

## **Spiritual Authority:**

What is authority and what makes authority spiritual?

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### On Authority

If a police officer exclaims, “Stop in the name of the law,” she is using a form of authority. Authority has been granted and delegated to this person for the purpose of upholding the law. It is to be used for the protection and service of others, not for the personal gain of the officer. This simple illustration points out several relevant dynamics of authority.

Authority is received from others. It is delegated.

Authority is granted from a greater authority. People who take authority are referred to as “dictators.” It is wise for a person to not seek higher position, but rather wait on God and for that position to “seek” them. It is extremely difficult if not impossible to wean out any hint of personal ambition in the pursuit of any position of influence. Our identity is too tied to what we do and how others perceive us. A potential leader waiting in the wings is wise if she waits on the Lords and humbles oneself in that posture of waiting. If God is in it, the person will receive greater influence at the right time and in the right manner.

Authority is granted for the accomplishing of a task.

The purposes of leadership are as myriad as the positions held by them. The key principle here is one of influence. A person is granted authority - be it positional or relational - that they may influence others for a common good. Too many leaders mistake that the position they have received is the end in itself. However, leadership is granted for very specific purposes and the leader has been granted influence to move people and resources toward that missional objective.

Authority is for the purpose of benefitting others.

One of the greatest downfalls of leaders is mistaking that positional authority is deserved and all the perks that come with it are a right. If one holds to the principles of servant leadership, then the Lord washing the disciple’s feet as recorded in John 13 is the primary set of directions to be followed. A leader is to set one’s own concerns and ambitions aside for the greater good and the personal benefit of every single person within reach of that leader’s influence. “Perks” are not to be sought. Words such as “my staff” or “my church” are revealers of blindness in this area. People and organizations do not belong to a leader. Words really do matter here. This is the most likely area of misuse of authority. If the police officer in the above illustration were to use her authority

for her personal gain, she would be accurately described as corrupt. This is true for any person in any leadership position.

In their must-read book, The Ascent of a Leader, authors Thrall, McNicol and McElrath, state, “The character ladder leads to a relational organization - a community - that honors the completion of tasks. The capacity ladder typically leads to a task-driven organization, at the expense of people. This ladder creates people-users - leaders who use followers for their benefit, to further their own success. But leaders on the character ladder treat people as the object and focus of their success. They lead for the benefit of their people, not just their own success.”

I argue that a key marker of “success” for any leader in any position is that those who they influence experience marked growth - be that professional competency, relational skills, spiritual depth and/or character development. A wise leader pursues maturity in their followers in each of these crucial areas. As this happens, there is little that can stifle the accomplishment of that group’s mission.

But what makes authority spiritual?

Our extremely basic look at authority sets the table for us to reflect on spiritual authority. Of course, the first response to the question of what makes authority spiritual is “God.” This is obviously true. But all authority traces its ultimate roots back to the one who is Authority. It is possible for men and women to be in positions such as a pastor at a local church or leading a church planting team in Pakistan and not lead with spiritual authority. What makes authority spiritual is Presence - the Presence of God. A leader who consistently demonstrates the presence of God in their personal life and in public leadership are walking in spiritual authority. It is the very, living, active, shaping work of God in and around and through a person that marks spiritual authority. This is a key attribute to look for in anyone who has been granted any level of leadership position. It is foolish and unwise for any leader to assume that just because they are leading a spiritual organization or have a spiritual title that they are functioning in spiritual authority. A leader is not the one to affirm this dynamic in their own life - God and others are the ones to validate it.

How does one obtain spiritual authority?

Is it even possible to “obtain” this attribute? Yes and no. No because God is the one who grants it and we cannot manipulate that process. However, we can facilitate it. The only way a leader can carry the presence of God into public leadership is if they have spent *adequate* time in the presence of God themselves. This goes way beyond the concept of personal “devotions.” *Adequate* is a very loaded term. What is adequate for this season may not be for the next. The leader who sub-categorizes life in the areas of personal “devotions” at home and a leadership role at the office and not intricately mingle the two are gravely mistaken.

Moses may be the most graphic illustration of this dynamic. He was certainly a changed man after the burning bush scene. He did indeed lead Israel out of Egypt. However, it is during the periods on Mt. Sinai when he repeatedly spent time alone in the presence of God for up to 40 days at a time that his authority escalated in spiritual scope. Exodus 33 is a wonderful passage to study this dynamic in his life. Even after the time on Mt. Sinai, Moses continues to spend periods of time in the tent of meeting with God (Joshua is there too being shaped by this Presence). Moses becomes so aware of the desperate need for God's presence he fights for it in Exodus 33.

The only way my personal influence will begin to reek of the aroma of God's presence is to knowingly abide in that presence all through the day. As I practice times of solitude, prayer, silence, pausing through the day at different times to pray, and other crucial disciplines, the possibility of God's presence seeping its way into my life and work increases. I cannot manipulate this process, but I can facilitate and seek to remove anything in my life that might hinder it.

The effectiveness of a leader hinges right here. God is the one who transforms character. What every community and organization needs are leaders who ooze God from the very beings. Spiritual authority is sensed, felt, experienced in a gentle, gracious and strong way as followers spend time with these marked leaders.

#### Taking Spiritual Authority to the Streets

If there are elements of this article that have caught your attention, I encourage you to assume the Holy Spirit has put His finger on that very point for your reflection and growth. All leaders must maintain a life-long learning posture. It is primarily in the context that our character is exposed, tested and shaped. Spiritual authority is a trait that can ever be grown in. In fact, God beckons each leader to be a follower and journey with him deeper into his presence that more of his presence can go with the leader.

Take the following questions and reflect on them with deep consideration and ideally with other people. I have also included three must-read titles at the end of this list.

How are you manifesting the truth that the influence you have is for other's benefit not yours?

Are you keenly aware that authority has been granted to you, that it is not yours to keep?

How can you protect a natural slide from missional use of authority to personal gain from authority?

How are the people within your influence experiencing personal, marked growth and development? How can you more internationalize that process?

Can you identify specific examples of the manifestation of God's presence in your personal and public life? List them.

How are you seeking to deepen the spiritual quality of your leadership? How can you do this in private? How can you do this while "on the job?"

How are you fostering community in your work environment?

Do those you lead approach you with frustrations, concerns, disagreements, and feedback? If not, how can you foster such a grace-centered, open environment?

Three books to read now:

*The Ascent of a Leader* by Thrall, McNicol, and McElrath

Strengthening the Soul of your Leadership by Ruth Haley Barton

*A Leader's Legacy* by Kouzes and Posner