Ethical Leadership:
An Invitation to Spiritual Formation and Transformation for the Christian Professional

By Doris Gomez

Abstract

Great leaders – including Christians - who were discovered in unethical activities lose an essential part of their ability to lead. Especially for Christian professionals, the question must not stop at 'Who is a good leader?', but rather 'How should I live?' and "How do I know right from wrong?' Looking at the intersection of Christian spiritual formation and its role in leader development, this article seeks to answer these critical questions for the Christian leader by highlighting the importance of the inner spiritual life of the person.

Introduction

When leaders lose their souls, so do the organizations they lead. From ancient times to today, literature, history, and folklore have chronicled the folly of leaders who, after gaining positions of power, prestige and status, toppled into the abyss of failure. Many are the sobering witnesses of great leaders - including Christians - who were discovered in unethical activities, thus losing an essential part of their ability to lead. Leaders of every discipline and stature from politicians, to law enforcement officials, corporate heads, teachers and clergy have been accused - and found guilty - of wrongdoing.

The escalation of high profile scandals and moral failures in recent times in and beyond the world of commerce (see box *Moral Leadership Failures*) has created a renewed urgency to examine organizations and organizational leadership in an ethical context. The birth of an entire ethics consulting industry points to the recognition of the importance of ethics in organizations and their leaders. Sadly, the increasing commonality of "elite deviance," or wrongdoing by leaders, has crept into the cultural consciousness and is dulling down moral expectations and sensibilities. Sayles and Smith coined the phrase, "rogue executive"[1] to identify a growing class of leaders who seek and exercise the power imbedded in leadership for the sake of personal gain.

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Moral Leadership Failures

Politics offers bad leaders, such as Richard Nixon. It also offers evil leaders, such as Hitler or Stalin. The Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment trial of President Bill Clinton certainly provided impetus for a deeper and more critical reflection of ethical standards amongst politicians and those holding the highest office in the land. Religious institutions contribute their own share of fallen leaders: Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and Ted Haggard, are just a few of the names that come to mind. On the business side of things, the accounting irregularities at Citigroup and Merrill Lynch along with those of Enron and WorldCom are examples of a much larger epidemic of unethical business practices, decisions and behaviors.

The Shadow Side of Leadership

The choices and conduct of individuals that result in moral and ethical failure have complex causes and include internal as well as external influences. Palmer contends that individuals "for the most part, do not lack ethical knowledge or convictions. They doubtless took courses on professional ethics and probably received top grades. They gave speeches on ethical issues and more than likely believed their own words. But they had a well-rehearsed habit of holding their own knowledge and beliefs at great remove from the living of their lives."[2]

Regardless of the underlying causes, unethical and immoral behavior almost always trigger wide ranging effects that include an erosion of confidence and trust in leaders and the institutions they represent. This is because a leader is "a person who has an unusual degree of power to create the conditions under which other people must live and move and have their being, conditions that can be as illuminating as heaven or as shadowy as hell."[3] Think of teachers, parents, and clergy who create the conditions people must respond to. And what about corporate leaders whose daily decisions are driven by inner dynamics, but who rarely reflect on those motives? As Kets de Vries pointed out, "The road to understanding the dynamics of organizational life is often dependent on understanding what might be termed the inner theater of its key executives: the patterns of conduct that guide their behavior."[4]

Character: The Inner Theater

Increasingly, there have been calls for leadership theorists to explore the inner person of the leader, urging them to strive for wholeness and integrity from the inside out. For example, the theory of authentic leadership[5] focuses on the character of the leader as the driver of positive interrelationships with followers. It incorporates other positive leadership approaches, including transformational, charismatic, servant and spiritual leadership. Authentic leaders are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral

perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and of high moral character. These leaders are as guided by qualities of the heart as by qualities of the mind.

As Warren Bennis noted, "For executive leaders, character is framed by drive, competence, and integrity. Most senior executives have the drive and competence necessary to lead. But too often organizations elevate people who lack the moral compass."[6] Since character is the inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is, so it is character, guided by social expectations, that is the definitive trait of superior leaders.[7]

It is character that allows leaders to face the challenges, triumphs, failures and temptation of leadership without succumbing to them and responding with unethical and immoral behavior. Leaders who fail are those deficient in traits related to fortitude, integrity, truthfulness, bravery, selflessness, temperance, and moral reasoning. Clearly, mastery of technical or human relations skills alone is insufficient for true leadership. Good leadership is a composite of sound moral practice coupled with professional skills and knowledge.

The question – especially for Christian professionals – therefore must not end at 'Who is a good leader?' After all it is quite possible to be an 'effective' leader while not necessarily a 'virtuous' one. Rather it must address 'How should we live?' and 'How do we know right from wrong?' I am increasingly convinced that the answers to these critical questions can only be found in Christian spiritual formation as a central element in the development, formation and education of Christian professionals.

The possibility that human beings can be transformed to such an extent that they become a reflection of Christ is central to the message of the gospel and therefore it must be central to the formation of Christian professionals. Spiritual transformation in the lives of redeemed people is a testimony to the power of the Gospel and it results in an increasing capacity to discern and do the will of God (Rom. 12:2). Christians believe that God is the author and creator of all good things. So it should not surprise us that He also appears at the heart of leadership.

The Spiritual Formation of Christian Professionals

While ethical codes, training, and policies are now common artifacts of most major organizations, they seem insufficient to consistently alter behaviors. It appears that ethics requires higher-order reasoning skills, objective honesty, accountability to someone

Examples of Spirituality Integration

The global management consulting firm McKinsey & Company determined that when companies engage in programs that use spirituality techniques, productivity improves and turnover is substantially reduced. Companies are increasingly hiring chaplains to support employees. For example, Tyson's Foods has a large number of part-time chaplains at more than 70 sites. Coca-Cola Bottling has chaplains helping employees at more than 50 of their locations. Pizza Hut hires chaplains to guide employees who are struggling with personal problems, and they believe they have reduced the turnover rate by 50 percent.

Marketplace Chaplains USA serves over 450 companies in 44 states and in more than 850 cities. The more than 2,400 chaplains provide personal care to more than 500,000 employees and family members, including well-known companies such as McDonalds, Taco Bell and Herr's. According to one survey of more than 600 employees at Regal Marine, a boat building company, the chaplain's care program was cited as the #1 benefit.

The American Stock Exchange has a Torah study group; Boeing has Christian, Jewish and Muslim prayer groups; Microsoft has an on-line prayer service. There is a "Lunch and Learn" Torah class in the banking firm of Sutro and Company in Woodland Hills, CA. New York law firm Kaye, Scholer, Fierman, Hays and Haroller features Tallmud studies. Koran classes, as well as other religious classes, are featured at defense giant Northrop Gumnan.

Marketplace Ministries, based in Dallas, TX serves 268 firms in 35 states. The Fellowship of Companies for Christ International based in Atlanta has 1500 member companies around the world. They encourage Christian business leaders to operate their companies and conduct their personal lives in accordance to biblical principles. They provide biblically-based tools and resources.

Academia has caught on quickly over the years and business schools have made a great deal of progress in these areas over the past decade. The number and quality of required and elective business ethics courses has grown, as have the extra-curricular offerings and the recognition by other faculty that ethics is a core business discipline. The University of Virginia, Darden School of Business has developed a simulation program that integrates ethics into business decision-making and is required for first-year MBA students. The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania has an exemplary program teaching, emphasizing, and integrating ethics in the curriculum, including an option for students to make ethics a "major," noted on their transcripts.

IESE Business School at the University of Navarra in Spain features a Department of Business Ethics, as well as an integrated approach to incorporating ethics in the program. At Harvard Business School, a 2003 student-led symposium challenged leaders to embrace values and explore the bridges between spirituality and business.

or something outside of self, social concerns, ongoing self-evaluation, and the abilities to temper emotions, to control impulses, and to delay gratification.

There is a noticeable trend in the management world towards accepting and integrating a spiritual dimension into organizational theory and practice. Spirituality is becoming part of mainstream organizational theory and practice even in the secular world. A number of top companies are making explicit attempts to integrate a more spiritual approach into their management practices and many leading business schools have introduced spirituality and ethics into their curricula (see box *Examples of Spirituality Integration*).

Organizational consultants and popular writers such as John Adair, Peter Senge, Tom Peters, Peter Vaill, Steven Covey, and Charles Handy are increasingly explicit about the spiritual dimension to organizational life. For example, Covey states, "I believe that there are parts to human nature that cannot be reached either by legislation or education, but require the power of God to deal with."[8] One author concludes: "The movement to bring spirit and soul to business is no passing fad; it continues to grow and shows no sign of abating. Clearly something significant is stirring the corporate world."[9]

Most Christians believe that God's spirit works through all people by what is termed 'Common Grace' – enabling them to do good to others and change for the better. In this way spirituality includes the operation of the human spirit, but goes beyond to involve a relationship between the inner person and God. Although most religious traditions describe and proscribe some process of formation, spiritual formation has been a term mostly utilized by historic forms of Christianity.[10]

At its core, spiritual transformation is the process by which Christ is formed in us …for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives, and for the sake and benefit of others (Gal. 4:19; Rom. 8:29, 12:1-2). Consequently, Christian professionals must be aware that we are part of an interconnected whole and are here for the sake and the well-being of others. If we want to change that whole, we must change ourselves. Nouwen observes: "It is not enough for (Christian leaders) of the future to be moral people, well trained, eager to help their fellow humans, and able to respond creatively to the burning issues of their time. All of that is very valuable and important, but it is not the heart of Christian leadership. The central question is, are the leaders of the future truly men and women of God, people with an ardent desire to dwell in God's presence, to listen to God's voice, to look at God's beauty, to touch God's incarnate Word and to taste fully God's infinite goodness?"[11] The goal of Christian spiritual formation is, according to Willard, "an obedience or conformity to Christ."[12]

Change and Spiritual Discipline

The Bible overflows with stories of human change. When we compare the change experiences of the people of Israel as described in the Old Testament with the parables and examples of human change in the New Testament we find a remarkable consistency and congruence. Ever since the fall, God has continually worked to cause his people to realize their utter dependence on him. He does this by bringing us to the point of human extremity, where we have no place to turn, but him. As Paul explains in his letter to the Corinthians:

> We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. (2 Cor.1:8-9)

Human pride often holds back change. It is often only when we accept our own inability to solve the situation that our pride is broken and we look to God for change. Oftentimes, the greatest leverage we can create for ourselves is the pain that comes from inside knowing that we have failed to live up to our own standards. David was convicted by the visit of the prophet Nathan and wrote: "My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear" (Ps. 38:4). Nehemiah cried out: "I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you" (Neh.1:6).

While outward obedience to Christ appears to be something that we can do in our own power — a cleaning of the outside of the cup (Matt. 23:25–26) — inner heart change is only possible in and through relationship with God. Christian leaders and professionals have to be informed deeply by the spiritual disciplines that the Christian faith provides us with. While we cannot transform ourselves into the image of Christ, we can create the conditions in which spiritual transformation takes place. This is where spiritual practices or disciplines come in.

Spiritual disciplines are concrete activities that we engage in so as to make ourselves available for the work that only God can do. This is what Paul is referring to when he appeals to the Christians in Rome to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Rom.12:1) He is saying that we can be intentional about creating the conditions for transformation by engaging disciplines that help us surrender ourselves to God – not just in theory but in reality. As Foster describes it, "[Spiritual] disciplines are the main way we offer our bodies up to God as a living sacrifice. We are doing what we can do

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with our bodies, our minds, our hearts. God then take this simple offering of ourselves and does with it what we cannot do, producing within us deeply ingrained habits of love and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"[17] (see box *Spiritual Disciplines*).

It is God's will and delight that we actively resist being conformed to this world and seek instead to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The Greek word *nous* (translated *mind* in Rom.12:2) includes but goes far beyond intellectual or cognitive knowing. It denotes the seat of reflective consciousness and en-

compasses a person's faculties of perception and understanding as well as the patterns of feeling, judging and determining that shape our actions and responses in the world.

Thus, any approach to transformation that seeks to bring about real change must go beyond merely grasping information at the cognitive level. It needs the full knowledge that impacts our deepest inner orientations and trust structures, false-self patterns, and any obstacles that prevent us from fully surrendering to God. This kind of change involves clear teaching about

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Spiritual Disciplines

There is generally agreement that the process of spiritual formation is initiated by God, facilitated by the response in faith by the believer, worked out in both personal and communal contexts with the ultimate goal of holiness as the believer is formed into the image of Christ.

However, even though the process of formation is always initiated by God, the person being formed needs to consent to the formational process through the commitment to practice what is called the "spiritual disciplines" of Christianity.[13] These historic and biblical disciplines of the spiritual life facilitate spiritual formation and are categorized as:[14]

(a) Inward disciplines: meditation, prayer, fasting, and study
(b) Outward disciplines: simplicity, solitude, submission and service
(c) Corporate disciplines: confession, worship, guidance, and celebration

N.T. Wright in his book, *After you Believe*, states that the aim of the Christian life – the goal we are meant to be aiming for once we have come to faith – is the life of a fully formed, fully flourishing Christian character. Proposing a Christian virtue-based answer to the question "How shall we live?" he points to a virtuous circle containing the following five elements: [15]

(a) Scripture
(b) Stories
(c) Examples
(d) Community
(e) Practices

A spiritual life and Christian character, according to Nouwen,[16] cannot be formed without discipline, practice, and accountability - anything that helps us slow down and order our times, desires and thoughts on a regular basis and helps us to create space for God in our soul. These include the discipline of the:

(a) Heart (introspection and contemplative prayer)
(b) Book (reading of sacred Scripture and spiritual writings)
(c) Church (community of faith and relationship with the people of God)

the nature of the Christian life, concrete practices that help us internalize truth in ways that change how we respond in the world, and community that supports and catalyzes the process.[18]

Conclusion

The temptation to compromise basic Christian values – love, community, truth-telling, confession and reconciliation, silent listening and waiting on God for discernment – for the sake of expedience, is very great. In a high performance culture (both secular culture and religious) holding to deep spiritual values in the face of the pressure to perform – whether performance is measured by numbers, new buildings or the latest innovation – is one of the greatest challenges of spiritual leadership. Palmer reminds us that a "leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him or her self, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good."[19] So, the best and worst thing we bring to others and our leadership is our own self.

The most important leadership tool ultimately is the leader as a person and his or her makeup, and yet this is what seems to get the least amount of attention. Mostly, we focus on professional skills and knowledge instead. The challenges of leadership are both practical and deeply personal. After all is said and done, after all the leadership theory and tools have been studied, leaders ultimately lead according to who they are.[20] Our inward turn, therefore, is not idle self-absorption but is, in fact, critical to our effectiveness as leaders. Leaders must make a courageous decision to diligently examine their hearts, in order to identify areas of needed change and growth. Good leaders do not just focus on the development of their outer competencies required of them at the expense of their inner life. Good leaders recognize the need for both.

Notes

[1] Leonard R. Sayles and Cynthia J. Smith, *The Rise of the Rogue Executive: How Good Companies Go Bad and How to Stop the Destruction* (Upper Saddle River: FT Press, 2005)

[2] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (Hoboken: Jossey-Bass, 2009), p. 7.

[3] Ibid., p. 9.

[4] Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries, *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane: Essays on Irrational Organizations and Their Leaders* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1995), xxi.

[5] Bruce J. Avolio and William L. Garrdner, "Authentic leadership development: Getting to the root of positive forms of leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 16 (2005), pp. 315-338.

[6] Warren Bennis, "The Leadership Advantage," *Leader to Leader* 12 (1999), accessed January 28, 2013. http://www.internetmasterycenter.com/articles/self-development/leadership-advantage.php.

[7] Os Guinness, *Character Counts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), p. 12.

[8] Steven Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1989), p. 319.

[9] Paul Wong, "Spirituality and Meaning at Work", *International Network on Personal Meaning*, accessed January 28, 2013. http://www.meaning.ca/archives/presidents_columns/pres_col_sep_2003_meaning-at-work.htm.

[10] Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods.* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

[11] Henry Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), p. 42.

[12] Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Navigator Press, 2002), p. 22.

[13] Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), p.106.

[14] Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth (*New York: Harper Collins, 1998)

[15] N.T. Wright, *After you Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2010).

[16] Henri Nouwen, Michael J. Christensen, and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2006).

[17] Richard Foster, "What we believe about spiritual formation," *Transforming Center*, accessed January 31, 2013. http://www.transformingcenter.org/in/about/what-we-believe.shtml.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Parker J. Palmer, "Leading from within," in *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-leadership*, ed. L. C. Spears (New York: Wiley, 1996), p. 200.

[20] Doris Gomez, "The Heart of a Leader: Connecting Leading and the Inner Life," *Inner Resources for Leaders*, accessed January 31, 2013.

About the Author

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