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LEARNING TO LEAD CONGREGATIONS IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE AND  
CHALLENGE

By

HUGH M. BARLETT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE  
FACULTY OF COVENANT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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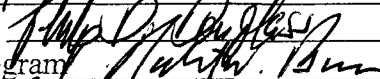
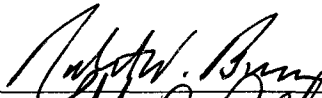
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to discover how pastors effectively lead through all the changes and challenges of congregational life.

This paper is a reflection on nearly thirty years of pastoral ministry service combined with insights gathered from interviewing pastors throughout the United States, both formally and informally, with special emphasis on churches in the Presbyterian Church in America. The review of literature examined scripture, Christian literature, and secular works concerning how pastors lead and serve people towards spiritual and organizational health. The literature review reinforced insights from ministry experience while revealing a pattern of three foundational leadership dynamics. Effective pastors lead under God's truth, by God's grace and in covenant with God and people. The pastoral leader's willingness to grow in these three areas has much to do with surviving and thriving in ministry.

The leadership dynamics of truth, grace, and covenant are expressed in the crucible of congregational life. In subsequent chapters brokenness, scarcity, confusion, conflict, isolation, and fatigue are examined as difficult challenges to pastoral leadership. Through its treatment of these topics, the paper uncovers important perspectives and approaches for dealing with the hard realities of ministry life and offers hope to future leaders.

A major portion of the paper asserts the importance of holistic spirituality, relational systems, and an adaptive leadership approach as necessary for effective leadership. Current literature on leadership and ministry reveals this type of leadership is

necessary but difficult in the face of a leader's own emotional responses and a congregation's expectations.

This paper concluded that ministers must lead in vital connection to God, His truth, His grace, and His covenant community. These healthy connections result in leaders growing and learning even as they lead in the most challenging contexts.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	vii
<b>PREFACE</b>	viii
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER TWO: TAKING HIS HAND: LEADERS WHO ENDURE</b>	4
<b>CHAPTER THREE: TRUTH POSITIONS US FOR LEADERSHIP</b>	8
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: GRACE GETS US GOING</b>	18
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: COVENANT CONNECTS US</b>	34
<b>CHAPTER SIX: BROKENNESS: HOLISTIC SPIRITUALITY HEALS US</b>	43
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: SCARCITY: GOD’S PRESENCE, PURPOSE AND PROVISION</b>	60
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: CONFUSION: VISION AND ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP</b>	71
<b>CHAPTER NINE: CONFLICT: CAN’T WE JUST GET ALONG?</b>	93
<b>CHAPTER TEN: ISOLATION: “I FEEL SO ALONE”</b>	107
<b>CHAPTER ELEVEN: FROM FATIGUE TO REFRESHMENT AND RENEWAL</b>	122
<b>CHAPTER TWELVE: CONCLUSION: LEADERS WHO LEAVE A LEGACY</b>	133
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	136

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Finally, my advisor Bob Burns is the architect of this project. Bob, you made this happen when many doubted, including me. You are the definition of encourager. Thanks for being a friend and a leader through the whole process.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION.  
Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan.



## PREFACE

I graduated from Wheaton College in 1981 and had my whole life ahead of me. I was engaged to Judy Henkle, and we married in February of 1982 on the nicest February day in her hometown of Lincoln, Nebraska. After our honeymoon in Colorado, I accepted a ministry position at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Lincoln. The capital of Nebraska, Lincoln is the home of the University of Nebraska with 25,000 students, and is populated by another 200,000 people. The church I served had about thirty-five dear people. We met in a house renovated for Sunday worship services. The twenty-seven-year-old “senior” pastor, Marlin Wismer, grew up in this church, and had returned to his hometown to lead it after graduating from Westminster Theological Seminary.

I joined him as his assistant pastor for \$300 a month. For the next five years we worked shoulder-to-shoulder and saw the church grow from thirty-five attendees to almost two hundred. Young, energetic, and way too sure of ourselves, we made every mistake in the book, but God seemed to bless us in spite of our ignorance.

This work in Lincoln was my first ministry in the church and I was captivated by it. When I left college, I had intended to enter seminary in a year. Due to the impact this local church had on me, however, I delayed seminary training for five years. I was stirred by a tremendous passion. Looking back I see the foundational experiences and formative skills of a first ministry, along with some looming challenges that would go unaddressed until almost too late. Lincoln was where it all began.

Ministry life and experience continued in St. Louis. In order to grow in my understanding of theology and ministry, I enrolled at Covenant Theological Seminary. I

spent 1987-1989 working on my Masters of Divinity. Many of the professors made a huge mark on me. I deepened my understanding of the great theological heritage of the Protestant Reformation. I developed pastoral insights. My diverse classmates encouraged and broadened my perspective about life and serving the church. Most of these lessons I would not fully understand or begin to implement until later, when I was leading in the local church.

After seminary I returned to the church in Lincoln where the elders had called me to plant a daughter church. My wife was pregnant with our first child, and we settled into our first home. We thought we were ready for the next step.

*That's when it all changed.*

Our mentor and senior pastor, Marlin Wismer, left the ministry because of fatigue. Through a series of events over the next months, I became the senior pastor of a church of nearly two hundred people. It was an exciting and confusing time. From 1989 until 1992, I sought to lead this congregation through the pain of losing their beloved pastor into a new future. At twenty-eight years old, surrounded by people I knew and loved, leading the church brought me great joy as it grew and developed. However, a sense of isolation and uncertainty began to creep into my mind and heart. My doubts about myself and my vision of the future often left me unsettled. My underdeveloped spiritual life and ministry philosophy pushed me to the edge of collapse. I was both bored and burned out. I was doing my job, but I was unsure of my place in leading a church ministry.

*Then things changed again.*

Chesterfield Presbyterian Church (CPC) in St. Louis called me as their senior pastor in 1992. I found myself in a very challenging church context. CPC was divided over issues of worship and ministry direction. Floundering, they looked for a pastor who could bring them together and move them forward. Over the next seventeen years the church grew from one hundred to almost one thousand people on Sunday mornings. Still, there were plenty of ups and downs – personally, pastorally, relationally, and financially.

The changes and challenges just kept coming: key staff persons left, lay leaders opposed the new vision, and ugly conflicts erupted. Growth came slowly, then fast, then slowly once more. We lost key leaders to death. We endured a challenging building program. We saw some lives change and others fall apart. Through all this, we grew closer together and became a sweet fellowship.

*And the changes kept coming ...*

As a part of the Missouri regional network of Presbyterian churches, I have been asked on a number of occasions to deal with difficult situations in other churches. Some of my insights into church life have come from these experiences as a consultant in the midst of other churches' challenges. Some of these churches faced vision conflict. Others had personal squabbles between leaders and pastors. Moral breakdown derailed a number of ministries. Small and large churches have broken into pieces, congregations turned against their pastors, and pastors stagnated in their leadership.

*Life keeps changing and challenges keep coming...*

I have felt fear of failure, doubts that flow from deep disappointment, and questions that shake my own sense of calling. *Will I make it? How can I go on? How will the church I pastor grow healthier?* I know I am not the only one asking these questions.

CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCTION

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.<sup>1</sup>*

Paul, Jim, and I paddled the North Platte River just outside of Holdrege, Nebraska. The Platte River is the widest, shallowest and laziest of rivers – the opposite of whitewater. With three of us in one canoe, we floated and paddled with no apparent challenges. In fact, our biggest problem was getting stranded on the innumerable sand bars that appeared around every turn of the river. It was not dangerous so much as dreary, requiring us to get out of the canoe and drag it forward into the next pool of moving water. Our setbacks were irritating at times, but certainly not life threatening – until we came around a turn near a highway bridge. There we saw debris and limbs stacked up against the concrete pillars. The river narrowed and, imperceptibly at first, quickened. Before we knew it, we had hit a submerged log and the canoe flipped. We were in total control one minute, but the next minute we found ourselves *in* the water being carried along by the current! The canoe wrapped around a tree; Jim and Paul were nearly taken under by some debris. We crawled across broken piles of rubble, trying to reach the shore. Formerly dreamy and complacent, we were now scared for our lives. After a crazy fifteen minutes, we climbed onto solid ground.

For many leaders, life in the church looks just like that. Most of the time ministry

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:7.

plans and programs progress slowly. Then, when unseen realities and resistance intrude, life in the church gets downright dangerous, especially for its leaders. Jarred from our complacency, we wonder: how can we be more effective leaders, steering congregations around or through perilous waters?

Most pastors write books after they have navigated huge challenges and are ready to help others follow their path to greater success. That is the book I wanted to write. To be honest, in the not-so-secret part of my heart, that is the book I still desire to write. But I realize I have not made it downstream in ministry far enough to even pretend to know the way. The distance I have traveled, I have often spent either wondering if I was going the wrong way or actually under my capsized canoe, holding on as the rapids spit me out. I am not an expert; I am a pastor who struggles to lead a congregation that has grown and struggled, then grown and leveled off. I have seen a church family grow together, and turn indifferent to others. Some days I am grateful for what God has done; other days I secretly wonder if I can make it. I am not alone in these struggles.

After having conducted extensive research, Dr. J Robert Clinton, professor of leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary, believes that more than 70 percent of leaders do not finish well. He bases this startling statistic on six criteria, gleaned from common traits among leaders who did not finish well according to their self-analysis, the analysis of their peers and followers, or the teachings of their professed religion. First, leaders who do not finish well lost their learning posture. They stop listening and growing. Second, the attractiveness of their character wanes. Third, they stop living by their convictions. Fourth, they fail to leave behind ultimate contributions. Fifth, they stop walking in an awareness of their influence and destiny. Finally, leaders who finish poorly lose their once vibrant relationship with God.<sup>2</sup>

Most pastors enter the ministry with a sense of adventure. God sends pastors and churches out on a journey with a meaningful commitment to explore new missions and

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath, *The Ascent of a Leader: How Ordinary Relationships Develop Extraordinary Character and Influence* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 14.

experience God's grace in wonderful ways. Nothing in this world is as thrilling as sharing life in Christ as a missional and compassionate community. I have tasted this reality, continue to long for it, and believe that by the Holy Spirit every pastor and church can experience it. But I no longer naively romanticize the calling to pastor God's people. This adventure is dangerous, difficult, even devastating, to all involved. Without Christ as our Lord and Savior – it is impossible. With Him – it is overwhelming. Through Him – it becomes deeply glorious.

This project does not offer a series of easily identifiable steps. Rather, it is a retracing of the path on which God has led me. For nearly thirty years in ministry, in three different ministry situations, in the varied roles of college pastor, assistant pastor, solo pastor, and senior pastor, God has provided me with a number of humbling and helpful lessons. I revisit them often, deepening my understanding of what He has done and what He is still doing in me. This book is about leadership – that indefinable, essential quality of influencing people from where they currently are to where they could be in relationship with God. I hope this project encourages the leaders God has called to seek renewal in the power of His glory.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Taking His hand: Leaders who endure**

*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.<sup>3</sup>*

Try holding your hand up in an arc above your head. You have done it in class as a student when you asked a question, or perhaps in corporate worship as an expression of praise. Maybe you have held up your arms as a basketball defender trying to block your opponent's attempts to pass the ball. One thing is certain: raising your hand is easy to do for a moment, but it is tiring to do so for long.

I use this example to illustrate the role of leadership, which requires individuals to offer up their lives in service to others. Through their example, leaders must bring people to a new place of insight and commitment. This may seem easy to do for a moment, but anyone who attempts it for an extended time finds that fatigue ensues. In fact, many pastoral leaders are discovering the role of pastor too wearisome and unrewarding to continue. Current research informs us that a large number of pastors have considered or are planning to leave the ministry.<sup>4</sup> How can we stay in the game? How can we actually survive in this calling? Better yet, how can we become more effective as pastoral leaders?

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 3:12.

<sup>4</sup> Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 36-40; Jackson W. Carroll and Becky R. McMillan, *God's Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 165.

To achieve any of this, leaders must have a renewing resource. Returning to our initial image, do you recall a time when holding your hand above your head was not exhausting? Consider when it was as natural as you could imagine: at three years old when you held your father's or mother's hand, their loving grasp steadying you and guiding you on the journey of the day. To find renewal in leadership, we must take our Heavenly Father's hand and allow Him to not only guide us, but also sustain us. Leaders need to be led.

But how are we to lead? Organizational consultants suggest a commitment to ongoing educational formation. In other words, leaders need to become learners. Truthfully, most of us resist learning. Sometimes pastors are so discouraged by the state of crisis in their churches that they feel learning is a foolish luxury for which they do not have the time or energy. Peter L. Steinke and other thinkers suggest that learning ceases when anxiety takes hold of our lives. Literally shut down by the fears that so obviously surround us, our paralysis removes any renewing perspective.

Chronic anxiety is perpetually present in someone or structured into a relationship. Simply stated, chronic anxiety is not specific to a threat. Any issue, topic, or circumstance can provoke chronically anxious people. Consequently, they have little capacity to step out of their experience, observe their own emotionality, reflect on what is happening, make choices based on principles, and manage their lives.<sup>5</sup>

On other occasions we resist learning because we are doing well. The church we serve is growing, giving is increasing, and ministry programs are running smoothly. This apparently successful era of church life can leave us unprepared for what awaits us around the corner. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky teach that technical success in a number of areas can often weaken our ability to learn.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 10.



The most common cause of failure in leadership is produced by treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. What's the difference? While technical problems may be very complex and critically important (like replacing a faulty heart valve during cardiac surgery), they have known solutions that can be implemented by current know-how. They can be resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization's current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of insight will make us unable or unwilling to adapt to the great changes and challenges that will eventually come upon any church or organization. Pastors who have come through building programs, for example, often plateau. The good activities of the moment swallow up the great opportunities for learning how to lead. Kevin Ford calls this the "sigmoid curve," suggesting that pastors and churches often stop learning precisely when they feel they do not need to learn. They then lack the insight for moving into the next chapter of life together.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason we fail to learn relates to our blind spots. Our personal and emotional issues keep us from seeing how we lead our congregations. Ford suggests that there are four ways we react to situations that could hurt our leadership of the church. These "red zone" responses are survival, acceptance, control and competence. While there are positive aspects to these responses, the negatives sides can greatly diminish a leader's ability to interpret events and influence others.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Martin Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2009), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Graham Ford, *Transforming Church: Bringing out the Good to Get to Great*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), 205-206.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-149.

One pastor who often led through control explained his behavior: "I believe that I am only two bad decisions from closing the doors of this ministry. Each day I work to avoid those mistakes." Though an extraordinary manager of his mission, the people around this pastor struggled in a fearful ministry culture, and were drained of joy and appreciation for what God was doing. What would it mean to respond to such a culture, instead of reacting to it? Where do we receive guidance for such responses? How do we as leaders put ourselves in a position of humility to learn and be led? Jesus invites us to take hold of His hand in learning how to grow.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Truth positions us for leadership**

*Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*<sup>9</sup>

*For most of us, it is easier to think about how to get what we want than to know what exactly we should want.*<sup>10</sup>

*The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shop they keep are churches. They are preoccupied with shopkeeper's concerns— how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money.*<sup>11</sup>

*The biggest cultural mistake we can indulge in is to yearn for technological “solutions” to our deepest cultural “problems.”*<sup>12</sup>

### **Case study: Chesterfield Presbyterian Church**

I came to Chesterfield Presbyterian Church (CPC) when I was thirty-two years old. I had already experienced more than ten years of ministry leadership in the church, and another two years of formal training in seminary. As a follower of Christ since my high school days, I had worshiped in a variety of churches: an Evangelical Community church in suburban Chicago, a Southern Baptist church in a small town in Mississippi, a Christian Reformed church in suburban Chicago, an Evangelical Covenant congregation, and two Presbyterian congregations (one set in an urban area, the other in a mid-size town). I observed various aspects of these ministries, some seemingly effective and

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<sup>9</sup> Psalm 90:12.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Neelly Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 1st Perennial Library ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 60.

others ineffective. Regardless, each of these churches brought me closer to Christ with their own unique approach to mission and community.

When I arrived in St. Louis as a new pastor, CPC did not have any sense of their unique approach. At that time it was a church with little hope. The congregation had failed to grow in any consistent manner – numerically or spiritually – over fifteen years, even while enjoying a tremendous location and the giftedness of a number of highly capable people. During the interim after a weary previous pastor left, the church had declined to just over one hundred people. Meanwhile they bore a huge financial debt. The pulpit committee had selected a great candidate as their next pastor, but the congregation split over whether he was the right person with the right vision. When he withdrew his name, a second pulpit committee was formed. I was one of three candidates. I was surprised to be unanimously called as their pastor.

When I came to CPC, I presented a general vision to the elders and later to the congregation. Some delighted, some doubted, and others feared that they had seen it all before. Over the first months, God began to impress upon me and some of the leaders of the church a new way to live out God's purposes at CPC. I found that it was important to humbly, yet boldly, present this direction. We remained open to discussions with those who challenged the vision from biblical concerns. We had to weather the shouts of doubters who saw this change as a road to compromise of the truth. We had meetings in small and large groups where we presented the opportunities and challenges ahead of us. We had to stand strong against those who opposed changes to the music, the removal of the pulpit, or the times of the service, on the basis of tradition ("we have never done it that way here"), emotion ("I do not feel comfortable with that"), or limited reasoning ("I

know a church that tried that and it failed”). We listened and tried to articulate the vision without demonizing the opposition. It was not an easy time, but it was remarkably exciting!

Underwater diving champions can hold their breath for so long, and dive so deep, that they become disoriented to which way is up or down. Some have mistakenly thought they were returning to the surface, only to head into the blue abyss. To avoid this deadly mistake, diving champions actually employ scuba divers to point them in the right direction. The divers' lives depend on being reoriented to the truth. Those seeking to lead the church in confusing times consistently need a similar reorientation to God's truth.

As followers of Christ, God's word regenerates, guides, and renews us for living. We should not be surprised that learning to lead, or leading as a learner, involves reflection on God's truth. The practice of reflection on God's truth provides a pattern for all of our leadership. By learning to receive, reflect, and respond to God's truth we are positioned to lead. Sermons can be scripted, but leading a congregation through the development of a discipleship approach, a change in worship style, and a greater commitment to service in a community – all take real wisdom. How do we get this kind of insight? How do we know the way through to the desired side of growth?

Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted. To be effective, you must respond to what is happening...you have to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor, over and over again throughout the day, week, month, and year. You take action, step back and assess the results of the action, reassess the plan, then go to the dance floor and make the next move. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on a changing reality.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 73.

The ability to reflect and create a vision is not merely transactional for the pastor of a church. Real vision begins with an appreciation for transcendent truth. A divine perspective exists above my own as a follower of Christ and as a leader of the church. Through His word, God, the Lord of life, enables us to gain an eternal perspective and then leads us boldly into the ministry. How do we gain such perspective? I have found that I learn to function as a visionary leader by recognizing my position and reorienting my perspective.

#### Recognizing position

For some, vision-casting comes across like a dictatorial mandate. In any number of church settings, pastors come out of their study and pronounce a new vision that everyone must accept and implement. For many this kind of heroic leadership was purported to be “the” definition of real leadership. Any questions were considered disloyal; any discussions were viewed as a waste of time. Power struggles ensued as pastors and people fought over vision control. As a result of this leadership battle some pastors were fired. Others fled to new churches. Much damage resulted from this approach regardless of whether the vision seemed to succeed or fail.

However, at the heart of true leadership is recognition of our position in God’s kingdom. Christian leadership is *delegated* and *derived*; it comes from God. Many accept that. But a corollary concept is more difficult to accept: vision comes from God’s Word as we learn and relearn it. Nelson Jennings explains:

The learning posture of missionaries (comes) when they enter a new context... The point is that God is the One who has brought the missionary into a new crucible of discipleship. As one insightful African analyst has put it, “They did not bring God; rather God brought them...”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> J. Nelson Jennings, *God the Real Superpower: Rethinking Our Role in Missions* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 30.

Before leaders can responsibly understand the people and mission they are called to lead, they must come close to the One who called them, and look into the word of God for direction.

Leaders must relearn the pattern of living they began as new followers of Christ. As for me, my Christian life began when I realized just how disoriented I actually was. I was born into a family of Mid-western progressivism and morality. In the 1960s and 1970s the values of honesty, integrity, and concern for others were the foundation of our family in suburban Chicago. My personal objectives were fairly typical: doing well in school, achieving in sports, and having fun. It was a safe environment, but it became dissatisfying. My first taste of failure in sports, and my futility in the social realities of middle school made me question the purpose of my identity. I could not articulate this confusion at the time, but I felt a constant flux of emotions that were at best chaotic.

It was into this middle school maelstrom that God graciously intervened. My older sister came to evangelical and saving faith at Illinois State University. She returned home to share the good news with her little brother. As she invited me to read the Bible, God spoke to me through His word. I read passages like John 3:16, Ephesians 2:8-9, and John 1:12-13, and understood that I was a sinner who indeed had a Savior who had died and risen again for me. I prayed in my bedroom on a January evening in 1973 that Jesus would show His love to me. He did.

Why do we struggle to believe that the God who spoke the truth to us and brought us to new life could now lead us through life as leaders? Learning to lead has always begun with learning to follow. Why do we cease to believe that His voice is formative for us and for the ministry we serve? Why do we stop accepting that God's word transforms

us? The gospel of John puts it succinctly, "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free,"<sup>15</sup> and later, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."<sup>16</sup>

The recognition of our dependence on God and His word creates a posture in our heart and in our relationships. Suddenly our casting of vision relates to a humble discernment of God's plan for His congregation and not a captivating creation of a leaders' brilliance. As leaders we must powerfully communicate a brighter future for God's people. But the brightness of this future does not originate from human ingenuity or heroic planning. Spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation on the word become indispensable habits for vision casting.

The psalmist says,

*I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven. As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy.*<sup>17</sup>

Numbers 12:3 states that Moses was the most humble man on the earth. His boldness came from his recognition of his position under God. In the first chapter of Joshua, God promises Joshua that he would find success when he meditated day and night in the word of God.<sup>18</sup> Based on passages such as these, it is right to assume that in order to effectively lead, we must learn to follow His leadership. When leaders assume this posture, it becomes contagious to those who hear the vision. When others doubt, this posture toward the Word forms a foundation for them to dialog with the leader. For those who are afraid of where the vision might lead, this posture of a learner of God's truth will point them to trusting in God and not the leader. For those who are rebellious, the

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<sup>15</sup> John 8:32.

<sup>16</sup> John 17:17.

<sup>17</sup> Psalm 123:1-2.

<sup>18</sup> Joshua 1:8.



leader's posture of dependence on God's word will promote a contrast between those who are principled and those who are personally antagonistic.

#### Reorienting perspective

As children, in the clear summer evening at a cabin in the woods of Wisconsin, we would look for shooting stars. After a few minutes, I would hear my brothers and sisters shout out, "There's one," or "I see one." My eyes zoomed all over the sky in frustration. I did not know where to look. I did not know what I was seeking.

God's revelation provides a pattern for our vision of the church. Just as my siblings could see what I could not discern, effective visionary leaders understand the general pattern of Christ's purpose for the church from the truth of His word. Acts chapter 2 reveals a general scriptural approach to ministry: Christ-centered, gospel-oriented, word-driven, Spirit-led worship, fellowship, ministry, and word-and-deed mission. Authors in recent decades have gone round about the characteristics of a healthy church. However, they end up in the same place if they look at God's pattern in the Bible. Sadly, some have created visions without any commitment to the biblical pattern. In earlier days Modernism tried to create a church vision without the gospel. Fundamentalism sought to limit the mission to just word without deed. By focusing on making a salvation decision, Revivalism lost sight of the place of community. The church growth movement sometimes lost sight of the primacy of the Word in its pursuit of mission results. And in its focus on community, the Emergent movement loses sight of the objective truth of God's word. The vision of the leader must be reoriented to the divine pattern for ministry for all churches in order to express it uniquely for a particular congregation.

Reorientation also comes through the aspect of *confession* of how the church has failed to follow God's vision up to the present time. Pastors and congregations struggle to evaluate themselves. However, accurate reflection and evaluation are essential to discerning God's vision for the future. If a pastor fails to exhibit a humble posture to a new congregation, members can easily feel under attack by the next new guy. Other times, a pastor who has been part of the church for some time can fail to recognize the way he has been a part of creating a stagnant or unhealthy culture. God's truth stands outside of us to enable us to see the pattern of health and to confess our failure to meet it.

This is one reason why current literature on leadership encourages questions that move people to recognize their need to change. Such questions arise from the gaps between God's ideal pattern and our real failure to follow it. Strong leaders help people appreciate the challenge before them. Not surprisingly, Jesus employs this strategy with his disciples throughout the gospels. Perhaps this is why he asks so many questions of those he taught.

Asking rather than telling, questions rather than answers, has become the key to leadership excellence and success in the twenty-first century.<sup>19</sup>

Questions can be very powerful in focusing attention. When leaders ask questions, they send constituents on mental journeys—quests—in search of answers. These journeys can be positive and productive, inspiring creative problem solving, new insights, and fresh perspective. Unfortunately, our questions can also send people on journeys that are negative and unproductive, provoking defensiveness and self-doubt.<sup>20</sup>

John Kotter... writes that the primary difference between leaders and managers is that leaders are those who ask the right questions whereas managers are those tasked to answer those questions (2002). Asking the right questions enables leaders to discover what is the right thing to do; answering them allows

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<sup>19</sup> Michael J. Marquardt, *Leading with Questions: How Leaders Find the Right Solutions by Knowing What to Ask* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

managers to do the right thing.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of reflecting on God's pattern, leaders will need to model their own brokenness in light of the truth. This type of transparency winsomely invites other leaders and the congregation to look to God's vision. Isaiah 6:5 reveals how the prophet recognized his own condition as one in a nation of sinners living under the pattern of God's holiness. He confessed, "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." The text reflects how Isaiah's perspective developed as he looked to the very throne of God, where God's holiness dwells. When Isaiah was undone, he was ready to be the one who could lead Israel. The truth of his sin before a holy God reoriented him to recognize his utter dependence on Him. So throughout scripture, we witness the truth of God's word bringing reorientation, then renewal. Passages such as Exodus chapter 24, Nehemiah chapter 8, and Acts chapter 2 show how renewal followed the reorienting effect of truth.

As we seek to lead through vision, we must learn to follow God's Word. As a model, I would suggest that private devotional times be combined with times of saturation in scripture with fellow leaders. Resist planning until you have soaked in the Word together. As we learn the fundamental pattern for life together in God's kingdom as revealed in the Bible, will we be ready to make application of those principles in the unique context of our ministry.

Finally, reorientation brings hope for change. Truth not only guides, it transforms. Where do we find the confidence to communicate and lead a vision that the congregation has never experienced? How will we address people's doubts concerning anything

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 171.

different and challenging? God's truth is a foundation upon which our hopes are built. His truth is a fountain from which our hope flows. Wishing for a new future is not enough, but waiting on the faithful promise of God is more than sufficient for any leader and church. Over and over again, the Word of God reminds us that we are not the ultimate agents of change or growth. We learn and relearn that God is the truly wise and powerful one.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?  
Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay him?  
For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Grace gets us going

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.<sup>22</sup>*

#### **Case study: Lincoln, Nebraska**

After college, at age twenty-one, I joined the staff of a small church in Lincoln, Nebraska that had a particular passion for biblical and theological clarity. My mentor, the pastor of this church, was twenty-seven at the time. Together we planned and worked toward a bright future for the congregation. Much of what we did was Christ-centered and biblically based. But below the surface was personal pride and performance. I had convinced myself that this little church was the best church in the city. My rationale involved a casual calculus of doctrine, life, friendship and style. According to this formula, we were the best ministers in the area. Our church was not the biggest. In our opinion, the bigger churches compromised theologically. We deemed other, stagnant churches “dead.” We were superior in our insight and our commitment. Because of this impression we believed we would be able to steer around the problems faced by other congregations. We would say all of this with vocal humility – such is the blindness of humanity and the foolishness of youthful leadership!

Why did we so clearly contradict our understanding of grace in our style of leadership? Why do I still contradict it? I came to Christ with the understanding of salvation as a free gift. By the time I entered the ministry this adolescent grasp of God’s

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<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:10.

free grace had never wavered, but neither had it deepened. As a young pastor I worked hard to see others grow in the grace of God. But my immature understanding of grace combined with fervent activism was not enough to keep me going. Like other pastors, I sought more training, more discipline, more education, more apprenticeship, more experience, more, more, more.... Somehow a disconnect had developed between my salvation and my ministry success.

We are not freed from this destructiveness by an individualistic, consumerist spirituality.... Only the work of Christ in His life, death and resurrection, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit redeems us from our sinful self-deception and frees us for new life – the life for which we were originally created. God in Christ “capacitates” us for the friendship for which we were created, and by the Holy Spirit draws us into new relationships to sustain us and lead us to discover the life that really is life.<sup>23</sup>

God’s grace gets us going. Romans chapter 8 states that the grace of God sets us free us from bondage of fear. I John chapter 4 teaches that the perfect love of Christ casts out fear. In the gospel, Jesus’ embrace takes believers from fear to trust. This ought to make a difference in the way leaders function.

By grace, when we fail, we are not finished

Leaders experience an ongoing, unrelenting sense of pressure and performance that can simply overwhelm them. My sense of performance has robbed me again and again of an enduring sense of passion. I believe that many leaders of reformed and evangelical churches often preach a grace-based Christian life, yet lead their congregations out of a works-righteousness perspective.

For Protestants this understanding in conjunction with reading the Bible in one’s own language and the priesthood of the believers transformed the church. This renewal sparked an ecclesiastical and missional explosion which now extends Christianity to the ends of the earth. What spread far and wide from Germany and

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<sup>23</sup> L. Gregory Jones and Kevin R. Armstrong, *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 63.

Switzerland to England, Holland, the New World to Africa, Asia, and now Oceania still has not soaked deeply enough into the hearts of pastors and leaders. The doctrinal debates about grace are quiet discussions. The practical apathy and lack of application is the problem for pastors and local churches.<sup>24</sup>

Rather than being motivated by their dissatisfaction with what they see in the ministry, most leaders are motivated by a belief in God's dissatisfaction with *them*. As a result, ministry becomes a sort of penance, a sort of pushing back the disappointment of God, as well as the dissatisfaction they have with themselves, through diligence and over-functioning. This may work for a period of time if things appear successful, but ultimately, it is an unsustainable treadmill. Every ministry will experience failure in the lives of the leaders, in the lives of the people, and in the ministry arena.

At that moment of coming to grips with failure, seeing it as it really is (whether a result of things done or left undone), many ministers simply check out; they are simply worn out. At that point they either flee from any accountability or seek to justify themselves. The reality is that a spiral of discouragement, despair, and ultimately defeat will take over if we look at every failure, every mistake, every sin in our lives as a period at the end of God's sentence for us and for the church.

Of course grace does not function that way. Paul, as an apostle, served God *in* his weakness. He was the least of the apostles, he said in 1 Corinthians chapter 15.<sup>25</sup> Paul is the least of the saints in Ephesians chapter 3.<sup>26</sup> In 2 Timothy he called himself the "worst of sinners."<sup>27</sup> We see Paul's recognition of himself as a flawed and broken person, but he recognizes that God's grace still operates in him. For this reason, he rehearses in his

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<sup>24</sup> Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 262.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:9.

<sup>26</sup> Ephesians 3:8.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Timothy 1:15.

teaching that it is God's grace that led him to this place, and God's grace that will lead him forward. This attitude models how leaders need to develop a devotional life that goes far beyond preparing talking points for the next sermon. We must take time to reflectively appreciate the unconditional and overwhelming grace of God in our own lives.

Just recently a member of the church I serve visited another church for a Sunday service. When he told a person who greeted him which church he attended, the person responded, "That's Hugh Barlett's church. I really don't like him." "Why?" asked the member of my church. "Because when I came to the church, he never remembered my name."

Based on feedback like this, it is easy as a pastor to feel that while I am saved by grace, I pastor by works. Later that same month, I officiated a funeral for a family that had lost their grandmother. After this meaningful service, I walked out with the mother and father, the two married daughters and their husbands, and their five beautiful children. All were grateful to God for the gospel and the ministry of the church. What a beautiful picture of covenantal love moving from God through the generations in the church! I remarked to the youngest adult daughter that she had been the first one of the family to come to CPC, and how many of her family worshipped with us together now. She stopped and smiled. "Do you know why I came to the church?" "No," I said, "Why did you come to CPC?" She replied, "When I visited a second time, you remembered my name." Sometimes I remember; sometimes I forget. Many times my failures seem to be so glaring, so public.

Much of the current literature on leadership is swelled with the notion of self-disclosure, the importance of authenticity, and the need to own one's weaknesses



as a means of bolstering credibility. To connoisseurs of leadership literature, this is nothing new. What I am calling you to, however, is far more than the mere acknowledgment of your shortcomings. I'm suggesting an outright dismantling of them—in the open and in front of those you lead.<sup>28</sup>

When people begin their Christian life, they understand we are sinners for whom Jesus died. The gospel offers us life because Christ lived, died, and rose again to set us free from our sin. This first experience of Christ-following should be the pattern for the rest of our lives, including our lives as leaders. This gracious embrace by the living God enables us to lead because, embedded in the promise of God's grace, there is a pattern of leadership. Failure is not the end of our story; it is the beginning.

I have pastored churches for nearly thirty years, and I have failed in some glaring and everyday ways:

- I called the mother of a baby the wrong name during her child's baptism – the name of her husband's *former wife*!
- I asked a woman when the baby was due when she was not pregnant.
- Just as I was to introduce the bride and groom, I lost my voice.
- I opened the baptismal to find no water on a Sunday morning.
- I overslept for an important finance meeting.
- I forgot to have the bride and groom kiss in a wedding ceremony.
- Our building campaign slowed to a crawl because of zoning approval problems.

These and so many other mistakes or challenges could overwhelm me with shame or bring my leadership into question. Every leader understands this struggle. The gospel reminds us where leaders are to find their identity.

The progress of our spiritual growth is not a matter of our own initiative and designing; it is under the control and direction of God who has begun a good work in us and will work patiently to perfect it until the day of Christ. To borrow a metaphor from Mahayana Buddhism, we are not like the infant monkey [that] must cling to its mother with all its strength if it is to avoid falling; we are like the

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<sup>28</sup> Dan B. Allender, *Leading with a Limp: Turning Your Struggles into Strengths* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2006), 2-3.

kitten which is carried from place to place in its mother's mouth.<sup>29</sup>

That new life was birthed from such utter vulnerability, such awful dying, is the central mystery of Christian faith. For Christians, the story of the death of Jesus on the cross is a story of strength drawn from weakness, power from vulnerability, life from death.<sup>30</sup>

By grace, we are freed from selfish leadership

A radical dependence on the gospel is essential for leaders. Otherwise we will try to find our identity in the approval of others. In Galatians 1:10, Paul explains that pleasing God in Christ frees us from the painful roller coaster of public opinion. He writes, "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." Leadership requires that we differentiate from the weight of people's opinions and lead in God's purpose. We see biblical figures setting a negative example of this over and over: Saul listened to the people and disobeyed God;<sup>31</sup> Aaron failed to honor God when he made the golden calf;<sup>32</sup> Peter encouraged Jesus to skip the cross;<sup>33</sup> Peter could not embrace the Gentiles.<sup>34</sup>

Pastors are leaving the ministry because they cannot shake other's disapproval of them. It wears on them. When we fail to find our identity in Christ, we will often seek an alliance with dangerous and powerful people in the congregation. As pastors we must minister to the entire flock, but often pastors refuse to recognize dangerous antagonists or critics, because the pastors need them so much. These pastors are not seeking to win over or lead difficult people – they are actually depending upon them. This kind of strategy is

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<sup>29</sup> Lovelace, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 39.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Samuel 15:10-26.

<sup>32</sup> Exodus 32:1-10.

<sup>33</sup> Matthew 16:22-23.

<sup>34</sup> Galatians 2:11-14.

deadly. God's justifying grace means that we are free from the fear of rejection based upon our performance. We will be able to set a course different from the culture and the consensus, though it will not be altogether comfortable!

Kouzes and Posner suggest that all leaders need to emulate or at least work towards such differentiation.<sup>35</sup> Scripture teaches that this style of servant leadership is reflected in characteristics such as the avoidance of quarrels,<sup>36</sup> the communication of gentleness,<sup>37</sup> and the expression of hospitality.<sup>38</sup> But fundamentally we must understand the *transactional* through the lens of the *transcendent*. Our identity and acceptance come from grace. We love, not to win the love of others, but because He first loved us. Personally, God's grace became a more regular functioning relationship to me only when I recognized that I was burning out because of my reliance on others to approve of me.

Self-absorbed ministry issues from a pastor's lack of Christian character. Whether a matter of an excessive estimation of one's own importance or a sense of weakness and insecurity, everything revolves around the pastor's need to be the focus of attention and affirmation.<sup>39</sup>

For years I felt the compulsion to win the approval of my elders and congregation. Each ministry moment became another confirming or discouraging evaluation about my place in the church. The results were disastrous. I over-functioned in order to awe people with my diligence or kindness. I wanted to be the best pastor, but I feared any kind of evaluation.

On one occasion, I was evaluated at a church-planting assessment center. Although they encouraged me to proceed with church planting, they shared concerns with

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<sup>35</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *A Leader's Legacy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 19.

<sup>36</sup> 2 Timothy 2:24.

<sup>37</sup> Galatians 6:1.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2.

<sup>39</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 92.

me about my drivenness. I cried as I drove back home. I was devastated. I wondered if I could continue in the pastorate.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, celebrates the grace of God and God's empowerment of his work. He acknowledges, "By the grace of God I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain."<sup>40</sup> Note that he quickly recognizes Christ in him doing the work. Self-sufficient leaders are by nature self-congratulatory. Rather than boasting and relying on the Lord's grace, they constantly seek praise from others. Paul says in Galatians 1:10 that seeking men's praise would exclude him from God's Kingdom service: if he were looking for the praise of men, he could not really serve Christ. Christ needs to be the focus in our ministry. As long as we are looking for praise, we will not share ministry with other people. Paul says in Philippians chapter 2 that Timothy is unlike many leaders, because he takes on Christ's concern for the welfare of others, rather than only looking out for his own interests.<sup>41</sup> We need to recognize that our self-absorbed congratulations swallow up the encouraging praise necessary for the empowering of other leaders in the church. Supporting other leaders involves more than taking a Dale Carnegie class. It is about taking real joy in seeing others accomplish great things in the Kingdom of God. Regardless of whether they are pastoral partners or lay people, whether they are gifted like us or unlike us, we celebrate because we truly are grateful that God is using others.

If empowering others for serving is crucial to effective leadership, how do we handle the "spotlight" of ministry? Our ability to share ministry is directly connected to our understanding of grace. So many leaders demand the spotlight. They make every

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<sup>40</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:10.

<sup>41</sup> Philippians 2:19-22.

meeting, every worship service, every gathering, a place where they must be in the center. They fail to see the critical importance of their ability to facilitate, empower, and partner with others in ministry.

We see a partnership mindset so clearly in Paul's ministry. Many of Paul's letters mention that they are from Paul, Timothy and Silas, a *team of people*. Paul believed in team ministry (just as Jesus did before him). He was willing, as an apostle called by God, to share the ministry with others. He allowed Timothy, Titus, Apollos, Silas, and others to grow and become the pastoral leaders they were meant to be. The implication for our leadership is clear: as grace moves us away from self-absorbed ministry, we are able to share the spotlight.

Practically this means that senior pastors have to share leadership moments. If you are a senior pastor, how often do you allow other people to preach in your church? Using the apostle Paul as our model, it is an important to have our congregations recognize others as leaders alongside the senior or solo pastor. Before our church became multi-staffed, one of the things I did was to have ruling elders preach in the Sunday morning worship service. In that smaller church context, I gave three of them five to ten minutes apiece. We would have services like this twice a year. As a result, the church began to see other leaders in the congregation as having the gift of teaching. It transformed the way we all viewed that gift. Now, as a larger church with multiple staff members, I try to give as many opportunities as I can for others to preach. It certainly does not minimize my gifts as the lead teacher in our congregation. In fact, people begin to appreciate that our ministry is not built upon one person's voice, but upon a vision of God's grace moving through a multiplicity of leaders in the church.

Of course, there will be some resistance to this. Some people desire a heroic preaching pastor, someone to be the familiar, authoritative voice. But that desire is not healthy. There will be a day when the current senior pastor will leave. There will be a day when some of the congregants may have to move and listen to another pastor. Over-dependence on one voice produces the fruit of a self-absorbed approach to ministry. Grace at work in our lives means we relinquish self, point to Christ, and allow others a more full-orbed experience of Him through their exposure to others' gifts.

By grace, we are aware of God's sovereign provision for us and for others

Grace allows us to get others going. Grace enables leaders to honor others who are serving as team members in ways that are very significant. We have to be willing to share the rewards of the ministry with others. This includes the financial benefits. I am shocked, frankly, by how much senior pastors make in comparison to other staff members. Senior pastors are often treated like a corporate CEO, making two to three times what other fulltime, long term staff earn. The argument for such compensation, of course, is that the key leader is more valuable.

But I am convicted biblically that senior leaders need to be willing to work in the vineyard longer and harder, and receive their pay in a way that rewards others as well. I am not making a cheap shot by advocating lower compensation for pastors. I would be happy to see all pastors make more money. I simply believe that the way we share financial rewards reflects our understanding of grace. Our pay is not what we deserve in an ultimate sense. We should be grateful to have an opportunity to be part of God's Kingdom, and be delighted to share His gifts with those around us, even as God blesses

abundantly.

### Results of a control orientation

#### Fear creates a culture of failure

These [senior leaders] often wall themselves off emotionally. They do not let others get too close to them. They can be overly controlling toward others- bossy, directive, demanding, rigid, and nit-picky. They impose perfectionist demands on others. They become anxious and angry whenever anyone or anything threatens their control.<sup>42</sup>

Another thing that happens when we live apart from grace is that we become control-oriented. The picture of Mary and Martha found in Luke chapter 10 is illustrative. Here we see Martha working so diligently, but without the focus of Christ at the heart of all she does. As a result, she becomes demanding. She believes deep in her heart that the Lord does not care. Then she demands that Jesus make other people do things for her. This attitude reveals a pattern too often replicated in our ministries.

Years ago I heard a pastor make this comment about a person who had left his church for good: “It’s so sad because we could have truly used that person.” It struck him as he heard the word “used” come out of his mouth that he looked at people as objects to control. He had come to believe so strongly that it was *his* church and *his* ministry that he operated out of a sense of fear and control. He began to see people as objects to use for his purposes.

It is so easy for us to build our ministries around our own works. Then, like Martha, we begin to use control as a means of accomplishing our purposes. As a result we squeeze people. We become masters of persuasion and manipulation. We try to

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<sup>42</sup> Ford, 49.

organize in a way that people feel the pressure. But in reality this creates a culture of fear that leads to a culture of failure.

A culture of fear produces an unhealthy spiritual environment. In 1 John chapter 4, the apostle says fear involves punishment.<sup>45</sup> Thus, when we use controlling fear to get our way, we set in place the seeds of our own destruction. We squeeze the system into our own “molds” and discourage both creativity and consistency. People feel overwhelmed and will not function according to their own gift mix.

In such an atmosphere, leaders become more concerned with the viability than the vitality of ministries. They want situations that are manageable. This approach will sap a church of its ability to risk or step out in the midst of uncertainty. The culture of fear causes pastors to control rather than lead people. In the short term, a culture of fear efficiently produces results. But in the long term, people burn out because they labor under all kinds of restrictions without purpose or vision.

A culture of fear grows like this: first we fear our own failure, and the desire for control controls us. Then, when we believe others are going to fail, we over-manage them. We set up boundaries around them because deep in our hearts we believe they will fail (if they don't do it our way). Then an environment of suspicion rather than trust and empowerment begins to develop. We begin to believe that others are simply looking (intentionally, not accidentally) for shortcuts or ways of doing less and less work.

In contrast, living in grace leads us into a perspective of trust rather than performance.

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<sup>45</sup> 1 John 4:18.



The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world. The Holy Spirit gathers them and does his work in them. In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. It is the responsibility that is being abandoned in spades.<sup>44</sup>

#### Lack of joy and sustaining motivation

When we obsessively focus on controlling the details, we miss the dynamic of God's grace. Fear and duty take over. There is no celebration of what God is doing day by day. There is only discouragement because the ministry is not what it should be. Thankfully, grace is God's embrace as He takes us where we are and leads us to a place where we can grow. However, if we fail to walk in grace, we will live in all kinds of denial and dutiful performance. *Jesus wants to bring us to a place of real delight, and the way forward is to experience God's grace, which frees us from our hyper-controlling tendencies.*

The typical relationship between believers and the Holy Spirit in today's church is too often like that between the husband and wife in a bad marriage. They live under the same roof, and the husband makes constant use of his wife's services, *but he fails to communicate with her, recognize her presence and celebrate... her.*<sup>45</sup>

It is the intersection of tragedy and hope that makes the shape of the cross visible in ministry. Ministry whose excellence can be measured by the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love combines a vulnerability to human tragedy and a deep persistent hope that enables resistance to evil and celebration of grace and new life.<sup>46</sup>

God's free and full embrace of us in Christ is a theological reality that must become an experiential relationship for the leader. The theological battle of the

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<sup>44</sup> Peterson, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Lovelace, 131.

<sup>46</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 39.

Reformation pivoted on one man's journey to walking in grace. Roland Bainton, in his biography of Martin Luther entitled *Here I Stand*, asserts that Luther's search for acceptance from the Holy God of the scriptures forms the fault line for the church.<sup>47</sup> In all his monastic quest of reading, praying, fasting, and worshiping, Luther remained uncertain about his ultimate position before God. Only in the gospel, as expressed in Habakkuk chapter 2 and Romans chapter 1, did he find that the righteousness of God was not merely a *standard* of God, but a *gift* received from God.<sup>48</sup> Justification by grace alone, through faith alone, became the standard formula of the Reformation.

As I began to serve at CPC, I heard Jack Miller, a seminary professor and pastor, speak to a gathering at a conference. He spoke on the question "Where is your joy?" taken from Galatians chapter 4.<sup>49</sup> I was cut to the heart. I had been ministering on empty for so long. I felt bitter about ministry. Over and over I had felt like God was holding out on me. I was doing my duty and he was slow to bless.

Only when I began to see the incredible riches of His mercy poured out in Christ as a living and vital reality in my relationship with Him did I begin to minister out of joy. A number of books by John Piper and Jerry Bridges began to soak my heart in God's immeasurable acceptance.<sup>50</sup> And I still need that soaking in acceptance, again and again. Challenge after challenge makes me doubt my standing as a follower of Christ or as a pastor. Some of these challenges include:

- Wrestling with besetting sins

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<sup>47</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1950), 15.

<sup>48</sup> Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17.

<sup>49</sup> Galatians 4:15.

<sup>50</sup> Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1991); Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace: God's Role and Our Role in the Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994); John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1991); John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003).

- The ups and downs of church attendance
- Questioning by other pastors
- Criticisms of wrong-doings
- Mistakes I make, both small and large

I have learned that as a pastor, I will never survive and thrive without continual replenishment of God's mercy. I believe this so deeply that I would consider it a universal truth for those in the ministry. Often our feelings of joy are tied to our ministry success. We falsely believe that we are better when our church gets bigger. Jesus points us in a different direction. When the disciples came back from the mission field rejoicing in their power over the devil, Jesus said that they should rejoice that their names are written in the book of life.<sup>51</sup> Dr. Phil Douglas of Covenant Theological Seminary says that ministry must flow from our identity in Christ's grace first, and then from our personality and gifts.<sup>52</sup>

Not only does God's grace heal our wounds and hold us up in hard times, it compels us to give our lives wholeheartedly to Christ on a daily basis. Christ welcomes us into His triune family, and therefore we share the family passion for others. Leadership moves from being a job to a calling to suffer and enter into the sufferings of those around us. Any sense of entitlement, prestige, fear, or pride must be overcome by the love of God in Christ. The answer for leaders comes when our suffering savior invites us to share His compassion and someday share His glory. Only God's grace can send us and sustain us in this ministry reality.

And this is the final and greatest difficulty with grace: the very divine multiplication that gives us joy and delight in the midst of our cultural calling also leads us directly to the places where the world is most in pain. Finding grace is

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<sup>51</sup> Luke 10:20.

<sup>52</sup> Philip D. Douglass, *What Is Your Church's Personality? Discovering and Developing the Ministry Style of Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 105.

not a matter of taking an aptitude test, discovering our gifts, and happily restricting our activities only to those things we find pleasant. Rather, over and over in the lives of God's people we see a pattern: abundance alongside suffering,

growing fruit but also dying seeds, grace and the cross. Grace itself leads us to the world's broken places.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Crouch, 261.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Covenant connects us**

*For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.<sup>54</sup>*

#### **Case study: Covenant Presbyterian Church**

The plan was to plant a church out of the larger congregation of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. My wife and I had hurried through our Seminary training with that end in mind. Upon returning to Lincoln, we began to gather a core group and plan a location for the church plant. Suddenly, all of that changed.

The elders, led by the senior pastor, began to doubt the prudence of a church plant at this time. I was caught in a difficult moment. We had plans to start a new church and we were excited. But now the other leaders were not on board.

Connection to the purpose of God and His people led us to wait and put our own plans in submission to the church and the desires of her leaders. It was a difficult time, but it was also growth-inducing to be connected to a plan beyond our own, and a people to whom we belonged.

Jesus told his followers who gathered near Him at the Last Supper, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”<sup>55</sup> Hebrews chapter 9 presents Jesus as the mediator of a new covenant.<sup>56</sup> Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection

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<sup>54</sup> Hebrews 9:15.

<sup>55</sup> Luke 22:20.

<sup>56</sup> Hebrews 9:15.

ushered in something new upon a foundation of something ancient, even timeless. We understand “covenant” as God’s sovereign, redemptive relationship wherein He promises to bless us as we believe and belong to Him. Theologians debate the profound intricacies of the Covenant of Creation and the Covenant of Redemption that under gird and propel God’s purpose from Genesis to Revelation. *For followers of Christ, covenant provides the call of God’s greater purpose, the community of God’s people, and the comfort of His abiding presence. To put it simply: Covenant connects us.*

God’s covenant work and promise embodies both truth and grace. God’s Covenant of Redemption is a revelation of His word in history. God *spoke* to Adam and Eve intimately in the garden. He *promised* Abraham an inheritance. He *directed* Noah, for his salvation. He *revealed* to Moses his calling. God *surrounded* David with the promise of a Kingdom. God sovereignly structures all of history with the truth of His covenant promise. Covenant also reveals God’s grace. God initiates covenant from the beginning of scripture until the end. Covenant is in its essence sovereign grace, not only in its initiation, but also in its accomplishment. Genesis chapter 15 portrays God’s commitment to covenant keeping. The Lord himself takes an oath of self-malediction to fulfill the promises of His covenant. Clearly, this redemptive foreshadowing points to Christ and His death on the cross for his covenant people.

Covenant is the bond of God with His people, promised from the beginning, unfolded throughout the scriptures, fulfilled in Christ. Covenant connects us to God and one another in a manner that sustains us as followers of Christ and leaders of His church. We celebrate this covenant in three ways: as connected to God’s greater purposes, as connected to His people, and as connected to His presence.

### Covenant connects us to God's greater purpose

In Genesis chapter 12, we discover that Abraham was minding his own business when God called him into His promise. This passage also reveals the purpose of God in our lives: when we come to Christ, He promises to bless us and make us a blessing.<sup>57</sup> Abraham was to be a father of many; his family would be known as a great nation. The Lord promised to bless the whole world through his descendant! Similarly, when we are brought into God's covenant, He declares that we are going to participate in His kingdom impact on the entire world. As Jesus said after His resurrection, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."<sup>58</sup>

Galatians chapter 3 teaches us that God's covenant promise of worldwide redemptive blessing was fulfilled in Christ.<sup>59</sup> The trajectory of creation to redemption to consummation for the follower of Christ is a pattern of God's greater purpose. The story of redemption becomes the anchor to one's personal story. The purpose of God in history becomes the meaningful background framing the purpose for one's life. This understanding of covenant means that as believers read the stories of God's redemptive purpose in the Old and New Testaments, their hearts are connected to those stories.

In the basement of the Beta Theta Pi fraternity house at the University of Nebraska, about six college guys began to study the Bible. They were spectators at first. The story of the Bible was distant and confusing to them. Gradually, these young men began to see their lives in the stories. They could relate to the challenges and questions the text revealed. Some of the young men pushed on and eventually saw God's greater

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<sup>57</sup> Genesis 12:1-3.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 28:19.

<sup>59</sup> Galatians 3:14.

purpose not only in all human history, but in their own hearts. The covenantal purpose of God had begun to reorient their lives. Meaning and motivation filled them. At the same time, a similar work was taking place in my life. I was a young college pastor leading this Bible study. And as I began to see God's greater purpose as an actual invitation to connect my life's purpose to His, it thrilled me.

Calling is an extension and personalization of God's covenant. His cosmic promise of redemption in Christ propels us to a personal commitment to serve Him. As Christ commissions the apostles in John chapter 20, He says that as the Father sends the Son, He now sends us.<sup>60</sup> We are connected to God's grand purpose.

Right now many leaders in the church lack a deep sense of motivation. There is often a lack of esteem expressed toward leaders, especially church leaders. The experience of leadership is analogous to the Gary Larsen *Far Side* cartoon where one deer is seen to have a target on his chest. A second deer is commenting, "Bummer of a birthmark, Hal." Leaders live as targets of criticism. In such a context, what can rouse us to greater endurance? What can awaken us to new challenges and opportunities? God's covenant calls us to see our own stories as connected to His greater story. God's covenant should give us a sense of ultimate confidence. What God has begun, He will finish. We are on the side of ultimate victory. God's covenant purpose can lift me up when I see little progress and lots of problems. *His* purpose can lead us into *true* purpose!

God's covenant purpose can not only lift the leader, it can move the church. I have discovered that as our congregation believes their efforts (which often feel meager) actually play a part in God's plan of redemption, they give themselves more fully to

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<sup>60</sup> John 20:21.



them. Covenant celebrates God's purpose. The ministry becomes a joyous mixture of selfless and fulfilling service. This is a critical part of the healthy church dynamic.

Covenant connects us to His people

Yet in contemporary America we often find Christian friendship difficult to understand, live, and even desire because of our dominant picture of ourselves as rugged, isolated individuals. Modern Western cultures have tended to emphasize, and at times even glorify, the individual. Individuals, so we are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) told, need to resist collectives, those impersonal structures that seek conformity, impose rigidity, and stifle creativity and freedom of expression. This notion of the individual, especially as it is defined over against conformity, is descriptively false and normatively dangerous.<sup>61</sup>

Covenant reveals that we are not alone. As God's covenant people, we are one body as we partake of one loaf.<sup>62</sup> The covenant promise creates a covenant people. Not only are we connected to God's greater purposes, we are also bound to God's people. For today's rootless generation, this covenantal family becomes a historical family.<sup>63</sup>

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are our spiritual ancestors. The reality of their lives provides a backdrop for our lives. God's faithfulness to them inspires hope in our own times of need.

Covenant binds us to the people of God. This bond leads us to a committed relationship with the church. As a college graduate, I felt very much like an independent agent. I was hired to do a job in a church. I would soon move on to further my training. However, the discovery of our covenant connection transformed my perspective. I began

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<sup>61</sup> Crouch, 62.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:17.

<sup>63</sup> Chap Clark and Dee Clark, *Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a Myspace World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity— and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005); Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

to realize that I was a member of God's family.<sup>64</sup> My life was not an island of individual choices, but rather part of a covenant commitment and experience. I mattered to the church. The church mattered to me.

I will never forget that evening. We ate pizza and we prayed. The leaders of our church had been formally charged in our broader denominational system with a serious offense. The issue was a technical matter surrounding the nomination and screening of future leaders. Because we had changed this process, one elder felt threatened and chose to attack us formally. That evening we were praying in preparation for the denominational meeting that would soon convene. It was a meeting that would be a confrontation. It was another in a series of the long, drawn out subterfuges against the new vision that was taking hold at the church. It was a sober time. It also was one of the sweetest moments of covenant connecting I have ever experienced. We were in this together.

I believe this covenantal connection is an indispensable aspect of church leadership. Books on leadership offer techniques for the leader to build loyalty.<sup>65</sup> These are often very practical and helpful. However, the profound impact of covenantal connection means that we do not have to create community. Rather, community already exists. Our responsibility is to cultivate it. Leaders in the church must work at maintaining community, but leaders do not have the pressure of creating community. This realization can totally change our perspective. Suddenly, all ministries are

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<sup>64</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Temptations of a CEO: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 123-130.; Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, and Ken McElrath, *The Ascent of a Leader: How Ordinary Relationships Develop Extraordinary Character and Influence* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

fundamentally relational.

The lesson for all leaders is this: earning credibility is a retail activity, a factory floor activity, a person-to-person one. It is gained in small quantities through physical presence. Leaders who are inaccessible cannot possibly expect to be trusted just because they have a title. Credibility is earned via the physical acts of shaking a hand, touching a shoulder, leaning forward to listen. By sharing personal experiences, telling their own stories, and joining in dialogue, leaders become people, not just holders of positions.<sup>66</sup>

Covenant connects us to His presence

As we have seen, covenant connects us to God's greater purpose and to His community of people. Ultimately, covenant connects us to the presence of God. While the covenant relationship has a powerful structure, its goal is to bring the believer into personal intimacy with God. The promise of Abraham's covenant is repeated and fulfilled throughout scripture. "You will be my people and I will be your God."<sup>67</sup> Known as the Immanuel ("God with us") principle, this covenant formula expresses God's intent for us to walk in communion with Him. His holy presence does not remain distant from us. Rather, we are, through Christ, brought near to Him.

Christ's coming to earth provides an eternal comfort to all people. The angels declared to the shepherds, "Peace on earth." God has come near to us. And for leaders who must act wisely, courageously and decisively, no truth can be so precious. He is near.

Christ's incarnation is supremely important because it gives us the perspective<sup>40</sup> and priorities that we need, when we sometimes lose heart because of unbearable circumstances, or when we are so immersed in daily routines that we take his presence for granted. Machines such as computers are attractive because they are subject to our whims and are useful until they break. They are not personal presences and do not require relationships and accountability. People are presences, on the other hand, but very few of them will become the kind of friend

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<sup>66</sup> James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Credibility: How Leaders Gain It and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, The Jossey-Bass Business & Management Series (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 46.

<sup>67</sup> Genesis 17:7.

who will be there when we need them. Friendships unfortunately break like machines. Neither machines nor people can be substitutes for a saving relationship with our heavenly Father who has loved us in his son. Christ, in turn, through the Holy Spirit enriches our relationships and ennobles our chores with a meaning and purpose that can transform our days into his service.<sup>68</sup> For believers, this nearness to God brings us to an intimacy with Him in worship.

Prayer permeates the life of believers as they find hope and help in times of need.

The presence of Christ is also a comfort in our missional journey. Notice how the Great Commission concludes with a promise of His presence.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the book of Acts, believers under immense pressure find the intimate presence of Christ to be their sustenance.<sup>70</sup> God's covenant presence brings encouragement in loneliness. The leader will often feel deserted and look to God's presence for support.<sup>71</sup> Spiritual disciplines become part of our renewal as leaders. Corporate worship and the Lord's Supper reopen our hearts to His spiritual presence within us. Corporately, these covenant renewal moments remind us of Christ's redemptive work for us.

Covenant renewal also moves our hearts as a body of believers. The Old Testament pattern of covenant renewal provides a guide for our corporate renewal in the church.<sup>72</sup> In the New Testament, when Jesus invites us to the Lord's Supper, He is dining with us in order to move us to repentance.<sup>73</sup> This is a strong statement reminding us that as we lead our congregations, we must never substitute our boardroom agendas for throne room intimacy with God. Ultimately, we will find our deepest source of power for ministry not in planning, but in prayer and worship. If we neglect prayer and worship, we

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<sup>68</sup> Lanier Burns, *The Nearness of God: His Presence with His People* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 13.

<sup>69</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>70</sup> Acts 4:23-32; 12:5; 13:1-3.

<sup>71</sup> 1 Kings 19:1-21.

<sup>72</sup> Exodus 24:1-8; 2 Chronicles 15:1-19; and Nehemiah 8:1-9:38 exemplify covenant renewal in Israel.

<sup>73</sup> Revelation 3:18-21.

will lose the necessary endurance necessary for ministry in a broken world.

They were a leading couple in the church. No one talks about ranking people that way in church, but they were mature and generous leaders. As we sat in the restaurant, they shared their vision for an ongoing, shared ministry to pastors and leaders. It was thrilling to hear.

Just a few months later those plans were dashed. The wife was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She died seven months later. As they shared those last months, and I watched with them the purpose of God unfold, it became clear that healing on earth would not be God's will. As she lay dying, she asked me to make heaven real for others. God's purpose goes beyond ours. We lost a precious sister and a prized servant. In our pain we held on to the comfort of God's presence and the purpose of His covenant.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Brokenness: holistic spirituality heals us**

Remember the story of our capsized canoe on the Platte River? We had been canoeing for hours. Suddenly, the boat was upside down. Without any visible warning the docile river had changed. We scrambled to hold on to our belongings. But soon we forgot those and focused on recovering the canoe and paddles. What had happened?

Below the surface of the water, there was a network of hidden tangled roots and debris. If we had been alert we would have seen the subtle ripples and eddies of the current giving us notice of what lay beneath us. Because we never considered what was under the surface of the water, we were turned upside down by the hidden forces below.

It was late at night and she had been crying. She and her husband were finding life together more than they had bargained for. I encouraged her that, as bad as it seemed, it could get better. She snapped back, “What if it doesn’t?” I had come that night with arguments of why and how their marriage could be transformed from burden to blessing. She would have none of it. For seven years, nothing had changed.

Then all at once it did change. Her husband, who had been a pastor on staff with us for many years, left the ministry. He was a tremendous pastor, and an incredible teacher of the reformed faith. He was a model of commitment. Then he burned out.

How had it happened? His marriage had been difficult to integrate with ministry. His wife did not feel connected to the work. Even more, she resented the divided attention he brought to their life together. He had tried everything to bridge this gap with

his wife. He had narrowed his commitments so that he was no longer gone at night. But nothing seemed to be enough.

Why do some situations never improve? How do pastors lead in the midst of all this brokenness? Brokenness is a universal human experience. Theologically, we understand the root cause of suffering and misery in our lives. We are sinners who have covenantally and personally turned away from the Author and Giver of Life. The result is brokenness in cosmic, historical, social, and personal arenas. Reformed theologians assert that the effect of sin is not only comprehensive – all of us are caught in it – sin is captivating. We are trapped by sin and we cannot get out without the saving work of Christ.

The prevalence and depth of brokenness in the people we lead and serve has driven many pastors out of ministry. Some ministry contexts are like an emergency room, where pastors are shocked by the daily dose of trauma they see each day. To enter that world, one must be led by Christ himself.

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.<sup>74</sup>

As we follow the Spirit, He leads us into Christ-likeness, and equips us to restore those caught in sin. These verses from Galatians reveal that the Spirit of Christ leads us into the broken world of human existence where people are overwhelmed by the evil in their lives. How many times pastors think of taking a more comfortable job! How often do they daydream about the clean, crisp office with efficient output and clear measurable

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<sup>74</sup> Galatians, 5:25 – 6:1.

accomplishments? How often have they longed for the simplicity of an hourly job they could leave behind at 5:00 p.m.?

When we enter the ministry, we carry the hope of healing people. Often we are shocked to see how much they hurt. Leaders must be led into this world of pain equipped with God's truth, grace, and covenant. But they also must develop a deeper perspective on the needs and the challenges they will face in leading congregations of people. Only as they are led in the power and grace of the Spirit will they endure joyfully in a world of hurt.

Many of us as pastors believed that theological education would bring transformation. We hoped that a verse from scripture, like a simple pill, would ward off sin. While this approach has a kernel of truth in it, it underestimates the subtle ways we deceive ourselves, the social and cultural ways in which we are entangled in sin, the generational patterns that entrap us, and the sinkholes of sin that develop under the surface and destroy our lives over time.

Some in the evangelical world suggest that an instantaneous experience will remove sin from our lives. This approach may involve a spiritual technique of prayer, fasting, or self-help recovery. It may include rigorous rituals. Often, this approach to spirituality diverts ones' focus from the finished, redemptive work of Christ onto ones' own efforts. More often, the normative, but lengthy process of insight, repentance, and healing is substituted with sincere but superficial intentions.

In recent years many voices have arisen against these information-only, or simplistic behavioral techniques as an approach to spiritual growth. One of these voices, Peter Scazzero, advocates a more balanced and healthy process of spiritual maturity. His



books, *The Emotionally Healthy Church* and *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, address a glaring need in the lives of evangelical pastors. According to Scazzero, emotional health consists of spirituality lived out in biblical expression, as demonstrated by:

- An acceptance of brokenness
- The integration of head and heart: holistic spirituality
- An understanding and appreciation of family of origin
- Spiritual growth that requires continual revisiting and reworking
- A spirituality that is expressed in spiritual disciplines <sup>75</sup>

Holistic spirituality is a Christ-centered perspective that prepares us to effectively minister in the broken world. Understanding holistic spirituality as comprehensive brokenness and healing in Christ enables us to see the awesome work of God in restoring overwhelmed, broken people. We experience this holistic spirituality, revealed in God's word and given to us in Christ, by trusting in the gospel. It is not an additional layer of knowledge or another filling by the Spirit. Rather, holistic spirituality is the realization and application of the fullness of God's grace to the deep, profound, and subtle ways that sin has devastated our lives.

Christianity has always taught that God's grace revealed to us in His truth is the dynamic behind spiritual growth. Spirituality builds upon the truth of Christ's lordship and love for us. His love made evident in our justification and adoption propels our passion for every good work as a Christian and as a pastor. So why do we speak of holistic spirituality? Is it a necessary addition to or a dangerous distinction from the gospel?

Holistic spirituality is the expression of God's eternal truth and His embracing love in our everyday lives. It is a pattern of remembering what Christ has done, reflecting

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<sup>75</sup> Peter Scazzero and Warren Bird, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship That Actually Changes Lives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 69-174.

on His love and lordship over our past, present, and future, both in our creational design and in our brokenness. It is the rejection of the idols and false insights from our own experiences. And it is responding in faith to His call to holiness, love, and service.

This call to healthy spirituality is a recommitment to the holistic way God views leaders in the Bible. The foundation for leadership may include credentials such as professional diplomas from theological schools that provide the skills for exegesis and communication. Ultimately, however, leaders are spiritual people who are called live out of their brokenness in the redemptive power of Christ. This perspective means that leadership goes beyond superficial statistics into the spiritual dynamics that both propel and limit real change.

### **A deeper and broader problem**

When I went through my denomination's church planting assessment, I assumed my resume of church experience, my outgoing personality, and my seminary grades made me an excellent candidate for church planting. However, one of the assessment counselors told me that he had concerns about the lack of integration between my head and heart. "You know a lot," he said, "but your heart is lagging behind. You need to grow."

My first reaction was defensiveness. My second response was to forget what he said and forge ahead. God, however, has ways of not letting us sit in our complacency. The next year brought a number of challenging situations that stretched me beyond my own insight and strength. I remember saying to my wife one night, "I need to grow." It was clear that I knew the doctrines of grace, but I had not applied them to my heart. I had

more to learn than just vocabulary. I needed a transforming work within me to bring health and renewal in a holistic sense.

Holistic spirituality requires that we look more deeply at the problems that we and those we lead encounter. In Matthew chapter 15, Jesus took a question about religious washing and used it to clarify a deeper issue. He explained that sinfulness comes not from our environment, but primarily from our heart.<sup>76</sup> What proceeds from our hearts is far more dangerous than what goes into our mouths. So we, as followers of Christ, need to recognize that a superficial spirituality will not enable us to facilitate real change in our congregations.

Holistic spirituality not only sees the deeper problem, but is part of God's design for living in a more profound way than we could imagine. Jesus once explained this to a young man, reaffirming what God communicates throughout scripture: we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.<sup>77</sup> We must wholly and fully engage in our relationship with Jesus. As leaders, we cannot be content with a spirituality that merely addresses the surface of our lives.

After serving in the ministry for nearly two decades, a pastor friend came to a place of real doubt and discouragement. Writing later about his interaction with his spiritual director during this time, he shared how surprised he was when the spiritual director challenged him to a deeper relationship with Jesus. "What do you mean?" he retorted. "I've spent my whole life in ministry for Jesus." Later, upon further reflection, he recognized that indeed, his understanding of God had truly remained superficial.

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<sup>76</sup> Matthew 15:1-20.

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 22:37-39.

For many of us growing up in the evangelical Christian world, our earliest experiences with spirituality had to do with Bible memorization. Now, I do not want to demean the primacy of God's word in the process of sanctification. As we have already seen, John 17:17 says that sanctification comes through the truth. However, that truth is processed in a living and vital relationship with Jesus, our Lord and savior, through the Holy Spirit, who makes us more aware of the great love and holiness of our Father. This truth is something that penetrates beyond our head and sinks into every fiber of our being.

We cannot lead unless we have a truly holistic spirituality. My years in ministry have forced me to experience this. Back in the first church I served, we interviewed a man who had just graduated from an evangelical seminary and was moving to Lincoln with his family to teach at the university. He joined our church and was quickly put in a place of teaching Sunday school and interacting with others. He made a profession of faith and gave testimony that was articulate and comprehensive. But within six months of being at the church he left his wife, left the church, and left his faith behind. How could someone who knew so much live so unfaithfully?

Another scholar with a Ph.D. in historical theology and ministry experience was a leading teacher at a seminary. All of his credentials masked a secret life of pornography and sexual immorality. How could someone who knew so much live so immorally in relationship to the gospel? Hypocrisy among the leaders of Christ's church testifies to the lack of spiritual health among leaders. It is possible to know a great deal about the gospel without having gospel reality in ones' life.

I know a pastor whose church grew rapidly. As a result, he led in the hiring of three more staff. In the midst of overseeing and leading his staff, he began to criticize,

belittle, and badger them. One day all three staff quit. The elders were mystified. How could such a great leader have such a lack of leadership skills? Yet another pastor I know began to rant against his entire staff, threatening them with losing their jobs. How could someone with so much experience and responsibility show so little maturity?

The problems that we face as pastors and people go deep into the deceptive crevices of our hearts. Our ministry life may be fast and furious or consistent and comfortable. Regardless of the situation, we must face the deep wounds that are present in the lives of our own hearts and our people. A church-planter friend of mine in an upper-middle-class suburban area told me he thought his people were so successful that there was nothing that they needed. I shuddered to think of how he failed to see the wounds they carried and that Christ could heal. As one who has pastored in similar upper-middle-class settings, I have watched people's lives be nevertheless blown apart by sin. I have seen:

- Depression that drains away the will to live
- Pornography that pulls men from their wives
- Suicides among the young, middle-aged and older
- Cutting among young female adolescents
- Disordered eating of all types and stages
- Sexual confusion and immorality
- Anxiety issues that keep people in an emotional prison
- Rage that leads to abuse and broken families
- Divorce that devastates generations
- Shopping addictions resulting in tens of thousands of dollars in debt
- Appearance obsession which leads to countless cosmetic surgeries
- Performance driven lives that are empty of deeper purpose
- Children who are emotionally abandoned by their parents

I have seen these realities in the lives of pastors as well as people in their congregations. If we are not willing to enter into the brokenness of our own hearts and then allow Christ to sustain us as we minister to others, we will come apart in weariness

or live apart in hypocrisy. A commitment to holistic spirituality must permeate our ministry philosophy and perspective of leadership. How then do we apply this concept as leaders?

Christ heals us in a multi-directional redemptive relationships:

He invites us to look beneath the surface of our lives

One of the first new concepts we heard either before or after our conversion is that we are sinners. When that truly sinks in, Christ's saving work becomes a precious answer to an impossible problem – me! Spirituality thrives in redemptive appreciation of our own brokenness. As long as I viewed myself as an occasional sinner or a charming rebel, I could not fully experience grace in my life.

The leader who fails to face her darkness must live with fear and hypocrisy. The result will be a defensiveness that places saving face and controlling others as higher goods than blessing others and doing good work. Clearly, the biblical model of leadership is odd, inverted, and deeply troubling. It is so troubling that most churches, seminaries, and other religious organizations would never hire a “chief sinner.” The only one who thinks to do so is God. Consider the one he chose to lead his people's fight to freedom through Exodus. There is no question that Moses was his people's chief sinner.<sup>78</sup>

In the first fifteen years of marriage, my wife and I shared general harmony marked by outbursts of frustration. We were both “good kids” who thought we could love one another in the Lord. By His grace we survived, but we did not *thrive* because of my own defensiveness, which kept me from looking at my sin. I was fearful of the shame that would result from an honest accounting. If I could not reach the standard of my wife's or my expectations, I would lower the standard, or better yet, never look at the standard. Each bad moment of marital performance was boiled down into two formulas for

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<sup>78</sup> Allender, 56.

recovery: I will be more attentive and I will be less angry. Over and over I promised and recommitted myself to this. Over and over again I failed.

One anniversary we sat at dinner, enjoying the solitude from the children. After the fun conversation and the pleasant commitments, I decided to be honest. “I don’t think I’ve been a good husband. I feel like a failure.” Judy started to cry, but to my surprise they were tears of joy. She expressed her love to me, a broken husband. She said she had known all along that I was a failure – and that she was too! In our deeper sense of brokenness we now could begin to love each other more redemptively than romantically.

Holistic spirituality means I am willing to be the responsible owner of my comprehensive brokenness. For leaders, this becomes the source of vulnerability that is a powerful tool for leadership. In his book *Leading with A Limp*, Dan Allender asserts that only in our brokenness does our leadership have a redemptive quality. He explains that unless we are willing to reflect on our own story and especially its wounds, we will never be able to steer away from sin or fully take hold of God’s calling.

Here is God’s leadership model: he chooses fools to live foolishly in order to reveal the economy of heaven, which reverses and inverts the wisdom of this world. He calls us to brokenness, not performance; to relationships, not commotion; to grace, not success. It is no wonder that this kind of leadership is neither spoken of nor admired in our business schools or even our seminaries.<sup>79</sup>

This observation correlates with a principle expressed by leadership authors Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky. They share that unless we are willing to look beneath the surface at the ways we really function, we will never be able to lead others effectively.

People who lead adaptive change most successfully have a diagnostic mindset about themselves as well as about the situation. That is, they are continually

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 55.

striving to understand what is going on inside, how they are changing over time, and how they as a system interact with their organization as a system.<sup>80</sup>

Holistic spirituality recognizes that in all of our leadership conversations there is a *text*, a *context* and a *subtext*. Each issue we face has a “text”: the content with which we are dealing. Many times this text is straightforward and shared by all parties. At the same time, we must understand the context out of which we and others are speaking. We must ask, “How does this context impact what we are talking about?” Finally, many leaders fail to recognize the subtext, that is, what is going on beneath the surface. Heifetz and Linsky call this the “song behind the words.”<sup>81</sup> We need to listen and understand the words that people speak to us. But we also need to be aware of context and subtext. History and assumptions inform the present discussion.

A large church leadership team wrangled over the direction of the church. Email after email parsed word meanings. Eventually the debate became heated with more-than-hurt feelings. The church divided. When a consulting team came in, they quickly discerned what the last five years of church life had done to make every discussion a loaded interaction. The church had faced the untimely death of the senior pastor followed by a period of massive uncertainty. There is a context for every text. What is true in organizations is also present in personal conversations. People speak a “text” to us within a “context” of their own hurt, pain, success or struggle. A leader must look beneath the words with an appreciation for the context.

Subtext is also a factor. A subtext is an internal, dynamic interplay between our heart, mind, and the realities of our story in light of our personalities and approaches. How have we chosen to act and react in life? How do we now choose to respond to life in

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<sup>80</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 84.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 34.



the midst of change and challenge, chaos and crisis? Leaders have to understand in their own hearts that there is a text (what we say), a context (a history and experience of who we have been and who we are) and a subtext (a dynamic of how we function internally). Until we see how holistic spirituality and the redemption of Christ transforms each of these areas, we will never be able to lead effectively. Looking beneath the surface empowers us to navigate the seen and unseen debris of our own sin and that of others. This perspective can keep us from becoming reactive in our interactions with others. Without an awareness of text, context, and subtext, we are more likely to be surprised by others' resistance to us, caught off guard by our own defensiveness, paralyzed by anxiety, or endlessly irritated by the comments of others at the table. When we understand text, context, and subtext, we know there is more to the story, and we can choose to act accordingly.

The church functions like a family. As pastors we can lead with wisdom when we are not reacting to every person and situation. Consultants emphasize the importance of holistic spirituality in bringing us to maturity that is responsive rather than reactive.

Unfinished business is a present emotional reaction shaped by a past experience. It is a reactive response guided by strong emotional feelings based on past experience of anxiety. Unfinished business does not allow for a thoughtful, creative response to a here and now situation; rather it triggers an emotionally reactive response to it. Whom we bring into our life, our major life decisions, how we embrace important people, and the amount of closeness or distance we need emotionally are all shaped by the degree of unfinished business we carry into our adult lives.<sup>82</sup>

Mature leaders can rise above their reactive tendencies. Leaders who grasp and grow through their own issues become valuable guides to the people they are leading.

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<sup>82</sup> Ronald W. Richardson, *Becoming a Healthier Pastor: Family Systems Theory and the Pastor's Own Family*, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 13.

Self-focus is what we have to keep coming back to. Self-focus means being able to stop watching what others are doing, to see if they are changing yet, and pay more attention to what we are doing in reaction to them. Doing this, we can begin to claim more responsibility for our part in the process, with that comes self-control.<sup>83</sup>

He leads us to look back into the patterns of brokenness

My father was an upright and uptight man. A WWII veteran born during the Depression, he worked hard to create a good life for his wife and six kids. We were not afraid because he provided for and protected us. At the same time, he lacked the emotional health to lead us graciously. Anxiety flowed from his hidden fear. His work motto, “Never confuse effort with results,” meant that doing your best might be enough, but it might not.

To revisit the lack of my father’s love and delight in me is hard work. While he was alive, I told him that I loved him. He said it was hard for him to say those words to me, so he didn’t. Whenever I publicly share about my earthly father’s love and his limits, others nod in agreement.

Holistic spirituality requires that I be willing to go back and process what it means that I labored for years without my earthly father’s love. Failure to do this would leave blind spots in my soul that could lead to breakdowns or blowouts. Ronald Richardson provides an example of how neglecting to constructively address family dynamics can compound relational difficulties.

If your mother continues to think that you agree with her about your father, you won’t be able to get closer to your father. Her communications to him about you will disincline him to you. She may directly say to him, “And Bill agrees with me that you are wrong.” Or she may find some way to intimate that you and she are on the same side, that you are in “her camp.” Or, if your father tells your mother that you agree with him that she is “crazy,” then your mother will not open up to you. You have to find a way to communicate to them both that you are your own

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 76.

person and only in your “own camp.” You won’t be able to do this if you are caught up in the content of who is right or wrong in their disagreements.<sup>84</sup>

For many years, I responded poorly to certain people in authority. My rebellion was subtle, never overt. However, it kept me from being able to work closely with certain types of people because they resembled my father in their style of relating. As I began to look back into my own story, it became clear that I had adopted this approach as a coping mechanism to handle the hurt I felt over his lack of encouragement. It was a natural but ineffective way to protect myself. However, my lack of insight into the connection between my father and my working with others diminished my leadership effectiveness. As I have gradually grown in discernment about this, I have been able to more calmly and courageously move forward as a leader in situations where I work with people I would rather avoid. Leaders rarely feel that they have the time to do this kind of reflection. An investment in this hard work of personal growth, perhaps with the help of a counselor or close friend, is invaluable for ones’ development as a leader.

He enables us to look beyond ourselves to His grace

Finally, we can look forward to what God has for us. Christ-centered spirituality deepens us as leaders so that we can develop the ministries God has prepared for us. How? First, it can change our whole approach and evaluation of ministry. So often we measure success in ministry as numbers and dollars. These superficial measures of success clearly fall short of God’s perspective and desire. How should we measure success? In his book, *Transforming Church*, Kevin Ford presents the concept of the healthy church, as opposed to the growing church.<sup>85</sup> A transition from focusing on growth to focusing on responsible health is, I believe, sweeping evangelicalism. Holistic

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>85</sup> Ford, 30-45.

spirituality describes “success” as an assessment not only of what our people know, nor merely what they do, but more so on who they are becoming. Such a perspective changes how leaders view their own success. Now I look at the leadership function as not only what I do, but also on what I know and who I am becoming. I am no longer satisfied and content if activities in the church are going well. I want to look more deeply at how God is working in my heart and in the hearts of others.

In their book *Adaptive Leadership*, Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky stress the importance of reflective leadership.<sup>86</sup> They explain that observing, interpreting, and intervening are reflective tools of meeting challenges and leading change. But when we are held hostage by our own fears or frustrations, we will not be able to reflect wisely. Holistic spirituality enables us to separate ourselves from the crisis of the moment in order to observe, interpret and intervene in appropriate manners.

So often in the midst of a challenge, I am swirling in the craziness of the moment. Wrapped up in the building program or other ministry initiatives, I missed key opportunities to initiate or sustain the growth and development of others. When I was overly concerned about personal attacks and negativity, I lost sight of the opportunities God provided for us. And I have been unable to determine how to approach new ministry opportunities when resources seemed scarce. Do you see how my capacity to function as a reflective leader is directly related to how I function spiritually? If I have a superficial approach to spirituality, my leadership is limited to managing issues. But mere management can never remake the world. Christ calls us to a deeper spirituality so we might develop ministries that truly deepen others’ lives as well.

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<sup>86</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 32-40.

So, how do we bring about significant change? As we analyze real problems and opportunities in our churches, we need to recognize them as more than just surface challenges. There are deep dynamics that keep churches from being missional, prayerful, or compassionate. Christ-centered, holistic spirituality pushes us beyond simplistic mottos, slogans of reengineering and campaign programs. It helps us to recognize a whole movement orchestrated by the Holy Spirit and facilitated by our willingness to face our deepest fears and hurts.

You are trying to move people who have not been convinced by logic and facts. They prefer the status quo to the risks of doing things differently. They are stuck in their hearts and stomachs, not in their heads. To move them, you need to reach them there. *If you are not engaged with your own heart, you will find it virtually impossible to connect with theirs.*<sup>87</sup>

The complexity of our humanness and our fallenness is why it is so important for us to live aligned with God's truth and to be assured of God's grace as we delve into these issues of spirituality. Without God's truth and grace, our spiritual journey would be one of endless frustration or clueless sentimentality. Our spiritual walk must be anchored in the humility of God's truth. He has given us the pattern and the path in Christ for life. We do not grow merely by a sense of intuition or a sense of ourselves. The constant grace and embrace of God enables us to continue to look into the terrible brokenness of our own and other's lives and not despair. Truth, grace, and covenant form the foundation for holistic spirituality. We must follow that pattern as we lead.

Our church owns a number of houses. One of these houses had a large pine tree that blew over during a windstorm. It was thirty feet tall. What was shocking was that the roots were only one foot deep. This picture often characterizes us as pastors. We need to

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 38.

be led into a deep spirituality that allows us to develop well-rooted ministries that leave a legacy of impact.

In John chapter 4 we read the story of Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well.<sup>88</sup> This woman recognized that her life was empty. She had tried to fill it with so many things. After her conversation with Jesus she described him as one "who knows everything about me." Jesus knew her story and therefore could restore and redeem her brokenness. He spoke the truth to her, and he brought that truth to the inner being of her life. This kind of deep spirituality brought amazing transformation, not only to this woman, but also to the whole community of Samaria. In biblical accounts of deep transformations in people like Paul, Peter, or the woman at the well, we recognize that God impacts the world by transforming us spiritually. With this in mind, we will now look at how God guides us into the community where He calls us to lead.

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<sup>88</sup> John 4:1-42.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Scarcity: God's presence, purpose and provision**

*That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*<sup>89</sup>

I had the job I always wanted, but not under these unexpected circumstances. I was twenty-eight years old and the senior pastor of a church of nearly two hundred people. My privilege was to preach each Sunday morning and Sunday night. I got to moderate the session meetings and set the agenda. It was thrilling and overwhelming, but it was also difficult because of a lack of resources.

I had been an assistant; now I was a solo pastor. I missed my mentor. And once I was in his position, I wished I had someone like myself as an assistant. I had to wait a year until the man I hoped could be my assistant would return from seminary. We were short on money. A key elder had just left due to relocation. I just felt like I needed more support, more help.

I often feel ministry would be so much easier if I had more people and resources. What I have learned is that God is resource enough for me to lead in the most difficult situations. Scarcity, whether real or perceived, is a constant companion for the leader. Moses headed to Egypt with only his staff and his brother Aaron.<sup>90</sup> Gideon felt under-

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<sup>89</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:10.

<sup>90</sup> Exodus 4:18-30.

manned.<sup>91</sup> Paul told Timothy that at one point everyone had deserted him.<sup>92</sup> Jesus himself wanted the disciples to pray with him, only to feel deep loneliness when they drifted off to sleep.<sup>93</sup>

### **Presence: When we feel deserted**

Pastors lead by mobilizing God's people toward a goal. It is disconcerting when people leave the church. A pastor friend in a growing church plant in a suburban metro area lost one of his most vibrant and supportive elders in a tragic accident. He felt this dear friend was irreplaceable. Within a year, this pastor left the work because of grief and the impact of this loss on the ministry.

In our American context, businesses relocate people all the time. As a result, many key servants and leaders in the church move as their careers advance. The joy of new people moving into your community is matched by grief as they move out. The personal pain of loss is only one component of the challenge. Practically, the gifts and talents people bring to the ministry of a local church can be vital to a congregation. We all believe that God gifts and places people in their appropriate areas of service. But when our best pianist, Sunday school teacher, elder, hospital caregiver, or organizer leaves, we feel the burden of loss. At these moments we wonder if we have enough resources to survive in ministry.

The Great Commission found in Matthew chapter 28 calls the church to mission. We need to hear from these verses that Christ has the power to accomplish this work. Jesus said, "All authority and power has been given to me," but we also need to

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<sup>91</sup> Judges 7:1-25.

<sup>92</sup> 2 Timothy 4:16.

<sup>93</sup> Matthew 26:36-46.



remember that this power comes to us in His presence; “I am with you always to the end of the age.”<sup>94</sup>

The Holy Spirit is the presence of God with us. John chapters 14 and 15 develop this theme. Jesus has not left us, but is leading us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>95</sup> Acts chapter 1 recounts the historical inauguration of the ministry of the new covenant church with the presence of the Spirit.<sup>96</sup> Hebrews chapter 13 reiterates the promise that God will never leave nor forsake us.<sup>97</sup> This covenant connection through God’s Spirit can quell the feelings of abandonment so easily felt when key people in our churches move away.

Perhaps Joshua chapter 1 provides the best picture of God’s strengthening of a leader in the midst of loss. Moses was such a significant leader that Joshua could never replace him. God speaks to Joshua and encourages him to seek His presence in daily reflective focus on the Word.<sup>98</sup> Like Joshua, we need to reflect on God’s never-failing presence. Notice that Joshua was instructed to meditate day and night. In the morning Joshua could reflect on God’s Word when the tasks of leadership seemed overwhelming. In the evening Joshua could think on God’s Word when the fears and regrets of the day seemed more than he could forget. And do you note the irony that Joshua is promised success? Most of us would focus on mere survival!

We have seen that leaders experience the loss of resources due to members’ relocation. They also experience such loss by personal breakdown. My mentor left the ministry in a wave of personal fatigue. Judy and I planned on planting a church in

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<sup>94</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>95</sup> John 14:15-20; John 15:25-27.

<sup>96</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>97</sup> Hebrews 13:5.

<sup>98</sup> Joshua 1:7-8.

Lincoln only to find that the sending church was unable to take this step because of the burnout of her pastor. Marlin's breakdown was a shock to me. He was leaving the ministry and he was leaving me. And then, in a surprise turn of events, he was leaving me in charge of the mother church! All of this took place over a period of six months, just after I finished seminary. Judy and I purchased our first house in August. We celebrated the birth of our first child, Sarah. Then we grieved the loss of Judy's mother to cancer the following week. Our lives were up and down. Next we faced the loss of our dream to plant a church, the loss of our pastor/mentor, and the anxiety of being responsible to lead the mother church. All throughout those next months we walked in uncertainty. Our only security was the knowledge of God's presence. As it turned out, this was enough, even when it felt otherwise.

God's presence sustains even when we cannot see the next step in front of us. Many times, we may think, "I should have stayed longer at the previous place. I should have taken the other opportunity." Sometimes we rehash our motives. Other times, we just feel a sense of panic that we have been left in a situation we cannot control.

Another way we experience loss of resources is when we are blindsided by betrayal. Once I had a staff person who succumbed to sexual immorality. A successful ministry covered his secret sin for a time. When his failing was finally discovered, he left the ministry by turning against the church and even discouraging others on the church ministry team. He left behind a broken ministry and the shattered lives of those who felt a deep sense of betrayal.

When those we love betray us, bitterness is a natural aftertaste. This reality can drag us down into a sea of discouragement and disorientation. How does God's provision

answer the bitterness of betrayal? When those we have loved and served turn against us, the pain takes our breath away. Our pain makes us want to take revenge or retreat from this place of horror never to return.

God's promise points us forward to His provision. God's purpose at times seems mysterious but offers wonderful comfort: we follow in the footsteps of Christ. As leaders we think of our calling in terms of the impact we may have for the gospel through our teaching, counseling, and evangelizing. But we seldom consider ministry as a calling to suffer. We may preach about suffering, but we rarely anticipate or welcome it. And yet, some of our holiest moments in ministry come when we simply endure the unjust rejection of a member, partner, or board of leaders.

When betrayal comes it is easier for us to see our betrayers as evil than to see ourselves as Christ's followers surrounded by His holy protection. His provision reminds us that we could never expect anything less. We are going to be made like Him.

Purpose: When nothing seems to be happening

Scarcity threatens our motivation with the deception that losses are random and have no greater purpose. Joseph's story in Genesis calls us to imagine what it would be like to be abandoned by brothers, and later forgotten by fellow prisoners in Egypt.<sup>99</sup> Joseph recognized that in God's plan his suffering had a greater redemptive purpose. Often in the pain of the moment it is difficult to perceive God's greater purposes. But our sovereign God stands above the momentary pain with a grand purpose. As we embrace a covenant perspective, we begin to lose our fears of being left in a predicament. God's grace sustains us in the desert.

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<sup>99</sup> Genesis 37-50.

In ministry, fruitfulness is measured in a myriad of ways. Sometimes all we see is a barren wilderness of apathy and mediocrity. People come and go, and little vibrancy is evident. In the history of missions, faithfulness in this kind of ministry has been lauded as a model of perseverance. But in American churches this kind of plateau is thought to signal the need for a move. The attitude is often, “Pastors need to get things going or get going.”

On occasion a lack of fruitfulness does signal the need for a change. Jesus alerted his early missionary teams that they should shake the dust off of their sandals when a city rejected them. Paul and Barnabas often moved on after a decisive persecution or a couple of years of ministry in a city. While moving may be an answer for some situations, often pastors will need to lead in a place where there seems to be no fruit. When nothing seems to be happening, God’s grace keeps us going.

As I began to serve the church in Lincoln as solo pastor, I was leading nearly two hundred people. As I began, I had high hopes for the people in our church and for outreach to the community. My plans were communicated and implemented in a methodical fashion. I waited for an explosion of fruitfulness. But nothing happened.

How do you function when nothing seems to be happening? I was preaching, counseling, leading, and serving. I was doing everything I could think of, and I saw less fruit than I expected. How do you lead when no one is very excited to follow?

I believe God renews His church over and over again in a powerful manner by varied means. But leaders often must be willing to be led by God into the wilderness before renewal comes. God’s call inevitably takes us through a time of waiting and wondering. Before any great work of God, those involved in leading wondered if

anything would happen, if anyone would participate. During these times of waiting and wondering, God calls us to rely on Him rather than on results.

At one church I served, five wealthy families moved away as soon as we began a building program. I thought we would never finish the capital campaign. God taught me that He makes things harder so we can grow in holiness; we grow as we become wholly dependent on Him and nothing else. This seems easy to say in retrospect, but it is hard to face in the midst of a trial. When Gideon sought an army to fight, God whittled away the number of warriors.<sup>100</sup> When David fought Goliath, Saul's armor would not fit him.<sup>101</sup> Learning to receive God's provision means returning over and over to our relationship with Him.

My experience tells me that many pastors plateau and become complacent when they see little or no visible fruit in their ministry. Over the years, our leadership team has been staggered by the number of plans that have failed at CPC. As a successful, growing church, we expected our ministry plans to continue successfully. But things did not happen that way. For example, when we reached out in faith to extend the gospel, project after project failed:

- A Korean church plant meeting in our building divided in conflict.
- An Hispanic church plant dissolved due to pastoral immorality.
- A Kenyan mission partner struggled due to political riots.
- A Detroit church plant never got going and closed.
- A South American mission barely survives.

What was God teaching us through these experiences? We have looked for spiritual reasons for these apparent failures. We have wondered about our leadership

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<sup>100</sup> Judges 7.

<sup>101</sup> 1 Samuel 17:38-39.

vision. We have questioned our process. And we still don't have clear answers. For the moment, we are waiting and learning to be sustained in His faithful provision.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.<sup>102</sup>

Finally, let me end this section with a warning. Frenzied activity is not an answer to a shortage of results.<sup>103</sup> My first ministry experience was a mission to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. When I was hired, I had no idea how we could or should reach a university campus. I was a twenty-one-year-old graduate of Wheaton College with a Bible and history major. I felt like I knew quite a bit, but in reality I had very little idea of what to do.

And then it happened. Not overnight, but slowly, night after night, I began to see God open doors for ministry. It was the mid-1980s, and I saw eight small group Bible studies spring up. Another small liberal arts college, Nebraska Wesleyan, allowed us to have a group on Sunday night. The church began to see a flow of college students coming to worship on Sunday. It was wonderful, and it was life changing. It was also personally devastating.

Three years later my wife and I went to seminary. I took an overload of classes while she worked fulltime. We considered seminary to be a break, maybe even a vacation. Why? Because we were captive to something very deceptive – we were enslaved by our own compulsion, not a calling.

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<sup>102</sup> Habakkuk 3:17-19.

<sup>103</sup> Curtis C. Thomas, *Practical Wisdom for Pastors: Words of Encouragement and Counsel for a Lifetime of Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 97.

Compulsion comes from a voice in a broken soul. It feeds upon the appearance of ministry success. (There may or may not be actual fruitful ministry occurring, but the appearance of fruit is enough to drive compulsion onward and upward). Here are some signs of leadership frenzy:

- Inability to be patient with others
- No time for Sabbath rest or reflection
- Exaggerated sense of entitlement
- Superficiality in primary relationships such as marriage, family, and ministry teams
- Diminishing ability to say no to any opportunity
- Sense of being a victim to ministry

Such compulsive ministry is based on our own agenda and relying on our own power for ministry. But ministry based on God's calling brings us back from frenzy to faithfulness. God's presence calms leaders and enables them to remain faithful to His call. In the gospel story of Martha and Mary, Jesus welcomed the undistracted reliance of Mary.<sup>104</sup> Mary is a model of what leadership should look like in the midst of scarcity – restful reliance on the Lord.

Provision: When we are short on resources

The scarcity of resources is a common challenge in church life. For pastors it can be one of the most challenging motivational issues. First, pastors are professionals who get paid less than most people in many communities. Whether you live in the country, city, or suburb, pastors tend to earn less than the average person in their community. There are notable exceptions, but they are exceptions. Most of us went into ministry knowing this; however, the practical stress of financial shortages can be distracting if not depleting.

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<sup>104</sup> Luke 10:38-42.

God's call reminds us of His personal provision for us. Whether we hear the faithful words of Hudson Taylor and George Muller, or dig deep into scripture, we recognize the practicality of God's provision. Pastors can pray for their daily bread. At the same time, many of us need transportation, clothes, housing, and money just to be able to participate in our church's life. Some have borrowed golf clubs, fly rods, snow shovels, dress shoes, and other special items so that they might be able to connect to those in their community.

I remember not being able to get my daughter's ears surgically repaired because we were uninsured at the time. I've had my car break down on pastoral visits. Certainly, there is much for pastors and leaders in the church to discuss regarding pastoral compensation and support. My concern here, however, is how the lack of financial resources can keep us from anticipating great things in ministry. Our sense of scarcity creates weariness in well doing.

Two problems seem particularly difficult. In years of financial pressure, we begin to feel sorry for ourselves. This self-pity seeps into our souls, robbing us of the joy of Christ. By His presence, Jesus desires to point us to a deeper reward. His refreshing presence reawakens in us a sense of our journey, an adventure in which a treasure awaits. Does this sound mercenary? Yes, if we are thinking of an earthly and present reward. But in our stoicism, we have relegated the concept of rewards into oblivion. Why? One reason is theological. Many who are committed to a gracious understanding of salvation, in which God gives salvation in Christ without any earning or deserving, struggle with the idea of rewards. Rewards are not a spiritual incentive plan meant to prod us to love



God more. Rewards are the result of relationship; they are the fresh fruit of faith that flows solely from the work of Christ, for us and now in us, through us and throughout eternity.

Look at how rewards are intended to refresh us as we feel the scarcity of life on earth:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.<sup>105</sup>

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.<sup>106</sup>

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.<sup>107</sup>

In my life as a leader, I can often long for ease and comparative blessing. As I have watched others have what appears to be more fruitful ministries, I have struggled. In this manner I have failed to rely on God's call. God is the Lord over my call. If He chooses to bring scarcity into my life, it is His prerogative. If He chooses to be generous to others, why am I envious? As we wrestle with scarcity, we begin to see the strong links between our understanding of grace and calling, demonstrated in His presence, purpose, and provision in our lives.

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<sup>105</sup> Hebrews 11:6.

<sup>106</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

<sup>107</sup> Colossians 3:23-24.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Confusion: Vision and Adaptive Leadership**

*Communities, too, have a way of allowing the celebration of their good works to mask their weaknesses. This is one of the most important reasons for communities and leaders to be working always at the intersections of strength and weakness, stretching ourselves to cultivate capacities that do not come naturally to us, to push beyond our scores on the Myers-Briggs or our mission statements.”<sup>108</sup>*

We paddled along the meandering river and felt the first taste of the heat of the day alongside the weariness of fatigue. I wondered if we would have strength enough to paddle the whole way. We pulled in our paddles and moved to the center of the current. Wow! When we kept our canoe in the center flow of the river we moved along so much faster and so much more effectively.

Three hundred Sunday worshippers had dwindled to one hundred. All kinds of people had left for all kinds of reasons. Some left in frustration, some left in boredom, some left with hurt feelings. As the new pastor, I sat with the leaders and listened to them share their hopes and dreams about the church. I asked them, “What do you want to see happen in our lives together as a church if God would bless us?” The answers were interesting and diverse.

“We should be growing numerically.”

“We should be able to support our missionaries.”

“I’m not sure ...”

“We should balance the budget and pay off our debt.”

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<sup>108</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 43.

“We could be the most evangelistic church in our area.”

“We should be deeper theologically and spiritually.”

“We need to restore leadership to the elders.”

The mood was mixed because the church was in the throes of a difficult period of decline and division. Prior to my arrival, the church extended a call to a minister who rejected them. In the next months they changed the church’s name and tried to begin a new worship style. As the newly called pastor, I was not certain what would work. One thing was clear – both the pastor and congregation were confused about our future vision.

### **Confusion is common**

When leaders are lost, they seldom want to ask for directions. Most leaders believe they should automatically know which way to go. Confusion, the feeling of being lost, comes from a combination of past failures, present pain, and the pressure to make things better. When churches face a complex series of challenges combined with an expectation for visible success, they look for leaders to point the way forward. Leaders must lead in vision. Which direction? What kind of vision? Leaders who hesitate find that corporate anxiety intensifies. Soon, people shout an increasing number of conflicting options with louder voices. In such a context, leaders recognize that they are responsible, but they often do not know what to do. This sense of disorientation is universal for leaders. We are all naturally uncertain about the future.

While being forward-looking is a highly valued leadership competence, it’s the one leaders are least capable of demonstrating. And there’s more bad news. Those of us who help leaders become better at creating and communicating visions of the future stink at it, too... We know this because, ever since we started measuring leadership practices, this is the competency that has shown up as being the least understood, appreciated, and demonstrated. Leaders report that they’re not very good at or comfortable with envisioning the future and enlisting others in a common vision. The feedback from their constituents is even more negative.

This is the skill set at which the vast majority of leaders need to become significantly more capable.<sup>109</sup>

### Defining Vision

Ultimately God moves the church's ministries forward. He does it through the same dynamics of grace that operate in our individual lives. His redemptive work in Christ does not remove our finite limits, or perfect us in an instant. When we live by God's grace as individuals, we trust God to forgive us and continue a process of spiritual growth that enables us to more fully respond to His call. Colossians 3:10 tells us redemption is a culmination of God's created purpose for us as individuals and as the church: "[We] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

Corporate vision flows from the same redemptive dynamic. *Vision is the renewed application of God's universal purpose in Christ for a unique community, through the particular people of a local church, by the Holy Spirit's presence and power.* God's vision calls a church to become a special display of His redemptive presence in its local context.

*Vision is a renewed application...*

We can see how the future of our ministry connects with God's ancient and eternal purpose. A vision pictures a future of changed lives and transformed structures. Such visions can be broad or specific, but they paint a portrait of a new tomorrow for the church. The excitement and the anxiety of a new vision flow from its unknown newness. Some will feel, "We could never do this." Others will wonder, "But what if we could?"

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<sup>109</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *A Leader's Legacy*, 100.

*...of God's universal purpose...*

In one sense, a new vision for a particular church is actually not new. It is simply another chapter in God's eternal story of redeeming all things in Christ.

And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.<sup>110</sup>

The vision for any church is another expression of God's purpose throughout human history. It is both unique and connected to one grand purpose. God's unique vision for a particular church shares the same universal purpose as do all other Christ-honoring churches. For this reason we must remain humble with respect to other churches. While the visions of American corporations rely heavily upon niche marketing and strongly compete for market share, God's vision for His church is complementary rather than competitive. We often lose sight of this in our eagerness to attract new members.

*...for a unique community...*

Jesus sends us to a unique place. Jesus encourages us, too, when He declares in John 20:21, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Christ sends us as redeemed humans to reach a fallen humanity. Our task is to take the unchanging gospel and express it in a culturally appropriate manner. We try to speak the same language and follow the same customs, all the while displaying the eternal gospel in our everyday realities. Cultural differences explain why each church has a unique vision given by God. Understanding and approaching the uniqueness of one's mission field

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<sup>110</sup> Ephesians 1:9-10.

requires the critical discernment of leaders. They must exegete their missional context in order to discern God's unique vision for the church.

*...through a particular people...*

In the same community God has a number churches with different visions because of the varied gifts and personalities of His pastors and people. God has sovereignly placed people in the church to be ready to unleash their gifts for His impact. How one builds the unique mission for a community relates to the people who will serve the church. The unique blend of people, personalities, and gifts challenges the leader to develop the best game plan for this vision.

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.<sup>111</sup>

*...by the Holy Spirit's presence and power...*

Chesterfield Presbyterian Church's vision statement ends with this phrase: "This vision rests upon the supernatural work of Christ who alone can build His church through the Spirit's work in our lives together." All of our plans rest upon God's work in us and through us to accomplish His will. God's work in us is how we become like Christ as individuals, and it is how we become like Christ as a church in our community.

Are we looking for this vision as leaders? It is my belief that such a vision is discerned and not created. It is discerned as the leaders of a church seek the wisdom of God for their congregation, both individually and together. Such a vision is graciously given to each congregation over time. To perceive this vision we must commit ourselves to renewing our minds corporately as well as individually.

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<sup>111</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:4-7.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.<sup>112</sup>

Visionary leaders seek God's vision. Building upon the Word of God's general call to the church, leaders must prayerfully seek God's path for the future. They must be willing to examine options and analyze priorities for the next chapter of the congregation's life together. Leaders must also ask for the wisdom of others. There are a number of formal or informal ways to obtain input from the people of the church. As one consultant put it, "It's not the leader's vision, it's the people's vision that matters most."<sup>113</sup> Ultimately, it is God's vision that matters most of all. After many conversations and interactions, leaders discern this vision in concert with others. Then, they must courageously take the church in that direction.

What prevents us from discerning and living out God's vision for the church? Sometimes as we paddle along in ministry looking for the current of God's will, we come to an abrupt halt. Figuratively, we have hit a sandbar. Nothing is more frustrating than having to stop, reflect, and address the vision killers that have slowed us down. We need to take a moment to explore how this happens.

#### Vision Killers: Looking out for sandbars

Leaders need to look for sandbars, or vision killers, and steer around them. One of these sandbars is reactive anxiety. When anxiety in a ministry context arises, often reflected by a decline of attendance or finances, it leaves leaders with little energy for profitable work toward the future. Reactivity toward difficulties by individuals and

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<sup>112</sup> Romans 12:1-2.

<sup>113</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *A Leader's Legacy*, 113.

groups can lead to a general sense of fear. Edwin Friedman, a Jewish rabbi and family therapist, described this as a climate of “chronic anxiety.” This is a state of mind and heart that remains anxious even when a particular crisis is over. For some, anxiousness becomes a generalized response to life. Chronic anxiety leads people and groups into unhealthy approaches.

One of these unhealthy approaches is the desire for simple solutions to complex problems. People often want to use one-step, magic bullet imitations of other successful churches. When I first arrived at CPC, many people in our meetings would ask, “Why don’t we worship the way that church does it?” Others would say, “This church runs small groups this way.” Chronic anxiety and reactivity longs for the simplicity of one-two-three-step plans: a book to read, a technique to try, a model from a successful church to apply. All of these are ways that people cope with anxiety in a church-family system. None of them provides the space or opportunity needed for a conversation to develop around the special vision God may have for their unique congregation. Leaders find themselves arguing more than listening and discussing God’s unique future for the local congregation.

Scapegoating is another sandbar that flows from chronic anxiety. Just as there is no one simple solution to complex challenges, nor is there one primary reason for all of the problems a church faces. Often, in the midst of the discouraging moments in church life, people will place all the blame on one person or thing, such as a former pastor, a lay leader, a run-down building, or a ministry program. This scapegoat wrongly bears the blame for every issue. “The reason we are not growing is our youth leader”; “The reason we are not growing is bad worship”; “The reason we are not growing is the faults of the



leading families”; “The reason we are not growing is....” Scapegoating is a simplistic reduction that keeps people from seeing anything except the problem in front of them. When leaders allow themselves to focus on one person, program, or problem, they lose sight of the comprehensive need for renewal and change.

Another sandbar that kills vision is panic. A sense of urgency is essential for movement in an organization; however, a sense of panic paralyzes both the leader and the people. In his book *Leading Change*, Harvard professor John Kotter explains that a leader’s role is to introduce urgency.<sup>114</sup> But when urgency turns into fearful panic, it causes leaders to pursue any and every priority, to become manic in the way they approach every issue. This pace is exhausting and ineffective, confusing the people one is trying to lead. Many visions have been undone because of this sense of panic, and have fostered reactive responses such as “It is taking too long,” or “We will never get there.” In times of panic, leaders need to be able to respond by gaining perspective, keeping calm, and staying focused on the vision.

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins discusses what he calls the “fly wheel principle.”<sup>115</sup> He explains that as leaders grow organizations, they have to keep working the vision, much like the initial process of pushing a flywheel. The process is very slow at first. And inevitably there is a period of time where you push, but nothing seems to be happening. During such delays, what is needed is faith that you are doing the right thing, not panic. If leaders stop pushing that flywheel to do something else, they will find that the organization will fail to move forward. Vision requires that you continue pushing that

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<sup>114</sup> John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 5-61.

<sup>115</sup> James C. Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sectors. Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer: A Monograph to Accompany Good to Great* (Boulder, CO: 2005), 24.

flywheel, patiently, and in the same direction, by maintaining consistent priorities.

Urgency is healthy, but panic is not.

Yet another sandbar that kills vision is a negative past history. Of course, every church has some history of failure. When a church is in decline or has a problem, that history can color everyone's thinking. However, traumatic histories can paralyze the ability of both leaders and followers to visualize another story. When your past determines your story, there is a problem. That is exactly what had happened at CPC. The history of the church had been one of real division, dissension, and discouragement, and it left the leaders with a sense that no matter what they tried, it was destined to fail.

I find that, in dealing with a particular church history, one needs to broaden the story. One way is to recognize the greater story of the gospel, and look at the ways in which the weakness and brokenness of all sorts of people did not thwart God's greater plan. Expanding the history is a key to rewriting one's story. Leaders need to first believe and then communicate that God is at work in His church, through His son Jesus, in the midst of immense brokenness, reluctance, and weakness. And yet, the gospel moves forward. At times, we can only imagine a hopeful future when we expand the history to include a redemptive rewriting of our own history. This means that preaching, teaching, and listening to God's story in His Word is a necessary step in overcoming the vision-killing impact of a negative history.

Surprisingly, a little success can also be a sandbar to vision. Kotter describes how businesses often slide into complacency.

Too much past success, a lack of visible crises, low performance standards, insufficient feedback from external constituencies, and more all add up to: "Yes, we have our problems, but they aren't that terrible and I'm doing my job just fine," or "Sure we have big problems, and they are all over there." Without a sense of

urgency, people won't give that extra effort that is often essential. They won't make needed sacrifices. Instead they cling to the status quo and resist initiatives.<sup>116</sup>

Sadly, churches are just as likely to suffer from this dynamic. Jesus warned us about lukewarm congregations in the book of Revelation. Today we see them throughout the evangelical world.

Mediocrity masquerading as faithfulness is equally problematic for both congregations and pastoral leaders. When congregations and their pastoral leaders settle for the conviction that not much should be expected to happen, sights are lowered and expectations are diminished. Rather than the abrupt sinful brokenness found in congregational divisions and destructive leadership, mediocre congregations and pastors betray the gospel by failing to trust in the transformative, life-giving power of the Triune God's abundant grace and love. Mediocrity creates a slower spiral downward than outright corruption, but death and destruction are no less likely to occur. It just takes more time.<sup>117</sup>

In this context apathy, not anxiety, is the challenge. Pastors have to open people's eyes to the joy and urgency of mission and vision in the church. Disrupting complacency requires a prophetic leadership approach based in truth, grace, and covenant to effectively stir people to action.

Sometimes the sandbar that slows vision originates in the heart of the leader. Personal pride can sideline the capacity to pursue vision. Often times, a proud sense of one's own accomplishment can undercut the openness a leader needs for a vision of the future. No leader is immune to this kind of vision killer. Pride is a callous insensitivity to the Holy Spirit and to the work God is doing. Defensiveness about new ideas is a sign that one is too rooted in one's own ideas. Unwillingness to receive criticism is another way a leader can shortcut vision development.

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<sup>116</sup> Ford, 205.

<sup>117</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 3-24.

Vision is a “holistic conversation” that starts with God speaking to us. God creates each community and brings leaders to each community. We need to see specifically how God moves (and wants to move) in our particular ministry. In Jim Collins’ book *Good to Great*, he writes that an effective leader supremely commits to vision with a deep sense of personal humility.<sup>118</sup> For the Christian leader, this commitment points back to the truth, grace, and covenant we reviewed in previous chapters. Living in God’s covenant, while guided by His truth and secure in His grace, as Christ leads us personally, we find the humility and hope necessary to both cast and doggedly pursue vision. It is out of relationship with Christ that we can move forward in the vision we discern for the church we serve.

#### The courage to discern: Leading adaptive change

Clarifying the values that orient your life and work and identifying larger purposes to which you might commit are courageous acts. You have to choose among competing, legitimate purposes, sacrificing many in the service of one or a few. In doing so, you make a statement about what you are willing to die for, and therefore, what you are willing to live for.<sup>119</sup>

In their book *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky seek to persuade leaders that their primary role is to focus on adaptive challenges rather than technical change. They define adaptive challenges as follows:

Adaptive challenges can only be addressed through changes in people’s priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew.<sup>120</sup>

How do we find the confidence to begin this journey of addressing adaptive challenges? We must begin with a conviction of truth. God has a perspective about

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<sup>118</sup> James C. Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap—and Others Don’t* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), 17-39.

<sup>119</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 39.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

church, about community, and about life in Christ. We are to measure our lives and our communities against His patterns. The principles of Christ-like ministry, found in the scriptures, are expressed in any number of differing contexts. Healthy churches will look different in the ways they relate to people and ministry. But they will all have within them the dynamics and principles of healthy life.

Change flows from the truth found concerning God's pattern for church life in His Word. Before looking at methods and programs, one must look at the timeless mission. Leadership begins by reflection on God's unchanging principles. Steven Covey, in his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says that true leaders have a compass, and that compass directs them toward those realities that do not change. His principle, "Begin with the end in mind," speaks of the fact that there is content that doesn't change.<sup>121</sup> For Christian leaders, our compass is the truth of God's Word. Another author, Max Dupree, asserts that leadership is an improvisational art (i.e. that leaders will improvise and use artistic expression). But even in highly improvisational music like jazz, rules, relationship (musicians honoring one another's roles), and structure guide the whole endeavor.

Jesus gave us rules and relational guidelines in the scriptures. Pastors are never building the church on a new foundation. Jesus provides the foundation, as the cornerstone in which the church grows and develops.<sup>122</sup> Not only does He provide the dynamic for growth through His Spirit, He also provides the pattern for how we are supposed to lead the congregation through His scriptures. Christ-centered adaptive change begins upon the foundation of truth.

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<sup>121</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Fireside Book, 1990), 95-144.

<sup>122</sup> Ephesians 2:20.

Biblical truth has to be applied to our changing contexts. God calls leaders to reflect upon His unchanging principles and patterns and contextualize them to the time, place, history, and people among whom they minister. There must be reflection on what does not change, and reflection on what is always changing. God's leaders must interpret their specific ministry context through God's Word. Protestants describe this illumination as a product of the Holy Spirit. As the Word of God transforms us, we begin to discern God's will.<sup>123</sup> Developing this discernment requires spending time thinking, praying and reflecting on how God would bring about change in accordance with His purpose and plan for a distinct congregation. It is this "embeddedness" in the truth that brings ultimate confidence that an endeavor will not fail, and simultaneously provides the measurements by which we appraise success and failure.

Commenting on the process of addressing leadership issues, Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky do not disparage the importance of technical change. They merely propose that leaders not limit themselves to technical solutions. Of course leaders must first accurately diagnose whether a situation is technical or adaptive before they can formulate an appropriate response.

When new pastors come to their congregations and begin to think through vision with their leaders, it is easy for them to want to take on the heroic or charismatic persona, by saying "I believe God is leading us to..." Taking on this air of sanctified assurance can have quite an impact on people who are discouraged. It can develop an unhealthy assumption that the leader has a pipeline to God. That assumption can lead to a dependence on the mysterious capacity of a leader to always know God's will. However, addressing adaptive challenges in a manner that falls in line with God's truth requires that

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<sup>123</sup> Romans 12:2.

the proposed changes can be understood and owned by people. God's people are not to follow you as an inerrant leader, but as the representative of congregational leaders who have discerned a vision based on God's truth. This is a critically important reality for leaders to grasp: they must submit themselves to God's guidance rather than presenting themselves as the sole mouthpiece of truth. It is God's truth, not ours, that positions us to face adaptive challenges.

How do leaders begin to discern vision? Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky suggest that there are three aspects to adaptive vision development: observing, interpreting and intervening.<sup>124</sup> These authors emphasize that while working in each area, leaders need to take time to employ reflection and response. For the past two decades American corporations rejected reflection and response in favor of quick, immediate action. Many corporate cultures encourage leaders to take a "Ready, fire, aim," approach. Nike tells us to "just do it." Sprite invites us to "Obey your thirst." American Express boldly challenges us to "Do more." In a complex and changing world, there needs to be a time of reflection where a leader observes, interprets and plans intervention.

### Observation

How do leaders learn to observe? Because we can be so focused on the task at hand, we can miss the larger realities that inform the challenge before us. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky describe leadership contexts as a dance floor where the people involved are interacting together with the "music" of the corporate culture playing in the background. They encourage leaders to "get on the balcony" where they can see the dance floor with a broader perspective.<sup>125</sup> As pastors, we can become so focused on

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<sup>124</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 32.

<sup>125</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 51-74.

preaching sermons that we don't see all that is involved in the entire worship service. Or we can be so busy preparing the agenda for an elders' meeting that we fail to see the relational process of the meetings. Similarly, we can be so engrossed in a building plan that we fail to see how people are actually living and growing.

Observation means taking time to see how things truly function. We need to give ourselves time to being with the people of our congregation when we are not responsible for the activities. At least ten Sundays a year, I participate in our worship service without leading. I greet people, I meet people, and I worship. But I am not involved in preaching or leading the service. As a result, I put myself in the role of an observer. I notice that a number of people come to church late. I see a number of people come and go, in and out, throughout the service. Some are going for practical reasons (for example, to use the restroom, or to tend to a baby). Others move restlessly back and forth. I notice a lot of conversation between leaders and lay people. I begin to recognize that a number of people slip in and out of church without talking to anybody. As I stand back from greeting, I notice some people who seem uncomfortable and nervous in the entryway of the church. As I watch, I notice that some couples do not come in to church together. I notice that many people do not linger after the service, but look for a convenient exit to get away from people. I notice children roaming about between services looking for fun, climbing trees, and celebrating their freedom. I see a number of young people staying and talking. I notice that senior citizens come early, and the younger folks come a little later. I notice that some people spend a lot of time working on their cup of coffee. All these things I have noticed as I took time to observe. I do not always understand the



significance of these details for life at CPC. What I see is not necessarily good or bad.

But it is important for me to take time to observe, to watch.

Good observation actually takes more than time. It requires a non-reactive heart. As I began to observe people's behaviors, I sometimes had quick reactions to them: What are they doing out of the service? Why are they so late? Why are they not singing? Why are they not listening to the message? These snap judgments on people's behavior kept me from being open to observe and learn from what they were doing. Observing is not only a discipline of time. It is a practice of opening my eyes to what I see, and not closing my mind to what I do not want to see. To productively observe means that I work to withhold my reactions. Regardless of whether my reactions are positive or negative, they can cloud the research conclusions of observation. We must step back from our place in the system – get on the balcony – and recognize what is happening.

Another way observations can be obtained is through statistics. Statistics measure observable trends. One trend we noticed from statistics is that families without children tend to be less consistent in their attendance. The fifty- or sixty-year-old believers who have been faithful servants their entire lives often no longer come to church every week. It is important for us to understand why this is happening.

Observations also take place through conversations. It is important to hear people's joys and sorrows. Therefore, a leader must stop talking and provide a safe place for people to share. I learn what people enjoy as I hear people's excitement. For example, people love the donut holes we provide every Sunday. People celebrate certain types of music. They comment about certain sports teams. Listening to what people talk about informs me.

A hard, but important way to make observations is by listening to people's complaints: "The bathroom is bad. The service is too long. The kids' program doesn't meet my child's need." All these pieces of data help me see what people experience at our church.

Finally, we must be willing to observe our own experience. What are our personal challenges in life? I have found it helpful for our pastoral team to spend time talking about what our community struggles with and what we celebrate. As Jesus walked about Israel, he observed that some people weren't trustworthy,<sup>126</sup> that a widow's offering was important,<sup>127</sup> and that people were like sheep without a shepherd.<sup>128</sup> Through these and similar observations, Jesus was preparing for the most radical of all adaptive challenges – addressing the root condition of the world's brokenness.

#### Interpretation

After collecting data through observation, how do we interpret that information? For those with a scholarly bent, reading books and other materials becomes an indispensable part of interpretation. The observations we gather in our communities can be translated through books on culture. I have found it incredibly helpful to read books like Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart*, Laura Pappano's *The Connection Gap*, and other books and websites that uncover some of the interpretations researchers have about the world in which we live.<sup>129</sup> This kind of information allows me to begin to build a framework for understanding my observations.

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<sup>126</sup> John 2:24-25.

<sup>127</sup> Luke 21:1-4.

<sup>128</sup> Matthew 9:36.

<sup>129</sup> David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); Madeline Levine, Ph.D., *The Price of Privilege* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006); Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled— and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. (New York: Free Press, 2006).

Another way to gain information in order to interpret data is through conversations with others, in both formal and informal gatherings. Over the years I have found a number of people with whom I can have free-flowing conversations, allowing me to interpret what's going on in the culture and in the church. They might be elders or staff people in the church, or folks outside the church. For me, classes at Covenant Seminary have been helpful in opening my mind to ideas that swirl around the world. The stimulation of a class provides me with resources and impetus to interpret what's going on around me. The same thing is true with conferences and seminars. They provide me with an opportunity to hear other people's interpretations of what we're experiencing in ministry. Finally, leadership meetings should be times of interpretation where we share together our observations and what we think they mean.

Indeed, the world that every baby, every human society and our primordial parents found themselves in clearly needs some interpreting. One of the most striking things about the world is just how little it discloses to us about its true meaning. It is full of mystery – at its best, full of wonder; at its worst, full of terror. Making sense of the wonder and terror of the world is the original human preoccupation. And it is this deeper sense of culture that most clearly distinguishes us from all the rest of creation. Ants and birds and chimpanzees make something of the world, in the sense of reshaping their environment with anthills and nests and even rudimentary tools and techniques – but we simply have no indication that any other creature wonders about the mystery of the world. Making sense of the world, interpreting its wonder and its terror, is left up to human beings alone.<sup>130</sup>

Pastors will often find interpretation a stage when elders will either abdicate or dominate. Many lay leaders in a church will defer to the interpretations of senior pastors, viewing senior pastors as the ones God has called to lead, and often assuming a seminary education gives pastors unique interpretive insight. As a result, senior pastors may do all

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<sup>130</sup> Crouch, 24.

the interpretation in every meeting. This can create a deadly environment in terms of understanding and ownership of the vision.

I know of one church that had become very large. When their founding pastor left, they began to experience significant difficulties. Under their new pastor the church experienced considerable division. As I grew in my understanding of the situation, I was stunned to discover how few of the leaders really understood what made their church unique. As Kevin Ford has said in his book *Transforming Church*, “Very few church leaders understood their own code [defining characteristics].” After observing church leadership for over two decades, I have learned that even fewer churches understand the dynamics of what is going on in their own community.<sup>131</sup> In the particular church I’m referencing, only a handful of the leaders understood that the changes they faced would have challenged any pastor, let alone the new pastor in their midst. As I reflected on how this division came about, I realized that the previous pastor had made all the observations and interpretations for them. I call this the conspiracy of complacency in a local church, where heroic leaders, viewed by others as omni-competent pastors, make all the observations and interpretations, and never equip their lay leaders. For a period of time the pastor enjoys the limelight and other leaders avoid responsibility. However, in the long run, the congregation suffers decline and distress.

Other churches avoid the hard work of observation and interpretation by micro-managing details. Oftentimes in the midst of decline, discouragement, or fear, leaders attempt to control the ministry rather than to empower those who want to address challenges in an adaptive manner. In this case, the leaders attempt to move quickly to the third step of intervention. They do this by looking for shortcuts in order to recover

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<sup>131</sup> Ford, 105-126.

relative ministry success. The pressure becomes, “What’s the answer, and what are we going to do right now?”

However, with adaptive challenges, the answers are never easy or forthcoming. Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky argue that leaders must move patiently through observation and interpretation so they are prepared for the next step.

### Intervention

Adaptive work generates what can feel like maddening digressions, detours, and pettiness. People often lose sight of what is truly at stake or resort to creative tactics to maintain equilibrium in the short run. All of this can leave you deeply discouraged or burn you out. You may start questioning whether the whole thing is worth it and be tempted to downgrade your aspiration. You may numb yourself to these frustrations. Or you may decide to throw in the towel. It is hard to stay in the game in the face of hopelessness or despair. But to lead change, you need the ability to operate in despair and keep going. And that calls for building the stomach for the journey.<sup>132</sup>

After reflection through observation and interpretation, there will come a time for decisive action. The role of a leader in this phase requires a wide array of skills. To guide a congregation through a new adaptive approach to church life, leaders will need to do four things: gain credibility, communicate the pain and the gain of following the new vision, position themselves in relationship to both supporters and resisters, and calmly keep moving the congregation toward the vision.

It all begins with credibility – trust. Leaders who exhibit competence in their role as a teacher and administrator begin well in developing trust. However, it is the integrity of leaders and their consistent relationship with their people that grows and develops their leadership capital. Each loving and just exchange between pastor and people paves the way for adaptive change.

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<sup>132</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 260.

Trust engages the heart of the follower and this is what encourages people to give their emotional commitment to a cause. When teammates trust one another they fling themselves into their work, bringing emotions like passion, pride, love, and even anger to the table. Without full and complete trust, a leader can only win a kind of cold, mercenary-like allegiance to his or her vision. And as most know, the degree of a team's emotional commitment is often what separates otherwise equally talented competitors.<sup>133</sup>

Second, in order to deepen trust, leaders must speak realistically about the pain and the gain of change. While speaking of the benefits of the vision, we must not forget to identify with the loss inherent in any new change. Credibility is multiplied if we warn of the hardships of the journey while holding ultimately to hope in the success of the endeavor.

Third, leaders must position themselves to influence the entire church – not just specific interest groups – in the midst of change. Pastors cannot present a hope for the future and then align with only a few in the congregation.

To survive and succeed in exercising leadership, you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with you supporters. Most of us cringe at spending time with and especially taking abuse from people who do not share our vision or passion. Too often we take the easy road, ignoring our opponents and concentrating on building an affirmative coalition.<sup>134</sup>

While relationships with allies and opponents are essential, it's also true that the people who determine your success are often those in the middle, who resist your initiative merely because it will disrupt their lives and make their futures uncertain.<sup>135</sup>

Leaders have to sense the flow of ownership and opposition to change. Intervention requires that leaders know where they stand across all the groups of the church community. The intervention needs to be uniquely developed with an understanding of the varied interests of all people groups within the congregation.

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<sup>133</sup> Jack Kahl and Tom Donelan, *Leading from the Heart: Choosing to Be a Servant Leader* (Westlake, OH: Jack Kahl and Associates, 2004), 13.

<sup>134</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 87.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Finally, effective leaders need to express calm and confidence in the midst of the anxiety created by leading change. Jesus tells his disciples that in this world they will have real trouble, but to take comfort in Him because He has overcome the world.<sup>136</sup> Resting in His presence with us is the only way we can maintain this posture. Adaptive leadership leans humbly upon Christ for the direction and the accomplishment of the vision. His unfailing character provides the confidence we need in moments of confusion.

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<sup>136</sup> John 16:33.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **Conflict: Can't we just get along?**

Here is a different kind of rafting story. This time, instead of a calm float on the Platte River in Nebraska, I was on a more dangerous river traveling with a guide. As our raft came around the bend, the six of us heard the whitewater guide shout, "Right paddle forward, left back paddle!" Then he reversed his instructions, "Right back paddle back, left paddle forward." Then he screamed "Stop!" Just like that we flew through the rapids and the water crashed over us. We had made it, because we steered straight into the rapid, kept calm, and continued paddling. Similar to my experience in those rapids, all pastors leading change will face the rapids of conflict. Conflict is the whitewater of church life. It can propel you forward – or flip you over and stop all progress.

Eight middle-aged men sat at a table in a quiet conference room. Four of them were powerful and successful businessmen who exuded the confidence of their successful careers. The other four were church consultants who listened to the executives describe the church conflict in which they represented one side. Within minutes, as the details of the disagreement emerged, these men were trembling in anger, hurt, and sadness. The church they had loved was now shattered. They had practically been pushed out the door.

Days earlier, the same four consultants had listened to the pastor of the church who was on the "other side" of the church conflict. He was slumped over in agony and exhaustion after dealing with the tensions of the preceding year and the crisis of the last



month. He had been verbally attacked and pushed toward resignation by some on the other side.

Both sides in this church conflict loved the church. Both sides had the highest commitment to the future of the ministry. Sadly, both sides were unaware of the larger dynamics of the congregation's history and their own reactions to it. The conflict caused staff to resign, members to leave, relationships to end, and everyone to be hurt.

How do we handle ministry conflict? Conflict can be healthy or deadly. It can destroy a church or force it to grow. Leaders need skills to deal with the organizational realities of conflict. They also need spiritual health to navigate the relational aspects of conflict. There are two types of conflict that occur in church life. First, there is healthy conflict. Pastors can deal with this type of conflict through leadership skills. But there is also a second kind of conflict that arises from those who have been so devastated by sin that normal relational skills will prove ineffective and even dangerous.

As we face church conflict, we must head into the rapids, stay calm, keep paddling and trust our Guide. We cannot exit the river in the midst of whitewater. We must run the rapids. Christ will not leave us alone in the whitewater.

### **Head into the rapids: Moving forward into conflict**

Leading change will always bring anxiety. Anyone can become wary of change as they recognize the loss it creates. Leaders need to discern when conflict comes from this natural structural and personal resistance to change; however, the tension can be minimized by skillful leadership.

### Focus and Pacing

Heifetz and Linsky believe that an effective leader must “turn up the heat” to produce change. However, leaders must monitor the way this increased tension is being handled by those they are leading. They must be careful to bring change without having the system “boil over.”<sup>137</sup> To be effective, a leader needs to steer the group to a place of real willingness to change, even as the leader demonstrates an appreciation for the fear and loss inherent in the process.

What principles should regulate how fast we promote change? The first principle is to determine to what degree people recognize organizational problems. In other words, people need to have clarity about the crisis they are facing. When I first came to CPC, the church was facing an obvious challenge. They had gone two years without a pastor and attendance had declined to half of what it had previously been. Financially, the church was nearly swallowed up in debt. Everyone in the church knew the congregation was in real trouble. A clear crisis provided a clear opportunity for change.

When a majority of church members fully accept crisis as their reality, a leader is granted more latitude to make changes rapidly than when the congregation does not perceive real problems. However, many churches are in real trouble in terms of understanding their mission, their style and methodology of ministry, or the way in which their ministry matches the community, not to mention recognizing their leadership ineffectiveness. Because these realities are not perceived, the leader has little opportunity to make changes on a broad scale. Change must begin with small, incremental steps.

I was afforded a great blessing because everyone at CPC recognized the church was in a real predicament. Serious change was needed in order to deal with serious

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<sup>137</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 69.

problems. Nonetheless, such clarity of crisis does not always make people easier to deal with. Many times people are so anxious because of the crisis that they freeze in fear. Nevertheless, the clarity of a crisis always affords greater freedom to change things.

The second principle for addressing healthy conflict is the clear understanding of how a solution addresses the problem. Many times initiatives such as a change in leadership style, a greater commitment to prayer, a shift in methodology, or the subtraction or addition of a program, may not be understood as attempts to address fundamental problems of a church. The way leaders communicate change must plainly demonstrate how the proposed steps have everything to do with the crisis at hand.

When CPC began the process of a building program in the year 2000, there was very little debate about the need. We were running three worship services in a very small worship facility. The crisis of fitting everyone into a service was an overwhelming weekly reality. While there were challenges to the program over the next four years, everyone saw the congruence between our needs in worship and the building expansion we proposed. As a result, very little conflict occurred.

Such congruence was not in place concerning the need for church renewal when I became the pastor of the congregation a few years earlier. One of the first things needed to initiate renewal was to reenergize the leadership. The leadership was so fatigued by program responsibilities that they were unable to lead and serve the congregation effectively. Therefore, I suggested that we drop some programs such as Sunday evening church and Wednesday night prayer meeting. I also suggested that the elders no longer supervise individual ministries like worship and the deaconate; while they would maintain general oversight, they would no longer go to board meetings. The elders

needed to pull back from these roles in order to have the time and energy required to set a new direction.

At first the elders and congregation did not appreciate this change. Some proclaimed, “In this time of crisis, the church needs more leadership.” But in reality, the church needed their existing leaders to work in different ways. They needed to function as servant shepherds rather than organizational managers. I began to explain the reasons behind these changes, but it took time to overcome the resistance. As a result, that change occurred more slowly. The congruence of the solution to the problem was less obvious at the start.

#### The bell-curve of change: Identifying the voices

When churches resist change and manifest hostility, leaders need to assess the pattern of response to change among affinity groups. Dr. Phil Douglass, professor of practical theology at Covenant Theological Seminary, suggests that there is a continuum of acceptance in the way people respond to change.<sup>138</sup> On one side of the continuum you have the early adopters. On the other end you have the never-adopters. In between, you have the early, middle, and then late-adopters. The leader has to discern the resistance to change from each group and respond accordingly. Part of that discernment is recognizing the relational connections between the never-adopters, and those who are in the middle. Understanding the influence never-adopters have on the capacity for middle-adopters to accept change can be critical to a pastor’s survival when conflict arises from fear of change. Learning to read such relational dynamics becomes a necessary skill in reducing conflict.

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<sup>138</sup> My thanks to Dr. Phil Douglass for his course on *Renewing the Church*, which was part of my Doctor of Ministry work at Covenant Theological Seminary. His lectures on change introduced me to the continuum of responses that leaders face in advancing change.

Do you trust me?

The number one indicator of how quickly leaders can institute change is the trust level that the leader has developed in the church. If the majority of the congregation trusts the pastor, he has permission to move rather freely, and sometimes very rapidly towards change (as long as the he works hard at communicating the rationale for such change while maintaining trust). If there is a general trust, there is a great deal of freedom. The challenge for many pastors is to repair trust with the elders, deacons and congregation at large if it has been broken.

Trust is earned or repaired in multiple ways. For example, credibility is gained through obvious success in ministry endeavors. But most of all, it is earned through consistency of character, integrity and values. That is why trust takes time to build in any context. It is worth the effort.

The uncommitted middle: moving the masses

[T]he people who determine your success are often those in the middle, who resist your initiative merely because it will disrupt their lives and make their futures uncertain.<sup>139</sup>

Resistance and mild hostility to change often comes from the stubbornness of complacency. These people are not your agitators or antagonists. They are the “middle adoptors” who form the general population of your congregation. Leaders must evaluate how accustomed these people are to change.

Sometimes an evaluation of the general capacity for change is as much an evaluation of the community where the church is located as it is an evaluation of the church members themselves. When I pastored in Lincoln, Nebraska, there was a segment of the church that was from the farming community. These folks were faithful people in

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<sup>139</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 89.

church life, but they were not accustomed to change. Now I am a pastor in a suburban setting of a large metropolitan area. The people here are used to changes and initiatives of great scope, and they actually thrive in that kind of world. Knowing your community (through observation and interpretation), and the general resistance or acceptance to change is critical to recognizing how fast you can proceed.

How do you deal with the uncommitted middle? One of the first commitments we must make is to serve the congregation. Part of that service means taking care of general ministry, and performing pastoral duties with competence. A way we build trust with the main body of our church is to be a reliable servant of the peoples' needs. Teaching, shepherding, caring and organizing become an indispensable part of earning the credibility of the congregation as a whole. Some pastors desire to avoid these responsibilities by changing the expectations of the people. This may be possible in a church-planting arena with no heritage or low expectations. Or this may be possible in a highly specialized church where a large and efficient staff already provides many of the goods and services of ministry. But in most circumstances, pastors have to be effective generalists. A general competence in teaching, shepherding, care-giving, and organizing provides a platform of trust. People in the "middle" will evaluate pastors based on what they see him doing as much as on the persuasive element of what he says.

Pastors who hope to bring change must also teach in a manner that ministers to the broader congregation. It means their messages must bring the constant of the eternal gospel to people who are not interested in change. Many leaders make the need for change so important in their sermons that they fail to provide any nourishment for the person who is not pondering the need for change at all. Pastors are called to sensitive and

full-orbed preaching that is embedded in the gospel. This gospel focus allows our change agenda to flow from the gospel itself, rather than having change be our constant emphasis. When people feel on a weekly basis that they are learning God's Word, and as they learn to be led by it, they will then receive leadership from that shepherd.

To develop credibility with people "in the middle," pastors must also pray for their people. Being faithful in prayer is one of the great ways to see God's supernatural work in people's lives. To pray that people would change opens up the avenues of God's grace in the wider community. Faithful prayer will bring a fervent patience and persistence to pastoral leaders.

Another way to develop credibility is to communicate and celebrate ministry successes. An effective pastor/leader will communicate the ways that God is working in the broadest and most detailed manner, celebrating everything that God is doing in the church body. When people "in the middle" begin noticing the movement of God in one area of the church, it will spur them to look for God's leading in other areas.

Yet another credibility builder is to make yourself available at the door of the church after worship services, at church picnics, or in the lobby at the beginning of church. Do the things you need to do so that people can see you and have access to you. In these informal times people will pick up a level of comfort and confidence in who you are and how you care. Those kinds of realities begin to translate into their commitment. Many leaders remain aloof in public settings. They miss the opportunity to rally people to their leadership agenda. There is a need to constantly engage people in order to demonstrate concern about their lives and their agendas. As you connect with people, they will grow to understand and respect you. Granted, this can be exhausting for some

people while energizing to others. Regardless, it is critical to establish credibility with people “in the middle.”

Early adopters: a potential for adverse effects

One surprising insight has helped me to manage change conflict. Early adopters are not always the best spokespeople to the late and never-adopters concerning change. They can seem overconfident and almost foolhardy. Leaders will often ask an early adopter, especially an elder or another leader, to be the one who convinces others. This choice of a spokesman may backfire. Every leadership team has a wide-eyed idealist, and those slower to change may view the idealist as unrealistic. It is wise to find other voices within the center of the leadership team and in the congregation to be spokespersons for change.

Healthy conflict resolution can be tiring, but it is ultimately satisfying. Cautious, good-hearted people can actually help the church move forward. Pastors do well to get close and really listen to these folks. At the same time, there is a group of people in every congregation who will destroy the leader and the church if you let them lead. To them, we now turn our attention.

Keep calm in the rapids: Dealing with difficult people

She was shaking as she said she believed I was destroying the church. Yet she clung to the hope that she had seen the previous two pastors leave and one day I would leave as well.

He told me “I have been in the ministry – I know what it is like. You can always count on me.” He picked me up the next morning after my first sermon and took me out to breakfast. He was so excited to have been part of the pulpit committee that had brought



me. He hoped I would live in his neighborhood when I bought my house. Within a week he was spreading vicious rumors that I was a substandard preacher and an insincere leader.

As previously mentioned, in John 16 Jesus said, “In this world, you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.”<sup>140</sup> I learned early in my Christian experience that there were people of indifference or skepticism who could become hostile about the Christian faith. Still, I never anticipated how much trouble people within the church could cause me as their pastor. Over the years people have criticized my physical appearance, my intellectual ability, my practical wisdom, my basic compassion, my sensitivity to the Spirit, and most certainly my ideas for change. I have had people stop coming to the church without ever saying anything, people who have yelled at me and stormed out, people who have hugged me and then sought to tear down my integrity behind my back, people who have circulated letters questioning my sincerity, and members who have insulted and belittled me. And all this happened in two of the healthier, kinder churches I pastored.

Leading in ministry can include a long journey of dealing with difficult people. While in prison near the end of his life, Paul speaks of being deserted, harmed, and betrayed. Paul felt alone and recognized that the Lord would have to rescue him.

Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments. Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message. At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against

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<sup>140</sup> John 16:33.

them. But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>141</sup>

Dealing with difficult people can be one of the very things that drives pastors from the ministry. It can take the joy out of the journey and sap us of needed energy for adaptive change. How do we remain vital in the midst of all these vicious attacks?

It would be wrong for me to suggest that all the difficulties I have had with people over the years have been a result of others' sin and weakness. I have deserved some of the things that have happened to me! I can recall times when people's hurts and disappointments were because I was less sensitive and loving in my leadership than needed. *Many times my pride or personality can be difficult for others. Any discussion of dealing with difficult people must begin by recognizing that we ourselves are difficult in our own way. We need to have a good understanding of ourselves, of our own dispositions and dysfunctions.*

However, after examining ourselves, we must prepare for the reality of relational conflict with difficult people. It is similar to water skiing: when the wake of the boat bounces you to and fro, you need to lean back, let the rope pull you, and allow your knees to be the shock absorber. Pastors need to "bend their hearts" to avoid rigid reactions and responses to people in conflict. When leaders anticipate the potential of unhealthy conflict, they can brace themselves for the bumps to come.

The opposition: Working with your enemies

To survive and succeed in exercising leadership, you must work as closely with your opponents as you do with you supporters. Most of us cringe at spending time with and especially taking abuse from people who do not share our vision or

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<sup>141</sup> 2 Timothy 4:9-18.

passion. Too often we take the easy road, ignoring our opponents and concentrating on building an affirmative coalition.<sup>142</sup>

Heifetz and Linsky contend that it is important to keep close to those who oppose your initiatives.<sup>143</sup> While this advice is helpful even in healthy conflict, it is necessary when dealing with those who are oppositional by nature.

It is the chronically anxious individuals in the church family who are apt to conduct a “search and destroy mission.” They will not hesitate to impose whiter wills on others. They make hostages of their gifts, attendance, and participation. They employ their stewardship as brinkmanship. Their ultimate threat is to run away from home – transferring or terminating their membership if an action is not rescinded, a person is not removed, or a demand is not satisfied. These tactics are effective in church families that place a premium on peace and harmony. They will exchange integrity for tranquility. They cannot free themselves from the bondage of others.<sup>144</sup>

When pastors relate to devastated people in the same manner as they do cautious or fearful individuals, they will find themselves depleted and neutralized in their attempts to persuade. The first principle in dealing with such people is for leaders to consciously differentiate themselves from the anxiety and anger these people emit.

At times of crisis, a congregation functions best when its key leaders are differentiated. The crisis certainly ushers in confusion, despair, and a temporary period of powerlessness and hopelessness. It is a crucial time for the community to slow down and reflect on what has happened. The natural instinct is just the opposite – to press immediately for decisions, explanations, and actions to dispel the awful uncertainty and helplessness. Impatience has its source in anxiety. Experience has taught us that healing has its own timetable. Being hasty is low-road functioning.”<sup>145</sup>

A second way to differentiate from difficult people is to listen to, but not necessarily agree with or affirm what they say. In John chapter 2 we observe Jesus

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<sup>142</sup> Heifetz and Linsky, 87.

<sup>143</sup> Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 67.

<sup>144</sup> Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006), 25.

<sup>145</sup> Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*, 71.

employing this strategy.<sup>146</sup> He did not entrust himself wholly to any person or group. His identity was based in the certitude of his relationship with his Father in heaven. Jesus could stifle the smothering voices of attack and opposition because He was of the same heart and mind as His Father.

We, too, must separate ourselves from the voices of those who attack. We must recognize that our identity, vision, and calling all find their definition in our Heavenly Father. We must find our rest in who we are in union with Christ, or our feelings in the midst of dissenting voices will ultimately overcome us.

Differentiation is a calm confidence in the understanding of our own identity in Christ. Boundaries, not persuasion, will ultimately be one of the secrets to making progress in this area. As leaders hold their ground and remain firm, much opposition will eventually relent. Differentiated leaders demonstrate the strength not to allow troubled persons to exert power over them.

Leaders also have the opportunity to set boundaries within their leadership teams. Sadly, oppositional people can also be found in the leadership circle. As elders or deacons, they have the right to express their disagreements with plans and changes. But when meeting after meeting is disrupted and shut down because of negativity and criticism, it is important to find a new way to function within those leadership circles.

One of the ways ministers can lose credibility in the midst of conflict is by being overly aggressive. Leaders forfeit credibility with the middle adopters if they lash out against a difficult person. By remaining calm, others will focus on the frustration and volatility of the antagonist. This requires preparation and

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<sup>146</sup> John 2:24-25.

planning so that a person cannot dominate and quickly sabotage the new initiatives. I believe it is a mistake for leaders to continue trying to persuade difficult people on the leadership team after many attempts. Instead, the leader must clearly and directly analyze the broken process in a meeting with the entire team. When the team finally discovers that the divisions are not over issues, but over the dysfunction of a member, as a group it can give the agitator an opportunity to repent. If this opportunity is rejected, the team will have to put an end to the disruptive pattern in the meetings. If required, the leadership team must take steps to remove the antagonist from the group. While this can take a long time, it is a powerful step in moving a church through conflict.

Keep at it

With all the challenges of conflict, pastors need to be consistently praying for and forgiving those who are opposed their leadership. This is critical to the spiritual wellbeing of the church, the pastor, and the difficult people.

The whitewater of conflict is frightening. Remaining focused on Christ enables us to keep going. As they steer through these rapids, leaders are actually propelled forward and gain new confidence for the journey ahead.

## CHAPTER TEN

### **Isolation: “I feel so alone”**

I remember one canoe trip when I was really getting tired. We had been at it all day and a light, and cold drizzle had begun to fall. All of us wanted to get home, but we were still miles from our checkout point. I pulled hard with my paddle, but we seemed to be making such little progress. Then I looked back and saw my partner holding his paddle across his lap. “What was that?” I thought. I had been paddling alone.

The pastor preached powerful messages each Sunday. His church grew to over one thousand people with a number of excellent ministries and programs. In public, he was caring and charismatic. People loved to be near him. He was a person they admired and respected. In the church’s leadership meetings, he conveyed confidence and competence. One day sitting next to me in a meeting, he surprised me by remarking that *he felt utterly alone*.

For many pastors, feelings of resentment in leadership come not just from the heavy load, but also from bearing that load alone. I used to be surprised by those conversations about loneliness at conferences or ministerial gatherings. Now, I recognize that I have felt the same way on numerous occasions. I too have felt utterly alone.

#### **Why do we feel so alone in leadership?**

As a leader, you are not the only one who feels such loneliness. Leaders of churches live in harried and populated loneliness.

Numerous studies over the past two decades have documented a longstanding problem with clergy loneliness. As recently as 2001, the Pulpit and Pew National Survey discovered that only about one-third of the clergy interviewed said they had never felt lonely or isolated. Indeed, “loneliness and isolation” was the single greatest predictor of overall job dissatisfaction among Protestants and Catholics, according to that 2001 survey.<sup>147</sup>

Some of our loneliness is positional. As pastors, we are viewed as a “different species,” as ordained, theological, spiritual caregivers. Our calling seems so separate from many of our congregants as well as from others in our community. Pastoral leaders move into a role where others get out of their way and follow their lead. While this kind of submission frees us to lead, it also feels like we are separate. This special role can foster a distancing reality with our congregations.

In addition to the misguided notions of pop psychology, certain contemporary structure and expectations of pastoral leaders have reinforced the appeal of a therapeutic conception of calling. We have allowed a “lone ranger” mentality to emerge among clergy for a variety of competitive, legal, and bureaucratic reasons. But a lone ranger lacks the ecologies of support, holy friendships, and community that sustain a faithful and ever-deepening understanding of one’s calling. Such a mentality leads to a preoccupation with oneself in destructive ways.<sup>148</sup>

Our isolation can also arise from our mistaken view of heroic leadership. In their passion for church growth, and under the pressure of enlarged expectations for ministry success, pastors often isolate themselves and function without community. For example, they may:

- Dominate staffs where younger associates quit under pressure
- Fall prey to illicit relationships on the internet
- Fall into homosexual affairs with struggling members of the church
- Desert their wives and families
- Have secret addictions to alcohol or painkillers
- Plagiarize sermons in order to impress congregants

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<sup>147</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 74.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

These breakdowns flourish in a world of lonely isolation. Without meaningful connection, pastors can fall like anyone else in Christ's church. Pastors need the reality of community.

Surprisingly, pastoral leaders may also become isolated because they are relationally underdeveloped. These leaders have overdeveloped their ability to empathize, and underdeveloped their capacity for friendship. Often pastors seek the ministry in order to help people, but they have a difficult time receiving help and healing from others in the congregation. This over-functioning towards others makes them appear heroic; however, that heroism is not a humble expression of grace. It is a compulsion that empties them of the capacity to be in authentically sustaining relationships.

But maturity as adults calls us to discover the reality of our interconnectedness with others. This adolescent individualism, if left unchecked even as we grow older, is dangerous, because we deny the other people around us who provide challenge and support. Even more importantly, we fail to recognize that we can overcome our tendencies toward self-deception and other forms of sin only through deep and loving engagements with God and others.<sup>149</sup>

Finally, leadership isolation flows out of the values of western culture.

Individualism is the dominant commitment of Americans. This commitment to self-sufficiency isolates us from others who can minister with us or to us. Robert Bellah articulated this in his profound work entitled *Habits of the Heart*.

Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself... as democratic individualism grows...there are more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>150</sup> Bellah, 37.



### Sharing ministry together: Not doing it alone

To move out of our isolation, we must share ministry with others. The Bible teaches that the work of ministry is a shared activity. Jesus modeled this by selecting disciples.<sup>151</sup> Paul worked with Timothy, Barnabas, Silas and others.<sup>152</sup> When we work together in relationship, we share the load. Sharing ministry makes the task before us more complex, but people who work side-by-side with us help to sustain us for the long journey of ministry.

We've said this many times, and it's worth repeating again. Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. There may have been a time when leaders could command commitment, but those times are long past. People follow people, not positions. If there's not some sense of personal relationship, then it's just less likely that people will want to follow.<sup>153</sup>

How do we find co-laborers with whom we share the ministry? Acts teaches that God is the one who calls overseers through His Holy Spirit.<sup>154</sup> One of our primary tasks as leaders is to identify people that God has called as leaders. We can be assured that God is in the process of raising up leaders.

We recognize leaders by observable character qualities. First Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1 describe these observable realities about leaders in God's family. They are to be generous and not greedy. They are to be hospitable and not closed off. They are to be held in respect before they enter office.

Over the years, I have seen many situations where leaders are selected in churches because of what they look like, rather than what they live like. In some churches holding a certain profession, being wealthy, having a family connection, or being a certain age is

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<sup>151</sup> Matthew 10:1-23; Matthew 16:17-19; Matthew 20:18-20.

<sup>152</sup> 1 Thessalonians 1:1; Philippians 2:19-24; Acts 13:1-2.

<sup>153</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *A Leader's Legacy*, 52.

<sup>154</sup> Acts 20:28.

enough to recommend one for leadership. The scripture asks us to observe the character and conduct of potential leaders as a *primary way of determining their suitability for service*. The persons selected as leaders can be either co-laborers or antagonists in the ministry. I cannot emphasize enough that who you select as leaders, and the criteria you use to select them, is critical for your own health in the ministry

What if we “inherit” an established group of leaders? How do we share ministry with an already existing group? When I first arrived at CPC in 1992, the deacon board was a circle of seven men who were in charge of the physical plant and details of the financial operations. Because the finances were so tight, this group monitored and directed all fiscal matters by themselves. When I arrived, the group could be described in *a number of ways. First, their morale was extremely poor. Even though they liked each other as individuals, when they were together, they were in a chronically bad mood. The reality of the meetings was that little hope was held out for successfully accomplishing any of their many tasks. There was a sense of discouragement because there was so much to do: fix the parking lot, repair the hole in the roof, repair ceiling leaks in the entryway, improve the grounds and make sure the maintenance of the church was accomplished.*

At each meeting they were overwhelmed with the many needs they felt could never be met. This condition had settled into the deacons over a number of years. Their entire decision-making process had become reactive. Each project was a crisis. As a result, *there was always a sense of backtracking, rechecking, and retreating.*

Not only did they feel hopeless, but they also felt alone. The deacons felt they were left with these impossible situations without any help. They felt like they had been left to do the dirty work they did not have the resources to accomplish. So they turned

their general sense of frustration toward the elders and the people of the church.

Whenever the pastor attempted to give encouragement and advice it was often rejected as too simple or as unrealistic. The lack of movement became an experience that bonded them together but also kept them demoralized.

So, how does a pastor move an existing group toward vitality? It begins by building relationships. I started to take an active interest in the lives of each person on the deacon board. I began to build alliances, connections and friendships with them, not only concerning their work as deacons, but also in other areas of their lives as well. With one deacon, I played softball. Another deacon was keenly interested in spiritual matters, and I spent time talking with him about those things. I worked alongside a third deacon to complete tangible projects.

One of the most important ways for us to lead is by hanging out with people and finding time to build bridges. My great desire was to change the perspective of the deacons involved, but I could only do that by first working on our relationships. Most pastors seek to persuade before they befriend. However, you can't do one without the other. It is essential to relationally connect with the people on our team. In order to do this, Patrick Lencioni makes a strong case for exhibiting vulnerability as one takes opportunities to get to know people.<sup>155</sup> This can be difficult for leaders, and I didn't do as good of a job as I could have with the deacons. But I did attempt to begin to build relationships that would make a difference.

Even while working with existing groups, leaders must begin to develop new leaders. Nothing revitalizes a group more than new blood. When we added a couple of

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<sup>155</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 201.

new deacons, it began to lighten the load for everyone involved. Recruiting people with a new perspective was so much easier than maintaining the existing group. These new folks had never experienced the difficult, draining years that preceded their service as deacons. They came with a fresh enthusiasm to see things done well. Often, I would spend one-on-one time with these folks before they became deacons in order to get to know them, to build relational bridges, and to develop a sense of expectation. With one of these potential deacons, I spent quite a bit of time talking and thinking about the area of finances. He became instrumental in building confidence and competence back into the financial area of the church. Over the next fifteen years, he would prove to be an anchor as our church went through so many financial changes. His involvement made a significant difference.

#### Sharing ministry makes leaders accountable

Pastors often lead alone because they fear accountability for their work. One of the great challenges to the entrepreneurial style of church is its lack of accountability. Presbyterian church government structure is built upon the principle that leadership is not centered on an individual person, but on a plurality of elders. This is biblical wisdom. We need the oversight and accountability of the community. Many who like to proceed rapidly with their plans chafe under the slowness of the committee, the board, or the ministry team. Sadly, story after story can be told of bold leaders who disregarded accountability to others in order to reach ministry success, only to crash and burn in personal or church breakdown. We will not sustain and maintain ministries for decades unless we share the work with a community of servant leaders.

To give you an example of how mutual accountability prevents me from feeling alone in ministry, let me share with you about life with our ministry staff team. Each Monday morning we meet together. The rhythm of the meeting requires my presence. Many senior pastors look forward to the day when they can opt out of these leadership meetings. They hire an executive pastor to run the meetings. In so doing, senior pastors often lose connection with the people they serve.

Why is it so important to work in close connection with our ministry teams? First, a leader's influence is always in the context of relationship. Neglecting relationship with your team is a costly mistake. While ministry motivation comes from God, it is nearly always funneled through reaffirmation and modeling when leaders meet together. When we isolate ourselves from the community of leaders, we all are at risk of becoming discouraged or disengaged. I remember during a particularly busy season I became less available to a key staff member. After failing to be together over a number of months, he broke down and left the ministry. It was his choice, even a tragic and unnecessary choice, but I was not close enough or attentive enough to notice. We need each other.

Not only is shared ministry helpful to a team, it is sanctifying for the leader. Whenever we plan and give ourselves to lofty goals, it is challenging for us to slow down and submit to others. And while we began the ministry taking vows of mutual submission to each other in leadership, we often resist healthy submission to others. You might remember that in my early years of service at the church in Lincoln, I wanted to plant a daughter church out of the main congregation. I had yet to attend seminary, though I had finished Christian college and was an able student. I believed that time invested at seminary would slow my ability to start this church. In extraordinary circumstances the

Presbyterian Church allows a pastor to be ordained without completing three years of seminary training. In my youthful zeal, I believed this was one of those situations. The presbytery did not agree, and would not ordain me until I attended seminary. I needed to submit to them. Was I happy about that? No. I could have left the church and started a new church. But by learning to submit to others I was protected from running headlong into a mistake. Most importantly, I began developing a habit of submitting to God by submitting to others.

Not only is sharing ministry healthy for us as leaders, it is healthy for our churches. It is important that we demonstrate to our teams our submission to others, because there will be many times when we ask them to submit to us and to the other elders. I have discovered that almost every week our staff and lay leaders have to put their own approaches aside to serve the greater plan or purpose of the church. If we are modeling submission, then we are helping them learn to function more effectively in teams.

For all of its benefits, sharing ministry together is difficult. How does a wise leader facilitate healthy ministry relationships?

#### Appreciation

When I was making \$300 a month in church ministry, my mentor would take me out for lunch or breakfast. He would always pay. He modeled for me, as a younger leader, the constant need we have for caring for staff in practical ways. Senior leadership needs to pay on these occasions. Leaders can truly build bonds through thoughtful and tangible expressions of care. It is a sign to your team that you notice and value them.

When I was twenty-five, my mentor walked into our one-bedroom apartment with a new

color television. We had an old black and white television that was adequate, but this new television became a symbol of his appreciation. Gifts motivate us because they communicate concern.

Appreciation is also expressed through practical care. Ministry team members generally sacrifice financially in order to be in ministry. I have found that, especially with new and younger staff, time spent loading and unloading moving vans is a connection moment. The older I get, the less I look forward to it. But it is an incredible relationship builder when you are moving into a new life and ministry, and your van is met with a team of eager volunteers. While moving seasons feel awfully inconvenient, the relational return is astronomical.

Crisis care also matters. When a pastor's home is damaged, real support is a breath of life. When my hot water heater broke, a church member took care of it. Another staff member had sewage in his basement, and a fellow staffer went over and mopped into the night. Sharing the burdens of ministry and life together enables us to sense the Lord's presence in challenging times.

Creativity requires trusted teamwork

Trust gets tested in the crucible of change. Creative and adaptive change requires trust among ministry partners. In the early 1990s, CPC was changing its worship style. Our worship leader was a fantastic keyboard player, and he was also a loyal friend. Our connection allowed us to be creative. We went through a two year pathway of change that left both of us uncertain how to hold onto some hymns and introduce new songs. We both endured pressure from all sides. We both got criticized. We both made mistakes. But we

stayed connected. We supported each other rather than allowing ourselves to become isolated. Our friendship and support created a context of creativity.

Creativity requires trust because creative change is fraught with failures. Failures may be real or perceived, but they bring with them blame and fear. Many times churches fail to maintain creative change because the struggles turn leaders against each other. One says, “You should have done this!” The other responds, “You did not support me.” The finger pointing strains the relationship and replaces confident commitment toward a new vision with cautious protection of one’s role and reputation. Leaders need to take the time to rebuild trust in one another in order to unleash the energy necessary to achieve shared goals.

While much of our discussion has centered on staff development, the same principle holds true for the leadership boards of our churches. The elders at CPC faced a real challenge. We needed to build more space for worship, but we also had a seminary student graduating in our midst who manifested unique qualities of care and counseling. Should we pursue the building program or the less urgent need of developing our staff? The board wrestled through the decision and hired the staff person even when it was the less obvious path to take. Some in the congregation questioned the timing of this hire because it pushed our building program back a year. As we trusted God’s direction and each other, we saw the health of our church family grow even when it was unclear what to do. Sharing this decision as leaders strengthened us for many future challenges.

Connection is vital to the life of the leadership team

Building personal connection is critical to effective leadership. These ties of hospitality are critical for knowing each other’s stories, hurts, experiences, desires, and



weaknesses. Here are ideas some churches use to maintain connection on teams:

- Eat together during board meetings
- Pray together weekly for congregation
- Take team retreats once or twice a year
- One-on-one lunches with leaders
- Monthly meetings
- Mission trips together
- Prayer retreats
- Team dinners with spouses

All of these practices reflect a desire to connect in order to better love and lead the congregation.

#### Sharing life together: Holy friendships

Pastoral leaders live with the dual roles of pastor and leader. For pastors to grow, they must be able to set aside their pastoral role and be in relationship with a few others who care for them as a person. With these people, sharing life together takes precedence over sharing ministry. These restorative relationships may be found in the local church or in the wider community. Holy friends support the healthy life of a pastoral leader.

Pastors struggle, many times, with developing these fraternal relationships because they are used to constantly living in the role of being a people-helper. When you become accustomed to helping, your ability to be vulnerable can atrophy. Most pastoral leaders have a relational fatigue that comes from dealing with people day after day with a posture of counseling, coaching, leading, caring, and listening. If a pastor is married and has children, he has very little time and energy left for other relationships. So pastors in their 30s and 40s commonly find that supportive, edifying friendships have disappeared.

I do not have a magic formula for recovering what one author calls holy

friendships.<sup>156</sup> Some suggest that this cannot happen in the church; others believe that it can. I have found that relationships within the church work quite well. One has to exercise wisdom about how much one shares. But my experience has been that one can receive very supportive friendship from the people who live and move with you in pastoral life.

Maturity as adults calls us to discover the reality of our interconnectedness with others. This adolescent individualism, if left unchecked even as we grow older, is dangerous, because we deny the other people around us who provide challenge and support. Even more importantly, we fail to recognize that we can overcome our tendencies toward self-deception and other forms of sin only through deep and loving engagements with God and others.<sup>157</sup>

Holy friendships have to do with sharing not just ministry life but everyday life. People need to know that they are cared for, not just for what they produce, but for who they are. And so these friendships need to include an ability to talk about sports, finances, literature, past life experiences, and future dreams and aspirations. The ability to do that opens one's heart to a revitalizing hope.

Holy friendships also facilitate internal renewal. Friends who think out loud with you, pray with you, and challenge you toward growth are critical to growing in maturity. This combination can be difficult to find and often requires intentionality and structure. I believe that a interacting in multiple contexts is a truly helpful approach to relationships. Belonging to a small fellowship group, joining an accountability group, sharing with a cohort of pastors, and having individual friendships are a sampling of these varied contexts.

Mentors can also provide holy friendships if the relationship goes beyond a focus on skill development and includes the heart. Finding experienced helpers, mentors and

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<sup>156</sup> Jones and Armstrong, 65.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

coaches is indispensable for growth. Some of these coaches can provide very specialized help in areas like teambuilding, evangelism, or preaching. Many times an older mentor can be someone who truly brings new life to a leader. Look for people who share a passion for the ministry with an age and/or experience level beyond yours. Seek out others who will be able to speak into the situations you face. Find someone who interacts in a similar context, and with whom you feel a connection, so that you will be able to receive his or her input.

In my life there is one person who refines and encourages me like no other – my wife Judy. She knows me and she loves me. This holy and intimate friendship has been the greatest gift to me. She both rejoices and grieves over the ministry realities of the church with me. She knows how to break my obsessive and controlling leadership patterns. She draws me out of my hyper-focus on the problems of the day and dares me to live as a man. Her longings for me as a person force me into a deeper appreciation for God in our life together. This path toward marital encouragement is not easy. Like so many couples, we have sought professional counseling to aid our growth together. Sometimes we feel that after twenty-five years of marriage, we are actually starting to get it. The benefits are worth the investment.

Together, we have the joy of loving our children. They are truly a gift from God. The shared challenges of loving each other and our children are sanctifying and sustaining to me as a leader. Without these reorienting relationships, ministry could so easily overwhelm me. When ministry is difficult, part of what sustains me is knowing that I am well loved.

In the end, the most formative holy friendship is Christ's relationship with us. If

we are not growing in our relationship with Jesus Christ through a deepened understanding of His grace, if we are not growing in deeper connection with those around us (with our families and also with the family of God), and if we are not developing a deepened sense of God's calling in our life, then we will not be an effective catalyst for growth and change for the kingdom of God. No matter how gifted, able, or winsome we may appear, there is going to be occasion after occasion where our lack of spiritual development will be a roadblock. And finally, our lack of passion will lead to maintenance rather than a sacrificial approach to life in ministry. Sharing life means sharing the love that God has showered upon us. God's word confirms what our hearts already know: "The greatest of these is love."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### **From fatigue to refreshment and renewal**

We were running three worship services on Sunday mornings. The ministries to children and youth were spilling into the hallways. Because we were ministering to younger Christians our finances were still tight. We began a building program to expand our worship area from three hundred to six hundred and to add additional classroom space. It was an exciting time.

And then it all changed.

Our worship leader and youth leaders left for other churches. The building program was delayed for months as we waited for an approval from the city government. The lay leader who was an architect and chairman of the building committee left during the middle of the program. The builders had promised us we would only spend one month out of our building. We spent eleven months in exile in rented space. Costs ran higher than expected. Finally, we completed the project and celebrated our new facility.

I was exhausted.

Elijah had just witnessed the greatest miracle of his prophetic ministry. As recorded in 1 Kings chapter 18, the fire of heaven had fallen and the people were renewed in their passion for the living God.<sup>159</sup> In the next chapter, Jezebel threatened Elijah's life; he collapsed in fatigue. Then God came to Elijah and renewed his hope. God mended Elijah's heart by making him aware of faithful others who surrounded him and

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<sup>159</sup> 1 Kings 18:16-46.

those who would continue the ministry when he was gone.<sup>160</sup> Fatigue is healed by the faithfulness of God to those who are weary.

Pastoral leaders get tired. The relentless nature of ministry means that fatigue is a constant companion of leaders in the church. While lay people joke about ministers only working on Sunday, the truth lies on the other side of the continuum. A pastor's work is overwhelming because it wears upon the body and soul. How do we deal with fatigue? How can we be restored when we have a weary heart?

### **Change of heart or change of location**

When pastors become exhausted, many simply look to serve in a different church. This can be a dangerous move. The congregation is often hurt when the pastor leaves. Long term pastorates have many benefits: faithful modeling and mentoring, generational impact, and deepening of community connections. Too many pastors leave when they are fatigued, but before they have finished the work to which God has called them. In a world of change, pastoral consistency has a tremendous positive benefit for the church.

There are clearly times when God calls pastors to new places and new positions of ministry. However, they must be sure that the reason they leave is not fatigue. Leaving in a stage of burn out will not remedy the problem. Some of the greatest pastoral collapses occur at the next church in which a pastor serves.

Bill thought he could change his heart by changing his address. Instead, when he arrived at a newer, more vibrant, and larger ministry, he was simply overwhelmed with the pace. His fatigue did not fade. It actually deepened. The leaders of the church turned against him and he was asked to resign.

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<sup>160</sup> 1 Kings 19:9-21.

Receiving a new call should flow from a conviction that God has finished His work through us in the present church and opened the door to another place to exercise our gifts. It is an accounting of passion and also a stewardship of gifts in relationship to God's kingdom. Fatigue should not be the basis for decisions about transition. Before considering a move, pastors need to be renewed and restored in order to effectively discern God's call.

Sometimes pastors remain burned-out, plodding along in unhappy routines.

American pastors are abandoning their posts, left and right, and at an alarming rate. They are not leaving churches and getting other jobs. Congregations still pay their salaries. Their names remain on the church stationary and they continue to appear in pulpits on Sundays. But they are abandoning their posts, their calling. They have gone whoring after other gods. What they do with their time under the guise of pastoral ministry hasn't the remotest connection with what the church's pastors have done for more than twenty centuries.<sup>161</sup>

For those caught in an unhealthy rut, renewal becomes a critical concern. How do we find refreshment and restoration in our present ministry contexts? All too often in the ministry oppressive situations seem to continue with no end in sight. We engage in relational conflict and difficulties; we suffer loss of vision and deep weariness of mind and heart. Wrapped up in mental, emotional, and spiritual battles, we need to refresh ourselves in effective ways.

Restorative relationships

Jesus modeled the need for connection with others in difficult times. As Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, he asked the disciples to pray with Him. Jesus sought out relationships at His time of greatest emotional and spiritual struggle. To counteract the fatigue incurred in ministry, we too must have restorative relationships. As stressed earlier, it is so important for us to develop a network of allies, confidants, and

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<sup>161</sup> Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, 1.

encouragers. And it is so important for us to use those relationships to help encourage us through the painful, difficult situations. We need to make sure we know who those confidants are who can encourage us when attacks are personal.

I have found that I have different people who encourage me depending on the situation. I look to find those people: some who can really counsel me when I feel low; others who can coach me when I am struggling with the next step in a plan. Both are important. We also need to find those with whom we can share our pain safely both inside and outside the church.

One of my elders is named George. George has been a confidant to me. But he is also an ally. That can be a rare combination and a real joy. One of the ways George and I connect is by *dreaming together*. He is a *blue-sky planner*, a person who loves to think beyond the moment. Discussions about ministries, properties, missions, and leaders generally take place outside of formal meeting times. The two of us will sit together in a car or at his office where we spend time simply dreaming and talking about what we believe God might be calling us to do. That kind of relationship rejuvenates us both.

Another restorative relationship is with our wives. How do you tap into her love for you and receive the balm of comfort and renewal provided in that love? For those who are married, connection with our wives enables us to become the men we were intended to be. Our marriage has to become a place of safety and renewal.

Now, even apart from the journey of leadership, the calling to be a husband is worthy in and of itself. A commitment to marriage is not a prelude to powerful ministry and not a prescription for how to have a better church. Rather, marriage is an intrinsic, beautiful connection in God's creation, and one that blesses the individuals who enter



into it. God calls us to share our lives with our wives in true delight, regardless of our calling.

Often the greatest challenges of renewal for leaders comes in turning their minds “off.” Pastors are thinkers, planners, caregivers, workers and worriers. Therefore, ministry issues often come to mind while we are at home, robbing our marital relationship of the emotional energy it deserves. There are many things we can do to reengage with our partner and remove ourselves from ministry pressures. We grow by turning the entrepreneurial mind off, and replacing it with redemptive relating in the home. Here is a list of some shared moments that can facilitate relationship and restore us:

- Taking a walk together
- Praying with and for one another
- Eating meals with just the two of us
- Calls to connect during the middle of the day
- Going to bed at the same time
- Regular sexual intimacy
- Date nights each week
- Anniversary celebrations

Five years ago I took a sabbatical and had an opportunity for three months simply to unwind and focus on restoring my personal passion. One of the things that occurred in this short sabbatical was a reinvigoration of my personal relationship with the Lord. It became clear to me that before I could be a pastor, I had to be a follower of Christ. I had to be a person who delighted in the reality that Jesus loved me, that he was my Lord and Savior. Another aspect of this sabbatical was recovering the everyday pleasure of just being with my wife. We had a number of experiences in that sabbatical. Some were special, including taking a cruise. But simply being together, without the pressures and

deadlines of ministry life was a real treat. That special time together reminded me that before I was a senior pastor, I was the husband of this dear woman.

This recognition is important not merely because it restores me to sanity, but because it renews me. As I give myself to Judy and to my family, I become more of what Christ intends me to be. I experience more of what it means to learn to think of another person, not merely to manage them, but to make them a sacrificial priority in my life.

Interestingly, as I move through the stages of family life, I find that my wife is the one person not fooled by what people have said about me or to me. When people tell me I've done something well, she smiles and agrees. But her love and care for me does not rise with any acclamation from others. When people criticize, it does not affect her perspective of me. Her steadfastness helps remind me that I am a person before I am a pastor.

For many pastors the deterioration of this humbling and wholesome relationship called marriage is a prelude to disaster. When our lives are obsessively focused on being public people and developing programmatic machinery to accomplish ministry, we become less than what Christ intended us to be. Connection to our wives (and children) leads to renewal because it requires us to sacrifice and lay down life and agenda, ultimately bringing us into a right understanding of who we are before God.

Marriage not only renews us, it also restores us. The time I spend talking to Judy, the time I spend in physical intimacy, the time I spend in emotional sharing, the time I spend with our family in simply being silly, watching a movie, or canoeing down a river – these realities restore me to God's grace, to God's beauty in creation, to the wonder of God's work in other people apart from anything I do. At work we track time. In our

family lives, we must lose track of time. We celebrate the life God has given us without being overwhelmed by the urgencies and exigencies of productivity.

Much can be said about family in relationship to the Sabbath. Clearly Sabbath relates to our relationship with the Lord and our worship of Him. However, it is also worship of the Lord in gathering with others, including our family and our extended church family. For pastors, the church family can easily become a place of work, so that only in our personal families can we truly connect to Sabbath and worship. This is an area where I must confess I have fallen short. Much of my family worship life has been left to occasional or spontaneous experiences. These have been wonderful, but often I have allowed the functional, formal, public aspects of worship to replace the personal in our family. We must nurture our family in order to develop a deep resource of renewal, both for our family's sake and for our endurance as leaders.

#### Finding renewal in the midst of fatigue

There are also other ways we can be refreshed in our life as leaders. Christ calls us back to the freshness of our first love by meeting us in our fatigue and mending the weary parts of our lives.

#### Mental refreshment

Some of our fatigue arises from the familiarity of the same old routine. It is easy to get in a rut not only organizationally, but also mentally. Finding ways to stimulate our mind with new ideas renews us.

Books take us on incredible journeys of discovery. Learning to read for restoration means that we find books that are not commentaries for sermons or ministry books for planning. Many of my friends devour fictional literature both modern and

ancient. Reading J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis stories transports them to other lands to fight battles and finish epic journeys. I have found history and biography very stimulating to my mind in the last few years. Military history, which takes me to the battles of World War II or Vietnam, is sobering and thought provoking. Learning about Abraham Lincoln has challenged my notions of modern living and civic duty. Such books renew our minds and develop our reflective capacity. They ready us for the next day of focused effort.

Along with reading, I highly encourage pastors to take continuing education. Taking classes at Covenant Theological Seminary has kept me fresh with the timeless and timely understandings of God and His ministry. If you cannot afford classes, many conferences and seminars are available in person and online to restock your mental selves for ministry. When I am fatigued, it is essential to make time to take in new and different forms of thought.

#### Emotional refreshment

How do we keep our heart alert to God's glory? As we plod through the repetitive routines of the day, we need to laugh, sing and cry.

Music stirs my soul. Singing in worship is a consistent time where God touches my heart. Other music also refreshes me. My music collection includes songs from nearly every genre. When I need a boost of creativity or spark, I will crank up a song or listen to a melody. The words and music of U2, Eva Cassidy, the Beatles, Chicago (their old stuff), David Sanborn, and countless classical artists stir my heart.

Movies are now the primary language of our culture. Watching thoughtful films, whether new or old, has opened my heart to the beauty of God's glory and the incredible

brokenness I share with others. Allowing ourselves to enter into the narrative of a movie reshapes our hearts for our own story.

Documentary films about diverse subjects can be found at any movie rental store. A brief story about architecture, the Black Panther movement, or an oral history told by Ken Burns can transport my soul and transform my perspective.

#### Physical refreshment

Studies show that children who visit state or national parks have a more healthy childhood.<sup>162</sup> Pastors need to walk in the woods or open country wherever they live. I have never lived in the beauty of Colorado or Montana, but I have always found places to go to walk where I can enjoy God's creation. Our family had the habit of walking together for many years. Those times with my children and my wife reenergized me for the rest of my life.

Regular exercise has always helped me. Trust me, I have not always been regular. Still, my gym is a place of renewal. The treadmill, elliptical machine, weights, and swimming pool have kept my stress level in check for many seasons of ministry. Once I go and participate, I always enjoy the rewards. Often the ruts of my busy schedule seduce me into an unhealthy rejection of this refreshment.

Finally, sometimes we simply need sleep. Studies show that sufficient rest is necessary for healthy functioning. Often pastors discover that the worries of their ministries rob them of this vital resource. Let a trust in God's providence lead you to times of rest and recreation.

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<sup>162</sup> Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2005), 3.

Grace allows us to fail and recover. It is okay to be a bad reader – take time to do it anyway. It is okay to fail as a prayer warrior – talk to Jesus about it! It is okay to resist exercise – give it a try again and see how it feels. Let's keep looking to Christ and allow Him to lead us back to the well of His refreshment.

### Spiritual Refreshment

It is important for us to find a way to worship and pray. I neglect this so often and when I do, I sense my batteries being drained. When I return to Him to sing and praise, I savor the Lord's presence again. Variety in my spiritual life is important to me, so I use many different avenues for devotions. Whatever works for us has to have a spiritual encounter to it. Through His Spirit Jesus draws near to us and we must focus on Him to benefit from His presence. Corporate worship with the Lord's Supper is a primary means of grace. Time in fellowship around God's Word is indispensable for me. I have met with a group of men studying books of the Bible each Monday for the last ten years. It soaks into my soul and restores me.

### A New Job Description

Finally, I want to encourage pastors to break the fatigue of the ministry by changing their job description from time to time. Emphasize different aspects of the role you fulfill for the church. Pastors often have a great deal of control over their schedule. There is always more work than we can do. For a week or a month choose other facets of the ministry to focus on. *I have experienced true renewal serving as a missionary, building contractor, landscaper, and organizational worker, as well as senior pastor.* These jobs may be only temporary emphases, but I find that I get a charge out of serving with others in a different area of need or opportunity. I am not suggesting that we

consistently extend ourselves beyond our giftedness. Rather, we can use the diversity of our job to our advantage. Use different ministry abilities when the same ones are exhausted from continual use.

In the end, the Lord says it is our relationship with Him that leads to rest and restoration. When we learn from Him we are renewed.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Matthew 11:28-30.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **Conclusion: Leaders who are led leave a legacy**

John Eldridge asserts that young boys all ask one thing as they move from boyhood to manhood: do I have what it takes?<sup>164</sup> Even as I move through the middle of my adult years, that question constantly arises in my heart. Do I have what it takes? There have been number of times as a pastor that I have sincerely doubted my ability to continue and effectively lead in the ministry. Recognition of God's grace and truth, covenant and calling, and connection in community enable me to lead. Each one of these is so much more important and significant than my doubts, and so much more powerful than my brokenness.

At the same time, I believe there is a question that every leader must answer: what legacy will I leave? There are public leaders who have brought great social change like Martin Luther King in civil rights; William Wilberforce in abolishing the British slave trade; C.S. Lewis with his apologetics of the Christian faith; or Bono in his fight for African debt relief. These crusaders have left a legacy of commitment to Christ and His Kingdom through their activities.

### **The legacy you leave is the life you lead<sup>165</sup>**

Local pastors also have the opportunity to leave an imprint of God's grace and goodness on the face of the world. When we look at the biblical record, we see more examples of leaders who left a legacy: Peter, who brought the gospel at Pentecost and

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<sup>164</sup> John Eldredge, *The Way of the Wild Heart* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 12.

<sup>165</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *A Leader's Legacy*, 2.



opened the doors of the new church; Barnabas, who gave his life generously and relationally to see so many leaders like Paul and John Mark grow and develop; Paul, who pioneered church-planting to the Gentile world; Timothy, who was Paul's most capable associate pastor; John, who faithfully endured even under exile and persecution; and James, who led the Jerusalem church through many adaptive challenges. Each of these faithful leaders is characterized by one amazing reality: they all considered themselves servants. Paul in Philippians;<sup>166</sup> John in Revelation;<sup>167</sup> Peter in his first epistle;<sup>168</sup> and James in his epistle<sup>169</sup>— each describes himself as a servant of the living God. These men consciously understood their role as persons responsive to Christ, led by Him as they led the congregations and ministries under their care. The fundamental challenge for leaders in today's church is not merely to be skillful in dealing with the ferocity of the opposition or the fickleness of a ministry team. Rather, it is a matter of faithfulness in hearing and heeding the voice of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Peter was clearly disoriented and demoralized after Christ's resurrection. He had heard the words of peace and forgiveness; he had felt the breath of Christ as He breathed the Spirit upon the disciples. But at that meal on the shores of Galilee, Peter heard again what he had learned throughout his time with Jesus. Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time that question called Peter to relearn the grace of God. The symmetry of his denial was now a singular opportunity for his devotion. Peter humbly confessed Christ's knowledge of this love; he placed his own perfection in the hands of

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<sup>166</sup> Philippians 1:1.

<sup>167</sup> Revelation 1:1.

<sup>168</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-4.

<sup>169</sup> James 1:1.

the One who led him. “Lord, you know.” No longer confident in himself, he poignantly placed himself completely in Christ.

Christ surely delighted in that profession. But His invitation to relationship led to an invitation to service: “Feed my Sheep and tend my Lambs.” A redemptive relationship with Christ must go forth in a redemptive expression of service. The love Christ has for us and the love we have for Him will lead us to give ourselves to those whom Christ loves. The full embrace of His arms will not only protect us, but will propel us into a deeper and wider commitment to leadership. Leaders who learn this truth will not merely last; they will leave a legacy.

We don't lead our lives in solitary confinement. We lead our lives out in the open. We lead our lives in the company of others, and that is where we leave our legacy. It's the quality of our relationships that most determines whether our legacy will be ephemeral or lasting.<sup>170</sup>

When Christ leads the leader in a growing and dependent relationship, a legacy will be established that will last. To Him be the glory forever and ever!

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<sup>170</sup> Kouzes and Posner, *A Leader's Legacy*, 55.

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