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Arguably, no time in church history has more closely approximated the first-century beginning of the church than now. Our ancient brethren faced a pagan pre-Christian culture. Similarly, the contemporary church encounters a pagan, post-Christian, and postmodern world. The essential biblical model of ministry of the first century has never been more appropriate than it is today.¹

RICHARD MAYHEW

Christians in China are praying for our Christian brothers and sisters in America. We believe we are handling our persecution better than you are handling your prosperity.²

A CHRISTIAN LEADER IN CHINA

Current Drift— Future Sift

For every Gospel action, there is an opposite and devious demonic reaction. We see this in the book of Acts. It appears in church history. We experience it in our personal journeys.

The Gospel revolution began when the Spirit empowered the resurrection witnesses on the day of Pentecost. Thousands were converted, baptized, and enfolded in a matter of hours. In the following days, thousands more would convert. In Acts 6:7 multiplying masses became a part of the believing assembly of Christ followers.

But Satan did not roll over. He reloaded. In Acts 4, he attacked via persecution. Peter and John were seized, threatened, and told to cease their Gospel preaching endeavors (Acts 4:1–22). In chapter 5, the enemy attacked through corruption, motivating Ananias and Sapphira to lie about their giving (Acts 5:1–11). Later in chapter 5, another wave of persecution struck. This time the apostles were arrested, threatened, and beaten (Acts 5:17–40). Then, in Acts 6, a more subtle snare emerged as the enemy sought to promote division and distraction. Disunion between the Greek and Hebrew-speaking believers arose over the neglect of the Greek widows. The apostles were required to address the administrative breakdown that could lead to breakup (Acts 6:1).

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So the Acts 6 spiritual resurgence arose in the midst of relentless spiritual counterattack. As I've noted, this occurred in a religiously hostile environment. Persecution by the Jewish authorities was dogging the apostles at every turn. Prohibitions against preaching the Gospel were enforced. The Jewish leaders had jailed the apostles and would soon launch a movement of martyrdom, starting in chapter 7 with Stephen's death by stoning.

Politically, the government in power when the early church began following Christ's ascension was anything but conservative. It certainly was not faith-friendly. We know that the Roman Empire was ruled by blood-thirsty leaders who were womanizers and commonly married multiple times. Past and present Roman emperors were worshiped as gods, some having their own temples erected in their honor. They touted a society of religious tolerance but would soon lower the hammer on Christians who worshiped only one God and Savior. Quickly Christians became despised and labeled as obstructionists to the prevailing religion and irreligion of the day. In this environment, Christians were branded as antisocial for not participating in the pagan norms of their communities. They were dubbed as contrary to the spiritual atmosphere of the day because they refused to worship the Roman gods.

In time, the Christ followers were classified as dangerous because the prevailing belief was that the "gods" were upset with those who refused to worship pagan style. It was believed that their Christian views were bringing a divine judgment upon the empire.

MORE PRESSURE—MORE POWER

By the end of the second century, the Christian apologist Tertullian complained about this widespread perception. "They think the Christians the cause of every public disaster, of every affliction with which the people are visited. If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls,

if the Nile does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lions!’”³

Nero, who ruled in the second half of the first century, distinguished himself by dipping the martyred bodies of Christians in oil and using them as torches to light his royal courtyards. We’ve all heard the accounts of his burning Rome, then blaming the Christians to justify blatant persecution that even featured believers in the Coliseum, eaten alive by wild animals before a frenzied crowd.

I believe we could conclude that the revival of Acts 6 was the impetus to the increased persecution. The incredible power of the Gospel became a threat to Judaism of the day and to the larger Roman society. At the same time, this revival served as preparation for the coming oppression, providing supernatural grace, transcendent resolve, and staunch boldness that would turn the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

Without question, we too are in need of a momentous Acts 6 movement of prayer and proclamation of the Word. I also cannot help but wonder if this will be the ultimate preparation for a coming sifting of the church. In all likelihood, a revival will advance the supernatural spread of the Gospel but will also fast-track the inevitable showdown between an intolerant culture and the truth of Jesus Christ.

PRESENT DRIFT

Let’s be honest. The spiritual awakening in Acts 6 seems a distant cry from the modern-day environment of church as we know it. And church as we know it is not working.

Ministry as “usual” has become a slow dribble toward our cultural margins. But because we don’t like “usual” we’ve created other labels. Ministry as “innovative” is capturing some attention

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but ultimately is not advancing the Gospel in a disinterested society. Ministry as “clever” lights up Twitter, but it is eclipsing the glory of Christ. As I often heard Jim Cymbala say, “It is hard for me to be clever and make Jesus beautiful at the same time.”

Ministry defined by the latest “formulas” leaves us baffled. We soon discover that wearing someone else’s ministry clothes never seems to be a fit. Ministry as “attractational” is gathering larger, less disciplined and less missional crowds. Ministry as a showcase for “leadership” is creating some rock stars but not anchoring our souls in the Rock of Ages. Ministry as “denominational” is wavering as we put more energy into religious bureaucracy and research but with few supernatural results.

By New Testament measurements, we are anemic and shallow. We certainly are distracted. Could it be that we are powerless at the very moment when our society needs to experience the reality of faith that rests on the power of God and not the wisdom of men (1 Cor. 2:5)?



In Their Own Words

Watch senior pastor Alistair Begg (Parkside Church, Solon, OH) describe “The State of Pastoral Ministry” at <http://www.64fellowship.com/oldpaths/01>

In his thought-provoking book, *The Great Evangelical Recession*, John S. Dickerson unpacks a much-needed wake-up call for the American church. Not only does he validate the coming reality of decreased giving and increased cultural hostility to the church, but he gives an accurate assessment of the actual number of evangelicals in the United States today. Based on four different studies, each with unique and verifiable research approaches, Dickerson reports that the number of evangelical Christians is actually between 7 and 9 percent of the US population. This comes as a shock to those of us who believed that the numbers were closer to 40

percent or more.⁴ Meanwhile a recent study by the Barna Group finds “the percentage of Americans who qualify as “postChristian” rose by 7 percentage points, from 37 percent in 2013 to 44 percent in 2015. Across the United States, cities in every state are becoming more “postChristian.” They summarize, “An increasing number of religiously unaffiliated, a steady drop in church attendance, the recent Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage, and the growing tension over religious freedoms all point to a larger secularizing trend sweeping across the nation.”⁵

The Southern Baptists, the largest evangelical denomination, unveiled troubling news in a recent annual report. Despite adding more churches to the SBC roster, the total number of churches lost more than 200,000 members, the biggest one-year decline since 1881. Membership fell by 1.5 percent, while weekly worship attendance dipped 2.75 percent in the same year. Baptisms fell eight of the last ten years, with last year being the lowest total since 1947.⁶ More recently the SBC International Mission Board president David Platt announced that the agency needs to cut at least six hundred missionaries and staff to balance its budget. Those cuts are needed to make up for a \$21 million deficit for 2015.⁷

Thom S. Rainer, president of LifeWay, the Southern Baptist’s publishing arm, responded, “It breaks my heart that the trend of our denomination is mostly one of decline. Programs and meetings are not going to revive our people—only prayer and repentance will lead our people to revival.”⁸

THE FUTURE VIEW

And it is not looking hopeful as we think of what will happen in coming generations. For the most part, the Millennial generation has closed the door on church involvement. Among those who grew up in church, nearly six in ten have dropped out at some point.

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Three in ten Millennials say church is not at all important, while an additional four in ten are ambivalent, saying church is either somewhat important or somewhat not important.⁹ And it is likely to get worse with the next wave of children being raised by a spiritually disinterested generation. Apart from a different approach to ministry and something truly supernatural, we are in trouble.

Hockey great Wayne Gretzky said, “I always skate to where the puck is going rather than to where it’s been.” As the church, we need to embrace this. It’s not that the puck of the American church is moving ahead like a well-executed sudden-death shootout between the Pittsburgh Penguins and Anaheim Ducks. Rather, the culture is waiting down the road for our arrival, like a disbelieving acquaintance who is unsure of our trustworthiness. But our real need is not to be “relevant” through new self-styled efforts to morph into a more palatable version of faith. Our need is to be revived in the New Testament essence of church leadership that will answer a hostile and wary culture with a display of all that makes Christianity unique and triumphant—the power of the Gospel, lived and proclaimed in supernatural power.

This book is not a call for some new growth strategy to correct the heartrending decline. Rather it is a hopeful call to a renaissance. A reawakening. A resolve to make “the next new thing” the “first old thing.” We must discover a new understanding of power in the old paths of New Testament ministry and anticipate a powerful intersection of this reality with a befuddled society.

FUTURE SIFT—NEEDFUL SHIFT

In our present moment we are clearly accelerating in the transition to a postChristian culture. Some would say we are already there—living in a culture hostile to people of faith. The present moment has even been dubbed as a society of “Christophobia.”¹⁰

The sifting has begun and the shifting of our paradigms is approaching. With two thousand years of church history behind us, we have a reliable trail of evidence on the rise and fall of Christianity. We know that persecution is a paramount reality in today's world. Open Doors, an excellent ministry that exists to serve persecuted Christians around the world, warns that each month 322 Christians are killed for their faith, 215 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence are committed against Christians (such as beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests, and forced marriages).¹¹

To think that America is immune is naive and the precursor to a dangerous apathy. As pastor and author John MacArthur has noted, "Religious liberty isn't promised to Christians. . . . Persecution is."¹² My friend Brett O'Donnell, who works for a variety of national and state political candidates, has his finger on the pulse of the culture as well as anyone I know. During a conversation at a recent dinner, he said, "Daniel, your grandchildren will be the first generation to grow up in a society where being a Christian and being an American citizen is no longer compatible."

To "sift" means "to separate by or as if by a sieve; to examine or question closely; to isolate that which is most important or useful."¹³ I believe a sifting is coming. This is a reality that will separate true Gospel ministry from empty, socially acceptable

*A sifting is coming
that will separate true
Gospel ministry from
socially acceptable
Christian religion.*

Christian religion. A result could very well be the shedding of all things superficial and peripheral. This may well mark the return to very basic, Spirit-dependent, prayer-energized, and Gospel-propelled ministry, irrespective of programs, budgets, and facilities.

The suspicion and hostility within the present culture is growing like a suffocating kudzu vine engulfing a grove of Georgia

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trees. As I write, the nation is watching Christians being fined and even jailed for not complying with the mainstream establishment of gay marriage. Believers holding a biblical view of marriage are being labeled as “homophobic” by the highest political leaders in the land. The entertainment industry is celebrating all forms of immorality and debauchery in award-winning movies and songs. People who do not embrace this new day are now postured as the misfits and antebellum weirdos.

Already, Christian schools are being threatened to comply with the normalization of unbiblical lifestyles in the official documents of the institution or risk losing accreditation and government-sponsored loans for their students.¹⁴ Many leaders are convinced that the day is approaching quickly when tax-deductible giving to Gospel-rooted churches and Christian organizations will be taken away. When the government decides to tax churches for their land and buildings, the large facility-dependent, program-driven megaministries will likely falter.



In Their Own Words

Watch H. B. London (“America’s Pastor to Pastors”) describe the unique challenges of “Pastoring in the 21st Century” at <http://www.64fellowship.com/resources/oldpaths/02/>

A HOPEFUL PREPARATION

The best preparation for the future sifting is a return to the realities that gave early church leaders a transcendent faith and extraordinary impact. I have personally witnessed this kind of devotion on multiple occasions within the house churches of China where the greatest current-day revival and advancement of Christianity have occurred under the oppression of a communist government. With no facilities, no social media, no large programs, Christianity has

flourished. Ministry in China is led by humble Christian leaders and the people are doing one-another ministry reminiscent of the New Testament. Old paths. New power.

Back here at home, with all the training, technology, wealth, talent, and unprecedented opportunities we now have at our disposal, we are losing ground. So the sifting has begun. In all likelihood, it will become more focused and intense.

Fortunately, the old paths of leadership seen in the book of Acts are still able to provide new power to face the challenges of ministry in a postChristian culture—even in North America.

It is time to experience a truly transforming ministry approach. As Os Guinness has written:

Let there be no wavering in our answer. Such is the truth and power of the Gospel that the church can be revived, reformed and restored to be a renewing power in the world again. There is no question that the good news of Jesus has effected powerful personal and cultural change in the past. There is no question too that it is still doing so in many parts of the world today. By God's grace it will do so again even here in the heart of the advanced modern world where the Christian church is presently in sorry disarray.¹⁵

Our real problem is not a pervading darkness but a failing light. Light always dispels darkness.

Our real problem is not the pervasiveness of the darkness but a failure of the light. Light always dispels darkness. The glorious light of the resurrection life of Jesus Christ is still sufficient and available to those who reject self-reliance and return to His plan for biblical leadership. This return can reignite the radiance of the Gospel in transforming power.

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In America our big challenge is that in many cases we do not recognize our need to be awakened. We may be like the church of Sardis in Revelation 3:1–6—living in the false reality of a former glory, still believing we are full of life, effective, and fruitful—when we are really comatose. Could it be that our reputation has far exceeded our spiritual reality? Recall Christ’s words of warning to His followers in Sardis:

“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.” (Rev. 3:1–3)

You may be in the leadership of a church that is in clear need of a reawakening to the sufficiency of the Spirit and authority of Christ. All the indicators are pointing downward and the need is obvious. On the other hand, you may be in a ministry that seems to be hitting on all cylinders. Attendance is strong, programs are flourishing, and the momentum is upward. Yet the question must still be asked about whether our works “are complete in the sight of God.” We must honestly assess the level of life transformation, extraordinary prayer, Spirit-empowered preaching, authentic evangelistic living, and fruitful discipling. Like the believers at Sardis, we need the grace to wake up, strengthen what remains, remember all that we have heard and received, and embrace these things in a vital awakening.

Let us affirm with all our energies that we need a personal, congregational, and national revival; one that might spark a sifting, leading to a full Great Awakening. Or, perhaps we need a sifting, prompting a revival, leading to a Great Awakening. In either case,

we need a fresh and powerful work of the Holy Spirit. Short of revival we are simply running laps on the Titanic. As we enjoy the titillation of our self-contained evangelical culture, the ship is headed for disaster.

Here's the good news: Christ offers a new experience of His power to face these challenges to all who will return to the old paths of the New Testament pattern. As G. K. Chesterton has observed about church history, "At least five times the Faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died."¹⁶ Let us believe that the "dog" of our current drift will die in the fire and heat of the new power Christ offers the church.

Lord of the years, sovereign over time and history, speak to us in power by your word and Spirit, and so break into the shortsightedness and error of our understanding. Help us to distinguish the true from the false, the enduring from the passing, and the costly from the cheap. . . . Give to us such a clear understanding of the times in which we live that we may serve your purposes in our generation and be more truly your people in our world today . . . In the name of Jesus, Amen.¹

OS GUINNESS

Jesus has not called us to figure it out but to follow Him.

ANONYMOUS

An Urgent “Leadership” Renovation

Celebrate Recovery is a program that has franchised its way into thousands of churches across the evangelical landscape, providing a practical path of freedom for those captured by addictions of various shades. I’ve never attended a CR meeting, but if one existed just for pastors I would have gone, and I know what it would have been titled: “Leadershipaholics Anonymous.”

You see, for many years I was a fanatical leadershipaholic. Enamored by the influence, insight, and ingenuity of high-profile impact players, I devoured books on leadership like a contestant in Nathan’s International Hot Dog Eating Contest on a warm July day in New York City. Like the obtrusive bill on a pelican, the section on leadership in my personal library was pronounced and filled with the latest and greatest catch of the moment, lying just below the surface of my quest for maximum personal potential. I waited with palpable eagerness for the next leadership conference so I could hear the sage insights of church, business, and even political leaders as they gave me the next golden ticket for pastoral success.

To embrace the old paths of biblical influence we must identify new paths and evaluate their nature. To do so requires an honest

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assessment of our current obsession with a good thing that has become “the” thing—and perhaps kept us from the essential thing.

Some days I wonder if present-day evangelicalism can even function apart from the word *leadership*. The concept has almost become an idol in pastoral ministry. Certainly, the glut of books, conferences, seminars, blogs, podcasts, and simulcasts about leadership far outweighs gatherings to understand or experience the person and power of the Holy Spirit. We are bored with the old-fashioned notion of Spirit-empowered, Spirit-guided, and Spirit-produced impact. These doctrines seem too familiar, maybe elementary, and rather passé, best valued by the out-of-step, old-school guys. We assume, and functionally dismiss, many truths about the Holy Spirit, but we are definitely skilled at articulating endless discoveries about how to influence, manage, and maximize our strengths. Announce a new leadership convention or an innovative management book and we gather like mosquitos on a summer sunbather on the shore of a Minnesota lake.

The other day I downloaded five leadership podcasts produced by a popular pastor, not because I have an appetite for his ideas, but just to see what is on the menu that sustains so many of my ministry colleagues. Five podcasts later, I knew all about savvy management principles. I repeatedly heard all the reasons why I should try to imitate other shrewd leaders for my important decision-making. I gained some splendid insights about human behavior in staff settings. I even felt that if I wanted to be cutting edge, I needed to download five more presentations. Of course there was some value in these things and we can learn from anyone who imparts fundamentally sound ideas.

Not to be a crank about it, but I did notice that not one mention of Christ, the Holy Spirit, prayer, humility, or any of the salient themes in Jesus’ earthly ministry made the cut. Leadership seems to be the new fascination of pastoral ministry. We are

consuming this stuff like zombies looking for warm flesh on *The Walking Dead*. Like the morbid spooks on the popular end-of-the-world show, we hear a noise that sounds like some leadership grub and we stagger off en masse to find a tasty morsel. But where is it getting us, and is it providing the essential nutrients for transforming a lost world?



In Their Own Words

Watch Pastor Keeney Dickenson (First Baptist Church, Crockett, TX) speak openly about “Prayerless Leadership,” his “bookaholic” mentality, and the role of pastors in revival at <http://www.64fellowship.com/oldpaths/03/>

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP?

It’s been said many times that when a truth becomes “the” truth, it results in untruth. I have concluded we have overreached, overestimated, and oversold the whole leadership theme. Renowned business writers Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus reported in their research that they have discovered more than 850 different definitions of leadership.² It seems we have examined the topic to such an extreme that we do not even know what it is anymore.

Of course, leadership is a useful enabling in the hands of God. It is a gift God bestows for the benefit of the church. A leadership definition I like is offered by Kenneth O. Gangel, “The exercise of one’s spiritual gifts under the call of God to serve a certain group of people in achieving the goals God has given them toward the end of glorifying Christ.”³

A proper definition of leadership is vital. Why? Because a biblical definition of church leadership is fundamental to a work of revival. We must evaluate the real essence of our calling and identify the shiny objects that lure us away from that duty. I am convinced

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that the great impediment to a new experience of spiritual power in the church may not be spectacular sins but subtle self-reliance.

Biblically, “leadership” is mentioned as a spiritual gift (Rom. 12:8) and, interestingly, further toward the bottom of the list. The concept appears in 1 Corinthians 12:28, again toward the end of the sequence. The original meaning in the Greek is to “stand before.” The word was used to describe an individual who steered a ship.

Like all gifts, God sovereignly bestows leadership for humble service to the body of Christ. I don’t want to belittle this significant gift, since I been given that gift for my own ministry as-

We have taken leadership, a supernatural gift, and turned it into a finely honed strategy.

signments, but simply desire to point out that we have blown it way out of biblical proportion. Perhaps of greater concern is that we have taken leadership, a supernatural gift, and turned it into a finely honed strategy. By doing so we have diminished the supernatural char-

acter of leadership and made it just another tool in the drawer of ecclesiastical performance.

Further, it seems our pursuit is contrary to what Jesus actually taught. Here were our Lord’s exact words and the context that prompted His incredible wisdom:

Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, “What do you want?” She said to him, “Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared

by my Father.” And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt. 20:20–28)

This aspiring mother wanted significance for her sons. Jesus responded by elevating sacrifice and selfless abandon. Jesus exposed the world’s view of leadership as an exercise of ambition in pursuit of position. Then He affirmed, “It shall not be so among you.” His way of providing guidance and having influence was to serve as a slave. A slave is one owned by another, having no rights. Those who aspire to exercise a gift of guidance for the church must embrace complete obedience to their owner, Jesus Christ. And He is our example as One who came “not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Our modern pursuit of “leadership” is often interlaced with aspirations for prominence, based on a desire to be someone of significance. Our paradigms are rife with competition, self-promotion, and notoriety. And what is behind it all?

I remember sitting with Henry Blackaby enjoying lunch as we took a break from speaking at a conference in North Carolina. As we interacted about the current state of church ministry, he offered a perspective I will never forget. With erudite wisdom he said, “I am convinced that there are more men in pastoral ministry today motivated by insecurity rather than calling.” That resonated. Maybe it was just me, but in the early years of ministry I learned the thorny lesson that my carefully veiled insecurities, ambitions, and enthrallment with “bigger and better” were not exactly harmonious with God’s Word or God’s glory.

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I wish I could say that in my decades of pastoral ministry, I exercised the gift biblically, meekly, unselfishly. But that was not the goal of my leadershipaholic bent. I never want to go back to that old pursuit again, now that I have discovered something so much better and more compelling.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

You may ask why I am picking on our modern concepts of leadership. Three reasons:

First, pastors have limited time, energy, and attention. We must allocate our treasured personal resources in a manner that is biblical and that can facilitate a genuine, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Chasing after lesser things produces diluted, shallow, even man-centered ministry.

Second, I have concluded that the devil does not care what we replace the centrality and sufficiency of the Holy Spirit with—as long as we replace Him with something. In my view, “leadership” has become the prevalent substitute of choice. And, yes, it “works.” Leadership accomplishes a lot in business and even in the cults. But a productive and subtle self-reliance diminishes the person and power of the Holy Spirit in the work of Christ.

Third, because artificial models produce superficial results. We are imitating one another into spiritual oblivion. Yet, the prototype of New Testament leadership is still sufficient and essential. When we seek to imitate the “success” of other talented superstars, we fall short and the fruit is plastic rather than life-giving.

AN ALTERNATIVE BIBLICAL APPROACH

For many years, I read through the Bible every year, utilizing many versions and plans, for my personal growth. But as my enthrall-

ment with the leadership glitter began to tarnish I determined to discover what the Bible explicitly taught about those to whom God had entrusted significant spiritual influence.

In reading the Scriptures it became evident that the primary common denominator of those individuals used by God was centered in the simple phrase, “the Lord was with him.” Certainly, every biblical leader had a mix of natural attributes and developed skills, but these are seldom mentioned. Rather, the primary secret to their excellence was a genuine and manifest sense of the presence and power of God. This factor was an essential issue of the heart and is best understood and sustained in current-day ministry by a fullness of the Holy Spirit via a humble, enduring, and prayerful walk with God.

In the Old Testament, this phrase was descriptive of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and David, as well as some of the significant judges, kings, and prophets. In the New Testament it was said of John the Baptist, Mary, and the disciples.⁴ Of course, in His final commission Jesus did not reassure us by saying “And, behold, you will guide the church by becoming skillful leaders and dynamic visionaries, even to the end of the age.” Rather, His words were clear, precise, and compelling. “Behold, *I am with you* always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20, emphasis added).

When we compare Matthew’s account with our Lord’s famous last words in Luke and Acts (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8), it is clear that Jesus is referring to an imparting. He speaks of a permanent indwelling and supernatural empowering of the Holy Spirit, apart from whom we can do nothing. So our great pursuit should not be pop-culture notions of leadership. Rather, we should align our passions and priorities to ensure that the fullness and fruit of the Holy Spirit are the compelling flagship and force of our ministry.

Our conventional, modern-day pursuit of leadership, for all of its practical benefits, tends to be about what we can devise for

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Christ. The priorities of prayer and the ministry of the Word are clearly about that which Christ wants to initiate then perform through us. This is a lesson the great evangelists have learned. Jim Cymbala saw the truth the one time he met Billy Graham at his Montreat, North Carolina, home. Graham's son Will invited Cymbala, who had spoken the previous night at The Cove (a beautiful retreat center operated by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association) to come visit the evangelist. Cymbala's message had focused on the Christian's primary calling to "be with Jesus" in deep fellowship and humble dependence—and then to serve as the overflow of that intimacy.

After introductions and warm conversation, Will (who directs The Cove's operations) described his excitement at the message on the priority of intimacy and prayer as key to preaching. As Will spoke, Dr. Graham raised his hand to stop him. Then Graham said, "That's for me. That message is just for me. That is what I really need . . . to be with Him."

OF PARAMOUNT RELEVANCE: BEING HUMBLE

The following passages highlight the apostle Paul's framework for spiritual influence. Many may be familiar to you, but I trust you will read them with fresh eyes. Paul underscores something other than our familiar emphasis on the dynamics of refined human influence. Paul's old paths of spiritual impact are demonstrated throughout his letters, but a few excerpts can bring the point home. We begin with First Corinthians 2:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and

An Urgent “Leadership” Renovation

in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (vv.1–5 NASB)

By today’s standards, Paul was unimpressive and was clearly disinterested in any sophisticated and high-powered principles of “kingdom impact.” His passion was not to attract listeners to his ministry but to be sure they were awed by the power of God. In a subsequent letter to the Corinthian church he amplified:

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.
(2 Cor. 3:5–6 NASB)

Inadequacy is not a popular notion in the featured workshops at our church-growth symposiums. The amazing truths of the life-giving work of the Spirit seem to have fallen off the page on the programs of many of our national conferences. Still, the apostle’s words ring relevant: “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves” (2 Cor. 4:7 NASB).

We elevate great leaders, famous speakers, extraordinary talent, enormous churches, remarkable strategies, impressive formulas, and stirring human insight. Yet the real treasure is paramount and available in hearts of inadequate servants who seek the face of God as the core of what it means to oversee the work of Christ. That is what Paul did, and he listened to God’s reply: “He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me”(2 Cor. 12:9 NASB).

The more we value and embrace weakness, the more delight

OLD PATHS, NEW POWER

Christ finds in making His power known in and through us. This is not the theme of most leadership books or conferences I have encountered. Yet Paul reminds us of the ultimate challenge every spiritual leader faces:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places . . . praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints. (Eph. 6:12, 18)

Paul reminds us that our primary task is to triumph in the face of an unseen but paramount spiritual battle. Because the conflict is fundamentally spiritual, the only way we win is through spiritual means. Paul emphasizes the imperative of pervasive, all-encompassing prayer—that the Lord may be with us.

HIS DELIGHT: OUR HOPE IN HIM

God's delight, prompting the blessing of His unmistakable presence, remains the same today regardless of our multitude of other appealing options:

Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." (Jer. 9:23–24)

God's pleasure abounds toward the inadequate servant who rejects all self-boasting. His delight is not in an adroit ministry guru who is ready to profit from those in need of a new, productive

strategy, but in those who hope in Him. "His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love" (Ps. 147:10–11).

As it has always been throughout biblical history, God looks upon the heart. His pleasure is upon the soul that is fixed on Him; the heart that hopes in the power of the relationship, not the production of human enterprise.

The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love. (Ps. 33:16–18)

Relying on our own resources is a misleading road to mediocrity, even disaster. God's attention and blessing rest on the life that has a high view of His power and an assurance of unfailing love.