How Not to Follow

Michael d'Offay 17 May 2018



Honouring and following our godly, spiritual leaders is God's way. But when following leaders in our churches, it's possible to fall into immature extremes. I want to look at 1 Corinthians 1, where we learn two important lessons on how not to follow leaders.

1) Too High a View of Leaders

Because of the immature and carnal attitudes of some, the Corinthians had divided into camps or cliques that began to obsess over and idolise these godly men. Paul writes, 'For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."' (1 Corinthians 1v11) So we see that they squabbled over who was the better leader: Paul or Apollos or Cephas. Later on, we will look at the "I follow Christ" group.

So is Paul saying here that we shouldn't follow leaders?

Well, later he directs the believers to 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1 NIV) and the fact that he writes the letter to them, encouraging and commanding them, means he expected them to listen to him. Paul didn't have an issue with strong leadership. Instead, he takes issue with the way they elevate and idolise leaders by putting them in the place

of which only Christ is worthy. Paul has to bring them back to Jesus and asked them pointedly, '"Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?' (1 Corinthians 1:13)

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The carnal human heart wants to idolise someone or something. We too easily put our hope in man and think a spiritual (or political) leader holds the key to our calling and destiny. Often, we are more concerned about what an elder or pastor thinks of us, rather than what God thinks of us. I've been guilty of this.

Even Great Saints Go Astray

A good follower doesn't put a leader on a pedestal and expect impossible standards from them. Paul drives the point home: 'What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed… So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.' (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). It is God who holds the key to your growth, not a leader.

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We must remember that the godliest and most virtuous of men have shortcomings, and even great saints go astray. I love how David Pawson writes so honestly in his memoirs: 'As I have bared my soul (and my body) in these pages, I have battled with the fear of disappointing and disillusioning readers who have looked up to me. As a friend of mine used to say: 'When people get to know me, all awe and wonder rapidly disappear."1

Ironically, it is these types of leaders we admire the most.

So the first way we do not follow leaders is by having too high a view of them. The pedestal belongs to Jesus. In a wonderful twist, the Lord of all stepped off it to become a servant leader and shed His blood to forgive our sins.

2) Too Low a View of Leaders

The second attitude we must avoid is illustrated by the "I follow Christ" party. While others

boasted of following Paul or Apollos, they boasted of only following the Lord Jesus.

This Jesus camp saw the carnality of the others and swung to the other extreme – we only follow Jesus! They moved from elevating leaders to disregarding leaders. The Jesus-only group are also mentioned as those who quarrelled and caused division, so we know their attitude was also wrong.

> Spiritual maturity means a healthy honouring of leaders… even if the leader is much younger than you.

In pastoring over the years, I have seen this attitude in saints – and in myself at times! Some believe they don't need leaders and form 'organic churches', often in homes without any leadership structure. But for many others, they join our churches and are outwardly agreeable and committed, yet remain inwardly skeptical and distrusting. Because of past hurt or abuse by bad leadership, or an independent or over-sensitive heart, these folk keep their physical or emotional distance by choosing not to trust a leader again.

However, the Lord will give great grace to those who choose to think the best and trust their leaders, which is actually a sign of faith towards God and of obedience to His word.

Spiritual maturity means a healthy honouring of leaders. It takes spiritual maturity to recognise spiritual authority, even if the leader is much younger than you.

Following Leaders Well

We must avoid wrecking-ball attitudes towards spiritual leaders – of idolising them and then criticising them; of venerating them and then degrading them; of elevating them and then disregarding them.

I am walking in my spiritual inheritance and calling today because I chose years ago to submit wholeheartedly under the authority of Christ-like and gifted men (Hebrews 13:7;17). I needed these leaders around me to help equip and stretch me then. I need them still today.