

Journal of Applied Christian Leadership

Volume 11 | Number 2

Article 7

9-2017

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, Morris (2017) "The Need for Spiritual Leadership," *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership*: Vol. 11: No. 2, 78-82.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/jacl/vol11/iss2/7>

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MORRIS THOMPSON

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Abstract: Leadership comes in different shapes and sizes within our society. Some leadership practices are characterized as good, and other forms are toxic. However, within the 21st century, spiritual leadership is necessary as Christian leaders focus on growing the next generation of leaders. This article focuses on the importance of the spiritual leader within today's society, and will first discuss the need for dedicated spiritual leaders. It will then discuss how spiritual leaders affect the spiritual growth of others. Finally, it will discuss the need for spiritual accountability.

Why We Need Dedicated Spiritual Leaders

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is found in Mark 2:1-12. In this story Jesus was staying in a small home in a town called Capernaum. Word had spread that he was there, and so the crowds grew. They grew so large that people were spewing out of the doors and windows. During this time four men carrying a paralyzed man on a stretcher attempted to enter the house because they believed that Jesus could heal their friend. Apparently it was difficult for these four men to enter the crowded house the conventional route (through the front door), so they decided to make a hole on the rooftop and lower their paralyzed friend into the room with Jesus.

Seeing their faith, Jesus decided to let this paralyzed man know that his sins were forgiven. Upon saying this, the Pharisees began to question His authority to forgive sins. They rightly believed that only God has the authority to forgive men and women of their sins. Jesus knew their thoughts and decided to prove to them that his authority (as God) was, in fact, bona fide. He then said to the man, "Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk." Immediately the paralyzed man got off of his stretcher and began to walk.

There are so many amazing moments in this story, but there is one thing that stands out to me: the fact that it took a group to bring this paralyzed man to Jesus. This man was not only physically paralyzed, but spiritually paralyzed as well. In the years that I have worked in small group ministry I have

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found people from all walks of life enter a group and find healing, but the one commonality is that they are all paralyzed. Whether it's physical, financial, emotional, or spiritual paralysis, they have been paralyzed in an area of their life that is preventing them from growing spiritually. In the story, it took four other people to recognize this man's pain and lead him to the One who could heal him from his physical and spiritual paralysis. The close encounter led that man to both a literal and physical confrontation with Jesus. That is what defines the role of a spiritual leader. A spiritual leader is someone who leads others to a closer walk with Christ.

This is why spiritual leaders are so important for the spiritual growth of others. Without other people helping us to grow in a closer walk with Christ, we will never find true healing. In my churches, I frequently preach that it is impossible to grow as a disciple of Jesus by yourself. In order to grow spiritually, we need other people that God strategically places in our lives. These individuals help us to get from that point of paralysis and into a healing relationship with Jesus Christ. Those four spiritual leaders in the story went to the extent of destroying a stranger's roof in order for their friend to find healing. The wonderful thing about spiritual leaders is that they will stop at nothing in order for others to meet Jesus.

Spiritual Leaders Make or Break the Growth of Others

I have always been interested in sports, especially team sports. I feel an interesting combination of fascination and impressiveness with winning teams. Some of the greatest teams that come to mind are the 2001 Los Angeles Lakers, the 2007 New England Patriots, or the 2014 San Antonio Spurs. Oftentimes we look at these teams and give credit to their star players. The Golden State Warriors would have been nothing without Steph Curry, Draymond Greene, and Klay Thompson. The New England Patriots would not have had a winning team without Tom Brady as the starting quarterback. However, I would venture to say that these players' incredible abilities and skills would not have been manifested without an even better coach on their side.

I have seen examples time and again of mediocre players playing under the leadership of mediocre coaches who never reach their true potential until they play for a great coach. As good as Tom Brady is, he would not be who he is today without the leadership of Coach Bill Belichick. Steph Curry, Klay Thompson, and Draymond Green were developed into the star players that we see today by Coach Steve Kerr. I believe that if these three players played for a mediocre coach, the Golden State Warriors would just be another mediocre

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team. Behind every star player is a great coach because players will only play as good as their top leadership. John Maxwell describes it as “The Law of the Lid.” Your team will only be as good as its top leaders (Maxwell, 2007).

The same principle holds true in spiritual leadership. Those that spiritual leaders lead oftentimes are only as strong as their leader. If people are following spiritually weak leaders, one of two things will occur. Either they will follow suit and become spiritually weak as well because they are not being poured into effectively, or they will get frustrated with the weak leadership and seek a stronger leader. In order for spiritual leaders to lead effectively they need to closely follow the Master Leader, Jesus Christ.

When training small group leaders, I emphasize the need for that leader to have a strong devotional and prayer life. If the leader does not have a close walk with Jesus, how can he or she lead others to a closer walk with Christ? The small group will only be as spiritual as its leader. Group members that have a higher level of spirituality will grow frustrated and eventually leave the small group. As spiritual leaders, small group leaders are to model a close relationship with Jesus for the rest of the group members. However, if the leader does not have a close relationship with Christ, it is impossible for the leader to model it for the rest of the group.

Staying connected to Jesus is the difference between a strong or weak spiritual leader. Paul wrote, “Follow me as I follow Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul is essentially saying that in order for him to lead effectively, he needs to continue to follow Christ.

As the spiritual leader, Paul is calling his followers to follow Christ along with him in his spiritual journey. This is the mark of a great spiritual leader; someone who is growing closer to Christ and calling others to journey in the process of spiritual growth with them. The job of the spiritual leader is to hold his or her followers accountable during their journey of spiritual growth.

Spiritual Accountability

Accountability is essential in spiritual leadership. Throughout the disciples’ growth as spiritual leaders, Jesus held them accountable. Although all spiritual leaders hold their followers accountable, it is important for the spiritual leader to remember that they need to be held accountable as well. The spiritual leader is held accountable by two groups of people.

First, the leader is held accountable by their followers. Accountability is reciprocal. As much as the spiritual leaders holds others accountable, the spiritual leader’s followers hold them accountable as well. When spiritual

leaders do not allow themselves to be held accountable, they turn into dictators. Earl D. Radmacher writes, “Human leaders, even Christian ones, are sinners and they only accomplish God’s will imperfectly. Multiple leaders, therefore, will serve as a ‘check and balance’ on each other and serve as a safeguard against the very human tendency to play God over other people” (Strauch, 1995, p. 43). It takes humility for the leader to recognize that they need to be held accountable in order to lead from a spiritual place.

The second person who holds the spiritual leader accountable is God. “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12). Although the spiritual leader holds their followers accountable, both the leader and the followers are all held accountable by God. Spiritual leaders who neglect to remember this tend to become toxic leaders. These leaders lead as though their decisions are the final word and cannot be assessed or critiqued by anyone. Spiritual leaders submit their imperfect wills to God through prayer and filter it through His Word. King David’s prayer to God was, “Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life” (Psalm 139:23-24). Although David was King of Israel, he still allowed God to hold him accountable in his leadership. When the spiritual leader allows God to hold them accountable, they are essentially allowing God to grow their spiritual life leading to a more effective spiritual leader.

Although spiritual leaders may see the importance of accountability, it is essential that they build an environment in which accountability can grow and thrive. Constructing a life surrounded by accountability gives the leader many ways in which they can be held accountable. In my time leading small group leaders, I stressed the need for each leader to be a part of a small group as well as an even smaller group called a “triad.”

Although the leader was leading the small group, they were still to be held accountable by their group members just as they held their group members accountable. The reciprocity of the accountability provided an environment for the spiritual leader to be held accountable by other people on a journey of spiritual growth. The triad was a group of three people: the small group leader and two other individuals. These two other individuals did not have to be a part of the small group, but they added a more intimate level of accountability for the small group leader. These individuals prayed together on a daily basis and met regularly to discuss their personal life, struggles, and spiritual growth. John Wesley, the Founder of the Methodist Church, trained his small groups to place an emphasis on transparency within their group meetings (Comiskey, 2014). Without this transparency the groups could not get to a

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level in which the group members could hold one another accountable. Because of the sensitive nature of the triad the things discussed between the three individuals were to remain confidential. The small group leaders who took part in these triads expressed a deeper level of spiritual growth, commitment, and accountability.

As God grows spiritual leaders he expects them to have a daily devotional and prayer life in which they talk with Him regularly. Jesus, as a spiritual leader, spent time with God on a regular basis so much so that Luke writes that it was His custom (Luke 22:39-46). God wants the spiritual leader to spend an ample amount of time with Him because it provides accountability from God. This heavenly accountability helps the leader to grow spiritually. Although this is important, God also stresses the need for the spiritual leader to find accountability in a group of trusted individuals. Spiritual leaders that rely only on accountability from God limit their spiritual growth and allow themselves to be vulnerable to pitfalls in their leadership. Removing the triad form of accountability out of their environment is like removing the leg off of a three-legged stool; it is impossible for it to stand.

Conclusion

Oswald Sanders (1986) writes, “True greatness, true leadership, is achieved not by reducing men to one’s service but in giving oneself in selfless service to them” (p. 20). Whether they lead in or outside of the church organization, the world needs spiritual leaders. Without their leadership and influence, the importance of spirituality will not be appreciated by the next generation of leaders. The world needs spiritual leaders who will help others to grow spiritually within their own leadership. The world needs leaders who are willing to be held accountable no matter the cost. We need spiritual leaders who are committed to helping others reach their true God-given potential.

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