

BOOK REVIEW
SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP
by J. Oswald Sanders
(Chicago: Moody Press, 1967, 1980)

Several hundred years from now, I suspect that this book will be read and quoted by pastors in England and America just as are classics like Richard Baxter's, *The Reformed Pastor* and William Law's *Serious Call*. These books possess a depth of insight and a timelessness that are rare in contemporary literature. Sanders almost completely dispenses with leadership techniques, and therefore his writing differs significantly from the "how-to" content characteristic of contemporary authors like Maxwell and Hybels. Sanders focuses almost exclusively on the *soul* of the leader.

The book begins with issues of godly motivation for leadership and ends with issues of the replacement and reproduction of leaders. In between, he dips deeply into the leadership principles of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, and quotes widely from great leaders of church history such as Martin Luther, J. Hudson Taylor, and Charles Spurgeon. Between the covers of this book are a spirit of Christlike servanthood, a call to self-discipline and humility, large doses of encouragement, and a refreshing candor about the perils of the job.

In the early church, the cost of leadership (you might be killed!) tended to be a reality-check on one's motivation for becoming a leader. The "glory" was tempered by the sacrifice. Today, American Christianity is relatively safe, and a position of spiritual leadership may be a prestigious and coveted career. This italicizes the urgency of proper motivation in leadership. According to I Timothy 3, a leader's ambition is not to win an *office*, but to assume a *function* to service as an overseer. It is not appropriate to be ambitious for power and position. Conversely, it is commendable to aspire to a ministry of serving God's people. It is significant that the term "leader" occurs only six times in the KJV. God seems to be making the point that leadership is exercised and motivated by referring to it mostly in terms of servanthood, e.g., "Moses *my servant* is dead..." Sanders goes so far as to allege, via A. W. Tozer, that "A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead," and "the man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader." (p.39)

The closest that Sanders gets to leadership "how to" is in the central portion of the book as he explores the need for prayer, wise time management, reading, and cultivating one's leadership potential. Probably every Christian leader would agree with the quotation from Vaughan, "If I wished to humble anyone, I should question him about his prayers." (p. 103) We profess that prayer is the Christian's "vital breath," but we find a perplexing aversion to it. One would think that if there was ever anyone who did *not* need to pray, it would be the Son of God, but solitary and sacrificial times of prayer were prominent in his ministry. Chadwick regretted that he not prayed more; on the other hand Luther said that the busier he was, the more he prayed, as much as three hours in the morning. Sanders learned well the value from his predecessor, Hudson Taylor, that one must learn to move men, through God, by prayer alone. For all of our human efforts of

spiritual influence, in the end, and at the very core of things, it is only the power of God that truly influences spiritual change in lives. So, if you want to be great in the eyes of God and in the view of Christian biographers, you had better get serious about praying.

If there is any flaw in this book, it is the over-use of quotations from D. E. Hoste, Sanders predecessor as director of China Inland Mission (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship). But one overlooks this ubiquity in view of the stellar content of the quotes and the fact that the content of this book originally appeared as a series of monthly articles written for the constituency of the mission. While some might object to the lack of technical leadership “how-to” content, I believe that it is actually the strength of the book, because techniques quickly become dated, while treating the heart of leadership principles will always be timeless. One wise man once said that, for every new book one reads, one should read an old one. This book reads like an old one because of its heavy reliance on the writings and biographies of great leaders of the past. In these pages one sees leadership through the eyes of the Bible’s greatest leaders, and then samples the hearts and convictions of leaders from the early church, through the Reformation, and into the modern missions movement, the Great Awakening, and the glory days of evangelical preaching in the British Empire. It is likely that the reader’s appetite will be whetted to go find some of Sanders’ source books to investigate further the minds of these great spiritual leaders.

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