

From the Principal's Desk

Leading From a



Heart

The spiritual life of the principal in a Christian school is either a steppingstone or a stumbling block to the spiritual vitality of his or her campus. Just knowing the *theory* of biblical truth will not transform mind, soul, and body. God-honoring leadership is not a theoretical concept or a head game. The principal must lead from a sanctified heart, which is the product of a life of consecration and holiness. Leading from the head rather than from the heart will result in self-deception and futility.

Leadership from a sanctified heart begins with a heart in which God dwells. It has one end in mind—eternity. The defining characteristic of leadership from a sanctified heart is *total devotion to God*, which is demonstrated through a genuine and authentic attitude and a contrite spirit. Leading from the heart requires intelligent, intentional, and incessant attention to ensuring one's total consecration to God.

The principalship is probably the most demanding, most highly scrutinized, and most under-appreciated job in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And yet, it can be the most rewarding spiritual activity in which anyone can

engage. To be a success in God's eyes, the principal must be endowed with more than charisma, highly developed professional skills, and practical expertise. God-honoring, successful principalship happens only when educators who have been called by the Holy Spirit find their motivation and passion for service in the desire to know the divine will, and then commit themselves to live humbly and uncompromisingly for the glory of God.

The level of excellence that God-honoring principals experience and demonstrate is a Heaven-inspired and

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Heaven-empowered service. The legacies of godly leaders reveal that there is a significant difference between the effectiveness and long-term impact of principals who live and lead from a sincere heart, and those who, knowingly or unknowingly, lead from a heart filled with pride, self-deception, and a lust for power.

Leadership based on ego and pretense is an all-too-common affliction that often produces impressive but superficial counterfeits. Leading from ego and pretense and not from the heart is an activity in futility and vanity. The contrast in leadership attributes between Moses and Pharaoh, David and Saul, and Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar can be seen in the enduring legacies of their leadership, whether for good or evil. Without a spiritual commitment (leadership from the sanctified heart), principals will merely go through the motions without ever fulfilling the divine invitation and objective of being transformed by the renewing of their minds. The end product of spiritual leadership is the fruits of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23, NRSV).¹

Leadership from the heart, like character, is not something that principals do. It is something that they *are*. Spiritual leadership is a heart-borne experience and not a skill-driven activity and is transformative for both the principal and his or her school. It transforms the leader as well as those who are led. It first glorifies God and then blesses others with a life of grace, humility, integrity, mercy, compassion, and transparency. Principals who lead from the heart lead with humility and grace and not with power and authority. They are other-centered, not self-centered.

Leadership Recession?

Leadership in Seventh-day Adventist education is first and foremost a spiritual function. Technical skills and expertise in organizational management are useless unless they are exercised from a heart that is fully committed to serving God and unwaveringly centered on the spiritual purpose of building up God’s kingdom on earth. Unfortunately, leaders who know God personally, self-intimately, and others compassionately seem to be on the endangered species



list these days. The Adventist Church, like the rest of Christendom and the secular world, seems to be undergoing an acute “leadership gap” that threatens the mission for which Adventist schools were established.

Successful spiritual leadership requires that the leader’s heart be fully committed to God. Without true conversion, the principal’s functions and activities are nothing but a chimera of false positives and temporary scaffolding that will not withstand the test of time.

Leading from a sanctified heart is the

essence of authentic living. Ellen White made a timeless appeal for spiritual, transparent, and God-honoring leaders when she wrote: “The greatest want of the world is the want of those men and women who will not be bought or sold, those who in their inmost souls are true and honest; those who do not fear to call sin by its right name; those whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle is to the pole, those who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”² Only leaders who have experienced true conversion can meet this high standard.

The call to a God-honoring life is more relevant and urgent now than ever before, given the current dearth of such leaders in society.

Although the special species of leaders described in the above quote is extremely rare today, God is still searching for and finding transformed and committed leaders. These covenant leaders (principals) are fully committed at heart and determined to do God’s will on earth.

Leadership from a sanctified heart manifests itself in a beautifully transparent lifestyle that demonstrates a high integrity quotient. God-honoring leaders cannot practice in their lives what

their hearts do not embrace. “Fake it ’till you make it” is not an option for those who serve God in sincerity and who seek to do His will.

No leader has been known to lead someone to the light while standing in the dark. Dead hearts cannot revive cold hearts. Hence the call for leaders who have personally experienced a spiritual heart transplant and who serve God with sincerity, in the spirit and power of Christ, their Leader and Mentor. When the soul of the principal catches fire, the souls of students, teachers, and parents ignite as well. “Those who would impart

truth must themselves practice its principles. Only by reflecting the character of God in uprightness, nobility, and unselfishness of their own lives can they impress others.³

Could it be that the number-one challenge of Adventist education today is not a financial but a spiritual problem? If this is true, then the spirituality of the principal may be one of the significant variables that can bring about the long-desired renaissance in Adventist education.

Adventist education needs to experience a turning toward the values of the kingdom of God through the spiritual leadership of its leaders. God is urgently calling for committed leaders who will humbly manifest the courage and commitment to “stand for the right though the heavens fall.” The prophet Jeremiah beckons to principals, “Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it” (Jeremiah 6:16, NRSV).

To a certain extent, leadership from the heart requires the exercise of reverse intelligence—analyzing and learning from what is and what has been. It also calls for the strategic use of anticipatory intelligence—intentionally acknowledging, focusing on, choosing, and pursuing preferred outcomes. The divine plan for education will, first and foremost, prepare young people (Malachi 2:15) for God’s eternal kingdom. This preparation for eternity cannot be led and facilitated by principals who lead from a heart of ego or pretense, or who are just going through the motions. Lee Boleman, in his book, *Leading With Soul*, writes: “When individuals live superficially, pursue no goals deeper than material success, and never stop to listen to their inner voices, they block their spiritual development.”⁴

Leaders who are not growing spiritually cannot lead from the heart because this requires an inner transformative experience that constantly seeks self-renewal in order to bless and influence others. God-honoring leaders are not just master teachers. They are, more importantly, master lesson plans to be read and observed by those who follow them.

The poet Leroy Brownlow wrote: “You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day; by things that you do, by things you say. Others read that gospel, whether faithless or true! Say! What is

special to God. Ellen White wrote, “The soul of the little child that believes in Christ is as precious in His sight as are the angels above His throne.”⁶

The redemption and restoration of God’s heritage must be the all-consuming agenda for principals. In the final analysis, all other school-related activities will be but mere temporal scaffolding. Leading from a sanctified heart is a mission-driven administrative imperative that gives uncompromising priority to what the kingdom of God and Adventist education are all about—the redemption of all students.

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Models and Mentors of Leadership From a Sanctified Heart

The principal is the spiritual thermostat of his or her school. He or she sets the spiritual climate and atmosphere. And how does a principal operationalize the leading-from-the-heart philosophy in his or her lifestyle and administrative practices? Three superheroes from Scripture answer this question with unequivocal and compelling clarity. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are three models who unabashedly lived their leadership from sanctified hearts and served the cause of God

the Gospel According to You?”⁵ Principals need to see themselves as open gospels read by students, teachers, parents, constituents, and the community.

Center and Circumference

Spiritual leadership is both the center and circumference of the Adventist principalship. An understanding of the value that God places upon children, and His divine design for their salvation, challenges principals to first of all, secure their own relationship with God and then work passionately and untiringly, always keeping in mind the divine mission for children—the salvation of every student. Children are very

with an incomparable and enviable margin of excellence.

Ezra

God commissioned Ezra, an Israelite priest, scribe, and leader who lived in the 5th century B.C., to undertake a special work of reformation and rebuilding. When Ezra learned of the spiritual condition of the Israelites, he humbled himself before God and prayed for their restoration (Ezra 9). His wholehearted response and obedience helped to lead his people back to God.

Ezra led a group of Jews from Persia to Jerusalem to undertake the challenging task of rebuilding the temple of God. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, he observed that the intermarriage between the Israelites and pagans had led his people into idolatry. He wept before God and prayed for revival.

Ezra was a leader who had his priorities straight! The first thing that he did in rebuilding the temple was to build the altar for offering the morning and evening sacrifices because he recognized that time spent in prayer dramatically alters one's relationship with God and other people. "The tragedy of our day is not unanswered prayer but unoffered prayer."⁷ Principals who lead from a sanctified heart most definitely also lead from their knees, for prayer is the fuel, oxygen, and power of the soul.

Nehemiah

Every successful principal must have a "Nehemiah Moment" in his or her lifetime, when a vision/mission that is born of God becomes a moral imperative that is fueled by a sincere prayer life and an unwavering commitment to do business God's way. Before Nehemiah accepted the challenge of rebuilding the ruined walls of Jerusalem, he first undertook the task of rebuilding his own spiritual life. He prayed openly to God (10 times during the short book that bears his name), confessing his own sin and the sins of his people, and asking for divine enabling to do the work at hand. A sincere prayer from the heart of a believing disciple is the key that opens the heart of God. Successful principalship, by Heaven's standard, is impossible without a personal and transforming Nehemiah Moment and a consistent and genuine Nehemiah-like prayer life. Good "pray-ers" are good players for God! Ellen White states, "The greatest victories gained for the cause of God are not the result of labored argument, ample facilities, wide influence, or abundance of means; they are gained in

the audience chamber with God, when with earnest, agonizing faith, men lay hold upon the mighty arm of power."⁸

Esther

Esther is an enviable example of commitment, courage, and compassion. Her life demonstrates the profound and dynamic interplay between divinity and humanity that occurs in a transformed life that is lived from the heart and demonstrates total commitment to doing the will of God, and when a believer possesses the courage to act fearlessly without concern for his or her own safety; displays divine wisdom, and demonstrates compassionate care for God's chosen people.

And the Answer Is . . . !

What is the short- and long-term impact of the quality of the spiritual life of the principal on students, staff, and parents? As principals cherish God in their hearts and reveal the fruits of the Spirit in their lives, they become increasingly more effective in sharing Him with everyone with whom they come into contact. Principals cannot raise their students and staff spiritually to heights that they themselves have never attained. Even as the human heart facilitates the flow of blood to all the organs of the body, so also does leading from a sanctified heart facilitate the spiritual vitality of those being served. This is leadership at its best! Leading from the ego and wielding power over others for vain glory may capture human admiration and may last for a time, but leading from a sanctified heart bears kingdom-fruits that inspire and last throughout eternity.

Conclusion

Leading from a sanctified heart is the essence of spiritual leadership and is the outgrowth of a sacred covenant with God. This commitment begins at the altar of contrition and requires un-

ceasing prayer. For, says Richard Foster, it is, "At the altar of Covenant Prayer we vow unswerving allegiance to make high resolves; we promise holy obedience."⁹ Leading from the heart is initiated and empowered by God. It leads to God, who empowers all those who will follow Him wholeheartedly—principals, teachers, students, and parents—to life eternal. This is the divine and eternal objective of Adventist education—the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption and restoration. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bible texts credited to NRSV are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
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