



# Spirituality and leadership: The inner life of the public leader



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Truth be told, I haven't read all the books that are on the market about leadership – it just feels that way. I've been one minute managed, gone from good to great, found out who moved my cheese and ended up at the feet of Patrick Lencioni. Pass through any airport bookshop and you are likely to find me leafing through the pages of the latest business best-seller. Yes, that's me with the carry-on bag blocking your way to the checkout.

During my career in commercial publishing I was responsible for several major biographies and autobiographies. This gave me access to some of the most remarkable leaders of our day, including politicians, sports personalities and members of the royal family. I was required to understand their private world and try to make some sense of it.

In one example I visited Jonathan Aitken in Belmarsh Prison outside London after he had been sensationally convicted of perjury in the biggest trial of its kind since Oscar Wilde. Sitting together in relative privacy, it was my job to ask him, as a former leading cabinet minister, why he had done it. His answer appeared later in his memoir *Pride and Perjury*<sup>1</sup> and still remains a fascinating account of human frailty and redemption.

Both in commerce and during more than a decade leading a sizable non-profit charity, I've wrestled with the challenges of my own leadership. I've watched colleagues burnout or collapse under the weight of their moral failure. I've mentored younger leaders grappling with their work and with themselves. I've also experienced the loneliness of leadership and the burden it can be on friends and family alike.

However big our small our role, many people find themselves in leadership positions. It might be the leadership of a family, a small team, a church or a vast company. Of course, whether we actually provide leadership is another matter. Putting a label on someone doesn't make them into that person, and many who call themselves leaders may not actually be exercising that gift. We all can think of examples of leaders who don't actually lead.

## Leadership from the core

In recent years it has become fashionable to say that it is irrelevant who we are on the inside just as long as we do a good job. Faced with the prurient fascination for the private lives of leading celebrities, the understandable backlash has been to say that it's none of our business what they do behind closed doors.

However, a clutch of global politicians, and even some well-known faces of the church today, suggests that when it comes to leaders this approach is not a good idea. Their example makes it ultimately untenable to say that it doesn't matter what's going on under the surface just so long as the impact is ethical.

We have paid a very high price for ignoring the simple and straightforward teaching of both Jesus and Paul on this matter. 'A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit', taught Jesus in his famous Sermon in the Mount (Mt. 7.18). Later he made much the same point when he said, 'First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean' (Mt. 23.26).

Paul put so much stress on this that he admitted to being in agony as great as childbirth that 'Christ is formed in you' (Gal. 4.19). As many leaders will testify, eventually who we are on the inside will come out. As a result, a number of leading business schools now offer psychometric tests and high-end courses on what is known as 'the dark side' of leadership. Essentially they are asking 'who are you when no one is watching?'

If the definition of 'spiritual' is everything that is not physical, then the interior journey of the leader is deeply spiritual. It takes us to the heart of what it is to be human with all our dark side and frailties. If we are to be successful at it, then it will require a deeply reflective life and lifestyle.

In my observations and mentoring, the classic spiritual disciplines of silence and solitude are the most essential part of true leadership. 'Spend more time leaning back in your chair and looking out of the window' is the counterintuitive advice I often give the upwardly mobile and hard-driven executive. The deliberate habit of slowing down is both the hardest and yet most rewarding part of the leader's daily routine.

Sometimes I even suggest to leaders that the most courageous and valiant act that they can do is to switch off their laptop and iPhone and to go to bed. Why? Because in doing so we are consciously trusting God for the outcome of our leadership. Try it yourself and learn what it feels like to quit running the universe for a while.

### All about character

Victorian social thinker John Ruskin considered how such an inner morality played out in the wider world of his day. A modern take on what he said would be to ask what a business person, or merchant as he called them, would be willing to die for.

In other professions, a captain would expect to go down with their ship and a surgeon would be willing to sacrifice their own life while treating their soldiers on the battlefield. Even a pastor prefers martyrdom to preaching error. So what would a business leader of a bank or insurance company be prepared to die for?

The answer goes to the heart of what drives business leaders today. Sadly, from fixing the Libor exchange rate to mis-selling financial products, the merchant has not always demonstrated impressive inner virtue.

Surely the role of business is to provide for the community. It is to offer the highest quality product for the widest number of people at the best possible price. Yet such virtue is often lacking. Instead the assumption is very often simply 'to make money'. Of course, it might be wrapped up in the good motivation to provide for your family, but this can disguise a worrying lack of virtue and moral character.

'Business is business', said the philosopher Dallas Willard when suggesting that it is often an expression used by someone who is about to do something they know to be wrong. With a shrug of the shoulders and a sigh of

resignation, they preface a corrupt act or dodgy decision with the justification 'well, business is business.'

But business is never just business and all leaders, deep down, know this. It's about the people we are leading

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and the customers we are serving. It's also about the physical environment that we are leaving behind us. As Ruskin puts it, the leader is responsible not only for the product of his business but also for the welfare of those he leads: '... into these two functions, requiring for their right exercise the highest intelligence, as well as patience, kindness, and tact, the merchant is bound to put all his energy, so for their just discharge he is bound, as soldier or physician is bound, to give up, if need be, his life, in such way as it may be demanded of him.'<sup>2</sup>

What of today? 'The era of market triumphalism', wrote Michael Sandel in *What Money Can't Buy*, 'has coincided with a time when public discourse has been largely empty of moral and spiritual substance'.<sup>3</sup>

In such a context leadership is a high calling. It requires a profound grasp of who we are and what makes us tick. Often in the most difficult of circumstances, it presses down on us and challenges the quality of our character and how we are formed spiritually.

### Pastors as teachers of the nations

For the follower of Christ, leadership is one of the primary places where our inner discipleship to Christ is being fashioned. As a result, all this talk of how to lead 'out there' in business, the academy, the social sector and non-profit charities should be of primary concern for the church.

It's not that we wait until we get home and set down our leadership responsibilities before we engage in the 'spiritual stuff' of becoming more like Jesus; it's right there in the busy-ness of how we lead in the boardroom, the classroom and on the shop floor. Much of this has been lost on the church which explains why leaders often find it hard to cross over into the culture of a church that takes so little interest in their daily concerns.

At least in some Christian traditions the 'general confession' towards the start of the service touches on the realities of leadership today. Ask any leader and they will tell you that sin and failure are commodities that they recognise all too well in themselves and in others. The trouble is that the rest of the service, and the pastoral support of the church minister, can be woefully inadequate to deal with the considerable burden of leadership as it is widely experienced.

This was once my own experience when, as a young executive, I found that my faith was increasingly unable

### NOTES

1. J Aitken, *Pride and Perjury* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

2. J Ruskin, 'The Roots of Honour', originally published in 1860. This lecture is available online at [www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/ruskinj/last/chap1.htm](http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/ruskinj/last/chap1.htm)

3. M Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 202.

4. D Willard, *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); *Personal Religion, Public Reality?: Towards a Knowledge of Faith* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010).

5. Willard, *Personal Religion*, p. 193.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 209. Dallas Willard's emphasis.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

to carry the weight of the responsibilities that I now had. What seemed so simple and satisfying as a student was no longer sufficient for the harsh reality of a secular workplace. I felt increasingly lost and decided that it was better for everyone if I quit the church for good.

Then, in a retreat centre in the summer of 1997, I bumped into Dallas Willard. Fifteen years later his book *Knowing Christ Today* (published in the UK as *Private Religion, Public Reality*) put into print some of the early thinking that he first shared with me then.<sup>4</sup> His concern was to see pastors as 'teachers of the nations' and provocatively asked 'who is to bring the knowledge that will answer the great life questions that perplex humanity?'<sup>5</sup>

## Leadership is a high calling. It requires a profound grasp of who we are and what makes us tick

In recognising the church as 'a familiar social reality' that continues to have a 'massive public presence in the world', Dallas Willard saw its leadership role in society.<sup>6</sup> In this context 'pastors for Christ teach the "nations" by declaring the presence of the kingdom everywhere and by pointing out the availability of eternal life now in the kingdom of God'.<sup>7</sup> Dallas Willard would often say that 'discipleship is for the sake of the world' not just the church.<sup>8</sup>

Here leadership in the church and leadership outside come together. Leaders in both spheres desperately need each other. The pastor needs the 'secular leader' to take the kingdom of God way beyond the confines of the church door. Meanwhile, the leader in society needs the Christian leader to 'guide disciples into their place in the world and show them how to "exercise dominion in life through one man, Christ Jesus"'.<sup>9</sup> That's leadership.

### Coaching in Christlikeness

This applies as much to the office as it does to the laboratory, farm, schoolroom, media studio, sports world, fine arts, government and the academy. Church, for Dallas Willard, is to be a school of love. We are to coach the leaders of nations in how to live well; to coach them for Christ.

For Dallas Willard, leadership and virtue are routed through the historic teaching of the Church about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The formation of Christlike character is an essential part of this and the role of the church is to teach leaders how to live life deeply and well, right in front of the people they lead and in the glare of public scrutiny.

For pastors to do this fully, they will listen a lot and speak comparatively little. They will go and meet leaders in their own contexts, perhaps over lunch where they work. And they will understand at a fundamental level that failure is often the primary teacher of how to lead better.

Other ways to support leaders include forming small groups where they can discuss in confidence their leadership challenges. If necessary the pastor can facilitate these, but the answers should come from the group. One church I know has asked groups of professionals from the law or the medical world to write up their own concise leadership charter. Each profession will be different, but they will share some common principles.

Supporting the spouse and family of the leader is another important way that the church can strengthen the inner life of the public person. In some circumstances the family may be cash rich but time poor. They may feel isolated and unable to commit to being in church at set times and to perform in certain ways.

While some leaders are only too willing to pick up similar roles in their local church, I have found it hugely helpful at times *not* to be asked to continue my day job into the evenings and weekends. It's not that we are lacking in commitment but how would the vicar feel if they were routinely required to minister themselves 24/7?

Much needs to be done to recover the idea of the pastor as the 'cure of souls' in a local church context. They themselves have needs concerning how to be better leaders themselves. Here again there is much to learn from each other as we intentionally open our lives to each other with honesty, trust, forgiveness and grace. With fellow leaders we can learn from the leadership style of Jesus, the best leader who ever walked the planet.

Could we see a day when leaders both inside and outside the church are mutually supportive of each other? Kneeling, praying, laughing and learning, as the first three verses of 1 Peter 5 puts it, how to 'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock' (vv. 2–3).