

AUTHENTIC SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

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The church needs to purge strong, natural leadership (SNL) from her ranks and pursue strong, spiritual leadership (SSL). Exodus 18:21, Acts 6:3, and 1 Tim 3:1–7, 10 each teach the same four core qualities of leadership that are empowered by God's Spirit, not man's flesh. These four include sufficiency, submissiveness, spirituality, and steadfastness. The greatest leader ever to lead in human history, the Lord Jesus Christ, perfectly exemplified all four. In spite of their ancient origin, these four basic leadership traits have not changed since the OT days of Israel and NT beginnings of the church because God's character has not changed and the nature of spiritual leadership remains the same.

This apocryphal letter highlights the challenging task of recognizing genuine leadership:

Thank you for sending the resumes of the twelve men you picked for managerial positions in your new organization. All of them have now taken a battery of tests. We have not only run the results through our computer but have also arranged personal interviews for each one of them with our psychologist and vocational aptitude consultant. It is the staff's opinion that most of your nominees are lacking in background, education, and vocational aptitude for the type of enterprise you're undertaking. They do not have the team concept. Simon Peter is emotionally unstable and given to fits of temper. Andrew has absolutely no qualities of leadership. The two brothers, James and John, place personal interest above company loyalty. Thomas demonstrates a skeptical attitude that would tend to undermine morale. Matthew has been blacklisted by the Jerusalem Better Business Bureau. James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus definitely have radical leanings, and they both registered a high score on the manic-depressive scale. One of the candidates, however, shows great potential. He's a man of ability and resourcefulness. He meets people well and has a keen business mind and contacts in high places. He is highly

motivated, ambitious, and responsible. We recommend Judas Iscariot as your controller and right-hand man.

Sincerely,
Jordan Management Consultants

While fictitious, but humorous, this obviously contrived letter brilliantly illustrates the challenge facing all church ministries—How does one recognize true spiritual leaders and distinguish them from non-spiritual leaders? The Jordan Management Consultants employed human reason at the expense of divine revelation in developing their criteria to do so. As a result, they spotted the strong, natural leader (SNL) and rejected what turned out to eventually be the group of strong, spiritual leaders (SSL).

Os Guinness captures this tragic pattern displayed in the church over the past three centuries. What marked the 19th and 20th century churches also defines the 21st.

Needless to say, distortions of the ministry are not new. In 1886, *Nation* magazine reported “Indeed, so far has the church caught the spirit of the age, so far has it become a business enterprise, that the chief test of ministerial success is now the ability to ‘build up’ a church. Executive, managerial abilities are now more in demand than those which used to be considered the highest in a clergyman.”

Yet another study in 1986 showed that the differences in expectations between liberals and evangelicals had almost disappeared, that secular expectations grew while the spiritual shrunk, and that the profile was largely dominated by two sets of considerations – those therapeutic and managerial.

(Concerning) a well-known Christian magazine that is designed for pastors and deals with the problems of leadership in the churches, a survey of the magazine showed that over the course of time, the magazine had examined almost every conceivable church problem in its pages. Yet, believe it or not, less than one percent of the articles had any reference to Scripture at all, or any serious theological component. In the form of the imperialistic genius of managerial and therapeutic insights, galloping secularization left theology in the dust.¹

These recent statistics regarding pastoral leadership confirm the reality that there are many bogus, counterfeit leaders filling spiritual leadership roles,

¹ Os Guinness, “Church Growth—Success at What Price?” *Coram Deo*, 16, no. 4 (April 1992): 51.

and they are bound to ultimately fail and severely damage Christ's church in the process.

- 23 percent of all current pastors in the United States have been fired or forced to resign in the past.
- 45 percent of the pastors who were fired in one denomination left the ministry altogether.
- 34 percent of all pastors presently serve congregations that forced their previous pastor to resign.
- The average pastoral career lasts only fourteen years—less than half of what it was not long ago.
- 25 percent of the churches in one survey reported conflict in the previous five years that was serious enough to have a lasting impact on congregational life.
- 1,500 pastors leave their assignments every month in the United States because of conflict, burnout, or moral failure.²

I once asked a group of pastors to define “spiritual leadership.” One man quickly responded with, “Knowing where you are going and getting people to follow.” He seemed a little irritated when I continued to probe for a better answer. His response focused exclusively on “leadership” and ignored the “spiritual” aspect. That is a common mistake when seeking leadership in the church. A better definition would be, “*Knowing God's will, walking in it, and effectively soliciting others to follow*” (2 Tim 2:2).

In the business world, SNL normally means success. However, a strong, natural leader in the church would be a disaster if he is not controlled by God's Spirit. This article points to the distinguishing features that contrast leadership in general with “spiritual leadership” as biblically outlined.

Just as there are a few primary colors; the Bible speaks of four primary leadership qualities. These are the RED'S, BLUE'S and YELLOW'S of spiritual leadership. Every man being considered for a leadership role in the church should be evaluated on the basis of these four spiritual qualities, *not* on his success in the marketplace alone.

The church desperately needs strong, spiritual leaders or SSL's which could also stand for strong, supernatural leaders or strong, servant leaders. God has given the church several significant passages in both the Old and New Testaments which all agree on these four fundamental qualities that identify true spiritual leadership and expose as counterfeit any other kind of leadership.

² John H. Redman, “The Statistics Are Shocking!” *Ministry Matters* (September 2003): 1.

Strong Natural Leadership (SNL)

Most churches and Christian ministries take the mistaken approach of looking at four attractive but insufficient outward qualities to identify spiritual leadership. No wonder the experience proves counterproductive, the statistics so alarming, and the anecdotes so frightening. We need to examine men as God does—with primary regard to their internal qualities, not the external. When selecting a king for Israel, God so instructed Samuel (1 Sam 16:7):

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

Highly Motivated

No one of the disciples reached the level of Peter who proclaimed his willingness to go both to prison and to death for Christ's sake (Luke 22:33). Yet, hours later he denied Christ three times (Luke 22:54–62). Temporary motivation alone will fail in the end.

Externally Pleasing

Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin and the son of Kish, who was a mighty man of valor, proved to be more handsome and taller than any of the people of Israel (1 Sam 9:2). Yet, God finally rejected Saul from being king over (1 Sam 15:26) Israel because he failed to obey God's orders (1 Sam 15:11). Outward appearance alone did not win the day.

Knowledgeable

Balaam, God's prophet, possessed direct revelation from the Lord that Israel was to be blessed, not cursed as they journeyed through Moab enroute to the Promise Land (Num 22–24). Yet Balaam taught Balak, King of Moab, how to bring God's curse on the Israelites (Rev 2:14). It is not what one knows alone that attracts God's favor.

Available

John Mark, son of Mary in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12), had been selected to accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:5). Being available, he went. But he did not remain very long, having abandoned them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). Thus, John Mark

being available but not steadfast on the first journey did not qualify for the second one with Paul (Acts 15:36–38).

In the larger scheme of things, Peter and John Mark later succeeded in spiritual leadership. Neither Balaam nor Saul ever did. So, failure need not be fatal in leadership, but may if other dimensions emerge. If then being (1) highly motivated, (2) externally pleasing, (3) knowledgeable, and/or (4) available alone will not qualify a person for true spiritual leadership, what will?

Strong Spiritual Leadership (SSL)

God has designed a far superior plan for fruitful spiritual leadership. The Divine blueprint involves (1) inward qualities, not just external features, (2) a regular pattern of life, not inconsistent behavior, (3) righteous motives and action, not inappropriate motivations and activities, and (4) fruitful outcomes, not empty efforts.

Not surprisingly, these core attributes can be found in both the Old Testament and the New. This study will examine Exod 18:21, Acts 6:3, and 1 Tim 3:1–7, 10, where each text extols the same basic properties.

Exodus 18:21

The context that surrounds this key verse focuses on Moses' struggle to lead the Jews beyond Egypt to the Promised Land. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, observed that Israel's leader was on the road to failure with his do-it-all style of leading (18:17–18).

So he proposes a threefold solution. First, intercede with prayer on behalf of the people (18:19). Second, teach the people God's statutes regarding their walk and work (18:19–20). Third, choose qualified leaders with whom to share the work load (18:21). Four basic qualities are outlined in v. 21. Should Moses embrace these instructions, implement this plan, and delegate these tasks (18:22), then fruitfulness would follow (18:23).

Sufficient

These men must first be "able," i.e. gifted and capable. This same Hebrew word is used of Ruth by Boaz in characterizing her as "a woman of excellence" (Ruth 3:10). The Proverbs 31 wife earned the reputation of being an "excellent wife" (Prov 31:10).

Paul's final letter to Timothy strikes the same chord (2 Tim 2:2):

The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

Sufficiency goes beyond mere motivation and adds to ability/skill with excellence. The point is this—not one without the other, but together they accomplish God's mission through men in extraordinary ways. Take Peter for example. When he was motivated (Luke 22:33), but without sufficient giftedness, he failed (Luke 22:54–62). But after God enabled him at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11), Peter served God's purposes with notable results (Acts 2:14–42).

Submitted

These leaders also needed to “fear God.” How is this quality deserved? By observing how they relate to God's Word. The Pharisees and scribes received a scathing rebuke from Christ (Mark 7:1–23) because they (1) neglected the commandment of God (7:8), (2) set aside the commandment of God in favor of their own tradition (7:9), and (3) invalidated the Word of God with their tradition. They feared neither God nor man and, as such, were not submitted to the authority and will of God (Luke 18:2, 4).

In this case, the internal quality is authenticated or invalidated by outward behavior. The internal quality of fearing God must be teamed with an outward submission. Saul had the externals (1 Sam 9:2), but not the internal. By comparison, David is described by God as, “A man after My heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22).

Spiritual

Able and fearing God heads the list of four. Next comes “men of truth.” They will be trustworthy if they are committed to God's truth (Prov 3:3–4).

Do not let kindness and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and man.

Here, knowledge of God's truth combines with character that lives out God's truth resulting in extraordinary results. Balaam had knowledge (Num 22–24), but no committed character to obey it (Rev 2:14). Thus, he failed. On the other hand, when Zaccheus gained sacred knowledge (Luke 19:1–6, 9–10) by salvation, he immediately responded beyond what God asked (Luke 19:8).

Steadfast

Jethro described the fourth and final quality as “those who hate dishonest gain.” This might be the only quality that is not immediately obvious. It seems to go beyond “honest” to include the time of testing to ensure the “hate of dishonest gain” Which assures of a steadfast, habitual quality.

Paul speaks about “faithful” men in 2 Tim 2:2. Elsewhere he refers to men who must *first* be “tested” (1 Tim 3:10). Strong, spiritual leadership needs to be time-tested in order to validate its availability.

John Mark had been available (early-to-mid AD 40s) but not tested when he failed (late AD 40s) in Acts 13:13 and 15:38 early in Paul’s first missionary journey. But this was not a final failure for John Mark. Although we do not know the details, over the next 10–15 years, John Mark overcame his less-than-acceptable behavior in Acts 13.

He was discipled by Barnabas (Acts 15:37, 39) and Peter (1 Pet 5:13) in the late 40s and early 50s. By the mid-to-late 50s, Mark wrote his gospel (with Peter’s input). In the early 60s, Paul commended him (Col 4:10; Phlm 24) and in the mid-to-late 60s, both Paul (2 Tim 4:11) and Peter (1 Pet 5:13) spoke of him in glowing terms. When John Mark was both time-tested and available for service, he then proved useful for Christ’s sake.

So, a strong spiritual leader must be sufficient, submitted, spiritual, and steadfast. Note that he must be all four at one time. Anything less meant he was not yet qualified.

Did Moses heed Jethro’s counsel? According to Exod 18:24–27 he did. Decades later (the 40th year) Moses recalls that he did (Deut 1:9–18). Interestingly, if we follow the historical narrative, Moses chose able men (Exod 18:25, sufficient), discerning men (Deut 1:13, submitted), wise men (Deut 1:13, spiritual), and experienced men (Deut 1:13, steadfast).

Acts 6:3

Fast forward fifteen centuries and God’s main focus has transitioned from Israel to the church. In her infancy, the church (especially the apostles) faced similar leadership challenges as had Moses. Interestingly, the apostles took an almost identical approach, almost as if they were consulting Jethro’s ancient words of wisdom. They needed to delegate responsibility to additional men who possessed the identical core qualities that distinguished Moses’ handpicked, expanded leadership group.

Sufficient

These new leaders were those whom the apostles could “put in charge of this task.” In other words, they were to be able and equipped to handle the opportunity.

Submitted

They were to be “full of the Spirit.” In other words they were to be submitted as God-fearing believers.

Spiritual

They were to be “full of wisdom.” In other words they were to be spiritual men, men of truth and therefore trustworthy to carry out their assigned responsibilities.

Steadfast

They were to be “of good reputation.” In other words, they were to be time-tested.

Someone might wonder why, after 1,500 years, these qualifying traits had not changed or been upgraded. The answer is that they did not need to be changed because the character of God had not changed and the nature of spiritual leadership remained the same.

1 Timothy 3:1–7, 10³

Did these initial qualities at the church’s beginning continue as she matured? As expected, three decades later they had not changed in their core qualities, although Paul had added more explicit detail to their basic descriptions.

Sufficient

Elders were to be spiritually able (1 Tim 3:4–5):

He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?).

Submitted

Elders were to be submitted, i.e., willing to do God’s will (1 Tim 3:1):

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.

³ For additional details consult Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1958), 121–36; George W. Knight, III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 331–47; John MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 91–121.

Spiritual

Elders were to be spiritual as exemplified by godly character (1 Tim 3:2–3):

An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.

Steadfast

Elders were to be time-tested, proven habitual in carrying out their leadership tasks (1 Tim 3:6–7, 10).

Superlative Leadership

Without question and without peer, the Lord Jesus Christ proved to be the superlative, only perfect leader in all of human history. If the consistency of core spiritual leadership qualities in the OT and NT are as unchangeable as they seem to be, then it would be expected that Christ exemplified all four.

Sufficient

Christ was gifted and able to carry out the Messianic ministry (Matt 9:28–30):

When He entered the house, the blind men came up to Him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.” Then He touched their eyes, saying, “It shall be done to you according to your faith.” And their eyes were opened. And Jesus sternly warned them: “See that no one knows about this!”

Submitted

Christ was willing to do all of God’s will (Matt 26:39):

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.”

Spiritual

Christ was spiritual in that He was grounded in the truth and wisdom of Scripture (Luke 2:52):

And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Steadfast

Christ was the authentic, time-tested Savior (Matt 4:1–11):

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning you’; and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; and he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.’” Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.

Summary⁴

| Primary Qualities | Exod 18:21 | Acts 6:3 | 1 Tim 3:1-7, 10 | Christ | Secondary Qualities |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|--------------|---------------------|
| SUFFICIENT “Gifted” | able men | whom we may put in charge | 3:4-5, 7 | Matt 9:28-30 | MOTIVATED |
| SUBMITTED “Godly” | who fear God | full of the Spirit | 3:1 | Matt 26:39 | EXTERNALLY PLEASING |
| SPIRITUAL “Grounded in Scripture” | men of truth | full of wisdom | 3:2-3 | Luke 2:52 | KNOWLEDGEABLE |
| STEADFAST “Genuine” | who hate dishonest gain | good reputation | 3:6–7, 10 | Matt 4:1-11 | AVAILABLE |

So What?

Since the four core qualities of strong, spiritual leadership proved to be identical for Israel, the early church, the later church, and Christ, what does that mean for the twenty-first century church and her leaders? It means that:

1. SSL qualities still have not changed.
2. God still expects SSL qualities to be the standard.
3. SNL qualities are not to be substituted for strong spiritual leadership traits.
4. SSL qualities are to test you as an individual leader.
5. SSL qualities are to test current leaders.
6. SSL qualities are to test potential future leaders.
7. SSL qualities raise significant questions such as:
 - a. Who and/or what makes the primary difference between an SNL and SSL?
 - b. What is your definition of “spiritual leadership”?
 - c. What will be the ultimate result with a group of SSL’s leading?
 - d. How would you evaluate yourself in regard to the four primary qualities of strong spiritual leadership?

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in EBC, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:414 alludes to the OT and NT parallels.

Starting Point

This was Dr. A.W. Tozer's conviction about proper motivation towards spiritual leadership.

A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead, but is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the press of the external situation. Such were Moses and David and the Old Testament prophets. I think there was hardly a great leader from Paul to the present day, but was drafted by the Holy Spirit for the task, and commissioned by the Lord of the Church to fill a position he had little heart for. I believe it might be accepted as a fairly reliable rule of thumb that the man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader. The true leader will have no desire to lord it over God's heritage, but will be humble, gentle, self-sacrificing and altogether as ready to follow as to lead, when the Spirit makes it clear that a wiser and more gifted man than himself has appeared.⁵

Now, if someone were to ask you to define "spiritual leadership," how would you answer?

⁵ Quoted by J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, rev.ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 39.