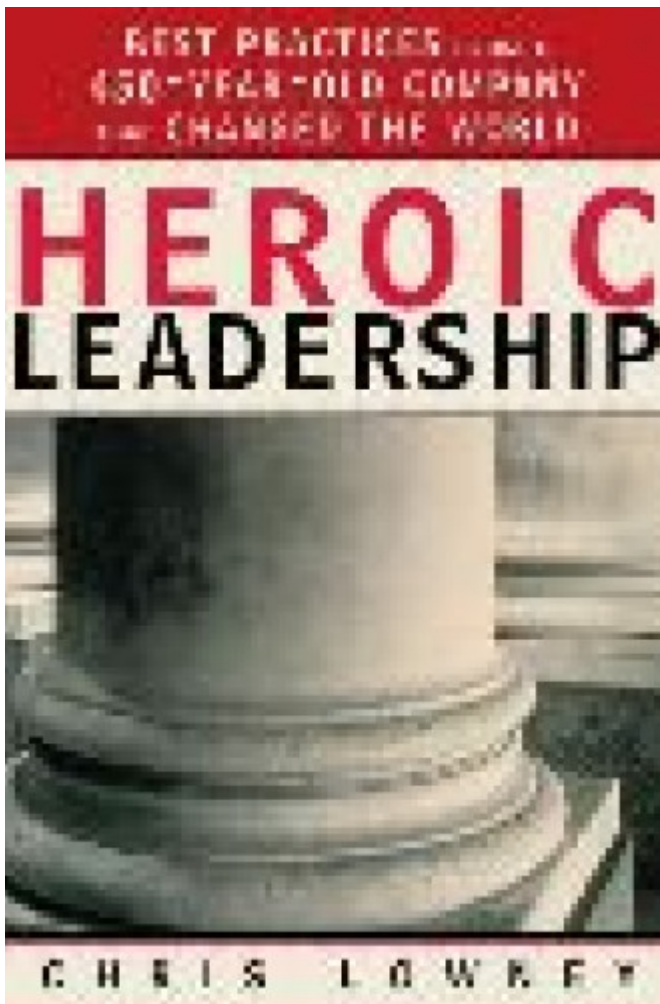


Heroic Leadership/God's Soldiers

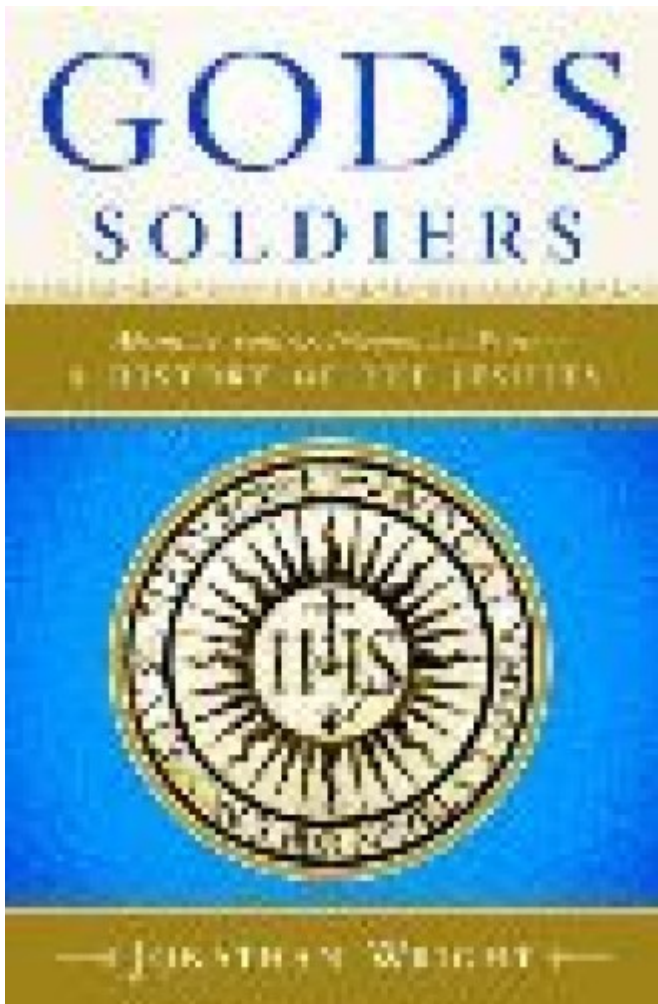
reviewed by [Arthur Paul Boers](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Heroic Leadership: Best Practices from a 450-Year-Old Company That Changed the World

Chris Lowney
Loyola Press



God's Soldiers: Adventure, Politics, Intrigue, and Power—A History of the Jesuits

Jonathan Wright
Doubleday

To a market hypersaturated with books on spirituality, leadership and, predictably, the spirituality of leadership, Chris Lowney, corporate executive and former Jesuit, adds a new twist. Noting that from early on Jesuits called themselves a “company” (as in the “Company of Jesus”), he insists that what we learn from them can inform all leadership.

Lowney’s book resembles many leadership tomes in its crisp summaries of themes, quotes set off in bold type, insets and leadership stories (successful and unsuccessful). He asserts that the Jesuits addressed “vital challenges” still facing “great companies today: forging seamless multinational teams, motivating inspired

performance, remaining 'change ready' and strategically adaptable." Jesuit accomplishments in evangelism, world exploration, social involvement, advances in science and medicine, and the founding of hundreds of schools and colleges across continents are stunning.

Heroic Leadership suggests that the Jesuit secret of success involves four principles: self-awareness; appreciation for change; compassion toward others; and heroism. We never learn how Lowney derives these principles. He does not make clear if they are intrinsically rooted in Jesuit identity or documents. Another problem with his approach is that he has not clearly defined his audience. He is trying to tap into that huge market eager for more books on leadership, but I doubt this group will appreciate his long historical accounts.

Lowney's attempt to secularize the Jesuits is troubling. He writes, "Whenever possible I've stripped overtly religious imagery and phrasing from quotes." He does this because "Jesuits did not become successful leaders simply by adhering to particular religious beliefs but by the way they lived and worked." Yet how one lives and works reflects one's values and is intrinsic to spirituality.

Lowney does not convince me that the Jesuit leadership pillars can be motivated by anything but deep Christian convictions. Jesuit self-awareness, to name but one, is entirely reliant on the Jesuit spiritual disciplines of discernment, accountability and spiritual direction rooted in prayer. The amazing achievements of Jesuits cannot be separated from faith; their motivations belie much that drives the corporate world (self-interest, success, fame, profit). It is also surprising that the book makes no suggestions about how to live out the principles or be formed in and by them. A description of Jesuit forms of discernment would certainly be helpful.

Despite these shortcomings, there is much to like about the book. The sections on Jesuit history and influential leaders are fascinating. Furthermore, the four core convictions are good marks of leadership, worth passing on. I relished discovering how many of the leaders, especially Saint Ignatius himself, the founder of the order, are unlikely success stories. That should give us all hope.

Though Lowney does mention some failures, he never shows the downside, let alone the shadows, of the Jesuit approach, which at times has generated formidable opposition. Good leadership invites a hard look at liabilities as well as successes.

Years ago, while visiting the Iona Community in Scotland, I met a man who told me he worked for a major multinational corporation with offices around the world. He then added, "The very same one you work for." I had not previously thought about the fact that the church can be compared with multinational corporations. Sadly, sometimes churches behave no better than those corporations do. A little less inspirational affirmation and a little more critique would contribute immensely to making clear what the Jesuits could teach leaders.

This deficit in Lowney's book is made up in Jonathan Wright's systematic chronological account of Jesuit history, *God's Soldiers*, which fully explores the story of this remarkable order. Unlike Lowney, Wright does not restrict his focus to famous leaders but offers a more comprehensive appraisal. He deals with the Jesuits' faults, which in the past included arrogance, ambition and unseemly alliances with governments or colonizing powers. There are also astonishing stories of martyrdom.