Developing Spiritual Leadership
Teddy D. Bitner

One of the most critical ministries in the local church is the development of committed, effective spiritual leaders. Those called into positions of spiritual leadership often do so without the benefit of a firm biblical foundation for their leadership concepts. Sadly, many bring some of the worst aspects of secular leadership into the church setting, attempting to apply concepts developed to feed self-esteem and personal advancement, instead of building up the church of God.

I strongly feel, from personal experience, that integrating secular management concepts into the local church is often done because people do not understand what the Bible has to say about leadership. The purpose of this article is to call attention to this problem, and to suggest how local churches can approach a continuing development of spiritual leaders.

Theology of Leadership
The importance of building good leaders in industry and the military has long been recognized and their training refined into a highly formalized process. Some of the ideas and practices of secular management theorists are undoubtedly very good and may be applied within a local church. However, the danger of buying into these concepts without Biblical examination is that we can be led away from very clear truths about Christian leadership evident in Scripture. All Christians should know that Jesus established some very specific principles about how leaders in the church are expected to operate. Matthew 20:25-28 says: “Jesus called them unto him, and said, You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they who are great exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you, but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister, and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Jesus clearly contrasts the nature of the Gentile or secular leader with what He expects of His disciples. Secular leaders take pleasure in exercising authority over those for whom they are responsible. They see that their authority resides in themselves, or in the position which they hold. On the other hand, a Christian leader does not act on authority from within, but on the authority of God. Furthermore, a secular leader “exercise(s) dominion” over his followers, or better, “lord(s) it over” them (NASB), while Jesus says a Christian leader is to be a “minister” and a “servant.”

The concept of leadership based upon servanthood was certainly foreign to the Gentile leaders of Jesus day. Modern management theorists, to some degree, recognize the need to include the idea of service to employees as a part of the overall management architecture. Significantly, the military has long advocated and expected the idea of “taking care of the troops” as an integral part of leadership. Though commendable, the motivation for a supportive approach to management is only one facet of secular leadership and is based upon employee production, not on individual well-being. After all is said and done, the basic approach to leadership demonstrated by secular leaders has not changed from the time of Jesus. Human behavior,
regardless of modern theories, remains unchanged because of man’s sin nature. The fundamental difference in authority, function and motivation between “Gentile” and “Christian” leadership clearly defines the uniqueness of leadership based upon the person of Jesus Christ.

We are servants as leaders, and we are to maintain a servant attitude in the accomplishment of our ministry responsibilities. In effect, being a servant is not a part of being a Christian leader; rather, Christian leadership is an outgrowth of our serving.

**Principles of Leadership Development**

Basic biblical principles provide the framework for leadership based upon serving. Three principles are highlighted in this article, but these three certainly are not all to be found in Scripture. I present these as ones which can readily be understood and applied within the local church.

*It takes quality to get quality.* Second Samuel 23 lists thirty-seven mighty men of valor who served David. These men were willing to sacrifice their lives for David, and in fact, helped him to become king. Brave men such as these are not attracted to a mediocre leader, but to men who earn their respect by their own high standards of valor. The quality of leadership we seek in our churches should be of the highest caliber. Therefore, our own manner of life should demonstrate unfailing commitment to God's service. Obviously, this principle causes us to examine our motives and manner of leading.

*People learn by example.* Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:10-11: “You have fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long-suffering, charity, patience, persecutions, afflictions, which came unto me at Iconium, at Lystra, what persecutions I endured; but out of them all the Lord delivered me.” Paul knew that Timothy had observed him in various trials, and knew that Timothy was very much aware Paul had continued to trust God regardless of the circumstances. Paul brought those things to mind when writing Timothy in order to instruct Timothy how he should face similar situations. Paul had no need to make apologies for his manner of life, because of his faithfulness. Whether we know it or not, as Christian leaders, we constantly set an example for others. This example, or model, may be either good or bad, but it is an example. Once we understand this principle, intentional modeling as a part of leadership development becomes an important aspect of training leaders. I write this to challenge all Christian leaders to remember that people do observe us, and in the absence of any other Christian role model, will pattern their behavior after ours.

*Leadership development is most effective when the process includes a means of establishing and maintaining accountability.* In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30), the master held his servants accountable for their performance in his absence. One of the applications of this parable is that accountability is a strong motivation for achievement. Each of us will be held accountable by God for our performance in His service (2 Corinthians 5:10), and we must train leaders to understand the importance of accountability in their ministry as a matter of course. The result of understanding and applying this principle is that any church which establishes a formal leadership development program must include some means of accountability, must establish an accountability system within the church organization in order to be consistent.
Leadership Development Programs
Any program designed to develop leadership should be comprehensive, have the understanding and support of church leadership and members, and have a number of components. How that program is designed will be determined by the local church based upon their understanding of needs at a given point in time. Such a program will be dynamic, in that its components may change or be reordered from time to time as a result of re-evaluations of the current situation. What must not change, however, is the basis of the program: a correct understanding of what the Bible has to say about Christian leadership.

The leadership development program components may be few or many, and may vary in complexity. Two of the “tried and true” components which many readers may have used or are currently using are presented here.

Personal development by mentoring. The use of one-on-one (one teacher to one student) is commonly found in Scripture. Examples include Moses and Joshua, Eli and Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, and Paul and Timothy. This method of instructing and developing leaders is the most concentrated, and it is also very time consuming. In general, the use of this approach requires the development of a very thorough training program which assigns two people (one teacher and one student) to complete a rigorous set of tasks together over a long term (probably a year). A one-on-one training program should encompass frequent, concentrated and structured meetings. Managing such a program, particularly the tasks of pairing people and maintaining progress accountability, is a challenging yet productive process for the church leadership. The key to pairing people is knowing the talents, capabilities, and commitment of leaders, training them to train / mentor others, and entrusting the task of accomplishing the mission to them. At the beginning of the training period, both the mentor and the student must commit themselves to see the project through to completion, and agree that an effective accountability system be used throughout the entire program. If properly done, this component of a comprehensive development program will help to produce “men of valor.”

Leadership seminars. Periodic seminars for all church leaders are effective ways of either using local church leaders or outside Christian leadership specialists to share specific aspects of church leadership. Vehicles which can be used within the seminars include workshops, panel discussions and lectures. Even the opportunity to organize such a seminar could be used to allow new leaders to try their hand at putting the program together and coordinating the logistical support required. Seminars need not be limited in attendance to the local church leadership. Leaders from other churches in the region can be invited when appropriate. Seminars are a good way to encourage leaders to share ideas and methods, and provide an excellent opportunity to teach or reinforce the principles of biblical leadership.

The use of personal development and leadership seminars, as stated earlier, can and should be integrated into a comprehensive development program, designed to fit the needs of a local church.
Conclusion
“The things you have heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). The responsibility for training the next generation of Christian leaders is clearly given to us. Purposeful leadership development is an investment in the future ministry of each Christian generation.

I believe that because of God’s spiritual gifting, within each local church resides a wealth of leadership experience. Our challenge is to insure that current and potential leaders understand and practice the kind of leadership that is clearly commanded in Scripture.

At the time this article was written Dr. Teddy Bitner was Academic Dean at Calvary Bible College in Kansas City, MO. He retired as a Colonel from the U.S. Army and was assigned to many logistical and planning positions, including member of the Army General Staff, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations at the Pentagon and command of 2nd Battalion, 52nd ADA, XVIII Airborne Corps during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He also led the NATO team which planned combat operations in Bosnia and subsequently wrote the Dayton Peace Implementation Plan.