

THE MAN NOBODY KNOWS

By BRUCE BARTON

Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee (2000)

Paperback, 128 pages

Reviewed by David Rausch, Eleanor Cooper, & James Tucker

The Man Nobody Knows by Bruce Barton, originally published in 1924, has a great deal to teach us from the perspective of leadership theory and practice. The word leadership was not in common use when the book was first published and has taken nearly a century to develop into the icon word that it is today. Highly controversial at the time it was written, the book retells the story of Jesus through the author's prism as an advertising executive and sales manager.

Bruce Barton founded the advertising agency that promoted the early giants of American business, such enterprises as General Motors and General Electric, and he is credited with creating the image of Betty Crocker to sell products of General Mills, another of his clients.

Associated with the highest level of business and government leaders in the 1920s, and himself a member of Congress for two terms, Barton is surprisingly best known for this one small book, which remains in print today and was one of the best selling books of the 20th century.

In a recent review of the book in the *Washington Post*, Jacoby (2007) wrote that “this book was an attempt to reclaim the image of Jesus from those who had portrayed him as a wimpy dreamer of impractical dreams” (p. 3). Barton (2000) disclaimed the images of Jesus he saw portrayed on the walls of his Sunday School. He stripped away the “weak and puny” accretions and presented a tough, entrepreneurial personality, a man with “muscles hard as iron” (p. 21) and “the voice and manner of the leader—the personal magnetism which begets loyal-

ty and commands respect” (p. 13). Top among the elements that Barton attributes to Jesus’ success as a leader are his “blazing conviction” and his “wonderful power to pick men and to recognize hidden capacities in them” (p. 17). He described a man with vision, consuming sincerity, and overwhelming faith in the work he is called to do. According to Jeff Sharlet (2008), author of *The Family*, Barton believed that “only strong, magnetic men inspire great enthusiasm and build great organizations” (p. 136).

In many ways, Barton’s image of Jesus is a projection of himself: positive, aggressive, promoter, organizer, enabler—the kind of leader he’d like to have and to be. As such, it’s an interesting example of contextualization. To understand this contextualization phenomena, we consider what Hesselgrave wrote in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible* (1984):

Contextualization is the process whereby representatives of a religious faith adapt the forms and content of that faith in such a way as to communicate and (usually) commend it to the minds and hearts of a new generation within their own changing culture or to people with other cultural backgrounds. (p. 694)

Barton’s interest in communicating from his professional perspective is similar to the way he believed Jesus communicated, using parables and cultural illustrations that would relate well to the people he addressed. As Richard Fried wrote in the introduction to Barton’s 2000 edition, “He offered religion with a modern face” (p. ix).

Understanding Barton’s (2000) use of contextualization offers an opportunity to look at the leadership lessons, context and theories that might emerge from the text. Take, for example, his retelling the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness:

In the calm of that wilderness there came the majestic conviction which is the very soul of leadership—the faith that his spirit was linked with the Eternal, that God had sent him into the world to do a work which no one else could do, which—if he neglected it—would never be done. . . . To every man of vision the clear Voice speaks; there is no great leadership where there is no mystic. Nothing splendid has ever been achieved except by those who dared believe that something inside themselves was superior to circumstance. (p. 13)

Barton (2000) used the term “the eternal miracle” to describe that individual experience which is the “awakening of the inner consciousness of power” (p. 10). He placed the story of Jesus’ temptation in the

wilderness in the context of a luncheon in New York City of two hundred of the most influential men of the day and raised the question: “When and how and where did the eternal miracle occur in the lives of those men?” (p. 10).

Servant Leadership is always on most lists when it comes to the relationship of Jesus and leadership theory. Greenleaf presented the theory in a 1970 essay, “The Servant as Leader.” Continuing Greenleaf’s work, Spears & Lawrence (2004) shared ten characteristics of servant leaders including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and building community. Barton (2000) identified service as the first component of Jesus’ “business philosophy” (p. 83).

The ten characteristics are visible in many parts of the text. For example, the healing characteristic is shared with Barton’s version of the parable of an invalid in Capernaum. In Barton’s retelling, the emphasis is not only on healing; he also uses this opportunity to advance his thesis on Jesus as a man of strength who healed others. Strength does not make the list of Servant Leadership, but it is important to Barton; he puts it this way: “And the man who so long ago had surrendered to despair, rose and gathered up his bed and went away healed—like others in Galilee—by strength from an overflowing fountain of strength” (p. 25).

Strength of body and conviction were qualities admired in Barton’s day when American business was gaining ground in the world and the captains of industry needed a spark to fire their imaginations and fuel their inner furnaces of conviction. Barton (2000) himself devised a promotional strategy for his book—that every executive would give it to the top ten men in his organization as Christmas gifts (p. xii).

The title of the chapter called “The Executive” was changed to “The Leader” in the 1950 edition of the book. The concept of leadership was developing. No longer were just executives and the captains of industry considered leaders, but common men, any one of us, could influence others. Although Barton’s book is clearly addressed to the business and government sector of the 1920s, his themes of service and personal awakening are applicable to anyone at any time in history.

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