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“Toward a Biblically-Based Vision for Spiritual Leadership in Myanmar”

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What is God’s vision for Christian spiritual leadership in Myanmar? Amid great religious, cultural, ethnic, theological, and denominational diversity, could Myanmar church leaders ever come to a place of common understanding and agreement on this critically important question? And if they do, will it be the kind of vision that will inspire, energize, and strengthen the churches throughout Myanmar?

As a foreigner, I am certainly not in a position to answer these questions for particular Myanmar churches within various ethnic, geographical or denominational contexts. Yet, as an ordained minister with the American Baptist Churches, a former pastor who has served several U.S. churches, a teacher and mentor for Christian leaders on four different continents, and a visiting professor at Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT), I know the importance of these questions for all Christians and Christian churches everywhere, including in Myanmar.

I don’t assume there is one “right” answer to what makes for effective Christian spiritual leaders, but, as Jesus said, I do assume that we will know the “good trees” by their “fruits” (Matthew 7:20). I also don’t assume that there is one right way to do theological education to prepare future ministers, but we should be able to tell by the end of a seminary education if students believe they are well prepared and motivated to serve

in Christian leadership and ready and eager to keep growing spiritually.

The importance of intellectual and spiritual development of Christian leaders

At MIT, where I teach New Testament Theology every year, we talk a lot about doing theology within our own particular context(s). By this we mean that we seek to identify and affirm ideas, language, and experiences that come from the particular context in which theology is being done, and resist exclusively using terms and concepts that come from foreign contexts. We emphasize the importance of seeing God at work in many different ways throughout the world, and assume that each ethnic group, sub-ethnic group, etc. has its own experience with God that can only be fully known and expressed in terms of each one’s own language and cultural symbols. This is not only true for ethnic particularities, of course, but has relevance for all other unique contexts, be they geographical, religious, socio-economic, linguistic, cultural, or any other factor that distinguishes one group from another.

This broad-based, ecumenical, contextual approach to theology and “theologizing”¹ is very challenging because most of us lack tools to do it well, but just the effort to become more broad minded has huge potential benefits. For one, thinking contextually helps students to better appreciate their own indigenous context and to look

¹Professor and leading New Testament scholar James Dunn describes “theologizing” as what we do when we reflect on the meaning of God’s revelation historically in light of our present circumstances and experience with God. This is what the New Testament writers did as they reflected on the coming of Jesus Christ and their experience of the Holy Spirit in light of their Jewish theological heritage. It’s what we Christians in every generation and context need to do to both honor what we have inherited and what God is doing among us today. See, James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2009).

for ways that God has worked among their people that they may have missed. Also, this approach helps them to not be so judgmental of others who come from different contexts, and to learn to appreciate differences among believers and churches without having to judge who is right and who is wrong, who is superior and who is inferior. Such an approach to theological education ultimately prepares students to serve the broader Church more wisely and effectively, because they know how to recognize how God is at work in a community even though the language, rituals, and symbols may be different. This intellectual, educational approach equips them to better converse and work with people of other religions and ethnicities, something that is critically important in a Buddhist country with 135 different ethnic groups.

Yet as valuable as intellectual and theological development is for preparing future Christian leaders, more is needed. When it comes to answering the main questions that this article poses, we are not going to find the answers to God’s vision for spiritual leadership from new philosophies or theologies alone—as instructive as they are for our students’ intellectual and personal development. When it comes to preparing to become pastors and spiritual leaders of particular congregations and Christian-based institutions, above all else students need spiritual formation, spiritual vitality, and tools for effective spiritual leadership that will work irrespective of denominational differences, ethnic group particularities, and other issues that differentiate one group from another.

Here is where the Bible becomes critically important. To develop our churches, create effective our Christian-based organizations and institutions, and adequately train our current and future pastors and Christian leaders, the Bible remains the greatest, most

appropriate, and richest resource for creating a vision of Christian spirituality and Christian spiritual leadership.

As the historically, authoritative as well as practical guide that all Christians everywhere have shared in common, the Bible alone is capable of serving as the foundation for Christian spirituality in all different contexts. From the beginning of the Church, Christians have relied extensively on the Old and New Testaments as the pre-imminent source for their spiritual beliefs and life under the assumption that, in the language of the Apostle Paul, “...the sacred writings ...are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15-17, NRSV). These well-known verses remind us to look to the Bible for what to believe about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Christian life (theological ideas and doctrine) in every age and context. Perhaps even more important, Christians over the centuries have experienced these sacred writings in ways that personally touch, lead, and guide them as individuals, churches, and communities. In other words, the Bible both reveals who God is and is used by God to touch and transform our lives. This is particularly true when it comes to developing a relationship with God and growing spiritually as Christians.

A biblically-based vision of Christian spirituality and Spirit-led leadership

While a full discussion of Christian spirituality and spiritual leadership in Myanmar would require exploring the unique perspectives and contributions of each

ethnic group and particular context, I offer here one broad reading of the biblical text to stimulate further conversation. My reading seeks to be faithful to the original context as best as scholars can tell and to frame spiritual principles and practices in terms that can easily be discussed and adopted by modern day readers in a wide variety of contexts.

The central role of love and faithfulness

In broad terms, the New Testament witness is consistent in its vision for what a transformed Christian life looks like and how God wants Christian leaders to function in their roles as spiritual leaders. The vision begins and ends with love. Jesus taught that what God wants most from us is that we love God with all of our beings and love our neighbor as ourselves.² Paul taught the exact same priority of love of God and neighbor, and added that God’s ultimate plan is to transform every Christian to become more and more like Jesus Christ, who modeled this love through his devotion to serving God and his fellow human beings sacrificially.³ John and those who came after him are equally clear that love is to be the premier mark of everyone who knows, loves, and serves God and follows Jesus Christ.⁴

As people marked by love, God wants our churches and Christian-based organizations to honor God and reflect the ideal body of Christ, comprised of Spirit-led members who work together for the common good.⁵ Our salvation is entirely rooted in the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and at the same time, all followers of Christ are called to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit to resist sin, live according to

² Matthew 22:36-40 and parallels.

³ Romans 8:29; 12: 9-21; 1 Corinthians 13; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Philippians 2:5-8.

⁴ John 3:16; 15:12-17; 1 John 2:3-6; 3:16; 4:7-12.

⁵ Ephesians 4:1-16.

the will of God, and live fruitful lives of Christian service.⁶ In short, a biblical view of a Christian spirituality is a community of Christ-centered, Spirit-led individuals, created by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, with the goal of knowing, loving, and serving God in every way possible.

For those in positions of leadership, both Luke and Paul indicate that leaders should serve faithfully and effectively, be full of wisdom, be led by the Holy Spirit, and live a godly life.⁷ As Paul explains it, Christians leaders should also have specific gifts that are effective in planting or running churches (apostles, administrators), bringing people to faith in Christ (evangelists), or helping Christians grow in their faith (pastors, teachers).⁸ In other words, Christian spiritual leaders are first called to be Christ-centered, Spirit-led followers of Christ just as all Christians are called to be. Even more, they are expected to be exemplary in their faith and conduct, and, then, in addition, they have the responsibility of building the church and helping others to grow spiritually and serve Christ faithfully.

In my Pastoral Ministry classes that I teach at MIT, I summarize the biblical vision for Christians who have been entrusted with various roles of leadership, whether in a church, a Christian-based institution or NGO, a family, or any other group he or she is responsible for, as Spirit-led leaders who...

1. know and love God deeply in a personal way,
2. follow Jesus Christ faithfully and wholeheartedly,

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 8:1-8; 12:1-2; Galatians 5:16-23; Ephesians 2:10.

⁷ Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 4:12-16; Titus 1:7-9.

⁸ Ephesians 4:11-13.

3. live and lead by the power, love and self-discipline that comes from the Holy Spirit, and
4. draw others into Spirit-led living and Spirit-led leading in ways that build up the whole body of Christ.

The first three characteristics comprise the calling of every Christian. Those leaders that best serve Christ’s purposes in their sphere of influence will first and foremost develop a vital spiritual life as the foundation for everything else they do. This is true for Sunday School teachers, church workers, deacons, pastors, denominational leaders, Christian parents, and everyone else who sees themselves or their role as one designed to honor God and serve Christ. Only the fourth responsibility is reserved for those in specific leadership roles.

*The Spirit-Led Leader: Nine Leadership Practices and Soul Principles*⁹

For practical purposes, I’ve developed a collection of principles and practices that go into greater detail about Christian spirituality and the calling of a Spirit-led leader. These nine priorities or practices are something every Christian leader who wants to honor God and serve Christ’s purposes well in his or her position of leadership can do. Undergirding these practices are nine soul principles, that is, biblical teachings that are meant to inform our thinking and beliefs. “Leadership practices,” then, are actions we do. “Soul principles” are teachings we believe and live by.

Leadership Practice 1

Envision your leadership flowing out of a deep spiritual life.

⁹The material in this section is taken from my book, *The Spirit-Led Leader: Nine Leadership Practices and Soul Principles* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).

Soul Principle 1

Fruitfulness in leadership requires the work of God in and through us (Luke 2:46-49; 4:42-43; 5:15-16; 22:42; John 15:1-13; 1 Cor. 12:4-7; Phil. 2:12-13).

Leadership Practice 2

Actively cultivate your own spiritual life.

Soul Principle 2

Spiritual vitality flows from a real change of heart and mind toward God (Matt. 22:37-39; Col. 1:28-29; 3:17; Rom. 5:5; 8:13-14; 9:21; Phil. 2:5-11; Gal. 5:22-26; Heb. 5:7).

Leadership Practice 3

Develop specific spiritual disciplines.

Soul Principle 3

Disciplines deepen our spiritual life and empower our leadership (2 Pet. 1:3-11).

Leadership Practice 4

Always seek to serve God’s purposes first.

Soul Principle 4

Aligning our will with God’s is an all-encompassing, ongoing process (Col. 1:9-10; James 1:5-7).

Leadership Practice 5

Create a vital spiritual environment within your workplace.

Soul Principle 5

God works powerfully as we seek his activity among us (Acts 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 1 Cor. 12:1-7; 2 Cor. 12:9-10; Gal. 5:16-25; Eph. 4:30–5:12; Phil. 2:1-8).

Leadership Practice 6

Make change a personal priority.

Soul Principle 6

Change is our calling (Mark 10:45; John 3:16; 5:24; Rom. 3:21-24; 5:1-6; 8:5-11; 12:1-2; Phil. 1:6; 2:12; Col. 1:9-12; Titus 2:11-14).

Leadership Practice 7

Lead by listening well.

Soul Principle 7

The Holy Spirit speaks and works through every team member (1 Cor. 12; Phil. 2:3-8).

Leadership Practice 8

Always trust God.

Soul Principle 8

Steadfast trust in God is indispensable to spiritual vitality and leadership (Ps. 23; 42:5-6; 56:3-4; Prov. 3:5-6; Isa. 55:8-9; Jer. 17:28; Rom. 5:3-5; 8:28-39; 12:2; John 14:1; Heb. 6:13-15, 11:1; James 1:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:6-9).

Leadership Practice 9

Open yourself fully to the love and grace of God.

Soul Principle 9

The grace of God creates the only sure foundation for personal transformation and dynamic spiritual leadership (Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Pet. 1:3-6, 8-9; Titus 2:11-14; 2 Tim. 1:11-12; Heb. 4:16; 11:6; Rom. 1:16-17; 8:5-6; Phil. 3:8-12; 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The importance of living with integrity

One of the biggest factors that holds us back from becoming the Spirit-led individuals, friends, and leaders God has called us to be is “compartmentalization.” We separate our spiritual life from our marriage, from our parenting, from our leadership, from our relationships with our neighbors, and from other aspects of our life. Examples of various compartments include our key relationships, activities, and major aspects of our lives such as our family, spouse, church, work, finances, friends, recreation, sexual life, health, passions and dreams.

It’s quite normal to divide our lives into compartments, and very practical. Yet, a problem arises when we have some compartments that leave God out. We become different people in different contexts, or, we don’t let one aspect of our life influence

another. For example, we may be a godly worship leader on Sunday morning and mistreat our wives and children on Sunday night. We may preach a good sermon one day, and lie, cheat or steal another day. We may love our friends and families, but hate our neighbors. We may teach godliness and saving face, but fill our hearts and minds with lust and cheat on our spouses. Compartmentalization like this is contrary to the life that Jesus lived and that he taught his disciples to live.

Instead of leaving God out of some of the compartments in our life, biblical writers call us to place God and Jesus Christ at the center of our lives. Then, we must draw on the power of the Holy Spirit to bring Christ into every aspect of our life so that we can more consistently honor God and serve Christ’s purposes in every area of our lives. This is what is meant by integrity—our lives become “one” or “whole” (integral) without inconsistencies and contradictions. When our lives are well integrated, we will have a consistency that brings the different parts of our life into harmony with each other. In other words, when Christ is at the center of our beings, flowing into every compartment by the working and leading of the Holy Spirit, Christ unifies the purpose, power, perspective, and ultimately our very selves, so we become the same Christ-centered, Spirit-led person at all times, in every context.

Paul’s vision of a spiritually vital, integrated life

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul portrays the integrated life in a different, but complementary, way. This is his vision of the ideal Christian. He writes,

For this reason, since the day we heard [of your faith and love], we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of

God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10, NRSV)

Paul’s picture of the fully mature Christian person is this: We will be living a life that is both pleasing to God and worthy of Christ. It grows out of a depth of spiritual maturity, and shows itself in a life of bearing fruit in every good work. (Cf. Psalm 1) Thus, the more we mature spiritually, the more who we are, what we do, and how we do it will be integrated into one, consistent whole person.

WHO—the “who” of our calling is to become a person of deep spiritual maturity—filled with love for God and spiritual wisdom and understanding;

WHAT—the “what” is all the good that we do in our lives to serve God; and

HOW—the “how” of our calling is to live and work in such a way that pleases the Lord and is worthy of him.

This is a picture of a spiritually integrated person—who we are, what we do, and how we do it, all flow from the same Source—God in Christ. It is a picture of Christ-centered, Spirit-led individuals active in the world serving Christ.

We all fall very short of this vision at various points. Yet our failings do not negate the truth of the Gospel or the relevance of the teaching of Scripture for our modern day. Nor should our limitations change our vision. Indeed, our weaknesses and failures underscore the importance of recovering these principles and practices as a biblically-based vision for Christian spirituality and spiritual leadership, and then learning how to go to God to develop these qualities in us. These ideals and practices can be adopted and

practiced by the Church everywhere, just as the biblical writers did among their diverse congregations in their generation. They provide the starting place for doing contextual theology as well as for exploring all ways to create and promote spiritual vitality in a wide variety of diverse contexts.

Conclusion

Adequate and effective formation of present and future ministers calls for a multi-faceted approach to personal and leadership development. Spiritual leaders must grow intellectually, develop new ways to address pressing social and economic issues, and learn how to relate better to Christians from other ethnic groups as well as to their Buddhist neighbors. Yet, at the same time that we are discussing and celebrating diversity among Christians, and when we are exploring what fruit might come from contextual theology, modern day theologizing, and inter-faith dialogue, we must not neglect the very lifeblood of the Church in our vision for and preparation of future spiritual leaders. Christian spiritual leaders must develop a deep, vibrant relationship with God, and keep nurturing the source of their spiritual power and hope—their relationship with Christ and their ability to be led by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, spiritual vitality is by far and away the most important ingredient of a living and fruitful Church, and key to enabling her to be able to effectively serve Christ’s purposes in Myanmar.

This article does not begin to address all the challenges involved in interpreting Scripture in modern terms or diverse contexts. It does not delve into how Christians can and should use the Bible in conversation with non-Christians, be it for the sake of evangelism or inter-faith dialogue. It barely scratches the surface of how pastors and

Christian leaders might apply the biblically-based principles and practices in their leadership and ministry roles, and only begins to talk about the challenges of being truly Spirit-led. These are all important subjects needing much much more reflection and discussion. Rather, the modest aims of this article have simply been these:

- to affirm the value of a broad-based, multi-faceted, intellectual, and ecumenical approach to Christian leadership development, while holding up spiritual vitality as the single most important ingredient for effective and faithful Christian leadership;

- to affirm that the Bible continues to be the most appropriate and helpful foundation for doing theology, while emphasizing its particularly critical role in defining and developing spiritual vitality; and

- to present a biblically-based vision for spiritual vitality for all Christians, and especially for those in positions of spiritual leadership in congregations, Christian-based institutions, and families.

As all the New Testament writers indicate in dozens of different ways, Christians who embrace a truly Christ-centered, Spirit-led spirituality, which shows itself in Christian love and service, will experience a vital, energized, and energizing relationship with God that meets their own deepest needs of those of their communities. Churches will be healthier and their witness among non-Christians will be more convincing and effective. I have seen the truth of this myself in a wide variety of contexts and cultures through my work in the Congo, Rwanda, Ukraine, France, Vietnam, and Cambodia, as well as in the United States. When Christ is truly at the center of our minds and hearts, and we learn how to listen to and keep in step with the Holy Spirit in every aspect of our lives, this kind of spirituality produces more humility, vitality, joy, peace, and fruitfulness.

Some would call this kind of Christian spiritual vitality revival. Others might call it church renewal. Still others might see it as a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Whatever the right term, a biblically-based Christian spirituality will always be alive, vibrant, Christ-centered, and Spirit-led. Such spirituality will never be satisfied with perpetuating tradition alone, but will always seek fresh ways for the Spirit to lead and guide the church today. It will not judge and condemn our brothers and sisters in Christ, but will seek to promote love and faithfulness in a spirit of peace and harmony. It will not be satisfied with compartmentalization and hypocrisy, but will seek integrity and wholeness. It will not be generated by human effort or personal brilliance, but will flow from the working of the Holy Spirit. And, perhaps most important for the sake of our churches and Christian-based institutions and organizations, it will not simply be words in a statement of faith or in a motto placed on a plaque on the wall, it will be embraced and modeled by the leaders at the very core of their beings.

I, for one, want to become more of that kind of a leader. I want to do my part to prepare our present and future leaders, in and outside of the seminary, to become that kind of leader, too. My prayer is that this kind of biblically-based, Christ-centered, Spirit-led spirituality will increasingly characterize all of our Christian leaders everywhere. It will always be what’s most needed for Christians and churches all over the world, including here in Myanmar.