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Establishing personal ethics: Modelling principles of spiritual leadership for a Christian educator

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Hyatt's (2012) statement "One of the most effective things about Jesus' lifestyle was that He didn't switch into another mode to introduce His disciples to the reality of God" (para. 5) is an important observation about the life of Jesus. Further, it is an example today to those in the role of a spiritual leader. The Apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, asserted "You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men: clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:2–3 NKJV). These words are believed to have explicit application to this author's life, and that of other Christian educators. Coupled with Timothy's admonition "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2), it clarifies that there is only one letter to be shown, no matter the situation within this role. The most important aspect of being a spiritual leader is not perfection in everything one does, but consistency in one's life and attitude, in public and in private.

As an educator, it is especially important to lead by example. Students come from various backgrounds and are dealing with numerous challenges. They are looking for someone to be 'an anchor that holds firm in the storms of life'. The modern college student is no longer just an older teen or young adult but may be the parent of young children or even the grandparent of older children. The one thing common to all of them is that, in some way, they are all dissatisfied with their present life situation. The reason they are attending college is to initiate change. This fact makes it important for students that their instructor can offer, informed guidance, with experienced stability.

There are a number of principles or character traits needed to be the spiritual leader God desires. Personal experience suggests the following important attributes, discovered and developed through the power of the Holy Spirit, bring about the consistency that is necessary to be the spiritual leader students need. Submission to God and His ways is the fundamental attitude of first priority. Followed by possession of wisdom and understanding; application of personal integrity and ethical practice; and demonstration of focus and perseverance. All of these principle attributes are dependent upon submission, to God. They will not develop without it. A cognitive analyze of the relationships between these character traits, suggests the model in Figure 1 (See p. 10).

Submission

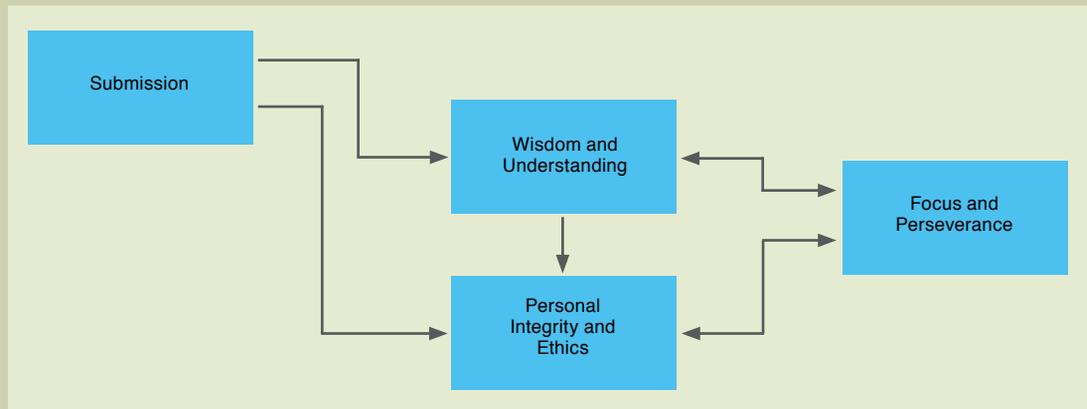
Submission to God is a first priority, being an essential and crucial preparation for any role as a spiritual leader. Leaders can only truly act as spiritual leaders when they come to the understanding that they are simply instruments of God for service to Him. When contemplating an instrument or implement of service, the attributes of sturdy durability and an ergonomic fit in the hand of the craftsman stand out. The only conclusion that makes sense is that the will of the leader must be placed in submission to the One who will lead the leader. Solomon advises, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:5–6).

The central quality of submission is the shaping of the spiritual leader to be able to lead as God would have him or her to lead. There are a number of occurrences, circumstances, and seminal experiences that can shape one to be God's spiritual leader. However, Blackaby and Blackaby (2011), assert the following:

Although childhood experiences, physical strength, failures, successes, and even birth order can

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Figure 1: Spiritual leadership attributes analysis



impact general leadership abilities, there is an added dimension to the personal growth of a spiritual leader not found in secular leadership development. That is the active work of the Holy Spirit. (p. 67)

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit. (Ephesians 5:15–18)

“*Submission to the will of God ... leads to two branches in this relationship. ... [one] the development of wisdom and understanding, [two] personal integrity and ethics*”

To be more thorough in description, the Holy Spirit uses these building blocks of character: the childhood experiences, physical strength, failures, successes, and even birth order; to mould someone towards being a spiritual leader. Further, He can use other pieces of the leader’s life to fashion him or her for leadership through the supernatural connection of the human being with the Spirit of God.

For submission to work its complete handiwork on the spiritual leader, the leader must be totally committed to the transformation process. That reality is expressed by Paul’s words when he writes,

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2 NKJV).

Reworded in modern language, a personal translation of these two verses says, “Give yourselves totally to God and allow Him to shape you to do His will.”

When contemplating the requirement of surrender in order to be effectively used by God, it becomes evident that a dependent relationship between the stated principles or character traits emerges. Submission to the will of God in one’s life leads to two branches in this relationship. The first branch is the development of wisdom and understanding (refer to Figure 1) and apparent in the admonition,

Being filled with the Spirit of God enables the spiritual leader to gain insight and wisdom that only comes from the mind of the Author and Creator of Wisdom.

Wisdom and Understanding

In much the same way that the Holy Spirit can use one’s experiences, successes, and failures to teach the spiritual leader to be submissive, He can also use one’s education and formal and informal learning encounters, including professional development, to enhance one’s wisdom and understanding. However, doing things and making decisions God’s way is even more important. This underscores the principal position that submission holds in the life of the spiritual leader; in order to discern, understand, and follow God’s direction, one must acquiesce to His leading.

Deckard (2005a) makes the point that Christian leaders are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, listening with spiritual ears for His wisdom. He draws from Proverbs 1:23, which says, “Turn at my rebuke; surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you.” Those words make it clear that spiritual leaders not only listen to the Holy Spirit for wisdom, they submit themselves to the Lord and have the indwelling and filling of the Holy Spirit to give them wisdom. One can deduce that submission precedes and facilitates wisdom and understanding. Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) reaffirm this view with the following statement: “You cannot be a spiritual

leader if you are not encountering God in profound, life changing ways” (p. 160). The way the lives of spiritual leaders are changed is by yielding to God’s control for growing within their leadership roles.

The connection between God’s role and man’s responsibility to effectively enable growth in wisdom and understanding emerges from these words, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). Two key words formulate the basis of that spiritual connection, “fear” and “beginning.” The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible defines the Hebrew words *yirah* (Strong’s 3374), translated *fear*, as extreme reverence, and *reshiyth* (Strong’s 7225), translated *beginning*, as first in order or rank. Therefore, to demonstrate one’s highest honor and respect for God is of the highest or primary priority for the spiritual leader, expressed as submission – leading to wisdom and understanding.

Demonstration of one’s uppermost honor and respect, submission before God, can and should be expressed through corporate and individual worship activities such as prayer and praise. It should also be exhibited through the everyday accumulation and application of the opportunities God provides to increase wisdom and understanding. A spiritual leader will seek to know as much as possible about how to effectively execute his or her responsibility as a manager and mentor every day.

From a human perspective, Rebore (2014) notes that an educational and historical perspective is important:

The administrator should know the purpose of education and the role that leadership plays in society. He or she should know and understand various ethical perspectives, including the value of having a diverse school community. The school administrator should know the history and philosophy of education. (p. 4)

This is the first of three stated requirements necessary for an educational leader to act with ethics, fairness, and integrity.

The first determination that leaders must make when making decisions is who they are going to listen to, themselves or God; every spiritual leader must come to the conclusion that what they think is best, is greatly inferior to what God knows is best (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). In other words, it is important for spiritual leaders to know the purpose of education and the role that leadership plays in society, and the value of having a diverse school community, but this wisdom must be guided by biblical principles. Wisdom and understanding in these areas of concern must be informed by the doctrines of a Christian perspective.

Deckard (2005a) states that “Christian leaders must search for wisdom, discernment, and insight [and] trust in the Lord [to supply it]” (slide 10), drawing on:

If you seek her [wisdom] as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Proverbs 2:4–6)

When it comes to wisdom and understanding, the spiritual leader has an additional infallible resource from which to draw. He or she must rely more on God’s input and leading for insight and comprehension than simply the accumulation of human knowledge available.

Extending from possession of wisdom and knowledge, the lessons learned from early in Proverbs 2, verse 9 asserts how these attributes are operationalised, “Then you will understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path.” According to Deckard (2005a), Christian leaders understand their ethical foundation for behaviour is built upon the Rock (God) and the Bible. Ascertaining the connection between wisdom and understanding and personal integrity and ethics from Deckard’s (2005a) statement, an arrow directly connects these two character traits in Figure 1.

Personal Integrity and Ethics

As stated previously, personal integrity and ethics is the second branch of dependency from the foremost principle of submission (as shown in Figure 1). The reason spiritual leaders are able to understand the Lord and His Word are the sources of their ethics, as Deckard (2005a) relates, is because they have submitted their own will to that of God, accepting His expression in His Word.

For the educator and Christian, a specific aspect of personal integrity and ethics can be defined as demonstrating consistently a high standard of decision-making and personal performance in the classroom, and requiring the same from students. According to Snow (2010), the words of Proverbs 4:10–13 make it clear to Christian leaders that doing what is right is the most important aspect of ethical behaviour. Of all the attributes and principles elucidated here, personal integrity and ethics are the most difficult to develop and maintain. Rendering an ethical decision is much more dynamic and fluid than making a simple choice by following one’s conscience and always choosing to do what is morally right. There are many circumstances, perspectives, and precedents one must take into account. Every situation has its own dimensions for which the spiritual leader must account.

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When it comes to ethical decision-making, Rebores (2014) advocates the deontological approach, which calls on the decision-maker to identify the problem, analyze the alternative solutions, compare them to norms, and then choose the solution that matches the highest norm. This method appears to be a logical approach to any ethical judgment, but a spiritual leader must look beyond human logic for guidance. In fact, according to Wofford (2012), Christian ethics is not deontological at all, but is, in fact, virtue ethics, and “one of the great theological errors—it is the error of Pharisaism to be exact—is to see either or both of them [New and Old Testament] as deontological” (para. 5). This position puts spiritually grounded ethical decisions at odds with those of secular origin.

The ethical challenge for the spiritual leader is also his or her advantage when making decisions because the spiritual leader has a firm foundation upon which to base decisions. God’s will is the missing element in the secular decision-making process. Rather than basing one’s decision-making primarily on human norms, the spiritual leader must follow the leading of the “Holy Spirit [who] reveals God’s will through four primary avenues: prayer, Scripture, other believers, and circumstances” (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011, p. 221).

Even so, some exemplary secular practices are based on Christian principles. According to Decker (2005b), fact-finding is pre-eminent before making a decision. He draws from Proverbs 18:15,17, “The heart of the prudent acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him.” Secular and spiritual leaders alike will agree that diligence in getting all the facts is one of the most important factors in making the correct decision. The practice of diligence in personal integrity and ethics, added to the wisdom and understanding that only comes from submission to the will of God, will develop the final principle or character trait to be discussed in this discussion – that of focus and perseverance.

Focus and Perseverance

The final principle of focus and perseverance is placed in a reciprocal relationship with the two branches of wisdom and understanding and personal integrity and ethics (as shown by the double-headed arrows in Figure 1). Both of these prior principles are necessary to develop the final principle, however the final principle helps to continue development of the two pre-requisite principles. Focus and perseverance is connected to personal integrity and ethics through the concept of consistency in one’s actions, which brings growth to

the leader and his or her followers; it is connected to wisdom and understanding through learning to do things God’s way.

None of the principles or character traits will ever be fully developed during one’s lifetime and the possibility of improvement is a constant state of affairs. The Apostle Paul relates that fact from within his own life,

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12–14)

Being a spiritual leader means seeing the work to the end. “Leadership is hard work. There are no shortcuts ... The reason there are not more great spiritual leaders today is because too few men and women are willing to pay the required price” (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011, p. 192). Hence, the importance of focus and perseverance in the life and actions of the aspiring spiritual leader.

Spiritual leaders are also in the business of developing new leaders. Practicing the principle of focus and perseverance sets the example for their followers. The Apostle Paul knew that he had not reached the goal Christ had for him, but he constantly moved toward it. In response to his constant improvement, he told the followers of Jesus to “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Focus and perseverance by a leader sets the example for followers. The leader needs to be consistent. Even with his secular viewpoint, Rebores (2014) understands the need for consistency when explaining about the need for congruency in the life of a leader. “Congruency refers to having one’s external expressions in harmony with one’s internal disposition” (Rebores, 2014, p. 306). It is this final principle of focus and perseverance that spiritual leaders use to show their followers the source of true leadership and how to develop these same characteristics in their own lives.

Conclusion

The principle of submission to God stands as the primary principle necessary for development as a spiritual leader. As an educator, I serve God as a catalyst of learning and character development for His students. To properly and consistently serve at the pleasure of the Lord, submission to His direction, guidance, and commands is paramount.

In order to acquire the wisdom and

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understanding necessary for conducting one's self and directing the actions and motives of one's followers from a spiritual standpoint, the educator or any spiritual leader must yield to the will of God in everything. Proper application of personal integrity and ethics is dependent not only on God's wisdom and understanding but first and foremost (once again) on exchanging human ideas of integrity and ethics for God's; total submission is necessary. Focus and perseverance operates in a give-and-take relationship with the characteristics of wisdom and understanding and personal integrity and ethics. They are dependent upon one another for full maturity in the life of the spiritual leader. Total submission to God; growth in wisdom and understanding; consistent acts of morality, ethics, and integrity; and constant focus and perseverance through the challenges of leadership set the example for one's followers. **TEACH**

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“Total submission to God; growth in wisdom and understanding; consistent acts of ... integrity; and constant focus and perseverance through ... leadership set the example for one's followers.”