

Another Look at the Shepherding Aspect of Spiritual Leadership

By Bob Young

Spiritual leadership involves many tasks. Leaders are elders (making decisions concerning the application of the Word); they are bishops or administrators (overseeing the work and workers), and they are shepherd-pastors (caring for every member of the flock). All of these are important. The one most often neglected is shepherding. Church leaders spend too little time on shepherding. Too many church leaders do not understand shepherding as a part of their role and responsibility as a spiritual leader. As a result, they have not studied shepherding and do not know how to be effective shepherds. Three things will help improve the shepherding capacity of spiritual leaders in local churches.

- Leadership implies relationship. You can't lead someone you don't have relationship with. Especially in the spiritual realm, leadership is relational. The first step is to understand the relational aspect of your leadership. Who are the people who are the focus of your evangelism, your shepherding, your mentoring, and your discipling? Every spiritual leader has four groups of relationships. Some are not Christians—we are seeking to evangelize them; some we are personally discipling in the Christian faith; some need mentoring so we are investing time and energy to help them develop as workers and leaders; some are faithful Christians who periodically need the influence and example of a faithful spiritual leader—they need our presence and encouragement in life's challenges and difficulties.
- Spiritual leadership is tough. It is tough because it requires relationships, and relationships take time. It is demanding and difficult. It is often draining. It is physically, emotionally, and spiritually tiring. Therefore, the second step is to establish healthy relationships. In order to do this, one must understand the nature of relationships and how to manage different kinds and levels of relationships.
- In my observation, one of the most challenging aspects of spiritual leadership is prioritizing activities. Many spiritual leaders struggle, not knowing with certainty what activities are most important. The third step is to make shepherding an essential part of our understanding of spiritual leadership, and to make it a high leadership priority.

Step One. What are the relational “musts” of spiritual leadership? What do spiritual leaders do in the New Testament? In the contexts of ministry, missions, and everyday Christian living—what are the relational dynamics of leadership? Spiritual leaders are faced with three primary challenges. Spiritual leaders spend an overwhelming majority of their relational time in these three things: reaching out to unreached people, facilitating and praying for the spiritual advancement of people—both new Christians and Christians who need help with spiritual development, and wrestling with human struggles so that the kingdom is advanced on this earth. Another way to look at this: every leader should have those you are seeking to influence; those you are personally discipling; those you are actively, diligently investing in; and those you lead “from a distance” through encouraging relationships. To manage all of these relationships well, spiritual leaders must focus their lives. They must throw off the thousands (literally!) of peripheral and trivial “urgent” matters and do those things that spiritual leaders do!

Step Two. How can a spiritual leader establish healthy relationships? Relationships require work and maintenance. Healthy relationships avoid dependency and codependency. Healthy relationships are based on mutual respect, trust, honesty, support, fairness, good communication, and maintaining clearly separate identities.

Step Three. Leaders struggle with whether what they do matters. It is hard to keep doing what does not make much difference. When someone is convinced that nothing will be different if they stop, they will stop! The solution is obvious—make sure what you are doing matters. God's leaders who understand the priority of shepherding will seldom doubt that their actions matter.

Spiritual leaders know those they lead, they develop healthy relationships, they make shepherding a priority. Spiritual leaders who focus their lives on what matters will be healthier spiritually and more capable of helping others toward spiritual health.