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Spiritual Formation of Christian Leaders

by Lois Semeye

Introduction

Spiritual formation of Christian leaders is paramount. It would be a contradiction for a Christian leader not to grow spiritually and yet lead people. A Christian leader must be a person of God before doing the work of God. However, the demands of leadership often draw leaders away from intimacy with God. A leader encounters many challenges in life, family, ministry or organization that may consume one's time, limiting time with the Lord. In order to avoid falling, the leader must purposefully and continuously seek intimacy with God, and consequently become an effective spiritual leader.

It is amazing how Christian leaders are in great demand. People look for meaning in life and they expect Christian leaders to have the answers. This translates into time and fatigue for the leaders. Yet these leaders must also take time for themselves. Leaders are surrounded by crowds and the crowds look to their leaders for direction, making it difficult to be alone. Leaders must learn how to get away from the crowds. However, leaders, perhaps due to ego, like to act as a superman and address all the issues brought to them. Consequently, they work many hours, justifying this as working for the Lord and yet losing intimacy with the Lord. Such leaders are in danger of falling into sin, thus becoming an ineffective Christian leader. In order to avoid this, a Christian leader must intentionally practice spiritual disciplines.

In this paper I will attempt to analyze what causes leaders to fall and suggest appropriate and relevant spiritual disciplines that help them to avoid becoming unspiritual. My list of causes will not be comprehensive but are chosen according to the spiritual disciplines discussed.

Christian leaders tend to undergo a process. They often start by learning the culture of the organization with great humility. In the second stage, they serve and even lead others spiritually. In the third stage, as the leaders settle in their positions, they begin to distance themselves from their followers. This is a dangerous sign that indicates growing pride. As a result, their fellowship with other believers is reduced. They become isolated, which leads them towards destruction as accountability diminishes. The demands on them increase and more and more they focus on 'working for the Lord', forgetting that being is more important than the unending activities of ministry.

The spiritual disciplines can help a leader stay on course. Spiritual disciplines are not a cure for spiritual apathy but can be a reality check. They help us connect with God if done rightly. Even Paul felt the need to be in right relationship with God and man. "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man" (Acts 24:16). Practicing spiritual disciplines helps

us obey the scriptures. Matthew 6:33 states, "But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well." One commentary on this verse states, "Jesus disciples are assured that all the necessary things will be given them by their heavenly Father".¹ When leaders put God first, their leadership shapes up according to God's ways.

Definitions

By definition, spiritual formation is the transformation process that occurs as one grows closer to the Lord and becomes and acts like Jesus. This is the shaping and nurturing of the Christian's inner being after the pattern of Jesus Christ. The indwelling Holy Spirit convicts and reshapes the believer's life. Spiritual formation is not by human works but is accomplished by God's grace. Our spiritual formation is not simply for our life but is also for others. Hence, a Christian leader should cultivate the virtue of living for others. Mulholland stated that spiritual formation is "a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others".²

A Christian leader then leads others for their sake. This process of becoming like Christ is enhanced when we practice the spiritual disciplines. In the practice of spiritual disciplines we simply "apply the acts of will at our disposal in such a way that the proper course of action, which cannot always be realized by direct and untrained effort, will nevertheless be carried out when needed".³ It is a means of grace. Jesus practiced many of the disciplines when he was here on earth.

It is appropriate to define a Christian leader, but this is not an easy task as there are many definitions. Stuebing states that the Christian leader should be noted for a godly character that includes:

Personal character (self-controlled, disciplined, temperate sensible)

Relationship with others, especially one's opponents (peaceable, gentle, considerate)

Reputation with others, especially unbelievers (blameless, having integrity, above reproach, respectable).⁴

The leadership gives an organization its vision and mission and its ability to translate that vision into reality. For a Christian leader there are two realms to consider and integrate. These are *the spiritual realm* that is developed through increasing intimacy with God, and *the physical realm* that is sharpened by training in leadership skills and principles. The Christian leader must balance these two realms as emphasizing the physical above the

¹ Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Abridged Edition: New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 35.

² M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 12.

³ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 151-2.

⁴ Richard W. Stuebing, *Training for Godliness in African Theological Education*, (Ndola, Zambia: ACTEA, 1995), 19.

spiritual leads to disaster. Chuck Miller states, “The effectiveness of our leadership hinges on the degree to which we are abiding in Christ”.⁵

The Importance of the Spiritual Disciplines

It is of great importance that Christian leaders practice these spiritual disciplines because leaders are not exempt from spiritual attack. Indeed they are in even greater danger as they are tampering with the devil’s kingdom when they lead people into righteousness. The weapons to fight these battles are not weapons of the world. “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3-4).

Christian leaders may experience warfare in numerous areas of their lives. These include immoral sexual behaviour where the temptation is great and yet it comes subtly and erodes the conscience. Another area might be bondage and oppression. This can be in the form of sexual perversion, violent temper, lying, alcoholism, hatred and the like. Christian leaders can be driven by pride as they see the number of followers they have at their command or even what they have accomplished. They may pursue power and prestige and thus shift the focus from God to themselves. This danger is expressed in 1Timothy 4:1, “The spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons”.

At the height of his career, the leader may ignore fellowship with others if he forgets that our Maker is a relational God who created us for fellowship. As the work of the ministry increases, it may also take precedence over the needs of his family, which results in conflicts and tensions at home. When the family does not relate well, the work also suffers and the leader may become more inhumane. The Christian leader becomes irritable and consequently his colleagues do not relate well with him. Productivity deteriorates, resulting in more tension. On top of that, many Christian organizations have limited financial resources so that when financial challenges increase, this results in more tension. The leader tries so hard to increase the cash flow, but if this leads to questionable Christian behavior, these attempts complicate the issue.

A leader’s enthusiasm and energy may lead him to close his mind to reason and also lead to a dogmatic pursuance of righteousness in certain areas of life while ignoring others. Christians thrive when growth is balanced in all areas of life. A Christian leader has no option but to take seriously the spiritual disciplines that define leadership. This training for godliness will lead to spiritual growth and a closer walk with God. However, no one can earn closeness to God. It is imperative that Christian leaders are committed to

⁵ Chuck Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders: Integrating Spirituality and Leadership Development*, (Camarillo, CA: Xulonpress, 2007), 82.

God's way. Otherwise there are too many problems on the way that can divert the Christian leader's mission and vision. "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). We can take "hearers" to include "followers". This command teaches that leaders must be on constant guard against falling into a sin that can easily destroy their ministry. They must adhere to the true faith and be consistently maturing. "Christian spiritual formation aims at mature harmony with Christ."⁶ Hence each leader should regard spiritual formation as a key area of his life.

The Disciplines Necessary for the Maturing Christian Leader

The spiritual disciplines discussed below are not a complete list, but if done well they will enhance a leader's intimacy with God. Miller stated, "Godly leadership is an extension of the leader's relationship with God".⁷ Adeyemo says, "They will be known for their character competence, courage, commitment and compassion".⁸ Christian leaders must strive for these character traits through the Biblical spiritual disciplines. However, Foster warns that, "The spiritual disciplines are an inward and spiritual reality and the inner attitude of the heart is more crucial than the mechanics for coming into the reality of the spiritual life".⁹ Foster lists 12 disciplines: meditation, prayer, fasting, studying (the inward disciplines); simplicity, solitude, submission, service (the outward disciplines), confession, worship, guidance and celebration (the corporate disciplines),¹⁰ though this discussion will focus on Meditation, Confession, Rest, Prayer and Fasting, Solitude, Self-Examination.

The Discipline of Meditation

Christian leaders are busy people, and meditation may seem like wasting precious time. Foster stated, "In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry, and crowds".¹¹ A Christian leader is always with people or doing things. One needs to take time for meditation otherwise other things will clog up one's time. The Bible states that meditation is important for one's success in life, "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Joshua 1:8). Every leader likes to be successful. The dosage necessary for success is given in this verse. Leaders need to meditate on the Word on a daily basis despite the great demands that work, people and even family lay on the leader.

⁶ Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press,) 2008, 270.

⁷ Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 64.

⁸ Tokunboh Adeyemo, "Leadership" in *Africa Bible Commentary*, (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 546.

⁹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1998), 16.

¹⁰ See the table of contents in his *Celebration of Discipline*.

¹¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 33.

There are several examples of meditation in the Bible including: Isaac, who “went out to the field one evening to meditate...” (Gen. 24:63), and Psalm 1:2 which says of the blessed person, “his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night”. Leaders need to be blessed people and so must take time to meditate on the word. The psalmist chose to meditate - “May the arrogant be put to shame for wronging me without cause; but I will meditate on your precepts” (Ps 119:78). Meditation on the Word should help leaders forego retaliation against those who wrong them. Such things are bound to happen and the leader’s response is critical.

Meditation is a way of life. It helps us become organized, more focused in life. In meditation, we gaze on and long for Christ. In the presence of God, we are changed. This happens as we personalize the Bible’s message and consequently, our spiritual life thrives. Christian leaders become effective because they have learnt to wait on the Lord and do what He wants them to do. The Bible records a disastrous an example of leaders/prophets who prophesied without first listening to God. Jeremiah 23:21-22, “I did not send these prophets, yet they have run with their message; I did not speak to them, yet they have prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people and would have turned them from their evil ways and from their evil deeds.” The Lord stands against Christian leaders who “do their own thing” instead of listening to God.

The Discipline of Confession

Confession is a discipline as we can choose to confess or not. For Foster, confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us. Without the cross the discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and subjective change in us.... means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.¹²

This discipline builds fellowship and results in effective teams. Christian leaders thrive where the followers are a team. But, due to the arrogance of Christian leaders, this discipline is not exercised as often as it should be. Proverb 28:13 reads, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” What Christian leader does not want more mercy?

Many Christian organizations suffer for lack of practicing this discipline. James 5:16 urges us - “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.” Christian leaders should create an atmosphere where the followers and the leaders are able to freely confess sins wisely and are not victimized. By confessing sins, the burdens and obstructions of life are lifted and this results in restored fellowship. Confessing can be a means of healing

¹² Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 198.

and transforming the inner spirit. Psalm 66:18 reads, "If I had cherished sins in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." Christian leaders who want God to hear them need to create that confessional atmosphere in the organization.

The Christian leaders should realize that all Christians are vulnerable to sin as 1John 1:8-9 notes - "If we claim to have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." But Christian leaders must be wise in sharing their sins. Genuine confession includes acknowledgment of sin, sorrow for committing sin and the intention to avoid committing the same sin. Christian leaders need to be honest and transparent in dealing with this discipline, and they must practice it wisely.

The Discipline of Rest

Contemporary life challenges this idea of rest. Many people seldom recognize it nor practice it. As mentioned before, leaders are in great demand and many feel they cannot afford to rest. But rest is paramount for Christian leaders. When fatigued, leaders are likely to make wrong decisions or to postpone decisions and that may result in disaster. Lack of rest often creates an angry person. A rest-deprived person becomes edgy and unpleasant to be around. Christian leaders sin if they continue to plan and do many things to beat deadlines, but forget that God is in control. "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while then vanishes" (James 4:13-14).

Emmert stated that, "It is difficult, and ironic, to imagine rest as the most transformative element in the Christian life. For evangelicals ... transformation and sanctification are closely linked to activity".¹³ Christian leaders are surrounded with issues they feel they must deal with so rest is rare. Yet Genesis 2:2-3 states, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." Should not a Christian leader learn from God's rest? Why did the God of the universe decide to rest? There must be something more we need to explore about rest.

We tend to love activity more than rest. Activities may not be wrong in themselves, but we must know why the Sabbath was given. Ex. 31:12-17 says Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy. Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who

¹³ Kevin Emmert, "Resting in the Work of God: The Forgotten Spiritual Discipline," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 56, Issue 3, March 2012, 37.

desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death. The Israelites are to observe the Sabbath, celebrating it for the generations to come as a lasting covenant. It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he abstained from work and rested.’ ”

In this passage God commands us to keep the Sabbath. Emmert writes, “this passage says that the Sabbath is an ‘above all’ command. It is as if God said, ‘This is the most important one!’ ”.¹⁴ The point is clear - rest was and is an important thing to God. God did not hesitate to give rest. “The Lord replied, ‘My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’ ” (Ex. 33:14). Emmert’s comment on these verses:

This “above all” command encourages us to trust God in a way that no other activity can. So much more could be accomplished by adding another day of labor, but the Sabbath requires us to trust that God will provide for all our needs and that he will continue to manage the world without our help. The Sabbath is a practical reminder that we are completely dependent on God.¹⁵

It is God who sanctifies and rest is closely connected to sanctification. Emmert adds that in, “both sanctification and justification, Christians are declared righteous and are continually being made righteous solely by the free grace of God. Though we are called to be active, the ‘activity’ seems mostly to mean the call to rest, to trust, to freely receive sanctification from God”. Every Christian leader must practice this discipline of rest. This will help us realize the need to depend on God for our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.¹⁶

The Discipline of Prayer

This discipline is among the ones that every Christian leader practices. Prayer brings human beings into the deepest and highest work of the human spirit. Prayer is both speaking and listening to God. For Foster, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives. The closer we come to the heartbeat of God the more we see our need and the more we desire to be conformed to Christ.”¹⁷

A Christian leader cannot do without prayer and expect spiritual formation! Martin Luther is widely quoted as saying, “I have so much business I cannot get on without spending three hours daily in prayer.” Christian leaders

¹⁴ Emmert, “Resting in the Work of God”, 37, from the ESV. NIV says, “you must”.

¹⁵ Emmert, “Resting in the Work of God, 37.

¹⁶ Emmert, “Resting in the Work of God, 37.

¹⁷ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 57.

can learn from Luther. Although surrounded by demands, appointments, meetings, visitations, presenting, writing, addressing people etc., a Christian leader must take time for prayer.

Mark 1:35 tells us that Jesus went to a solitary place early in the morning to pray. If the Son of God thought it important to commune with God how much more should we seek such times! The apostles gave themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). David woke up early to seek the face of the Lord (Ps. 63:1). The more we pray the more we think about praying as we see the Lord answering our prayers. Consequently, God's response to our prayers creates confidence and spills over into other areas of our lives.

Prayer can also be accompanied by fasting. God expects us to fast but did not give a command. For example He said, "When you fast..." in Matthew 6:16. This indicates that God expects us to fast. Fasting is a private matter, but can be corporate. Christian leaders need to discern when to fast as an individual and when to organize a corporate fast. Christian leaders should prepare their followers appropriately to fast but not by cohesion. Foster stated, "The group fast can be a wonderful thing provided there is a prepared people who are of one mind in these matters". However, fasting should not be a way of manipulating God to act. Fasting should be centered on God and not on its benefits. In other words, fasting should focus on spiritual purposes. "Fasting can bring breakthroughs in the spiritual realm that could never be had in any other way".¹⁸ Fasting is a spiritual discipline that has been ordained by the Creator for believers' good. Hence we can conclude that fasting is good for Christian leaders and can be a means of grace for their Christian formation.

The Discipline of Solitude

Leaders are often isolated and can experience loneliness. However, a Christian leader can cultivate an inner solitude and silence that sets one free from loneliness. For Foster, "Inward solitude will have outward manifestations. There will be a freedom to be alone, not in order to be away from people but in order to hear the divine Whisper better. Jesus lived in inward 'heart solitude'. He also frequently experienced outward solitude".¹⁹ Christian leaders can borrow a leaf from Jesus: "Jesus went out to a mountain to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles" (Lk 6:12-13). This and other examples of Jesus going to solitary places indicates the importance of solitude. Christian leaders should practice this discipline as they make crucial decisions in their ministries.

When the Christian leaders practice solitude, they can begin to see themselves clearly, and become true to themselves. When this happens spiritual growth can result. It is also a fact that God longs for us to be alone

¹⁸ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 77 and 87.

¹⁹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 138 and 143.

with him. In the process of being alone, one can distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of the world. This is because there is silence and we can focus clearly as there is no competition from social contacts. When the leader learns to be silent in solitude is then he can “speak the word that is needed when it is needed”.²⁰

The Discipline of Self-examination

This discipline of self-examination is what Barton calls *examen*. It is a discipline that every Christian leader needs to practice periodically. This discipline helps us examine daily, weekly or monthly events and how God was involved. The examen involves, “taking a few moments ... to go back over the events of the day/week and ask God to show us evidence of his presence (examen of consciousness) and ourselves in the light of his presence (examen of conscience)”.²¹ The Christian leader who is bombarded with all sorts of challenges, successes, joys and sorrows reviews how God was present in different responses and actions that were taken. This self-examination leads us to celebrate success, repent of sin, and become aware of what to avoid in the future. Besides, one would purposefully realize the difference that the presence of God makes. Miller articulates the self-examination question as, “What is happening on daily and continuing basis between the Father and me... the Son and me... and the Holy Spirit and me?”²²

Burton stated that the process of examen encourages us to draw close to the Lord. This discipline helps us cry to the Lord, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23-24). This discipline does not necessarily take much time and is easy to do and yet it can yield tremendous spiritual growth.

Conclusion

Spiritual formation of a Christian Leader cannot be overemphasized. The Bible is clear that anyone who wants to be successful must have an intimate relationship with God. “I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). This calls for authentic relationship with God, a relationship that must be firmly guarded. God’s grace accomplishes this. “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). It is the Christian leaders’ responsibility to ‘come’ to Christ and it is His responsibility to make them effective leaders. The assumption is that leaders must follow Jesus to succeed. They must follow and abide in Jesus and they will bear much fruit. For Christian leaders the problem arises when we fail to abide in Him and fail

²⁰ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 143.

²¹ R. Ruth Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Spiritual Practices that Nourish Your Soul and Transform Your Life*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2011, 59.

²² Miller, *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, 59.

to follow Jesus and thus forfeit true success. When leaders 'abide' and 'follow' they become Christ-like in character and personality. The challenge is 'being in Christ' first, then the 'doing' comes second.

To achieve 'being' in Christ, Christian leaders need to cultivate a close walk with the Lord. Practicing the spiritual disciplines will help them focus on their spiritual formation. This paper discussed a few of the disciplines that the writer thought were some of the most crucial ones but this does not exclude other disciplines. Christian leaders will have to discover which of the other ones are aligned to their personality and season of life.

May God give Christian leaders the grace to be leaders after God's own heart and who therefore serve His people. Christian leaders can do all things through Christ who gives them strength.

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