

Spiritual Leadership - D. L. Moody

Spiritual Foundations of Leadership

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The Bible says in 1 Timothy 1:15, "...Christ Jesus came in to the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst" (1984). Paul, perhaps the greatest spiritual leader of his day, wrote this to Timothy soon after the dawn of the church era. God calls out sinners in every generation, like Paul, and raises them up to be spiritual leaders. D. L. Moody is one such individual used of God in the late 1800's. This paper will discuss his life, ministry, and what made him a spiritual leader.

To better understand a person's motivations, one must know a bit about the individual's past. Dwight Lyman Moody was born on February 5, 1837 in Northfield, Massachusetts (Harvey, 1998). He was the fifth son for his parents. Edwin, his father, was a stonemason by trade who enjoyed drinking and socializing at a local pub. Dwight's mother, Betsey, was a homemaker, weaver, and the devout Christian of the family. She taught a Bible study daily to all her children (Harvey, 1998). When Edwin and Betsey were first married, they along with their community, enjoyed a prosperous time, but by the time Dwight was born, the economy was in a depression.

Although times were tight financially, the family was making it until Dwight was four years old. One day, Edwin came home complaining about a pain in his side and died that evening (Harvey, 1998). At this point, there were five children and two more would be born a month later. In order for the family to survive, Dwight's mother, in addition to her weaving, sent the four older brothers to work as hired hands on neighboring farms to help support those that stayed. The family lived, for the most part, independent of any help from the community. The exception, of course, was the help provided by the Reverend Edward Everett of the Northfield Unitarian Church. He would on occasion, supply anything from food to prayer when needed (Harvey, 1998).

When Dwight was old enough, he also went to work away from home, like his brothers.

This work took time away from school causing Dwight to fall behind in the basic skills of grammar and spelling. Being unable to keep up with his studies, Dwight dropped out of school after the sixth grade (Harvey, 1998). If school was not frustrating enough for him, he also had disdain for attending church and hearing sermons he did not understand. When Dwight was eleven, the railroad came to Northfield, and he set in his mind the goal of getting out to experience the world beyond.

When God looked down at D. L. Moody during his teen years, He would have seen an unsaved young man with worldly aspirations and a lack of desire for anything spiritual. Oswald Sanders (1994) said that if the church is to be a force, "...leaders are needed who are authoritative, spiritual, and sacrificial" (p. 18). D. L. Moody, at this point in his life, is very far from being that kind of leader, but this would change in the years to come. At the age of 17, D. L. Moody would get his chance to see the world, starting with a move to Boston. Once there, God would begin sending people into Moody's life that would forever change his future, eventually making him one of the greatest spiritual leaders of his generation.

On a cold day in February of 1854, D. L. Moody left his hometown of Northfield on a train bound for Boston (Harvey, 1998). He was seventeen years old. His Uncle Samuel was co-owner of a shoe store and after some discussion, hired him as a salesman. There were, however, a few rules that Moody would have to follow. The one that would have the most profound influence on his life was required attendance of Mount Vernon Street Orthodox Church. Particularly required was his attendance in Edward Kimball's Sunday school class (Harvey, 1998).

Moody's first day in class exemplified his lack of attention to studies, both of his mothers daily Bible lessons, and his lack of knowledge in grammar and spelling. Moody struggled to understand the basic doctrines like salvation, as what he was taught in Northfield and what he

was being taught at Mount Vernon diverged greatly. In April of the following year, Moody's Sunday school teacher, seeing the conflict within Moody, decided to speak to him about his salvation (Harvey, 1998). Mr. Kimball went to the store Moody worked in and in a quiet moment, presented Moody with the gospel. Moody accepted the Lord's salvation. He continued to attend church, even though his poor grammar and lack of understanding of doctrines failed to allow him admission into church membership. The church elders offered to teach Moody, but being disenchanted with the church, he distanced himself from them despite their good intentions (Harvey, 1998).

Moody remained in Boston until 1856, when the reality of the rigid Boston atmosphere had erased the glamour Moody had envisioned of the big city (Harvey, 1998). In September of that year, after a dispute with his uncle, Moody set out for Chicago with little money and lots of hope. God had planted a seed in Moody, but it would be in Chicago that he would gain the spiritual maturity to be used in a mighty way of God.

Another uncle of Moody, who lived in Chicago, arranged a job for him with Wiswall's shoe store. It did not take long for Moody to figure out that the primary ambition of everyone in Chicago was to make money (Harvey, 1998). Moody's ability to relate to the common man quickly made him a top seller in the store. This combined with his habit of being thrifty, gave him the ambition to join in the pursuit of money as well. Moody tried to continue his involvement in church activities, but his poor grammar skills made most attempts short lived.

In 1857, Moody changed jobs and became a traveling salesman, but in his spare time, he still desired Christian activity (Harvey, 1998). A friend suggested he go to Wells Street Mission and pursue volunteer work there. This is where he would finally find a place to fit in, because having grown up poor, he understood how those that came to the mission struggled. It was here that he began to develop spiritually. Once he got started, he committed himself fully to the work

of finding young people to attend Sunday school at the mission. It was not long, however, before Moody and the boys he was teaching grew tired of the formality of Wells Street Mission so he launched a mission of his own, free from denominational restraints, geared towards the needs of the city's poorest.

The school met with immediate success. As it grew with the support of friends around Chicago as well as dedicated teachers, larger and larger facilities were acquired. The school, in a short time, was teaching over six hundred a week (Harvey, 1998). Despite the growth, Moody never lost sight of the individual and was often seen in the evenings teaching with a child on his lap, a Bible in one hand, and a candle in the other. After the loss of Moody's closest friend at the time to an illness, and after fighting the will of God, Moody made the sacrifice of quitting his job, which paid very well, and committed himself to full time ministry. With a schedule busier than ever, Moody, at every occasion where pastors were gathered together, would try to improve himself by learning more about the Bible by inquiring about scripture and doctrine (Harvey, 1998). He was also working on improving his grammar and spelling skills.

Winslow (1979) gives three qualifications of a leader that Moody had achieved at this point. First, "the body (of believers) identifies its own leaders on the basis of service" (p. 4). Moody would personally lobby those that could provide material needs to the mission whether the need was money or facilities. He also would pursue with vigor, the visitation of people currently attending as well as the recruitment of new members. This strategy was making Moody widely known throughout the Chicago area, and whether people agreed with him or not, nobody could dispute his sincerity and influence for the cause of Christ.

The second qualification that Winslow (1979) identifies is "...on the basis of spiritual gifts and faith" (p. 5). Even though Moody was not confident in his preaching abilities, he did have the gift of teaching and his faith was above that of most. Harvey (1998) tells of a time

when the mission was in dire need so Moody went to a friend and asked for a donation of one thousand dollars. He needed double that amount but he feared rejection. When the friend went away to write the check, Moody prayed. The check he received was in the amount needed, not the amount asked for. Moody always had faith that God would provide.

The third qualification that Winslow (1979) identifies is "...the evaluation is on a qualitative, not quantitative basis" (p. 5). Moody had a passion for the poor, particularly children, because he understood from his own childhood what living in poverty meant. While he was able to attract large numbers, his focus was on the individual exemplified by the child mentioned above. He also reached out to those groups of poor families, forgotten by other churches, that he would find in pockets all over the Chicago area. His concern was for one soul at a time.

It was not long after he began to have success in Chicago that Moody would be caught up, like the rest of the nation, in the winds of the American Civil War. A young and struggling YMCA appointed Moody and a friend by the name of Benjamin Jacobs to help provide Christian ministry to troops living at Camp Douglas, a tent city just outside of Chicago (Harvey, 1998). As the war waged on, Moody came to the realization of how important each soul was. Despite his shyness and fear of speaking to others, Moody realized he could not rely on Jacobs and others to carry the load. Moody had the desire to preach despite his feelings of inadequacies in speech (Harvey, 1998). In 1863, after consoling a dying soldier with scripture and assurance of salvation, these obstacles would be forever removed from Moody's life. While he would spend years continuing to learn the Bible from other preachers, Moody would emerge from the war not as a self-conscious amateur, but as a seasoned preacher. After the war, Moody would again heed God's call and spend the remainder of his life, not only teaching, but also preaching and evangelizing throughout the United States and in Europe with even greater success.

Stephen Covey (1990) would call this a major paradigm shift for Moody from a process he calls “breaking with the past” (p. 67). Because of Moody’s childhood struggles, he was left ill equipped, in his own mind, to speak and write like preachers he observed. He had to let go of this fear before he could grow further. Moody, seeing the hardships and suffering of war first hand, knew he had to do as much as possible to bring the gospel message, comfort, and peace to those he ministered to. The ability to contribute in this way was no doubt a powerful motivation for Moody. Also knowing he was called of God, Moody had the most powerful means available to break with his inhibitions of the past and stay focused on the future because as Matthew 19:26b says, “...with God all things are possible” (1984).

Oswald Sanders (1994) says, “...when God does find a person who is ready to lead, to commit to full discipleship, and take on responsibility for others, that person is used to the limit” (p. 17). That was D. L. Moody, who overcame what he lacked as a result of the struggles he encountered growing up. He humbled himself and accepted God’s will for his life, he sacrificed material wealth, and prepared himself spiritually for the position God had in store for him. Because of the love he had for people in general, but for the poor and especially the children in particular, he was recognized as a spiritual leader in the community and round the world. The Apostle Paul, a spiritual leader of his day, is quoted at the beginning of this paper admitting that he is a sinner. But despite that he leaves a thought with Timothy, and to every spiritual leader, why God uses them. In 1 Timothy 1:16, “But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1984). Thank God for D. L. Moody!

## References

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