

IS THERE A BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

Definition

Leadership is knowing where you want people to be and taking the initiative to get them there. Spiritual leadership is knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God's methods to get them there in reliance on God's power. Two things characterize ordinary secular (or merely human) leadership: a goal and a following. You can know exactly where you are going, but if no one is following, you are not a leader. And you can have a great crowd following you, but if you don't know where you are going, you are not a leader. Leadership demands both a goal and a following.

Spiritual leadership demands more than a goal and a following. It demands that the goal be God's goal, not merely man's, and that the methods for mustering a following be God's methods not merely man's, and that all the labor expended to get there be expended in reliance on God not man. The spiritual man is the man who has his life from the Spirit, lives daily by the power of the Spirit, and aims in all things to please the Spirit. Therefore, leadership performed by the spiritual man is: knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God's methods to get them there in reliance upon God's power. That's the definition of spiritual leadership that we will be working with for the next several days.

Suspicion of Leadership

It seems to me that the very first thing we run into when

we begin to discuss spiritual leadership today is that the whole idea of leadership is suspect, especially in the spheres of home and church. There has been, I think, an unusual unintended and unsuspecting coalition of forces that have combined to produce an atmosphere in our country in which strong leadership is more to be suspected than admired.

For example, in the church the movement which we may call the "body life movement" has for the past fifteen or twenty years stressed the responsibility of all Christians, whether they are professional clergy or not, to find their gifts and employ them in the ministry of the church. The gulf between laity and clergy has been viewed as unbiblical and harmful to the church. So the stress has fallen on the frailty and fallibility of the clergy (they're just like everybody else) and on the potential and power of the people in the pew. Numerous churches in the Baptist General Conference have a sign in their front yard giving out the name of the church and the ministers. The sign says "Ministers: all the people."

Of course, there is a tremendously important truth in all of this, but my point is that an atmosphere has been created, I think unwittingly, in which any stress on strong individual leadership is viewed with suspicion because it seems to be a threat to the equality of all believers in the body of Christ.

Another example of the forces which have combined to produce this atmosphere of suspicion and doubt about the value of powerful individual leadership is the feminist

movement. Among most of the people under forty in our day, whose minds have been saturated by the egalitarian mentality of the feminist movement over the past ten years, hardly any would even think of posing the question concerning spiritual leadership in the home. The concept of one person leading another person in a marriage relationship is simply anathema to the feminist way of thinking. I was in a discussion recently with a professor of philosophy who set up two contrasting models of how people should relate to each other, both at home as well as in other expressions of Christian society. The two models were hierarchy on the one hand, and egalitarian partnership on the other hand. Hierarchy implies relationships of over and under. Egalitarian partnership implies relationships where people are always on a par. His argument was that the only model in which there can be mutual respect for persons is the partnership model, not the hierarchy model. We were in a group of some thirty people during this discussion and not a single person raised an objection to his position. The point I want to make here is not whether he was right or wrong, but that a mood exists today which is so pervasive that when a person calls into question a form of community which has existed inside and outside the church for millenia and seems to have some biblical warrant, nobody even raises a peep of objection. The reason for that, I think, is that we have simply been saturated by the mood of our day to the point where we can't see things as clearly as we should. The feminist movement, therefore, has

contributed very largely to the sense of suspicion with which strong individual leadership is viewed, especially in the home.

Another force which has contributed to the uncertainty and confusion regarding leadership is the psychological articulation of permissiveness towards children. Here I refer to those organizations and individuals who have commended over the past twenty years that the best way to rear children is not to exert strong control over their behavior and punish their misdoings, but rather to provide latitude for their expressive and creative personalities to develop. Here again, if one speaks of strong, effective parental leadership, a cloud of suspicion rises in our society. (Use examples here of parents afraid to discipline their children.)

I don't know as much about the business world as I do about the church, but my guess is that if we took the time here to have you businessmen describe the mood you sense in business and industry, you might be able to find indications of this same atmosphere of suspicion. My guess is that the body life movement in the church has its counterpart in business and industry. That is, I think labor is expecting more and more prerogatives in determining management policy and sharing in management benefits.

We will be returning to some of these issues in the talks that follow, but my point for now is simply to help you see that there is, indeed, an atmosphere inside the church and

outside that makes the whole concept of strong individual leadership, whether spiritual or not, suspect. The results of this atmosphere are a distinctive loss of nerve on the part of many men in their areas of leadership responsibility. They are eager to do what is right and in the prevailing mood are uncertain as to what they should do or be as a person with responsibility. Fathers are confused about how to rear their children and how much control to exert and whether to discipline or not. Husbands are uncertain about whether or not they have any right to exert spiritual leadership in the home, whether this is demeaning to their wives and contrary to scripture. Pastors and elders and deacons in the church are certain that they are to be servants, as Jesus said, and are confused about how servanthood and strong leadership can fit together. In view of this mood of confusion and uncertainty and loss of nerve, I think the first item on our agenda in this discussion of spiritual leadership must be to answer the question

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That is, is it God's will for the world and the church that there be such a thing as strong individual leaders who muster a following? Are parents to be leaders of their children? Are husbands to be leaders in their home? Are elders and deacons to be strong individual spiritual leaders in the church? In general, is God's way of getting things done in the world and achieving his purposes to use strong individual leaders or not?

In order to answer this general question I would like for

us to look at the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to see the way God has worked in the past and how he has instructed us to structure the church and the home.

Old Testament

The first thing that has to be stressed when we look at the Old Testament scriptures regarding spiritual leadership is that God Himself is the great spiritual leader of His people. That is, God knows where He wants people to be; God takes the initiative to use the methods of which He approves; and God relies on His own strength to get people there. The greatest act of leadership that God performed for the people of Israel was in guiding them out of Egypt through the Red Sea, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. It says in Exodus 13:21, "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night." And after they had come through the Red Sea Moses sang a song to the God of their salvation and said in Exodus 15:13, "Thou hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast redeemed, thou hast guided them by thy strength to thy holy abode."

And ever since that great day of deliverance and guidance by the hand of God, Israel has sung in her psalms about the joy of having God as their leader. For example, in the most famous psalm of all, Psalm 23, it says, "He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of

righteousness for his name's sake." Then in the great 139th psalm, which teaches how God is everywhere and cannot be escaped, the psalmist says (v. 9-10), "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me." And when the prophets looked forward to the way God will favor his people in the future they again declare that he will be their leader and their guide. For example, in Isaiah 49:10, the prophet foretells that a day will come when God's people "shall not hunger nor thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall smite them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them." And in Isaiah 58:11 it says, "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things."

And since Israel had seen God lead them in the past and had heard him promise that he would lead them in the future, their prayers were filled with prayers for leadership and guidance in the Lord. For example, Psalm 5:8, "Lead me, O Lord, in thy righteousness because of my enemies; make thy way straight before me." Psalm 25:5, "Lead me in thy truth and teach me, for thou art the God of my salvation; for thee I wait all day long." Psalm 27:11, "Teach me thy way, O Lord; and lead me on a level path because of my enemies." Psalm 31:3, "Yea, thou art my rock and my fortress; for thy name's sake lead me and guide me, take me out of the net which is hidden for me, for thou art my refuge." Psalm 143:10, "Teach me to do thy

will, for thou art my God! Let thy good spirit lead me on a level path!"

One of the implications we can draw from this teaching in the Old Testament that God is the leader of his people and that they must depend on him for guidance like a sheep depends on a shepherd (Psalm 78:52) is that all human beings need a leader. Our knowledge is so limited and our sinful hearts are so prone to go the wrong way, the way of destruction, that we will be utterly lost if God does not undertake to lead us. We are like sheep; God is the shepherd. We are blind; he is the eye doctor and the seeing eye dog (Isaiah 42:16). We are lost; he is the one who finds and leads us to safety and salvation. I have often been asked, "Isn't Christianity just a crutch?" My answer is usually, "Yes, it is a crutch, because all cripples need crutches." Perhaps it would be better to say that Christianity is a seeing eye dog or a white cane. The problem people have with this is that they don't like to admit that they are blind and sick and lost. Before Christianity brings us any good news of salvation, it brings us the bad news that we must humble ourselves and admit our helpless condition apart from our great spiritual leader, God. My suspicion is that much of the rebellion against appropriate human leadership in our society is due to a deep-seated rebellion that people have against any leadership at all, including God's. The fundamental sin of man is the lust for autonomy and self-reliance and power and glory. Therefore, the first and most important lesson

to be learned about spiritual leadership is that God alone intends to be the great spiritual leader over creation and that every human, no matter how much leadership he exercises among men, is like a crippled sheep before God, utterly depending on him for everything. We will see in the long run that this knowledge and this confession is what fits a man to be a leader of men and that leading others with this attitude is the way that God is most greatly glorified.

So now the question rises: If God is the great spiritual leader and aims to be glorified as the leader of all men, is there any place for human leaders over men coming in between the individual and God? The answer of the Old Testament is very clear. It says in Psalm 77:20, "Thou didst lead thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." It's clear from this text that, at least in certain periods in the past, God's way of leading his people was to raise up strong individual leaders to perform the guidance which he desired. Let's take a brief survey of the history of Israel to see illustrations of God's doing this.

You remember how God approached Moses in the wilderness in Exodus, chapter 3, and said to him, "I have come down to deliver my people out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of the land to a good and broad land ... Come, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt." Notice how God says that he himself intends to do the delivering but then he

commissions Moses to go bring the people out. This is typical of the way God will work all through history. He is the ultimate worker in all human leadership. But nevertheless he ordains that there be meek and humble men who rely on him to be his instruments of deliverance in the world. God says to Moses in Exodus 32:34, "But now go, lead the people to the place which I have spoken to you; behold, my angel shall go before you." So again we see that even though God is acting to guide his people by an angel and make their way straight, nevertheless he ordains that there be a man, Moses, to lead the people on earth.

But Moses was not the only leader in Israel at that time. In Exodus chapter 18 it becomes evident to Moses' father-in-law that the work of leading this people and providing decisions for them was far too much work for one man. So he says in verse 17, "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone." So Moses' father-in-law says in verse 21, "Moreover, choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place such men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times; every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they shall decide themselves; so it will be easier for you and they will bear the burden with you." So

we can see from this text that it is not God's will that there be only one star leader among his people but that there be an array of leaders at all different levels from thousands to tens, it says.

At the end of his life just before the people were to pass over the Jordan River into the Promised Land, Moses said, "'Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep which have no shepherd.' And the Lord said to Moses, 'Take Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand upon him; cause him to stand before Eleazar the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight.'" So we can see that when Moses is ready to pass off the scene God makes provision for another leader of the whole people to take his place. The reason that Moses gives is that if there is no one to take his place the people will be like sheep without a shepherd. And remember that this is true even though the godly people in Israel prayed, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

When Joshua had passed off the scene, a period arose in Israel's history called the period of the judges. The whole point of this book seems to be that when there is no godly leader in the community the people do what is right in their own eyes and thus do evil in the sight of the Lord. Again and

again the people fell into sin and cried to the Lord and we read things like this, (3:9) "But when the people of Israel cried to the Lord, the Lord raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who delivered them." So it was a godly leader called a judge, who brought the people back again and again from their sinful ways. This is what Moses had meant when he said that his people would be like a sheep without a shepherd when there is no leader. The main point of the book of Judges is stated twice, once in 17:6 and again in 21:25. In both places it says "in those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."

The Lord eventually brought Israel the righteous king that they so desperately needed. It says in Psalm 78:70,71, "He chose David his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds, and from tending the ewes that had young he brought him to be the shepherd of Jacob his people, of Israel his inheritance." So David became king and shepherd in Israel, a man after God's own heart; and the people prospered. For it says in Proverbs 29:2, "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan." Things always went well for Israel when they had godly leaders, godly kings and governors and teachers. But it was a catastrophe when there were no leaders like this. One of the ways that the prophet Isaiah describes the catastrophe of Israel's fall in 51:18 is: "There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne; there is none to take her by the hand among all the sons she

has brought up." In other words, the mark of a forlorn and sinful people is that there are no leaders among them who can take them by the hand and guide them.

So we can conclude from our brief survey of the Old Testament that, even though God is the great spiritual leader over his people, it was his will in those early centuries of Israel's history to provide godly human leaders among the people. This was not seen as a conflict with his leadership but rather as an instrument and extension of it.

New Testament

We should begin our survey of the New Testament with the same central affirmation that we saw in the Old Testament, namely, that God is the ultimate spiritual leader over the church. This is true of God the Father, God the son Jesus Christ, and God the Spirit. For example, in Matthew 6:13 Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven ... lead us not into temptation." In other words, God the Father is our leader and our great desire is that he lead us in such a way that we will not be tempted and brought to destruction. With regard to the Son, Jesus Christ, Luke 1:79 says that he is coming "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." When Jesus approaches a man that he wants to lead he simply says "Follow me" (Mark 2:14). Or: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Or: "One thing you lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, and follow me." Jesus is pictured

as the great shepherd and it says in John 10:3, "To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." In other words, Jesus is the great spiritual leader of the church. But since Jesus is not here physically today the New Testament teaches that guidance of the Father and Son is exerted through the leadership of the Holy Spirit. It says in John 16:13, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come." And in Romans 8:14 it says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." In Galatians 5:18 it says, "But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law ... if we live by the Spirit let us also walk by the Spirit." So we can see that the New Testament pictures God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as the divine leader of the Christian community.

So the question arises again, just as it did in the Old Testament, what place then does human leadership have within the church, the people of God? The New Testament is keenly aware that if a man who is unfit for the job of leadership undertakes to lead he will bring destruction. Jesus says in Luke 6:39, "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?" In other words, the Lord does not put

a blanket approval on all human leadership. He goes on to say in verse 40, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher." In other words, only those people who are taught and shaped by Jesus Christ into his own image will be fit to undertake leadership in the Christian community.

So, we know what Jesus did. He appointed twelve apostles to be with him (Luke 6:13). In Ephesians 2:20 we read that these twelve apostles are the foundation of the household of God. After Jesus had left the earth in his physical body it was the apostles in Jerusalem who were responsible for the leadership of the community, according to Acts 6:1-6. They were given a unique authority by the Lord to lead his community and build up the faith of the Christian church. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:10, "I write this while I am away from you, in order that when I come I may not have to be severe in the use of the authority which the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down." So it is clear that though the Lord Jesus is the head of the church and the ultimate leader of the body of Christ, nevertheless he appointed and authorized a group of men to be the teachers and leaders in the early church so that his flock would not be like sheep without a shepherd.

But that leaves open the question, which gets very close to home, whether after the apostles are gone there should be strong individual leadership within Christian homes and churches?

The answer emerges from the New Testament as a resounding yes. In Acts 14:23 as the apostles were making their final visits to some of the churches that they had established, it says, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed." In other words, it was the purpose of the apostles to leave behind them individual men who could carry on the leadership after they were gone. One of the foremost needs for such leaders is in the area of teaching. Here we need to clear up a very common misconception. Many people think that since the Holy Spirit is given to all believers, and the Holy Spirit is the great teacher and counselor of the church, therefore we don't need human teachers to help us understand God's will. But this is a false inference. Just as in the Old Testament God aimed to be the leader of his people but nevertheless used human instruments, so in the New Testament God aims to be the teacher of his people (1 Thess. 4:9), but nevertheless uses human instruments to make his revelation understood. Do you remember how the Ethiopian eunuch was converted? He was riding along in his chariot reading the eighth chapter of the prophet Isaiah when the evangelist Philip joined him and asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And Acts 8:31 says "And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'" In other words, the Holy Spirit does not intend to do his enlightening guiding work of teaching apart from, but only through, the instruments of God-sent teachers of the word. If this were

not true, then the teaching of Ephesians 4:11 would seem to be pointless: "And Christ's gifts to the church were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ." In order for the body of Christ to be built up there needs to be not only isolated individuals studying God's word, but also gifted teachers explaining and applying it. These teachers are some of the most significant leaders in the body of Christ. We know that it was the apostles intention for these gifted teachers to be at work in the church as long as the church existed because Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, "And what you have heard from me before many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Notice the four generations of teachers in that verse: Paul, then Timothy, then those he teaches, and those that they in turn teach.

Of course, teaching is not the only function of the spiritual leader. There is a managing, administrative, ruling capacity. For example, it says in 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." And when the qualifications of an overseer, or elder, are described in 1 Timothy 3, it says that "he must manage his own household well, keeping his own children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?" In other words, besides teaching, there is the role of organizing and

managing other people in such a way as to get things done that God wants done.

Another confirmation that God intends for there to be strong individual leaders within Christian communities is that he admonishes the congregations in the New Testament to submit to these leaders. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 Paul says, "We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work." And in Hebrews 13:7 it says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith." And in verse 17 he adds, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls as men who will have to give an account. Let them do this joyfully, and not sadly, for that would be of no advantage to you."

I've stressed leadership within the church because I'm going to save our discussion of leadership within the home for the third talk. Concerning leadership in business and politics, the New Testament does not deal as directly with those. But many of the principles that we will see in our subsequent talks relate fairly clearly to the kind of leadership Christians would want to give in those areas.

Conclusions

1) The great truth that must not be ignored in our discussion of spiritual leadership is that God is the leader of history and of mankind. God knows where he is going and how to get there

and he is working in the ways that he deems appropriate to bring humanity to that place. He has made a way for us to join him in his destiny by sending Jesus Christ into the world to die for our sins so that if we believe on him and walk in his footsteps we have salvation and thus never perish.

2) Nevertheless, even though God is the great and ultimate spiritual leader, this does not rule out his use of human agents in his process of leadership. Rather, the whole scriptural record shows that it is God's will and purpose to ordain strong individual leaders to guide his people, to shepherd his flock and to bring them along the way to where he wants them to be. The Bible is very realistic about the possibilities that human leaders can go wrong (Isaiah 3:12; 9:16; Proverbs 16:29). They are subject to the temptation of pride and presumptuous domination (1 Peter 5:3). They are also subject to the problems of their own weakness and fallibility. Therefore, large questions are remaining for us to think about. For example, why is it that God chooses to use men to accomplish his purposes and how can sinful, fallible men exert leadership without corrupting themselves and other people? In order to answer the first question we will have to look at what God's purpose actually is in the leadership which he performs and which he calls his servants to perform. In order to answer the second question we will have to ask what the biblical disciplines for leaders are.

3) I think it follows from the biblical portrayal of spiritual leadership that it is not wrong to seek to be a spiritual

leader. Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:1, "The saying is sure: if anyone aspires to the office of overseer (bishop), he desires a noble task." Therefore, since God has ordained that there be leaders it appears that the aspiration to become a leader is not an evil aspiration but a good one. It may become evil if it is sought for the wrong motives and by the wrong means. But since leadership is good and God ordains that it be performed by people within his church, therefore we cannot say that it is wrong to aspire to leadership. On the contrary, the contemporary suspicion and unease with leadership is misguided and should be replaced by a biblical affirmation.

STUDY QUESTIONS
For
IS THERE A BIBLICAL MANDATE FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP?

- 1) According to this paper, what is “spiritual leadership?”
- 2) According to this paper, why is there a suspicion of leadership? Do you think this is true?
- 3) How would you explain to someone the Biblical mandate for spiritual leadership?
- 4) Is spiritual leadership optional for you? Explain.
- 5) What will exercising spiritual leadership require of you?