
THE CONVICTION TO LEAD

25

PRINCIPLES
FOR LEADERSHIP
THAT MATTERS

ALBERT MOHLER



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This book is lovingly dedicated to

MARY

Without whom the story would never be told,
And with whom the story is wonderful.

There are chapters yet to be written, and joys yet to be known.

*Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life
that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in
life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.*

Ecclesiastes 9:9

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Leaders are made by other leaders, and are made better by other leaders, and go on to make yet more leaders.

The line of acknowledgment and gratitude never ends, but this list must. In all things, thanks be to God.

R. Albert Mohler Jr.
Louisville, Kentucky

The Conviction to Lead

True Leadership Starts With a Purpose, Not a Plan

Let me warn you right up front—my goal is to change the way you think about leadership. I do not aim merely to add one more voice to the conversation; I want to fundamentally change the way leadership is understood and practiced.

For the better part of the last three decades, leadership has been a major cultural preoccupation and a professional obsession. Walk into an airport bookstore, and you will find the front tables filled with books promising to make you a better leader. Apparently, frequent travelers have a healthy appetite for such advice. Walk into a Christian bookstore, and you will find ample evidence of the same hunger.

If you are like me, you probably have read a small library of books on leadership, have attended numerous conferences and seminars, and keep up with leadership newsletters and professional journals when you find the time. Hotel conference rooms overflow with people listening to speakers deliver talks on leadership, and colleges and universities have gotten into the business as well, offering majors, degree programs, and even entire schools devoted to leadership studies.

And yet something is missing.

I was born in 1959, right at the center of the golden age of American management. The “managerial revolution” was in full swing, and America’s corporate leaders were managers of the first rank. But no one really thought of them as “leaders.”

President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, assembling a cabinet of youthful and technocratic managerial experts, largely drawn from America’s leading corporations. Writer David Halberstam would later call these men “the best and the brightest.” Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy’s vice president, was considerably impressed by Kennedy’s collection of managerial expertise. When he gushed about them to former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, the Speaker retorted, “Well, Lyndon, you may be right and they may be every bit as bright and intelligent as you say, but I’d feel a whole lot better about them if just one of them had run for sheriff once.”

We get his point. Those managers were among the brightest of their generation, but they managed the nation right into the disasters of the 1960s, such as the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam. Evidently, management is not the same thing as leadership.

As a teenager I was already looking for examples of leadership. I read about Winston Churchill, and I recognized that he was no mere manager—he was a leader of world-changing courage. When he spoke, a nation was given the hope and determination to fight a war that simply had to be won—against odds that left even many of his own friends and family convinced that England’s future was already lost.

I cut my political teeth working as a high school volunteer in Ronald Reagan’s campaign for the Republican presidential nomination in 1976. Early that summer no one had to ask me twice to be part of the line welcoming Governor and Mrs. Reagan into War Memorial Auditorium in Fort Lauderdale for a major speech. I got to shake Reagan’s hand and then hear him speak. He did not talk about vague policy goals or speak in political bromides. He spoke with passion about ideas and the possibility of changing the way Washington was run.

I recognized that he was a leader and that his leadership was transformational. I knew he believed what he was saying, and I could see

that he persuaded others to believe with him. Reagan did not win the nomination in 1976, but he went on to carry forty-nine states in the 1980 presidential election. By that time, regardless of partisan identification, Americans were learning again to look for a leader.

In college I studied political science before ending up as a religion and philosophy major. If my exposure to political science was any indication, those professors cared very little about leadership. Every class seemed like a statistics assignment.

In seminary I had to take classes that were then called “church administration.” Trust me on this—the classes had little to do with the church and a lot to do with administration, but nothing to do with leadership.

I had to create my own leadership studies program. You will probably discover, or you may already know, that the same is true for you. I read historical biographies, observed the national and international scene, and began to read the emerging literature on political and business leadership. I took every opportunity to watch leaders up close, spending time with as many of them as I could.

== The Leadership Renaissance ==

Fast-forward a few years to when I was editor of one of the oldest Christian newspapers in the nation. I received a call inviting me to join a small group of Christian leaders for a meeting on national drug policy at the White House. President George H. W. Bush was launching a major new initiative intended to stem the drug problem. The other leaders and I flew together up to Washington, and on the plane I noted that almost all of the pastors were talking about someone I had never heard of before. A California pastor named John Maxwell was recording sessions in which he was training his own staff in leadership.

Pastors were buying his tapes and passing them around like the old Soviet dissidents used to exchange samizdat—forbidden political literature. Before long, John Maxwell was teaching leadership all over the country, and his books were showing up in airport bookstores.

By the 1990s leaders were flocking to Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, where pastor Bill Hybels had started his

series of huge leadership conferences. I attended one of the earliest. By the end of the decade it was hard to even get a seat in Chicago, and most people would have to settle for a regional site elsewhere. What was going on?

The hunger for leadership had reached every sector of our society, including business, government, education, cultural institutions, and, of course, the church. Christians, along with everyone else, wanted to develop leadership.

It was not always so, although it is hard now to imagine a time when leadership had something of a bad name. The twentieth century was a brutal and murderous laboratory for leadership. All you have to do is think of names like Vladimir Lenin, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Josef Stalin, and Mao Zedong. In light of these horrors, many people began to wonder if leaders and leadership were themselves the problem.

Theodor Adorno and his colleagues at the University of Chicago suggested this in their 1950 book, *The Authoritarian Personality*. They seemed to claim that any ambition to lead was based on unhealthy psychological needs and would produce dangerous results.

This mentality took root in the culture of the 1960s, where counterculture groups demanded the abolition of many leadership positions, and the larger society grew increasingly nervous about the nature of leadership. Educators followed suit with classrooms in which the teacher's role was to be just a fellow learner, no longer "the sage on the stage."

Of course it didn't work. It couldn't work. The nation needed leaders. Businesses needed leaders. Even antileadership movements needed leaders. And teachers had better know more than their students.

The church desperately needs leaders as well. Congregations and Christian institutions need effective leaders who are authentically Christian—whose leadership flows out of their Christian commitment. Wherever Christian leaders serve, in the church or in the secular world, their

Wherever Christian leaders serve, in the church or in the secular world, their leadership should be driven by distinctively Christian conviction.

leadership should be driven by distinctively Christian conviction. The last three decades have seen the emergence of a renaissance in leadership, and the deep hunger for leaders has never been more evident than now.

Like me, you want to grow as a leader in order to be ready for all the leadership opportunities you may be called to accept. So what is the problem? It is not a lack of interest, a shortage of books and seminars, or a dearth of leadership development programs. Nor is the problem a lack of attention to what leaders do and how they do it. The problem is a lack of attention to what leaders *believe* and why this is central.

≡ The Two Cultures of Modern Christian Leadership ≡

The problem is that the evangelical Christian world is increasingly divided between groups we might call the Believers and the Leaders.

The Believers are driven by deep and passionate beliefs. They are heavily invested in knowledge, and they are passionate about truth. They devote themselves to learning truth, teaching truth, and defending truth. They define themselves in terms of what they believe, and they are ready to give their lives for these beliefs.

The problem is, many of them are not ready to lead. They have never thought much about leadership and are afraid that thinking too much about it will turn them into mere pragmatists, which they know they shouldn't be. They know a great deal and believe a great deal, but they lack the basic equipment for leadership. As one proverbial deacon said of his pastor, "Oh, he knows a lot, but he can't lead a decent two-car funeral procession."

The Leaders, on the other hand, are passionate about leadership. They are tired of seeing organizations and movements die or decline, and they want to change things for the better. They look around and see dead and declining churches and lukewarm organizations. They are thrilled by the experience of leading and are ardent students of leadership wherever they can find it. They talk leadership wherever they go and are masters of motivation, vision, strategy, and execution.

The problem is, many of them are not sure what they believe or why it matters. They are masters of change and organizational transformation,

but they lack a center of gravity in truth. They often ride one program after another until they run out of steam. Then they wonder, *What now?*

You deserve to know exactly who I am and why I am writing this book. I want to turn the Believers into Leaders and the Leaders into

Many leaders are masters of change and organizational transformation, but they lack a center of gravity in truth.

Believers. My goal is to knock the blocks out from under the current models of leadership and forge a new way. I stake my life on the priority of right beliefs and convictions, and at the same time I want to lead so that those very beliefs are perpetuated in others. If our leaders are not passionately driven by the right beliefs, we are headed for disaster. At the same time, if believers cannot lead, we are headed nowhere.

My goal is to redefine Christian leadership so that it is inseparable from passionately held beliefs, and to motivate those who are deeply committed to truth to be ready for leadership.

I want to see a generation arise that is simultaneously leading with conviction and driven by the conviction to lead. The generation that accomplishes this will set the world on fire.

I want to see that happen, and I think you do too.

Leading Is Believing

The Leader Is Driven by Beliefs That Lead to Action

When a leader walks into the room, a passion for truth had better enter with him. Authentic leadership does not emerge out of a vacuum. The leadership that matters most is convictional—*deeply* convictional. This quality of leadership springs from those foundational beliefs that shape who we are and establish our beliefs about everything else. Convictions are not merely beliefs we hold; they are those beliefs that *hold us* in their grip. We would not know who we are but for these bedrock beliefs, and without them we would not know how to lead.

In 1993, I walked into my office as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for the first time and closed the door behind me. In the months between my election and taking office, I had ample time to understand my challenge. I was called to turn one of the largest and most venerable Christian institutions upside down, taking it back to its founding commitments and convictions. Almost the entire faculty was against me, and they had far more teaching experience and academic tenure than I would ever know. Students were already organized in protest, and a gaggle of reporters was almost permanently staked outside my office.

Just four years earlier, I had graduated with my PhD from that very institution, my own alma mater. Now I was back as president, charged to make changes that my former teachers would fight in every way they knew how.

As that door closed behind me and I drew a quick breath, it was clear that I lacked almost everything any sane search committee should have been looking for in a president of an institution of this historic stature. But I knew one thing—I was driven by the convictions the school used to stand on, the truths that had brought the school into being. These convictions were right, true, and of primary importance. And, just as importantly, I knew I had the conviction to lead.

This is true of all leaders in some sense, but the Christian leader knows this truth in an especially powerful way because conviction is so essential to our Christian faith and discipleship. Our Christian experience begins with belief. That most familiar of all New Testament verses, John 3:16, tells us that God sent Jesus Christ, his only son, “that whoever *believes* in him should not perish but have eternal life” (emphasis added). When Paul and Silas tell their terrified jailer how he can be saved, they express it with powerful and unmistakable simplicity: “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31, emphasis added).

The command to believe is central to the Bible. Christianity is founded upon certain nonnegotiable truths, and these truths, once known, are translated into beliefs. The beliefs that anchor our faith are those to which we are most passionately and personally committed, and these are our convictions. We do not believe in belief any more than we have faith in faith. We believe the gospel, and we have faith in Christ. Our beliefs have substance and our faith has an object.

Put simply, a conviction is a belief of which we are thoroughly convinced. I don’t mean that we are merely persuaded that something is true, but rather that we are convinced this truth is essential and life-changing. We live out of this truth and are willing to die for it.

The Bible underlines the fact that conviction is absolutely central to the faithful Christian life. When the author of the book of Hebrews sets out to define and demonstrate what authentic faith looks like, he

writes, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). Faith is the full assurance of the facts of what God has done for us in Christ, but its roots lie even before that. As the writer of Hebrews tells us, “By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (11:3). Just a few verses later, he writes that “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11:6).

In other words, there are some things we have to believe even before we believe that God saves sinners. First of all, we must be convinced that God exists and that he created this world and rules over it. Without these prior beliefs, we would have no understanding of the gospel of Christ.

But we *do* know these things, and these most powerful of all truths take possession of us and begin to rule in our thinking. While this is true of all Christians, the full strength of conviction is what sets the Christian leader apart. These convictions are the very essence of Christian leadership, and it has always been this way.

Consider Peter and John, the two apostles who, just days after the death and resurrection of Christ, had the courage to stare down the Sanhedrin and defy their order not to preach in public about Jesus. They told the arresting authorities that they simply could not stop telling what they had “seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Those same beliefs are the convictions that do not allow Christian leaders to be silent today, even in the face of threats and opposition.

Conviction explains the courage of Stephen, the first martyr of the early church, who looked straight at those who were about to stone him to death and told them of the gospel of Christ, convinced that God would protect him, even in death. The apostle Paul was willing to experience beatings, imprisonment, shipwreck, and eventual martyrdom all because of the fact that he was convinced God would keep his promises.

Justin Martyr, one of the leaders of the early church, also serves as a portrait of convictional leadership. Leading members of his own congregation to their mutual execution at the hands of the Roman authorities,

Justin encouraged his people with these words, written to the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius: “You can kill us, but you cannot harm us.”

That is authentic leadership in its clearest form—the willingness of people to die for their beliefs, knowing that Christ will vindicate them and give them the gift of eternal life. Thankfully, most of us will never have to experience that kind of leadership challenge. Nevertheless, the convictions remain the same, and so does the function of those commitments in the life and thinking of the leader. We know these things to be so true that we are willing to live for them, lead for them, and, if necessary, die for them.

At the center of the true leader’s heart and mind you will find convictions that drive and determine everything else.

The leadership that really matters is all about conviction. The leader is rightly concerned with everything from strategy and vision to team-building, motivation, and delegation, but at the center of the true leader’s heart and mind you will find convictions that drive and determine everything else.

Many of my most encouraging and informative models of convictional leadership come from history. Throughout my life I have drawn inspiration from the example of Martin Luther, the great Christian Reformer of the sixteenth century, who was so convinced of the authority of the Bible that he was willing to stand before the intimidating court of religious authorities that had put him on trial, and even to stare down the Holy Roman emperor and declare, “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me.”

Here I stand. These words are a manifesto of convictional leadership. But Luther was not merely ready to stand; he was ready to lead the church in a process of courageous reformation.

I was a teenager the first time I saw the movie *A Man for All Seasons*, based on the play by Robert Bolt. At the center of the story stands Sir Thomas More, who is eventually on trial for his life. King Henry VIII is furious that More, who had been the lord chancellor of the realm and one of Henry’s closest colleagues, would not sign the oath of supremacy that would declare the king to be superior to the church. I later

learned that More had himself persecuted the Lutherans and William Tyndale, the great translator of the Bible into English. Bolt's version of Thomas More did not tell the whole truth, but from the first time I saw that film until now, I have been inspired by the example More set as he went to the scaffold in order to be true to his convictions. Facing the crowd gathered to witness his execution, Sir Thomas More stated, "I am commanded by the king to be brief, and since I am the king's obedient servant, brief I will be. I die His Majesty's good servant, but God's first."

That is the kind of conviction that makes all the difference. Sadly, far too many of today's leaders seem to have little idea of what they believe, or are driven by no clear and discernible convictions. How many of today's leaders are known for being willing to die—or even to live—for their convictions?

You can divide all leaders into those who merely hold an office or position and those who hold great convictions. Life is too short to give much attention to leaders who stand for little or nothing, leaders who are looking for the next program or riding the latest leadership fad, trying on idea after idea but driven by no deep convictions.

I want to be a leader who matters, making a difference with my leadership precisely because my convictions matter. Even in the larger world of politics and world history, we can see the difference between leaders of conviction and leaders who are looking for a safe place to land. Conviction explains how Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn could defy the Soviet regime, writing books that revealed the inhumanity of that repressive government. Conviction explains how President Ronald Reagan could stand in Berlin and, against virtually all political advice, demand, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Conviction explains how former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher could reject calls for political compromise by responding, "The lady's not for turning." Conviction explains the courage of Martin Luther King Jr. writing his now famous "Letter From Birmingham Jail," and Nelson Mandela giving hope to his people as he was imprisoned on Robben Island.

If you think about it, just about every leader who is now remembered for making a positive difference in history was a leader with strong

convictions about life, liberty, truth, freedom, and human dignity. In the long run, this is the only leadership that matters. Convictional leaders propel action precisely because they are driven by deep convictions, and their passion for these convictions is transferred to followers who join in concerted action to do what they know to be right. And they know what is right because they know what is true.

**Without conviction,
nothing really matters,
and nothing of significance
is passed on.**

How could any Christian leader be satisfied with anything less than this? Positions and offices and titles fade faster than ink. I recently took my son, Christopher, on a trip to New York City. Several times we found ourselves looking at statues and monuments to men who were, at some point, famous or powerful. Most have faded from all memory, their likenesses now blending in with the New York landscape, millions passing by without even giving them a second's notice.

Think about this: Most Americans consider the president of the United States to be the highest office of secular leadership imaginable. But how many Americans can name even twenty or thirty of the forty-four men who have held that office? When was the last time you heard someone mention Chester A. Arthur or William Henry Harrison? We do remember those who were known for their convictions and for the courage that those convictions produced. This same principle can be extended to every office and position of leadership imaginable. Without conviction, nothing really matters, and nothing of significance is passed on.

I believe that leadership is all about putting the right beliefs into action, and knowing, on the basis of convictions, what those right beliefs and actions are. This book is written with the concern that far too much of what passes for leadership today is mere management. Without convictions you might be able to manage, but you cannot really lead.

For Christian leaders, this focus on conviction is of even greater importance. We cannot lead in a way that is faithful to Christ and effective

for Christ's people if we are not deeply invested in Christian truth. We cannot faithfully lead if we do not first faithfully believe.

At the same time, many Christians feel called to lead and are passionately committed to all the right truths, but they are simply not sure where to go from here. In the following chapters we will deal with the practical elements and skills of leadership, which are important issues in their own right. But the starting point for Christian leadership is not the leader but the eternal truths that God has revealed to us—the truths that allow the world to make sense, frame our understandings, and propel us to action.

Writing to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul encouraged them to know that the gospel had come to them, “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). As a Christian leader, I hope and pray that is true of me and of you also. I want to lead “with full conviction.” This is the heart of convictional leadership, and it starts with the leader's convictional intelligence.