

> GOSPEL <
ELDERSHIP

EQUIPPING
A NEW GENERATION
OF SERVANT LEADERS

ROBERT H. THUNE



“Absolutely *nothing* is more important in a church family than the DNA of the leadership culture. The healthiest churches I know are those that are led by pastors and elders who are captured by the gospel, smitten with Jesus, and transformed by God’s grace. Bob Thune’s new book, *Gospel Eldership*, presents a vision and roadmap for cultivating this kind of leadership culture.”

Scotty Ward Smith, Teacher in Residence, West End Community Church, Nashville, TN

“I’ve lost count of the number of times that pastors, church planters, and seminary students have asked me for a practical, hands-on, gospel-centered, and challenging resource for elders-in-training and current elders in churches. The book you have in your hands is that resource—finally! *Gospel Eldership* provides much-needed and long-awaited formation for servant leadership in our churches!”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; pastor, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, KY; Secretary, Evangelical Theological Society; author of *Historical Theology*, *Sojourners and Strangers*, and *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice*

“There is so much confusion about how the church should be governed and led. I love how clear and compelling Bob has made the high calling of being a pastor in *Gospel Eldership*. I can’t wait to use this incredible resource in our church and I would encourage you to do the same.”

Darrin Patrick, Lead Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis; Vice President, Acts 29; chaplain to St. Louis Cardinals; author of *Church Planter*, *The Dude’s Guide to Manhood*; coauthor of *The Dude’s Guide to Marriage*

“Bob Thune brings us gospel formation over information with a bias for soul depth, not breadth. Buy *Gospel Eldership* for your next elder candidate process—or better yet, buy it for current elders to start a journey toward greater honesty, openness, and holiness. Your church will thank you for it.”

Daniel Montgomery, Lead Pastor, Sojourn Community Church, Louisville, KY; founder of the Sojourn Network; author of *Faithmapping*, *PROOF*, and *Leadership Mosaic*

“This material shaped me as a leader when I was new to pastoral ministry, and this is what we use to train our elders. Bob is a gifted pastor, and this is what he does best: holistic development of church leaders. In this book, you will find sound theology, gospel-centrality, and wise insight from the heart of a leader. The personal and practical application is what makes this resource a game-changer.”

Will Walker, Pastor, Providence Church, Austin, TX; coauthor of *The Gospel-Centered Life*

“Thune understands that when elders apply the gospel, the church thrives. His material is fresh, sharp, and drenched in gospel claims. If you love elders, train elders, support elders, serve as an elder, or even aspire to eldership, *Gospel Eldership* is a must-buy, must-read, must-discuss, must-apply!”

Dave Harvey, Executive Director, Sojourn Network; founder of AmICalled.com; author of *When Sinners Say I Do*

“Bob Thune is a rising star in the evangelical church today, and his *Gospel Eldership: Equipping a New Generation of Servant Leaders* reveals why. He is a careful thinker, robustly biblical, and fiercely articulate. All of that, and so much more, comes through in *Gospel Eldership*. I am grateful to God for Bob Thune and for his significant contribution in this most worthwhile book.”

Jason K. Allen, President, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There is no greater challenge for local church pastors than the identification and training of mature, godly, gospel-centered elders. I’ve read numerous books on leadership and the role of elders in the body of Christ, but none quite like what Bob Thune provides in this excellent volume. For Bob, ‘gospel-centered’ is not just a tag line or a cliché, but a vital truth that shapes everything about the calling and spiritual character of those who serve in this critical ministry. I cannot recommend this superb book too highly.”

Sam Storms, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City

“It is noble to aspire to eldership. However, transforming elder aspiration into godly, prepared pastoral service demands more than desire. It requires hard work—the work of personal discipline and a power outside of self. Godly elders depend on gospel power, the sufficiency and excellency of Jesus Christ applied to every aspect of life and ministry. *Gospel Eldership* will help you cultivate elder character, skill, and doctrine that depends on Jesus. I have used *Gospel Eldership* in several rounds of elder training and appreciate it more with each use. Our elder candidates often comment on its usefulness and convicting power. I will continue to use *Gospel Eldership* with enthusiasm as we train godly, gospel-motivated men for pastoral service.”

Jonathan Dodson, Lead Pastor, City Life Church; author of *Gospel-Centered Discipleship* and *The Unbelievable Gospel*

GOSPEL ELDERSHIP

EQUIPPING A NEW GENERATION
OF SERVANT LEADERS

Robert H. Thune



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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: What Is an Elder?.....	1
Lesson 1- Servant Leadership.....	8
<i>Exercise: “Know Thyself”</i>	
Lesson 2- A Biblical Approach to Church Leadership	20
<i>Exercise: False Righteousness</i>	
Lesson 3- The Primacy of Character.....	34
<i>Exercise: Identifying Idols</i>	
Lesson 4- The Leadership Triangle.....	43
<i>Exercise: Leadership Triangle Self-Assessment</i>	
Interlude: The Duties of Elders	56
Lesson 5- Elders Feed the Church	58
<i>Exercise: The Gospel and Spiritual Disciplines</i>	
Lesson 6- Elders Lead the Church	68
<i>Exercise: Examining Your Character</i>	
Lesson 7- Elders Protect the Church	82
<i>Exercise: The Gospel and Conflict Resolution</i>	
Lesson 8- Elders Care for the Church.....	92
<i>Exercise: Identifying Pride</i>	
Lesson 9- Missional Eldership	101
<i>Exercise: Mission and Your Heart</i>	

Lesson 10—The Temptations of Leadership	110
<i>Exercise: Identifying Your Temptations</i>	
Conclusion	119
Appendix A: Functional & Formative Eldership	122
Appendix B: Supplemental Resources	127
Endnotes	130

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To Alex Strauch: Thanks for helping us go "back to the Bible" in our thinking about church leadership. We're all standing on your shoulders.

To my dad: Thanks for being a faithful, reliable, Christlike spiritual leader in both the home and the church. So much of what I know about leadership I learned from you.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS AN ELDER?

Whether formal or informal, recognized or unrecognized, leadership is a given in any church. In fact, leadership is a given in any human society. When kids play football on the playground, someone picks the teams. When volunteers get together to clean up a neighborhood park, someone organizes the initiative. When friends get together for a book club, someone chooses the book and plans the discussion. Every human community has some form of leadership.

Right now you're looking at a resource on church leadership. Based on that fact alone, I can deduce that you have some interest in church leadership, or at least, one of the elders in your church sees leadership potential in you. What I don't know are your current convictions about church leadership, your past experiences with church leadership, or your present context. So let's start with a basic observation we can all agree on:

Every church has leaders.

Starting from that universal reality, the real question we need to ask is *What kind of leaders should the church have?* Did God intend his church to be led by just anyone? Or did he give some outline, some matrix, some set of instructions for church leadership?

As we answer this question, we repeatedly see in the Bible an emphasis on a group of leaders referred to as elders, bishops, or overseers. For instance,

When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed *elders* for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:21–23)

Let the *elders* who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 5:17)

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint *elders* in every town as I directed you. (Titus 1:5)

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the *elders* of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. (James 5:14)

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of *overseer*, he desires a noble task. Therefore an *overseer* must be above reproach. . . . (1 Timothy 3:1–2)

God intends for his church to be led by godly leaders known as *elders*. So what *is* an elder?

An elder is a pastor. Many of us only apply the title of “pastor” to those in full-time vocational ministry. But in the Bible, the terms *elder* (*presbuteros*), *pastor* (*poimen*), and *bishop* (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably to refer to the same person or group of people. Two particular New Testament texts make this abundantly clear.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the *elders* [*presbuterous*] of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them . . . “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* [*episkopous*], to *shepherd* [*poimainein*] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” (Acts 20:17–18, 28 NASB)

Therefore, I exhort the *elders* [*presbuterous*] among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, *shepherd* [*poimanate*] the flock of God among you, exercising *oversight* [*episkopountes*] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God (1 Peter 5:1–2 NASB).

In my household, I have the titles of husband (to my wife), father (to my children), and head of household (to the IRS). But those titles are all various aspects of one role or office: the leader of a family. The same is true in the Bible. One office—the office of local church elder—is referred to under three titles: elder, pastor, and overseer/bishop. Some elders may serve the church full time (those we usually call “pastors”), while other elders may serve as lay volunteers. But biblically speaking, elders are pastors and pastors are elders.

An elder is a pacesetter. The elders of the New Testament churches were not mere figureheads; they were leaders, pacesetters, and discipline-makers. Scripture sees elders as competent, committed, mature leaders who teach (1 Timothy 3:2), rebuke (Titus 1:9), rule (1 Timothy 5:17), guard sound doctrine (Titus 1:9), do evangelism (Titus 1:8), deal with difficult people (Titus 1:10–14), and raise up other leaders (2 Timothy 2:2).

An elder is *not* merely a faithful, reliable Christian who shows up to meetings and votes. Rather, an elder sets the pace for the rest of the church. Elders are leaders of strength, wisdom, and integrity, whose lives and character are worthy of being imitated and reproduced in every Christian.

An elder is a man. We live in a very egalitarian culture today, where any distinction in gender roles arouses suspicion. But the Bible unapologetically makes such distinctions. Is this because the Bible is a repressive, patriarchal text that needs to be updated and adapted to fit modern sensibilities? Or is it because God actually made men and women differently, to fulfill distinct but complementary roles?

The Bible's vision of the relationship between the sexes is one of rich interdependence (1 Corinthians 11:11–12). God designed men and women to complement one another as his image-bearers (Genesis 1:26–31; 2:15–25), and his design includes differing roles for men and women in the home and in the church (1 Timothy 2:11–3:5). Men are given the responsibility of headship in the home and in the church, which means that the office of elder-pastor is to be filled by men. This is not a matter of empowering men and restricting women, but rather of freeing both sexes to enjoy the beautiful, God-glorifying harmony of a robust interdependence. *Complementarianism* is the theological term for this viewpoint. Men and women are complementary in their God-given design and roles, with men bearing the responsibility for spiritual leadership in the home and church.

This book is unapologetically complementarian in its approach. If you are still forming your convictions on this matter, I invite you to read this study with an open mind. And I urge you to ponder this question: If the men in your church looked like the men this resource envisions, would you have any reason not to trust, respect, and affirm their leadership? To further your theological formation on this important issue, consult the resources listed in the endnotes.¹

Elders, then, are the male leaders of the church who serve as pastors and pacesetters. But we must say more. If a church is to be healthy, its elders must be men who are *grounded and rooted in the gospel*. That is the crucial gap in many churches today, and that is the weakness that this book is designed to address.

Many resources on church leadership seem consumed with church management, church structures, and church governance—as though the most important thing elders do is hold meetings and vote. Almost nothing has been written about the quality of spiritual life an elder must have *as an elder*. Of course, there are many good books about spiritual formation, and many helpful resources designed to facilitate basic Christian discipleship. But few of these resources are targeted specifically at *church leaders*. Is it not true that leaders experience unique temptations, challenges, and struggles? And is it not true that for a church to go deep in the gospel, its leaders must be deep in the gospel? That's the vision and the goal behind *Gospel Eldership*.

In my experience, it's possible to be very old in the faith and yet tragically young in the gospel. If the gospel truly is “the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16) and is constantly “bearing fruit and growing” within us (Colossians 1:6 NIV), then elders must be strong in the gospel. They must know their own heart idolatry and how the good news of the gospel applies to it. And they must have a sense of “gospel fluency” so that they can swiftly, effectively, and clearly apply the gospel to others. Those are the kind of leaders that I'm seeking to develop with this book.

So if you're curious about that kind of leadership; if you're seeking to be a leader like that; or if you're seeking to raise up and release those kinds of leaders, this book is for you.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This book can be used in a number of different ways. It's designed to be adaptable for different settings and contexts. But it's written with three primary audiences in mind.

1. Current elders who want to deepen their theological understanding and their gospel fluency.
2. Elders-in-training who are progressing through a season of learning and examination.

3. Christians who are seeking to better understand the Bible's teaching about local church leadership.

From my experience, *you'll* see the best results when this book is used as a small-group study. Ideally, a current elder or spiritual mentor should lead a group of emerging leaders through the content. This way, the written material serves as a springboard for the more important work of personal mentorship and spiritual formation. The following is a suggested weekly plan for using the resource in this way:

1. Have each participant read the article and work through the exercise independently during the week.
2. Come together as a group for 90–120 minutes to
 - a. Talk through the discussion questions.
 - b. Share what you learned in the exercises.
 - c. Cultivate honest, transformative relationships with one another.

The focus of this group time is not information, but formation. Therefore, each participant should come ready to share openly and honestly. You don't necessarily need to talk through every single question (though sometimes that's fruitful). Rather, feel free to hone in on whatever aspects of the lesson are most thought provoking and character shaping to your particular group.

As you study, keep in mind that this is a spiritual formation resource. It's not a theology textbook, an academic dissertation, or a full-scale biblical exposition. At the back of this guide, I've included a short bibliography for those interested in going deeper into some of the theological literature surrounding eldership and church leadership.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Expect to be challenged. This resource is not intended to reinforce what you already know, but to reshape and reform your understanding of church leadership. Along the way, you'll be challenged and provoked.

Expect to be surprised. This book is intended to provoke self-discovery and to uncover heart idolatry, sin, and selfishness you may not be aware of. This is a *good* thing because it invites you into deeper partnership and fellowship with the Holy Spirit! But it's also a *surprising* thing because self-awareness has a way of sneaking up on you when you least expect it.

Expect a deeper level of community. If you work through this resource with a small group of leaders, as recommended above, the Holy Spirit will forge tight bonds of friendship and brotherhood. Be ready to know and be known in ways that go far beyond your current experience.

Expect a deeper love for Christ and his church. As I've written this resource, this is what I've prayed for. I hope this resource builds your theological knowledge and helps you grasp some practical components of eldership. But more importantly, I hope it awakens a sense of worship and conviction within you as you seek to become the leader God intends *you* to be.

lesson

1

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

OBJECTIVE

To examine how Jesus's model of leadership differs from the world's default mode of leadership, and how Jesus makes this sort of leadership possible.

SCRIPTURE READING

- Mark 10:32–45

ARTICLE

When you think of Jesus, do you think of him as the most effective leader who's ever lived?

Eldership is leadership. Good elders must be good leaders. And when it comes to leadership, we tend to look to the bookstore, the boardroom, or the blogosphere. We seek out mentors who have succeeded in the business world or led large ministries. We envision Jesus as a Savior, a sage, a Galilean miracle-worker—but not as the Leader of leaders.

But if Jesus really does “uphold the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:3); if “by him all things were created” (Colossians 1:16); if in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3), then clearly he knows everything about everything. He’s the most brilliant leadership expert ever. He knows more than the most successful CEO, the sharpest leadership consultant, the most

compelling movement leader. What Jesus has to teach us about leadership is life-altering. And “leadership experts” have been rediscovering it for centuries.

THE DEFAULT PARADIGM

Jesus’s instructions about leadership stand in stark contrast to the status quo. The world’s default model of leadership, practiced over centuries and across cultures, is about ***being served***. There’s a hierarchy, and the leader is at the top. The followers serve the will of the leader, fulfill the desires of the leader, and further the interests of the leader. When God’s people asked for a king, he warned them about the reality of this kind of leadership.

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots. . . . He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves.” (1 Samuel 8:11–17)

This top-down vision of leadership is so ingrained in us that it’s enshrined in popular proverbs: “To the victor go the spoils”; “It’s lonely at the top”; “The cream always rises.”

Jesus’s disciples were well schooled in this paradigm of leadership. They envisioned Jesus’s kingdom as more of the same. And they wanted to make sure they had a place at the top.

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever

we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. (Mark 10:35–41)

In response to this request, Jesus turned the conventional thinking about leadership on its head. He introduced a whole new paradigm of leadership.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But 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 slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42–45)

Jesus is *prescribing* for his disciples the kind of leadership they ought to practice, and he’s also *describing* what he himself has come to do. Jesus expects his followers to be *servant leaders*. And he’s come to make them just that. As the Chief Servant, he will give his life as a ransom to deliver us from selfish leadership and to free us to also perform servant leadership.

So, how does a “Jesus way of leadership” become a reality in us?

JESUS IS OUR EXAMPLE

First, Jesus is our example. He is the ultimate Servant Leader. He is the one we are to emulate. He is our model, our archetype, our pattern. “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14–15).

Following Jesus’s example means we jettison our false, flawed, self-advancing concepts of leadership. We embrace servant leadership as good, true, and beautiful. And then we *decide* to pursue it. We commit to it. We apprentice ourselves to Jesus and resolve that we will become servant leaders.

JESUS IS OUR SUBSTITUTE

Once we decide to follow Jesus’s path of servant leadership, we begin to come face-to-face with the selfishness and sinfulness deep within us. Jesus’s way of leading is impossible! It is contrary to the bent of our hearts. We want power. We want control. We want comfort, ease, and convenience. We want to be liked, needed, appreciated. We want to do what works for us. We want to be served rather than to serve.

This is why the gospel is foundational to Christian leadership! To flawed and fallen leaders, the gospel proclaims: “Rejoice! Jesus has come to redeem you.” Jesus is not just our *model*; he is our *mediator*. The Son of Man came to serve selfish, greedy, flawed leaders. He died for us so that we might live for him. Our hope is not in our excellent servant leadership; our hope is in Jesus’s perfect servanthood toward those who acknowledge their lack and their need.

JESUS IS OUR POWER

When weak leaders depend on a strong Christ, he does not just forgive their sins; he empowers them with his renewing grace. The Bible uses

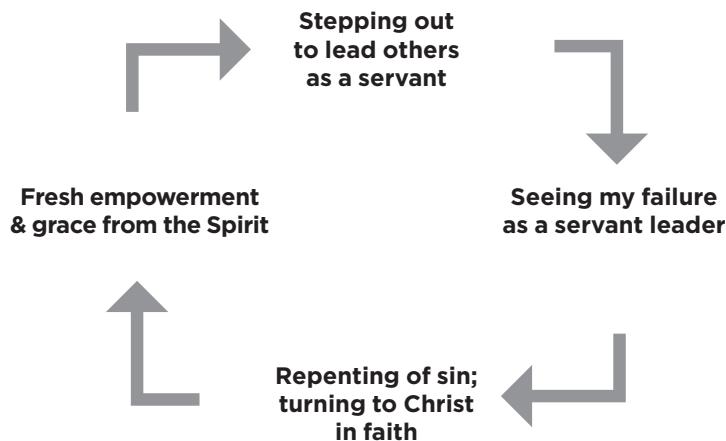
the metaphor of “pouring” to describe how generously God gives his Holy Spirit to his people through Jesus: “He saved us . . . by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, *whom he poured out on us richly* through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5–6). Whatever you lack, the Spirit has. Whatever you need, the Spirit can provide.

Paradoxically, then, the most servant-hearted leaders are those who are most aware of their struggles with servanthood. Why? Because these leaders are constantly going to Christ for fresh strength. They are constantly depending on the Spirit. They are constantly in lack, constantly in need, and therefore constantly experiencing God’s renewing grace. The late seminary professor and pastor C. John Miller summarized the good news of the gospel using two phrases¹:

- ***Cheer up! You’re worse than you think!*** Your failures and flaws are even deeper than you know. Your capacity for servant leadership is smaller than you imagine. Your selfishness is stronger than you’ve realized. But....
- ***Cheer up! The gospel is far greater than you can imagine!*** God is not constrained by your limitations! God uses the weak, the flawed, the powerless. God loves to pour out his Spirit on humble leaders who acknowledge their need.

CONCLUSION

Gospel leadership is servant leadership; and servant leadership drives us back to the gospel. We cannot be the servant leaders Jesus commands us to be without believing the good news of the gospel. Likewise, we cannot believe the gospel without being moved toward greater servanthood. This cycle of renewal brings life and joy and fruitfulness to our leadership.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What aspects of the world's model of leadership do you find attractive and compelling? What is it about those models that appeal to you?
2. Reread Mark 10:32–45. In what ways do you see the “glory hunger” of James and John playing out in your own calling or aspiration toward eldership?
3. “Following Jesus’s example means . . . we embrace servant leadership . . . and then we *decide* to pursue it. We commit to it.” Have you resolved to be a servant leader? In what ways? If you haven’t, what are your hesitations? How will you establish this commitment in a traceable and verifiable way, so it can be affirmed by others and revisited by you?
4. The article mentions power, control, comfort, convenience, and approval as some of the self-interested motives involved in leadership. There are others. What self-interested motives do you see in your own leadership? How do they manifest themselves in your leadership? Cite specific examples.

5. Why is God's grace toward you in Christ good news *right now*? What aspects of his grace, mercy, and provision are you most thankful for after reading this article?
6. Where do you want to see a fuller manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power in your leadership? Describe it.
7. What further questions does this lesson raise for you?

lesson

1

EXERCISE

“KNOW THYSELF”

I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment. (Romans 12:3)

Leadership can be selfish without appearing to be so. The most obvious types of selfishness are . . . well, obvious. But there are deeper and more subtle expressions of self-interest that hinder us from real servant leadership. One of these subtle expressions of selfishness is the tendency for leaders to work out their own insecurities in the midst of leadership. For example,

- A leader who fears disapproval may use leadership in order to be liked.
- A leader who fears uncertainty may use leadership in order to gain a sense of control.
- A leader who fears vulnerability may use leadership as a way to “perform” in front of others and avoid being known deeply.
- A leader who fears failure may use leadership as a way to avoid risk.

This exercise is designed to help you begin to uncover and reflect upon some of your own insecurities, and see how they manifest themselves in your current leadership style.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Take some time to think about and write down short answers to these questions:

- What are you most afraid of as a leader?
- In your leadership, what do you seek to avoid at all costs?
- What *must* you have as a leader in order to be satisfied?
- What makes you angry or sad? Why?

- What voices do you hear in your head? (Write them down; record the contours of your self-talk.)
- “If people knew _____, they wouldn’t follow me.” What goes in the blank? Why do you think it’s true?

Now, reflect on what you’ve written. Can you see how you use leadership to assuage your own doubts, fears, and insecurities?

- Are you *posturing*—pretending to be someone you’re not?
- Are you *performing*—working hard to make yourself acceptable to God and others?
- Are you *panicking*—leading out of frenzy and anxiety rather than out of humble, restful confidence in God?
- Are you *passive*—avoiding certain aspects of leadership out of pride (I shouldn’t have to do that) or fear (I don’t know if I can do that)?

GOSPEL APPLICATION

In Jesus Christ, God accepts you and welcomes you just as you are. He knows everything about you. He is aware of all your under-confidence

and overconfidence, all your pride and fear, all your sin and selfishness—and he delights in you anyway, because of Jesus! There's nothing you can do as a leader to make him love you more, and nothing you can do as a leader to make him love you less. He invites you to come to him, right now, acknowledging everything you've written and turning to him for fresh provision, power, and hope.

The core sin under every other sin is *unbelief*—the refusal to rest in the promises, assurances, and truths of the gospel. In closing, reflect on the following questions, and turn to Jesus with each of your answers:

- How do your responses above show unbelief? What specific biblical truths are you treating as untrue?
- How do your responses above show self-protection? How are you avoiding really *needing* Jesus as Savior?

- How do your responses above show self-reliance? How are you avoiding complete dependence on the Holy Spirit?
- Are you willing to acknowledge your selfishness and go to Christ, needy and weak, for power and provision? Do so now. (Then, when you meet to discuss this exercise with others, do so together.)