

Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925)

Advertising executive Bruce Barton (1886-1967) was the son of a Congregationalist clergyman. In his famous The Man Nobody Knows (1925) Barton tried to make the Christian story intelligible and useful for the business executives of his age. After discarding what he derides as the weak and feminine Jesus of his Sunday School days, Barton found "the founder of modern business." In the excerpt below Barton focuses on Jesus' success as an executive. Barton's account reflects the commercial world's dominance of American culture in the 1920s, as well as the interpenetration of corporate and religious language of the day.

Theology has spoiled the thrill of his life by assuming that he knew everything from the beginning--that his three years of public work were a kind of dress rehearsal, with no real problems or crises. What interest would there be in such a life? What inspiration? You who read these pages have your own creed concerning him; I have mine. Let us forget all creed for the time being, and take the story just as the simple narratives give it--a poor boy, growing up in a peasant family, working in a carpenter shop; gradually feeling his powers expanding, beginning to have an influence over his neighbors, recruiting a few followers, suffering disappointments and reverses, finally death. Yet building so solidly and well that death was only the beginning of his influence! Stripped of all dogma this is the grandest achievement story of all! . . .

Success is always exciting; we never grow tired of asking what and how. What, then were the principle elements in his power over men? How was it that the boy from a country village became the greatest leader?

First of all he had the voice and manner of the leader--the personal magnetism which begets loyalty and commands respect. . . . We speak of personal magnetism as though there were something mysterious about it--a magic quality bestowed on one in a thousand and denied to all the rest. This is not true. The essential element in personal magnetism is a consuming sincerity--an overwhelming faith in the importance of the work one has to do. . . .

The second [secret of Jesus' success] was his wonderful power to pick men, and to recognize hidden capacities in them. It must have amazed Nicodemus when he learned the names of the twelve whom the young teacher had chosen to be his associates. What a list! Not a single well-known person on it. Nobody who had ever made a success of anything. A haphazard collection of fishermen and small-town businessmen, and one tax collector--a member of the most hated element in the community. What a crowd! . . .

Having gathered together his organization, there remained for Jesus the tremendous task of training it. And herein lay the third great element in his success--his vast unending patience. The Church has attached to each of the disciples the title of Saint and thereby done most to destroy the conviction of their reality. They were very far from sainthood when he picked them up. For three years he had them with him day and night, his whole energy and resources poured out in an effort to create an understanding in them . . .

The Bible presents an interesting collection of contrasts in this matter of executive ability. Samson had almost all the attributes of leadership. He was physically powerful and handsome; he had the great courage to which men always respond. No man was ever given a finer opportunity to free his countrymen from the oppressors and build up a great place of power for himself. Yet Samson failed miserably. He could do wonders singlehanded, but he could not organize. Moses started out under the same handicap. He tried to be everything and do everything; and was almost on the verge of failure. It was his father-in-law, Jethro, who saved him from calamity. Said that shrewd old man: Said that shrewd old man: "The thing that thou doest is not good. Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou and this people that is with thee, for this thing is too heavy for thee, for thou are not able to perform it thyself alone."

Moses took the advice and associated with himself a partner, Aaron, who was strong where he was weak. They supplemented each other and together achieved what neither of them could have done alone.

John, the Baptist, had the same lack. He could denounce, but he could not construct. He drew crowds who were willing to repent at his command, but he had no program for them after their repentance. They waited for him to organize them for some sort of effective service, and he was no organizer. So his followers drifted away and his movement gradually collapsed. The same thing might have happened to the work of Jesus. He started with much less reputation than John and a much smaller group of followers. He had only twelve, and they were untrained simple men, with elementary weakness and passions. Yet because of the fire of his personal conviction, because of his marvelous instinct for discovering their latent powers, and because of his unwavering faith and patience, he molded them into an organization which carried on victoriously. Within a very few years after his death, it was reported in a far-off corner of the Roman Empire that "these who have turned the world upside down have come hither also." A few decades later the proud Emperor himself bowed his head to the teachings of this Nazareth carpenter, transmitted through common men.