

Spiritual Leadership, Second Revision
By: J. Oswald Sanders; text updated by Mark Fackler;
study guide by James C. Galvin
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Oswald Sanders was a missionary in the Far East, serving as field director for the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Originally, this book was a compilation of a series of addresses delivered at OMF conferences in Singapore between 1964 and 1966. A South African minister notes that, in the 1960s, Sanders' organization was suffering significant attrition of missionaries, and the minister argues that these addresses were delivered against this backdrop. ¹ Sanders saw problems in the character, integrity, and piety of leaders he knew, so he set out to address those problems in what has become to many a classic in the field of ministerial leadership. Moody Press has updated the language to make the book more available to a new generation of readers, one that intentionally includes women, and also to provide a study guide. Together with *Spiritual Discipleship* and *Spiritual Maturity*, this volume was Sanders' way of engaging the issue of serious Christian discipleship.

Spiritual Leadership is a study, in Sanders' own words, of "the principles of leadership in both the temporal and spiritual realms" in 22 chapters (11). While Sanders meant to address missionary leaders in the OMF, he also wanted to speak as well to new Christians who aspire to leadership, and to encourage and "rekindle aspiration and crystallize a fresh purpose" among experienced leaders who have grown stale (12)

What is leadership to Sanders? "Leadership is influence, the ability of one person to influence others to follow his or her lead" (27) note the effort to now use inclusive language. It is both natural, being innate to the person in talents and gifts, and "spiritual," being an endowment of the Holy Spirit. His view of natural leadership appears to be indistinguishable from personal charisma. Such a leader is decisive, possesses confidence and inspires confidence in others, exhibits ambition to lead, understands how to move people intuitively and practically, and constantly seeks

¹ Thomas Scarborough, Review of *Spiritual Leadership*, John Mark Ministries website, <http://jmrn.aaa.au/articles/14144.htm>. Scarborough ministers to an Evangelical Congregational Church near Cape Town city center.

self-improvement. Leadership is understood as the ability to gain assent over the objections of those whom one leads (28).

Sanders' models for natural leadership are drawn especially from the World War II generation, as well as from earlier generations. Clearly, he admires Allied military commanders and politicians (27-28). Women leaders are not mentioned, with the exception of Florence Nightingale (54).

Spiritual leadership is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works with the strengths and weaknesses of individuals to conform them to the classic models of Jesus, Peter, Paul, Moses, and Nehemiah. "Spiritual leadership blends natural and spiritual qualities," Sanders writes, even going so far as to claim that the natural qualities of leadership are actually "supernatural gifts, since all good things come from God" (28). This is strikingly high anthropology for an evangelical Christian, given the effects of the fall (which Sanders does not mention), and the "spiritual warfare" dualism that Sanders embraces (82, 89). Sin damages only negligibly the usable natural gifts an individual possesses for leadership. Grace subsumes them into useful attributes. Sanders writes, "New birth in Christ does not change natural qualities, but when they are placed under the control of the Holy Spirit, they are raised to new effectiveness" (83).

So, spiritual leaders are both born and made (29). They are spiritual to the degree that they have the "touch of the supernatural" (25), by which Sanders means inspirational power (31, 73-74). God alone chooses them. The spiritual qualifications they must have cannot be conferred by schools, courses of study, or church bodies all of which Sanders sees as anemic (18). Yet, Sanders is caught in a bind here, in that he wants to claim godly origins and empowerment for spiritual leaders (80), and yet "spirituality alone does not make a leader; natural gifts and those given by God must be there, too" (82). In the end, the test of a leader is "...whether anyone is following" (28). But by that standard, Jesus at his crucifixion and most of the Old Testament prophets were failed leaders.

Much of the problem with this book is Sanders' amorphous notion of spirituality. It is a touch, a hint, an intuition; one knows it when one sees it. The nearest he comes to a definition is "...the fragrance of the garden of the Lord, the power to change the atmosphere around you, the influence that makes Christ real to others" (31). This ambiguity reduces the work of the Spirit to a set

of subjective improvements to the qualities a person naturally possesses. Spirituality is personal piety, one's character, and the qualities of a gentleman missionary of the first part of the twentieth century.

Further, this book is plainly masculine in its examples, language, outlook, and theology. A leader is an articulate, inspiring gentleman, courteous, strong in a Victorian sense, not overly ambitious. Outside of the one favorable reference to Florence Nightingale (54), women are eccentric foils for the point Sanders wants to make (106), poets or biographers of admirable men (17,133, 28), or are simply bad examples (135). No sprinkling of feminine pronouns can rescue such a book from the indictment that at least half of the human race is left out of consideration for leadership. His claim that a spiritual leader should be a *man* (41) should be taken at face value.

Finally, Sanders over-identifies leadership with a rather rigid set of personal qualities that are good enough in themselves, but he rarely admits that accountability is vested in anyone but oneself. The social dimension of leadership is seldom mentioned, and church structures are problems to the leader rather than godly means of discernment and formation for leadership. Diversity of experience is limited to gentlemanly differences among missionaries, military leaders, ministers, businessmen, and heroes of the past.

Yet there also is much in the book that is commendable. Sanders has inspired two generations of men to become Bible-reading, prayerful leaders. The book abounds in good, common sense advice on personal integrity and mature character. But Sanders' disciples need to write their own books on more inclusive leadership in our time, while treasuring this classic in their libraries.

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