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*Chapter 1*

# RETHINKING LEADERSHIP

I failed. Those who knew me at the time didn't realize it, but I failed.\*

It was my first position as a Senior Pastor. Many of my wife's family members had been raised in that small, rural congregation. Some of them continued to fill the pews of the little white church building each week. They had called me as their pastor when I was an eager but inexperienced twenty-four-year-old. I didn't know what I was doing. My preparation included a theology degree from a Bible college and growing up as a pastor's son. I had served as a youth pastor for a few years before moving overseas as a church planter in West Africa. That missionary adventure was cut short after a rough bout with malaria, kidney stones, and a few other afflictions stripped me down to a pasty white, six-foot-six inch skeleton. My wife and I were encouraged to return home, wondering what God had in store for us. What would we do?

When I took over the little church, I was desperate for it to succeed. I wanted to see people believe in Jesus and discipled into His image. I wanted us to commit to a lifestyle of missions

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\* Unless noted otherwise, "I" always refers to Micah, though Jeremy is equally a coauthor of this book.

and invest our lives in others. Judging from the numbers, we succeeded. We more than doubled our weekly attendance. The church was more than a hundred years old and had never had any staff members outside of a bivocational pastor, and we added two bivocational staff members during my time there. The budget grew substantially. These are all wonderful things, but because of the pressure that I placed on myself, I made some critical errors. I exhausted myself in trying to do everything. To so many people watching, the church and my leadership might have looked successful, and yet ultimately, I failed.

Did you notice how many times the word *I* appeared in that last paragraph? Even my best intentions for gospel ministry were wrapped up in my own misunderstanding of success. Even what I did for Jesus was about *me*. I didn't just want the church to succeed. *I* wanted to succeed. That is why I failed.

## A Biblical Plan

The biblical plan for church leadership is to develop a culture of multiplication: to not only see people come to faith, but also help them grow into maturity. A large part of that maturity is learning how to minister to others. This ministry leads to them becoming more like Christ. This shouldn't be surprising, and yet too often it is. The Bible is pretty clear on this point, and yet you would be hard-pressed to find a pastoral job description that lists personal discipleship and multiplication of ministry leaders as a primary responsibility. God never intended Lone Ranger pastors to save the day, charging into ministry on their own. It's a childhood fantasy to believe that we can

pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps, flash a perfect smile, and be everyone's hero. While a leader may get away with riding solo for a while, even earning a legendary mystique as more-than-human, ministry was never intended to be done alone. You can't—and shouldn't—do it all.

Unfortunately, many of us have developed a pattern, particularly in the American church, that perpetuates this myth of heroic individualism in ministry. We've even nuanced our verbiage to reflect it. When a pastor does ministry, we tend to describe their behavior as "pastoral." We might say things like, "Pastor so-and-so is especially pastoral." What we mean is that they are good at serving the ministry needs of others. This is unfortunate. Scripture seems to indicate that church leaders are not called primarily to do ministry themselves as much as they are called to prepare and deploy the church to do ministry.

Does this mean that pastors are not called to personally serve the people in their churches and communities? Of course not. However, this is not their unique calling as pastors. They ought to lead the way in ministry but not as their primary vocational responsibility. Ministry is our familial responsibility as church members. Multiplication is our vocational responsibility as church leaders. All Christians are expected to serve one another, and as

**Ministry is our familial responsibility as church members. Multiplication is our vocational responsibility as church leaders.**

pastors we should lead the way. But it is not solely our job to do ministry.

In the upcoming pages, I, along with my coauthor Jeremy Maxfield, will make the case that “doing” ministry is part of our familial responsibility shared with every believer in the church. It is to be expected, then, that we select our leaders from among those who “do” ministry well. But it is also clear in Scripture that our leaders are not called to spend all their time doing, in isolation, and instead are called to develop the church so that we all do ministry together. Consider Ephesians 4:11–16:

And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into a mature man with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ. From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part. (HCSB)

Here, the apostle Paul shares the secret to success—true success. It’s literally spelled out for us—*Church Leadership for Dummies*, as it were. We are called “for the training of the saints in the work of ministry.” The first-century missionary and church planter lets us all in on the scorecard. It hasn’t changed in the nearly two thousand years since Paul was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write these words. There are no hacks, shortcuts, or formulas, but we do have a clear picture of what it means to win. We have a clear goal as leaders despite the transient fads and current buzzwords.

The text lays out four simple truths about church leaders and their responsibility to the church that are revolutionary when we take them seriously. So, before we review the four points introduced in Ephesians, ask yourself, *Am I ready to take these seriously?*

Honestly, are we more interested in our own measures of success or in a biblical perspective? Will we have the courage to allow God’s Word to flip our understanding upside down in order to set it right side up? Are we ready to consider whether our best intentions and efforts may look impressive but ultimately lead to us failing in our true calling as leaders?

You may have noticed that Paul identified several leadership roles, pastor being just one of them. Throughout this book the terms *pastor* and *leader* will often be used interchangeably for our purposes within the local church context. The reason for this is that the roles of apostles, prophets, and evangelists are given primarily for the work of spreading and unifying new churches, while the roles of pastors and teachers are given for the growth and unity of members of the churches themselves.

This brings us to our first point: these roles of leadership are *given*.

***And He personally gave***

First, God gives leaders to the church. Leaders are not in their role simply because of giftedness or desire, though both of those things are important (see 1 Tim. 3). Leaders exist in their roles, first and foremost, because God has ordained that they be there. A church leader's role is a commission, an assignment from the God of the universe.<sup>1</sup>

This means that we must take our ministry leadership roles seriously—as a matter of responsibility and obedience. It's vital that we pay particular attention to what the scriptural text directs us to do in our leadership roles. We must not get distracted from our assignments, nor can we approach them with halfhearted efforts. Let's ensure that we're accomplishing the specific work that God has assigned us.

The text says more than that leaders are simply given to the church though. It specifically says that leaders are given as a personal gift from God. The seemingly redundant wording of the sentence emphasizes the personal nature of what God has given. God not only gave, but He *personally* gave. This is a gift characteristic of God Himself, as an overflow of who He is. The idea here is that church leaders are intended by God to be a good and gracious gift to the church. Now, we wouldn't recommend that you stand before your congregation on Sunday and tell them that, as a leader, you are God's gift to them. That probably wouldn't go well! But you ought to find tremendous encouragement, confidence, and hope in the fact that you

have been given a specific task by God, and that your work is a blessing.

While church leadership is a blessing, it is not easy. Serving the church is difficult. It is often lonely. It typically does not pay very well, and it can prove challenging for your family. In the midst of all of this, you will find yourself needing this encouraging truth from Ephesians 4:11. When challenging times come, you should reflect on this passage. God, in His authority and goodness, has ordained that your position would exist and that you would lead His church. What's more, in God's good providence, He intended for you to be His good gift to the church, and He intended the church to be a good gift to you, to your marriage, to your family, and more.

As leaders, it is essential that we guard the integrity of leadership as the precious gift that it is. We must surround ourselves with accountability in community. We must measure our lives in faithfulness to the Word of God. Unfortunately, it is possible, and far too prevalent, that this doesn't prove to be true in practice. Pastoral malpractice exists, and it can be devastating. Whether it be moral failure, leadership failure, theological failure, or some other type of failure, a specific pastor or leader can prove to be detrimental to the congregation they lead. When this happens, however, it should be clear that this contradicts God's intended good design for the church and her leaders. God's design is one of mutual blessing.

We must acknowledge that congregational malpractice also exists and has destroyed too many good leaders. This is why when hiring new staff or training new leaders, even in a healthy congregation, the inevitability of eventual disappointment,



conflict, and pain should always be clearly stated up front. Because of the intimate, personal nature of faith, the sting of pain from a church relationship can be among the greatest any person can experience. Yet again, however, when it happens, it happens in direct contradiction to the design that God intends for His church and her leaders.

The church is one, big, sometimes-dysfunctional family. But we are a family nonetheless. The church is given by God to be a blessing for us all—a good gift of His grace in our lives. He Himself has given you to His church for His purpose. The church is not yours; she's His. But He has entrusted her to your care. Be a blessing. Love the church like you love God Himself. He personally gave you to one another.

*... for the training of the saints in the work of ministry*

Second, knowing that leaders are given at the pleasure of God, it is important to ask what the task of the leader is. What does it mean, practically speaking, to love and bless the church to whom you've been given? While any honest response would affirm that this requires a multifaceted answer, the answer for the purpose of this book and the one explicit in this specific text is that leaders equip the body. God gives leaders to the church, but He doesn't give the church leaders so that they can do all of the ministry. This distinction is vital to both leaders and churches.

As mentioned earlier, we have unwittingly modified our vocabulary to indicate that when we serve the needs of others, we are typically known as being “pastoral.” This gives away a subtle but dangerous belief that what it means to be distinctly pastoral

is to minister to the needs of others. It allows us to make non-sensical statements like: “pastor so-and-so is not very pastoral.” Technically, being pastoral in that sense would be one of many characteristics or qualifications for a pastor, one that could be pretty far down the priority list or even omitted as “preferred but not required” on the job description.

The biblical definition of what it means to be a pastor has been hijacked and corrupted. Sadly, we’ve done it to ourselves. It’s tempting for pastors to serve as little more than entertainers or CEOs, regardless of a church’s size or style. We have defined pastoral leadership in a consumer-driven context in which the pastor is viewed as a professional dispenser of religious goods and services, and congregants are viewed as spiritual consumers who simply sit back and have their needs cared for. The job of the churches—and therefore the jobs of the pastors as paid professionals—is to meet the needs of anyone who comes through the door.

While this may make the pastor seem noble, and while the pastor should certainly be a servant, we actually do a tragic disservice to other individuals, the church as a whole, and the kingdom of God if we personally do the ministry that God has called the whole church to do. Not only that, the Bible is clear that the ministry won’t be done well and that the church will not flourish when we assume this philosophy of the professional service provider.

Please don’t make my mistake. God does not expect you to “do ministry” as your vocational responsibility. This certainly is a controversial statement in our contemporary church environment. In a few chapters, we’ll dig into this more deeply. But for

now, let's be clear: pastors and church leaders don't minister to the needs of the church as their *vocational* responsibility, but they do minister to the needs of the church as part of their *familial* responsibility. God has given the church—and every member of it—to minister to the needs of the body. Ministry is our collective responsibility. It is for this reason that I don't use the title “Minister” for myself or anyone else on our church staff who is paid to work for the church. We do not allocate “ministry” to the compensated few. Instead, we recognize that leaders of the church—including the paid pastoral staff—are tasked with equipping the entire church to serve the needs of the body together.

Paul said that the role of the pastor is to train the saints for the work of ministry. It couldn't be clearer. Church members are all called to do the work of ministry. The distinct calling and role of pastors is training, equipping, and multiplying the workers. As the lead teacher, your role is not to simply teach people in the church what they need to know but to train people for what they can do as the church.

Did you notice the other title or name given in the text? It's easy to skim over what is arguably the most important identity mentioned in this paragraph. We are prone to prioritize roles of leadership as exceptional, but the most incredible and intrinsically valuable description of personal identity and position is the one we all share—saints. We have all been set apart as holy for God's purpose, united as one body. This is a major theme throughout Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. The great mystery of God has been revealed. He is creating a new people for Himself. Saints. The body of Christ. When that transformative

reality sinks in, when we “comprehend with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God’s love” (Eph. 3:18 HCSB), it completely demolishes our tendency to prop up a leader on a pedestal. Instead, we rally together to build up the collective body of Christ. The goal is no longer a select few professional Christians but an entirely united congregation of mature Christians.

Leader, remember that your identity in Christ is not pastor—it is saint, just like the people you serve. God is fully pleased with you through the completed work of Jesus, not an overloaded work schedule. Doing everything yourself does not honor Christ or help the church. Share the load. Empower others. Lead by humble example as one part among many. Your position is not primarily defined in relation to being over other church members; it is primarily defined in relation to being under Christ. Together, each part of the body works in unison with the head. God Himself has given you to the church, not to do all the work yourself but to train the saints for the work of ministry.

**God is fully pleased with you through the completed work of Jesus, not an overloaded work schedule. Doing everything yourself does not honor Christ or help the church.**

***... we will no longer be little children***

When God gives leaders to the church and the leaders invest their time in developing the body to do ministry together, the

## LEVELING THE CHURCH

body is built up. We grow—not just in size, but in stature. Maturity is the goal. The purpose of leaders is to help everyone grow up. It's what Paul identified as a driving passion in his letter to another church, in Colossae: “We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28 HCSB).

In God's economy, the ability of the church to mature into the image of Jesus shares a dependent relationship with leadership who is training and handing off ministry. This seems counterintuitive compared to our often typical practices in the church. We have developed a pattern of expecting maturity before we give people ministry responsibilities. Functionally, it's as if we are expecting people to grow in strength by reading nutrition labels and identifying exercise routines without ever developing healthy eating habits and practicing the movements they see. Maturity is the end game. We train to win. And we can't win until everyone gets in the game to play their part.

In Ephesians 4, Paul wants us to understand that unless we turn people loose with ministry responsibilities, they will never grow into maturity. In other words, growth in theology and practice occurs as people get their hands dirty, scrape their knees, and share their lives in ministry. Your job is to be the coach, not the star player. At most, you're the quarterback leading a team down the field. You're the captain of the team, first among equals. You direct other players, read the situation, and keep everyone focused together in order to reach your common goal. No matter how talented you are, you'll never succeed if you keep the ball and try to run it every time you line up. Sometimes you may see an opportunity to charge toward your

goal, but most of the time you're handing things off or passing them to other players who are open. Your team doesn't exist to help you win. Your job is to help the team win.

There are too many armchair quarterbacks. The Christian life is not one of passive spectators or even opinionated fans. We all are players. Pastor and author Jim Putman of Real Life Ministries has popularized the saying that church is a team sport.<sup>2</sup> The apostle Paul said something similar centuries before when writing that leaders are tasked with “equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. Then we will no longer be little children.” The goal is growth. Success is measured by maturity.

We live in a church era built on the foundations laid in the age of enlightenment. For generations, there has been an unspoken core belief that education in a classroom setting is the primary pathway to growth and success. Sunday school traces its origin back to this time period of the late 1800s. While this form of group education absolutely has value, it’s time for us to move away from such a narrow model of functional relationships as dispensers and consumers of religious information. This does not diminish the importance of structured educational growth; it actually magnifies it by rightly repositioning it as a formative part of holistic growth and maturity. It’s part of what Colin Marshall and Tony Payne have so helpfully described as the trellis and the vine.<sup>3</sup> A gardener’s objective is fruitful growth, not the construction of rigid structures in the garden. Any good gardener—and any good pastor—knows

that flourishing requires intentionality. Otherwise all of our labor is fruitless or, at best, unsustainable. We're just working up a sweat and staying busy without any real plan or application of wisdom over time.

Be good teachers. Prepare and deliver well-crafted sermons. The pulpit ministry of the church should obviously maintain a place of prominence in our churches. This is essential in congregational life. However, we have to abandon the mindset that just delivering the Word clearly and offering classes that teach the right lessons are sufficient to lead people to Christlikeness. The Word itself would contradict that (see 1 Cor. 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:21–22; Col. 3:16; James 1:25; 1 Peter 2:9–12; Heb. 10:24). In our church, we summarize our ministry strategy this way: we deliver the Word, disciple the believer, and deploy the church. There's an ongoing and intentional effort to not only educate, but also to emulate and replicate. It's not enough to teach if we aren't growing into maturity and reproducing through multiplication.

We have to grasp the specific ways that the church grows when the leadership equips the body to do ministry, rather than simply doing the ministry for the body. They grow in unity, knowledge, doctrinal stability, gracious speech, and the character of Jesus. Each of these is directly tied to ministry experience, helping us understand why God underscores the priority of church leaders developing church members for ministry.

***Let us grow in every way into Him who is the head—Christ***

Finally, when God gives leaders to the church and the leaders invest their time developing other church members to serve

in ministry, everyone grows up and, ultimately, Jesus gets the glory. We live in the days of the Super Pastor (we'll address Super Pastor more in chapter 6). The Super Pastor platforms well. He has a large following. He appears to have it all together and appears able to do just about anything. However, what the Super Pastor doesn't realize is that he is crippling the church he leads. When all eyes are on him and he performs on behalf of both Jesus and the church, everyone's growth is stunted, the church body atrophies from inactivity, and he is blindly headed for a disappointing fall. Though most Super Pastors may not realize the damage they are doing, I believe that they do realize that their life is a mirage. It's a fairy tale without the happy ending. There's no way that storyline finishes well. But leaders may genuinely be deceived into thinking that it's their job—their calling from God even—to keep up their appearances in order to lead others. A desire for increasing numbers will tolerate an increasing numbness. Soon, everyone is settling for a good show rather than active participation in the life-giving body of Christ.

As pastors, we aren't nearly as gifted as we often portray ourselves to be. And for some leaders, this facade eventually comes crashing down, hurting the pastor, their family, and occasionally tearing the church apart that they were trying so desperately to hold together. The saddest thing about all this is not that the church leader has built a fragile house of cards. No, the saddest part is that the pastor, too often, gets the glory. Super Pastors develop super followings of people who adore them—even idolize them. And as unhealthy as that is for the pastor, for those who follow the pastor, and for the churches



they serve, the greatest harm done is the damage done to the name and reputation of God.

However, in a church where a pastor is doing what he is supposed to—developing the members for ministry—the body collectively serves together, not allowing for any one person to get the credit, thus pointing to God as the Creator and Sustainer of all things. All this ministry is done as Jesus enables it to be so, and it is done to bring Him great glory. Notice the pattern in Ephesians 4:11–16:

- Jesus brings the church together (unity in diversity)
- Jesus makes the church grow
- Jesus increases the church's capacity to love
- Jesus helps every believer reach his or her potential

This is the dream for every church leader I know. This is what we really want when we allow ourselves and our mistaken measures of success to get out of the way. We want the church to grow into, and to be, every one of these things. Could it be that God gave us a plan to make it happen, but we've naively sought to move on and improve on it through more recent history? Have we been seduced by business models, marketing principles, and growth strategies and forgotten our true love and the seemingly paradoxical truth of God's Word?

## **Our Purpose**

The aim of this book is not to point fingers at anyone. The desire is simply to point to Scripture and ask whether our leadership

and churches resemble what we see in the text. We will display a biblical model that leads to discipleship and leadership development, and unleashes the church to serve on mission. We don't have all the answers for you, just like we don't have all the answers for the church we serve. But we believe we're asking the right question and looking in the right direction, even as we clumsily seek to move toward active and intentional growth in maturity through multiplication. We grow by letting go.

I started this chapter—and this book—by confessing that I had failed. I didn't develop members for ministry. Sure, there were occasional examples. Some of the wonderful people I pastored would probably stick up for me and disagree with my analysis. But I know what I did. And more specifically, I know now what I *didn't* do. I know that in my stress-fueled push to see the church grow and “get everything right,” I often took ministry responsibilities away from people so that I could do them myself. I determined that I could do things better, more quickly, or more easily by myself than if I taught someone else do it. Consequently, I not only preached weekly and developed vision and strategies for the church but also found myself designing and printing the bulletins, weekly. I would regularly get to church early on a Sunday morning to sweep out the foyer. I ultimately tried to have my hands on every area of the church ministry. And, if I'm, honest, I still struggle with this. Grabbing a broom or lending a helping hand isn't a problem; not being willing and able to let go is.

The upshot of my efforts was that the church did grow. People around me would pat me on the back. Others would tell me they admired my ministry. But I know that I failed. I did

the ministry instead of developing and deploying the church to do ministry. Instead of developing and discipling a committed core of church leaders, in some senses I left the church in worse leadership shape when I left than when I came, even though there was more money and more people. As painful as it is for me to admit it, it's also cathartic. I failed. But thank God that He shows grace, and I don't have to continue failing to be intentional in that way as I've moved forward as a pastor.

Even while writing this book, I don't pretend to be the shining example of leadership success. My struggles aren't all past tense. The church I serve is not without its challenges. I still experience the growing pains of pastoral responsibilities and don't know whether I'm making all the right decisions. But I can say with confidence that Jeremy and I believe wholeheartedly in the purpose of leadership laid out in this book. He and I have seen the fruit of multiplying leaders as we both served other churches while working for LifeWay in Nashville, and even more recently as we served together on the lead pastoral team for Brainerd Baptist Church in Chattanooga. We'll share more about what we have learned, how we've seen God work, and where we've made mistakes. But most of all, we pray that you'll be encouraged and emboldened to stop trying to do everything yourself. You can't do it all. You shouldn't do it all. The more you try to hang on to ministry, the more you hold back the ministry. Unleash your church!

Our prayer is that you can learn from the Word of God and from what we've learned to be the true measure of success as a pastor. Are you doing great work, but doing it all yourself? Or are you equipping and empowering others? Are you continually

adding one more thing to your agenda? Or are you multiplying ministry? Are people growing in maturity? Are they looking to Jesus and looking more like Jesus?

You have a unique responsibility. Do what God has called you to do—what He personally gave you to the church to do. Create a culture of multiplication by narrowing your focus. Look at who you are developing. Start doing less ministry by yourself whenever you can include someone else. Don't spend all of your time visiting hospitals, counseling people, and preparing for funerals without taking others along with you. By adding someone to your usual activities, you no longer carry 100 percent of the weight for the ministry tasks previously done alone. Eventually, others are not only helping 50/50 in what you do, but twice as much ministry will begin to happen without your invitation or supervision. When you focus on development so that you're not the only person "doing" ministry on behalf of the church, you've multiplied your impact—and your longevity in ministry—exponentially. They see, then share, then spread ministry beyond your limited capacity to be everywhere and to do everything. Do less ministry. Develop more people. Deploy your people for the good of the church and the glory of Jesus' name.