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ON BEING "JUST" A FOLLOWER: REJECTING THE PEJORATIVE AND PURSUING A HIGHER CALLING

Abstract: The world has many more followers than leaders, but most of the attention is focused on the leaders, with followers considered passive, easily manipulated, and in need of both direction and motivation. Scripture, however, reassures us that being a follower is a worthy and even honored position. Despite this assurance, a follower is not excused from becoming a virtuous person, even if the leader is not virtuous. Using the writings of both Aristotle and the Apostle Paul, this article discusses the necessary virtues and actions a follower should consider, whether currently a follower or a developing leader.

Keywords: *Follower, disciple, virtues, virtuous acts, character*

From antiquity to the modern era, philosophers have focused primarily on leaders—their characteristics, their actions, their goals. The intellectual tradition of leadership tells the story of powerful men (and more recently women) who guide passive followers to accomplish exceptional feats. This tradition says very little about followers. For both Plato's philosopher-king and Aristotle's virtuous monarch, leaders served as guides for the masses who lacked the capacity and proper education to become leaders.

Machiavelli also believed that the masses needed guidance; their lack of intelligence and power made them easy to manipulate for the prince's own ends. In keeping with this intellectual tradition, modern leadership scholars studied leader traits, styles, and behaviors. Only recently have scholars turned their attention to followers. Though little attention has been paid to the developmental journey that one takes from followership to leadership, we can find excellent examples in Scripture.

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Followership and Christianity

"And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me,'" (Mark 1:16; Matt. 4:19). Neither Peter and his brother, Andrew, nor James and his brother, John, were looking for jobs. They were entrepreneurs; they were economically independent, at least marginally. Jesus called them to be followers with the goal of changing their lives, helping them develop new skills, and mentoring them to become teachers. Ultimately, His goal was to prepare the disciples to become leaders. This preparation existed in the form of a calling to followership. Jesus used the phrase repeatedly, as seen in His calls to Matthew (Matt. 9:9), Philip (John 1:43), and the rich young man (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22), and in His warning against false prophets (Luke 17:23).

The biblical idea of a calling a person to become a follower is not unique to the calling of the first disciples. Elisha left the plow to become Elijah's servant (1 Kings 19:19-21). Other examples occur when a charismatic leader calls for people to join him in an expedition of war (Judg.3:28; 6:34; 1 Sam. 11:6-7). It appears frequently in the Acts and Epistles. Peter escapes from prison by obeying the angel's command to "follow me" (Acts 12:8). Paul comments on the disunity of the church at Corinth: "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1 Cor. 1:12, NIV). This is not a question of being a follower but of discerning who to follow.

The Christian concept of followership stems from the ideas of service and discipleship. The words "discipline" and "disciple" come from the same Latin root *discere,* to learn, implying that disciples develop discipline in the area of discipleship. Today we would be more likely to say they were socialized into the group of the leader.

Servant is the term most preferred by Paul for this status. He describes Jesus as the servant of God (Rom. 13:4; 14:8; Phil. 2:7). At the time of Paul's miraculous conversion, he is told, "I have appeared . . . to appoint you as a servant" (Acts 26:16). Paul uses various forms of the phrase "Paul, a servant of Christ" when identifying himself to others (Rom. 1:1; Gal.1:10; Tit. 1:10). James (James 1:1), Peter (2 Pet. 1:1), and Jude (Jude 1:1) do the same. Jesus used the term "servant" frequently: "Anyone who wants to be first must be . . . the servant of all" (Mark 9:35, NIV). The term "disciple" also describes Christ's followers.

Despite Paul's self-identification as a servant, we think of him as a leader. The same disjunction is true of the other disciples; they called themselves servants, but we call them leaders. This is an important point. Jesus and His first generation of disciples repeatedly called people to follow them, and people did follow. Those we honor as leaders considered themselves to be servants. The next generation of leaders (bishops) was similar; while they were without question leaders, they described themselves as followers. The exception is James, who is named as the leader in Jerusalem.

Jesus did not call His followers to be mindless laborers who waited for constant commands prior to acting. He did not call them to abandon thinking for rote obedience. His call diverged from pejorative stereotypes of followership, which involve thoughtless or slavish behavior. Rather, He sought followers who wanted to learn to think as He did, followers who didn't merely follow His commands but who recognized and prioritized the good.

Contemporary Views of Followers

Unfortunately, most of us have not had leaders with the beneficence of Jesus or His disciples. We are not alone. The majority of followership research focuses on categorizing followers based on their impact upon the organization or the leader. A leader is someone who has achieved a position of authority by virtue of skills. A follower lacks these skills and probably also lacks education and experience. As viewed by leaders, followers are generally a sorry lot.

Kelley (2008) illustrates this point by dividing followers into five groups. The first are "sheep," and neither think nor act on their own. They need both direction and motivation. Second are the "yes-people," those who are positive and energetic but need thinking and direction, which leads to pride and the belief that they are the ones who do all the work. Third, the organization has "alienated" followers who think, but negatively. They would respond to any idea with "It's not new, you know." The fourth group is the "pragmatics." These folks follow the leader only when it is clear which direction the organization is going to go. They provide no support until they know who will win, but they know they will survive until the next leader is chosen. Colleges and universities are full of such people.

Fortunately, Kelley (2008) sees a fifth style of followership, the "stars." These positive people think for themselves. They serve a common purpose with the leaders, but each in their own role. Stars will disagree with leaders, but if they question the leader's decisions, they present alternatives privately and civilly. Any leader needs a few "star" followers in order to succeed.

Outlines such as this give leaders no suggestion for how to raise the followers up at least one grade in the scale. The attitude is one of "sheep are sheep and the alienated must be kept quiet." But is it possible that followers are interested in improving their skills and therefore their positions?

Who Are Good Followers?

This leads to the big question, "What does it mean to be a good follower?" Obviously this is a sub-set of the question of what makes a good person. When we think about meta-questions such as this, it is good to remember that the accumulation of knowledge did not begin at the time of our birth. Additionally, many problems are not new or unique to our culture; they have sparked the thoughts of intelligent men and women for ages. Therefore, when thinking about an issue, it is can be extremely helpful to ruminate on the writings and ideas that have accumulated for centuries.

For example, if we are part of a religious tradition, particularly the three "religions of the book," we are aware of the question of the origin of evil. Should we decide to pursue this problem, we might start with the Hebrew prophets, and if in the Christian tradition, proceed to intellectual giants such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. If we are Protestant, we might wish to add Luther and Calvin to our list. Anyone in the Western tradition would go to the enlightenment thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke and finally come to modern thinkers and writers.

We can also follow this path in asking what it means to speak of a good follower. It has been said that all philosophy is nothing but a commentary on Plato. I will add that the ethics of what it means to be a good person is nothing but commentary on Plato's student Aristotle.

So, who was Aristotle? Though we think of him as one of the Greek philosophers, he was from Macedonia, born in 384 BCE. His father was a court physician, which may explain why he was so interested in biology. At age 17 he entered Plato's Academy in Athens and stayed there for 19 years until Plato died. In 335 BCE he founded a school in Athens called the Lyceum, which he filled with maps, manuscripts, zoological specimens, and botanical samples. He particularly focused on comparisons and contrasts to find the common form of any group of items. He generalized from this, looking for common elements in culturally diverse individuals to characterize what led to excellence in the life of an individual.

So, what does it mean to be a good person, a good follower? Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Ross, 1991), would say that "the excellence of human beings will be . . . the state of character which makes a person good and which makes that person do his or her work well" (1006, a5). Knowledge of the good is not sufficient; it is the state of character that causes one to do right. Assuming that we will accept Aristotle's contention that it is character that is of utmost importance, how do we get there?

Aristotle has an answer:

> We ought to make sure that our acts are of a certain kind because the resulting character changes as they change. It makes no small difference; therefore, whether a man (or woman) is trained from youth up in this way or in that, but a great difference, or rather all the difference. (1103, b23)

Good habits are morally indispensable because they help us live consistently toward particular ends. Although habits are scarcely of themselves reasons to live or act, they tend to strengthen a life of meaning and purposefulness.

Aristotle is very interested in the development of character, but the chances are that most readers consider their character to be fixed. Aristotle would disagree. They may be well developed, but repeated deliberate actions, even by adults, do have a direct effect on modifying character.

The Apostle Paul would agree with Aristotle. He usually ended his epistles with moral exhortations (e.g., Eph. 4:17-32; Phil. 4:4-8), thus linking actions with character development. Paul also followed Aristotle, who identified his list of "cardinal virtues" (prudence, justice, courage, and self-control) by providing his own list of virtues in Galatians 5: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (NIV). Note that while there is some overlap between these lists of virtues, in that both Paul and Aristotle list self-control, Paul's list focuses on virtues one needs when dealing with others while Aristotle's list may be seen as more focused on self-fulfilment.

The question becomes, "how do we develop the virtues?" The question behind that question is, "Can they be taught?" Plato was not sure; in *Meno* (trans. Anastoplo & Berns, 2004) he tended to think not. Aristotle was not in doubt. The virtues do not come from nature, nor are they against nature, but nature gives us the capacity to acquire them (Aristotle, 1103, a13). Paul would argue that the virtues he listed are the "fruit of the Spirit," not developed by human effort but a divine gift to God's children.

Aristotle says that our characters are formed by our actions, and that both the moral virtues and the corresponding vices result from the same acts. Musicians become good or bad by the same mechanism, making music. Builders become good builders or bad builders by the same action, building. It is by being just with others that we become just, by becoming habituated to fear or confidence that we become cowardly or brave. Thus, character traits, like the arts, arise out of activities (1103, a44).

How do we know that an act is virtuous? Aristotle gives what appears at first glance to be circular. An act is virtuous if, and only if, it is what a virtuous person would do (1105, b5). To answer the ethical question "What should I do in this situation?" one should ask "What would a virtuous person do in this situation?"

When Teddy Roosevelt was a young boy in college, his role model was his father, and he weighed every proposed action by asking what his father might do or think. All he had to ask himself regarding some action was whether he would be proud for his father to know he had done it. His father was virtuous; therefore, virtue was to act like his father (Morris, 1979).

Jesus provides His own triad of virtues—justice, mercy, and faithfulness—which He describes as the "weightier matters of the law" (Matt. 23:23, NIV). He then adds an extra dimension to the concept of character when He calls us to "be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:47, NIV). The parallel reading in Luke states: "Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36, NIV). Christ places virtue and perfection in a relational framework, a copying of what one sees another doing, with the assumption that the "other" is indeed a virtuous or perfect person.

Outside of Christ, the single person who is totally virtuous is a very rare specimen, if indeed, one really does exist. What we are generally left with is finding specific virtues in one person and other virtues in another and attempting to combine them into ourselves. Some of these people we choose for role models will have many virtues; some others may have only one.

The problem of followers looking for role models is challenging because of the lack of virtuous leaders. Dr. John Gardner, a member of President Ronald Reagan's task force on private sector initiatives, put it this way: "Unfortunately a high proportion of leaders in all segments of our society today . . . are rewarded for a single-minded pursuit of interests of their group. They are rewarded of doing battle, not compromising" (Brokaw, 2012, p. 42). They are not rewarded, I would add, for role modeling and development of followers.

Aristotle's second description of how we should live comes from another description of virtue, the mean. Life is not a discrete zero-one variable but consists of a continuous spectrum of possibilities. Generally these can be considered as ranging from an excess of a characteristic to a deficit of the characteristic under discussion. Both of these extremes Aristotle calls vices (1006, b36 ff).

Let us illustrate with the way one becomes courageous. Courage is the right reaction to danger and fear; a mean between paralysis and recklessness (both of which Aristotle calls vices). It is obvious that courage will not be an arithmetic mean, but will shift with the circumstances. This is a very under-specified definition that needs to be completed with regard to situation, the magnitude of danger, our strength, and other resources. In one situation courage may require bold action at great personal risk. In another it may be courageous to flee ("He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day").

Aristotle did not think that every human activity could be so considered. For example, you could not have a golden mean of adultery: with the right person, at the right time, in the right place. It would be absurd to expect that in unjust and cowardly actions there would be a mean of acceptable behavior. No, a virtuous person striving to do right would not reason in this manner (1107, a1).

How can we find this middle ground? "Wisdom," including reason and self-restraint, is the central virtue. But knowledge of good is not sufficient; it is the state of character that makes one good and therefore causes one to do right. Virtue requires choice, which requires reflection and intelligence. One must deliberate between alternatives. In order to attain the noblest ends, the noblest choices must be discerned, and once discerned, actualized or truly practiced. In other words, there can be no substitute for either personal decision-making or virtuous action.

This type of wisdom and life is not always appreciated by leaders. Being a virtuous follower is not without risk. Consider the examples of Daniel, who refused the king's food and disobeyed the king's decree regarding worship, or Joseph, who refused the attentions of Potiphar's wife, or David, whose virtue was not appreciated by Saul. Daniel was put to the test to prove that his choices were indeed the best ones. Joseph spent time in prison because of his choice. David was hunted for years by Saul, even though initially David's skill in battle and ability to provide soothing music had been appreciated by Saul. In all of these cases, those who were the followers eventually became leaders in their own right, but when their initial choices were made, the successful outcome was hardly assured.

In our world, a follower has no reason to expect a leader to be virtuous. However, this does not excuse the follower from becoming and being virtuous. Not even a somewhat virtuous person would blame circumstances for their lack of character development. We, not others, are responsible for who we are. In answering the questions “Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary? Who may live on your holy hill?” (Ps. 15, NIV), Scripture is very clear regarding our responsibilities. The answer given in the Psalm includes exhortations to be blameless, act righteously, speak the truth, refuse to slander others, keep one’s oath even when it hurts, and refuse to take advantage of others when the opportunity arises. The Psalm ends with these words: “Whoever does these things will never be shaken” (v. 5).

When I was a medical resident, there was an attending physician that none of us respected in any way. Through choices not my own, I had to spend more time with this attending physician than I wished; that is, my position of being a follower was forced on me. One virtue I found in this man was the way he made hospital rounds. I worked to learn this virtue from him and deliberately tried to teach it to other residents. Taking this attitude as a follower may seem like looking for a kernel of corn in a cow pie, but it can be worth the effort.

How will virtuous followers appear to others? They are the ones Kelley (2008) called “stars.” These have acquired the skills of the leader, can think for themselves, and serve a common purpose with their leader. Stars may, at times, disagree with leaders, but they present alternatives privately and civilly. Some of these may go on to become leaders; others will find satisfaction in being introduced by the leader as “I couldn’t do my job if she left.”

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