

The Apostle Paul

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon discusses the essential factors of spiritual leadership, as exemplified by the apostle Paul, and emphasizes the importance of vision, experience, originality, courage, balance, dependence upon God, and loyalty.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:1, Galatians 1:11

Topics: "Spiritual Leadership", "Imitation of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound responsibility of spiritual leadership as exemplified by the Apostle Paul, who invites others to imitate him as he imitates Christ. He outlines seven essential factors of effective leadership: vision, experience, originality, courage, balance, dependence on God, and loyalty. Paul's life and ministry serve as a model for leaders, demonstrating how a clear divine vision and personal experience shape one's ability to lead others faithfully. Sparks highlights that true leadership is not merely about authority but about embodying the principles of Christ in one's character and actions. Ultimately, Paul's call to follow him is a call to follow Christ, underscoring the importance of integrity in leadership.

Transcript

"Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ"(1 Cor. 11:1).

When a man says such a thing as this he assumes a very heavy responsibility. He involves Christ in his conduct, and for anyone to take his advice and then go wrong, would mean that Christ would be implicated in the error. The would-be leader will be committed to a very full and exact understanding of Christ and His ways.

History has given ample evidence that Paul was well aware of the responsibility which he took upon himself, and moreover, to the fact that Paul was a very safe leader in every christly respect. Therefore, when we come to a consideration of leadership as in the case of Paul, we are also seeing leadership in the case of Christ in many essential respects. The comparison can be made by the reader without our indicating it in detail.

It would be superfluous for us to spend time trying to prove that the apostle Paul was a leader. Everyone knows it to be so. No one in the whole of this dispensation, after Christ, has exerted more influence upon minds and lives than he, and he is today making things very heavy going for the best theological brains.

But our concern is to bring the salient points of his spiritual leadership into clear definition for all who have any responsibility among God's people. We shall indicate seven such factors in spiritual leadership.

1. Vision

By "vision" we mean dominating objective and purpose. Paul was a man of immense energy, and his energies covered a vast number of details and items. But Paul was not just tremendously active with a view to getting things done. That is, his was not a life of diffused activities, not even good works. Everything sprang from and was harnessed to one clear positive objective. Paul had seen something. He called it "the heavenly vision", and for that he said that he had been "apprehended by Christ Jesus". He was a man who knew very clearly where he was going, what his manysided activities were for and what the end of all had got to be. He has placed on record precisely and concisely what that vision and objective was. That is not the subject of this message; it is elsewhere in our ministry. Our present point is that, if there is to be that to which history will bear witness as really having been permanent, although temporarily undervalued and perhaps discredited, it must proceed from and be governed by a God-given vision of divine purpose. There must be a seeing clearly of how things would be if God had a true expression and realization of what is His full and supreme intention.

There will be disappointments, discouragements, heartbreaks and near despair at times, but there can be no alternative or turning to some substitutes. The vision, if given by God, will be so much a part of the leader as to be nothing less than life or death to him. This is evident in all the seers of old, and as much as in any in the case of Paul the apostle.

2. Experience

When we mention experience as being an essential in leadership, we are not necessarily thinking in terms of years. It may take time, but leadership is a matter of quality rather than quantity. Leaders are often those who have had a great deal pressed and concentrated into a short time and space. What we particularly mean by experience is that the one concerned has, through a deep, and perhaps drastic, history with God, become himself that into which he aims to lead others. No mere theory or textbook conception is history. His vision, objective, and its principles have been wrought into himself. He is his message! There is a secret power issuing from his personality which comes not firstly from intellectual conviction but from God's ways with him. The man and his message are one. He knows in his very being what he is talking about and aiming at. Experience just means that which comes out of thorough trial and proof. It is akin to experiment: a thing tested, put to the test. Leadership rests upon this knowing and being as the result of testing and proof.

We have only to look at the apostle Paul's particular ministry and note how God dealt with him, not only from his new birth, but even from his natural birth to see how all fitted into that ministry. Difficult, yes impossible, as it may be to believe it, there is a secret history of God in the life chosen by him for leadership, even before a living knowledge of the Lord, and from the time of new birth there is a history with God related to purpose. In most cases it is a deep history; a cramming and crushing into a comparatively short time of that which makes for reality and makes mere theories almost abhorrent.

3. Originality

Going hand in hand with experience, and, indeed, just a slant thereof, is originality. This, as its very nature, rules out effort or "trying to be original". Indeed, it is not aiming at being different, getting off "the

beaten track", or anything of that kind. Originality is not a deliberate discarding of old or existing orders with a view to starting something new. It is not the effort to think of something that no one has thought of before. It is not being smart or clever. Neither is originality imitation. That goes without saying. The word itself just means "beginning". This is not something caught from another or others. This is not something stored away in our unconscious minds and now coming out, even without our recognition that it is not our own. It is in the very nature of a thing that God does in us that it is so real, wonderful and personal that we cannot believe that anyone has ever known this before. One may preach a certain matter for years and then one day the Lord brings that life into a living experience of the very thing and he or she will come and preach to you about it as though you were the most ignorant on the matter. But see the life, the strength, the joy in the original! How often it would be pertinent to repeat to many preachers and would-be leaders the question of Christ to Pilate: "Sayest thou this of thyself, or did another tell thee it of me?" In other words: "Where did you get that?"

It is essential if others are to be led into experience and not merely into teaching or theory, that the leader is truly able to say, "The Lord has made this known to me". In this matter the apostle Paul has left us in no doubt. "It was not after men... neither did I receive it from man" (Gal. 1:11, 12 etc.).

Whether or not in the same measure, the truth and principle must exist in all leadership.

4. Courage

It might be thought to be most unnecessary to argue for courage in connection with leadership. It seems so obvious. But it is not so obvious as all that. Much depends upon what is meant by courage. Physical courage is one thing, perhaps the most common. Moral courage is another thing, far less common. But spiritual courage is still of another order, and the least common. We are not going to spend time on the differences, but rather upon getting right to the heart of the matter. But let us say this, that the kind of courage which is our concern here does not ultimately rest upon anything natural. It may not rest upon either physical or moral constitution. Indeed, these can be quite a minus quantity.

In Pilate's judgment hall or adjoining it -- during Christ's trial, the man who had faced and weathered many a violent storm at sea, and the man who believed that he could face any moral test, was a pitiable sight, reduced to abject cowardice. In Jerusalem before the same authorities less than two months later, the one thing noticed and recorded about him was his "courage". That is what we mean by "spiritual courage". It is not based on temperament, but is above temperament! Temperament or training may act and behave at the dictates of policy and diplomacy. Temperament may hate the way of unpopularity, may fear to lose friends, standing, advantage. Therefore in self-protection and self-preservation, compromise will be the resort or back-door way out of a dilemma. It could be worse, but this is the weakest way. True courage is a stand -- at any cost -- on principle, and no compromise if compromise means in the first place, sacrificing some spiritual value, and in the last place, merely postponing the crucial day.

Courage is not just unreasoning stubbornness. It is not unwillingness to be adjustable or to confess to having made a mistake. It may be just the opposite of these.

Courage is a clear knowing of essential divine principles and being willing to let go all personal interests on their behalf. Again, Paul's leadership is so evidently of this sort.

5. Balance

It would at once be thought that when we immediately follow what we have been saying with "Balance", we are taking something back, because, so often, balance and compromise are confused. The best way of showing the difference will be to look again at our apostle, and in doing so, see a clear reflection of our Lord in this particular respect.

Few men have combined strong opposite features in balance more beautifully and effectively than this example. That Paul was a man of very powerful forces is unmistakable. Whatever he did, he did it in strength. His own description of himself is very true: "So fight I, not as one that beateth the air..." (1 Cor. 9:26). There was no air-beating about Paul. If he struck, he struck hard and reached his mark. The forces stored up in that little body and mind were very powerful, and balance with him was not weakness of character or feebleness of presence. Balance in the case of this leader is clearly seen in the combination of austerity and kindness. He could make the same people feel what he called "a rod", and melt into tears in his sympathy and tenderness. He could -- like his Master -- leave those who did injury to others or to God's interests, just devastated and shamed, and so to speak "without a leg to stand on". And yet, he could win a grim battle, as in Corinth, by sheer love and meekness.

It is not our intention here to list the various contrasts which were harmonized in Paul, but just to point out that a true spiritual leader will not be one who is all will and no heart, all softness and no strength, all cold reason and no sympathetic imagination, all sloppy sentimentalism and no "truthing it in love" (Eph. 4:15).

Balance demands the counterpoise of opposites and the man who would lead others must win their confidence, if it be possible, by holding strength, firmness, faithfulness, even to wounding if needs be, in even proportion with understanding, kindness, and sympathy.

6. Dependence upon God

Perhaps it would be considered to have more point if this particular feature of leadership were set in the context of natural inefficiency. That is, if the one in view were lacking in the things which naturally make for leadership. If birth, training, education, intellectual power, social status, personality, and such like qualifications, attainments and abilities were of a very ordinary or meagre kind. Then we could well understand and appreciate a real and honest dependence upon God.

It puts an altogether different complexion upon the situation when all of these things are present to any unusual degree, and it opens the door to a very serious conclusion. If it was true of the apostle Paul that, possessing all these natural advantages beyond most men, he was a man who had to -- and knew that he had to -- depend upon God for everything, and that apart from God he was really impotent, then we are forced to serious conclusions.

It would be too big and too long a piece of work to gather all the evidences of that dependence. We know much from his own pen of his infirmities, weakness, entreaties for prayer that he would be helped, his acknowledgment of "help received from God"; and the one great declaration: "We despaired of life; we had the answer that it was death, that we might not trust in ourselves but in God who raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:8, 9). We should have to include all that teaching on "faith" which was the very basis of his life. What conclusions are we forced to by this case?

Obviously, the first is that, whatever value the sovereignty of God may have in such natural features, by themselves they are no guarantee of spiritual leadership. Should ever a man called to spiritual leadership tend to "lean to his own understanding" he will find himself confounded. The Anointing is an Extra to the

fullest and best, and -- note this -- is of another order of qualification.

This leads on to a further conclusion. It is that natural or acquired abilities are -- at most -- only servants, not masters. They belong to the soul that is intellect, emotion and will, for such is the meaning of the word "natural" in the New Testament. The soul is the servant of the spirit, and it is in and through the human spirit "born anew" that the Holy Spirit dwells and works. The soul is that by which human communication is made as from man to man. Reason helps reason. Heart helps heart. Will helps will. This is all good, but it remains on the natural level until the extra of the anointing enters by the spirit. Then things move on to the eternal level with issues that are much more far-reaching. It is just here that dependence has its real meaning, but it relates to the whole man: spirit, soul and body; as we see with Paul.

7. Loyalty

It would be difficult to say with finality which is the greatest of all virtues, but in trying to reach such a conclusion we should find ourselves under considerable obligation to place loyalty very high up, if not at the top. Loyalty includes so many things like faithfulness, trustworthiness, fidelity, constancy, generosity, and so on. It is so great a virtue because it is in such definite contrast to the meanest and most contemptible of traits. Treachery could be placed at the bottom of the scale, with its evil brood, especially the inuendo. Of all the poison darts in a quiver there are few more sinister than the inuendo. It is the resort of the coward who hides behind a covey of insinuations and refuses to come right out into the open. Aspersions are cruel weapons.

With all that we know of wrong, weakness, meanness and disloyalty in churches and people, it is more than impressive to note how the apostle Paul refused to speak or write of it to other churches and persons. We are much disgusted with a lot at Corinth that was deplorably unjust, unfair, unkind, and grossly selfish. But we never find Paul talking of their failures to other churches. Rather does he make the best of them. His loyalty finds rich expression in his lists of people. Paul would never stoop to try and strengthen himself by demeaning someone else. He was a man who would, if such could be found, find some extenuating explanation for a seeming or actual delinquency when it was a matter of talking to others. To the delinquent he would be absolutely faithful and frank. You could rely on him to stand up for you, even if he knew well your failures.

Whatever might be said against him, it would require the most contemptible of persons to lay a charge of being a "little" man against him. He was too big a man to be jealous or disparaging. He never thought or acted lightly in the matter of friendship. Friendship was a sacred thing with him, never to be cheaply thrown away. How very much there is to say about this great virtue and factor of loyalty, but with so little said it is not difficult to see what an important and vital part it plays in leadership. It was so largely this that justified Paul in holding the position of spiritual leader which he had.

And in this respect, as in others, he was safe in saying,

"Follow me, as I follow Christ".

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