

WARNING
CONTAINS
NO
Sugar

Honest Words
for Aspiring Leaders
in the Church

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AN EXPLANATION

There is certainly no shortage of great leadership books. At this very minute these significant works are piled high on the shelves of Barnes & Noble. They're popular for a reason. Most have been deliberately written with enough generality to fit any church situation. Some of them have cross-over applications for secular contexts like the workplace.

This little book, though, has a specific backdrop. I am writing from the trenches of a new church. If you'd like to color in extra detail, it's also a young church, spiritually and physically. I am one of the few exceptions—a graying, slightly fattening guy who has somehow managed to keep his sense of humor and passion for the household of the faith.

At this point in our congregational life (which is a few years down the road from our launch date), our spiritual vitality has led to new areas. Leadership is one of them. Rather than just stand back and watch our future randomly develop, I'm getting involved and offering guidance. This book is a slice of my effort.

If you're in a more advanced setting, you've probably been exposed to world class content on leadership already. In that case, this volume may come across as a bit juvenile in comparison. I can hear it now..."Dude for *real*, a chapter telling church leaders to come to church?"

If that's your reaction, please remember my setting: Young. Aspiring. Growing.

John Myer

I GET YOUR HEAD ON STRAIGHT

If you're wondering what the title of this book means, it's just this: comfy words won't be spoken here. Once we start talking about spiritual leadership, what we're really addressing is the welfare of God's people. That's serious. Most folks who aspire to leadership have little understanding of what they're getting into. The nutshell version of it all comes down to people entrusting their souls to you. They trust you won't lead them down a dark alley into religious extremes or doctrinal error, wasted time, or worst of all, a wasted life.

It's a big deal for people to follow you into a spiritual enterprise. Solomon knew this. In one of those remarkable moments preserved in scripture, God appeared to Him and told him to ask whatever he wanted. Any lesser man would have seen this as an Aladdin's Lamp opportunity. He could have asked for anything—money, power, women, long life. But this man had his head screwed on straight.

Solomon prayed, "You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in...Give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (1 Kings 3:7, 9). His sentiment was, "I want to do right by your people." And God liked it. He gave Solomon a magnum dose of wisdom, plus all the frills he hadn't requested.

Maybe you've been asked to lead a service group or a ministry. Maybe you're even helping to lead a church. I want to encourage you in this, because good leadership is a blessing to the children of God. But I've noticed that newer leaders tend to ignore some fairly basic, obvious things and end up shooting themselves in both feet. They wrongly believe that since they have been named "leader" by some senior person then others are morally bound to line up on them. As they go out to lead, no one seems to cooperate with them.

In some cases, that is the fault of the followers. But guess what?—in this book, I won't be railing against them. Instead, I'll be giving *you* a hard time. In fact, maybe you'll shut this book and conclude that you're not ready for leadership at all. I've seen it happen before. When the fine print of leadership comes out, some would-be leaders get offended. They think the standard is unreasonable. They feel that someone has put them under the law.

I obviously don't agree that leaders should struggle under a burden of legal requirements, since they should be models of New Testament grace. But I have to admit that the least "free" people in a congregation are its leaders. According to Jesus, it's unavoidable that somebody will always have to lay down his life for the sake of others.

These words understandably create a certain level of anxiety, because, as Paul asked, "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). Yet a little apprehensiveness isn't so bad. Blind self-confidence has been the ruination of many would-be leaders. Solomon could have stood on the fact that he was the son of David, the greatest of all the Old Testament kings. He had no doubt watched his father and was acquainted with royal administration. Maybe he had

native qualities that were consistent with strong leadership. Still, he prayed for wisdom to lead the people of God. This was true humility. Solomon resisted the role of the talented new hot-shot manager who plays fast and loose with the flock.

So, how do we “Come in and go out among these people?” Aside from the lessons that can only be learned on bended knees, church leaders new to service need to hear some pretty basic thoughts—*shockingly* basic. These things are so apparently minor that “green” leaders treat them as though they’re completely inconsequential. Surely nobody else notices them...right? Wrong.

The devil really is in the details. For the sake of your future leadership credibility, you’ll need to adopt this rule: a bunch of little things equals a few big ones and a few big ones will blow it for you.

I’m going to assume (and I hope I’m not wrong), that you’ve read the leadership qualities laid out in 1 Timothy and Titus. Even if your ministerial path doesn’t include being an elder or a deacon, a lot of what is said in those passages applies to leadership in any context. For sure, go back and read them. But for now, get ready to read what might seem like just so many crossed t’s and dotted i’s.

2

LEARN TO VALUE A FOLLOWING OF ONE

It's no secret that modern evangelical Christianity has a numbers obsession. In the minds of many leaders, success and size are equivalent factors. Even those of us who try to resist this mindset keep a wary eye on our respective congregations and ministries, often fretting over numerical growth.

While you're busy obsessing about the size of your team, I strongly recommend you check to make sure that one person is present among your following: *you*. Before anybody else comes into the picture, you had better be in charge of yourself. Paul understood this perfectly when he wrote, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27).

Too many Christian leaders think that it's okay to be wild in their private life, as long as they act godly in front of the church. You might believe that your mind is your inner sanctum, your personal fantasy playground, but I advise extreme caution here. The Bible says of a man that, "As he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7). Private life has an unpleasant habit of spilling over into public gaze. If your interior life is out of control, sooner or later you will begin to act out.

Our church started as a campus outreach to college students that later grew into a church of graduates and young professionals. A number of young single women are typically in attendance. I made a covenant

with myself that I would never allow my mind to drift into impure thoughts about any of them (or the married ones, of course). That personal determination has made it easy for me to exercise true pastoral ministry toward them, serving them together with my wife. I have the immense satisfaction of being transparent and genuine, seeing them as daughters, precious souls, and not the objects of foul thoughts.

There's probably not one area ministers gamble with more than the secrecy of their own hearts. Consider the disturbing preponderance of porn addictions among pastors today. It demonstrates that in a very serious way, many people who occupy places of ministerial leadership have failed to subdue private thoughts and behavior. The word "lawless" describes their shortcoming—enjoying freedom from constraints and boundaries in thought life, internet habits, the language used at home, etc. The Lord rebuked the Pharisees over this point when He pointed out how that they took care of outward appearances, but neglected inward reality (Matt. 23:25).

Christian leadership is a lot more than making strategies, executing plans, and giving orders. It's about ruling over yourself in grace (Rom. 5:17). It means remembering that, "The fruit of the Spirit is self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23).

We're all sinners, and so no one is perfect. But we're also in the process of cooperating with God's work in us as He moves toward His goal of sanctifying our whole body, soul, and spirit (1 Thes. 5:23). Along the way there will be falls and blunders. But don't interpret this as a green light to live like a wretch. And don't dare try to recruit grace as a license for sin. According to the Apostle Paul, grace teaches us to

deny unrighteousness (Titus 2:12). Instead, take steps to rule over God-dishonoring behaviors that you have secretly indulged in. Renew your diet of the Word of God and meditate on the glories of Christ there. Cut down on the risqué movies that seem to stir your flesh and fill your thought life. If need be, get an accountability partner, confess your sin to a trusted companion, report your progress with complete transparency. Be reasonably in charge of yourself before you try to take the souls of others into your hands.

Many a ministry has lost its spiritual power just because a hidden element of corruption was allowed to remain and proliferate. Some, thank God, have increased in power and blessing because the leader was thorough with his personal housecleaning. It's not that these Christians have eliminated temptation and failure from their lives, but they keep finding grace to deal with the problems afresh.

Strive to offer leadership as free of moral and spiritual pollutants as possible. Ministry out of a clean source is powerful. Give the people of God a drink of pure water as you lead. The Kingdom standard for true authority and leadership is poignantly shown in Revelation 22:1 where John says, "He showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal proceeding from the throne of God and the Lamb."

The struggle for effective leadership doesn't just happen as your sphere of influence is growing. No, this war is fought when no one else is around, when your following numbers a grand total of one.

3

BE THE MAN

This one is to the men. Lead your family. Be a rock. Be strong, but not like Samson, the weakest strong man who ever lived. He killed a thousand enemy soldiers with the jawbone of an ass, but couldn't overcome his girlfriend, whose constant whining melted away his commitment to God. And don't be like the first man, Adam, either. He was so weak it didn't take the devil's extensive resources to make him fall—just a beautiful naked wife. That day in the garden there weren't any arguments about disobeying God, no debates or fireworks. He just took the fruit and ate it like a kid in a high chair.

We've seen these scenarios replayed many times about the guy who rules on the basketball court or at the video game console, but not at home. He has heard that to rise up and lead his family is chauvinistic and unloving. So he doesn't. Well, learn to love your wife and family, but at the same time don't let that love lead you around like some kind of spiritless dunce.

It is not just married men who fall victim to the "aw-shucks-I'll just-do-whatever-she-wants" syndrome. Single guys act like boy-toys, too. If pretty girlfriend wants to go to church, he dutifully does the same. If she wants to go someplace else, or even stop serving Jesus, and start drinking and having sex, boy-toy goes along with all of it. Let me encourage you to have a little male dignity. You say you want to lead: then stand for Christ and the church in the matrix of romantic relationships.

Here are some things to add to your home front phraseology:

“This is Sunday morning; we’re *not* sleeping in.”

“Let’s get more involved in this faith community rather than just attending and watching.”

“Honey, I know you want to get ahead on some bills, but at least ten percent ought to be tithed. I’ll be adding it into the budget.”

“Dear, feel free to hold me accountable if I start acting out in non-Christian ways” (swearing, too much beer or television or video games, or general neglect of the family).

“Let’s have family devotionals” (prayer, Bible reading or fellowship).

If you’re single, just change the above to a morally appropriate first person application—“*I’m* not sleeping in,” etc.

A Christian husband loves deeply without turning into a jellyfish. Yes, sometimes he needs to shut up, listen quietly and weigh what his wife says, without childish reactions. But he always ends up saying like Joshua, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:16). In this area, the man of the house doesn’t ask for opinions or a group vote.

Much ink has been spilled over the controversy of young men who choose to immerse themselves in recreation, toys, games, and other trivial pursuits at the expense of adult responsibilities. The phenomenon called “delayed adolescence” has women everywhere wondering where it all stops. When will he get a car or a job? When will he commit to a career field and stop going back to school? When will he move out of his parent’s basement? They’re concerned for good reasons. Delayed adolescence results in relationships that never turn into marriage or marriages that never mature. Needless to say, this

trend doesn't invite very much respect for the male gender. What intelligent woman would want to follow a man who lives like a foolish little boy?

This point of emphasis doesn't mean to rush out and start acting like a jerk, barking orders and showing off testosterone. The husband of Ephesians chapter 5 is not some self-indulgent "boss" of his wife. The model presented there is self-sacrificial in nature. He loves his wife, "like Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for Her." Just remember that it doesn't say, "Christ loved the church and did whatever she wanted." His love serves and bears all burdens, but does not collapse into a pile of indulgent sentimentalities. His love is expressed in the power of commitment and an attitude of generosity.

A man's moral authority flows out of this Christ-like character; it is not merely a benefit related to his physical gender. Think of that the next time you might be tempted to quote Ephesians 5 to an uncooperative wife. Expect that no one will be inspired to follow a man who behaves in self-centered, thoughtless ways. So, seek to inspire people at home, first. Love your wife and children into following you.

4

LOVE YOUR MEETINGS AND BE PUNCTUAL

This one is so obvious, that it ought to go without saying. But I'll say it anyway. *Go to church.* There's 52 weeks in the year. Go to church on most of them. Establish yourself as the person who's always around. Yes, there's room for sickness, travel, and miscellaneous things. But enough of the sudden inspirations for road trips, sleeping in after all night video marathons, and claiming headaches, busyness, etc. Leave all those excuses to those who *won't* be leading the church.

It's simple, really. People only follow those they can see. They don't follow ghosts. If you're not there most of the time, no one will follow you. And please, don't bother with trying to justify an absentee lifestyle. Really. If the church is important, you'll be there.

I'm aware that many people must travel for work and have schedules that demand being out of town. If you fall into that category, I encourage you to try and change it. Kudos to you for your hard work ethic, but if you want to be an effective leader in the church, something eventually has to give. If you keep being gone, even the children in the Kids Church will know more of what's going on Sunday morning than you will.

I'm going to lay another heavy on you. *Be on time.* The guy always coming in 15 minutes late says to himself that at least he was there. He's right, at least he was and we're happy about it. But that attitude

stinks for a leader. Chronic lateness is just another way of making the statement that “I am not disciplined.” It tells other people that you have problems making yourself stop certain things and start others.

If a meeting is at 7:30 and I live ten minutes away, I shouldn't be leaving the house at 7:30. I should be shutting down previous activities and then leaving the house at 7:20. Actually if you're a leader, in many congregations showing up to church right on time means that you're already late! More than likely you've been needed for the last 30 minutes, back when you were at home, checking Facebook or sitting in line at the Starbucks drive-through.

Five to ten minutes late is not the end of the world, as long as it happens due to circumstances beyond your control. But if you habitually stroll in at the last minute or beyond, it eventually sends the signal that the matter at hand isn't really important. That's a great way to shoot holes in morale. The people you lead may end up concluding that they are more committed than you are. No one wants to follow a leader who acts as though a cause might not be worthwhile. Don't assume that chronic lateness will go unnoticed. It will be and it will be criticized. Church leaders have the least amount of leeway when it comes to timeliness. Sorry, but that's the playing field.

Maybe you're chaffing a bit under this point, thinking that stress on punctuality is a bit neurotic. Yet I'm sure you'd make a big deal of being on time if you were trying to catch that vacation flight to Hawaii or the new action flick at the Cineplex. Neither would you dream of clocking in late for work. If you do, don't brag about it too much. You've painted a target on your back that management will inadvertently take

note of and remember during the next big round of lay-offs.

If you want to remedy the lateness issue, then set alarms and mark calendars. Learn to stop what you're doing in order to get on with the next responsibility.

Meetings are important to Christians, especially the Sunday gathering (or whatever assembly time your congregation emphasizes). As long as they are something you skip on a regular basis or just have problems dragging yourself to, consider some radical therapy: suspend your leadership aspirations and give yourself time to grow in love toward your faith community.

Real leaders will naturally be the biggest cheerleaders of the church and its meetings, even if said leaders don't have official titles. The simple joy of being there and not missing anything is a leadership indicator more telling than any ten sandwich signs saying, "Leader."

5

DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO DO WITH YOUR LIFE

Ever notice all that stuff pinned to bulletin boards and printed on the church calendar—the things that church members for the most part either ignore or delete from email inboxes? Somebody not only plans those things, but they attend them. The folks who do it are leaders. Yes, they're pretty tied up with mission stuff. And I have a bit of bad news for you, too. If you're serious about leading the church, your calendar can't be too full of privacy, recreation, and down time.

When Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters” (Matt. 6:24), He meant that the top slot in your life can't equally go to two things. One of them will have to back down. Of course in the example mentioned, the two competing entities are God and mammon (earthly riches). Both of them are just big enough to require a person's entire life.

Real service to God requires passion and commitment. Just check the life of the apostles recorded in the New Testament. No one is moonlighting as something else on the side. It is the same principle with material riches. The pursuit of wealth requires passion and commitment. Check with any Wall Street mogul. Earning money, keeping it, and growing it is a full time job. Letting up for a minute will mean losing your place as lead dog.

If you're trying to manage two major competing passions, it will only be so long before they clash. Priorities related to both will fall on the same day, the same time, the same weekend, or ask for the same amount of money or energy. You will not be able to afford both. This isn't some kind of "bad luck" force that we call Murphy's Law. It is God making sure that both of your interests clash just so you have to make a choice. This is an easy decision for people who are not at the leadership core of the church (or at the core of the Christian life itself). Nine times out of ten, they will choose to put God on the back burner. They figure He'll get over it anyway, since He's full of mercy and grace, etc.

That won't work for you, the aspiring church leader. If you're a sports fanatic, a video game enthusiast, or a fervent outdoorsman, you don't have to stop doing those things, but you will need to understand that life no longer revolves around them. Nor can the church calendar be made to wrap itself around them. New leaders are tempted from time to time to do this very thing. They might suggest odd hours for a service event so they can maneuver around to their hobbies or private interests more quickly. Personal convenience-driven scheduling is no good. Treat it like lice.

As long as your calendar is full of model train expos, Star Trek Conventions, dog shows, fly fishing getaways, or commitments made to the annual pumpkin festival, that will unavoidably mean no-showing the church when you are needed most. Under those circumstances, I strongly suggest that you sit down and have a Come-to-Jesus meeting about what you really want to do with your life. It's decision time. Leadership doesn't mean that you sign up to do whatever you want. It means signing on to

suspend your rights, to be taken advantage of, to be the only person who really cares about the ice cream social, or who notices that the carpet needs vacuuming. It means approaching the new folks who are standing around looking lost in the church foyer when everyone else chooses to chat with their friends.

The Lord really wasn't kidding when He said, "Whoever desires to be great among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20:26). And, as someone else once said, you never really know how much of a servant you are, until you're treated like one. It is when no one gushes thanks and praise for your commitment that your servanthood shines out.

Try as you might, your calendar won't ever be as free as that of uncommitted folks. They can do whatever they want, when they want. Jesus once said to these people, "Your time is always ready" (John 7:6). Of course He was right. Their time is always theirs—whatever they want to do, whenever they want to do it. Yours isn't. But don't worry. Yours is coming. Jesus spoke of the reward of servanthood as something considerable—far beyond all the television shows you missed and trips to the amusement park that got crowded out of your schedule.

"So He said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life" (Luke 18:29-30).

6

NAIL THE REASON WHY YOU "DON'T GET NO RESPECT"

If you're not too decade-impaired, you'll remember Rodney Dangerfield's famous complaint, "I don't get no respect." Thousands of years earlier, in a far more sanctified tome, the Apostle Paul told Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth" (1 Tim. 4:12). That's because people typically do. Even the young tend to despise youth. It's not uncommon for people in a peer group to look at a companion and think, "Who is he, anyway? He's as young as I am." For obvious reasons the elderly also find it easy to despise youth.

Some of this bias might be warranted. No one wants a doctor who lacks experience. No one seeks out a brand new broker to handle their life's savings. It's also reasonable that some people would find it difficult to put their spiritual life into the hands of a person who hasn't lived yet. Youthful leadership can certainly be a plus in terms of energy, connections to the current social pulse, fresh perspectives, and creativity. All are truly coveted items for any ministry desiring to go places. Yet for some people, all of those benefits pale in light of the fact that you can't remember *The Brady Bunch* when it was cutting edge television.

Obviously when physical age is treated as a liability, it is not easy to overcome. For years I preached in a church where a significant number of folks were at

least ten years older than I was. A few were thirty years older. A time or two while standing in front of the congregation, I couldn't help thinking that while I was being born they had already experienced being born *again*. Although these older veterans were quite gracious and supportive of my leadership and preaching, it still occasionally made for awkward feelings. During that period of my life, I was purposely circumspect about how young I was, fearing that I might undermine others' confidence in my ministry. That meant deciding not to appear excessively immature. You might want to do the same.

Godliness doesn't mean pretension, acting as though you're twenty years older than what you are. It simply refers to carrying yourself in a way that invites respect.

One of those areas has to do with knowing boundaries. For instance, when the joking doesn't stop and seems to approach the edge of the cliff—when it becomes off-color or mean-spirited—can you be the first to bail? Even if it isn't vulgar, humor without brakes easily turns into goofiness. Ecclesiastes says, “Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor” (10:1).

I appreciate good humor that is well timed and smart. But nothing is worse than a leader trying so hard to be funny that you can't tell whether he wants to be a minister or a stand-up comic (and a bad one at that). Silliness doesn't impress anyone unless you happen to be serving kid's church and even then, kids are smarter than you think.

Now to a more sensitive area. Dress. I know it's trendy to wear faded, shredded, grunge clothes (even for pastors), but when the people you are trying to

reach dress better than you, it should make you wonder if your trendy dress is really about being culturally sensitive. Could it be more about a self-centered desire to be hip? Take a look around your church culture. If the people there seem to take better care of their appearance than you, it could be time for changes.

Knock off looking like you slept in your clothes. Iron your shirt. Shave (unless you have a beard, goatee or moustache). But don't be between the two. Either have facial hair or don't, but don't look the guy with the one-day shadow who was simply too lazy to take care of his hygiene. That's a great way to be branded "the kid" or if you're over thirty-five, the "strange dude."

When it comes to issues of respect, you can't ignore one of the most serious coins of the realm—your knowledge base. Youth and lack of knowledge have always been first cousins. Paul advised Timothy to "Rightly divide the Word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The person who knows the Bible gets the ear and respect of his listeners, exactly what young Timothy needed as he ministered in the midst of an older and sometimes cynical populace.

I'm not talking about being a spiritual prodigy here, just adopting some small, reasonable goals. Try to be accurate when you quote verses; don't paraphrase too much. Know what you're talking about and present yourself as a person who has done his homework. There's no way around sheer time spent in the Scriptures. Even if you're not going to be a preacher or a Sunday school teacher, there's authority in being able to say, "Thus saith the Lord."

As you're beginning to learn new things though, beware. The rarest commodity in a young heart is humility. Unbridled pride can make a young minister

do and say foolish things. Youth (with all its inexperience) and knowledge (the kind mainly learned from books) are often a toxic combination. Add to these a small measure of early effectiveness in ministerial work and now you've got a full-blown monster who thinks he ranks right under Jesus and therefore can't listen to anyone.

Per the Apostle Paul, humility and knowledge have a hard time coexisting, which is why he wrote that "Knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). Keep an open heart to listen and learn. Also remember that the Lord Jesus is very good at setting up situations to deflate you if you decide not to listen to this advice.

7

MAKE YOUR WORD MEAN SOMETHING

God said “Let there be light,” and there was light. In probably a thousand similar verses that followed, He spoke, He promised, and then He acted. This divine attribute is called faithfulness. The Apostle Paul said, “It is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2). None of us are God, but I strongly advise that when you say or promise something, then you should do it as well.

My past experience in church settings has not made me a pessimist, although I would definitely say that it has made me something of a realist. I learned that when some folks promised things, I could safely assume that it wouldn’t happen and that I had to immediately concoct an alternate plan, before we even parted company! They had established a reputation for dropping the ball, not as an occasional faux-pas, but as a habit of life.

Sadly, there are Christians who are certain to disappoint, even as they display the most resolute can-do attitudes during planning sessions. Why? Because for positive, supportive people, volunteering is addictive. It represents the spotlight moment when love for the church or excitement or simply the desire to stand in the gap motivates someone to say, “I’ll do it!” Whatever is the case, people who feel these things and quickly respond to them enjoy the sense of volunteering and taking one for the team. But when it comes to the process of accomplishment, which is

largely invisible and thankless, they lose their motivation and poop out.

If volunteering is a grace, then execution—carrying things on to success—is no less so. Following through requires time management and initiative. It requires creativity to overcome problems. It requires endurance to press through failures and keep going. Again, we're not dealing with anything terribly spiritual here. You'd need these skills just to land and keep a decent job.

Those who don't deliver results in this area still deliver something—a repertoire of excuses that sounds like, "I had a migraine/sniffles/a hangnail." "It was a tough week." "I had to go out of town." "Friends came in to town." "Santa Claus is coming to town." Once the planets always line up on you to keep you from honoring your commitments, it won't be long until people conclude that you can't be trusted or followed.

Take note: folks might follow talent or charisma for a while, but over the long haul, they follow *commitment*. Everyone wants to follow someone who believes so strongly in what he's doing that he (or she) backs it up with energy that follows through. You might want to say that to yourself twice a day.

There's been a lot of speculation about whether commitment is a dead concept anymore. Well, trust me when I say that commitment is alive and well, regardless of the generation. We all routinely see commitments made to long distance bike races, exercise regimens, diets, difficult academic programs, business start-ups, and dozens of other hardy, time-consuming, finance-draining endeavors. So, we're not dealing with a lost ability to say "yes" to big plans.

Jesus had a bead on the problem when He said, "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit

down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish” (Luke 14:28-30). Counting the cost means coming to terms with whether something is truly worthwhile and expecting some level of difficulty in getting there.

I know I’m taking a risk by emphasizing forethought here, because that tends to perfectly suit those who drag their feet in the face of needs and analyze things to death before they act. Truly, hesitation and “non-commitmentitis” is a damaging extreme all its own. It has been used as a covering for everything from laziness to avoiding the cross of Jesus. Much has already been said about that problem. However, its cousin, “commitment interruptus,” rarely gets press time. That’s unfortunate.

Too many have the habit of volunteering and then sheepishly folding because at the back of their mind there’s always a fire escape. If they become inconvenienced they can simply back out later with no ill effects. Jesus will not fire them. And aside from a little embarrassment, the church will not overly harass them.

No doubt we should find the most suitable niche for our gifts. The church ought to be a green house of grace, allowing us to find the best fit for our unique talents. In fact, our church allows for limited periods of commitment just so that no one feels stuck in any one place.

On the other hand, if you take it too far by dancing in and out of promises every month, you’ll come across like the person who routinely dates around and

flirts with commitment, but never gets married. Don't go there.

As a leader, when you say, "I do," try to make it count.

8

HAVE A JALAPEÑO FAITH

This chapter will seem to be the antithesis to the last one. I just got finished advocating forethought and sobriety for the sake of fulfilling commitments. Now I'm going to turn the coin over and plug for spiritual passion—something more from the heart than the head.

A Christian leader's deep radical love for Christ always electrifies his leadership qualities. Perhaps more than anything else, this is what makes a leader attractive and inspiring. The Apostle Paul exemplified this when he wrote, "I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is through God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death" (Phil. 3:8-10).

These profound affections motivated Paul to dare all kinds of adventures for Christ. Today, thousands of years after they were recorded, his zeal still influences believers the world over. For most of my formative years as a young minister, I found myself drawn into the whirlpool of the apostle's sentiments, which I still feel are among the finest, clearest, and most passionate feelings for Christ ever recorded. Paul represented everything that I and the rest of my

young ministerial friends aspired to—clarity of thought, depth of sight, hotness of heart, and the willingness to do anything for the Lord’s sake and the sake of the gospel.

The gold standard didn’t die with him. Others have emulated it down through church history. Their stories have been faithfully recounted in their biographies—tales full of devotion and soldierly bearing that provide a reference point for the rest of us.

Even some of their smaller anecdotes are striking: George Whitfield preached 20 different sermons a week. D.L. Moody once made 200 separate pastoral visits in one day. Charles Spurgeon experienced the most effective prayer of his life while suffering terrible bouts of depression and intense pain from gout. George Mueller cared for 10,000 orphans while financially broke. Corrie Ten Boom and her sister started a Bible study while incarcerated in a Nazi death camp. This is the type of leadership they and many others have provided the New Testament church. Now it is your turn.

What can we little potatoes do compared to those giants of the faith? Maybe not much. But neither comparison nor duty is the issue here. Real impact has to do with absorbing the immense value of the Son of God. Then, what emerges is up to God’s call, the present need, and your creativity, talent, and ability.

Here were some of the things I did during the earlier phases of my own leadership development:

- Memorized large portions of the Bible (one of my companions memorized the entire New Testament from Matthew to Revelation).
- Approached over a thousand people at random for the gospel. A few hundred came to Christ.

- Talked to a hundred people until I could specifically find one who would allow me to disciple him. I got the one and did exactly that.
- Conducted a door to door campaign on the fraternity row of several campuses, hunting for venues where I could establish a Bible study. Occasionally it got pretty wild. A time or two it worked.
- Got up at 4 a.m. and other weird hours to help someone else pray before work.
- Studied books of the Bible before training lectures, read them at least ten times, and wrote out a full study outline so that I could compare my findings with those of the instructor. Sometimes I was actually on track.
- Held my own year-long ministry training for those crazy enough to take a sabbatical from school or quit their jobs to join me.

Those were a few of my own contributions to the treasury of young jalapeño church leadership. They generated a serious tractor pull on others, but I did not choreograph them in order to gain a following. They hatched out of my personal zeal for Christ.

For your own good and the eventual good of those who follow you, cultivate a true spiritual dimension with spiritual goals. Read the Bible in a month. Read the New Testament in a week. Go on a thirty-day media fast. Pray all night. Go into a punk rock bar and have a Bible study. Randomly help people, praying to introduce them to the Savior.

Over the top, you say? Extreme? No, staying up all night on a video game and then going to work the next day without sleep is extreme—no, wait—stupid. And please don't give me the bit about not wanting to be a monk. Trust me, you're in no danger. The chief characteristic of many contemporary Christians is no

longer the bold, heroic faith of our forefathers. Men especially have swapped the spice of their spirituality for vanilla extract. That is, they've chosen to apply themselves to trivial challenges—obtaining amusements, toys, and hobbies—things that start to fade as quickly as they are gained.

Be over the top with your passion for Christ. It's something that's going to change you, empower you, uplift you, and make life better for your church, your marriage, your kids, and your eternity. Don't be known as the guy with the most music downloads or the girl with the most Facebook friends. Make headlines because of your full out zeal for Christ.

A friend of mine told me that she heard about a young man in medical school who vowed that however many hours he spent studying he would match it time-wise in service to Christ. She was so impressed with the vow that she got to know him, fell in love with him, and married him. Talk about leadership! The man's devotion to Christ enabled him to lead his future wife to the altar.

Finally, don't just copy the things I (or others) did. And don't purposely try to be radical for radical's sake. You'll just end up looking silly and being tired. Put the first priority on getting the excellent knowledge of Christ Jesus and *then* let the fireworks happen.

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VALUE EFFECTIVENESS OVER BUSYNESS

More than likely if you are reading this book, you aren't afraid of work. After all, leaders tend to be activists. Laziness, however, doesn't just mean avoiding action, it means avoiding *effective* action. It is the reluctance to learn new things that would solve problems and actually save work time in the future. The dislike for this kind of energy is formidable. Sometimes a person will do twice what he needs to do in order to avoid learning something, focusing on a problem, and actually solving it.

It is difficult to explain careful excellence to a person who is satisfied with busy mediocrity. I know because folks tried to explain it to me when I was on the busy-mediocre side of the fence.

As a young minister in training, I'll never forget being assigned the responsibility to design a small devotional brochure. It was a simple weekly project, but without the aid of modern word processing software and inkjet printers, the effort came down to White Out, scissors, scotch tape, glue sticks, and a fussy old copier. It was easy to mess up. I habitually cut it crooked and accidentally duplicated blocks of text. When people spoke up, I "fixed" the problem by mentally dismissing them as whiners. Although I had spent serious time to prepare it, I was coming across as sloppy and lazy just because I spent zero time learning to minimize error. I kept throwing myself into doing a lot without doing much of it right. Eventually, I had to learn to pay much closer attention

to proofing and ruler marks, but the real challenge came when I decided to do away with the craft supply approach altogether and learn computer graphic art design. That expenditure of energy eliminated the mistakes of copy toner streaks and blobs of white out. It also elevated my product into the realm of professional color art. It made all the difference between being busy and being effective.

Another type of energy that the lazy man doesn't want to expend is the proactive kind related to preparing and planning. Forethought is essential to many enterprises, including the spiritual variety. As the saying goes, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

Yet again, some leaders find it unbearable to invest precious time in the planning stage and if they do, the effort is slapdash and incomplete. As a result, they always seem to find themselves rushing around in a last minute frenzied state, trying to tie up unanticipated loose ends. Even worse, those following them may be left cleaning up the mess.

It isn't hard to see how the quality of a ministry will suffer under those circumstances. People will get fed up with crisis situations every week that arise from poor management and will begin bailing out. Still, during that painful process, leaders would never think of themselves as "lazy," since they're literally having chest pains trying to execute their own poorly planned activities. Ironically though, laziness in planning is exactly what got them there.

Don't fall into the naive trap of thinking that planning is unspiritual. The Apostle Paul's short-term and long-term plans were often revealed in the book of Acts and other places. Truly he was a man led by the Spirit. However, he let his spiritual leading interface with his brain. Paul had an excellent grasp of strategy, structure, and application which he

constantly utilized in his ministry. Of course this is a lot different from being a control freak, where an anxious obsession to schedule the future often ends in frustration. Good planning still leaves room for unanticipated moves of God. It does not, though, idly leave everything up to Him.

Responsive energy is still another area where lazy folks don't like to go. How do you respond to problems? If you're like most people, you'll be tempted to banish annoyances from sight by burying them somewhere. It's a fact that situations emerge, getting in your face and demanding unscheduled time and attention. No one feels happy about them. Most of these difficulties come from people and nothing rivals people-problems for their ability to inflict headaches. Compared to a fresh people crisis, things like coffee stains on the carpet are a cinch.

Hitting the flip side, even positive things related to people are demanding. If you have developed a bad habit of disregarding attempts to contact you, then you're going to run into major difficulties. Ignoring phone calls or emails and then pretending you never got them is nearly unforgivable when you're a key person or point-of-contact in an activity. Multiply by ten when the folks trying to reach you have volunteered their time and energy to carry out *your* agenda!

I realize that social-fatigue can strike even the most extroverted leader. Our world has become over-connected. Social media tells us on an hourly basis that someone has found a cool recipe for monkey bread or that they're chillin' after finals. It's enough to make us long for the days of black rotary dial telephones. In some larger settings, if a leader isn't careful, his or her cell phone, email, or Facebook can become a source of endless interruptions, many of

them inane. There's nothing wrong with taking a break. The Lord Himself sought to remove the disciples to a place apart from the crowds, where they could get some rest from crowd interactions. But dodging the flock as a lifestyle probably means you still haven't come to terms with the essence of leading a group of people.

The bottom line is that your people must be able to communicate with you. If you take days to respond to friends who desperately need feedback, you won't be earning any points with them. Oh, and they're likely to repay the favor later on, when you're the one begging for a response. If you've offended, then acknowledge it, apologize, and move on.

10

GET ALONG WITH YOUR PEOPLE FAMOUSLY

A bull in a china shop might be the overused metaphor of the century, but I can't think of any better image than when it describes leaders in the church. A one ton animal surrounded with precious cups and plates, can't seem to do anything without breaking something. There's no need for the bull to deliberately go charging around the shop; all it takes is a swish of the tail and things start falling and shattering.

In a similar way, leaders can effortlessly trample personal esteem with undue criticism, hurt feelings with inappropriate jesting, damage hope with blind judgments, and irretrievably alienate with temper tantrums. These things are straight out of the "Avoid at all Costs" manual.

Granted, mistakes are going to be made, but this shouldn't mean we can afford to let our guard down. As a leader, things you say or do when angry can be ten times as deadly as when the typical person says them (Just ask Moses about his little temper tantrum in Numbers 20:10-12, when God barred him from entering the Good Land).

One tirade airing out some inappropriate sentiments will disillusion an entire group of people. It could very well put question marks on your leadership or worst of all, it might even put a few on God. If you want to vent, go find a co-leader, or someone beyond you in maturity. If you really want to get radical, get on your knees and let it fly. You

won't stumble God. Yes, we must be honest with those we lead and frequently may have to tell them things they don't want to hear, but we can do it with a great deal of warmth and humility.

Able folks are usually at the helm of activities, but because of their strength of disposition, they easily inflict pain on others. The more gift and natural strength, the more caution they must exercise toward their fellow servants. In our church, one of the markers we always consider in prospective volunteers is whether he or she can get along with others. A service team needs more on its menu than talents; it thrives on the peaceful dynamic of its own members. If this is a standard for members, how much more for leaders?

The Lord Himself spoke about the critical necessity of good feelings among believers. He said that if you were worshipping God and remembered that your brother had something against you, to "...go your way. First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:24).

In this statement the serious nature of relationship maintenance comes strikingly to the fore—that while in personal worship, if you become aware of having sinned against someone, you should discontinue and go reconcile with the offended party! And note that the standard here is not a bland apology, but reconciliation, an act that brings two alienated parties back together again. This is fellowship 101 in the Body of Christ. You have to learn it, otherwise, you will end up destroying everything you build.

I have witnessed some pitiful scenarios where seasoned leaders decided to emulate Jesus as drill sergeant. They picked up a tough love approach, adopting humiliation and insults in order to train younger volunteers. Under those circumstances the

outcome is always the same: the protégées get whatever help they can from that leader and then one-by-one they desert him. In the end his abusive style smashes every piece of china in the shop.

However, leaders can be just as thin-skinned and fragile as followers. Bothered by the people that they lead, they take so many things personal that at any given moment they're mad at someone.

Wherever diverse personalities gather together, the ability to forgive will always be a priority. And it's not easy. Forgiveness is a *grace*, which means you often have to go deep in order to release another person from an offense. As the Bible says, "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Some grace has to be searched for and found. It may feel as though we need to jackhammer down through a layer of concrete to access it. Finding grace involves prayer and processing things in the Word for a fresh spiritual supply. We will need plenty of it in order to get over squabbles and personality differences, especially in situations where "talking it over" will not help anything and may stir up even more offense. This must be learned. There aren't any alternatives to forgiveness unless you count resigning your leadership or quitting the church for greener pastures.

Of course you could always just pretend everything is okay. I wouldn't recommend it, though. The leader who neither finds grace, leaves the team, nor seeks interpersonal resolution will internalize a lot of anger. His or her team is fated to turn into a drama zone as pent-up frustrations regularly erupt. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you turn a blind eye to faults and problems. We must continue to coach and exhort our

people. But remember that snippy remarks and temper tantrums are the stuff of the foolish. Leaders have to deal with their anger and spirit of unforgiveness before ever handling other people. I follow my own advice. Depending on how hot I have gotten, I purposely wait for a few days after being offended before talking to the offending teammate. That way I can make certain that through prayer and reflection my ill feelings toward that person has been largely flushed out. Then the matter at hand can be faced without negative spices added.

It doesn't help if a leader has a super-sized ego, either. Prepare yourself for reality. Unless you set yourself up as a mini-pope, no one is going to roll a red carpet out for you or thank you for everything you do. In fact, you may find yourself having to do that for others.

We've witnessed our fair share of peacocks—would-be leaders who think they're all that and a bag of chips. Typically these folks don't last long because so much humility is required to occupy leadership roles. It's only a matter of time before, bristling with self-appreciation, they run into a situation where they are denied the awe they think they deserve. Then, it's over and they leave. Typically they reappear in charge of something at another church where the pastor unfortunately doesn't yet know them or their appetite for elevation.

Since pride is the hardest thing to self-detect, let me offer a simple yardstick. Take a mental assessment of the people you're with. Ask yourself how badly you need them. Check whether there's any appreciation in you for them. This includes the ones whose personalities are different from your own. If you look around and feel no worth attached to the gifts of others, and they fairly wither in your mighty

eclipse, then you've probably got a pride bug. Paul said in Romans 12:3, "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." It's great to appreciate your own gift. There's nothing wrong with a good dose of graceful self-esteem, but always remember that you're unique, *just like everybody else*.

11

WHEN AM I NOT IN THE WRONG?

Our parting thought has to do with what happens when catastrophe strikes. Despite all of our best efforts, people get mad. They leave churches and then blame others (usually leaders) as being the cause. It happens. Of course that doesn't make it any easier for us. Many a tender hearted servant of the Lord has lost sleep over people who swear that the leadership wronged them. If you're the leader, you get a sick feeling in the pit of your stomach every time you think of that last ugly remark they made in your direction. Unfortunately, that is exactly what they want you to feel.

According to Jesus, stumbling blocks will come (Mt. 18:7). You will be blamed for some of these regardless of how Christ-like you aspire to be. Situations arise that folks cannot get over. We just need to make sure that as much as depends on us, we weren't the cause. And therein lies the rub. It is frequently a leader who must get into the middle of a drama, speak truth, and show firmness.

Even with all the tact and mercy in the world, we will be perceived as merciless and judgmental. While keeping a firm grasp upon love, we will be characterized as being exactly the opposite—hateful. As we pursue a course of careful neutrality, we will still be accused of taking sides. And though we'll pray and stick to scripture, we'll be seen as grossly in error. If it hasn't already happened, it will. Someone somewhere will see you as a blight upon his life.

Fortunately, just because allegations are made doesn't mean they're true. Those whom we lead aren't perfect beings with flawless discernment. Typical believers often decide to adopt mistaken notions and pursue foolish courses of action. One pastor said it well—"They fall out of the stupid tree and hit every branch on the way down." Anyone who gets in their way with exhortations, friendly chats, or even tears, is the bad guy.

I wish that every Christian across the globe would take the Apostle Paul's words to heart when he said, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable to you" (Heb. 13:17). I would like to recommend that verse, but those who really need to read it would probably just dismiss it as another attempt to control them.

It is amazing how quickly some of these problem folks become spiritual. When confronted concerning their bad behavior they quickly resort to platitudes like, "I listen to God, not man." Baloney. If they listened to God, they'd quit the ungodly lifestyle that they've been living. Those who cry legalism when accountability comes calling often have lives that are a miserable mess. They have a hard time listening at home or at work to anyone (since they only listen to God), so, marital situations, kids, and employment are constantly unraveling. It has never dawned on them that God might speak through other people. The only time they seem to listen is when someone is telling them to do what they want to do anyway.

Not all of these situations are necessarily confrontational. There are plenty of people who hide, skipping church and dodging any counsel that might contradict how they're living. What can we do about

all these situations? Should the church become a place of endless confrontation and tension as we try to "fix" people? No. One of the most basic lessons you need to remember is that Jesus is the Christ, *not you*. He has been anointed by God to solve all problems, transform God's chosen, wrap up the age, and bring the kingdom of God to the earth. All of these things are far above your pay-grade. Sometimes leaders forget this and develop a Messianic complex. They accept the responsibility for things they can't possibly change. When they fail, they accept the blame as well, creating the perfect on-ramp into depression. It certainly is a nice wish to make everyone happy or perfect (or both), but seriously trying it is grounds for a nervous breakdown. Do yourself a favor: plant and water, but leave the miracle of growth to God (1 Cor. 3:6).

Nothing demonstrates our recognition and acceptance of mortal limitations better than getting down on our knees and taking cases to God. Prayer doesn't sound like much of a solution when someone you serve starts going into a nosedive. In fact, prayer seems to be a tired cliché for those who don't know what else to do.

If you feel that way, it may just be that you haven't enjoyed enough of flying "upon the wings of the wind" (Psa. 18:10), that is, coasting on the power of God's strength. You should seek those experiences. Every leader needs to put feeble hands to the plow and feel a power bigger than the universe backing them.

Yes, I know that you've prayed a number of times for people who still ended up making dumb decisions, damaging their spiritual lives and hurting their families. Up until this moment you've probably prayed for some who remain stubbornly entrenched

in self-centeredness. Perhaps you've run out of things to say for them except, "How long, O Lord?"

I can relate. As one who frequently wants to give up and launder certain names off my prayer list, I have discovered one of the very greatest mysteries in Christian life and service: unanswered prayer. Think of it this way: Jesus said if two of us agree on earth concerning anything that we ask, it will be done for us (Mt. 18:19). Furthermore, if we abide in Christ we can ask what we desire and it shall be done for us (John 15:7). Where these promises are present, it is amazing—indeed, utterly incredible—when prayer does not get the response we wanted!

In the face of such disappointment we can conclude that either the Lord's Word is empty or something bigger is going on. I think the safer position lies in the latter. Behind unanswered prayer lies a reservoir of hidden purpose. Sometimes it has to do with the leader learning lessons as God deals with his pride or self-confidence, or bad temper. At other times it is for the good of the people being prayed for, as the Lord takes time to bring them through deep waters of discipline. One way or the other, it is divine wisdom.

All of this makes for a lot of impatient fidgeting while in the waiting room, but you might just want to grab a magazine. You are a leader, not a god. Though we answer for the souls of those with us, God owns the flock. He knows when those same souls rejected our counsel, hardened their hearts, and went their own self-bound way. In the meantime, we do our best for everyone. We bear the cross of Christ. We pray. We hope.