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### **Mentoring**

Stephanie Lowery

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Taylor University  
Sacred Roots  
White Paper #4



# Mentoring

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Taylor University's Sacred Roots Thriving in Ministry Project formally launched in 2018. Several hundred academics, congregational leaders, and undergraduate students have worked together to explore how spiritual friendships and spiritual classics can help congregational leaders thrive in challenging ministry contexts. Those interested in learning more about the Sacred Roots Project are invited to explore the Sacred Roots Spiritual Classics, published articles and white papers, and additional resources available at [www.sacredrootsministry.org](http://www.sacredrootsministry.org).

### **Inquiries**

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“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.”  
~ Prov. 27:17

“Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their labor:  
If either of them falls down,  
one can help the other up.  
But pity anyone who falls  
and has no one to help them up.  
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.  
But how can one keep warm alone?  
Though one may be overpowered,  
two can defend themselves.  
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”  
~ Eccl. 4:9–12

Across the African continent, there is a well-known proverb which says as follows: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” I’ve lived in Kenya, East Africa for over 18 years now, and have seen this proverb proven true more often than not. To ‘go far’ in life requires a community of people supporting you; a person cannot make it on their own, without anyone else or any assistance from others. Thinking back on my faith journey, I can easily name several people who have had a lasting impact on my spiritual life, whether or not they were aware of it. I’m sure you can say the same.

On the other hand, white, Western culture has tended to exalt individualism, independence, and the idea of the ‘self-made’ person. The hero is the lone ranger type of person, who stands against the crowd and does something bold and innovative without need of others. These are the kinds of heroes we tend to find in Western literature and movies.

How do I as a mixed-culture person respond to these contrasting values? Should I view life with more of a communal lens, or more of an individualist one? And where does mentoring fit into the Christian life, if at all?

### **A Christian View of Humanity**

Allow me to offer a very brief overview of a biblical view of humanity. From the very opening chapters in Genesis, the Bible demonstrates that humans are the crown of creation—we are the only created being that are made in God’s image. As a result of being image-bearers, we are given special authority and responsibility to care for God’s creation, to represent him in his world.

Indeed, in the perfect world of Genesis 1–2 there is just one problem in what is otherwise a good, delightful world: it is “not good” for the human to be alone. In one sense, Adam isn’t alone: God is present with him, as are the other creatures God has made. In this case, “alone” refers to the fact that Adam is at that time the only human. God declares authoritatively that Adam needs other *humans* for companionship and for representing God.

Unfortunately, in Genesis 3 we have a close view of the end of this delightful and perfect world. Satan enters the picture, sin enters the hearts of humanity, and human relationships are deeply warped by sin: Adam and Eve's relationship with God, each other, and the created order are all damaged.

Further on, in the Gospels, the long-awaited hope of redemption is finally seen: the King has arrived, humbling himself to enter his creation as a human. The King, Jesus, proclaims and demonstrates that the kingdom is 'near', and in his life, death, and resurrection breaks Satan's power and fulfills God's laws. Jesus the Restorer offers all who are willing the opportunity to be set free from slavery to Satan, and instead serve him. The one who repents is united to Christ, who imparts the Spirit to the new disciple. From that day onward, the image which was damaged and warped is being restored. That restoration takes place communally: a community of fellow disciples, who have been redeemed and are likewise following the Christ. In this community, relationships are slowly but surely being restored. In this community, we are our brother and sister's keepers, called to encourage and nurture one another as we eagerly await the King's return and the end of evil. In this, our destiny is to be in joyful, perfect communion with each other and with the Triune God who defines us, loves us, and redeems us.

### **What Is a Mentoring Relationship?**

Where does mentoring factor into this faith journey? How is it part of the gospel message, if it is? And what is meant by the term 'mentoring' in the first place? According to Stanley and Clinton, "Mentoring is a relational process in which a mentor, who knows or has experienced something, transfers that something (resources of wisdom, information, experience, confidence, insight, relationships, status, etc.) to a mentee, at an appropriate time and manner, so that it facilitates development or empowerment."<sup>1</sup> Simply, mentoring is a relational process in which a mentor empowers the mentee in some way. It may be imparting a skill, behavior, or attitude, or making an opportunity available to someone who otherwise would not have had it. In mentoring, the mentor influences the mentee in such a way that the mentee is shaped and empowered. This by definition involves far more than just a transfer of knowledge. To be empowered is to have authority or ability to do something; in other words, this moves beyond head knowledge—as important as that is—into attitudes and actions.<sup>2</sup> Empowerment presumes some level of change, of transformation in the mentee. In a digital world dominated by Google, information is easily accessible, but information alone does not necessarily result in change, especially godly transformation. By contrast, the aim of mentoring among Christians is never just accumulation of knowledge or skills, but growth in Christlikeness.

To simplify, Christian mentoring is a relationship in which one person is assisted by another person in their pursuit of sanctification or their God-given calling. For example, we can think of the prophet Eli mentoring young Samuel (1 Samuel 3), or of Paul's protégé Timothy being mentored by his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5).

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Stanley & J. Robert Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Definition based on Merriam-Webster dictionary, accessed 9 April 2021: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empowered>.

In 1 Samuel 3, we encounter a bewildered boy who repeatedly hears a voice calling to him in the night, and he is unable to identify the voice correctly. He runs to Eli, into whose care he has been entrusted, but Eli has not called out to him. After the third occurrence, Eli realizes it must be the Lord addressing the child, and therefore he coaches Samuel about how to respond. Eli's guidance prepares Samuel, so that when the Lord calls out for a fourth time, Samuel responds appropriately and receives the divine revelation of coming judgment on Eli's family. Understandably fearful of telling his mentor this terrible news, Samuel tries to avoid passing along the message. However, Eli commands Samuel to share the word of the Lord, which Samuel does faithfully. Eli's response indicates that he accepts Samuel's words as coming from God; he does not discredit the boy because of his age or lack of experience, but trusts that God has communicated through a child and accepts God's judgment upon his line.

In this account, we see several aspects of mentoring highlighted: there is certainly a relationship of influence. Probably we would call Eli the mentor and Samuel his mentee. Eli cares for the boy, and Samuel in turn trusts and obeys Eli. Eli's greater experience enables him to assist Samuel with responding properly to God. However, Eli is still humble enough to receive the Lord's rebuke and judgment through Samuel; he may be older and more experienced, but he does not assume this means that he cannot learn from Samuel. Neither does he assume that God cannot work through someone who is his 'junior', instead of himself. Therefore, we see Eli mentoring Samuel, while at the same time Samuel affects Eli. This requires humility and openness on Eli's part—openness to hear a hard message, and willingness to accept both the message and its bearer.

Therefore, in regards to mentoring, Eli empowers Samuel by sharing his wisdom on how to respond when God speaks. At the same time, Samuel faithfully shares the divine revelation with his mentor, which shapes Eli's view of his family's future. In other words, mentor and mentee influence each other. This is not a one-way relationship, but one where both old man and boy are growing in wisdom.

In the case of Timothy, Paul mentions the reality that Timothy had been greatly influenced by his mother and grandmother, who had lived out their faith so well that their faith had become Timothy's also. Paul also mentored Timothy, in a relationship so close that the apostle affectionately refers to Timothy as 'my son' (2 Tim. 1:2). He urges Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel (2 Tim. 1:8; 2:3) and to pass along the gospel message received from Paul (2 Tim. 1:13–14; 2:2). The apostle enjoins Timothy to imitate him and put into practice what he has learned from Paul, which is not just a message but a way of life, including attitudes, habits, and a Christ-like character (2 Tim. 3:10–17).

In the case of the Thessalonian and Corinthian churches, Paul boldly urges the believers to imitate him (1 Cor. 4:16; 2 Thess. 3:9). The author of Hebrews draws upon this same idea, that believers are to be passing along and demonstrating what they have learned. Twice in Hebrews, the author urges Christians to imitate other Christians, whether those who have already died and those who are still with them (Heb. 6:12, 13:7). The idea that one Christian would tell others to imitate him or her may seem prideful at first glance. It may sound like an overconfident, even prideful claim, until we remember that Paul elsewhere commands "Follow my example, *as I follow the example of Christ*" (1 Cor. 11:1)! This is our common calling as Christians: to follow

Christ and imitate him as best we can. We do not follow Christ in isolation, but in a vast company of fellow saints.

### **Why (and When) Is Mentoring Necessary?**

The more I think about mentoring, the more I'm convinced it should be considered a means of grace and an aid in the life-long process of sanctification. Depending on which church tradition (denomination) you belong to, the phrase 'means of grace' may be unfamiliar. 'Means of grace' refers to ways that God provides for his people to confirm and strengthen their faith and grow in godliness. Thus these 'means' through which God works include the sacraments as well as Scripture and prayer. The Methodist church includes a wide range of activities in their understanding of what constitutes a means of grace. They divide these into two primary categories: works of piety and works of mercy, both categories containing a number of individual and communal practices. Under communal works of piety, "Christian conferencing (accountability to one another)" is listed as one means. "Making disciples, growing vital congregations and transforming the world is part of a spiritual adventure that is empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit as churches engage in the means of grace."<sup>3</sup> Regardless of a person's church tradition, Christians can celebrate that the Holy Spirit works through simple, seemingly mundane things in order to accomplish his will in God's people and draw them deeper into relationship with the Triune God.

One of those 'mundane' things is close Christian relationships, where one person influences the other. Mentoring matters, especially for Christians, because we are called into relationship with God and God's people. Part of our shared Christian calling involves mentoring: accompanying each other in our faith journey and passing along what God has taught us. On the other hand, we need to be mentored for very closely related reasons: we too need encouragement and accountability. Especially as leaders, it is easy to become isolated, but we must fight against this. Leadership without close, supportive friends can easily result in burnout or serious ministry failures.

What are some specific reasons a person would need mentoring? They may be at a transitional stage in life or ministry, and desire prayer and input from a trusted friend. Perhaps there is a specific skill or attitude they would like to develop, or they need an opportunity that only someone else can make available for them. The reason for needing a mentoring relationship can be as simple as needing someone with whom to share deep burdens and joys, so as to maintain good emotional and spiritual health. Further, peers can co-mentor each other, as they are likely to be going through similar situations and feel more freedom with each other than in talking to someone in a position of power over them. Mentoring can be sporadic, situation-specific, or very long-term: it is flexible, and offers many ways to meet needs. For instance, a historical figure such as St. Augustine or a current public figure that I have never met could also be a mentor to me, through his or her writings.

The question is not really if I need mentoring relationships; I do. The question is am I willing to seek them out and commit myself to growth, with the aid of fellow pilgrims?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/the-wesleyan-means-of-grace>, accessed 9 April 2021.



## How Can Mentoring Relationships Be Developed?

First of all, it's good to remind ourselves that mentoring does not require perfection, or else we could never be mentors or have mentors! Perfection is not expected; what is expected is shared commitments to Christ and to pursuing growth.

As we think about relationships of influence between broken people, what *is* necessary for these relationships to be effective? For one, humility, which includes a willingness to be corrected and to learn, on both the part of mentor and mentee. Second, trust is crucial for a healthy mentoring relationship. Both sides need to trust that the other person is invested, cares about them, sees value and worth in them, and will not pass along any confidences shared! Third, the ability to listen carefully to each other is key; if the mentor and mentee are not listening to each other well, there will be problems. Stanley and Clinton study several necessary ingredients, including availability (of the mentor) and attraction. The latter means that there is some quality of the mentor that the mentee finds appealing or admirable, giving them the desire to be influenced by the mentor. These are five key areas to address as we seek to develop healthy mentoring relationships. I say '*as* we seek,' not '*if* we seek,' because I really am convinced that we cannot afford to make mentoring an optional part of our Christian lives; it is an essential.

### Conclusions

As I find myself straddling multiple worlds—my passport country (the U.S.) and my host country (Kenya)—I am more aware than ever that regardless of where we Christians find ourselves, we are called to be 'aliens and strangers,' pilgrims journeying together in our pursuit to become more like our holy God, by the power of the Spirit. And that line of thought, of 'aliens and strangers' and being shaped in and by fellow Christians, leads me back to one of my favorite non-biblical stories: "Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back." It is the middle part of the original movie trilogy, where the young hero, Luke Skywalker, has discovered his calling to be a Jedi Knight, but realizes he has not been sufficiently prepared. Thanks to one of the 'cloud of witnesses'—his former mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi—he voyages to a back-water location in search of his next mentor, the small but wise and formidable Yoda. His training with Yoda tests his willingness to learn, his commitment to Jedi ways, and his faith in the mystical Force. And in the end ("The Return of the Jedi"), it is the life-altering mentoring that Luke receives which allows him to fulfill his calling and defeat the darkness without using its means.

As Christians, we are called to be involved in this world, but not of it; we are called to fight spiritual battles, but not using Satan's methods and tools. We are called to be holy and imitate Christ, but thanks be to the Triune God we are *not* called to do any of these tasks alone: we do it as those who are united to Christ, inhabited and empowered by the Spirit, and surrounded by a company of fellow spiritual warriors. And in the Father's perfect design, his plan of restoration—including our total sanctification—will be accomplished by a thousand different events, some of which will be the mentoring relationships we have with others.

## Recommended Resources

Anderson, Keith R. & Randy D. Reese. *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: 1999.

Ash, Christopher. *Zeal without Burnout: Seven Keys to a Lifelong Ministry of Sustainable Sacrifice*. UK: The Good Book Company, 2016.

Hendricks, Howard & William. *As Iron Sharpens Iron: Building Character in a Mentoring Relationship*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995.

Houston, James M. *The Mentored Life: From Individualism to Personhood*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2012.

Stanley, Paul D. & J. Robert Clinton, *Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992).

Thompson, Dean K. & D. Cameron Murchison, eds. *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018.