

What Makes a Good Follower? Ephesians 4:11-13

Introduction:

Twenty-two times in the Gospels, Jesus said, “Follow me.” When Jesus first called the disciples to himself, he called to them, “Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men.” In Jesus’ final words to his disciples, he commissioned them, saying, “Go into all the world and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them, and teaching them all I have commanded you.” A disciple is by definition, one who follows another—their life, their example, and their teaching. It seems that being a follower is essential to becoming and being a Christian—it’s how one is united with Christ and continues in Christ. Therefore, being a follower is essential to becoming a faithful Christian. Being a follower is essential to becoming a faithful church member. Being a follower is essential to becoming a faithful disciple-maker. We are all disciples who are called to make disciples. We are all called to live as Paul explained was the goal of his life: “Follow me as I follow Christ.”

The paradox within Christ’s church now is that—one some level—every leader is a follower and every follower will be a leader. Yet distinct roles remain. Even within the Trinity, there are distinctions. Ontologically, the three Persons are all equal in essence and being, but economically they have distinct roles within the Godhead. In a family, husbands, wives, and children equally share the same image of God, yet at the same time, distinctions and roles exist there. Roles and distinctions are not demeaning; they are meant for our good; they have a strategic nature and a vital purpose.

In the church we have men and women, Jews and Gentiles, seasoned saints and fresh believers, and we have leaders and followers. We are all equal, yet distinctions remain. Ontologically, we are all equal bearers of God’s image, spiritually we are all brothers and sisters, followers of Christ, fellow heirs with him. We are one in Christ. Yet distinctions do exist. We do have biblically prescribed leaders and followers among us.

One is not more glorious than the other. One is not more important than the other. We are all servants of Christ. We are all servants of one another. We are all servants of the mission that we are called to. This is Paul’s metaphor of a human body. There are no unimportant parts. They all serve a purpose. The church is the body of Christ—diversity in unity working together to carry out Christ’s mission in the church, the community, and the world.

For the past 20 months at Grace Church of Dover, we have sought to unify a disparate group of people under a shared culture and common mission. We have been developing faithful servants, followers, and leaders who get along and push with all of their might in the same direction.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with leadership. It’s ingrained in us from a young age—be a good follower and you’ll be promoted to being a leader. But not everyone is called to be an official leader. Faithful following is often seen as a means to an end rather than a valuable end in itself. Books on leadership abound and there are whole sections dedicated to the topic. But books on followership are few and far between. You’ve probably heard countless sermons on good

leadership and leadership qualifications, but the question we want to explore this morning is—*"What makes a good follower?"*

Being a faithful follower at church is not unrelated to being a follower of Jesus: it is Christ's church after all. It is a natural expression or outflow of following Christ. We are all called to deny ourselves and carry our cross; this is not simply a task we're called to in our personal lives or in the world, but it is something that is fleshed out in the life of the church as well. Being devoted to your local church is an expression of your devotion to Christ. For all of us, in order to be a faithful disciple of Christ, we must be faithful followers in the church community he has placed us in.

Langer and Jung: "We want following to be viewed as an aspiration and a calling—something worthy of our highest efforts . . . Followers, leaders, and the organization as a whole share a commitment to a common mission . . . The heartbeat of a healthy organization [or church] is leaders and followers who exhibit a deep and common ownership of a shared purpose."¹

Being an elder or having a position is not the pinnacle of achievement or influence. You don't need a formal title or an official position to have real influence in real people's lives. You can still have influence; you can still achieve great things—eternal things—without having position or title. Influencing without position is admittedly harder, it's more relational, it's more time-consuming, it's more intentional, it's more self-driven. As a servant leader without the advantage of a position or title or authority, are you able to have influence? I think our culture has ingrained in us that we have to wait for a title. Are you able to encourage others, engage with others, serve others, cooperate with others, motivate others, build others up? Are you waiting for a position before you contribute? We shouldn't wait till we have a position to be all in, to love people, care for people, disciple people. If you can't influence people without a position, you won't be able to with a position.

Eph 4:11-13 "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Paul shares his philosophy of ministry in God's kingdom, God's economy, God's family, God's church. Leaders are responsible to establish faithful followers of Christ in their church community. The leader's job is not to pontificate, monopolize all of the ministry, micromanage people, but to empower others, to delegate authority and influence to others, and to equip others to do the work of the ministry. The leader's job is to help you and develop you to become more faithful and more fit in the work of the ministry so that you might take part in the building up of the body of Christ. This is accomplished by example, by delegation, by equipping.

Roger Parrot: "Good leaders empower everyone to envision, explore, experiment, and exercise their ingenuity as they approach their task. Using their distinct perspective, gifting, and style, we

¹ Langer, Richard Langer and Joanne Jung, *The Call to Follow*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022, p. 76.

will soon be shocked by the ownership and creativity they bring to their responsibility if we encourage independence.”²

Leeman: “[Good authority] exists not to serve itself, but to grant freedom, power, wisdom, and growth in those it serves. It works to draw people up into itself—so they can do what the person in authority does.”³

If you are at this church and you don’t have a title, that is okay. If you aspire to have a title, that is a noble thing, but it’s not a guaranteed and it shouldn’t be your ultimate goal. Followership is another area of Christian stewardship. What makes a good follower? A good follower is not one who is a passive attender, spectator, or consumer. A good follower is attentive, active, intentional, relational on Sunday mornings and throughout the week.

1. Faithful Followers Are Committed to Joyful Deference

Hebrews 13:17—“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

We should follow our leaders with joy. Why? Because submitting is profitable for you; it is for your good. It is advantageous to you. Following means to set aside your personal preferences—those negotiable, secondary issues—so you can remain united and committed to the non-negotiables within the church. Submission is willing, voluntary, selfless, joyful commitment to the shared mission overseen and directed by the elders. You don’t view your leaders as those who enjoy ruling over you, but those committed to your good and to your growth. You know them; you trust them.

Elders establish the vision; they plot the course; they set the pace. Following our leaders is part and parcel of following Christ. Selflessness is intrinsic to following; selflessness is intrinsic to serving; selflessness is intrinsic to submission. When we all come to church, we must check ourselves at the door. It’s not about you! And if you are willing to start there and let go of that, then you’ll be free to say, “It’s about Christ; it’s about the mission; it’s about others.” The rugged individualism and self-expression that is glorified in the secular culture is not celebrated within Christ’s church. Rather it is confronted, smashed, and we are freed from its hold on us.

- Deference to Christ as Lord of the church
- Deference to leaders as the shepherds of the church
- Deference to one another as members of the church

² Roger Parrot, *Opportunity Leadership*, Chicago, IL: Moody, 2022, p. 130.

³ Jonathan Leeman, *Authority*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023, p. 21.

2. Faithful Followers Are Committed to Zealous Engagement

2 Tim 3:10-11 "You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions and sufferings."

Heb 13:7 "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith."

Leaders should be those who are zealously engaged in ministry. And we are to follow their example. Leadership sets the bar for the zealous engagement. They set the expectations for all others. On top of teaching, caring, and envisioning, they are to inspire others. They passionately practice servant leadership within the context of the local church. And we are called their "fellow laborers and workers" (1 Cor 16:16). The emphasis is on "fellow." We work alongside them. We work together. When the doors are open, we are there. Are you laboring? Or are you coming to church to relax and enjoy the efforts of everyone else around you? Do you come to church to engage with others? Find someone to follow, to emulate, to build your life after. Someone who prioritizes the Gospel, Christ, and his church and integrates them well into all areas of their life.

- Zealously engaged in worship
- Zealously engaged in service
- Zealously engaged in relationships

3. Faithful Followers Are Committed to Mission Ownership

A few months ago, Laura and I were in a CVS and were waiting for something. Awkwardly standing there with an employee and a manager, I asked, "What does CVS stand for?" And to my surprise neither the manager nor the employee knew. I trust you know the name of your church, but do you know its stated mission? Do you know its core values? Do you know what connects it to and what distinguishes it from other churches in your area? Do you know its uniquely expressed purpose?

Matt 28:19-20 "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Col 1:28 "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

Our mission is to make brand new disciples and to mature existing ones. Our mission is multiplication. We are to multiply ourselves, multiply the ministry. Deferring your preferences and deploying all your resources into zealous engagement allows you to cooperate with the mission of the church. We are a unified front with the same goals. Whether you have a title or position or not, whether you are a leader or follower.

CONCLUSION:

Because following is selfless, submissive, self-sacrificial, and self-driven, faithful followers make excellent disciple-makers, servants, leaders, and together they make an effective church.

- Effective disciple-makers (because they model devotion to Christ and his church)
- Effective servants (because they are selfless and sacrificial)
- Effective leaders (because they know what it's like to submit)

Jonathan Leeman: “People must learn to submit before they can rule, and the best leaders are the best submitters.”⁴

To be in authority you must be under authority. This is a biblical principle. Not only seen in Paul's explanations of leadership and his commands to us, but we see this pattern in the narratives of Scripture: before they became leaders, **Joshua** followed Moses for forty years, **Elisha** served Elijah for ten years, **Peter** followed Jesus for three years, **Timothy and Titus** were traveling companions who followed Paul.

- An effective church

An effective church is a church where everyone is committed to joyful deference, zealous engagement, and missional ownership.

Acts 2:42-47

Christopher Ash: “Imagine a church who gets behind a shared vision, led by godly [elders], each resolving to push with all the zeal and energy the Lord inspires, and all in the same direction!”⁵

When it comes to leaders, we tend to put them on pedestals. Remember this about your leaders, they are just like you. They are ordinary; they are human; they are followers of Christ; and they are members of this church before they are leaders of the church. They never ask you to do anything they wouldn't be willing to do themselves. They are on the frontlines with you. They are in the trenches beside you.

It should be natural to submit leaders you trust, leaders who truly care for you, leaders who take the time to truly know you, leaders who are willing to work hard beside you, and leaders who want equip you to do your best. It should be easy to serve in church where you are excited about and can fully get behind their values, vision, and mission.

There are many opportunities to serve. A servant leader sees a need, steps up, and fills it. A good follower doesn't simply see tasks to do, but opportunities for relationships, encouragement, discipleship, all related to our mission. It's unhealthy to see tasks and not people, for ministry is about relationships. We're serving the Lord and we're serving people. No matter how menial, no

⁴ Jonathan Leeman, *Authority*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023, p. 70.

⁵ Christopher Ash, *The Book Your Pastor Wants You to Read*, Epsom, UK: The Good Book Co., 2019, p. 108.

matter how obscure, we are content to serve where there is a need. Following is not demeaning. It's worthy of our highest efforts.

In 1666, a fire leveled London. A few years later in 1671, renowned architect **Christopher Wren** was commissioned to rebuild St. Paul's Cathedral. One afternoon, he decided to check out the project for himself. On that day he observed three bricklayers on a scaffold, one crouched, one half-standing, and one standing tall, working very hard and fast. To the first one he asked, "What are you doing?" "I'm a bricklayer. I'm working hard laying bricks to feed my family." He asked the same question to the second brick layer. He responded, "I'm a builder. I'm building a wall." But the third brick layer—the most productive of the three—when asked the question, responded with a gleam in his eye, "I'm a cathedral builder. I'm building a great cathedral to The Almighty."

No matter where you serve, what you're doing is productive, effective, and valuable. An effective and productive church is one where the leaders and the followers both see themselves as a valuable part of the ministry. One is not more important, one is not more necessary, one is not more glorious. Both are vital and indispensable to the mission. Whether you are a volunteer, a member, a shepherding group leader, an elder, you have a vital role to play. You have potential to have real, lasting influence.

It is certainly countercultural and counterintuitive, even contrary to our flesh, but selfless, sacrificial service, as exemplified by Christ, is guaranteed to amplify our influence. We are called to come and die, to deny ourselves. Why? Because it's not about us. It never was.

One of the greatest gifts God has given me *as a follower* were faithful leaders who brought the best out of me. The greatest gift God has given me *as a leader* is faithful followers who also bring the best out of me. The best we have to offer to Christ, to one another, and to the world is self-sacrificial love and faithful engagement in the mission. The aspiration of all Christians is to reach the end and to have their Master look them in the eye and say, not "Well done, thou good and faithful leader," but, "Well done, thou good and faithful SERVANT."

God's church is not a platform for us to perform on or promote ourselves. Church is not a place to outshine and upstage Christ. It's a place to lift him high, exalt his name, and ascribe glory to his name, and we do that through singing, praying, preaching, but ultimately we accomplish this by following his example—by getting low in the dirt and washing each other's feet.

Recommended Resources on Following:

- *Leading from the Second Chair: Serving Your Church, Fulfilling Your Role, and Realizing Your Dream* by Mike Bonem and Roger Patterson, Jossey-Bass, 2005, 193 pages.
- *The Call to Follow: Hearing Jesus in a Culture Obsessed with Leadership* by Richard Langer and Joanne Jung, Crossway, 2022, 222 pages.
- *Love Your Church: 8 Great Things about Being a Church Member* by Tony Merida, The Good Book Co., 2021, 175 pages.
- *The Book Your Pastor Wishes You Would Read* (but is too embarrassed to ask) by Christopher Ash, The Good Book Co., 2019, 126 pages.