

1 SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

This is part one of “Spiritual Leadership” by Eric Swanson.

Wherever the work of God has gone forward, it has always had a leader at the helm. It has been a singular person called by God to lead people to accomplish his objectives.

God called a man to begin a nation (Abraham), to preserve that nation (Joseph), to lead that nation out of slavery (Moses), and to lead them in conquering the land (Joshua). He used individual men and women to further his agenda. He directed judges and kings to govern and prophets to reprove his people. And finally he sent one man to die for the sins of the world. Take these few leaders out of history and you have a radically different history. In God’s economy, one person can make a difference. Little wonder God says, “I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap...” (Ezekiel 22:30)

The mystery and privilege of Christian work is that God uses people like us to accomplish his work. We are his “fellow-workers,” his “ambassadors,” his “representatives,” his “servants,” and “ministers.” The Psalmist expressed it best when he wrote, “Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” Psalm 77:19,20

WHAT IS SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

Spiritual leadership is a blending of natural and spiritual qualities utilized for influencing God’s people to accomplish God’s purposes. Even the natural qualities are not self-produced but God-given and therefore reach their highest effectiveness when employed in the service of God and for His glory.

The work of ministry requires that it be accomplished by spiritual people, utilizing spiritual methods to accomplish God’s objectives. If you take any of these out of the mix and you cease to have Christian work.

THE CRISIS OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

We face a spiritual leadership crisis...and have faced a spiritual leadership crisis for the past 2,000 years. Jesus said, “The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few.” There is more work to be done than laborers and leaders willing to work. When looking at spiritual leadership, we may need to set aside some traditional thinking on what makes a leader. Yes, spiritual leaders are change agents. Yes, they influence followers. Yes, they accomplish objectives. But their motives and methods are radically different. We march to the beat of a different drummer. A spiritual leader is always a person being led before he or she is a leader. Jesus, did or said only what the father did or said (John 5:19, 8:28). Following precedes leading. Jesus identified his leadership roles in new terms. He came to be a servant (Mark 10:45) and a shepherd (John 10).

THE LEADER AS A SERVANT

In Matthew 20:24-28 Jesus explained how kingdom values affected leadership style. “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first

must be your slave--just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus did not criticize a person’s desire for leadership, he simply defined the path to that leadership. A servant is committed to the success of another.

In John 13:1-17 we see Jesus in action. In the absence of a servant he took on the role of a servant and washed the disciples feet. After washing the disciples feet he concludes with this poignant lesson on leadership; “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” (John 13:14)

The essence of spiritual leadership is following Jesus and serving people. The tasks of leadership may vary. You will lead programs, people and projects. But the method of leading never changes. We don’t move from servanthood on to something else. The silver thread running through everything we do is that of servant-leadership. Leadership that does not involve servanthood is not spiritual leadership. Once we stop serving, we stop walking in Christ’s footsteps of leadership.

THE LEADER AS A SHEPHERD

In 1 Peter 5:2-3 Peter writes to the leaders of the church. “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

The primary duties of a shepherd are to lead, feed and meet the needs of the sheep. When we stop caring for people we relinquish the right to lead. Our care for people is the basis for ministering to them. The adage is true...people don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care.

Servanthood pertains to the task. Shepherding has to do with people. The style of a Christian leader will always be serving and caring--having a high concern for the task and high concern for the people involved. Little wonder that the offices of Christian leaders are “pastor” (shepherd) and “deacon” (servant). Leadership training then, is really learning to shepherd and learning to serve.

REFLECT & RESPOND

1. Besides the fact that Jesus is our example, why do you think “following precedes leading” is an important part of spiritual leadership?
2. What leaders have modeled well for you the idea of being a “servant” and a “shepherd”?
3. What opportunity do you have right now to be more of a servant or a shepherd?

I HAVE COMPLETED THIS TASK

2 A LEADER PEOPLE WANT TO FOLLOW

This is part two of “Spiritual Leadership” by Eric Swanson. This article is written for Team Leaders but it can apply to anyone desiring to grow in spiritual leadership.

Spiritual leadership is a combination of acquired traits that when blended together form the basis of leadership. The more of these traits a leader has and the more developed each trait is, the more potential impact the leader wields for God. Each of us wants to be led by those over us who exhibit these traits. Our staff and students want leaders with integrity whom they can respect and follow. The following ten traits form the basis from which we lead.

1. VISION

A leader without vision is not a leader. The person God uses has a clear idea of what God wants done and his part in doing it. Moses met with God at the burning bush and received his marching orders. God gave Joshua crystal clear instructions of what he wanted Joshua to do and how he wanted Joshua to live. If you do not know where you are going, you have forfeited the right to ask others to follow you. As a team leader, do you have a clear mental picture of what God wants done? What is it that you want to accomplish for God? Where are you going? What kind of people does God want you to build?

2. EXAMPLE

A visual illustration of the Christian life is far easier to emulate than written theories in a book. The apostle Paul did not hesitate to invite people to imitate and follow him as he closely followed the Lord. “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1) “You became imitators of us and of the Lord...” (1 Thessalonians 1), “Join with others in following my example...” (Philippians 3:17), “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put into practice.” (Philippians 4:9) “For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example.” (2 Thessalonians 3:7)

Leading by example is extremely difficult to do over a lifetime. The life of a leader is one of building and battling (Luke 14:25ff). Our flesh (the part of us that likes to eat donuts and watch TV) wants to be comfortable. We would rather sit back and take an executive position and theorize about ministry than lead out again. However, once you stop leading by example--once you begin saying, “I used to do this...” you relinquish your leadership role in the truest sense of the word. You can be a consultant or a manager but you can no longer lead by example. What have you stopped emphasizing because it is presently absent in your own life?

3. INTEGRITY

When choosing a king for Israel, God told Samuel who was enamored with the appearance of David’s oldest brother, “Do not consider his appearance or his height... The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7). Integrity is a matter of the heart. “And David shepherded them with integrity of heart...” (Psalm 78:72) Once you’ve lost integrity, you’ve lost credibility. Once credibility is gone you won’t be able to get a cat to follow you. Integrity is built through making and keeping promises and commitments.

It is consistency of life. It is a word that means “wholeness.” It is putting all of the areas of our life in the same direction. Integrity does not signify perfection. Perfection is unattainable but integrity is within our grasp. God will not use a leader who lacks integrity.

4. GOD’S WORD

Leaders are readers. Christian leaders are devoted to the word of God. Because a man of God depends on God, he learns to listen to and depend on God’s word for goals, methods, insight and power. It is the word of God that makes him “adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:17) Our audience... our followers need the assurance that we are regularly meeting with God and hearing his voice--that we are leading them from the guidance we are getting from God. They want to listen to the person who listens to God. If a leader is to influence people to accomplish an objective, then a Christian leader must be certain that the objective is something God wants done. To lead a ministry you must devote yourself to the word. The dispute in Acts 6 caused the disciples (leaders) to clarify their job description. “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables” (Acts 6:2). Waiting tables is good and necessary. However, people will survive without clean silverware. They will not grow and thrive without leaders who feed from and teach the word of God. In Hebrews 13:7 the author writes, “Remember you leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.” Leaders give people the word of God. An essential characteristic of Christian leadership is the ability to receive truth from God. What are you doing to feed yourself from the Scriptures? What are you doing to feed others from God’s word?

5. PRAYER

“We (leaders)...will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.” Acts 6:4 The weakest link in the life of a spiritual leader is probably prayer. Leaders, by their nature, are activists. They want to get things done. Prayer is often seen as in interruption of the work. It’s tough talking to an invisible being for any length of time. Yet Jesus, for all he came to do, “would often slip away to a lonely place to pray” (Luke 5:16). E.M. Bounds wrote, “Men are looking for better methods. God is looking for better men--men of prayer.” Joshua’s first lesson of leadership was learned on the battle field against the Amelekites (Exodus 17). While he was slicing and dicing Amelekites in the valley, the real battle took place on the mountain. As long as Moses interceded for him, the Israelites prevailed. Spiritual battles are won in prayer. If the success of your work and ministry was a reflection of your prayer life, where should your ministry be right now?

6. SPIRIT-FILLED

Spiritual leadership can be exercised only by Spirit-filled people. Other qualifications for spiritual leadership are desirable. To be Spirit-filled is indispensable. Jesus said “...apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) Even those whose duties are largely temporal in nature must be people controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 6). Wherever you see spiritual leadership, the Holy Spirit is behind the scenes, empowering, directing, leading. Paul wrote, “...not that we are competent to consider anything as coming from ourselves but our competency is from God, who made us competent ...(by) the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:5,6)

7. HARD WORK

1 Thessalonians 5:12,13 “Now we ask you brothers to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.” Leadership in the God’s kingdom is not a life of executive privilege but that of hard work. The work may be very enjoyable, challenging and rewarding but it is work. That’s why it is called “the work of ministry.” We are admonished to “...lead with diligence” (Romans 12:8).

8. FAITH

“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7) Philosopher George Santayana said, “It is better to have one lion leading a thousand sheep than one sheep leading a thousand lions.” A leader has the responsibility of leading the charge in believing God. A person of faith is a person of inner strength, courage and action. Faith is that which inspires courage in one’s followers. The leader’s faith quotient must be ahead of (or at least on par with) his followers.

9. GROWTH

A leader is not perfect but is always in the process of taking the next appropriate step in his or her life of faith. Once a leader stops learning and growing, she stops leading.

10. HOME LIFE

Howard Hendricks says, “If it doesn’t work at home, don’t export it.”

In 1 Timothy 4:12-16 the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about his style of leadership and how he could overcome his handicap of youthfulness. Observe how many of the above elements are present in his admonition: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift which was given you... Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress.”

PURPOSE OF LEADERSHIP AND AUTHORITY

Every spiritual leader is “one who will give an account” for the lives of his followers (Hebrews 13:17). Spiritual authority is bestowed by God for the benefit of those being served. Paul writes about “...the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down...” (2 Corinthians 10:8). God gives leaders to his people “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11,12). How well does your purpose as a leader fit God’s purpose for a leader?

QUALITIES OF PEOPLE GOD USES

Spiritual leadership does not rest in a title or in a position. The biblical approach to leadership rests on the quality of life of the individual leader. Because of the very nature of the term, “leader,” the followers will follow his or her example. In Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 we see a list of life-qualities, probably pursued by few, available to all and deniable to none. The attributes are a combination of character, maturity (“must not be a recent convert”), skill (“able to teach”) and track record (“they must first be tested... managing their household well... a good reputation with outsiders”).

There are times when you need to draft spiritual leaders and they too must be qualified. If there is not a pool of potentially qualified leaders, you have not been giving yourself to the right things in your ministry.

REFLECT & RESPOND

- Which of the ten traits would you like to grow in? What do you need to help you grow?
- “Spiritual leadership does not rest in a title or in a position.” How does this apply to the role you play on your staff team and within your movement? What difference would it make in your life to see yourself as a “spiritual leader” even if you aren’t officially in charge of something?
- How does the last statement in this article challenge you? “If there is not a pool of potentially qualified leaders, you have not been giving yourself to the right things in your ministry.”



I HAVE COMPLETED THIS TASK