Thirsting for God

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INTERVIEW WITH JON DYBDAHL

THIRSTING FOR GOD

Petr Cincala, M.Div., M.S.W., Ph.D., is married, has four children, and served as a freelance missionary among Czech atheists for 10 years. Presently, Petr works at Andrews University as Director of the Institute of Church Ministry, Assistant Professor of World Mission, Director of NCD America (Natural Church Development), and as Managing Editor of the Journal of Applied Christian Leadership.

Jon L. Dybdahl Ph.D, is a Professor Emeritus at Walla Walla University and Andrews University. After a midlife personal spiritual crisis and subsequent renewal, Dybdahl became deeply interested in the area of the spiritual and devotional life. As he began to do research, he came to see that most Protestant churches and seminaries gave little time to the personal spiritual lives of students and church members. As a university and seminary professor, he discovered that one could go through the seminary and receive advanced religious training and never have a class which explored in depth the personal spiritual life of students. He, himself, was a product of that kind of training.

As Dybdahl studied and explored, he found the whole area of religious studies that had been hugely neglected by most Protestants. The more he studied, he began to find personal renewal and a satisfying of the hunger of his soul. He also developed a deep desire to share what he had learned and experienced with his students.

Over the next few years, Dybdahl had the opportunity to initiate classes on spiritual life at both Walla Walla and Andrews Universities. He found students to be deeply interested and personally hungry for that kind of training. Fortunately, in the last number of years, this lack has been acknowledged by many Christian colleges and seminaries and efforts have been made to do this kind of training. Over the last 10 years, Dybdahl has been in 35 different countries speaking and teaching on this topic. Part of what he has learned through his experiences can be found in his book, titled Hunger: Satisfying the Longing of Your Soul.

Journal of Applied Christian Leadership: What role does personal spirituality play in the life of a leader?

Jon Dybdahl: For Christian leaders, personal spirituality is foundational and a prerequisite for effective leadership. Communication with Christ and being in touch with God in their spiritual life is absolutely essential, and has to be something that is not just assumed, but deliberately brought about, meditated
upon, and practiced by any leader expecting to be effective and to see God’s blessing on his/her work.

For a lot of people, particularly in Western culture, what is commonly seen are business and managerial forms of leadership. There is nothing wrong with that, but Christian leadership is different. Leadership is something that needs to be practiced. Leadership needs to have a reflective side. A Christian leader must take time to think, consider, and have a period of quietness rather than just making quick decisions. A Christian leader must be reflective and learn to listen to God. This is a key part of spirituality.

**JACL:** How does God speak to a leader?

**JD:** God speaks in a number of ways to leaders. He speaks through His Word, the Bible, but He also speaks through people who are seeking His will, such as colleagues in a leadership team where people can share and talk together about God, His will, and His leading. God also speaks in times of silence, when we take time to examine our lives and ask, “How am I doing?”

**JACL:** This notion of encountering God in silence and asking: “How am I doing?” is intriguing. So is spirituality then a form of self-knowledge?

**JD:** A life filled with personal spirituality gives leaders a sense that God is active in their life and work. This can help them face the challenges that come to them day by day. God becomes their partner in leadership, which makes the difference.

Self-knowledge and knowledge of God go together. The closer we get to God, the better we understand ourselves. Understanding who we are makes us more dependent on God and on what He can do in our lives.

Personal, emotional, spiritual, and psychological healing takes place as we practice the core values of Christianity. Experiencing love and being honest about our situation helps to heal us. Leaders may see their spirituality as one of the tasks needed to done, but they should to look at spirituality as an island of peace.

**JACL:** How do you get to seeing the spiritual life as entering an island of peace?

**JD:** If we are doing something in our daily spiritual lives that feeds us, that gives us peace and a sense of God’s presence. Our walk with God gets exciting, and we look forward to getting up early in the morning or whenever we spend time with God.
The idea that I can hardly wait to spend time with God because He is renewing me spiritually, emotionally, and even physically is at the core of spirituality. If we look at spirituality in this way, it changes the way we respond to God. It is just like looking forward to a great meal. When you are looking forward to something good, you anticipate it and it becomes a source of deep satisfaction. A spiritual life that looks forward to a live encounter with God changes everything completely.

**JACL:** How important is corporate spirituality for Christian leaders?

**JD:** Corporate spirituality is very important. Oftentimes in our individualistic society we can forget that. A careful reading of the book of Acts shows that the spirituality of leadership in the early church was very corporate. The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 is a result of corporate prayer. Leaders who are persecuted flee to the place where corporate prayer is being practiced (Acts 4:31). Acts 3 shows us that early leaders practiced corporate types of prayer much the same as their Jewish brothers. Unfortunately, too many Christian leaders have never been trained in the practical steps to be spiritual leaders.

Recently we prepared a series of studies for Christian leaders working in India. We found that they had not been adequately trained, so we set up a training program in spirituality for them. These were all people who were supposed to be spiritual leaders. We prayed every day plus we had one full day of corporate prayer seeking God personally and seeking Him as a corporate group. Our leaders were amazed and said, “We have never prayed so much. We wish we could do more of it.” It struck me how we usually do corporate prayers: a “quick” prayer in the beginning and at the end of a meeting to make sure the meeting goes well. There is nothing wrong with that, but having a serious time as a group praying together would have a tremendous effect on leadership. It would give us much more a sense that God is really near and we are part of His work.

**JACL:** What are some of the ways you have found effective to lead corporate prayers?

**JD:** There is a variety of ways on how corporate prayer can be led. If there is a particular issue, start with a Scripture text, have people meditate on it in private, and then come back and pray as a group over the things about which each individual thought. Let it happen naturally. Or organize a conversational prayer.

If a local church or a Christian organization needs special help with a par-
ticular issue it is facing, organize a spiritual retreat to corporately seek God’s guidance. It can happen in many different ways, but just having a group experiencing it together and praying over the key issues not only gives a sense of corporate identity, fellowship, and togetherness, but also a sense of corporate purpose.

**JACL:** In what ways do spirituality and religiosity overlap and differ?
**JD:** True spirituality is an internal heart issue. Spirituality, as it should be understood, is a personal thing that involves the whole being in relationship to God. Religiosity speaks more to outward behavior that may or may not include a personal heart response. Spirituality is more relational, emotional, and more thoughtful, whereas religiosity is more about performance.

When teaching leaders about the spiritual life, I like to spend time with them in a one-day spiritual retreat. Then at the end of that day, people testify how God has made a difference in their lives. There is a need to emphasize corporate spirituality more. We should not be afraid to talk about sensing and experiencing God’s presence when we gather in His name. If we invite God to be there, we expect Him to be there, and people’s lives are going to be changed. This can happen corporately as well as individually.

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**JACL:** Do you have any helpful tips for leaders on how to nurture balanced spirituality?

**JD:** True spirituality involves time. We must commit to making the spiritual side of our lives a priority in our daily schedule. Anything we seriously need to practice, we must create space and time for it to be done. We need to include it in our planning.

When leaders are planning, they should have a corporate prayer discussion to be able to move forward in a certain direction as a group so people can make a personal commitment, pray together for God’s leading and seek God’s guidance. This is how they will recognize the difference between the plans their leaders have and God’s plans. It makes a difference how people feel about their work.

Part of planning may be a regular time set apart for prayer and meditation.
in a corporate setting. Sometimes people are led to pray more in their personal lives after they’ve experienced corporate encounters with God, but it goes the other way as well. Some of it depends on the personality of the leader, as well. Some people lead more outwardly while others are more private.

Daily reflection, listening to God, laying before Him the plans for the day or our long-term plans—those kinds of things are helpful and make us more thoughtful.

**JACL:** How can a leader pass on spirituality that transforms life?

**JD:** Anyone who expects to affect another person or a group spiritually must model the kind of spiritual life that they are teaching. Only as leaders demonstrate in their own personal life the value and fruit of genuine spirituality can they affect others. If we are teaching others that they should pray 15 minutes every day, the leader would probably do well to practice 30 minutes of prayer daily.

**JACL:** Can leaders grow spiritually? How would you know that you are growing spiritually? Is it the length of time I pray and study Scripture or are there other ways?

**JD:** It is extremely difficult to evaluate spirituality solely on the basis of time spent. Spirituality is like any relationship. Valuable time must be spent, but a precise accounting of that time is not necessary. Quality and intimacy of the relationship are some of the ways we can evaluate spirituality.

Christians originally described the growth process as the way, the path or the journey. There are different parts of the journey we do not experience until we travel for a while. As we travel, changes take place. We need to be ready to see and experience new things, and see God at work in new ways both in our lives and in the lives of the people with whom we work. There is always more, and so our spirituality is a journey.

**JACL:** Pastors are often expected to be managers, to keep things under control, or to reach numerical goals. What impact does this organizational striving have on their closeness to God?
JD: Leaders can be overcome by the stress of mundane responsibilities. Having a structured spiritual life can help keep things in balance. Leaders would do well to ponder the story of the apostles in Acts 6:1-4. In this passage, the early leaders were faced with needs beyond their capacity to address without compromising their spiritual calling. So they made decisions and took actions that addressed the ministry challenge, yet freed them to practice their spiritual life and ministry.

There is no one spiritual secret to success, no magic formula—do this, this, and this, and you will see success. You need to seek God, and He will help you to see what needs to happen.

JACL: We know that even good leaders can get burned out. How can prayer help?

JD: We can come to prayer with very different attitudes. Some come to prayer with the frenetic attitude of praying as a means to accomplishing part of my daily “to do” list and finishing part of my daily activities. In contrast, we can come to prayer as a place of quiet rest in a peaceful garden where we come to be refreshed and live in God’s presence. The first kind of prayer contributes to burnout, while the second kind leads to calm peace, and is an antidote to burnout.

Leaders need to be open to new things. Jesus said, “There are many more things I could teach you but you could not bear them now” (John 16:12). I suggest we see every instance of a burnout as a time for growing and learning. “God, what are you trying to teach me?” There are types of burnouts that should be prevented, but the general kind of burnout may serve as an opportunity for learning.

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JACL: We are all shaped by the environment and culture we grow up in. Christians tend to develop spiritual pride that may serve as a drive for their ministry as well as their life with God. In what ways can spirituality foster humility?

JD: Spiritual pride can be a real danger. One of the best ways to avoid it is to take seriously the Biblical teaching on repentance. If we take the time to ponder our own lives and bring our thoughts and actions under the scrutiny of God in sincere heart repentance, humility is a result. In doing this self-exami-
nation, God's presence daily will bear much fruit.

Leaders need to be sensitive to how God is leading. Journaling is helpful. I often journal things that are happening and through it I can see better how God is leading. It helps me to constantly hear His voice and follow His will. That is really the solution. Do not force yourself into some kind of mode. Leaders may tend to say, “If I was like so and so, if I could do this or that . . .” Well, it is better to ask what God has for you.

**JACL:** Innovative leaders may tend to borrow spirituality that is popular in the world. How can leaders successfully avoid the traps of New Age and non-Christian spirituality?

**JD:** Christian spirituality must be centered in Jesus and the personal God of the Bible. We can say that the twin principles of Christ and the Scriptures form a foundation and criteria by which to evaluate and judge all other spiritualities. Leaders should model that kind of Biblical spirituality and in so doing will encourage others to do the same.

The main competitors to spiritual life come from eastern religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism. The key theological difference affecting spiritual life is faith in a personal God. Christian spirituality is about a personal relationship. God is alive and we can communicate with Him. In Eastern spirituality, god is more like a force. You need to do the right things, say the right things. Certain meditation techniques are emphasized for different occasions, but in an impersonal way.

Christianity also teaches there is good and evil. Most of eastern spirituality is blind to the conflict between good and evil. Their goal is to overcome ignorance; however, Christians seek to be delivered from sin. There is a difference between Christian and Eastern meditations, and it affects our spiritual life. They are founded on different principles.

**JACL:** Do you have a closing message for church leaders?

**JD:** Prayer and communion with God is the heart of spiritual leadership. Often we approach prayer as a form or ritual. That can leave us in a dry patch. When I pray with leaders from Africa—I do not know how to explain it—it is like praying in a different key: the fervency, the belief, the openness, the sense that you are really talking to somebody, that I wish Western culture would catch more. May leaders truly expect God to work. If we want to see a prayer renewal in the church, we as leaders need to get serious about it.