

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL*

**RICHARD STEARNS**

**LEAD**



**LIKE IT**

**MATTERS**

**TO**

**GOD**



**VALUES-DRIVEN LEADERSHIP**  
**IN A SUCCESS-DRIVEN WORLD**



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# LEADERSHIP CHANGES THE WORLD

## JOINING THE REVOLUTION

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**SCRIPTURE** ► “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.” (2 Corinthians 5:20)

**LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE** ► Christian leaders are called to be change agents for Christ, bringing healing and restoration into the brokenness of their communities and workplaces.

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*Let every man abide in the calling wherein he is called, and his work will be as sacred as the work of the ministry. It is not what a man does that determines whether his work is sacred or secular, it is why he does it.*

**A. W. TOZER**

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

**MARGARET MEAD**

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**MARGARET MEAD, THE FAMOUS ANTHROPOLOGIST,** was right. When you stop and think about it, virtually every accomplishment of the human race over the millennia has been achieved not by single individuals, but by the collective effort of groups of people who have joined together in some sort of organized way. When groups of people come together, each contributing different skills and abilities, the whole is always much greater than the sum of the parts: one plus one plus one can equal fifty.

Let me give you just a few examples. Do you ever marvel at everyday miracles like skyscrapers, automobiles, smartphones, vaccines, suspension bridges, or even the flat-screen TV in your home? None were achieved by a single person. They were the result of the collective efforts of large groups of people working together, often standing on the shoulders of other groups of people that came before them. The people who built your TV had to rely on the past achievements of those who learned how to produce glass, refine steel and aluminum, injection-mold plastics, broadcast radio signals, and create semiconductor circuits. In fact, your television is the product of thousands of groups of people working over thousands of years adding one innovation after another to the total of human knowledge.

So, what's my point? Groups of people working together change the world. And groups of people always need to be led. Without leadership, groups of people are just, well, groups of people. Without leadership, they might as well be herds of cows. Why does one sports team win the trophy over all the others? Leadership. Why does one company outperform others? Leadership. Why does one church committee accomplish more than others? Leadership. It is not an exaggeration to say that all human achievements have been made possible by leaders who provided direction and vision to groups of

people, enabling the groups to accomplish something that none of the individuals could have achieved alone. Leadership is the one critical ingredient that changes the world.

But there is a myth about leadership that I would like to debunk. We tend to put leaders on pedestals. We glorify them in our culture as some sort of super race of beings. But in reality leaders are just one cog in the machinery of human endeavor, one member of the team. Of what use is a symphony conductor without her musicians? What good is a coach without his players? What is the value of the committee chair without her committee? There is an important symbiosis between the leader and the led. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul described the church using the metaphor of the interdependencies within the human body. It is a wonderful picture of the importance of every member of a group, not just the leader.

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Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. . . .

But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, *so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.* If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Corinthians 12:14, 18-26)

Essentially Paul was saying that the body only functions because all its parts are different, and each plays a critical role. No one part of the body, not even the head, can function without the others. Steve Jobs could never have brought us the iPhone without a legion of designers, engineers, marketers, accountants, and programmers behind him. Abraham Lincoln could never have freed the slaves and preserved the union without brave social activists, other voices in Congress, his own cabinet members, and the Union Army.

For the Christian leader, there is another truth in this passage that should be the bedrock of his or her leadership philosophy: “there should be no division in the body,” and “its parts should have equal concern for each other.” Every member of the group you are leading is precious, deserves honor, and is uniquely gifted by God. People want to follow a leader who values them in that way.

And, while I’m at it, there is another leadership myth that needs debunking. Leaders are not rare. Almost all of us are leaders. The CEO, the symphony conductor, or the school principal are not the only leaders in their respective institutions. In my CEO roles I had multiple vice presidents reporting to me who were also leaders. And they had directors and managers reporting to them who were leaders. The school principal has department chairs, coaches, librarians, and so on—each of whom is a leader in their own sphere. The conductor has the heads of each instrumental section. Most organizations have many leadership roles. The truth is that most of us are both followers and leaders at the same time, being a member of one team and the leader of another. And even if you have a job with few leadership duties, you may be a leader at your church, in your neighborhood, or in your family.

## THE “WHY” OF LEADERSHIP

So why does leadership really matter to God? You’re probably reading this book because you want to become a better leader in your chosen profession. You work hard and you hope to get recognition, promotions, expanded responsibilities, and, yes, more money. Those things are the “what” things. They may be things you are hoping to achieve, but they don’t answer the “why” questions. Why do you do what you do? Why is your work important to God? The “why” questions start to get at things like purpose and meaning, which require us to think much more deeply about our lives in Christ.

For most of us, there doesn’t seem to be much of a connection between the God we worship on Sunday and the work we do on Monday. I spent twenty-three years of my life working at companies that sold deodorants, toys and games, and luxury tableware (Gillette, Parker Brothers Games, and Lenox China). But did God really care about my work in those places? And did my work really matter in God’s larger purposes in the world? The answer is a resounding yes, but perhaps for reasons that are not immediately obvious. To understand how our work connects to our faith, we need to go back into our Bibles to discern just what God wants to accomplish in the world and why we, those of us who are followers of Jesus, play such a crucial role in the unfolding of God’s plan. There is a big picture here that we need to see if we are ever to understand how our lives—and what we do with them—matter to God. To put it in business terms, our personal mission or calling needs to flow out of the mission of God in our world. So, bear with me as I unpack a little theology. Because without understanding the theological underpinnings of our vocations, the work we do for forty or fifty hours a week for maybe forty years won’t integrate very well with our faith.

## GOD IS CALLING US TO JOIN HIM IN CHANGING THE WORLD

Fundamental to my understanding of the mission of every follower of Jesus Christ in our world is this statement: I believe that Jesus came to launch a revolution that would fundamentally change the

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world in profound ways. A revolution he called the coming of the kingdom of God.

If you were to read through the four Gospels looking for the words “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of

heaven,” you would conclude that Jesus was totally preoccupied with the *coming* of such a kingdom. This “kingdom coming” idea is mentioned more than a hundred times in the Gospels, mostly by Jesus himself. To take this even a step further, after a fresh reading of the Gospels using this “kingdom” lens, you would likely conclude that the central mission of Jesus’ incarnation was to purposefully inaugurate and establish God’s kingdom on earth.

So just what was this coming of the kingdom of God all about? It was essentially Jesus’ world-changing vision of a new relationship between God and humankind—a relationship that could now begin to heal the brokenness of the human race and renew God’s creation, conforming it to the character and likeness of God. It was his vision of a new way of living, a new dream for human society that would turn the values of the world inside out as people chose to live under God’s rule and according to his values. And he intended it to change the world.

In the introduction to this book I quoted 2 Corinthians 5:20, the verse I had stenciled on my office wall, which calls us to be Christ’s ambassadors. But let’s now look at that verse in context.



Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ and gave us the *ministry of reconciliation*: that God was *reconciling* the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the *message of reconciliation*. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be *reconciled* to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21)

There is a lot in this passage we could unpack, but let me draw your attention to the word *reconcile/reconciliation*, used five times in these verses. In the Greek, the word for reconciliation is *katallagē*, which means “restoration to (divine) favor.” Merriam-Webster defines *reconcile* this way: “To restore to friendship or harmony; to make consistent or congruous.” In other words, this “ministry of reconciliation” is about restoring people to friendship and harmony with God and making all things more consistent and congruous with God's desires.

On a personal level this reconciliation occurs through the forgiveness of our sins through Christ's atonement, which restores us to a right relationship with God. But on a grander scale, this ministry of reconciliation also extends out into our world. Christ's followers, now forgiven and restored, seek to restore all things to favor with God: individuals, families, communities, schools, businesses, organizations, governments, and nations. God has commissioned us as his ambassadors to be involved with his grand renewal and restoration project in a broken and fallen world. As followers of Christ, we are invited and directed to participate in his great redemptive rescue mission.

In the Lord's Prayer we find a remarkable statement that we often just recite by rote: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" The coming of the kingdom of God is not just about some heavenly future; it is very much intended to play out right here on earth. As Jesus' followers, we are sent into the world to begin the process of reconciling all things to God. This is Jesus'

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vision of his transformed disciples transforming the world.

We personally join Jesus' kingdom revolution by *repudiating* the values of this world—greed, arrogance, selfishness, hatred, racism, sexism, domination, exploitation, and corruption—and *modeling* the values of God's kingdom: love, justice, forgiveness, integrity, sacrifice, encouragement, generosity, humility, inclusion, and compassion. We are called to become ambassadors for and purveyors of these kingdom values, which work to restore the brokenness of humanity. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

## **FIREFIGHTERS OF THE KINGDOM**

To take this out of theological terminology, one way I have described this kingdom mission is compare it to the way our white blood cells function in our body. (My long-ago degree in neurobiology has given me just enough knowledge to be dangerous.) Essentially, when our body experiences brokenness because of a wound or infection, our white blood cells rush to the site of the brokenness to repair, restore, and heal. Or, to use another metaphor, our white blood cells are the body's "firefighters," rushing to put out fires. I think this is a

beautiful picture of the role of the church in our broken world. We are called to circulate in every part of our world and our cultures to bring healing and restoration wherever we find brokenness. And human brokenness is found everywhere—in families, communities, schools, businesses, and governments.

As followers of Jesus Christ, who first healed our brokenness, all of us are now called to be his ambassadors, serving as his agents of healing and restoration wherever we live and work. This is the “why” of our lives and work. This is our core mission and purpose wherever God may have placed us. This is why our work matters to God. The British theologian N. T. Wright puts it this way:

Our task as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to a world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to a world that knows only exploitation, fear and suspicion. . . . The gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology and even—heaven help us—Biblical studies, a worldview that will mount the historically-rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way . . . with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom. I believe if we face the question, “if not now, then when?” if we are grasped by this vision, we may also hear the question, “if not us, then who?” And if the gospel of Jesus is not the key to this task, then what is?

## LEADERSHIP FOR WHAT?

You signed up to read a book on leadership, but the past few pages of theology may have seemed like a bit of a bait and switch. But it is only when you understand that you are engaged in a revolution to

change the world for Christ that the true purpose of your leadership role becomes real. God's agenda of reform and redemption, as his kingdom comes "on earth as it is in heaven," targets every human institution. Leaders shape communities, corporations, schools, hospitals, charities, and governments. Christian leaders can shape them to conform more to the heart of Christ, who loves the people who work there.

I asked earlier whether God really cared about my work at Lenox, Parker Brothers, or Gillette. The answer is yes. Work is inherently valuable as we use our unique talents and abilities in ways that reflect God's own creativity to produce products and services that benefit the broader community. Work also provides needed livelihoods for individuals and families. But, perhaps more significantly, our workplaces matter because they are human institutions filled with people

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whom God cares about. God wants all people to flourish and to be drawn into relationship with him. And so, if God's kingdom is to expand and grow, every human institution must also be renewed by the

values and principles of his kingdom revolution. Organizational cultures can be brutal, or they can be life-giving. Good and godly leadership contributes to human flourishing when it creates cultures and environments that are fair, just, and caring.

**CALLED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

A few months after I left my CEO job at Lenox China to join World Vision, I called my former executive assistant, Maureen, to see how

things were going back at Lenox. I was troubled to hear her report. She said something like this, “Rich, it’s just not the same here now. The atmosphere is so negative. It seems like everyone is out for themselves. Even the language is coarser. People are hurting here now.” Then she said, “Can you come back?” Now, after years of working together, I know that Maureen was biased, but what she was saying was that leadership matters—it makes a difference. To be honest, during my years at Lenox I wondered more than once whether my Christian faith made any difference at all. I had a Bible on my desk and tried to treat people in ways that were humane and caring, but I didn’t always feel like I was making a difference for the Lord. But at some level I was shaping the culture and values of Lenox to be more pleasing to God. Christian leaders shape and influence institutions, and that matters. Integrity, excellence, humility, forgiveness, encouragement, trust, and courage are values of the kingdom of God. And when leaders incarnate those values, the world changes. God had placed me on the front lines of his revolution at a place that happened to sell fine china and crystal. Lenox mattered to God, and the place where you work matters to God too.

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