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Editorial: Spirit-empowered Leadership: Leading and Being Led

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SPIRIT-EMPOWERED LEADERSHIP: LEADING AND BEING LED

JOHN THOMPSON, GUEST EDITOR

Given that you are presently reading this special journal issue devoted to Spirit-empowered leadership, I would guess many of you are like me: I love strategy and vision. Dreaming, developing, and deploying a new plan invigorates me. However, over the last twenty years I have grown in my understanding and conviction that Spirit-leading is more important than strategic thinking. God's plan is better than our plans and he sees what is ahead much more clearly than I (or we) do.

Two decades ago, I entered a doctoral program in Strategic Leadership. It was an interdisciplinary program with participants from the fields of business, education, medicine, government, and theology. Leadership imbeds every profession and touches every sphere of life. We all desire to be effective (and hopefully good) leaders in our particular professions, in our families, in our communities, and in our organizations. Embarking on a multi-national church plant at the time, my desire was to gain skills needed not just to lead one church but eventually to lead a multiplication movement of multi-ethnic churches in other American cities. How that played out over the last twenty years turned out differently than I had pictured. I did pastor that new church for a decade. But leading a stateside multiplying movement of church plants never materialized. Instead, I found myself in multiple countries training ministry leaders and the last seven years teaching in the university setting. While attempting to lead others, God has led me into unexpected territories. I expect you too have been surprised by how the Holy Spirit has directed your journey, intervened in supernatural ways, and provided guidance and giftings to accomplish his purpose for your life.

We need the Spirit of God in our leadership. We desperately need both the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit in our leadership. Without this empowerment, we default to leading from our own brokenness resulting in the manipulation and wounding of those around us in the pursuit of our own agendas. Leadership skill can be dangerous and bring great harm if it is not Spirit-empowered. Conversely, leadership skill can bless and foster human and organizational flourishing if it is formed by, filled with, and functioning under the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Over the last century, the academic study of leadership has evolved in its quest both to understand the fundamental nature of leadership and to find the “silver bullet” for leading effectively. Leader traits and behaviors, environmental and cultural contexts, principles of power and influence, and organizational complexity have all been explored over the years. These approaches focus on the human, organizational, and sociological factors of leadership. This journal issue poses another question for consideration: How might the Holy Spirit enable people and their institutions to lead well?

Jesus told his followers to wait in Jerusalem and “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:4, 8). Acts 2 through the end of the book described transformed leaders impacting the world around them. These leaders had Spirit-inspired boldness in the moment and yet continued to grow in their transformation individually and as a community. Peter spoke with boldness in Acts 2 and yet still needed transformation in his own understanding of God’s inclusion of the gentiles in Acts 10. He and others subsequently discerned and led the community of faith into new expressions of their faith at the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15. The book of Acts, furthermore, described the empowerment of the early church for strength in the face of persecution. We need these attributes of empowerment as leaders as well. We need Spirit-empowered growth, gifting, character, adaptability, and perseverance.

This edition includes five articles that help us look at Spirit-empowered leadership. While there is so much that could and should be said about Spirit-empowered leadership, we hope the articles presented here push the conversation forward and provide an impetus for continued scholarly work in this area that can inform and shape our personal and collective understanding, experience, and practice of Spirit-empowered leadership.

We begin with an exemplary Spirit-empowered leader to whom issue is dedicated. Sally Shelton, in her article “*In Memoriam*: Vinson Synan: Model of Spirit-led Leadership,” calls attention to the unifying work of the Holy Spirit. She examines the life of Dr. Vinson Synan as a pastor, denominational leader, historian, writer, and an academic. She described his leadership as visionary, Spirit-led, and bridge-building.

Daniel Isgrigg, then, lays a foundational orientation to the current literature in Spirit-empowered leadership in “Toward Spirit-Empowered Leadership Distinctives: A Literature Review.” He highlights some of the challenges in defining Spirit-empowered leadership, identifies and describes the few resources presently that do address this challenge, and identifies five common characteristics

mentioned in many of the studies for Spirit-empowered leadership. This article provides a vital baseline for present and future research in Spirit-empowered leadership.

Wonsuk Ma moves us into a biblical and theological look at Spirit-empowered leadership. He examines two biblical models of Spirit-empowered leaders in the Old Testament in “The Prophetic Servant: The Ideology of Spirit-Empowered Leaders.” The Old Testament provides both good and bad examples of Spirit-empowered leaders. Ma examines the good examples of David as the ideal king as well as the prophetic Servant figure that emerges in the prophetic writings. Through these models, principles for Spirit-empowered leadership are extracted and a theological lens is given foreshadowing Jesus as God’s Spirit-empowered prophetic Servant.

From these foundations both in the literature and in Scripture, we then move to two articles that provide contemporary application of Spirit-empowered leadership in an academic setting and in a ministry setting. Jay Gary offers a case study from Oral Roberts University on developing a process for Spirit-empowered leadership formation in higher education. Oral Roberts University was founded by the world-renown Spirit-empowered leader, Oral Roberts, with the mission to raise up healthy and effective Spirit-empowered leaders who through their leadership would serve as healers in every domain of society and every corner of our world. In his article, “Spirit-Empowered Leadership: Exploring Three Dimensions,” Gary describes the university’s process over the last twenty-four months of refining this process fifty years after the founding of the university. Gary shares a three-dimensional model of personal development, interpersonal influence, and generational emergence that has emerged through the process for understanding and shaping the development of Spirit-empowered leadership.

From the academic context, we move to an international setting to examine what Spirit-empowered ministry leadership looks like in the rapidly changing environment of Bulgaria. In “Bulgarian Pentecostal Leadership in the Crucible of Change,” I (John Thompson) describe how the leadership characteristics, behaviors, and values of Pentecostal leaders have changed over the last thirty years in a society experiencing tumultuous change since the fall of Communism. This cultural setting provides a look at both the impact of culture on leadership and the need for leadership adaptation and change for a rapidly shifting context. Spirit-empowered leadership must not be static, but rather must be dynamic.

We conclude this journal with one of Vinson Synan’s last written pieces. He provides bookends to this journal with the first article describing his life and the last

article providing a sample of his prolific writing. May each of us follow in Synan's footsteps living a life of Spirit-empowered leadership.

My prayer and declaration for each of you in your pursuit of Spirit-empowered leadership is found in the words of Paul: "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6). May we keep learning and growing in our Spirit-empowered leadership.

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