Leaders and Followers in Local Congregations

***Both Are Needed But We Tend to Focus on Leaders***

I spent several decades teaching management and leadership workshops for would-be leaders in a number of organizations. In my experience organizations are preoccupied with leadership. Countless classes and courses a are offered to develop better *leaders*, but often little is said about what makes good *followers*. Here’s the thing: all of us play the role of follower *more* than we play the role of leader. True believers are first and foremost followers of Christ. Jesus said, in John 10:24, *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”* Secondly, many of us follow elders in our congregation. We follow mayors, governors, and other office holders. Wives follow husbands. Children follow parents. So, while following dominates our lives it doesn’t dominate our thinking.

**What Makes a Good Follower?**

One cannot define a good follower without considering how they are led. Leadership is crucial to good followership. In a congregation under the oversight of elders (or even in a family household) different followers need to be led differently. Think for a moment of Christians in a local congregation: Some are new, perhaps recent converts to Christ. Others are seasoned Christians who know their Bibles well. Some are “on fire” – enthusiastic and motivated. Others are demotivated and unenthusiastic. Given these variables we can create the following Follower Grid with a follower’s *knowledge* on the vertical axis, and his *zeal* on the horizontal axis. The Grid is a variation on what I taught to leaders over the years in my consulting practice.



With the Grid before us we can identify five different types of followers and how they need to be led.

**1. THE NEW FOLLOWER** (Needs an ***Instructing*** Style of Leadership)

Consider for a moment a new Christian. He is likely someone who hardly knows his Bible but has learned enough to realize his only hope is in Christ. In your experience, how would you assess the zeal of a new Christian? High, right? But how would you assess his knowledge of the Word? Very likely it is low. In such a case, the appropriate leadership style is one of “Instructing.” A new Christian needs someone – be it an elder, evangelist, or a more seasoned Christian – to mentor and coach him. He needs instruction to grow in the faith. Note the zeal of those baptized on the day of Pentecost but also the instruction they needed from the Apostles (Acts 2:42). Or consider what Paul said of the Jews who had a “zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge” (Rom. 10:2).

**2. THE GROWING FOLLOWER:** (Needs an ***Involving*** Style of Leadership)

As the new Christian begins to grow and his knowledge increases, it’s important to begin involving him more in kingdom work. It might be premature to “turn him loose” to teach a class, but he might be ready to co-teach a class with a more seasoned brother. It is during this time when the follower with the help of a leader can discover his “gifts” for kingdom service. If we push him too fast or hold him back too long, we may demotivate him. Sometimes growing Christians are asked to carry too big a load resulting in failure, or sometimes they stagnate because they’re not given the opportunity to grow in the faith and assume greater responsibilities. The Hebrew writer warned of this when he wrote, “let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity….” (Heb. 6:1).

**3. THE MATURE FOLLOWER:** (Needs a ***Sharing*** Style of Leadership)

Leaders who have knowledgeable and zealous followers can have confidence in giving them more responsibilities. Such Christians volunteer to teach classes, evangelize effectively in the community, and become mentors to less mature Christians. Such Christians are typically self-starters who take on tasks without them being assigned. They look for and initiate opportunities to serve and do so with great enthusiasm. In many ways, these Christians *share* in the leadership of a congregation – albeit informally. The worst thing a leader can do is “over control” these Christians lest they demotivate them. Leaders who lead by edict and don’t involve these followers in decision making are likely to alienate and demotivate them. These are the best kinds of followers, though they may sometimes question and challenge the thinking of their leaders. Typically, they do so not because they are trying to undermine them, but because they are enthusiastic, Bible students who are serious about serving the Lord as He has directed through the Word. By way of example, consider the apostles, already *zealous* for the Lord and His commission, awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem and once filled with all *knowledge* became ambassadors of the Word – *sharers* in His work and glory (Acts 2; Rom.8:17).

**4. THE DEMOTIVATED FOLLOWER:** (Needs an ***Encouraging*** Style of Leadership)

Sadly, there are some followers who despite their deep Bible knowledge and understanding have lost their zeal. The leader’s role in such situations is to encourage and motivate the follower – to try to re-instill the zeal that has been lost. This can be accomplished *positively* by reminding him of his calling in Christ and all He has done for him. Or, it can be done *negatively* by warning him of the consequences of heartless service. God’s people in the Old Testament frequently fell into such heart-dead worship. Consider their attitude and the sacrifices they brought to God described in Malachi 1:13: “…my how tiresome it is….and you bring what was taken by robbery, and what is lame or sick….” They knew God demanded sacrifice, but their hearts weren’t in it. The same was the problem with Laodiceans who had grown lukewarm in their service (Rev. 3:14-22). Without attention, these followers will likely slip into the next category of follower.

**5. THE LIFELESS FOLLOWER:** (Needs a ***Telling*** Style of Leadership)

Worst of all are followers who have lost their zeal and are happy to remain ignorant of the Word of God – the very Message that has the power to motivate. Such followers’ hearts are hard, and they feel no need to study and learn from God’s Word. They may slip in and slip out of worship assemblies and are content to do no kingdom work. Such followers create a challenge for churches because their apathy can infect the rest of the flock. They need to be confronted with love and firmness. They need to be told repeatedly what Christ has done and the importance of growing in Christ. They need to be warned about the coming judgment. Their souls are in jeopardy and require special, persistent attention lest they be lost. Consider the warning given to the church in Sardis, “…you are dead. Wake up and strengthen the things that remain which are about to die….” (Rev. 3:1-2).

So, follower, how would you assess your *zeal* for God and your *knowledge* of His Word? Are your growing or stagnating? And leaders, what “style” do you use to lead? Do you find yourself telling more than involving or sharing leadership? For both followers and leaders, the perfect role model is Christ Jesus who was both follower (John 12:49-50) and leader (Colossians 1:18).

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**About Matt Hennecke**

*Matt worships with the Douglass Hills congregation in Louisville, Kentucky. He has been both a preacher and an elder over the years and has written several Bible class workbooks. He started LeadingWave Consulting over 30 years ago where he provided leadership development consulting and training for Motorola, McDonalds, State Farm, AT&T, Bank America and other organizations. As soon as the pandemic is over, Matt plans to offer an interactive, Bible-based weekend meeting on leadership for elders and members of congregations. For more information contact him at* [*mjhennecke@gmail.com*](mailto:mjhennecke@gmail.com)*.*

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