-versed in the Gospels and adept at making links between Jesus’ day and our own; and such a view of 21st-century London appeared naïve in the extreme.<sup>1</sup> But it was also that the message seemed dangerously convenient, a neat get-out clause for every Christian believer who wished to avoid the challenge of personal holiness and to hide behind the one they were called upon to follow.

The apostle Paul, I pondered, had no such qualms. ‘Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ’ was his call to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:1), and similar commands are liberally scattered throughout his letters.<sup>2</sup> Here, by contrast, was a man who acknowledged the need to live out the life of Jesus in his generation:

not just pointing his readers to a book, or teaching them a series of lifestyle principles, but recognizing that his first calling as a Christian leader was to embody the message of his crucified, risen Lord.

And while the sentiment of the car sticker might be superficially attractive, the challenge of Paul's position was undeniable, and his logic was compelling. A sad reality is that most people today will never read a Gospel, runs the logic. Its sobering counterpart is that those selfsame people will frequently 'read' the Christians who are called to embody it.

The sticker in the window of the car in front, and the call to 'follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ', first planted in me the idea of writing this book. For one thing, Paul's words suggested a way of life to which every Christian believer should aspire: being the 'salt of the earth', the 'light of the world' and 'yeast in the dough', in Jesus' famous metaphors (Matthew 5:13–16; Luke 13:20–21). For another, they contained a striking, even revelatory insight—that leadership and discipleship are so closely related as to be virtually indistinguishable from one another.

The context of 1 Corinthians 11:1 makes this point still clearer. Here was Paul writing to a church that combined great spiritual fervour with alarming spiritual immaturity. Among their more childish characteristics was a tendency to division based on personality cults: 'I follow Paul,' said one; 'I follow Apollos,' another; 'I follow Cephas,' a third; to which the fourth would respond—perhaps somewhat smugly—'I follow Christ!' (1 Corinthians 1:12). In such a context it would have been easy for Paul to support the 'I follow Christ' brigade. Clever children, after all, quickly discover that 'Jesus' is generally the right answer to any question posed by their Sunday school teacher. The fact that Paul formulated it quite so differently seemed highly significant against such a backdrop. To the Corinthians, after all, Jesus was invisible. It was now up to the second generation of Christian disciples, Paul himself and the 'body of Christ' in Corinth, to live out the life of Jesus lovingly, faithfully and with gospel integrity.

Up to that point, I had read, listened and taught much on leadership. I read books that focused on learnt techniques and practices—casting a vision, developing a strategy, building a team, dealing with conflict—and I read books that were far more centred on personality and self-understanding. I learnt my Myers Briggs profile,<sup>3</sup> completed my Belbin inventory<sup>4</sup> and knew my five top strengths in the Strengthsfinder exercise.<sup>5</sup> The best of such approaches had proved hugely positive and illuminating and helped to develop my self-understanding and shape my leadership practices.

Yet at times I had become uneasy and frustrated at much of the leadership material on offer—or, at least, increasingly aware of its limitations. There seemed to be a frequent attempt to ‘baptize’ secular management theories: to see Jesus as the ultimate CEO, someone at ease at the head of the table in a major multinational corporation, moving it from ‘good’ to ‘great’ with consummate skill. There seemed to be a regular shift in language and meaning—the word ‘vision’, for example, moving from a powerful, God-given encounter to a long (and frequently tedious) process of consultation followed by the eventual drawing-up of a five-year strategic plan. There seemed to be a danger that personality tools would move from the realm of description to prescription, thus closing the door on a God for whom ‘all things are possible’ (Mark 10:27) and whose ‘power is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). Yes, there were lessons to be learnt, but sometimes those lessons appeared tangential to the heart of Christian leadership.

Another debate consumed both time and energy, polarizing Christians between those who stressed ‘doing’ and those in favour of simply ‘being’. Some leadership books I read left me exhausted with the sheer activism of their writers—generally highly successful church leaders who had grown a church from 300 to 3000 in a matter of months. Their motto was ‘It’s better to burn out than rust out’, and their role model was Paul at the height of his missionary endeavours, moving from city to city with alarming rapidity and extraordinary effectiveness. Other books, usually written by those of

a more Catholic persuasion, were far more contemplative in tone. Their motto was ‘We are called to be human beings, not human doings’, and their champion was Mary of Bethany, who had chosen ‘what is better’ by sitting at the feet of Jesus—so earning his commendation in contrast to her workaholic and bad-tempered sister (Luke 10:38–42).

I read books on episcopal ministry, on priestly ministry, on lay ministry and on ministry teams. I read books on women’s ministry and a book somewhat directly entitled *Leadership is Male*.<sup>6</sup> I read an alarming book which suggested that leaders under 45 were far more likely to lead growing churches than those over 45<sup>7</sup>—alarming in that I had just celebrated my 45th birthday. And meanwhile, I was teaching at a number of leadership conferences in Norway, Sweden and the UK, sharing some of the insights I was picking up along the way, but also wanting to wrestle with the Christian scriptures—allowing them to speak with an authentic voice rather than squeezing them into the box of 21st-century management theory.

That sticker in the car window, and its antithesis in 1 Corinthians 11, therefore opened up for me a new way of looking at things, an approach where Christian character—nothing less than the imitation of Christ—was thrust into the forefront of the leadership debate.

If discipleship and leadership are quite so closely related, then—if our authority to lead is directly proportionate to the quality of our discipleship—Christians can enter that debate with a unique and distinctive voice. Indeed, theirs will be a vital contribution at a time when traditional authority structures are increasingly derided, when issues of integrity are at the forefront of the political and commercial agendas, and when only those leaders who practise what they preach—Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, to name but three—are regarded as both credible and safe to follow.

At first sight, this approach seems to side with the ‘being’ brigade. We need to be like Jesus, and how do we do that? Presumably through the traditional disciplines of prayer and fasting, solitude and

silence—taking our place on the floor beside Mary of Bethany. Yet Jesus was a man of action as much as a man of prayer. Following him must therefore involve doing as much as being, the two neatly encapsulated in Mark 3:14–15: ‘[Jesus] appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.’

Imitating Christ cannot dispense with the need for spiritual discipline (being with Jesus), but neither can it ignore the challenge of kingdom activity, the call to ‘preach and... drive out demons’. The growth towards a Christ-like character includes the extravert challenge of mission alongside the introvert challenge of a deeper communion with the Father. Activists need to develop their contemplative side, and contemplatives their missionary activity. Only then are such leaders safe to follow, as those who themselves are seeking, however falteringly, to follow the example of Christ.

## JESUS AND LEADERSHIP

The idea that character is key in the life of a leader is hardly a startling one. It is there in the New Testament, most notably in the instructions about overseers and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and about elders in Titus 1. It is there in the best of the books about Christian leadership, and—in a world where trust is of the essence—it is there in the syllabus of many a business school, theological college and medical training institute.

James Lawrence’s *Growing Leaders*<sup>8</sup> helpfully identifies ‘calling, character and competence’ as the key areas of leadership development, quoting Bill Hybels’ definition of character as ‘who you are when no one else is looking’. Leighton Ford’s *Transforming Leadership*<sup>9</sup> speaks of the empowering nature of Jesus’ leadership style and his ability to change situations rather than merely working within them. The description of Jesus as a ‘courteous rebel’ (itself a

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quotation from Stephen Neill) particularly stands out for me, as does Ford's own portrayal of the balance of Jesus' character—his apparently contradictory personality traits held in powerful but creative tension. John Adair's *The Leadership of Jesus*<sup>10</sup> compares Jesus' leadership style with that of other leaders of his day and identifies humility as the most distinctive and significant theme in Jesus' life and legacy.

One thing that many writers seem to miss, though, is a startling fact—that Jesus himself virtually never talked about leadership. The Twelve he called to himself would today be called a 'leadership team'. Jesus taught them, he equipped them, and he promised them a key role in the future when they would 'sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matthew 19:28). When one of the team betrayed Jesus and promptly hung himself, Peter made an exegetically adventurous leap from Psalm 109 in his conviction that another should 'take his place of leadership' (Acts 1:20), and Matthias was quickly appointed in Judas' place. Yet throughout the Gospels, Jesus studiously avoided the 'L' word altogether, alongside the other obvious designations of pastors, elders, overseers or priests. His followers were called 'disciples' (literally 'learners') or 'apostles' ('those who are sent'). They were variously described as workers, students, servants, slaves, fishers of people, lambs among wolves and, in a particularly moving passage in John 15, friends. Peter, James and John appeared to form something of an inner core, but James and John's attempts to secure the leadership privileges they might expect from that position were met with a gentle but firm rebuttal (Matthew 20:23).

Peter, it's true, seemed to be uniquely set apart, although the phrase used in Matthew 16:18, 'On this rock I will build my church', was hardly the language of a conventional leadership role. As to why Peter was selected as the first among equals, there are varying opinions, but one obvious attribute singles him out from the rest. Peter was not only the first to acknowledge the true identity of Jesus. It was also Peter who stepped out of the boat and

came to Jesus across the water (Matthew 14:28–29), Peter who followed Jesus as far as the courtyard of the high priest (26:58), and Peter who was the first of the apostles to enter the empty tomb (Luke 24:12). He was also there (by invitation) on further significant occasions, from the mount of transfiguration to the garden of Gethsemane.

Not all of these incidents showed the apostle at his best, of course, or would form obvious contenders in a compilation of ‘Peter’s greatest hits’. But they do demonstrate how this man acted as Jesus’ closest follower in a literal sense—following him on to the water, up to the mountain, into the garden, up to the courtroom, into the tomb. Once again the point is made that in Jesus’ understanding, leadership and discipleship (or ‘followership’, to coin a term) amount to very much the same thing.

Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 23 is particularly instructive. In the context of a strong critique of the blindness and hypocrisy of the Pharisees, he issued his followers with the clearest of instructions: ‘You are not to be called “Rabbi”, for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father”, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher”, for you have one Teacher, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant’ (vv. 8–11). The theme of the greatest being the servant is common to all four Gospels. In Mark it was associated with Jesus’ own calling not ‘to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (10:45). In John it was famously enacted in the visual parable of the foot washing on the night before he died (13:3–4).

These passages more than hint at the reasons behind Jesus’ suspicion of ‘leadership’ as a category in which to place his disciples. First and foremost, his concern sprang out of an understanding of his own mission in terms of service—of giving his life ‘as a ransom for many’—and, as he pointed out on several occasions, ‘Students are not above their teacher, nor servants above their master’ (Matthew 10:24). In other words, if the teacher or master serves, his

students or servants would clearly be called to do the same.

In a secondary sense, though, Jesus' own experience told him of the corrupting influence of power on fallen human nature. 'Everything they do is done for people to see,' he said of the Pharisees as he castigated their hypocrisy and self-absorption (Matthew 23:5). 'Do not do what they do' (v. 3). 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them,' said Jesus of the Roman authorities of his day. 'Not so with you' (Mark 10:42-43).

Underlying such thinking was a long biblical tradition going back to the prophet Samuel and the Israelites' ever more pressing insistence for a king. In those distant days, the prophet had grimly spelt out the implications of the people's demand: 'He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses... He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves... He will take a tenth of your grain... a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves' (1 Samuel 8:11-17). 'Take, take, take' was the language of kingship in Samuel's understanding, and in that of the prophets who all too frequently witnessed the fulfillment of his stark warning.

It's no wonder that the old categories of power and privilege no longer seemed to fit as the disciples began to follow Christ, and that the old language of 'taking' could only apply in a radically new sense. 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:29-30).

To say that Jesus was lukewarm on the subject of leadership is therefore something of an understatement. He never gave his followers any designation that smacked of leadership in its normal sense, or took them aside for specifically leadership training. He never passed on his insights into vision-seeking, team-building or time management. It's true that we can extrapolate certain principles from Jesus' own practice in these areas, but the Master's sole concern was to disciple his followers through the word, both spoken and enacted.

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From Jesus they learned about the kingdom of God, about humility and prayer, money and generosity, love and purity. From him they learned about forgiveness and grace, healing and proclamation, heaven and hell. They were taught to go and make disciples (Matthew 28:19), to let their light so shine before others ‘that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven’ (5:16). Their leadership calling was simply to say with Paul, ‘Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ’, using words if necessary. It was as straightforward, and as supremely challenging, as that.

## JESUS THE DISCIPLE

At first sight there is one exception to Jesus’ reticence in the Gospel records, and that lies in the description of his own role as leader. In the Gospel accounts, he is variously designated ‘Son of Man’, ‘Son of David’, and ‘Son of the Living God’. He is additionally described as Teacher, Rabbi, Master and Shepherd. ‘You call me “Teacher” and “Lord”’, he said at the conclusion of the foot-washing episode, ‘and rightly so, for that is what I am’ (John 13:13), while seven chapters later, Thomas was responding to his encounter with the risen Christ in the most radical statement of them all: ‘My Lord and my God!’ (20:28).

If Jesus is indisputably the master, though, there is another strand in the Gospels that portrays him in the role of disciple. In Matthew 12:18 he is explicitly identified with Isaiah’s suffering servant, ‘the one I love, in whom I delight’—the beginnings of a rich seam of thinking that leads to some of the most powerful insights in all of Christian theology. In Mark 1:12–13, and elsewhere in the Gospels, there is the clear sense of Jesus as a man under authority: ‘At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan.’ Prayer was central to Jesus’ ministry, communing with a Father who affirmed

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him, equipped him, directed him and provided for him. The many references to Jesus as a man 'sent' by God imply that Jesus himself was an apostle ('one who is sent'), while the anonymous writer of the letter to the Hebrews placed him in the role of disciple ('learner') when he boldly wrote that Jesus 'learned obedience from what he suffered' (5:8).

It is in John's Gospel that this theme is most fully developed. Jesus 'can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (John 5:19). 'What I have heard from him I tell the world', Jesus affirms a few chapters later, and 'I always do what pleases him' (8:26, 29). 'I did not speak on my own', he continues in chapter 12, 'but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken' (v. 49), and the close identification between Jesus and 'the one who sent me' emphasizes both his unique authority and his trusting submission to the will of the Father.

Even Jesus, then, was a disciple called to make disciples. The authority of his leadership was dependent on the quality of his discipleship. In this grand game of 'Follow my leader', rich with cosmic significance, Jesus may be visibly at the front of the queue in the Gospel narratives, but before him is an invisible presence who leads and directs his every step. And it is as the perfect disciple to his heavenly Father—as one whose obedience was tested through the most extreme of human sufferings and triumphantly passed the test—that Jesus' own leadership becomes inspirational, life-giving and supremely fruitful.

'We are only able to imitate and follow a man whom we have before our eyes,' wrote Augustine of Hippo, 'and yet it was necessary for us to follow God who is invisible, and not a mere man. In order then to give us an example we could safely follow, God became a man.'<sup>11</sup>

## THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

A brief survey of leadership in the Gospels leads to a clear conclusion: that Jesus' passion was for discipleship rather than leadership; indeed, that, in Jesus' understanding, the two categories entirely overlap.

It's not that leadership competence is unimportant, of course. Nor is it that every true disciple is called to the same leadership role, or chaos would ensue. But character, discipleship, the imitation of Christ, occupies such a pivotal place in the Gospel narratives that every other leadership attribute and charisma (in its secular sense) must constantly be judged in its light. 'Now then these three remain,' we might conclude: 'charisma, competence and character. But the greatest of these is character.'

Set against such a background, the call of Jesus to 'follow me' is not simply a divine call: 'Follow me because I am the Son of God.' It is also a human call: 'Follow me because I myself am the perfect follower.' Neither of those phrases, of course, is true of Paul's leadership, or your leadership or mine. It would be quite inappropriate for any Christian leader to issue a 'Follow me' call without any further qualification. 'At that time if anyone says to you, "Look, here is the Messiah!" ... do not believe it!' (Mark 13:21) would be Jesus' rejoinder to such a foolhardy and, in its original sense, 'misleading' practice. But complete with the qualifying phrase, 'as I follow the example of Christ', the Christian leader's call to 'follow me' is not only acceptable but essential; hence the exhaustive and sometimes exhausting nature of the training of the Twelve, as Jesus worked night and day to form a discipleship group who were, quite simply, safe to follow.

## COME, FOLLOW, WAIT, GO

'Follow me', though, was not the only call issued by Jesus to his disciples. There were times when he called people to 'come to me',

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times when he invited them to ‘wait for me’, and times when he asked them to ‘go for me’. Come, follow, wait, go: each represents a different aspect of the call to discipleship, and each reveals unique facets of the character of Jesus the caller.

The call ‘Come to me’ suggests a leader who is facing his or her people, arms perhaps outstretched in a gesture of friendliness and warmth. Acceptance and accessibility are the key themes of such an approach, as the leader consciously seeks to reduce the distance between themselves and those they lead. ‘Come to me’ leadership is therefore strongly relational. At its heart lies an intimate and face-to-face encounter, a meeting that is comforting, enriching and, at times, mutually exposing.

The call ‘Follow me’, by contrast, implies a leader who is walking ahead of his or her people, with only their back (not their face) on view to those responding to the challenge. Here is a more rugged calling—arguably a more demanding one—as the leader strides ahead, blazing a frequently courageous and uncomfortable trail. The ability to inspire is foundational to the ‘Follow me’ leader, but it is an inspiration based on actions, not just words. On its own, ‘Follow me’ may lack compassion and patience, creating a culture of the survival of the fittest, where the casualties are plentiful and the carers are few. But forgo ‘Follow me’ and organizational drift sets in—a loss of vision, a lack of direction, where the led become increasingly enfeebled and inward-looking, and very little gets done.

Disciples called to ‘wait for me’ are by definition on their own but are held in that place by a sense of expectation, trust or simple need. ‘Wait for me’ leadership at its best is faithful, prayerful and patient, and encourages the same qualities in those who are led. It has a wider and longer-term view of God’s purposes and how they will come to fruition. Its timing is based on the seasonal world of farming more than the relentless world of industry. And how does it distinguish itself from the laziness and indecision of ‘Wait for me’ counterfeits? Simply through the sheer quantity and quality of its fruitfulness.

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‘Go for me’ presents the image of a disciple looking out toward the horizon and the leader standing beside them, one hand on their shoulder and the other pointing out the direction in which the disciple needs to go. It may suggest the need to sort something out, perhaps a domestic situation or an area of immaturity or compromise. Yet at heart it forms the substance of a missionary calling, inviting people to step away from their home-based comforts and securities and set out on a journey which is, by its nature, both exciting and scarily unpredictable.

‘Come, follow, wait, go’: in part they represent different styles of leadership, so most people reading the last four paragraphs will be able (with a little reflection) to recognize those in which they are instinctively strong and those where they struggle. But if Christ himself is our model, the challenge is to embrace all four of these approaches rather than opting for the one or two that are most congenial to our character or temperament. Given the argument of this chapter as a whole, that will involve, first and foremost, a wholehearted commitment not so much to leadership training but to Christian discipleship—coming to Jesus, following him, waiting for his timing and responding to his missionary call.

How, then, do the challenges to come, follow, wait and go shed light on the character of Jesus? And how can we ourselves grow as disciple-leaders, rejecting the febleness of ‘Don’t follow me, follow Jesus’ and embracing the challenge of ‘Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ’? These are the two questions at the heart of the study on which we now embark.

———— Part 1 ————

# COME TO ME

*‘Come to me, all you who are weary and  
burdened, and I will give you rest.’*

MATTHEW 11:28



## ACCESSIBLE LEADERSHIP

One of the historical oddities referred to in E.H. Gombrich's magnificent book *The Story of Art* is the number of aesthetic movements that were first 'christened' by the critics who derided them.<sup>1</sup> The word 'Gothic', for example, was initially used by Italian art critics to denote a style that they considered barbarous, brought into Italy by the Goths who had effectively destroyed the Roman empire and true culture with it. 'Baroque' means 'grotesque', and was employed by those who insisted on the absurdity of mixing classical forms in ways that went far beyond the good taste of Ancient Greece and Rome. 'Mannerism' and 'Impressionism' were also terms coined by their opponents, and although the first exhibition held by the Impressionists was widely ridiculed ('They take a piece of canvas, colour and brush, and daub a few patches of paint at random, and sign the whole thing with their name,' as one critic put it), it wasn't long before Monet and his friends were wearing the Impressionist badge with pride.

The same may be said of the expression 'Friend of tax collectors and sinners'—a term of abuse used by Jesus' opponents but one that Jesus himself never tried to repudiate. His reputation as a man apparently indifferent to the company he kept—indeed as one who actively sought out the more disreputable members of the society around him—provided constant fuel for a growing swell of gossip and censure instigated by the religious leaders of his day. And both the asceticism of John the Baptist and the apparent hedonism of Jesus seem to have provoked those leaders in roughly equal measure (see Matthew 11:18–19).

The sheer accessibility of Jesus' leadership is evident from the

moment we first pick up a Gospel. ‘Come to me,’ said Jesus, and they came—synagogue rulers, royal officials, Pharisees and members of the Jewish ruling council; tax collectors, lepers, unspecified ‘sinners’ and women with unmentionable diseases; parents wanting Jesus to bless their little children and mothers seeking preferment for their big children; and—despite Jesus’ own perception that he was ‘sent only to the lost sheep of Israel’ (Matthew 15:24)—Roman centurions, Samaritans, Canaanites, Greeks and some exotic visitors from the east, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Jesus’ parable of the wedding banquet had it just about right: ‘Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find’ (Matthew 22:9). Whatever our theology of election, Jesus appeared in no sense choosy.

Why, then, was he willing to associate with quite such mixed and frequently unsavoury company? Why was he ready to court such hostility for the stand he took on this particular issue? The answer is that accessibility lay at the very heart of the mission to which Jesus knew himself to be called. He was the Son of Man, come to seek and to save the lost. He was the shepherd called to find the sheep that had strayed. He was the doctor whose availability to the sick was integral to his sense of vocation (Luke 19:10; 15:4; Matthew 9:12). In response to his opponents, Jesus would sometimes use the word ‘sinner’ as they did, but his own preference was to speak the non-pejorative language of lostness and disease. And for the shepherd to ignore the sheep who had strayed, or for the doctor to keep his distance from the patients who so desperately needed him, would have been the gravest dereliction of duty, the most basic disregard of the call to pastor and to heal.

There are many reasons, of course, why leaders frequently like to keep their distance. Shyness, privacy, stress, busyness: all play their part in building an invisible barrier between the leader and those who are led, while the question of leadership priorities becomes particularly acute as an organization begins to grow. But practicalities like these were not responsible for the outrage with which

Jesus' radical accessibility was greeted. Underlying that anger lay two basic values to which his opponents were variously committed: the cultivation of leadership mystique on the one hand, and the commitment to ritual purity on the other.

### MISLEADERSHIP: MYSTIQUE AND RITUAL PURITY

'Mystique' was a concept that the classical world inherited from Persia (although the word itself is derived from the Latin *mysticus*). As John Adair puts it, it was the Persians who had 'introduced prostration as part of a novel method of creating an aura of divinity around their kings'.<sup>2</sup> This 'aura of divinity' was maintained through the remoteness of the king from his people, and found expression in the increasingly elaborate palaces, courtyards and protective walls that bedecked the ancient world. To the more dictatorial of its advocates, it could also spill over from the culture of palace to that of temple, where emperor-worship supplanted the worship of more ancient (and generally more worthwhile) deities.

Classical culture had a contrary tradition, too, in which a leader made himself accessible to his people. Xenophon, for example, found it strange that 'while every mechanic knows the tools of his trade, and the physician knows the names of all the instruments he uses, the general should be so foolish as not to know the names of the officers under him'.<sup>3</sup> The Greek historian Flavius Arrianus describes how the young Alexander the Great showed deep concern for the wounded after one of the battles in his Persian campaign: 'He visited them all,' writes Arrian, 'and examined their wounds, asking each man how and in what circumstances his wound was received, and allowing him to tell the story and exaggerate as much as he pleased!'<sup>4</sup> But even Alexander, that exemplary model of motivational leadership, seems to have been progressively seduced by the Persian approach. John Adair charts his growing self-importance in later years, fuelled by flattering courtiers, both Greek and

Persian, who puffed up his pretensions to be a living god; and the drunken murder of his friend Cleitus for daring to question this doubtful development remains a significant blot on Alexander's otherwise remarkable record.

Caesar Augustus, introduced to us at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, had largely bought into the culture of 'mystique': indeed, the very name 'Augustus' ('exalted') is a simple reminder of that fact. Even the puppet-king Herod Agrippa happily received the adulation of his people ('This is the voice of a god, not of a mere mortal', Acts 12:22) and died five days later in an incident that both Luke and the Jewish historian Josephus regarded as an act of divine retribution.<sup>5</sup> So against this background it is hardly surprising that the accessibility of Jesus did not endear him to his Roman hearers. Jesus' words in Mark 10:42, 'Those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them', prove that he would never see eye-to-eye with his Roman contemporaries on leadership issues. Paul's later reflections also acknowledge the apparent 'foolishness' of the gospel to its Gentile hearers, not least in the kind of people whom God was gathering around the crucified carpenter: 'God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise' (1 Corinthians 1:27).

While mystique was part of the Roman world of Jesus' day, the Jewish culture was far more focused on the theme of ritual purity. Taking their lead from the holiness code in the Torah (and their inspiration from the great battles of the past, most especially the revolt of the Maccabees against the impurity of their Seleucid overlords<sup>6</sup>) and amplifying the Torah's regulations with a hundred-and-one fiddly bylaws, the Pharisees were outraged at the laxity of Jesus and the dangers of moral contagion from the company he kept. Simon the Pharisee's response to the embarrassing gate-crasher who wiped the feet of Jesus with ointment and tears is typical of this approach: 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner' (Luke 7:39). And the beginning of that sentence—

## Come to me

‘If this man were a prophet’—suggests that even the more sympathetic of the Pharisees regarded Jesus’ radical accessibility as a major stumbling block to their acceptance of his authority as one sent by God.

Jesus’ response to such criticism has already been noted, and the ‘doctor’ image is especially suggestive. Yes, evil can be contagious: it can infect us like yeast ‘infects’ a batch of dough (see Jesus’ warning in Matthew 16:6). But goodness—the power of the kingdom to forgive, restore, transform and heal—is more contagious still. Jesus never underestimated the grip of sin in our lives as some more liberal commentators are prone to do: ‘everyone who sins is a slave to sin’, as he put it bluntly in John 8:34. Yet the Spirit’s anointing to ‘proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind’ (Luke 4:18) most clearly rested upon him, and with it came a completely new approach to holiness, which was proactive, not reactive; faithful, not fearful; on the front foot, not constantly in retreat. The great commission of Matthew 28 would perhaps have been fulfilled by now had only the Church emulated our Lord’s example.

## JESUS THE SHEPHERD

In contrast to these misleaders, Jesus’ call to ‘come to me’ took its cue from a deep biblical image: the picture of God as shepherd alongside the ‘under-shepherding’ of prophet, priest and king. The good shepherd in this image was one who gathered the sheep to himself. The bad shepherd was consistently responsible for their scattering.<sup>7</sup>

Having bad shepherds was tantamount to having no shepherds at all, as the prophet Micaiah was bold enough to remind weak King Ahab. ‘I saw all Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd’, he announced, earning for himself Ahab’s grumpy response, ‘Didn’t I tell you that he never prophesies anything good

about me, but only bad?’ The context of this story is also instructive, with Ahab having gathered the people to fight the king of Aram. In the absence of a good shepherd-king (one modelled on the life of David), Micaiah warned Ahab that such attempts to gather were inappropriate. Instead Ahab should let the Israelites disperse, scatter. ‘These people have no master’, the prophet said. ‘Let each one go home in peace’ (1 Kings 22:17–18; 2 Chronicles 18:16–17).

Moving from (arguably) the worst shepherd in the Old Testament to (unarguably) the best, the most tender example of ‘Come to me’ leadership appears in a famous passage in Isaiah 40. There it is said of God himself, ‘He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young’ (v. 11). The author of Psalm 23 also took this theme to a new level.<sup>8</sup> Instead of merely portraying God as the ‘shepherd of Israel’, the psalmist moved to a far more intimate, personal concept of the ‘Lord my shepherd’. This is a shepherd who exercises (in our terms) both ‘Come to me’ and ‘Follow me’ leadership, preparing meals for the sheep and leading them along the paths of righteousness ‘for his name’s sake’ (v. 3).

In the New Testament, this gathering imagery, in a startlingly feminine form, is a feature of Jesus’ leadership in his lament over Jerusalem: ‘Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing’ (Matthew 23:37). His image of the good shepherd who ‘calls his own sheep by name’ (John 10:3) is similarly powerful, recalling Xenophon’s critique of those generals who don’t know the names of the officers under them. And Jesus didn’t simply speak in such terms. Time and time again, he practised what he preached, gathering the most unlikely group of people to himself, frequently around a meal table.

The most famous ‘Come to me’ invitation of them all, though, is also the most illuminating. ‘Come to me,’ said Jesus, ‘all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,

## Come to me

and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Matthew 11:28–30).

Many people, of course, are weary and burdened, and a hundred Christian generations have rightly found comfort in this warm and winsome invitation. But Jesus may have had a particular type of hearer in mind when he issued it—not simply those who were wearied by life in general but those who were burdened by the incessant demands of the religious leaders, with their intrusive interpretations of the law. As he said later of the Pharisees, 'They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them' (Matthew 23:4).

The 'yoke' of the law was later mentioned in the critical discussions of the Council of Jerusalem. In debating the question of the Church's accessibility to its growing Gentile membership, Peter wisely posed the question, 'Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?' (Acts 15:10). It's hardly surprising, then, that Jesus' gracious invitation to lay down that burden and replace it with an 'easy' yoke (perhaps in the sense of being fit for use and tailor-made for the wearer) was to prove so attractive.

It might seem ill-advised to seek to rehabilitate a much-derided children's hymn at this point. But the verse, 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child'<sup>9</sup> picks up some of the major traits of 'Come to me' leadership rather well, whatever its sentimental associations. Gentleness, meekness, mildness—or, to modernize the words a little, gentleness, humility and a peaceable spirit—join compassion and vulnerability as key qualities in the character of Jesus, and these virtues help to explain the radical accessibility which was to prove such a significant feature of his ministry. It is to these 'come to me' qualities that we now turn.

‘Don’t follow me. Follow Jesus!’ runs a popular slogan. The apostle Paul wrote, ‘Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.’ As leaders and would-be leaders, can we ever hope to echo Paul’s words—or should we only point away from ourselves to Jesus? *The Fourfold Leadership of Jesus* explores what it means to lead as Jesus led, as he called his disciples to come, to follow, to wait, and to go.

Those four commands embody the four different aspects of leadership that this book explores as a model for us today, a biblical alternative to the current popularity of management theories. As we follow Jesus, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit into the likeness of Christ. Disciples are raised up as leaders, who in turn nurture further disciples, so that the work of the kingdom of God continues to grow, and we too can dare to echo Paul’s bold words.

Andrew Watson has been vicar of St Stephen’s, East Twickenham, since 1996 and has helped pioneer three church plants in that time. He is involved with the New Wine networks, and is a member of the Church of England’s General Synod and Council of Mission and Ministry. He regularly speaks at church conferences in the UK and abroad on issues relating to leadership.

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