

Governance and Spirituality:

The Profound Impact of Board Members' Spiritual Health on the Institutions They Govern



A single person moved by the Holy Spirit can be a channel of blessings and make a substantial difference in Seventh-day Adventist educational institutions. Conversely, a board member who is disconnected from the Spirit, even for a short time, can cause a lot of damage.¹ This was made clear to me some years ago when I served as a conference superintendent of education for the Greater New York Conference.

We needed an Adventist school in eastern Long Island, New York, after the closure of the previous school, which had served families in the area for more than 40 years. We established a small committee to pray, plan, negotiate, and open a school on the premises of the Babylon church where a previous small Adventist school had closed 25 years earlier, leaving behind a large debt that the church had to pay off and the pain that came with it.

There were many challenges: First, the church members would have to embrace the project in spite of the bad memories. Second, we would have to win the support of other churches in the area so that they would subsidize the new school and/or enroll their children. Third, we would need to find funding to bring the old building up to code and cover the expenses associated with opening of a new school. Fourth, the Babylon Town Council, which had a reputation for being very difficult, would have to give permission to use

the existing building for a school. We desperately needed God's blessing for this project to become a reality against all these odds.

After much prayer and deliberation, with the support of the church pastor and planning committee members, the project was presented before the church members at a special business meeting. There were many legitimate questions and objections, and it seemed that the members were ready to vote down the proposal. Then suddenly, God used the voice of a courageous and dedicated member who spoke like Caleb and Joshua did² and helped convince the church to move forward with the project. Subsequently, she responded to the call and faithfully served for many years as the board chair of the new church school.

Answering our prayers, God miraculously opened all the doors and removed all the obstacles. Today, the South Bay Junior Academy is still providing Adventist education to many families in the area.

Adventist Education and the Great Controversy

Adventist education is fundamentally a ministry³ and a spiritual endeavor. In the context of the great controversy between good and evil, board members should keep in mind that Christian educational institutions are primarily established to advance God's kingdom: "To restore in men and

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women the image of their Maker, to bring them back to the perfection in which they were created—this was to be the work of redemption. This is the object of education, the great object of life.”⁴ Consequently, this battle cannot be fought exclusively with brain power, financial resources, or professional skills. Divine weapons are needed to fight spiritual battles. It is ““Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6, NKJV).

Because of their influential and visible position, board members are the targets of the enemy’s attacks, as was Simon Peter.⁵ They need to “resist him, steadfast in the faith” (1 Peter 5:9). Otherwise, they may become an impediment to the progress of God’s work. I still remember the painful story of a bitter personal quarrel between an influential board member and a principal that ended in a church school closure. The board member wanted to prove that he had the “last word” and that he had the “power to make the principal lose his job.” So he persuaded the constituency to shut down the school. That sad-but-true story illustrates the deleterious impact of a proud, vengeful, and selfish trustee.

Lou Solomon noted that “becoming powerful makes people less empathetic,” and that “the most common leadership failures don’t involve fraud, the embezzlement of funds, or even sex scandals. It’s more common to see leaders fail in the area of every day self-management—and the use [of] power in a way that is motivated by ego and self-interest.”⁶

The disturbing story of the ruthless Queen Jezebel reminds us that board members are *trustees* and should hold themselves to the highest ethical standards and never condone nepotism or cronyism. Jezebel carefully planned Naboth’s elimination with the intention of seizing his vineyard for her husband (1 Kings 21). Similarly, board members sometimes pressure the administration to gain position, promotion, or salary increases for their relatives or friends.

As they carry out their important responsibilities, spiritual leaders must be aware of their shortcomings since “We have this treasure in earthen vessels” (2 Corinthians 4:7). Richard Exley candidly reminds us that the “potential for the abuse of power is present in every one of us. Frequently, it is held in check, not by true humility, but only by lack of opportunity. If we are given a little power, let the world beware!”⁷ Dan Allender invites us to acknowledge our limitations as we “lead with a limp.” He calls us to resolutely walk away

from ineffective and harmful responses to challenges, including cowardice, rigidity, narcissism, hiding, and fatalism, and to embrace effective responses, comprising courage, depth, gratitude, openness, and hope.⁸ “Those who control others should first learn to control themselves. Unless they learn this lesson, they cannot be Christlike in their work. They are to abide in Christ, speaking as He would speak, acting as He would act, with unfailing tenderness and compassion.”⁹

Seeking to Define Spirituality

Researchers have struggled to define spirituality.¹⁰ Bruce Speck acknowledged that “clearly, a consensual definition of spirituality is lacking.”¹¹ Covrig, Ledesma, and Gifford made a distinction between spirituality and religion,¹² but Kenneson challenged that approach.¹³ Joanna Crossman advocated a “secular spiritual development,”¹⁴ while Cadge and Konieczny noticed that religion is “hidden in plain sight” and should be openly acknowledged like gender or race.¹⁵ Fry and Kiger listed values related to spiritual leadership: trust, forgiveness, integrity, honesty, courage, humility, kindness, compassion, patience, excellence, and happiness.¹⁶

In this article, *religion* is not equated with *spirituality*. There are some religious people who are also spiritual, but not all of them are. Religion has brought crusades, inquisition, persecution, bigotry, violence, and judgmental attitudes. Spirituality comes with love, acceptance, patience, courage, and forgiveness. Spiritual people demonstrate authenticity, transcendence, connectedness, self-reflection, self-control, inner peace, and a sense of purpose. Spirituality is first and foremost about the heart. Spiritual board members cultivate

the “fruit of the Spirit,” which according to Paul, “is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22, 23).

However, even authentically spiritual persons sometimes have an incomplete or incorrect understanding of the truth. The Millerites, for example, were very spiritual, but believed incorrectly that Jesus would return to Earth in 1844, when in fact, He was about to inaugurate His ministry in the most holy place in the heavenly sanctuary.¹⁷ Apollos’ knowledge of the gospel was limited to the teaching he received before being baptized by John the Baptist. He was, however, a very spiritual man who loved God and was dedicated to His service. Although very eloquent and highly educated, he was

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humble enough to receive a Bible study from two manual workers, the tentmakers Priscilla and Aquila.¹⁸

The Holy Spirit is guiding believers into all truth, but that revelation is progressive. Besides, believers are not always ready to learn everything that the Lord wants to teach them: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12) Jesus told the disciples. “The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things” (John 14:26). A spiritual person has an attitude of humility and a willingness to learn deeper truths in order to grow in the Lord.

The Perils of Counterfeit Spirituality

Religion without spirituality is censured numerous times in the Bible. It is characterized by extremism, a judgmental attitude, a desire to control other people, a spirit of revenge, arrogance, pride, selfishness, discrimination, exclusion, greed, and/or corruption. Paul scorned those who have “a form of godliness but [deny] its power” (2 Timothy 3:5).

Spirituality is not about attending religious services, observing rites, participating in ceremonies, or even memorizing doctrines, although these religious practices usually help nurture it.¹⁹ The Pharisees were strict observers of the law, but they “neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23 NASB).²⁰ They were very religious, but they were empty of true communion with God. The doctrines they had studied so well did not transform their selfish and proud hearts. Paul also addressed this problem: “Though I have *the gift* of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2). He added in 1 Corinthians 8:1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies,” also translated “knowledge makes arrogant, but love builds up” (NASB). It is not about what we know or how much money we have, nor about observing rules and obtaining compliance to policies—although these are important—it is about becoming a new creature, transformed from the inside out by the love of Jesus.

Saul of Tarsus was full of fervor for the Law and “exceedingly zealous for the traditions”²¹ of his fathers, but it took that encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus to change his heart and set his priorities straight—a reminder that authentic spirituality grows in the presence of God.

Counterfeit spirituality is often presumptuous. Christians sometimes expect God to approve their ways and bless them even when they are negligent, disobedient, or lazy. They claim that “This is God’s work, it cannot fail.” Jeremiah warned the children of Israel: “Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these’” (Jeremiah 7:4). Ellen White wrote: “Nehemiah did not regard his duty done when he had wept and prayed before the Lord. He united his petitions with holy endeavor, putting forth earnest, prayerful efforts for the success of the enterprise in which

he was engaged. Careful consideration and well-matured plans are as essential to the carrying forward of sacred enterprises today as in the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls.”²²

Trustees of Adventist schools cannot afford to be capricious and arbitrary. They must not use their personal opinions to recommend discipline for employees or students. A couple of decades ago, a church school principal, one of the best educators in the conference, was summarily fired by the local school board because she ordered pizza for her students. The board members firmly believed that a “true Adventist” could not and would not have offered such “unhealthy food” to the students. In their righteous indignation, they voted to remove the principal from office, effective immediately. It took the firm intervention of the conference officers and a lot of wisdom to convince these board members that they needed to follow due process and that they were not allowed to dismiss an employee whose job was contracted by the conference. School boards can make recommendations for termination or dismissal, but ultimately the decision rests with the conference board of education and its representative, the education superintendent. Termination policies are stated in official denominational policies and government regulations.²³

Genuine Spirituality Bears the Fruits of the Spirit

If someone is called to serve as a board member, he or she is entrusted with great privilege that comes with responsibilities. “It is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2). Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah were successful spiritual leaders who can be an inspiration for board members. They were diligent, faithful, honest, courageous, and prudent. Their strong faith motivated them to carefully prepare themselves, to plan thoughtfully, and to judiciously execute their projects. They felt convicted that in whatever they were doing, they were responsible “to the Lord and not to men” (Colossians 3:23). They demonstrated the “wisdom that is from above,” described by James as “pure, . . . peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy” (James 3:13-18).

Spiritual board members have high expectations. They believe that God’s people should be the head and not the tail.²⁴ This is especially so in education, where administrators and board members demand quality, efficiency, professionalism, honesty, transparency, fairness, and compassion. They have zero tolerance for incompetence, chaos, immorality, mediocrity, or corruption. They have the conviction that God is ready and willing to accomplish extraordinary things for His children. “God will do great things for those who trust in Him. The reason why His professed people have no greater strength is that they trust so much to their own wisdom, and do not give the Lord an opportunity to reveal His power in their behalf. He will help His believing children in every emergency if they will place their en-

tire confidence in Him and faithfully obey Him.”²⁵

Our high expectations must, however, be proportionate to the support and resources available to our students and educators. It is not reasonable to have the same expectations for everyone. “The specific place appointed us in life is determined by our capabilities. Not all reach the same development or do with equal efficiency the same work. God does not expect the hyssop to attain the proportions of the cedar, or the olive the height of the stately palm. But each should aim just as high as the union of human with divine power makes it possible for him to reach.”²⁶

Excessive workload and premature burnout are chronic challenges in the Adventist system. We expect teachers to be available during the entire school day (often without a break), and also in the evening and on Sabbath, and often on Sundays as well. Sometimes, employees are even called to duty during their vacations. School boards must be intentional in encouraging school administrators to make efforts to protect employees’ personal time and give them some space to renew themselves and recharge their batteries.

One of the Adventist Church pioneers, the powerful preacher James White, was so dedicated to his work that he was always busy preaching, publishing, visiting, and chairing meetings. His beloved wife, Ellen, warned him that unless he slowed down in his numerous activities, his health would dramatically fail, and he might even lose his life. However, James was not ready to slow down. Consequently, at the age of 44, he suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed. When he got better a few months later, he went back to his busy life. He became very sick again at 56 years old and died at the age of 60. A fruitful ministry that could have served the church for so many more years was cut short.²⁷

In French, people often say, “*L’excès en tout nuit*,” which could be translated, “Excess in everything is harmful.” Excess and extremism are very effective subterfuge of the devil in his efforts to beguile God’s children and drag them away from their glorious destiny. One of the fruits of the Holy Spirit is ἐγκράτεια (*egkrateia*), which means temperance, self-restraint, self-control, self-governance, inner strength, or moderation.²⁸ That is the virtue exemplified by the person who, through the power of the Spirit, keeps things under control and is not carried away by passion or circumstances.

The counsel that Christ gave to His disciples 2,000 years ago is still valid today: “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). Ellen White

corroborated this message in her comments: “It is not wise to be always under the strain of ministering to other people’s spiritual needs, for in this way, we neglect personal piety and overtax soul and body. . . . We must take time for meditation, prayer, and study of the Word.”²⁹ There is a time to work hard, but there is also a time to relax and replenish our energies. That timely lesson is relevant both for board members and school employees.

The role of the board is not to manage the institution, but to be watchful, prayerful stewards of it. Boards support a culture of prudence and ensure that institutions follow guidelines and comply with policies. Like Joseph in Egypt, board members ensure that provision is made for rainy days, economic downturns, and natural disasters. They are concerned about providing healthy and safe facilities for students, school personnel, and visitors.

As prudent stewards, board members ensure that the institution does not embark on reckless, grandiose initiatives. They make certain that no project proceeds without a feasibility study and proper planning. They approve conservative but visionary budgets, and demand that the institution complies with government regulations that do not contradict the instructions of the Bible.³⁰ They expect from school leadership a detailed, visionary, realistic strategic plan that is updated annually, and even participate in creating it. Jesus asked the question, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—

lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish”” (Luke 14:28-30).

One of the most important responsibilities of the board is to select competent and committed leaders for the institution. Board members cannot afford to wait for the current leadership to become unavailable to start thinking about possible replacements. That is why succession planning is so crucial. The board and the administration must be intentional in cultivating for the long term a variety of options for future leadership, both at the board level and at the institution as well. Great spiritual leaders plan for their own succession: Joshua was ready when Moses was gone. Elijah mentored Elisha. John the Baptist said about Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Barnabas intentionally prepared Saul and John Mark. Paul trained Titus and Timothy for ministry. Boards should do the same

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to ensure the stability and the steady growth of their institutions by systematically identifying promising talents and providing growth opportunities for potential future leaders.

Spiritual Board Members

Spiritual board members welcome all students and employees, with their differences, as a gift from God. They see them as God's children regardless of their aptitude, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or age. Leaders must be approachable and perceived as ready and willing to listen to others, including teachers, janitors, parents, and students. Board members led by the Spirit proactively promote equity, which may translate as fair representation and treatment of all people groups at all levels.³¹ They support the worldwide mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church by taking a firm stand against discrimination and preferential treatment. They are compassionate, and they protect the vulnerable members of the school family. They should be the voices of the voiceless, particularly the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, the children, and the elderly.³²

Boards sometimes have to make difficult decisions that will affect personnel, students, families, and even the church. That is a sacred responsibility that must be handled with humility and prayer. These decisions may be prompted by financial exigencies, employees' misconduct, safety concerns, or government initiatives.

The board may also simply recognize that times have changed, and that the institution needs to take a new direction. The members may need to take drastic actions and decisions, make significant changes, or do a thorough cleanup. That is when board members' integrity is tested.

Board members cannot afford to adopt a lackadaisical attitude. Sleeping at the switch or denying hard realities could have a terrible impact on the lives of many people and even threaten the viability of the school. There is no room for complacency. *Laissez-faire* trustees should resign (or be removed) to make room for responsible stewards who will embrace their sacred responsibilities: "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (1 Corinthians 14:8).³³ Even God's patience has its limits. The same lowly and gentle Jesus knew when it was time to cleanse the temple.³⁴ He sprang into action in an astonishing manner. Board members who do not wish to be charged with dereliction of duty are called to do the same. Scott Cowen, president emeritus of Tulane University, gave the following advice to those who want to be "effective trustees": "Don't be afraid to take on the sacred cows." He added, "To lead with integrity, you need to make principled decisions responsive to the particular realities you confront."³⁵

In the solitary chamber of their souls, trustees must make the commitment to take a stand for what is right and ensure the integrity of the institution. In these crucial moments, board members will search for God's guidance, "gird up the loins" of their minds, "be sober" (1 Peter 5:8), and act in a

timely manner with sensitivity, common sense, wisdom, and determination. "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing" (Matthew 24: 45, 46).

Conclusion: "Who is sufficient for these things?"³⁶

Because of their imperfections, Christians are exhorted to humble themselves and rededicate their hearts to God by spending time in prayer and meditation, and by hiding His Word in their hearts.³⁷ When board members follow this admonition, their vibrant spirituality will radiate into church institutions. Daniel developed the habit of praying three times a day.³⁸ Nehemiah offered a silent prayer in the presence of the king.³⁹ Joseph always felt he was in God's presence.⁴⁰ Job offered a sacrifice daily for his children.⁴¹ Board members should follow these spiritual giants' example and intercede daily for their family members and also for the school family. We are reminded in *Prophets and Kings* that the challenges of leadership can only be met with prayer. The author offers this encouragement to those who lead:

"Never are they to fail of consulting the great Source of all wisdom. Strengthened and enlightened by the Master Worker, they will be enabled to stand firm against unholy influences and to discern right from wrong, good from evil. They will approve that which God approves and will strive earnestly against the introduction of wrong principles into His cause."⁴²

The promise is certain: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). God is ready to do extraordinary things for our educational institutions. It all depends on our spiritual readiness. Joshua's admonition to the Israelites also applies to trustees: "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you" (Joshua 3:5). ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Each individual board member has the power of influence. This should be committed to God. Ellen G. White wrote: "The higher the position a man occupies, the greater the responsibility that he has to bear, the wider will be the influence that he exerts and the greater his need of dependence on God. Ever should he remember that with the call to work comes the call to walk circumspectly before his fellow men. He is to stand before God in the attitude of a learner. Position does not give holiness of character. It is by honoring God and obeying His commands that a man is made truly great" (*Prophets and Kings* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1917], 30, 31).

2. Numbers 13:30 (NKJV): "Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, 'Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it.'" Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture texts in this article are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

3. See George R. Knight, "Education for What? Thoughts on the Purpose and Identity of Adventist Education," *The Journal of Adventist Education* (October-December 2016): 6-12; and John Wesley Taylor V, "What Is the Special Character of an Adventist College or University?" *ibid.* (January-March 2017): 24-29.

4. Ellen G. White, *True Education: An Adaptation of Education by Ellen G. White* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2000), 11.

5. Luke 22:31, 32.

6. Lou Solomon, "Becoming Powerful Makes You Less Empathetic," *Harvard Business Review* (April 21, 2015): <https://hbr.org/2015/04/becoming-powerful-makes-you-less-empathetic>.

7. Richard Exley, *Perils of Power* (Silver Spring, Md.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1995), 66.

8. Dan Allender, *Leading With a Limp: Turning Your Struggles Into Strengths* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook Press, 2006), 8, 9.

9. Ellen G. White, "Words of Counsel," *Review and Herald* 80:17 (April 28, 1903): 7.

10. David Rousseau, "A Systems Model of Spirituality," *Journal of Religion and Science*, 49:2 (June 2014): 476-508.

11. Bruce W. Speck, "What Is Spirituality?" *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2005:104 (Winter 2005): 8.

12. Duane Covrig, Janet Ledesma, and Gary Gifford, "Spiritual or Religious Leadership: What Do You Practice? What Should You Practice?" *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 7:1 (2013): 104-113.

13. Philip Kenneson, "What's in a Name? A Brief Introduction to the 'Spiritual but Not Religious,'" *Liturgy* 30: 3 (July 2015): 3-13.

14. Joanna Crossman, "Secular Spiritual Development in Education From International and Global Perspectives," *Oxford Review of Education* 29:4 (December 2003): 503-520.

15. Wendy Cadge and Mary E. Konieczny, "'Hidden in Plain Sight':

The Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Secular Organizations," *Sociology of Religion* 75:4 (December 2014): 551-563.

16. Louis Fry and Mark Kriger, "Towards a Theory of Being-centered Leadership: Multiple Levels of Beings as Context for Effective Leadership," *Human Relations* 62:11 (September 2009): 1681.

17. See Hebrews 9.

18. See Acts 18:18-28.

19. See Isaiah 1:11-15.

20. *New American Standard Bible* (NASB). Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation.

21. See Galatians 1:14.

22. White, *Prophets and Kings*, 633, 634.

23. Education personnel (teaching faculty and administrators) are under contract with the hiring conference. This means the conference is legally responsible for employment, termination, and any changes in employment status of education personnel. Non-teaching staff (e.g., cafeteria or janitorial/maintenance) are typically contracted with the school, making the administration responsible for the terms of their employment. For this reason, local school boards must consult with the local conference education superintendent when recommending any action that will impact the employment of education personnel. Clear policies regarding termination or dismissal are included in the *Church Manual*, the *K-12 Education Code* and various denominational working policies, and government regulations. See also Charles McKinstry, "The Firing of Mary Mediocre: The Case for Due Process at the School Board," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 70:5 (Summer 2008): 16-19.

24. Deuteronomy 28:13.

25. Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1890): 493.

26. _____, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903): 267.

27. _____, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1868), 1:103-105; Virgil Robinson, *James White* (New York: Teach Services, 2005), 171-178.

28. Galatians 5:23. See Sam Williams, *Galatians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997), 151; Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), II:339-342.

29. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1898): 359-362.

30. Romans 13: 1-7; Acts 5:27-29.

31. Isaiah 56; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11-16; Revelation 7:9 and 14:6.

32. See Acts 10:34, 35; Micah 6:8; Leviticus 19:20; and Deuteronomy 10:17-19.

33. Board officers may gently nudge ineffective members, encouraging them to either take their responsibilities more seriously or to quietly leave their seats to someone else who has the time, interest, and/or skills to significantly contribute to the progress of the institution. Some institutions' constitution and bylaws contain provisions addressing board members' excessive absences or their persistent failure to support the institution.

34. Mark 11:15-18.

35. Scott Cowen, "Want to Be a Really Effective Trustee?" *Higher Education Today* (July 2012): <https://www.higheredtoday.org/2018/07/11/want-really-effective-trustee/>.

36. See 2 Corinthians 2:14-17.

37. Psalm 119:11.

38. Daniel 6:10.

39. Nehemiah 2:4.

40. Genesis 39:2-5.

41. Job 1:5.

42. White, *Prophets and Kings*, 31.