

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP: THE EARLY CHURCH OF ACT AS A CASE STUDY

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1. Introduction

LEADERSHIP is a very important and needed topic for today. It is one of the most discussed and explained subject in the modern world since it is part of every successful venture.

Though there are a variety of books and resources in the world on the subject, the Bible remains one of the best sources on good effective leadership. Great world leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. among others have all drawn from the Bible for successful leadership. The Bible indeed contains a great many examples of good leadership. However the Bible presents a paradigm of leadership, which differs from those of the popular theories on the subject. Through its stories, The Bible teaches and models the “what” and the “how” of “spiritual leadership”. This model of leadership is a very much needed subject today especially for the leadership of the SDA Church.

Since the Bible contains a great number of principles of spiritual leadership, this presentation aims to present just a few key ones. Therefore the article is not an exhaustive list of principles of spiritual leadership. It focuses on the definition of spiritual leadership by describing the “what” and the “how” of it through the model of the leadership of the early church in the book of Acts.

This article presents 3 Biblical principles of spiritual leadership from the book of Acts, each with Biblical texts and its application to the present day SDA church leadership, especially in Africa. However these principles and their applications are not limited to the SDA

Church leadership in Africa alone but to every SDA church leadership in other continents where the principles are relevant and applicable.

2. Principle #1: The Discipline of Corporate Guidance

Spiritual leadership is evidenced in the discipline of guidance. Guidance is a spiritual discipline that involves seeking God's will, either personally or communally. This principle of spiritual leadership is seen in the actions of the early church. In their selection of church leaders (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23) and in their planning for evangelism and mission (Acts 11:27-30; 16:6-10), they sought the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit through worship, prayer and fasting and the prophetic gift of Agabus. After seeking the Holy Spirit's leading, they could say of their decisions, 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28).

In contemporary church leadership, decision making and planning is run and done by human agenda, opinions, and machinery. This is corroborated by Dr Carl Bates' statement:

If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of our midst today, about 95 percent of what we are doing in our churches would go on, and we would not know the difference. Yet if God had taken the Holy Spirit out of the midst of the first Christian community, about 95 percent of what they were doing would have ceased immediately."¹ Indeed, unlike the leadership of the early church led by the Holy Spirit, present day church leaders run the church.

The leadership of the church today needs to follow the example of spiritual leadership provided by the early church leaders. Richard Foster affirms this point:

With all our modern methods of missionary recruitment we would profit by giving serious attention to this example of corporate guidance. We would be well advised to encourage groups of people to fast, pray and worship together until they

¹Cited in David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 166. Quoted by Ron E. M. Clouzet, *Adventism's Greatest Need: The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2011), 43, no. 2.

have discerned the mind of the Lord.”¹

To experience and ensure divine corporate guidance, there is a need for personal preparation before the meetings for elections and planning. In addition, quality time should be given for Bible study and earnest prayer during the meeting.² Divine corporate guidance will become a reality if our board and business meetings are turned into prayer meetings and worship services.³

However, the questions arise, “How can we be sure that this action or decision is the leading of the Holy Spirit? Does God still speak to us today as He did to the early church leaders?” The testimony of the Bible and daily Christian life confirm that God still speaks to the church today through the Holy Spirit. He speaks through Scripture, prayer, the community of faith and providential circumstances.⁴ “No one of these methods of God’s speaking is, by itself, a clear indicator of God’s directions. But when God says the same thing through each of these ways, you can have confidence to proceed.”⁵

Seeking God’s will in our committee meetings prevents the

¹Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, Study Guide Edition (London, Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 221

²“We can make our committee devotional times significant and meaningful. Prayer can become more than a token exercise in our committee meetings—asking God to bless our decisions. Instead we can allow prayer to become such a significant part of our corporate activities that it helps bring the group together to God, seeking His guidance in making decisions. . . That prayer experience can focus on lifting each other up in prayer, praying for divine guidance in specific agenda items and/or specific requests or concerns. Two hours in focus on God’s Word and vital prayer time before entering the business of a conference committee might transform our committees and decisions. Where this has been tried, it has proven to actually save time lost in needless discussion and bickering. . . Meeting together to pray can be an important step in resolving many conflicts and becoming open to change and the Holy Spirit’s work.” Ben Maxson, “Where are the Spirit-filled Leaders?” *Ministry* 1993. . <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1993/January/where-are-the-spirit-filled-leaders>

³Foster, *Celebration*, 226; Ben Maxson, “Where are the Spirit-filled Leaders?” *Ministry* (1993). . . <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1993/January/where-are-the-spirit-filled-leaders> ; Robert Pierson, “God’s Priorities,” in *Revival and Reformation* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald, 1974), 14.

⁴Foster, 234; Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, 15th Anniversary Edition (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 56; Jan Paulsen, “The Holy Spirit—So What?” *Ministry*, April 2012, . . <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2012/04/the-holy-spirit-so-what?>

⁵Blackaby and King, *Experiencing God*, 56.

type of self-sufficient planning that makes no room for God to lead and work.¹ Without corporate divine guidance, man-made plans emerge which are forced upon God to approve – plans that are more trusted than God.

“Can you operate a budget on prayer? Yes. But when you do that, you are attempting something only God can do. What do most of us do? We set a practical budget, which is the total of what we can do. Then we set a hope or faith budget. The budget we really trust and use, however, is the one we can reach by ourselves. We often don’t trust God to do anything.”²

Contrary to this current trend of church leadership, spiritual leadership involves seeking divine direction during decision making, planning and election of church leaders. It involves coming to know God’s will and fitting our plans to His plans instead of vice versa.

3. Principle #2: Focus on Spirituality and Ministry

Another important principle of spiritual leadership as exemplified in the early church of Acts is its focus on spirituality and ministry. One of the first instances where this principle is evident is in the crisis of Acts 6:1-7. It was observed that there was unfair distribution of supplies between the Hebrew and Greek widows (Acts 6:1). In response to the problem, they clearly affirmed that their role was to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:2, 4). They were not to be distracted from this priority. Consequently, seven

¹“There is a type of planning that is so self-sufficient that it gives humanity all the glory and pushes God out of the picture. It may include formal prayers. But this kind of planning makes intercessory prayer that confesses that nothing good can happen without God’s blessing seem unnecessary, because that program rests secure in human plans, budgets, personnel, and equipment. We are ready for all the contingencies. There is no vital faith relationship with the Lord. . . , trusting the Lord to do His marvelous work. . . . Planning that places every detail within our resources and leaves no place for God to do His wonders is truly counterproductive.” James Zachary, “Burn the Chariots and Lame the Horses,” *Ministry*, December 1991, 11.

²Blackaby and King, *Experiencing God*, 42.

deacons were selected to attend to the pressing need of the church and this led to great growth (Acts 6:3, 5-7).

Their devotion to spiritual disciplines led to spiritual growth which was evidenced in ministry. This is also evident in the missionary journeys of Paul and Barnabas. They were active in preaching, evangelism and church planting. After churches were established, the book of Acts clearly shows that they spent time visiting and nurturing church members and leaders (Acts 11: 22-26; 14: 21-22; 15:32, 35, 41; 16:40; 18:22, 23). This again confirmed their refusal to relegate or compromise the priority of spirituality and ministry. This twofold emphasis among the church leaders led to the growth of the church in both quality and quantity (Acts 16:5).

In present day church leadership, the ministers, from the president of the division to the local pastors, are busy with a lot of responsibilities that prevent them from taking time to nurture their personal spirituality. This leads to spiritual deficiency which is reflected in the quality of their sermons in ministering the Word to their members and constituency. However, the case of Acts 6 makes clear that present day church leaders and ministers must devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.¹

Church leadership today tends to be distracted by the mundane responsibilities of doing the work of the Lord. Unlike the leaders of Acts 6, they have allowed themselves to serve tables instead of devoting themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. The following quotes from the Spirit of Prophecy stress the importance of setting the priority right:

Not a few ministers are neglecting the very work that they

¹"The apostles were men of prayer and ministers of the word. And when the contention arose over the daily distribution of food, the apostles reevaluated their focus. They saw there was a real need to distribute the daily allocation of food in an equitable way, but it was becoming an overwhelming task. And so they delegated responsibility to the deacons. And in so doing they affirmed the God-ordained focus of their ministry as spiritual leaders. Similarly, it would not be right for us to become tyrannized by the urgent and forget that which is important. We are called to spiritual leadership. We must devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

How often have we rationalized our lack of prayer by saying, 'Oh well, the Lord understands. After all, I'm busy doing His work.' But God is not impressed with that kind of logic. It was not right back then, and it's not right now. We need to keep our focus on track. We too must devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word." Derek Morris, "The Minister as a Spiritual Leader" in *The Adventist Minister*, edited by C. Raymond Holmes and Douglas Kilcher (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1991), 22-23.

have been appointed to do. . . Why are they called upon to attend so many business meetings, many times at great distance from their fields of labour? Why are not business matters placed in the hands of businessmen? The ministers have not been set apart for this work. The finances of the cause are to be properly managed by men of ability, but ministers are set apart for another line of work. Let the management of financial matters rest on others than those ordained to the ministry.¹

Do not load the president of the conference with details of business. For years our people have been instructed to choose trained business men to attend to this part of the work Let the business of our conferences be looked after by businessmen. Give the ministers opportunity to do their appointed work. Give them time to cultivate spirituality²

In line with spirituality, ministry should also be made priority. This is because there is a relationship between the two. The church leader who is personally spiritually well fed is the most qualified to feed and nurture his church members. Consequently church leaders and administrators should ensure that local church pastors have enough time to study and feed their souls with the Word so that they can feed the flock.³

As stated above from the example of Paul's missionary journeys, ministry involves visiting and nurturing church members

¹Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to the Church*, volume 7, 254-255.

²Idem, *Manuscript 120*, 1902.

³Robert Pierson, the General Conference President from 1911 to 1989, commented on the importance of making spirituality and ministry priority for our ministers: ". . . We need to help our pastors. We all give great lip service to the high regard in which we hold our pastors and ordained ministers, but do we truly treat them as they indeed are—the key men in our church program? Do we as administrators enable them to do the work God really intends for them to do as shepherds of the flock? . . . I believe the pastor ought to spend many hours every week preparing to feed his flock . . . But we administrators often keep them so busy with committees and other assignments that they don't have enough time to spend with their books and on their knees. Then we wonder why we have so many apostasies. Somehow we must give our pastors more time to study and pray and visit the members. . . Our pastor's first work is to get into the homes of the members to study and pray with them and encourage them and help them with their missionary work. That is where their help is needed." Pierson, "God's Priorities," 18, 19.

in the field. In present day church leadership, most times, the president is travelling outside his constituency unaware of what the members and local church pastors in his constituency are going through. They [the president and his directors] really have no idea of what is going on in their constituency.

However, according to the model of spiritual leadership in the book of Acts, the president needs to know what is going on in his constituency. By visiting his constituency (the hospitals, schools, colleges and other key centers within the conference), he can be aware of what the real situations and needs are and effectively meet them through corporate divine guidance. This includes working with theological seminaries in the constituency. Both theologians and church administrators/leaders need each other as they seek God's leading for the church in their constituency.

Therefore, the second principle from the book of Acts points out that spiritual leadership involves making spirituality and ministry priority. It includes spending quality time in authentic personal devotions, visiting and nurturing members and church leaders and training them for ministry.

4. Principle #3: Involving, Nurturing and Training the Youth for Spiritual Leadership

The New Testament early church of also illustrates that spiritual leadership involves investing in the youth of the church. The book of Acts contains the starting point of 3 success stories that demonstrate this principle of spiritual leadership. It shows how church leaders discovered and nurtured young men in the church who later became church leaders themselves and played a very significant role in the growth of the early church.

Barnabas saw potential in his cousin, John Mark. Consequently, he invited him to join them in one of their missionary journeys (Acts 12: 25). He was doing fine until he suddenly deserted the mission, left the missionary team and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13: 13, 14). When another opportunity arose to take him on another trip, Paul vehemently refused because of his previous abandonment. This led to a serious disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (15: 36-39). However, Barnabas never lost faith in John Mark and took him along (Acts 15:39). In later years, the epistles of Paul and Peter

testify that Barnabas' effort in mentoring John Mark made him useful and valuable in ministry as both of them affirm (Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; 1 Peter 5:13). He eventually became the author of the very first Gospel of Jesus: the Gospel of Mark.

Paul took interest in Timothy when he met him in Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). Though his father was a Greek, he grew in knowledge of and love for the Holy Scriptures through his Jewish mother, Eunice and grandmother, Lois (2 Timothy 1: 5; 3:14, 15). With time, Paul took Timothy along in his missionary journeys and mentored him in church leadership (Acts 17: 14-15; 18:5). The result was that Timothy became a church pastor as evidenced by Paul's injunctions and admonitions to him in the Pastoral Epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy (1 Timothy 1:1,2; 2 Timothy 1:1,2). Timothy also joined Paul to write letters of encouragement to other Christians as recorded in some of the Pauline Epistles (2 Corinthians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; Philemon 1:1)

Aquila and Priscilla, a couple involved in the leadership of the early church (Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19), met Apollos, a Jewish young man from Alexandria, when they heard him in Ephesus (Acts 18: 24, 26). He is described as competent and eloquent in Scripture and spoke boldly in the synagogue (Acts 18: 24, 26). Though he knew only the baptism of John and preached it with fervent spirit, Aquila and Priscilla took time to take him in and explained to him the truth as it is in Jesus (Acts 18:26). This growth in knowledge and brief mentoring resulted in the conversion and discipleship of many to the faith (Acts 18: 27, 28). Apollos became a notable leader in the work of the early church and brought many to the faith as confirmed by the mention of his name in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1: 10-12; 3:1-9, 21-23; 16:12).

These three examples clearly illustrate the fact that spiritual leadership involves mentoring the next generation to lead the church. The practice of mentoring and training young leaders as successors in God's church can also be seen in many examples in both the Old and New Testaments. One classic Old Testament example is the training and mentoring of Joshua by Moses to become the next leader of Israel (Exodus 17:14; 24:13; 32: 17, 18; Numbers 27: 15-23). Jesus did the same as He prayerfully chose and mentored the 12 apostles and prepared them to lead the church after His ascension (Luke 6:12-16; Acts 1: 1-14). Since this appears as a consistent pattern among the spiritual leaders of Bible times, it is important that leaders of the church today must do the same.

However, in contemporary times, church leaders are not

always comfortable and confident in involving and delegating church leadership responsibilities to the young members of the church. In addition, most of the time, the church leadership system focuses on training and investing in ministers or members who are already old and ready to retire. Our young pastors and members are not invested in very much. Furthermore, many church leaders hold on to their leadership positions even when they have stayed so long in that position (like many African leaders who refuse to step down: Gadhafi, Robert Mugabe etc).

Many times when church leaders are ready to step down from office, they have not prepared any successor to take over from them and to continue in their work. The leader has no one to recommend if asked because they have not mentored anyone. When compared to the earlier mentioned examples above, this practice is inconsistent with the biblical pattern of spiritual leadership.

SDA Church leaders today need to take into serious consideration this above-mentioned biblical pattern of spiritual leadership. Like Moses (Numbers 27: 15-23), they need to pray that the Lord would lead them to youth in the church that have potential for leadership. In addition, they can also give everyone the opportunity to lead in groups during church activities. This will bring to light those with this spiritual gift of leadership. When discovered, they are to be instructed and involved in leadership planning and challenges. This involves delegating to them leadership responsibilities in the church.¹ Another aspect of this mentoring is giving them the freedom to create and lead their own ministry for the church.² Therefore the work of a spiritual leader in

¹"One of the ways to keep youth spiritual is to involve them in the work of the Lord. Don't let them just sit there with all their bundles of energy and do nothing. Delegate! Give them something to do! Tell them what to do and how to do it! Give them the opportunity and watch them do it! Don't expect too much from them. Love them and be patient with them. Gradually you will see great leaders in action. This will prepare them to be good successors and will keep them in the church. . . We make them love the church by making them a part of it." - Ikechukwu Michael Oluikpe, "The Need for Spiritual Youth Leadership in the 21st century," *Youth Ministry Accent*, General Conference edition, 3rd Quarter 2010, 52.

²"So give your young people opportunities for real leadership and not just token involvement. Nominating Committees are notorious for wanting to "get the young people involved" by putting one or two on every committee. In this way members appease their consciences by saying that their kids are involved without really releasing to them the possibility of changing something. What if we monitored our young people's growth, helped them understand their spiritual gifts and special abilities, and then gradually mentored them into the

preparing the youth of the church as the next generation of leaders can be summarized in this sentence: train them and trust them.¹

Another aspect of putting this principle into practice in church leadership today is in the selection of candidates for further studies. The current church leaders should invest in encouraging and training young promising potential leaders for further training so that they can serve the church in the long run and not just when they are about to retire.

Spiritual leadership involves paying attention to the youth of the church, training and involving them in leadership and investing in them for leadership. Spiritual leadership does not "overstay its welcome". It knows when the time is up and when it is time to step down and give way for another divinely chosen successor. It involves preparing spiritually capable successors to step in when the leader steps down.

4. Conclusion

It is noteworthy that these 3 above mentioned principles of spiritual leadership as showcased in the book of Acts are all intimately and intricately connected. For church leadership to experience true corporate divine guidance [Principle #1], they [the leaders] must each, individually, be deeply connected to the Lord through a devotional life and ministry that is led by the Holy Spirit just like the leaders of the early church [Principle #2]. Corporate guidance [Principle #1], which is dependent on a personal devotional life and ministry [Principle #2], is also essential for selecting successors [Principle #3]. The nurturing of youth/young leaders of the church [Principle #3] is a subset of nurturing every member for ministry through encouraging of spiritual gifts and ministries [Principle#2].

leadership of some ministry? Or better, what if we helped them develop a new ministry that is close to their heart?" – Ryan J. Bell, "The Whole Body of Christ" in *We Can Keep Them in the Church*, eds. Myrna Tetz and Gary Hopkins (Pacific Press, 2005), 39.

¹Jan Paulsen, "The openness that lies before us," September 2006 . . . <http://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2006/September/the-openness-that-lies-before-us.html>

"Likewise, workers of God must have sufficient spiritual resources to finish their tasks. The worker with a living, personal relationship with God, the worker who is filled with the Holy Spirit and supported by a dynamic faith, has access to more than enough material and spiritual resources to complete whatever task God may give." Zachary, "Burn the Chariots," 11.

Visiting the members and the institutional centers in the constituency [Principle #2] will reveal what the needs of the churches are and how these needs can be effectively met. This leads to the need for corporate guidance [Principle #1]. Hence each principle is related to each other and all together, they present a picture of the “how” of spiritual leadership— a picture of what it involves.

In defining a spiritual leader, the book of Acts gives a very simple and basic one in its description of Barnabas: A good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith (Acts 11:22-24). Therefore a spiritual leader is simply a person who is led by and filled with the Holy Spirit. In addition, the text also seems to imply that the church grew because of the kind of man Barnabas was (verse 24). True spiritual leadership is powerful and has all the sufficient resources to accomplish the work of God anywhere in the world.¹ In the light of contemporary church leadership, it is evident that spiritual leadership—a leadership led by and filled with the Holy Spirit—is the greatest need of the church today.

This is confirmed in the words of Elder Robert H. Pierson:

Brethren, our present programs, plans, and priorities are not good enough. All our institutions with their sophisticated equipment, all our so-called up-to-date approaches, have not developed that glorious church that is destined to greet her Lord. All the carefully constructed, well-oiled machinery have not prepared the church for the latter rain or the loud cry. Insubordination is still keeping us out of the kingdom. We look in vain for any but fleeting glimpses of the spiritual power of those unsophisticated believers of the first century. All our great speaking, our great music, our great teaching, even our great healing and our great worldwide welfare program have not brought a finished work and a returning Lord! Something is wrong. A revival and reformation in our leadership and administration must come. Not until we let go of all these handfuls of earthly sand that we are clawing for and clinging to for dear life, and begin to cling to the Rock of Ages and seek His Spirit, can we ever hope to succeed in the assignment God has given His remnant church. Only as we seek the Holy Spirit

¹“Likewise, workers of God must have sufficient spiritual resources to finish their tasks. The worker with a living, personal relationship with God, the worker who is filled with the Holy Spirit and supported by a dynamic faith, has access to more than enough material and spiritual resources to complete whatever task God may give.” Zachary, “Burn the Chariots,” 11.

as the source of power for our leadership, the energy for all our assignments, will we ever rise above the miserable limitations of our own abilities and break out into that glorious experience that God speaks of as the Loud Cry.¹

These words, written in 1974, still ring true today in the 21st century. Indeed spiritual leadership is the greatest need of the church today.

¹Pierson, "God's Priorities," 17.