

What I Learned From the Fathers

Our spiritual fathers have much to offer us from their years of walking with God. Here's what I learned recently from Jack Hayford, John Perkins, Lloyd Ogilvie, Loren Cunningham, Henry Blackaby and Winkie Pratney.



In the days of the early church, the apostle Paul stressed the importance to believers of having a leader, or “father,” they could learn from. He wrote to the Corinthians: “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” (1 Cor. 4:15-16, NKJV).

It is no different today. Those who are young in the faith need leaders to imitate, and those who are more mature must seek to live worthy of imitation, to be leaders who understand the responsibility and foundation of healthy church leadership.

The topic of church leadership emerges often in conversation among my friends—those my age, younger and older. Our conversations are marked by a desire to live biblically and to walk in humility, obedience, dependence on God and the fear of the Lord, as well as to honor those around us.

We also find ourselves greatly concerned about the current shakings among leaders in the church and their ramifications on followers, flocks and future generations. Fortunately, God has provided us with many godly “fathers” whom we can learn from—those who have lived and led the longest among us, who are “preaching what they practice” and whose lives reflect what it looks like to finish well.

Last summer some of my friends and I had the privilege of learning from six of these “fathers”—Jack Hayford, Loren Cunningham, John Perkins, Winkie Pratney, Lloyd Ogilvie and Henry Blackaby—at a historical DVD shoot for *Conversations With Fathers of the Faith* that took place at the Billy Graham

Training Center in Asheville, North Carolina, and in Atlanta. Various subjects were covered during this “tribal council”—the men’s relationships with Jesus, tending one’s heart and spiritual health, leadership challenges, relationships and forgiveness, the church and the marketplace, the next generation, discipleship, and the church’s mission.

While gleaning wisdom from the 300 years of combined leadership experience, we were reminded of an important truth: Healthy church leadership is not about titles, or positions of power, size or success, or fulfilling one’s destiny; it is about keeping Jesus foremost, living from the inside out and leading in the ways of God.

Keeping Jesus Foremost

It was quickly apparent that the greatest thrill and delight for these church fathers is still Jesus! The joy on their faces was obvious as they described an intimate friendship that grows deeper with the passage of time. We heard their voices crack with tenderness as they spoke with fond affection of the one who continues to woo their hearts.

“I still feel like a little boy in the presence of Jesus, in the presence of the eternal Father,” said Hayford, president of The Foursquare Church. “My pursuit of the Lord is to walk with Him every day until I feel the warmth of His presence and the confidence of His hand on me.”

Cunningham, founder of Youth With A Mission, further elaborated: “My relationship with Jesus, it’s more than anything you could put on a schedule. There is something far more, and that is the breakthrough of His presence, His voice, to hear Him say, ‘I love you, I love you.’ And I start weeping because it’s His love being demonstrated.”

Each spoke of the priority of unhurried time in prayer and in the Scriptures as the way to experience God and to hear His voice. Blackaby, a pastor and teacher and author of the well-known resource Experiencing God shared: “I spend time with Him. It’s like Marilyn and I have been married 48 years and

people would say, 'How have you maintained that?'

"I say, 'I spend time with her.' And I'm always thinking, What is it that's on her heart that I can do? And so with the Lord. You have to know His heart. And so I spend a lot of time in the Scriptures because God has not hidden His heart from us."

Like the rest of us, these men acknowledge times in their walks with God during which they seem to "hit a ceiling"—a place where their friendship with Jesus doesn't feel quite as fresh as it had in days past. During a discussion on this topic, Pratney, a lifelong student of revival and a discipler of young people, shared from his experience that "the only way you get out of the ceiling is by getting a fresh revelation of who He is—and He's happy to do that for us all the time!"

It is clearly evident through the lives of these "fathers" that becoming enamored afresh with our "first love" (see Rev. 2:3-5) needs to be the foremost activity in the lives of those providing leadership in the church. Unless we are doing this, we are missing the most basic and central component of our entire Christian life—an ongoing and growing intimate friendship with Jesus. Without knowing His character, His heart, His Word and His voice, how is it possible to lead His body and bride?

Living From the Inside Out

These "fathers of the faith" also made it clear to us that their leadership is simply an overflow of who they are. What they have allowed God to build and develop in them has become the reservoir that the Holy Spirit draws upon as they lead people, make decisions and discern the guidance of God. The deliberate tending of their hearts has helped to guard and guide them as disciples of Jesus and leaders in the kingdom.

"I find myself having to confess my sin and be more willing to confess my hurts. I'm depending more on the grace of God and the Word of God. I'm depending on the Spirit of God," said Perkins, president of the John M. Perkins Foundation for Reconciliation and Development. "When I preach now, I don't

depend as much on my own words, as I depend on the Spirit to do something that I can't even express."

Ogilvie—a preacher and author and the 61st chaplain of the U.S. Senate—further addressed issues of the heart that we all wrestle with. He said, "I've found that the only way to deal with envy, competition or jealousy is just to take it to the Lord and thank Him for the gifting in the other person, and then review the wonderful ways that God has used me in the past, and thank Him and thank Him and thank Him until finally a membrane around my soul is broken open and I am free again."

"When you have walked in the light and the life of Jesus as long as we have," said Hayford, "the real temptations you face and the points of correction and confrontation are the points of surprising self-discovery where the Lord just touches you and says: 'No, you can't say that. Don't do that. Go back and say that you're sorry about that,' and you realize the inadvertency of your unwitting, unintended carnality and then say, 'Lord, I'm going to always respond and come as a child no matter what.'

"What is it that keeps it going? The fear of God. I would fear not so much His judgment as ... not having His abounding blessing."

While comparing notes on some of their greatest mistakes and missteps, Cunningham shared a story that has become quite well-known over the years among YWAMers. "An event that was a major mistake occurred while we were told by God to buy a ship to be a hospital ship. God had confirmed and reconfirmed it. However, in buying the ship, we moved from faith to presumption at a certain point, and we had taken from the Lord His glory and put it on a ship. I thought we were finished, but I just decided we were going to come clean, which we did. And God turned that into a time where everyone wanted to hear how I had made a mistake and what I did about it!"

In the context of God's correction, Blackaby related a valuable insight he had learned about relationships. "I tended to be very shy and was a loner. It wasn't long before I realized I needed key friends who I could bounce things off of and they could bounce things off me. I was a loner doing what

I thought was best and then God corrected me.

“Jesus said, ‘How you receive the ones I send you, you’re receiving Me, and how you receive Me, you’re receiving My Father who sent Me.’ So I began to watch, convinced that God would bring to my life individuals, and how I responded to them was indeed how I was responding to Him and the Father. That was a huge shift in my thinking. So I’m very aware of how I must treat the ones God sends me.”

Pratney reminded us of how our mistakes and failures are viewed by the emerging generation. “One thing about kids today is they learn more from other people’s mistakes and failures than they do from their successes.

“They’re being so overwhelmed with success stories and everybody promising the world if you do this or take this or try this. When they’re continually told that, and they’re so sensitive of their own failures of things, they learn hugely when people they look up to tell them their story. Kids learn more from what we don’t have than they do from what we do have.”

Leading in the Ways of God

It was wonderful to hear these men talk of their love for Jesus’ bride, the church. They described their desires, hopes and concerns for the church—past, present and future. One thing was certain: The way the church is led is very important to them.

They desire that it be led in the ways of God, not the ways of men. All of us are susceptible to doing God’s work our way, but the manner in which we go about it is as important to God as the end result. Listen to their hearts and insights.

Perkins said: “I think this new generation is defining the kingdom of God, but they might not be putting Jesus in the center because they are reacting against the church. It’s the kingdom in right perspective, but I think the kingdom might be without the king, without really seeing the Lordship of Jesus

Christ.”

“Be a student of the historical activity of God,” was Blackaby’s recommendation. “Don’t turn away from it. I think God at this point is giving a plumb line for the next generation. I think we’re at a crossroads. Look for the old ways and walk in them. They’re not the ways of men. They’re the ways of God.”

When addressing local church leadership, Ogilvie’s comments were very direct: “It’s almost a rule like the law of gravity that churches will move as fast and as far as the leadership team has lived.” In other words, what we want produced in and through those we lead must first be lived by those serving in leadership.

Ogilvie also believes that “the basic thrust of the ministry of the pastor and of the local church is to produce disciples.” Hayford agrees and provided a practical working definition of what to aim for. “Discipleship is the replication of the person and ministry of Jesus. Person, character and ministry. His life in them, His style of life in them, and His manner of ministry that happens through Him. All this. The replication of that in believers.”

The most moving moment of the gathering occurred near the end as the ministry leaders affirmed one another. Mutual honor and sincere affection flowed as evidenced by their brotherly touches and their generous words. “The Lord has spoken recently through Ephesians 4 to me about when we come to the unity of the faith,” Cunningham said. “And I used to think that meant everybody had the same doctrinal statement. But when I look at the Bible it’s not a doctrinal statement. It’s that we unite together around the Lord. And there God will command blessing.”

Our response to this shared expression of humility and honor was to pray together. It created hope. What my friends and I learned from these fathers of the faith will not be forgotten: Keep Jesus foremost, live from the inside out and lead in the ways of God.

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