

# Personal Qualities of a Christian Leader

By Richard E. Lauersdorf

[Salt Lake City, Utah, July 19, 1991]

What is a “leader”? What do we mean with the term “leadership”? In his fable, “The Frogs and Their King,” Aesop tells how the frogs in the pond wanted a leader. Again and again they came to Jupiter with their request till finally in reply he tossed a log into that pond. For a while the frogs were happy with their new leader but gradually they discovered they could jump on him, run all over him and receive no resistance or response from him. Besides, that log didn’t give any direction, but just floated back and forth on the pond.

Exasperated at this lack of leadership, the frogs went back to Jupiter with the request for something stronger. This time Jupiter, weary of their complaints, gave them a stork. That stork stood tall above the frogs and looked like a leader. For a time the frogs were happy as the stork strutted around the pond, making much noise and attracting much attention. But when this leader began to hassle and even devour his subordinates, the frogs realized they had another problem.

Does either one of these extremes describe Christian leadership? Is this what the church should look for in its leaders, logs who let people do whatever they want or storks who tell people everything they must do? Or are there other qualities desired in Christian leaders, qualities which lead to more desirable styles of Christian leadership?

Instead of dictating styles for leaders and laying down a set definition for leadership, let’s take up the topic assigned to us. From a brief study of what Scripture says about “Personal Qualities of a Christian Leader” hopefully we’ll also glean something about what a leader is and what leadership entails.

Opening the Scriptures, our finger falls quite naturally on 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In these familiar sections the Spirit set down qualifications for “bishops” and “deacons.” Studying those qualities, we note the emphasis on the spiritual more than on abilities. The “bishops” and “deacons,” if we try to summarize, were to have impeccable character and unquestionable morals, be intellectually disciplined and able to teach others, maintain an open heart and an open home, be seasoned church workers and stable family leaders, relate well to others and rule over their passion for money and fame. Studying those qualities, we also note that they do not in general go beyond what God expects of every Christian leader, not to mention every Christian.

With these verses in the back of our mind, let’s thumb through more of God’s Word and see what we can find about the personal qualities of the Christian leader.

1. *A leader follows THE Leader.* Already in Exodus 18, when Moses needed help in leading the Children of Israel, his father-in-law pointed to this quality. “Select capable men from all the people - men who fear God,” Jethro advised his son-in-law (18:21). Years later, in the early days of the New Testament church when again help was needed in leading God’s people, we find a similar qualification. “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit,” the Twelve advised the church (Acts 6:3). “Men who fear God,” “men known to be full of the Spirit.” Why, you could easier preach sermons on those phrases than find a synonym for them. Both Jethro and the Twelve were speaking about men whose eyes have seen the King; whose hearts were filled with love for God’s Word and work; who recognized God’s stamp on them both body and soul and reflected His ownership with their attitudes and actions; who had their priorities straight and practiced accordingly by seeking first God’s Kingdom. Christian leaders are to be *consecrated* leaders, leaders who follow the Leader.

What a basic quality this is for anyone who would lead in the church. Leadership begins with being and then leads to doing. Only those who follow the Leader can really serve Him. For they will serve out of love for Him, even as they recognize that their best service is but a faint echo to His unfailing love (2 Corinthians 5:14). They also will serve with the goal of His glory in mind and with the question constantly before them, “Will what I am doing praise Him?”

Nor will those who follow the Leader be content with following at a distance where they can hardly see Him or now and then catch sight of Him. They will strive to follow Him more closely. Regardless of their position or training they hear Peter speaking to them, “Keep on growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:18). And with Jeremiah they joyfully respond, “When Your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight” (15:16). All their days they long with the Psalmist, “O God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You” (63:1). And they know where to find Him, in His Holy Word!

Perhaps in application we might ask several questions, some requiring positive, others negative answers. What does this quality of “following” the Leader say about looking for the talent and hoping the attitude will come later when nominating people? About getting to know our lay people better? About getting information about them from the grass roots before appointing them? About choosing delegates for conventions on the basis of availability or ability?

What does this quality of following the Leader say about a leader’s personal Bible study patterns? About the study of the Word in our church councils and faculty meetings, in circuits and conventions? About the need for continuing education in the servant’s life? About the need for courses like “Training Christians for Ministry” in our parishes?

A leader follows the Leader or else he cannot lead. And the more closely he follows the Leader the more he will lead like Him.

2. *A leader serves like THE Leader.* If we were to pick one word in describing Jesus’ leadership, might it not be the word “servant”? The Old Testament evangelist described Christ’s servant style 700 years before its full disclosure on Calvary (Isaiah 53). The Servant Himself, summarized, “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). And His great apostle urged, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:5-7). Jesus, though He was “very God of very God,” was not hung up on Himself like Diotrephes who was described as loving to be first (3 John 9). Of course, Christ had authority and used it when necessary. Of course, He took the bull by the horns and made decisions when called for. Of course, He chastised what was wrong and did so even strongly. But His style was to love, not force; to guide, not dominate; to give, not get; to lead by service, not dictation. Remember that Thursday night before He went to the cross in His greatest service of all and for all? On bent knees, with a hand basin, and a drying towel, He washed feet, the feet of His followers. Washing the feet of those contentious, power-hungry disciples, He gave them a vivid lesson in leadership. Years later was Peter remembering that night when he urged the elders in the churches of Asia Minor to be “eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3)? THE Leader’s words that Thursday night, “The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:26) ought to ring constantly in the ears of every Christian leader.

Mindful of this quality, we can understand why Paul stressed maturity in Christian leaders. “He must not be a recent convert,” Paul said and then showed why, “or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil (1 Timothy 3:6). “Conceited” contains the picture of someone’s eyes, because of smoke from the fire, watering and as a result viewing things blurred. So a recent convert can become blurry-eyed because of pride and as a leader not see things clearly. Emotional and spiritual stability are not always related to age, but necessary if a leader is to avoid pride, exercise self-control, and serve humbly in the spirit of the Leader.

What does this quality of “servanthood” say about the stealthy virus of pride which can infect both leaders and followers? About the temptation for those who lead and are looked up to by others to savor their “homage”? About those who desire but don’t have an office, consequently criticizing those who do? About a leader’s attitude toward or talk about his accomplishments?

What does this quality of “servanthood” say about the exercise of authority by those in office? About infusing into the church methods of the business world - where power is related to position and the ultimate

power is in the hands of the C.E.O.? About what a legitimized use of power is for a leader? About the temptation for leaders in a church body where doctrine is set to become set also in making decisions in other areas?

What does this quality of “servanthood” say about letting the office seek the man? About the types of students we recruit and the types of training we give them? About the role model function of professors, bishops, neighboring pastors, servants in the congregation? About the ways we screen in our congregations, circuits, conferences, districts for maturity? About the role of our District Presidents and Circuit Pastors in being *Menschenkenners*? About increasing numerical size making this role more difficult and what to do about it? About our younger districts and mission congregations and the need for mature leadership in them?

A Christian leader, like the Leader, has power, but is not a power wielder. He leads through humble service, not heavy-handed control. The Leader once said it and a Christian leader still hears it, “The greatest among you shall be like the youngest; and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Luke 22:26).

3. *A leader sets a good example like THE Leader.* Though we’ve already touched on this quality in the previous parts, we want to amplify. One of the words used in Scripture for the serving gift of leadership is *προϊστημι* (Romans 12:8). The verb means to stand in front of, not miles ahead, but in sight so that you can be followed and copied. “Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity,” Paul urged his student and fellow servant, Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12). “In everything set them an example by doing good,” the great mission counselor advised Missionary Titus (Titus 2:7). And in 1 Corinthians 11:1 he brought it into focus when he told Christians in the problem-plagued congregation in Corinth, “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.” The example of THE Leader shows a Christian leader much. His death on the cross was the key, of course. But there was also His concern for people, commitment to the cause, and His spotless character. Christ made people follow Him by showing them what He was doing for them. He won their following with His example instead of demanding it from them. Leadership experts like Peter Drucker in the secular world also stress the power of example. In his book, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization* he wrote, “Leadership is not characterized by stars on your shoulder; an executive leads by example” (p. 193)

Mindful of this quality, we can understand why Jethro told Moses to pick leaders who were “trustworthy” and why Paul spoke to Timothy of men who were “above reproach” (Exodus 18:21, 1 Timothy 3:2). Leaders need to be men of moral character; men with a good credit rating; men who “make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2:10). It doesn’t require much logic to grasp the reason why. Greater and better action can be expected from those who respect a leader’s example.

Paul even added the demand that leaders “have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7). Strange, isn’t it, that those outside the church should have a say about leadership in the church? Remember, the world may hate us, but surely ought not distrust us or else they will also distrust the message we bring. Remember also how the world is always trying to cast stones at the church and chortles when it can do so at a church leader. Spurgeon once said, “An ill voice will effectively drown the voice of the most eloquent ministry.”

What does this quality of “serving as example” say about divorces, drunk driving charges, various indiscretions by leaders? About letting our hair down with members or outsiders? About our speech, our humor? What does it say about the gap between 2929 N. Mayfair and the grass roots, a gap which no amount of paper seems to be bridging? What does it say about circuit pastors, district presidents, synodical officials becoming more visible, going where the people are? What does it say about decentralization of our synodical leadership; what pros and cons are there?

Someone once said, “What you do speaks so loudly I can’t hear what you say.” Words and memos have been and always will be a poor second to a good example. Those who would lead need to remember this and will take Christ’s example for their guide.

4. *A leader shares the vision of THE Leader.* No one can accuse Jesus of a lack of vision. He knew what His mission was and put His all into it. In the temple as a twelve-year-old He told His parents, “Didn’t you know I had to be in My Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49) By the well in Samaria the first year of His ministry He told His disciples, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work” (John 4:34). On the

cross in that mid-day darkness He told the world, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The Leader knew His mission and went about it.

Nor can anyone accuse Jesus of having narrow vision. The Good Shepherd spoke of “other sheep” whom He must bring (John 10:16). The caring Shepherd saw the crowds “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” and “had compassion on them” (Matthew 9:36). Nor did the Leader go about His mission alone. Already that Easter Eve the risen Shepherd told His followers, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). On that mountain top in Galilee He commanded them, “Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them teaching them” (Matthew 28:19). He had the vision and carried out His mission of salvation. He recruited His team for this mission of outreach and nurture and promised to go with them. Talk about vision!

Peter Drucker, from whose book we quoted earlier, also writes, “We hear a great deal these days about leadership and its high time we did. But, actually, mission comes first. Non-profit institutions exist for the sake of their mission. They exist to make a difference in society and in the life of the individual. They exist for the sake of their mission, and this must never be forgotten. The first task of the leader is to make sure that everybody sees the mission, hears it, lives it. If you lose sight of your mission, you begin to stumble and it shows very, very fast” (p. 45). An effective leader grasps Christ’s vision, shares His mission and helps others to do the same. His concern is to help them become co-workers and fellow-soldiers, not bleachers, sitters and sideline-spectators.

What does this quality of “sharing the vision” say about parochialism in the church? About causes and cures? About special interest groups in the church, how they help and how they can hurt? About getting grass roots to become more aware of the church’s mission and having input into it? About which elements in our mission are fixed and which aren’t and what to do with them? About how hard leaders should push and when? About enlisting more of our people in the work on the local and synodical level?

The church’s mission is clear. Needed always are Christian leaders who can fill others with a fuller vision of the mission and a quickening enthusiasm for Christ, His church and His work.

5. *A leader feels for people like THE Leader.* What an example the Leader give us of concern for people. Cloistered with Nicodemus by night or crowded by 5,000 by day; blessing the babies or baring His cheek for a traitor’s kiss, summoning Zacchaeus down from his sycamore tree or seeking in vain to reach the Pharisees; we sense our Savior’s feel for people. Paul caught that feeling and tried to imitate it. He told the Philippians, “God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:8). To his nation, wayward Israel, he showed it, too. “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1). Concerned about people’s well being, listening to their needs, sensitive to their hurts, sharing their sorrows; compassionate, congenial, companionable, Paul cared for people. He even told the Thessalonians, “We were gentle among you like a mother caring for her little children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7). The word “mother” indicates a nursing mother, not a hired baby sitter. The word “caring” means literally to “keep warm” and is used by the Septuagint in Deuteronomy 22:6 for a mother bird spreading her wings over the nest to keep her young warm. What a picture this is of feeling for people.

We might be tempted to think of leadership as handling people. Scripture describes it as nurturing them. We can slip into viewing the task of leadership as managing and maintaining an institution. Scripture reminds us it’s gently nurturing each member of the group.

What does this quality of “feeling for people” say about the leader being a professional with office hours or a shepherd with an open door? About using people as a means to an end in the church or helping people grow? About the pastor’s huge job of nurturing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century society? About understaffing in our parishes, what it causes and what to do about it? About the perception that “2929 N. Mayfair” doesn’t care what people in the “hustings” think, feel, or are saying and what to do about it? About the need to communicate our “feel for the people” to them and how to do it?

God give us leaders who are among their people, not up on some plateau, who give unstintingly and unselfishly of themselves, who when sins alarm, lead us to Calvary; who when lives falter, strengthen us through Word and Sacrament, who when sights fall, raise them again to the coming glory. God give us leaders who share THE Leader’s feel for people.

6. *A leader trusts people like THE Leader.* Surely it took trust on the Master's part to put His mission into the hands of those first disciples. Jesus made no other plans, prepared no back-up proposal. He trusted His gospel to work in the disciples hearts and them, then, to work with His gospel in the world. And it worked! He even trusts us and each of us knows how untrustworthy we can be.

In the Book of Acts a somewhat laid-back character, Barnabas, gives us a model of the Leader's trust in people. Barnabas had faith in his fellow believers. When the rest were sceptical of Saul, the new convert, Barnabas sponsored him (Acts 9:26-28). When his nephew, John Mark, was unreliable on that first missionary journey, Barnabas was willing to give him a second chance though that action split Paul and him (Acts 15:36-40). Later though, it was Mark for whom Paul asked from that cell in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11). Barnabas even had faith in himself. When work blossomed at Antioch and the church at Jerusalem sent him there, Barnabas "was glad" (Acts 11:23). Nor was his joy dampened by having Paul come there to help with the developing work (11:26). Barnabas didn't feel threatened or defensive. Paul's added presence didn't make him insecure about his own position. But Barnabas trusted his colleague. Here was a leader who shows us something about trusting people like the Leader.

What does this say about trusting those who lead and those who are led? About motives that are impugned, hidden agendas that are suspected; disparaging remarks that are made, on both sides, by pastors and people, by those "in the trenches" and those in the office? What does this say about our willingness to listen? About self-examination first, before becoming defensive in the face of criticism? About studying areas of complaints like synodical staffing? About how trust can be built between leaders and people on all levels? About trust among divisions in the synod? About divisional bashing especially when money is tight? About getting to know each other better and thus trusting each other more and how to do this?

God does His work through people. People lead and people follow. As His people we need to trust each other even as we reexamine our sights and rededicate our efforts.

7. *A leader prays like THE Leader.* What a Man of prayer the Savior was. Frequently during His ministry He spent hours alone in prayer (Mark 1:35, 6:46; Luke 5:16, 6:12). In His prayers He prayed for others. At Lazarus' grave He prayed that the Father hear Him for the benefit of the people (John 11:42). In the upper room He prayed that His Father care for His followers, keep them faithful, consecrate them for service (John 17). on the cross He prayed that His Father forgive those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34). our Savior also prayed for Himself. In Gethsemane He asked for strength to do His Father's will (Matthew 26:36-46). On Calvary He pillowed His soul in His Father's hands (Luke 23:46). What an example the Leader gives us of prayer.

Is it any wonder that Paul was such a great missionary? He prayed like the Leader. He called down God's blessings on people and congregations (1 Thessalonians 3:9-10). He asked them to pray for him and the spread of the gospel (2 Thessalonians 3:1). He lived in daily contact with God, expected and received answers from Him. Ephesians 1:15-20 and Colossians 1:9-14 show how fervently Paul prayed for the spiritual welfare of those he served. Knowing that nothing could be done without God, Paul urged, "Pray continually" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Ever wonder how much more could be accomplished if leaders used prayer more like the Leader? What about our prayer life? Where's our mountain top? How wide is the scope of our requests? How can we encourage people and congregations more to pray for the spread of the gospel? Let it not be said of those who lead, "You do not have because you do not ask God" (James 4:4).

"What's a leader? What's leadership?" we asked at the beginning of this presentation. Hopefully our brief glance at the personal qualities of a spiritual leader has given us some answers. Though differing in personality and varying in gifts, Christian leaders have this in common. They follow the Leader and oversee His work in such a way that by their example and influence they inspire others to follow Him, too.