

Interview: Dr. Blackaby on Spiritual Leadership

An interview with Henry Blackaby on the workplace movement. • Leadership

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The first several months after I graduated from college, you could find me every morning sitting at a small table in a bright green kitchen in Brooklyn, New York, starting my day in prayer and study. I was concerned that without my college Christian fellowship group, I would cease to grow in trust and knowledge of God. When I shared my fears that first summer, several people suggested that I buy an Experiencing God workbook and meet Dr. Blackaby's challenge to continue maturing as a Christian. I found that workbook gave me a good start on defining my direction as a Christian adult in the working world.

So, imagine how thrilled I was to sit at a table with Dr. Blackaby a few months ago to discuss his ministry and his latest book, Spiritual Leadership. His soft, animated voice sharing his sincere concern over the lack of spiritual leadership today and his hope in the spiritual leaders God has called and the literal twinkle in Dr. Blackaby's eyes made my conversation with him one of the highlights of my adult Christian walk thus far. Whether you are a pastor, CEO or homemaker, I hope you find both encouragement and a personal challenge in this interview. The questions were posed by my former colleague, Entertainment Editor Matthew Turner, and myself.

Crosswalk: What impact do you expect your book, *Spiritual Leadership*, to have? With all the books on leadership already published, why did you and your son Richard write this one?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: I've already sensed the whole reason for writing it is there's a radical difference between leadership and spiritual leadership. A person can hold a religious position and be a leader but that doesn't make him a spiritual leader. Position does not identify your leadership role. I watched the whole Christian community so enamoured by the leadership books of the world. I noticed that one organization gave all its key leaders Bill Gates' book and I said, "What does a godless man have to teach God's people about Kingdom leadership? He hasn't got the faintest idea about Kingdom leadership."

God said, "My ways are not your ways. My purpose is far different than the world's. The world's is success. Mine is not success." God's goal is to reveal Himself, so if we're leading but not leading people on to God's agenda, leading them to a relationship to Him where they are releasing their lives to Him, then we're not spiritual leaders. There are two or three things. One - there are the groups that are reading the leadership books of the world. Second -- there are those who have taken the thinking of the world and put scriptures to it, which confuse the people of God completely, because if they see a scripture they believe it to be a godly principle. And I say, "No, no, no. It's straight out of the world." For instance, God never tells his people to have vision. We are not a people of vision. We are a people of revelation. And the passage that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish," is a very poor translation. What it is really saying is, "Where there is no revelation, the people

throw off their strength." Or my translation would be, "When God's people do not have a clear word from God, then everyone does what is right in their own eyes, and that's spiritual anarchy." If I were to categorize the leadership among God's people right now, it would be spiritual anarchy.

Crosswalk: Do you think it's easier for people who work in the faith community to experience God as opposed to secular professionals like doctors or lawyers?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: If someone were to ask me right now where do I sense the greatest potential for revival, I'd say in corporate America, because I relate to about 130 CEOs of the Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 companies. Most of all of them got through *Experiencing God*, and they've said, we want an hour-long conference call. [I have] eight to ten of them on a call, and about 10 different conference calls. And they're saying, "How do we experience God in corporate America?" And I said, "I'll tell you. Let me help you." And I would say it's much, much easier for me to guide corporate America than it is within this [Christian] community.

Crosswalk: Did you start meeting with CEOs of Fortune 500 companies before writing *Spiritual Leadership*?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: It's come about in the last four or five years. Mac McQuiston -- who's vice president of Focus on the Family -- his life was graphically changed by *Experiencing God*. And he began to relate to these CEOs. He said, "Henry, would you do this with me, because they're asking for some spiritual counsel, someone who can guide them through the Scripture and then through the Scripture to the relationship."

They're making huge decisions, and many of them are personally connected to President Bush and all the Cabinet -- you name it -- but they're saying, how can we use our lives? For instance, about 47 of the key CEOs, COOs and CFOs from the major companies met together to say, "We're convinced that the way to control TV, to make it family friendly, is through sponsorship." So major companies said, we are not going to sponsor ... like Proctor & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson, the big ones (these are Christian men and women) ... so they said, "Our goal is to have all programming on all the major stations at eight o'clock family friendly. Now a lot of that came out of their studying *Experiencing God*. And along with it, there was a major multi-billionaire from Colorado that already had a deep commitment to have a controlling interest in all the theatres in America, and he controls, right now, United Artists, and his goal is not to have anything that is not family friendly in the theatres in America. He has two studios in Los Angeles and one in New York where he's put his money into producing. So here's the business community saying, "How can we affect the value system?" For example, the CEO of Conoco, a large oil company, is a very committed Christian good friend and he's set the value system for Conoco all based on Christian principles. Many of these CEOs are affecting the whole value system of corporate America, I'd say, the greatest. And they are wanting to experience God. When we have a conference call ... they talk to me about their personal walk with God, about their family. They talk about their business and the decisions they are trying to make and they want counsel in all three.

Crosswalk: Do they also want counsel and support from one another?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: They do -- tremendous interaction. And many will say, "This is what I'm facing, for instance, with health care -- the providing of health care benefits for domestic partners." And some of the fellows would say, "We've already worked through that and we are not violating anything in the government. We've found a way to work through that. Stay on the line and I'll tell you how our company has done it." They are always interacting and ... twice a year there's a conference ... where they come to a central place for a full day where we have a major theme and then give them real clear help about what to do. They are really very anxious to live out their Christian life but their desire is to be salt and light, so they are making an accountable difference in America.

As I've been walking through this conference center [at CBA] and looking at the hundreds, if not thousands, of publishers, my question is, "Is all of this making any difference in the moral, spiritual life of America?" They'll put out 30,000 to 40,000 new Christian titles a year and make absolutely very little difference.

I gave a message to a nationally produced broadcast in Dallas, and I challenged them to be accountable. Don't just have spiritual entertainment. You don't have spiritual entertainment when the nation's going to hell. You don't entertain the people of God. They are God's means, to be salt and light. You need to help them to be salt and light, and you need to be able to measure what your station's doing to bring transformation to the lives of families and whole communities. And if we don't have any measure, you'll never know whether you're doing any good or not. Or we'll talk to each other and say, "This must be good because it's sure good to us." And God says, "But you're not making any difference whatsoever. I didn't call you to entertain my people. I called you to be an instrument through which I, God, can make a transformational difference in the whole nation." So, I challenged them.

Crosswalk: Do you think we are basing too much on feelings?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: We've let the culture shape the Christian ... and so we wrote the book on spiritual leadership to say there's a world of difference with God between a leader and a spiritual leader. And our definition of a spiritual leader is moving people on to God's agenda. That's what Jesus did; He took ordinary people and moved them on to God's agenda. What was God's agenda? His agenda was to take the Good News of the Gospel and transform the Roman Empire. And what did Jesus do? He took 12 men who had no idea about the Kingdom of God, and most of the teaching of Jesus was to help them move from the kingdom of this world to the Kingdom of God and to understand the ways of God. The ways of God are totally different from the ways of the world because their goal is different. But He succeeded in moving them from man's agenda to God's agenda. He turned the Roman Empire upside down with those men and those they taught.

And our purpose in writing the book on spiritual leadership is to try and pull out from the Scripture from beginning to end what is God's standard for a spiritual leader? What's the role of a spiritual leader as over against a leader of the world? And what's the character of a spiritual leader? How does he set his schedule? Where does he get his vision? See, the world gets the vision from their head. What do you want to

accomplish in the next five years? It matters not a whistle of a difference what *you* want to accomplish. The question is, "What do you think God's doing right now?" So that you can adjust your life to Him right now and then follow Him.

You see, that's what God came to Moses and said. "Moses, let me tell you what's on my agenda. I've heard the cry of the children of Israel, and I've come to deliver them. So I'm going to invite you to change your life to my agenda. Now, you can't deliver the children of Israel, but I'm going to. Will you let me do it through you?" Moses then had to make some major adjustments to God. When you put that whole time together, he tried to deliver the children of Israel on his own and it cost him 40 years. But you can see that all the way through the Bible. When He came to Noah, He didn't say, "Noah, what do you want to do for me?" He said, "Noah, let me tell you what's on my agenda." Now what was on God's agenda? He was going to destroy the whole world. And when He came to Abraham, when He was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorra, or when He came to the prophets, the key was, "I'm about to destroy Israel. You better go and bring a message from Me to them. They need to know what's on My agenda."

And my question is, "What's God's agenda right now in America? How close are we to the judgment of God as a nation?" But the average leader would say, "I don't have any idea." And I say, "But a spiritual leader would have an idea. He will know what's on the heart of God because he doesn't get his vision from his head, he gets his vision from God." And God has just announced to him what He's about to do. See, how did the disciples even know that Pentecost was about to happen? Jesus told them. Was it important that they know? You know, Pentecost was coming whether they were there or not. They didn't bring Pentecost; that was on God's agenda from the beginning of the world. But if they wanted to get in on Pentecost, they had better be where the Lord said. And they were all together in one heart and one soul, and the Spirit of God came upon all of them. Now, in our generation, what does God know He's about to do in America? And how important can it be? How close are we to the return of the Lord? Only the Father knows, but Amos 3 says that God never does anything except He reveals His secrets to His servants. The prophets believed God would let a spiritual leader know. He will. He's always done that. But is there a difference between a leader and a spiritual leader? That's what the book is about.

Crosswalk: Something I wondered in reading *Spiritual Leadership* is that God tends to call those people who don't have any intentions of being a leader. Is it problematic that people who are currently in leadership are people who strive to be a leader, and they are the target audience of your book?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: Our goal would be to create an opportunity for anybody to examine carefully to see whether they are a leader or a spiritual leader and to test it by the Scriptures to see if what we are saying is true. If I had the opportunity to lead and I saw something like this coming up, I'd really take it and say, "I need to be accountable in the mind of God. Biblically, there's a difference between a leader and a spiritual leader. And God does not use just anybody. Do I really want to be used of God? Are there some prerequisites that God requires of anybody who leads?" So the target is anyone who is a leader or God has called to be a leader who's serious about how God shapes and molds the person that He uses. I think that in this generation there's a growing number who really want to make a difference in their

world. They don't want to maintain a status quo but they don't have any models. And I'd say you have plenty of models. They are in Scripture and in history where God used men and women. And there are some givens about every one of them.

Now, do you want to pay the price to be one of them? There's a price to pay and many say, "Well, I'm in a comfort zone and I'm successful." But God doesn't call for success, He calls for obedience. And right now, no matter how successful you are, America is still going down morally and spiritually. You're not making that much difference. Are you willing to be accountable to God? Like someone has said, "The world has yet to see what God can do through one person totally yielded to Him." I think every single solitary Christian needs to ask that question about themselves. Will I go all the way through life ... and know all the resources of God and all the purposes of God and never care to adjust my life to God so He can work through me and my generation? I think we've got to seriously ask that question. No one will know if they don't know what the potential is ... they'll never have anything to measure themselves with. If we measure ourselves by ourselves, we'll come out looking pretty good. But if we measure what God is expecting, what God can do, we're a long ways from where God wants us to be. So in the book on spiritual leadership, we touch base pretty well with the most quoted and used books on leadership that are making the circuit today. The bibliography is about four pages long.

We have never done a book like we've done this one, and the approach is quite different. But we pray that we'll help people to see the difference between being a leader the way the world describes it and being a spiritual leader as God requires.

Crosswalk: Should a spiritual leader strive to be a spiritual leader in everything or almost everything that he or she is involved in? Should someone serving as the CEO of a company also serve as an elder at the same time?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: One of the things that we have failed to understand is that God made us holistic. He never allows us to segment our lives like we do. We say, "Well, this is my work, this is my church, this is my home, this is my personal life." God never lets you do that. Whatever we are, we are wherever we are. If we are a spiritual leader, we are a spiritual leader by nature. That will affect the way you guide your home, the way you participate in the life of the church, the way you involve yourself in your community where you live. You will be a spiritual leader. You don't "do" spiritual leadership. You are a spiritual leader. You take that into every area of your life, and that's what we're sensing from these CEOs.

God says that "if you lack wisdom ask Me, and I'll give it to you freely, but you better not doubt when you ask because the man who doubts is like a ship thrown about." Then He makes an awesome statement that "man is unstable in all his ways." And we say, "Wait. Isn't he just unstable in this area of his life? And God says, "You don't understand. If he's unstable when he asks Me for wisdom, he's an unstable person. The whole of his life is unstable." So the person who senses that God wants him to be a spiritual leader will sense that he's to be a spiritual leader in every solitary area of his life. You cannot segment your life by creation. Now psychology will tell you that you can. Sociology will tell you that you can, but they don't define it. God does. So what you are in your heart, you are in every area of your life. And I think that this

generation needs to come back to understand that you can't just be a spiritual leader over here but not over here, here, and here.

Crosswalk: How does *Spiritual Leadership* and the concept of spiritual leadership apply to women?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: Exactly the same. It is not gender-oriented. For instance, we have five children. All five are called to minister. The four boys are called to pastor. The number one factor is my wife. She is the person that God used to affect our family. Now many would say, "You didn't get out into the work world." But she says, "I did what God called ME to do." Raising a son who's president of a seminary who wrote this book with me, and another son who wrote the book, *The Man God Uses*, another son who is writing the sequel to *Experiencing God*, called *Experiencing God Together: Life in the Local Church Under the Headship of Christ*. Now, in the eyes of the world, would she be considered a leader? But in the eyes of God, would she be considered a leader?

Was Hannah a leader? She's the one who produced Samuel. Samuel was probably the greatest one of the greatest prophets. We let the culture shape us and define whether a woman is a spiritual leader. Now on the CEOs' calls, there are a number of women. Aunt Annie's Pretzels, the owner of that, she is on our call. Tremendous women who are in the workplace, are they responding? They are. It has nothing to do with gender. Every truth in the Word of God applies to us not by gender but by heart.

So can a woman have a heart after God and be used mightily by God to transform her world? No question about that. And is He? Yes, He is. There are some tremendous women that I know. I think of Anne Graham Lotz. She and I are very good friends. What an incredible person. Is she vilified all over the place? Yeah, especially from some of the redneck pastors who don't want to listen to any woman speak to a man. But Anne and I are becoming good friends. I admire her profoundly, and God is using her in astounding ways.

And we ought not to blow a trumpet and say, "I am a woman. Listen to me because I want to be a leader." I could list a whole bunch of women [working] quietly like leaven. The Kingdom of God is not like an explosion or an event. It is like leaven. How far can God use your life to transform the world? As far as He wants, but it may not look like an explosion or event where everyone says, "My goodness, this one has burst onto the world." But the way God does it, He says, "I'm going to make you like leaven and I'm going to put you in the middle of my world and I want you just to be my servant." And then you'll touch this life and that life and they'll touch four lives. And these four lives will touch 16 and without you even knowing it, without any fanfare, your one solitary life has begun to affect a whole city or state and nation. Depends on what you believe about God. The truth reveals what we believe about God, so I am one that is very committed to any person who is willing to follow the leadership of God, the principles of God.

Crosswalk: Is it natural for you now to experience God the way that *Experiencing God* describes it or is it still something you have to work at?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: It's a way of life. It's the way I've lived since I was a little boy, and certainly, God enlarges because you can't come to the end of knowing God. There is no comfort zone. If you don't know Him, He's going to have to take you face to face, which means He's going to have to take you into some experiences where you have no reference point except God -- not your skills, not your abilities, not your gifts, not your experiences, nothing. If you want to know more about God, you have to get led and get put in the situation that requires it. And many people find the comfort zone and they function there, and I say, "You just robbed yourself from knowing God because you cannot know more of God until He takes you into a situation which only He can resolve or only He can do, then you come to know Him." But then your level of faith has significantly changed so you never again relate to God without that reference point. So you now know more of God than you've ever known before. So if you stay working at it, it's just a way of life.

Crosswalk: So, do you think that is one of the biggest faults with us - that we are trying to jump to where our grandparents are in their faith while we're still in our mid-20s or mid-30s or whatever?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: I would say that this generation is probably the most biblically illiterate generation I've ever known. The only way you can know how to know God and His ways is from the Scripture, but we read all the books of men and they cannot tell you. You've got to have somewhere that presses you up against Scriptures, and in *Experiencing God*, that's what I try to do. That's how I pastored for 30 years, was to press the people up against the tremendous truths of the Word of God and then hold them there and tell them, my business is to have you experience Him this way.

That's what Jesus did. He took His disciples and said, "You don't know My Father but I do, and everything that I'm sharing with you I have received of My Father, so I am going to bring you into relationship with My Father." And there came a point when they said, "Well, if you would just show us the Father, that would be enough." And He said, "Have you been all this time with me and have you not known Me? If you know Me, then you know My Father. And if you don't believe Me, at least believe for the works' sake because it was My Father doing His work through Me." So then He turns around and says, "That's how I want the world to come to know Me in the same way the world came to know My Father, by encountering Me, but I release My life to My Father to let Him live out His Life in Me so I want you to relate to me so thoroughly that I can live out My Life in you and when I do they will encounter me just (Blackaby snaps his fingers)like that. And they'll be attracted to Me."

Now, our generation wants head knowledge but doesn't know how to take it from their head to their heart and from their heart to their life.

Crosswalk: Who mentors you?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: I don't want to be facetious, but I would say the Holy Spirit. I wish that I had had people who had spent time with me. They didn't know to. I grew up in a generation that knew nothing about discipleship. I grew up pretty well in Canada in high school and university there, and they have no concept of discipleship there. So when I got to seminary, I didn't even know the books of the Bible. I never had anyone who even told me I should know them. So I determined that if God ever

called me to be a leader, I would do everything I could to help those who were being called to know what to do. So that is why *Experiencing God* is so basic. Because no one ever taught me that I had to learn that myself, but it was so basic to me, so I said that's what I need to do to help. That's how I pastored. God is always at work, etc., and it's so fundamental and so basic and yet I've had hundreds of people say, "Henry, I've been a Christian for 30 years. Why have I missed this?" And I say, "I can't tell you that because the same Holy Spirit is in you that is in me and the same Scripture is available to you as to me, and I'm not a favourite with God, and what He's done with me He does with anybody." But I responded and I told several people that probably the most significant moment in my life came when I was about 9 in a unique encounter with God, which was not unique in its aberrations but was just very profound. God convinced me that He was God and I wasn't and I never ever approached God and demanded or instructed Him. He's God, and I'm not. And I tried to learn what it meant for God to be God and how profoundly sin has affected me.

We somehow believe, like Adam and Eve, that if we somehow just eat of the Tree of Knowledge, we can be like God. And our generation functions as though we are pretty well in control. And I say, "You don't understand. Every single part of that has been affected by sin. We can't even think straight. There is a way that will seem right to us, but the ends are death. That's true. And I believe it. I better seek the wisdom of God. So that has affected my whole life. And I said I would rather let God guide me than to assume I can guide me. I better let the Holy Spirit teach me rather than some other ... how foolish to think I know more than God. And if He knows more than me, why don't I just ask Him?"

Crosswalk: You bring up an interesting point when you say that *Experiencing God* is so basic. Is the church missing something?

Dr. Henry Blackaby: Well, No. 1: Jesus. We don't take Him seriously. We really do not take Him seriously. He said as a part of the Great Commission, the last part of the Great Commission is the heart of it, "Teach them to practice everything I have commanded and I will be with you." I've guided hundreds of pastor conferences over the last 12 to 14 years. Many times I'll ask the question at a large pastor conference. "You are a people who believe in the Great Commission. How many of you have seriously listed all that Christ commanded and have seriously sought to help every person in your church to practice every one of them?" Two pastors in 14 years. And I'd say, "That's what's wrong with God's people. No one has helped them." So I'll often lead a whole conference on prayer and come to the end of the conference, and I'll say, "Any of you have anything you want to say about the conference?" And it's the older people. They'll start to weep and they'll say, "I've been a Christian all my life, been in church all my life. You're the first person who ever taught me to pray." That's awesome. And so, I would say that a major problem is that we have not taken seriously what Christ commanded. I mean, it wasn't a suggestion that was the essence of God's purpose and plan to redeem a world.