

Spiritual Eldership - Loren Cunningham 2004 (Updated 2012)

When I was seven years old, my family and I visited Niagara Falls. I have an indelible picture in my mind of what I saw: a barge, wedged against a huge rock right at the edge of the falls, with the water raging around it. I was forever impacted by the story I heard:

Two young boys had been guarding the barge, safely tied to a dock far upstream. When night came, they fell asleep. As the boat gently rocked, the knot loosened and they began to float downstream. The boys slept on...drifting...not knowing they were in danger.

Hitting rapids, the lads awoke with a jolt. Realizing that they were in peril, they yelled for help, but no one was awake to hear their cries. As daylight came, people saw the boys in distress, now rapidly rushing toward eminent death, but there was nothing anyone could do-they were too far out in the middle of the river, and no one could reach them in time. They fell to their knees and cried out to God to save the boys.

Miraculously, just at the edge of the falls, the barge hit a huge rock and lodged securely against it. From there, the townsfolk were able to throw ropes and rescue the boys.

I shared this story in 2001 with the Youth With A Mission Global Leadership Team gathered in Kenya, expressing my concern that there were areas where we as a mission were "adrift" from our founding values and this drift could lead to our demise. Few organizations are able to continue with vision and passion beyond the second generation. Although YWAM was then 41 years old and had many thousands of full-time participants working all around the globe, future multiplication could not be assured by momentum alone. We needed God's understanding of where we had drifted and His re-alignment to bring a new thrust of apostolic growth. I carried this concern continuously in my heart.

Then, on July 13, 2002, God reassured me that we as a mission had "hit the rock." He promised that if we would obey His course correction, He would give us a new apostolic release. I wept with gratitude and relief.

The following month, the Lord called me to a time of fasting and prayer for YWAM. I asked "what are the essential ingredients for regaining our apostolic edge?" He began to bring an understanding of key elements for growth that I will explain below.

ELEMENTS FOR APOSTOLIC GROWTH

The following elements thrived among us as a mission during our first four decades, resulting in many new ministries and launching of YWAMers globally, but in the 90s we began to drift in some places. These are the moorings that I believe will bring about a renewed apostolic thrust

1. Freedom in the Spirit
2. Spiritual Eldership
3. Relationship

All of these must function under the Lordship of Jesus, according to His word and His will.

FREEDOM IN THE SPIRIT

Every individual, from the youngest to the oldest, must have freedom in the Spirit to hear and obey the word of the Lord. This opens up creativity for Him and from Him to initiate among us anything He wants to do.

We teach students, "You can hear God's voice...but you also must obey it and step out to trust Him to do the impossible." The steps are: (1) God gives revelation, (2) we interpret the revelation and (3) we apply what we understand. We may make mistakes sometimes in our interpretation or application, but that's not evil—that is how we learn. Often the young and inexperienced hear God most clearly, for they do not yet believe that it can't be done!

It is important that individuals have this freedom in the Spirit to hear and obey God, but this is not done in a vacuum or independently. Otherwise you can end up with the "tyranny of one." This is where it becomes important to understand how spiritual leadership works.

SPIRITUAL ELDERSHIP

Elders are not necessarily older in age (Timothy, a youth, was an elder and appointed other elders). But elders have a breadth and depth of experience and spiritual maturity, and they fulfill the leadership criteria outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

True elders are submitted to the Lordship of Jesus and to their followers, as servant leaders. They have a responsibility to take to God in prayer any word that is submitted to them by an individual, and also to test it according to the scriptures. This trust is sacred, and they should receive this new, baby vision like a grandparent would receive a grandchild. God's heart is broken when new vision is stomped on by leadership; He says, "it would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck..." Luke 17:2 (NRSV).

According to Timothy and Titus, spiritual leaders must be hospitable. The Greek word for hospitable, "xenophile," means "a lover of the new, the strange, the different." Thus they are open-hearted toward new vision and pioneer projects, asking God to "show us if this word is conceived by You and give us the timing and other application details." Then they should coach the group in how the word is best applied in the context of the whole.

Let me give you an example: In 1970 a multinational YWAM team felt God told them to go to Afghanistan. At that point in time, short-term teams of young people did not do that kind of thing! They brought their guidance to me, as their spiritual leader. The easiest thing would have been to say "no, it is a closed country. The risks are too high"—especially since my younger sister was on the team! But I had to pray about it, and God said "yes." The team went and ended up taking thousands of Gospels in local languages. They were arrested, but their judges had to read the "evidence," the Gospels they were distributing. The team was then released and instructed by those judges to continue to distribute the Gospels! YWAM has now ministered in Afghanistan for more than four decades non-stop, through every war. This is the fruit of honoring God's word, to whomever He gives it.

Spiritual leadership is like Moses going into the tent of meeting in the Old Testament, where he would meet with God and listen to Him about the affairs of the people. He then would come out and deliver the word of the Lord. A danger in any organization is for structures to dominate, taking a position above this emphasis on meeting with God. When that happens, suddenly decisions are made according to budgets and structure instead of the voice, vision and values of the Lord.

I believe every YWAM ministry should have spiritual eldership. Even small teams going on short-term outreach should identify who the leaders are and lay their hands on them and pray for God's anointing (Acts 13:1-4 and Exodus 40:15). These individuals, as well as those serving over them in leadership, should take seriously their mandate to seek the Lord on behalf of the people and bless them (Numbers 6:22-27).

There is nothing in this concept of spiritual leadership that says one person is better than another. God calls us to salute the dignity, value and equality of every person we come into contact with. Whether you have the ministry of an apostle or the ministry of helps, everyone is equal. The functions are different, but every ministry is equal in value to every other ministry.

RELATIONSHIP

During the 1970s, there was widespread abuse of the concept of "eldership" among the body of Christ. One teaching defined eldership in a way that sanctioned extreme control over individuals' lives and possessions. In an effort to distance ourselves from this movement, I believe YWAM backed off too far and we stopped exercising biblical spiritual leadership. This is one of the drift factors that must be righted.

Spiritual elders are to lead primarily through prayer, influence and relationship, not through control. One of the main ways this is done is through teaching. According to 1 Timothy 3, a leader must be "able to teach."

Jesus said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers among the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42-44).

Leaders who control people with clenched hands will produce followers who will one day shake their clenched fists back at them. This kind of hierarchical leadership is not kingdom authority. Inevitably it will produce rebellion.

Instead, if you lead in an open-handed way—giving and serving—you are leading in Jesus' way. He said, "Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

There are times and situations when spiritual leaders need to act with authority, but they should only intervene with authority after appealing through relationship. They must make sure it is the right battle (issue), the right time, and approach the situation in the right way. And in these contexts there need to be structures and legal boards in place that hold these elders accountable in all legal and financial matters, "rendering to Caesar, the things that are Caesars, and to God the things that are God's."

Autonomy, with each person, ministry or base working independently, is a non-scriptural concept. But likewise, if eldership is operating outside of these other factors—freedom in the Spirit and relationship—it leads to legalism and a hierarchical leadership that is not godly.

An apostolic movement dries up when there is not integration of these elements: freedom in the Spirit, spiritual eldership and relationship, all operating under the word and the will of the Lord. When they are operating together, it brings much fruit (e.g., Acts 15). May it ever be so with YWAM!