



SHEPHERDING AN ANXIOUS CHURCH



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The Balcony and the Floor Overview of the Anxious Cultural Landscape

Question: Why are things often prettier from the balcony perspective? (AI)

"Prettier from the balcony" means that a view or scene looks more visually appealing when observed from a balcony, likely due to the elevated perspective, wider field of vision, and potential added elements like natural light or interesting surrounding architecture.

Key points about this phrase:

- **Elevated perspective:**
Looking down from a balcony can often provide a more panoramic and aesthetically pleasing view compared to ground level.
- **Wider field of vision:**
Balconies usually offer a broader view of the surrounding area, allowing you to see more interesting features.
- **Natural light:**
Depending on the time of day, a balcony can provide a beautiful perspective on the play of sunlight across a landscape.
- **Architectural framing:**
The balcony's design, like the railing or surrounding structure, can sometimes enhance the visual appeal of the view.

Example sentence: "The city skyline looked much prettier from the balcony of our hotel room, with the lights twinkling below."

"Prettier from the balcony, uglier from the floor" means something looks visually appealing when viewed from a high vantage point like a balcony, but appears less attractive when seen from a lower level, like the ground floor, implying a perspective-dependent flaw in its aesthetics.

Key takeaway: The phrase highlights how the viewing angle significantly affects how something looks, with a higher perspective potentially enhancing its visual appeal.

Scripture never lets us lose the balcony view of God's work, the church in particular

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." – Ephesians 3:14-21 (NIV)

Yet, we are ANXIOUS!

Cultural discontinuity

The general cultural discontinuity that began with the advent of postmodernity is characterized by a massive volume and frequency of change. More change is occurring in our time than in any other, and it is occurring more often and in less predictable ways. Pete Steinke observes:

“Throughout history, civilizations considered continuity to be the norm. No society before now has had to live with such sweeping, pervasive change. And the pace is not going to cease. People won't be able to say, ‘Is the change over? Is it time to stop?’ They will have to realize that change will be a continuous process, even the new normalcy. ...Periods of major transition (“becoming”) are indeed weird and strange. There is an increase in uncertainty. Uncertainty breeds anxiety, displayed on a broader scale by a rise in warfare, a deepening of internal discontent, a weakening of the moral ethos, institutional exhaustion and breakdown, a loosening of religious bonds, and an escalation of mental and emotional stress.”¹

Western affinity with anxiety

Social psychologists and philosophers have long noted that Western culture, more so than non-Western, has a special affinity with anxiety, even calling it “the most typical Western emotion.”² It is rooted in the tension between presumed entitlements of individualism, freedom, autonomy, scientific confidence, and the capacity to shape one’s future and control risks vs. the unpredictable realities that call these into question. On the one hand there is an uncertain future and the randomness of human existence, but on the other is the Western belief in attainable self-realization, self-gratification, and the capacity to make sense of one’s experience. We are caught in “the acrobatic exercise of coping with the unpredictability of the future, and the inconsistency of a pervasive attitude that we can plan our whole lives.”³

More recently, this chronic anxiety has been compounded by an “acceleration of systemic emergencies” such as terrorism, pandemic outbreaks, economic crisis, and social unrest. Even worse, there are no safe places immune to these threats. COVID was the great disrupter.

The Covid-19 pandemic crisis was an all-pervading source of anxiety, in social relations, in terms of impact on economic and healthcare systems, and for its capacity to reveal situations of scientific and practical ignorance. In this respect, the emotional spread of anxiety is related to the questioning of scientific knowledge, to the political capacity to react to the crisis rapidly, and to the necessity that individuals reorganize their everyday lives on the basis of unclear dispositions.⁴

Contributors to contemporary social anxiety

1. Economic uncertainty, e.g., inflation
2. Technostress – Techno-overload, techno-complexity, techno-invasion

¹ Steinke, *Creating Healthy Congregations Workshop*, Participant Guide, 28.

² Paoli Rebughini, “A Sociology of anxiety: Western modern legacy and the Covid-19 outbreak. *International Sociology*, 36 (4), 556. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0268580921993325> (accessed 2024-02-06).

³ Paoli Rebughini, 558.

⁴ Paoli Rebughini, 556.

3. Identity threats – Fear among those with a common identity (e.g., ethnic, national, economic, gender, sexual) that their identity status is declining or inhibited and anxious attempts to maintain, renew, or achieve status
4. Racism and racial inequality
5. Differing moral universes – Moral convictions emerging from opposing world views, with generosity and empathy with those who agree but dissociation, indignation, or even harmful postures toward those who differ.
6. Global nationalism – Nationalism and border reinforcements on every world continent (not just U.S.) that fears encroachment of outsiders, especially between poor and rich countries.
7. Contentious mass media and social media – Media that reinforces our divisions
8. The “Great Rewiring” of an entire generation’s social and intellectual development through social media and smartphones – social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, addiction (Jonathan Haidt)
9. Political polarization – Alignment at the extreme ends of the spectrum, diminishing center
10. Social sorting – Separation into exclusively like-minded groups with similar views which evolves into more extreme views
11. Random violence in schools, churches, and other settings

Key contributors as it relates to faith

There are many thoughtful explanations on how cultural anxiety manifests itself. As it relates to the disruption of churches and the leaders who serve them, several factors seem significant.

- Long-term secularization – shift from a time when we could not imagine a life without God to not being able to imagine life with God
- Uncentered expressive individualism
- Sexual revolution and sexualized identity
- Pervasive moral crisis
- Cultural warfare and identity-based power dynamics
- Radicalized social justice based on power, oppression, and group identities
- Cultural fragmentation
- Political polarization
- Historical generational phenomenon
- Overly permissive helping professions

The vulnerability of churches in anxious times

How does all of this apply to churches? Churches do not exist in a cultural vacuum. To the contrary, as organisms that are both divine and human, congregations both transcend *and* reflect the surrounding culture. In times such as we have today, the emotional processes of all individuals, families, and institutions are to some degree impaired. The more immature members of society slip into chronic anxiety, and even the more mature are less intentional in their behavior, *creating a condition of recurring incivility and stressful conditions for leaders*. Congregations and their leaders inevitably face these conditions. In fact, churches may be more vulnerable than most institutions. In non-religious bodies, there are controls and incentives that make it more difficult for people to displace their personal and family anxieties. These are places of low tolerance. Churches, however, are places of voluntary association where the rules of discipline are seldom practiced, conflict is most often fearfully avoided, sin is denounced only generally with no

specific target, and the leaders will abide virtually anything to keep everyone happy.⁵ They are places of high tolerance. In addition, “religion is an emotionally charged subject, and people typically surround the most meaningful and worthwhile areas of their lives with tripwires and alarms.”⁶ These factors make churches ripe environments for the highly anxious. The increasing levels of church conflicts would seemingly support this.

The New Aggressiveness⁷

Peter Steinke observes that in our congregations, today’s polarization is maintained by a bold competitiveness. The goal of conflict is to win. No thought is given to “we sink or swim together.” Instead, one party swims and the other must sink. The more aggressive behavior becomes, the more the objective shifts from wanting to win toward wanting to hurt. In congregations the aggression is seldom physical; it is more often psychological. Conflict is no longer a time for learning but for conquering. Domination supplants education. Civility and courtesy give way to sneers and shouting. Heat, not light, is the outcome. Forgiveness and reconciliation may not even be mentioned or considered..⁸

When anxiety results in such forceful competitions, we are apt to see the following:

- People function with the primitive brain, breaking everything into this or that, black or white, plus or minus. The primitive instinct narrows complexity into “we versus they.” Some gain support for their “side” by deepening the polarization, even promising to maintain it.
- Worse yet, when emotional juices are sprayed on the issues, fervor and passion knock reason out of the picture. The original differences themselves are no longer sustaining the differing. Emotionality drives the competition. When that happens, people will not respond to reasonableness, insight, or love. With the yes-or-no thinking dividing the house, the objective all comes down to winning. Bring down the enemy!
- Behaviors become more aggressive – shouting down the other side, belittling, using in-your-face tactics to intimidate, threatening legal action, stacking the deck with supporters.
- Lying increases in many forms – half truths, withholding information, inflating statistics, bloating claims, fabricating events, releasing private info publicly, and false attributions.
- Self-righteousness emerges. One party thinks she can use any means to achieve her end because her cause is “right.” No one plays by the rules now. A person takes any advantage he can, even introducing God as his ally.

Anxiety on the Congregational Level

Aside from the larger anxiety-provoking cultural issues that our church members experience, internal issues that can disrupt the equilibrium of the congregation. These can be upsetting enough on their own, but they usually occur in clusters. They function like tremors that open up fissures in the church landscape, causing anxiety to rise the surface, maybe even to the point of serious eruptions that threaten the church’s stability.

⁵See the excellent discussion by Gil Rendle, “The Illusion of Congregational ‘Happiness,’” in *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2001), 83-94.

⁶Kenneth Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church* (Augsburg, 1988), 39-40.

⁷Comments on “The New Aggressiveness” taken directly from Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times* (Alban Institute, 2006), 105-107.

⁸Steinke quotes Garrett Keizer, *The Enigma of Anger: Essays on a Sometimes Deadly Sin* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 88.

Congregational Major Occurrences and Chronic Conditions that Increase Anxiety⁹

Major Occurrences

- Departure of long-time, beloved minister
- Mismanagement of financial resources
- Minister sexually acting out
- New building program
- Forced resignation of a staff member
- Steady loss in membership
- Downturn in financial contributions
- Important changes in the lives of leaders (e.g. family)
- Intense staff conflict
- Catastrophe destroying physical facilities
- Informal, nagging complaints
- Sudden, violent death of children
- Economic depression in larger society
- Rift between congregation and judicatory
- Group of members leaving congregation

Chronic Conditions

- Decision making residing in hands of a few people
- Griping as a normative way of behavior
- Pastor dominating almost every aspect of congregational life
- Little accountability
- Perennial shortage of money
- Nothing really getting done
- A sense of boredom or depression
- Feeling of hopelessness
- Small group dominating
- Differences ignored if not discussed
- “Viruses” (secrets, blame, etc.) enabled
- Poor or inadequate facilities

Common Congregational Stressors

- Significant disagreement about values and goals
- Structure no longer fits the congregation’s size or is unclear.
- Clash over leaders’ perception of their roles and congregational expectations
- Clash between ministry staff and board or between staff members
- The new minister rushes into changes
- Communication lines are blocked.
- Church people manage conflict poorly.
- Imbalance of power among (power residing in a few who do not empower others)

Twelve Most Common Triggers of Anxiety in Congregations¹⁰

- Money
- Type of worship
- Issues involving sex/sexuality
- Pastor’s leadership style
- Old versus new
- Growth/survival
- Staff conflicts/resignation of staff member
- Internal or external focus (especially a shift from/to either)
- Major trauma, tension, or transition
- Harm done to a child/death of a child
- Property, building, space, territory
- Distance between the ideal and the real

⁹ From one of Peter L. Steinke’s classic texts on congregational leadership in anxious times. See Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 30-31.

¹⁰ From Pete Steinke, *Healthy Congregations Workshop 2*, “Session 1: Healthy Congregations Respond to Anxiety,” 12.



Ways in Which Anxiety Impairs Functioning in Unhealthy Systems¹¹

- Limit resiliency
- Lessen learning abilities
- Magnify differences between people and groups
- Constrain imaginative capacities
- Intensify the demand for certainty
- Increase the negative diagnosis of others
- Heighten secrecy, cover-ups, and covert activity
- Escalate the demand for immediate resolution/short-term relief
- Arouse the forces of togetherness (sameness, agreement)
- Prompt the willing of others (convert others to own position)
- Delay decision-making
- Spawn data
- Diminish self-awareness
- Erupt into mindless, automatic reactions
- Create cutoffs in important relationships

What anxious churches expect from leaders and the impact it has on them.¹²

1. Quick fix mentality
 - A. Demand for certainty
 - B. Seek symptom relief; cannot be patient
 - C. Turn away from addressing causes
 - D. All or nothing – win-lose
 - E. Force person who is “the problem” to leave (scapegoating)
2. Effect on leaders
 - A. Reactivity wears leaders down
 - B. Herding causes leaders to give up self, question their own value and efficacy
 - C. Blaming results in leaders being sabotaged
 - D. Quick fix mentality causes leaders to offer short-term solutions

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¹¹ From Pete Steinke, *Healthy Congregations Workshop 2*, “Session 1: Healthy Congregations Respond to Anxiety,” 14.

¹² Items 1-2 adapted from Richard Blackburn, *Leadership and Anxiety in the Church*, A-6.



The Anxiety Gap

“Leadership is almost always intuitive because leadership situations are fluid and dynamic. Most of the time we don’t exactly know what to do. We end up with a gap between not knowing what to do and needing to do something.

The gap is one of the most uncomfortable places to live because a leader feels immense internal and external pressure to do something. In that gap all kinds of interesting things emerge: a bubbling cauldron of anxiety, fear, childhood trauma, the stories we tell ourselves, idols, and more. All of these show up in leadership environments. So, as leaders live in the gap, they are faced with three options: (1) run from it and give up leading because it is too uncomfortable; (2) fake it and pretend they know what they are doing and thus build a chasm of hypocrisy; or (3) develop a capacity to “mind the gap.”

Minding the gap, as you might imagine, takes some sweat and tears, but the result can be a deeper level of freedom. When you find yourself in this gap, take a pause rather than blazing forward. If you pause and tune in to your inner dialogue, anxiety triggers, what makes you mad, who makes you mad, assumptions you bring into every leadership situation, how you manage mistakes and how they inform your leadership, you can be free of the recurring patterns that keep you stuck.

But not only that.

Equally interesting is the emotional context of every leadership situation. Because leadership involves at least one other person, it involves at least one other boiling collective. So, leadership becomes about the emotional context: yours and theirs. Managing anxiety under the surface: yours and theirs.

We begin by becoming more self-aware about how this unconscious material informs leadership. If a leader can think about the way he thinks, he can become a very powerful presence, able to understand himself and, most powerfully, able to become fully present to the people he is called to lead and serve.

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Every leader will find herself in an unfamiliar situation, no matter how much formal training or experience she has. He will make mistakes, deal with conflict, and change her leadership style to adapt to the organization. Every leader can benefit from a set of tools that help develop a hyperawareness to what is going on under the surface, in the mind and in the body. This hyperawareness offers the leader a rare gift of being able to manage, rather than be managed by, all this subtext.”

Adapted from Steve Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety: Yours and Theirs* (Thomas Nelson, 2019), 5-6.

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Work from the Balcony #1: Transcend Anxiety as a Non-Anxious Presence

Leaders cannot stay ahead or even abreast of an anxious culture

There are too many forces beyond our control that perpetuate it. Instead, leaders must stay *above* the anxiety. “In anxious environments, leaders leverage influence through being the non-anxious presence.”¹³

Key idea: a more connected world is a more conflicted and therefore anxious world.

The digital network has made the cost of communication small; this means that large organizations and institutions can quickly find themselves in a losing battle against the formerly powerless. ...

For public-facing organizations and institutions, this creates a hazardous environment. Institutions that try to stay out of the conflicts of the networked world find themselves being drawn into culture war battles in the digital network, calibrated to react to the smallest inputs. Even silence can be interpreted as a form of communication. The centralized organizations of the Industrial Age held communications dominance.

...Denominations and influential churches also maintained communications dominance, spreading their values and vision through books, broadcasts, magazines, and resources. The structure of the media landscape enabled them to pursue their plans of discipleship and mission with an informational monopoly.

...However, with the advent of social media, the public possesses access to exponentially stronger feedback loops. Any person with access to the internet can comment on a multinational corporation’s Facebook page for no cost. Activists of all persuasions and beliefs have noted the hypersensitivity and reactivity of our digital world and use this to their advantage, applying pressure on larger organizations through online feedback to advance their goals.

...In a decentralized world, organizations, institutions, and churches can find themselves entangled in cultural battles as groups within their ranks create new feedback loops of discontent. Organizations and institutions contain boundaries and borders. However, in a network, there are few boundaries. Networks bring what was far close and what was formerly outside inside. In our previous phase, we often worried that Christians would hide away from the world in a Christian bubble, distracted with their doctrinal squabbles. This scenario is now smashed. The network’s connectivity and the disruptions that decentralization brings mean that there is no place to stand apart from the world. Cultural and political battles crash into congregations and denominations, replacing the in-house doctrinal squabbles and worship wars of the past.

In the networked world, even the most committed believer will consume only a fraction of the information and input from their church compared to what they consume via podcasts, YouTube, and Netflix. The digital network is now our primary formational environment. It shapes our opinions, values, and worldview. Today, the average churchgoer will Google a problem before they approach their pastor. The digital network is the primary shaper of their theological, political, and cultural worldview.

...This creates a new and challenging environment for the church. A congregation may be physically present within their church, but their primary influence comes from the digital networks to which they are connected. Those preaching and communicating can find themselves outmaneuvered by one or many competing factions within their church that advance the goals and worldview of outside networks. These outside networks could be political movements, conspiracy theories, nationalist movements, social networks, causes, or migrant diasporas.¹⁴

¹³ Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders* (Moody Publishers, 2022), 100.

¹⁴ Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence*, 93-96.

Anxiety breeds social herding, adapting to the most reactionary, emotionally immature members as a means of “unity” and keeping everyone happy

As a system overrun by anxiety becomes more reactive, it trends toward what Friedman labeled a herd instinct, in which “everyone will be emotionally fused with everyone else.” This creates a dynamic in which “the desire for good feelings rather than progress will on its own promote togetherness over individuality.” With the system rearranging itself to cater to the most emotionally unhealthy, those who wish to reflect, gain some distance to find perspective, or practice emotional health will pose a threat.

For example, a leader who decides to confront the issue of toxic political polarization within those they lead will often find others cautioning against such a remedy, instead recommending that leaders avoid upsetting either side.

Those wishing to chart a healthier direction will face tremendous pressure to adapt to the low emotional health that has captured the system. Any goals or programs of an institution that becomes overtaken by chronic anxiety will be replaced by the task of keeping the most dysfunctional members happy. Friedman saw this dynamic as cultlike. In this scenario, appeals to unity and inclusivity are masquerades to resist growth and any attempts at emotional renewal. Eventually, the herd instinct, rooted in emotional toxicity, will lead to fragmentation and falling out, as dysfunctional members of the system turn on each other.

Those within the system no longer act rationally, but rather, high emotion becomes the dominant form of interaction. The system’s focus is directed toward the most emotionally immature and reactive members. Those who are more mature and healthy begin to adapt their behavior to appease the most irrational and unhealthy. This creates a scenario where the most emotionally unhealthy and immature members in the system become de facto leaders, shaping the emotional landscape with the focus on their negative behavior and what they see as the negative behavior of others. The anxiety present envelops the vision of the organization within the system.

In a chronically anxious system, Friedman argued, “The more aggressive members are in a perpetually argumentative stance, and the more passive are in a constant state of flinch.” Conflict and retreat become the dominant modes of engagement with others. It becomes nearly impossible to gain any distance from an issue; reaction, hurt, and high emotions replace contemplation and thoughtfulness. Reflection is replaced by reactivity.

We see this mood everywhere today—social media interactions, political discourse, even within churches and families. As tools for gaining space and relief from an issue, humor, irony, and satire are lost. To the emotionally immature, everything becomes at best a slight, at worst a direct assault. Feelings become all-powerful and fragile all at the same time. Conflict, sexual activity, and even violence become normative forms of social engagement and interaction within a chronically anxious system’s network of human relationships.

It becomes nearly impossible for the healthier members of a system or its leadership to see the bigger issue and tackle systemic issues because the focus is brought back to the latest crisis and the feverish emotional responses that are swamping the network.¹⁵

The self-differentiated leader as a non-anxious presence

1. Forty years ago, Ed Friedman, penned his classic *Generation to Generation* (1985). It is still regarded as required reading in most seminaries. He coined the term, the *non-anxious presence*. It refers to a person (or group) who can remain calm and centered in the midst of anxiety or chaos, essentially acting as a stabilizing force by not getting swept up in the emotional reactivity of others.

¹⁵ Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence*, 97-99.

Friedman gave another term for the same concept, the *self-differentiated* leader. The well-differentiated leader is not an autocrat who tells others what to do or orders them around, although any leader who defines himself or herself clearly may be perceived that way by those who are not taking responsibility for their own emotional being or destiny. I mean someone who has *clarity about his or her own life goals*, and, therefore, someone who is less likely to become lost in the anxious emotional processes swirling about. I mean someone who can separate while still remaining connected, and therefore can maintain a modifying, non-anxious, and sometimes challenging presence. I mean someone who can manage his or her own reactivity to the automatic reactivity of others, and therefore be able to take stands at the risk of displeasing.¹⁶

Friedman presents the need for

clarity and decisiveness in a civilization that inhibits the development of leaders with clarity and decisiveness. ...For leaders who question the widespread triumphing of data over maturity, technique over stamina, and empathy over personal responsibility. ...The emphasis [should be] on strength, not pathology; on challenge, not comfort; on self-differentiation, not herding for togetherness.¹⁷

2. Peter Steinke, a student of Friedman, took his concepts and applied them to contemporary congregational life. He offers an excellent comparison of self-differentiated and undifferentiated leadership¹⁸

Undifferentiated	Self-differentiated
1. Quickly offended, easily provoked, too sensitive, slow to recover,	1. Self-managing, shapes the environment, resourceful.
2. Reactive, instinctive, automatic.	2. Responsive, intentional, thoughtful
3. Underhanded, covert, flourishes in the dark.	3. Open, light-shedding, aware
4. Demanding, willful, stubborn, resistant (especially to reason and love), unbending	4. Resilient, has sense of proportion
5. Think in black/white or yes/no, intolerant of ambiguity, seek final solution, want all or nothing.	5. Have breadth of understanding, allow time for things to process
6. Blame, criticize, displace, fault-finding, have poor discrimination	6. Take responsibility for self, learn when challenged, define self from within self
7. Uptight, serious, defensive	7. Relaxed, at ease, sensible
8. Competitive, either with or against, see life as a contest, contemptuous	8. Take turns, collaborate, stay in touch even when tension grows
9. Vague, non-specific, cloaked	9. Clear, objective, purposeful
10. Create too much or too little space and one-sided solutions	10. Create space, options, and common goals

¹⁶ Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick-Fix, 10th Anniversary Edition* (The Edwin Friedman Trust), 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁸ Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works*, pp. 11, 91-92.

The leader's greatest influence is PRESENCE, more than intelligence, training, or skill

Friedman argued that the most vital attribute to lead, especially in anxious human environments and systems, was a non-anxious presence. Thus, the leader's chief tool of influence is their presence.

Think of it this way. You are in a room with a large group listening to a lecture given by officials. Halfway through the presentation, smoke begins to fill the space. Someone screams, "FIRE!" Panic begins to grip the room. The exit seems to be blocked. All eyes turn to the officials at the front of the room. Yet they also seem to be so overcome with panic that they cry, scream, and shake. Then a woman emerges from the crowd, steadily walking up to the podium. In a calm but firm voice, she assures everyone that there is another exit at the back of the room, declares that everything will be okay, and asks people to leave via the rear door in a calm and orderly manner. In this scenario, who is the leader? Before the smoke appeared, most people would have seen the officials standing at the front of the room as the leaders. However, once the crisis arrived and panic and anxiety swept through the room, the calm and non-anxious woman who addressed the crowd would be seen by most as the leader. The lesson? In an anxious, crisis-driven environment, the leadership leverage comes from a non-anxious presence.

For Friedman, the non-anxious leader played the role within an emotionally unhealthy social system akin to the role that white blood cells play in the human body, fighting infection and bringing the system back to health. Just as anxiety can multiply throughout a system, Friedman argued that non-anxiousness could similarly reset a system. "Leaders function as the immune systems of the institutions they lead—not because they ward off enemies but because they supply the ingredients for the system's integrity," Friedman counsels.

However, to do this, the leader who wishes to operate as a non-anxious presence within an emotionally unhealthy system must understand a fundamental principle. So vital was this principle that Friedman labeled it "the keys to the kingdom." The fundamental principle was to remain present within the unhealthy environment while enduring the sabotage, backlash, and undermining that leaders inevitably face when trying to act as non-anxious presences in anxious social systems.

As the leader faces this backlash, the great danger is that anxiety will rise within them, enveloping them and making them part of the problem rather than the solution. The leader would then have what Friedman labeled as a "Failure of Nerve." Therefore, leaders who wish to be a non-anxious presence must keep their nerve and push through the backlash, sabotage, betrayal from friends and colleagues, criticism, and emotional pain, and keep growing toward the higher vision in a non-anxious way.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence*, 101.

Work from the Balcony #2: Nourish the Soul of Your Presence

Up to this point, I have used the term *non-anxious presence*. Actually, this is humanly impossible. We can, however, become *less* anxious. We do this through *self-awareness* and *spiritual nourishment*.

Self-awareness

All of the literature on self-differentiated leadership is based on family systems theory, especially the work of Murray Bowen, which has as one of its main tenets that we receive our emotional hardwiring from our families of origin.²⁰ This means that our capacity toward calm, purposeful, and reflective leadership depends on becoming aware of the deep-seated narratives that shape our emotional maturity. This usually requires long work in intentional leadership communities that use tools such as family genograms and reflective practice. This may not be accessible or desired for most appointed church leaders. This does not diminish the need for self-awareness, however. As Ronald Richardson says, “To attain this calmness requires us to understand better where, with whom, in what circumstances, and in what ways we become anxious. ...Developing greater clarity about our own symptoms of anxiety and how we live them out within the system is critical to being more objective about the larger situation.”²¹ There’s really no way around this.

Even if one does not engage in this deep work, four consistent practices are helpful.

1. *Increase your self-awareness* – Reactivity usually occurs outside of our awareness. With practice over time, however, we can learn to observe and disrupt our anxious responses. Growing our awareness of the presence of anxiety increases our capacity to notice our reactive behavior.
2. *Monitor your thinking patterns* – We all have patterned ways of thinking. A variety of influences have shaped those patterns, among them personal temperament, the functionality of our family of origin, and the stability of the settings in which we live and minister. David Burns has identified twelve common patterns that result from increased anxiety in a system. These include all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, disqualifying the positive, jumping to conclusions, fortune-telling, labeling or mislabeling, etc.
3. *Manage your feelings* – Leaders who want to become less anxious learn to monitor their feelings. When life experiences produce intense feelings, a leader takes responsibility for identifying and processing them appropriately. There is a practice that has proven helpful for some. When you can identify a feeling, go through a three-stage process. First, name it. Say, “I’m feeling mad” (or scared or sad). Second, own it. Say, “This feeling is mine to manage. It is not the responsibility of anyone else.” Third, ask, “What is this feeling trying to tell me?” Get curious and explore the circumstances in which the feeling arose. This may reveal that we feel threatened when there is no real threat. Something has triggered our chronic anxiety. Engaging in curiosity makes that clearer, and the very process of being curious turns down the volume on anxiety.

²⁰ For an extensive list of resources on this subject, see the Ministry Resource Guide, “Emotional Systems, Self-Differentiation, Non-Anxious Presence,” on my website, *LifeandLeadership.com*, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/leadership-approaches-emotional-systems-self-differentiation/>

²¹ Ronald Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 173-174.

4. *Slow the pace* – This is accomplished first through spiritual disciplines. Throughout the ages, the church has found the classic disciplines of the Christian faith to be the resource for keeping followers of Christ connected to his life and power. Prayer, fasting, solitude, silence, and worship are but a few disciplines that, when engaged, allow the leader to reflect on his or her life. Second, four other practices are helpful in the moment: clarify before responding, breathe and count, wait to respond, ask for a time-out.²²

Spiritual nourishment

The emphasis on spiritual work cannot be overstated. Herrington, Creech, and Taylor express this beautifully.

The emotional maturity that we are calling “differentiation of self” does not happen by accident. It is not enough to want to be mature or to learn a way of appearing mature to others. True maturity comes from pursuing training in godliness (1 Tim. 4:7–8). This is the role of the spiritual disciplines in our lives.

Unfortunately, immature and destructive reactions are built into our human nature. That is, it is easier for us to react instinctively out of our anxiety than it is to choose to respond thoughtfully out of our values. Paul spoke of this in Romans 7 as sin embodied in the flesh. Even when we want to do good, we often find it easier to act sinfully, imprisoned by the “law of sin” at work in our bodies (Rom. 7:15–24).

This automatic, emotional reactivity is what must be modified if we are to function with a higher level of differentiation. Paul makes it clear in Romans 8 that only the indwelling, powerful work of the Holy Spirit can overcome the automatic reactions of our sinful nature. Good intentions can’t; wishful thinking can’t; even willpower can’t. This is where the spiritual disciplines come in.

Spiritual disciplines are the means by which these automatic reactions are ultimately changed. The disciplines work to rewire our automatic reactions, offering us options about how to respond in a given situation. We no longer have to react as we once did. In fact, practicing the spiritual disciplines helps us see ourselves and the rest of the system with clarity and divinely guided insight so that we can make our choice based on God’s revealed truth rather than on the pressures brought to bear on us by the system.²³

²² The four practices summarize Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and Robert Creech, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation, Second Edition* (Baker Books, 2020), 79-87.

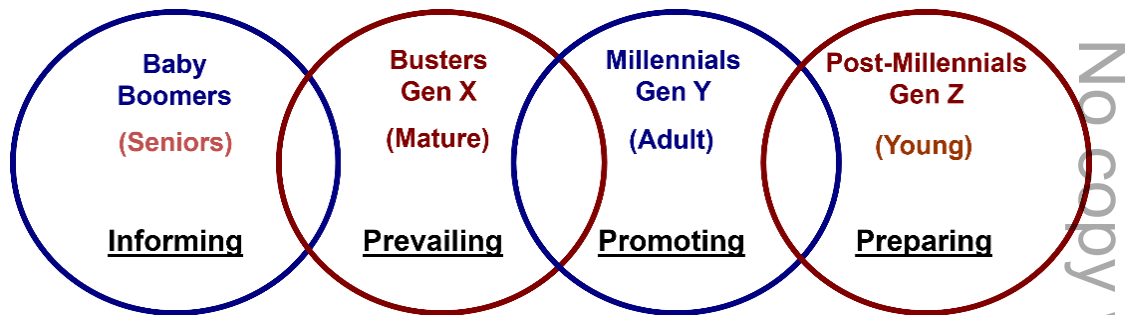
²³ Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, *The Leader’s Journey*, 155.

Work from the Balcony #3: Provide Your People with Clarity

We may underestimate the need for clarity

When the baby-boom generation ascended to leadership in the Churches of Christ, they addressed the areas where they had experienced the most pain in their formative years regarding legalism, abrasiveness, exclusivism, irrelevance to the surrounding culture, narrowly defined gender roles, and formalism in worship. They have replaced (or are replacing) these with good-intentioned efforts at becoming more grace-oriented, empathetic, nonsectarian, relevant, gender sensitive (at varying levels), and celebrative. Even our more conservative churches are fond of saying, “We’ve let go of a lot of our _____” (fill in the blank). Much of this was/is good and needed.

Many elders and ministers of that boomer group (age 59-78), alongside many members, are still reacting to the church of their youth, and seeking to achieve the “wins” against the legalism that the prevailing generation of their formative years stymied or disallowed.



They may forget that the distance between now and 1980 is the same as the distance between 1980 and 1935. Not only has there been an astounding volume and magnitude of cultural change since 1980, we are also experiencing the only two generations that were raised entirely under the postmodern ethos. This cultural influence, alongside the emphases the boomer adults have passed on to them, gave them a faith that many sociologists of religion call “moral therapeutic deism.”

Moral Therapeutic Deism describes a belief system where a distant, benevolent God exists who created the world and wants people to be good and happy, with the primary goal of life being personal happiness and feeling good about oneself. This essentially views God as a cosmic helper who intervenes only when needed to solve problems, with no strong emphasis on specific religious doctrines or practices beyond the general morality of kindness and seeking the common good (i.e., “human flourishing”). This concept is often associated with a more casual approach to religion, particularly among younger people in the United States. But before we react to this, we must own up to the fact that we are the ones who passed this on to them.

Fast-forward to 2025. While baby boomer elders may be anchoring their accomplishments against legalism, the younger population behind them may have never realized those battles were necessary. What they experience is a cultural milieu that is bereft of clarity – spiritually, morally, and philosophically. This partially explains a resurgence of interest in Calvinism, gravitation toward orthodox groups (e.g., Anglican Church of North America), and the popularity among Christian young men in cultural figures such as Jordan Peterson. This is not necessarily a majority of our youth or even younger adult generations, but it is safe to say that the challenges in reaching them are different than we may suppose. It is not a time for sanctified uncertainty.

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The relationship between clarity and anxiety

As we have seen, the need for clarity comes alongside our chronic anxiety, which has two effects. First, anxiety can normalize indecisiveness and ambiguity to accommodate the fear of aligning with one extreme and alienating the other. Also, the CofC bears two characteristics that create an inherent aversion to well-defined faith. One is our historical rejection of formal creeds. The other, as described above, is a desire to reverse a history of doctrine that was too systematized and narrow, creating sometimes visceral reactions that label clarity as non-virtuous or even abusive.

The second effect of anxiety on the need for clarity is the tendency of anxious people to gravitate toward the most extreme expressions of the polarized culture. People look for order in chaotic times, especially if that “order” offers a quick and decisive fix to the evils of the other side. This leads to adopting false and unreasonable ideologies that “straw man” the opposition and give one’s own side the win. Charismatic leaders who present as dogmatic and articulate often hold sway, as to where those who demonstrate moderation and reasonableness are criticized for failing to “man-up” and “step-up” out of their “insecure” “both-sideism.” This pressures leaders to take sides with their closest associates, even against their best judgment. The price for not doing so can be devastating socially and professionally.

But shouldn't today's leaders have a tolerance for ambiguity?

Yes, in one sense. Prominent authors such as Ronald Heifetz²⁴ emphasize “leader behaviors critical for survival in contemporary organizations are best achieved by those who have a tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty.”²⁵ They define ambiguity as uncertainty emerging out of three contexts: 1) a completely new situation in which there are no familiar cues, 2) a complex situation in which there are a great number of cues to be taken into account, and 3) a contradictory situation in which different elements of cues suggest different structures – in short, situations characterized by novelty, complexity, or insolubility.”²⁶ Effective leaders, they argue, “perceive ambiguous situations as desirable,” and ineffective leaders “interpret ambiguous situations as sources of threat.”²⁷

The leadership that results from this kind of tolerance for ambiguity is called “adaptive” vs. “technical.” Technical leadership is that which has clear goals, clear technology to accomplish the goals, experts who skillfully use the technology, and narrowly confined constituencies to judge whether the goals have been met. For example, if a church needs a capital campaign, there are experts to help you raise money and build a new sanctuary.

By contrast, adaptive challenges arise, according to Heifetz, “when our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge.” Such challenges are “distressing for the people going through them. They need to take on new roles, new relationships, new values, new behaviors, and new approaches to work.” Adaptive problems will not go away no matter how many “solutions” a

²⁴Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Harvard University Press, 1998); and David Wilkinson, *The Ambiguity Advantage: What Great Leaders Are Great At* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

²⁵Michael S. Lane and Karin Klenke, “The Ambiguity Tolerance Interface: A Modified Social Cognitive Model for Leading Under Uncertainty,” *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2004): 69.

²⁶Lane and Klenke, citing S. Budner, “Intolerance of Ambiguity as a Personality Variable,” *Journal of Personality* 30: 30.

²⁷Lane and Klenke, 30.

congregation throws at them. Hiring a new music minister will not address the generational division that creates tension over worship style. The problem is too complex to simply fix. It is adaptive, not technical.²⁸

How does a Christian leader today cope with such ambiguity and function effectively? Among other things, he must have a clear sense of “first importance” beliefs and unambiguous operational values to govern behavior and guide decisions. On the one hand, leaders must acknowledge the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in leadership situations, and expect the accentuation of this uncertainty in anxious times. But the same uncertainty should not characterize one’s beliefs and values. Whether articulated or intuitive, a leader must know his or her personal manifesto of beliefs, and must be the agent of that clarity among those he leads. “This is the faith I am unwaveringly committed to,” and values, “This is the character I will consistently reflect and the outcomes I will unflinchingly pursue.”

Anxious congregations are like turbulent waves that buffet and politicize leaders, treating them as elected representatives and pressuring them to cave in to dissent or to champion any number of competing agenda. They demand quick solutions, often calling for “decision!” and “direction!” with the double-binding implication that it be to their liking. If a leader’s inner system of beliefs and values is chaotic, it makes him or her vulnerable to being intimidated by the most articulate or forceful factions. Yet if a leader’s soul is secured by solid principles, it minimizes the tug-of-war and allows one to lead from a confident spiritual center.

Some analogies help. One analogy is these principles function as life anchors that keep a leader from being swept into the emotional and philosophical riptides encountered in leadership situations. Thus equipped, a leader is not easily politicized, polarized, or threatened. Another analogy is that beliefs function as a kind of semi-permeable membrane that allows the leader to traverse in a world of competing beliefs, with the healthy immunity to accept what is of self and reject what is not of self. Certainly there may still be due process, principled compromise, proximate solutions, and a host of other realities that typify the dance of leadership. But to follow the dance analogy, the dance will be done with a kind of surefootedness of a clear belief system. This surefootedness is worthless without a solid floor to dance on. Strong beliefs and values are the sturdy floor and skilled feet that are required for the challenging dance of leadership.

Clarity is HEALTHY

Several prominent writers highlight this, such as John Maxwell and Brene Brown.²⁹ One of my favorite expressions as it relates to church leadership is from Peter Steinke’s discussion of *congregational health promoters*.

1. *A Sense of Purpose* – Healthy congregations are purposeful, intentional. They keep asking, “What is God calling us to do? What is the meaning of what we do? They have a working vision that conveys the message that together they can influence their future. “If your line of vision is even with the floor, you can starve to death in a full pantry.” (Leland Kaiser) People

²⁸Summary of Ronald Heifetz and D. Laurie, “The Work of Leadership,” *Harvard Business Review* (January-February, 1997) by Scott Cormode, “Multi-Layered Leadership: The Christian Leader as Builder, Shepherd, and Gardener,” *Journal of Religious Leadership*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Fall 2002).

²⁹See Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (Random House, 2018), especially the section, “The Call to Courage,” 45-68; also John Maxwell, *Leading in Polarized Times*, John C. Maxwell blog, November 13, 2018, <https://www.johnmaxwell.com/blog/leading-in-polarized-times/>

will hesitate to follow leaders who avoid stressful conditions and will not take clear action. Leaders create conditions that make something new possible.

2. *A Sense of Coherence* – Healthy congregations have the belief that all of life coheres in a meaningful way and that all things will work out. This sense of coherence has three parts.
 - *Meaningfulness*: Because life matters, they involve themselves in what is done. They believe the outcome their response is of value.
 - *Manageability*: They have a sense of control, a sense of being able to influence events. They believe they can, insofar as possible, shape their destiny. They believe the resources are available to act effectively. They believe their response will lead to valued outcome.
 - *Comprehensibility*: They judge reality soundly. Knowing there is little danger in viewing the world as a challenge, they must make sense of confusion and change. They use information as a stimulus for growth. They believe the valued outcome will be health promoting.

This sense of coherence helps congregations appraise tension more realistically and less anxiously. It allows them to make more resourceful responses to challenges and stressors.

3. *Clarity* – Healthy congregations are always working on clarity, whether clarity of beliefs, direction or responsibility. Healthier congregations will work for concreteness and specificity. They are clear about what is and what is not beneficial to their well-being. They stay healthy because their immune system is intact, and they can detect illness at its source. Less healthy congregations will allow more fuzziness, indecisiveness, vagueness, and secrets or disguises. Just as when someone looks at a blurred picture in a movie will eventually become angry, confused and disinterested, the same occurs in an unhealthy church. Clarity, however, keeps people's attention and mobilizes their energy.³⁰

Occasions for clarity, individually and in church governance

We have already seen that in anxious times, churches, not unlike the rest of society, crave certainty. They become susceptible to polarized extreme viewpoints. There is widespread recognition that the line between politics and religion is blurred, and for many, politics is religion. And the divide is deep.

In addition, many sociologists are convinced that in the aftermath of the social upheaval of the COVID crisis, one of the reasons why church attendance declined is that people were processing their options ideologically. As they returned, they sorted themselves into churches that align with their political priorities and opinions. In communities with fewer congregations to choose from, people still co-exist with their social, political, cultural, and religious tensions.

In this environment, churches often pressure their leaders either into demands for hardline political alignment or retreat into theological and ideological vagueness. Both instincts express the desire for sameness. One wants sameness through complete unanimity, the other wants sameness through suspending the need for clarity. One wants all controversial issues to be addressed by the leaders, with the tacit contract that the conclusion is agreeable to them. The other wants no controversial issue be addressed, with the desire for everyone to be comfortable.

³⁰Summary of Peter L. Steinke, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Rowman and Littlefield / Alban Institute, 1996, 2006), 28-32.

Inevitably, there will be those times that require you to articulate where you stand. This happens in three ways – informal conversations, formal expressions of congregational beliefs, topical deliberations on congregational issues, and strategic affirmations of mission and vision.

Informal conversations between leaders and congregants

We start here because it is perhaps the most challenging of all aspects of self-differentiated leadership. It is one thing to be able to stand behind formal expressions of culture and make group decisions in congruence with them (see below). It is another feat altogether to consistently represent oneself and the decisions of the stewarding body in informal conversations where the weight of relational history, emotional connections, and even friendship hang in the balance. This is where leaders are most often triangled into exchanges that compromise their perceived strength of will and emotional stamina. There is no way to prepare for each of these exchanges. It is only the hard work of becoming more self-differentiated generally in all its aspects that provides the emotional and relational muscle and finesse to make these exchanges healthy and productive.

Make no mistake, however. These conversations are among the most determinative culture shapers of all leadership communication. The renowned MIT organizational psychologist, Edgar Schein, stressed how in any organization the casual conversations and interactions between members, where they share information about the organizational culture, can reveal underlying assumptions and beliefs that are not readily apparent in formal communication - essentially representing the "deepest level" of the organizational ethos according to Schein's iceberg model.³¹

Formal expressions of congregational beliefs

The New Testament presents three dimensions of congregational belief that may merit written statements

Theological dimension of orthodox belief

- Strong dimension: Affirmation of those truths that are foundational to the existence of the Christian faith (1 Timothy 3:16); submission to apostolic teaching and authority (Acts 2:42); growing in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:14-18).
- Weak dimension: Deceptive and/or divisive, immoral or greedy attempts to lead others astray (Acts 20:29; Romans 16:16-18; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:9-10; 2 Peter 2); denial of foundational truths (Galatians 1:6-9; 1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 John 9-10); defiance against apostolic teaching and authority (1 Corinthians 14:36-37; 2 Corinthians 13:10-11, "listen to my appeal")

The moral dimensions of holy living

- Strong dimension: Gracious and compassionate expression of difficult moral issues. Penitent and confessional forsaking of sin (Ephesians 5:3; 1 John 1:5-2:2; 1 John 3:7-8), compassionate, humble engagement with those who are "caught up" in sin (2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 6:1-5).

³¹ See Meredith Sommers, "5 Enduring Management Ideas from MIT Sloan's Edgar Schein," *Ideas Made to Matter: Insights for your Work from MIT Experts* (MIT Sloan School of Management, February 9, 2023), <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/5-enduring-management-ideas-mit-sloans-edgar-schein>.

- Weak dimension: Impenitent, insistent, licentious practice of sin, especially when others are led astray (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:9-11), or when one's influence in an area of liberty may lead another into sin (1 Corinthians 8:8-13).

Social dimension of love and unity

- Strong dimension: 1) Endeavoring to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3); 2) placing the interests of my brothers and sisters above my own (John 13:34-35, Philippians 2:5-11); 3) cooperatively placing myself under the guidance of godly leadership (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Hebrews 13:17)
- Weak dimension: Sowing discord or in other ways showing unloving behaviors (Titus 3:9-10), especially in an unwillingness to confess brotherly wrongs and reciprocate in conciliatory gestures (Matthew 18:15-20).

An excellent example of this kind of clarity is the belief statement of the Trader's Point Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana. Consult the Appendix for a copy of this statement.

Topical deliberations on congregational issues

This is when leadership bodies consider issues affecting congregational faith and life. There are at least four stages to these official deliberations:

Exploration – Leadership Team and prayerfully studies Scripture and relevant documents among themselves, and respectfully exchange viewpoints.

- Provide personal, process and product satisfaction at all stages of the discussion.
- Answer the “why” questions. The first question the congregation will ask.
- Inhabit the highest spiritual and missional motivations as guiding values for the conversations.
- Listen carefully to the lived experience of persons who are most deeply affected.
- Follow practices of civil conversation.
- Affirm each other at regular intervals.
- Maintain ownership in the process.

Determination – Leadership Team and arrives at a shared understanding of their position on the issue, expressed in a refined statement (internal) and teaching strategy (external).

- Assess congregational readiness.
- Revisit the exploration practices and consider important unfinished work.
- Be realistic, both in terms of possibilities and potential pushback.
- Prepare teaching and (eventually) draft an internal policy statement.
- Pursue unity and mission concurrently without letting the challenges of one obstruct the other.
- Balance courage with compassion.

Instruction – Leadership Team shares the fruit of their study with the congregation, in a manner that allows them opportunities of exploration, exchange, and input in congregational direction/activation.

- Choose a teaching strategy that respects your congregation's need for processing.

- Revisit your policy document (which was internal up to this point) based on congregational feedback – focus group, anxious anticipations, pastoral anticipations.

Activation – Leadership Team and congregation act in unity on the implications of their deliberations.

- Operate congruently with your key motivations as derived in the "why" question of the exploration phase.
- Implement the full latitude of your communicated decision within a brief time frame.
- Manage roll-out through less anxious leadership.

Strategic affirmations of mission and vision

These are the careful expressions of mission, vision, values, and congregational identity that define the church's reason for existence, the way it conducts ministry, the future it longs for and seeks to create, as well as the essential character of congregational life.

Most statements in this respect feel quite “corporate” and “technical.” To spur your imagination for mission articulations that are more vibrant and compelling, consider the Appendix – “Christian Mission and Hope, Statements from Tim Keller.”

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Work from the Balcony #4: Transcend Cultural Polarization

Growing up in my Republican-only context. I quickly absorbed all the values of the Right: pro-military, pro-guns, anti-abortion, pro-death-penalty, anti-feminism, anti-welfare. Any concern for the environment would tag you as the worst possible thing: a liberal. There was little wiggle room to embrace some of these values while rejecting others—you weren't supposed to be against abortion and the death penalty. The political right handed me a complete, prepacked ethic. And though I was told it was biblical, I don't think it had been thoroughly washed through Scripture.

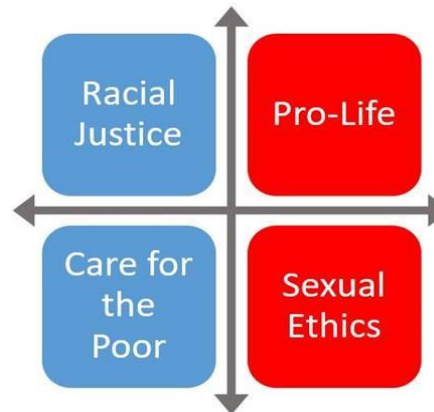
I see the same thing among Democrats: pro-choice, anti-guns, pro-gay-marriage, pro-universal-health-care, pro-LGBTQ-rights, anti-anything-Donald-Trump-has-ever-said-in-his-entire-life. Partisan allegiance creates a kind of in-group pressure to toe the party line in every way and prevents you from celebrating something Republicans might value, even if that particular value resonates with the way of Jesus.

I think we need to be extremely cautious about the effects this kind of groupthink has on the way we see the world. When a group demands our allegiance to their way of thinking, this hinders our ability to embrace Christ's upside-down ethic.

Preston M. Sprinkle, *Exiles: The Church in the Shadow of Empire* (David C. Cook Publishers), 150.

Scripture, not culture, must animate our political convictions and alignments

The late Tim Keller used this grid to show that historical Christian positions on controversial issues do not fit with America's two-party political system. Note the "red and blue" distinction. At some risk of oversimplification, Democrats fall along the blue areas and Republicans the red areas. Based on this, if you are more concerned about abortion, changing sexual mores, and the severe secularization of the public square, then you will tend to vote Republican. If you are more concerned about racial discrimination, marginalization of the poor, and the erosion of the environment, then you will tend to vote Democrat.



Of course, the reality is that Scripture upholds all of these concerns, and neither political party is driven by the breadth, balance, or basis of biblical ethical teachings. Christians should be committed to all four areas. Some may be excited about what the Bible says about justice but lack enthusiasm over what the Bible says about sexuality, or vice versa. When this happens, we are not letting the Bible animate us, we are letting the culture animate us. We must immerse ourselves in the word to maintain the biblical integration that puts these emphases together.³²

³² From Keller's dialogue with Carey Nieuwhof, "What I Learned from Tim Keller About Reaching Post-Christian America," *Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, May 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNve3Hexh28>.

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Christians must “reduce the heat” of polarization by distinguishing between moral principles and political strategies

Christians must maintain the distinctions between moral principles and political strategies. Moral principles are the commands of God, and even when social order upholds them, it is not always out of allegiance to God. Political strategies are fallible human efforts that hopefully nudge the culture to operate more closely in line with these principles. Efforts to uphold all the principles of a just and loving God are not served well by the two-party system. Our political system almost forces us to leave half our faith at the door – either personal morality or social morality.

Scripture teaches that we should strongly advocate for racial harmony, or more precisely, ethnic justice and reconciliation. “Race” is a social construct, ethnicity is a God-given identity, and all ethnicities are made in the image of God. Christians should also be deeply concerned about the poor and the marginalized, uphold the sanctity of human life from conception, and maintain the divine order on marriage, sexuality, and gender. In today’s political climate, some of these principles look conservative, some of them look liberal. Today, no political party or institution (outside of faithful churches) combines the full wealth of biblical morality and ethics. Yet, there is enormous pressure in our country for churches to major in some of them and minor in others.

Churches should become spaces where it is safe to disagree out of mutual commitment to truth

When voting, Christians must make choices based on their consciences as to what to emphasize or how to achieve the greatest common good. For example, all Christians recognize the need to respect the lives of the unborn, care for the poor, and welcome refugees, immigrants, and those who are suffering. When it comes to implementation, however, Christians honestly disagree. One who is pro-life may vote Democratic out of the pragmatics that fewer abortions occur when they are legally available. One who is deeply involved in helping immigrants achieve citizenship, even housing refugees, votes Republican out of the belief that secure borders, the rule of law, and clearer pathways to citizenship serve everyone’s best interests in the long run. Another believes the heart of God is always with the refugee and wants to keep the borders open. One believes the poor and the overall economy are best served through economic redistribution and stiffer taxation on the wealthy to provide for the less fortunate. Another believes the government should stay clear, and that deregulation spurs economic growth to everyone’s benefit, including the poor.

Our spirit toward those in the other party should be cordial, respectful, and humble. Unfortunately, there are few voices speaking with such tones in the political world today. Churches should be safe spaces for members to respectfully discuss their political differences. It’s crucial to differentiate these strategies from the core biblical values that unite the church community. When political strategy and higher principles are mixed, those with differing political views can be perceived as less faithful or spiritually credible, damaging relationships and creating distrust. By separating strategy and principle, members can recognize that political disagreement does not make someone an enemy of the Christian faith or of God. This fosters open communication and builds a more honest and supportive community.

While these discussions are not always realistic in many churches, with the right setup, they can be fruitful. Perhaps these ground rules could help: focus on listening, not arguing; keep that commitment; identify shared moral principles; accept disagreements; pray for one another; and celebrate the God who unites us in Christ as we engage in practices such as the Lords’s Supper.

Overarching principles to help us transcend political differences

Principle 1: Honor God's Sovereignty over National Governments

"Lord, the God of our ancestors, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you." 2 Chronicles 20:6

"The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us." Acts 17:24–27

"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." Romans 13:1-2

"God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 1 who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen." 1 Timothy 6:16

Principle 2: Emphasize God's Holy Nation over Earthly Nations

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." 1 Peter 2:9–10

"And they sang a new song, saying: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.'" Revelation 5:9-10

Principle 3: Affirm Primary Christian Identities over Secondary Identities

Primary – Divine image bearers (Genesis 1:27), disciples of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20, John 13:34-35), in Christ (Galatians 2:20, Philippians 3:5-9, Colossians 2:7), new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), saints (Romans 1:7), sinners saved by grace (Romans 3:23-24), children of God (Galatians 3:26-27), citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven (Philippians 3:20), people of God (1 Peter 2:9-10), God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:8-10), fellow citizens in the new humanity (Ephesians 2:11-22),

Secondary – Ethnicity, social status, gender (Galatians 3:28); tribe (Philippians 3:5-6); earthly citizenship (Philippians 3:20); political affiliation, etc.

Principle 4: Elevate Scripture Truth over Political Persuasion

Preston Sprinkle: "Christians should view ourselves as exiles living in the shadow of a foreign empire. This kind of perspective should cultivate a robust political identity from which we think

through various political questions today. One of my ultimate goals—one that’s pretty vanilla, if you think about it – is to shift our political conversations as Christians toward what the Bible actually says rather than what our favorite political pundits say. When faced with a question like “What’s your view of immigration?” I want to see Christians intuitively start that conversation by considering what the Bible says about immigrants. Or the question, “Are you a capitalist or democratic socialist?” Rather than parroting what your favorite political party tells you to say, I want your knee-jerk reaction to be to look to the Bible. And the confidence of your response should match the depth of your study of Scripture on economics. It actually has much to say.

Viewing ourselves as exiles living under a foreign empire should strengthen the church’s unity and group identity. Imagine a world where our common baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus bonds us together much more than our political views. Imagine a world where you feel closer to a fellow believer who voted differently than you do to someone who shares your political leanings. Imagine a world where being left wing or right wing aren’t the only options, where Christ’s kingdom creates a whole different way of viewing politics. I fear that we’ve so absorbed the narratives of our political surroundings that they’ve stunted our political and theological imagination. Secular politics has created a playing field with only the Left and the Right, liberals and conservatives. “Which one are you?” people ask. “Are you left or right?” I long for the day when Christians confidently smile at this question and answer, “I’m diagonal.”

To be clear, by renouncing the left/right political options and saying, “I’m diagonal,” I am not at all arguing for a centrist or moderate position that exists somewhere between the left/right options. Centrists are defined by the same political grid, whereas I’m arguing for a different grid altogether—a political identity that doesn’t derive from the secular left/center/right options. Exiles don’t have to let Babylon (or any empire where they live) determine what their moral grid looks like or what categories are available.”³³

Principle 5: Demonstrate Christian Witness over Political Influence

1 Peter 2:9-12 gives us a distinct identity that transcends any affiliation with a nation or political party. Peter calls us a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, tasked with proclaiming his excellencies. This witness involves exemplary Christian living, abstaining from worldly passions, and maintaining honorable conduct, so that our good deeds shine brightly, as Jesus instructs in Matthew 5:13-16, making us salt and light in the world. This means positively impacting those around us, not hiding our light or losing our distinct Christian character.

This becomes difficult when the church is politically polarized within. Jesus himself emphasized the importance of internal unity as a crucial part of our witness, stating in John 13:34-35 that love for one another is the defining characteristic of his disciples: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Francis Schaeffer, commenting on this passage, once said, "beauty in human relationships is the final apologetic." This internal unity, becomes a powerful testament to the transformative power of the Gospel. Paul's exhortation in Colossians 4:5-6 to "walk in wisdom toward outsiders" and let our speech be "gracious, seasoned with salt" also underscores the importance of how we engage with the world. Peter reinforces this in 1 Peter 3:15, urging us to be prepared to defend our hope with "gentleness and respect."

³³From Preston M. Sprinkle, *Exiles: The Church in the Shadow of Empire* (David C. Cook Publishers), 17-18.

However, this path is not easy. We face spiritual warfare, as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6, a battle not with earthly weapons but with divine power to demolish strongholds and bring every thought captive to Christ. This spiritual struggle is further complicated by our complex relationship with earthly authorities. Sprinkle highlights the early church's paradoxical view: submission to governing powers (Romans 13:1-5) alongside recognition of their potential satanic influence (Revelation 13:1-18) and ultimate divine judgment (Revelation 19:11-21).³⁴ Adding to this, Sprinkle argues that many Christians today, especially in the US, prioritize secular politics over Scripture, using the Bible to rubber-stamp political views rather than letting it shape them. This can lead to misplaced passions.³⁵

John Mark Comer adds another layer to this complexity, outlining five distinctive features of the early church that made it stand out from the Roman empire: ethnic diversity, socioeconomic diversity and a high value of caring for the poor, active resistance to infanticide and abortion, a vision of marriage and sexuality as between one man and one woman for life, and a commitment to nonviolence on a personal and political level. All five positions were basic, historic Christian orthodoxy, not *fringe* or off-center. He argues that embracing these positions today would likely place the Church at odds with both the political left and right. This counter-cultural stance allowed the early Church to make a powerful witness, even without political power. Capitulating to either side reduces Jesus to a mere chaplain to the world instead of a compelling allegiance.³⁶

Principle 6: Choose Influence Over Susceptibility³⁷

The apostle Paul's advice to the Corinthian church regarding relationships with non-believers (2 Corinthians 6:14) warns against placing ourselves in compromising alliances. While translations of this text may differ on the specifics, the core message remains clear: Christians should be cautious about partnerships that may lead them astray from their faith.³

A study in *Political Psychology*³⁸ highlights the relevance of this warning today. It found that some voters in the 2016 U.S. presidential election adjusted their moral beliefs to align with their chosen candidate. This phenomenon isn't limited to one side; it can affect both conservative and liberal Christians, potentially causing them to reinterpret scripture to fit their political views.

The study's key finding wasn't just that conservatives voted Republican, but that voters were willing to significantly alter their beliefs to match those of their preferred candidate. This has led to some Christians becoming "unequally yoked" with political figures, resulting in awkward public appearances, incoherent social media posts, and uncomfortable political alliances.

When faced with difficult electoral choices, a helpful approach is to "hold your nose, but don't hold their water". This means that while voters may have to choose between imperfect options ("the lesser of two evils"), they shouldn't become so influenced by a candidate that they compromise their values or become unrighteously influenced.

³⁴ Sprinkle, *Exiles*, 10.

³⁵ Sprinkle, *Exiles*, 11.

³⁶ John Mark Comer, *Live No Lies: Recognize and Resist the Three Enemies that Sabotage Your Peace* (Waterbrook Press, 2021), 213-214.

³⁷ Summarized from Paul Huyghebaert, "Christians and Politics: 5 Principles for Christian Interaction with the Political World," *Renew.org*, <https://renew.org/christians-and-politics/>.

³⁸ Huyghebaert cites William Kidd and Joseph A. Vitriol, *Moral Leadership in the 2016 Election* (Political Psychology: September 27, 2021)

Work from the Balcony #5: Keep the Mission, Ministry, and Maturity at the Forefront in Decision-Making

All too often a driving force in church leader behavior is holding down complaints and pursuing what Gil Rendle calls the “illusion of congregational happiness.”³⁹ It is the quest to find the “sweet spot” where all the burning issues are settled and we can enter a period of quiet after the dust settles. This plays out in a variety of ways.

For example, the leaders of a congregation want to make some needed changes in the worship assembly. They realize no matter which route they choose, significant individuals or groups in the congregation will be unhappy. Fearing stiff resistance either way they go, the leaders freeze, sometimes for years. This inertia increases congregational anxiety. One group wants movement and is upset about the stalemate. Another group fears change and is anxious about the “slippery slope” that could be around the corner. Everyone observes the “no talk” rule about the issues, fearing that “if we bring that up, it will make some folks unhappy.” Church members dance around the issues, practicing a fellowship of shallow church-chat. It’s like a gathering of porcupines doing a strange religious dance. Believers come together and waltz around the vestibule, come just close enough to feel each other’s quills, and then back off whenever the discussion starts going “where everyone knows we don’t go.” Then come the leaders’ meetings. The elusive “Some of our people are saying...” and “You know that will upset so-and-so,” become the all-sufficient force to bring discussion to a halt. Quelling complaints and keeping them from occurring become the measuring sticks of church effectiveness.

This “happiness trap” hurts the congregation *in at least eight ways*:

1. We reduce our faith practice to only those aspects we enjoy or appreciate, which assumes we are already where we need to be spiritually. This constrains the Spirit of God by not allowing us to grow and change in needed areas. Quelling complaints shields the congregation from spiritual maturity.
2. We preserve stability and status quo by reducing the evaluations of our effectiveness to whether we have complaints. If we have no complaints, everything is fine. If we have complaints, we eliminate the problems by returning to the status quo where happiness overrides complaints.
3. We focus the attention and energy of the congregation internally, and avoid, ignore, or minimize the call to external ministry.
4. We begin to see our appointed leaders as elected representatives. Anxious churches tend to politicize leaders, treating them as elected representatives and pressuring them to cave in to dissent or to act rashly to champion the agenda of this or that faction. Church members may put their leaders in the “double-bind,” asking for decisive action, all the while with the clear insinuation that the decision should be agreeable to them. And if not, they may leave, because their “needs” are not met.

³⁹Gilbert Rendle, “The Illusion of Congregational Happiness,” in *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2001), 83-94.

“The focus on ‘need fulfillment’ ...leaves out the possibility that what another may really “need” (in order to become more responsible) is not to have their needs fulfilled. Indeed, it is not even clear that feeling for others is a more caring stance (or even a more ethical stance) than challenging them to take responsibility for themselves. ...Increasing one’s threshold for another’s pain (which is necessary before one can challenge them) is often the only way the other will become motivated to increase their own threshold, thus becoming better equipped to face the challenges of life.”⁴⁰

5. We refuse to recognize leaders who do not “represent” our interests and may actually work in active or passive aggression to have them removed. Selections of elders or ministers tend to serve political interests.

6. We begin to manipulate meaningful Christian concepts into tools to get our own way.

“It has been my impression that at any gathering, whether it be public or private, those who are quickest to inject words like sensitivity, empathy, consensus, trust, confidentiality, and togetherness into their arguments have perverted these humanitarian words into power tools to get others to adapt to them.”⁴¹

7. We focus our frustrations on the most visible and vulnerable members of the congregational system (e.g. the ministry staff). People express their dissatisfaction toward what they can see and hear most readily. Certainly some dissatisfaction is legitimate, but not if our complaining posture keeps us from being gracious and forbearing. People may also be unaware of how their dissatisfaction is an “acting out” of a cluster of personal anxieties that they have been unwilling to manage. An easy way to avoid growth and change is to keep leaders in a beholden position to congregational whims.
8. We enable social “herding,” where the forces of togetherness become so strong that it moves everyone to adapt to the least mature members of the congregation.

Paradoxically, efforts to stop complaints are self-defeating. They create opportunities for additional and competing complaints from those who feel differently than the satisfied party. For example, if you try to address complaints about the lack of genuine community by allowing the minister to shift his time into developing small groups, new complaints will emerge that he is not available to make hospital visits.

What is the best response? Freeze? No. Again, inertia creates as many complaints as action. ***The truth is there is no way to stop complaints, thus the “illusion of congregational happiness.”*** The best response is to move the emphasis away from fixing complaints and prioritize actions based on what contributes best to the ***mission, ministry, and maturity of the church.***

The keywords here are *priority* and *emphasis*. **This is not to suggest a false dichotomy between being principled and making people happy**, as these are often compatible

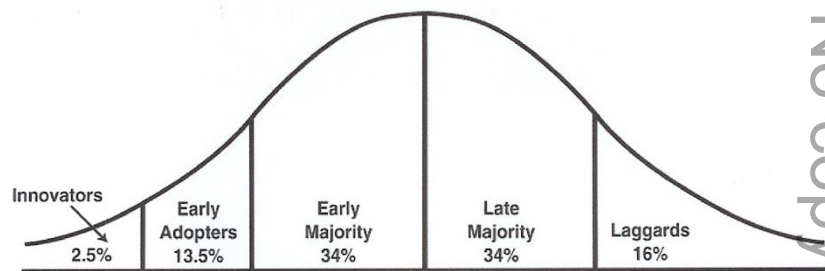
⁴⁰Ed Friedman, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick-Fix, Revised Edition* (Church Publishing, 2017), 146-147.

⁴¹Friedman, *Failure of Nerve*, 109.

interests. The problem arises when mission loses priority, and people begin to feel entitled to their way. The chart below illustrates the principle.

Focus Less on <i>Pleasing the Preferences of People</i>	Focus More on <i>Pursuing the Purpose of the Kingdom</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who wants what? • How do we satisfy.... [a person or a group]? • What should we do about.... [a problem or a complaint]? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does scripture call us to be and do? • What are we called to do in this chapter of our history as a congregation? • What are the goals we set out to accomplish? • What are the appropriate strategies for our ministry, and how will we measure their attainment?

Putting happiness above mission also fails to accept the reality of human experience that while most eventually get on with positive change, some never will, and most are slow to follow until it is well underway. This is described well in Everett Rogers' classic model, *Diffusion of Innovations*.⁴²



Innovators - They represent about 2.5% of people. They are eager pursuers of information. They have a wide spectrum of friends and acquaintances. They are ready to take risks. Conservative churches have a lower percentage of these than the general public.

Early Adopters - About 13.5% of people are the opinion setters in any organization. Tending to be younger and better educated, they too relish new information.

Early Majority - They represent about 34% of an organization. They join in when they are sure that a new idea will succeed. They are pragmatists.

Late Majority - Again, they represent about 34% of an organization. At first, they are skeptics. Some are "the guardians of tradition." They eventually join if the majority of others have done so.

Never Adopters (Laggards) - About 16% of the people in the organization have difficulty adjusting to any changes. They tend to have smaller circles of friends and experiences. They seek out people who agree with their opinion.

All of the above helps us see that even when we make positive changes that are needed for mission, this often brings *more complaints, not less*. The temptation is to return to soothing

⁴²From Everett Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*. The Free Press, 1995. Any web search will reveal a plethora of summaries on Rogers.

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others' pain by anxiously adjusting actions until happiness is restored. I call this "adjusting the shower water." When we turn on the shower and the water is first too hot or cold, we go through several adjustments until we find just the right temperature. You can do this with water, but trying it with people brings four results:

1. It destroys trust in those who favored the original direction.
2. It destroys credibility even among those who know they can manipulate others back into their perspective.
3. It trains people to get what they want by complaining.
4. It results in the loss of healthy, high-energy people who can make strong contributions to congregational life. Healthy people have the most options.

In contrast, Rendle suggests a three-fold response of principled presence.

1. **Stay connected.** This involves both listening and talking. First, listen to everyone, including complainers, in order to understand congregational concerns. This can include leaders, inviting focus groups, convening systematic listening groups, etc. Second, talk and keep before each other the what and why of the decisions. Always tie actions to the overall purpose, and challenge each other with the church's mission. Third, help others understand how they may grow through the situation without necessarily getting their way.

Remember:

- "Division loves separation; peace loves conversation."
 - "Anyone can have their say, but no one is guaranteed their way."
2. **Maintain a clear and reasoned position.** Rendle says, "People have a right to be heard, but they do not hold a mandate to be accommodated." If a church has addressed the higher purpose questions mentioned in the right side of the chart above, they will be able to articulate their positions in terms of purpose and not personal agenda or politics.
 3. **Resist anxious reactivity.** Allow people to adjust to changes, and realize they may not always be at their best behavior. Do not fight back. Be consistent in your communication with all interested parties. Do not take things personally. Listen to critics without caving to dissent. Keep a sense of humor. Help people through the chaotic wilderness into the new and better realities that your decisions are aimed at unfolding.

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Work from the Floor #1: Balance Clarity and Courage with Compassion and Connection

Leading amid polarization is challenging. Unlike some conflictual settings where only a small minority holds strong opinions on an issue, in a polarized environment, as much as two-thirds of a group might occupy opposing viewpoints. While we often hear about groups "splitting down the middle," the reality is that about a third of the members are usually in the middle. Because they tend to be less invested in the specific issue and often feel intimidated by the intensity of those on the extremes, they are easily overlooked.

David Brubaker shares his experience conducting interventions in these situations, identifying five common features of polarized environments:

1. *Personal Attacks*: Leaders become targets of personal attacks, even when they remain neutral, as they are then perceived as weak.
2. *Holy War*: Language becomes extreme, framing conflicts as epic battles between good and evil, rather than discussions of "costs and benefits."
3. *Distorted Information*: Information is weaponized to defeat opponents, with individuals seeking supporting evidence regardless of its accuracy and dismissing contradictory information.
4. *Relentless Obsession*: Individuals become obsessively focused on their issues and opponents, viewing any relaxation as a sign of weakness and potential defeat.
5. *Intractable Negotiations*: Compromise becomes impossible due to personal attacks, distorted information, and the perception of cosmic consequences.⁴³

Leading in such an environment demands a different skill set than traditional leadership advice. Planning, team building, and consensus-seeking become difficult. Leaders face the temptation to either take a side ("fight") or avoid the conflict altogether ("flee"). However, there's a third way, described by authors like Brené Brown and John Maxwell,⁴⁴ which emphasizes a close relationship between **clarity, compassion, courage, and connection**.

Clarity

Brené Brown is often quoted as saying. "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind." This involves the various levels of clarity we have already covered, and the willingness to express those beliefs transparently, even when it's uncomfortable. Brubaker, citing Speed Leas, observes that a lack of clarity in leadership can be just as damaging as authoritarianism. Leaders who avoid taking a stand risk appearing unprincipled and manipulative.⁴⁵

Courage

Congregational leaders frequently grapple with contentious issues, from gender roles to sexuality, that mirror broader societal debates. These issues can easily divide a congregation. While some organizations may be able to manage these issues through executive decision-making, congregations are experienced by their members as places of moral discernment by the whole

⁴³ Brubaker, *When the Center Does Not Hold: Leading in an Age of Polarization* (Fortress Press, 2019), Kindle location 731.

⁴⁴ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead*, 45-68; John Maxwell, *Leading in Polarized Times*.

⁴⁵ Brubaker, *When the Center Does Not Hold*, Kindle location 783.

body. Certainly authoritative Scripture teaching is a part of this, which takes one kind of courage, but the people must be brought along since churches do not have the same controls and incentives to keep people in place. This can threaten long-held relationships, requiring a significant reservoir of moral courage.

Compassion

John Maxwell says, "One of the greatest contributors to a polarized culture is the inability—or unwillingness—to think about the other person's point of view."⁴⁶ Compassion means actively listening and trying to comprehend others' perspectives, even when we strongly disagree. It necessitates recognizing the inherent dignity of every person. Compassion doesn't require agreement, but it does demand respect.

Connection

This is perhaps the most important and difficult dimensions. Maintaining engagement with others is essential, as division thrives on separation. Doris Kearns Goodwin demonstrates how Abraham Lincoln exemplified this. Despite his unwavering stance on slavery, Lincoln demonstrated empathy and "generosity of spirit," connecting even with those who opposed him. This ability to connect, coupled with his moral clarity, was crucial during the Civil War.⁴⁷ Jonathan Haidt delves into the neuropsychology of connection, highlighting the role of oxytocin. This hormone, often associated with mother-child bonding, also plays a crucial role in fostering trust and empathy in broader social contexts. Oxytocin levels rise during intimate contact, even simple touch, and when we empathize with others' suffering. It promotes trust and strengthens social bonds. This biological basis for connection underscores its importance in bridging divides.⁴⁸

Preston Sprinkle, drawing on Haidt's work, highlights the importance of appealing to both intuition and reason as a means of fostering connection. He argues that beliefs are often rooted in emotions and tribal affiliations, not just logic. Therefore, rational arguments alone are rarely persuasive. A humble and kind demeanor, combined with genuine connection—building relational bridges—is far more effective.⁴⁹ Haidt (256-284) also discusses the "hive switch," explaining how beliefs can become intertwined with tribal identity, making them resistant to change, even resorting to harmful actions to protect their group and undermine rivals. Understanding these tribal dynamics and the emotional weight of beliefs is crucial for leaders seeking to connect with those who hold different views.

⁴⁶ Maxwell, *Leading in Polarized Times*.

⁴⁷ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Leadership in Turbulent Times* (Simon and Schuster, 2018), 222-223, 242 quoted in Brubaker, *When the Center Does Not Hold*, Kindle location 856.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Random House, 2012), 270.

⁴⁹ Preston Sprinkle, *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage: 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View* (David C. Cook, 2023), 18.

Work from the Floor #2: Listen and Respond to the People from an Incarnational Posture

Incarnational conversation, where we “take up dwelling” in the thoughts of a person who may not think like we do. Philippians 2:1-8 (see also Ephesians 4:1-3)

<i>Drawing from our love for each other</i>	¹ Therefore... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · If you have any <i>encouragement</i> from being <i>united</i> with Christ, · If any <i>comfort</i> from his <i>love</i>, · If any <i>common sharing</i> in the Spirit, · If any <i>tenderness</i> and <i>compassion</i>,
<i>We strive to be of one spirit and mind</i>	² Then make my joy complete by... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · being <i>like-minded</i>, · having the <i>same love</i>, · being <i>one in spirit</i> and <i>of one mind</i>.
<i>And we do this by placing others before ourselves</i>	³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.
<i>Which is modeled by Christ's incarnation</i>	⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Four postures of incarnational listening:

1. **Empathetic** – I will enter this person’s world of feelings and thoughts with kindness and sensitivity.
2. **Humble** – I will place myself “under” this person, seeking first to understand, and only then to be understood.
3. **Image Bearing** – I will honor this person’s inherent worth and dignity through focused concentration on their story, not allowing their sin or mine to distract me from serving them.
4. **Sacrificial** – I will advocate, even suffer, for the greatest good for this person.⁵⁰

Six skills of active listening:

1. **Paying attention** – One goal of active listening and being an effective listener is to set a comfortable tone that gives the speaker an opportunity to think and talk. Allow “wait time” before responding. Don’t cut the person off, finish their sentences, or start formulating your answer before they’ve finished. Pay attention to your body language as well as your frame of

⁵⁰ See the excellent expansion on these principles in Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst* (Tyndale Momentum, 2018), 200-228.

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mind when engaging in active listening. Be focused on the moment, make eye contact, and operate from a place of respect as the listener.

2. **Withholding judgment** – Active listening requires an open mind. As a listener and a leader, be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities when practicing active listening. Even when good listeners have strong views, they suspend judgment, hold any criticisms, and avoid interruptions like arguing or selling their point right away. This can be easier if you maintain an open body posture. For example, having your arms resting on the side, rather than crossed across the chest, can signal a greater degree of openness.
3. **Reflecting** – When you’re the listener, don’t assume that you understand correctly — or that the speaker knows you’ve heard them. Mirror their emotions by periodically paraphrasing key points. Reflecting is an active listening technique that indicates that you and your counterpart are on the same page.
4. **Clarifying** – Ask questions about any issue that’s ambiguous or unclear. As the listener, if you have doubt or confusion about what the other person has said, say something like, “*Let me see if I’m understanding. Are you talking about ...?*” or “*Wait a minute. I didn’t follow you.*” Asking for clarification shows you are paying attention.
5. **Summarizing** – Restating key themes as the conversation proceeds confirms and solidifies your grasp of the other person’s point of view. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and next steps. Briefly summarize what you’ve understood while practicing active listening, and ask the other person to do the same.
6. **Sharing** - Active listening is *first* about understanding the other person, *then* about being understood as the listener. As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person’s perspective, you can begin to introduce your own ideas, feelings, and suggestions. People are more receptive to new ideas and suggestions when they feel understood.

Once the situation has been talked through, both you and the other person have a good picture of where things stand. From this point, the conversation can shift into problem-solving: *What assumptions are we making? What hasn’t been tried? What don’t we know? What new approaches could be taken?*⁵¹

When you reach this stage, consider the suggestions on the page below, “Ideas for Healthy Responses to Member Concerns.”

⁵¹ See “What Is Active Listening? How to Use Active Listening Skills to Coach Others,” September 1, 2024, *Center for Creative Leadership* (website), <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leadig-effectively-articles/coaching-others-use-active-listening-skills/>.

Ideas for Healthy Responses to Member Concerns

Note: Not all of these work in every situation, but they are helpful when applied correctly in appropriate contexts. These are not listed in any priority.

- Listen and affirm. Use reflective listening to understand and acknowledge their concerns in a safe conversation. Thank them for speaking with you about their concerns.
- Explore.
 - What is your biggest concern?
 - What would you prefer?
 - What would you like me to do with this information?
- Encourage direct communication (cf. Matthew 18:15-17)

Examples:

For any situation: “I understand your difficulty is with _____ concerning _____. Have you spoken directly with him/her? I would be happy to set up a meeting or go along with you to support both of you in the conversation.”

When someone brings an item to an elder: “I would be happy to bring this before the rest of the elders, but before I do, let me make sure I understand it correctly.... Now, when I bring this to their attention, it will be important for me to give your name. Are you OK with this?” If not, describe to them how difficult it is to respond to anonymous comments, and that the results may be disappointing.

- Avoid triangulation. Triangulation is where a person expects you to deal with their conflict with someone else. In these cases, you “affirm and deflect.”

Speed Leas’ three-fold response to triangulation:

- “Have you talked with _____?” If no, then...
- “Would it help if I went with you to talk with _____, as a support to help the two of you communicate?” If no, then...
- “I don’t think it’s helpful for us to continue the conversation. When you are ready to discuss things with _____ directly, let me know, and I’ll be happy to help.”

- On a deeper level, understand that often, concerns expressed about the church are the “presenting issue” of deeper anxiety clusters that can only be revealed through sensitive listening.

Once you have built strong rapport through genuine concern, consider helping people grow through the situation. Questions like this may help.

- “How we respond to this situation is important. Help me think for a moment about a way to respond to this situation that best... (fosters unity, deepens respect, builds trust, shows forbearance, etc.)”

- “Could we consider together the (best, most mature, most Christ-like, most Spirit-filled, constructive, etc.) response to make to this situation?”
- “I understand and appreciate your perspective. Now that we have an understanding, let’s try and practice Jesus’ example and consider the needs of others who feel differently than we do on issues. How might we be able to submit to their needs?”
- “I understand and appreciate your concern, but I also know _____, and have great respect for him/her as well. For just a moment, let’s give him/her the benefit of the doubt and reframe our way of thinking...” (i.e. practice Philippians 4:8, think about what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, praiseworthy)
- “I wonder, is there room here to extend grace to (or overlook, etc.) this weakness in _____.”
- “I realize you disagree with what is happening, but with the goal of practicing what Paul said in Philippians 2, to “consider not only our own interests, but also the interests of others,” what concerns do you think those who disagree may be bringing to the table?”
- What consequences or implications are you afraid this new learning may have for you? (Use only in situations where there is strong rapport 😊)

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Sample Covenant of Conduct
From Pete Steinke, *Healthy Congregations*

In order for the congregation and the elders to deal effectively with issues, the following guidelines are to be followed:

1. All members affirm their right to express their opinions about the life and ministry of the congregation.
2. The congregation operates with a participatory form of government that allows members to share their opinions directly with the elders, ministers, deacons, ministry leaders, and at congregational meetings.
3. When members of the congregation express an opinion to an elder, the elder shall ask, “What would you like me to do with this information?”
4. If the member desires to have the information transmitted to the elders, the member shall be invited to bring the information / opinion to the next elders meeting. The time and date shall be given.
5. If the member does not wish to appear in person, the elder shall ask the member for permission to use their name in reporting. If permission is not given, the elder shall say, “I’m sorry but I will not be able to repeat this to the eldership since we do not deal with anonymous letters or comments.”
6. If permission is given, the elder shall report the information / opinion to the eldership and use the member’s name.
7. At his discretion, an elder may ask the member to refer this issue to another elder for presentation.
8. Each issue shall be placed on the agenda and written in the minutes along with the action taken by the elders. Action may include: “Received as information,” “Elder to visit member and report at next meeting,” etc.
9. Opinions may be shared in writing with the elders and shall be handled in the above mentioned manner if the letter or statement is signed.

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Ten Guidelines for Civil Conversations⁵²

Risk – We will face our differences. We will consider all views and information, even if they conflict with our basic assumptions about the issue and result in conclusions that differ from our own.

Respect – We will demonstrate respect for our dialogue partners as human beings and as fellow Christians. We will take each other's views and convictions seriously. We will not question one another at the point of sincerity or Christian commitment.

Fairness – We will not judge people on the other side by popular stereotypes or by their least admirable expressions. We will allow people to define themselves, rather than presuming to know them by inference, categorization, or outside observation. We will allow those on the other side the freedom to restate, change, or expand their position in the course of the dialogue without interpreting these actions as a sign of weakness, confusion, or ambivalence.

Humility – We acknowledge that our understanding of God and of the things of God is limited and finite. We recognize that issues requiring dialogue are often complex and ambiguous, even when they appear straightforward from one particular vantage point, and that no one has a final answer to the question at hand. We will avoid the presumption of oversimplification.

Teamwork – We will work together as partners with those on the other side of the issue in order to learn something new about our own position, their position, or a new position yet to be discovered.

Openness – We will be open about the nature of our disagreement and will test our assumptions about where the points of disagreement are. We will not judge the correctness or orthodoxy of a position solely by how it relates to our own position.

Listening – We will stand next to people on the other side and attempt to hear the issue from their place. We will avoid formulating our response while another is speaking. We will attempt to empathize with the other side's point of view.

First-Person Speech – We will limit our speaking to the information, materials, and evidence we have available to us. We will focus on how we can deepen our understanding of the other side and narrow the gap from our side, rather than to worry or complain about what the other side will or will not do.

Depth – We will explore the complexity of needs, interests, feelings, and convictions that underlie the various positions on the issue. We will search for the secondary, interconnected issues and assumptions behind the presenting issue. We will be cautious of quick, easy solutions that appear to heal instantly or convert others to our side, but merely mask the point of disagreement.

Patience – Because we recognize that good dialogue is always a sustained conversation, we will stay with the process and not avoid or abandon the dialogue.

⁵²Joseph Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), 46-47.

**Appendix – Belief Statement
Traders Point Christian Church, Indianapolis, Indiana**

WHAT WE BELIEVE

Everyone is welcome at Traders Point, regardless of whether or not you believe everything we believe. In fact, you can belong before you believe!

We believe the Bible is the only adequate guide for living a Christian life. We hope the following statement of belief will help you become better acquainted with the preaching and teaching emphasis you are likely to encounter at Traders Point.

Shaping the teaching, culture, and direction of our church, these foundational biblical beliefs fuel all that we say and do here.

THE TRINITY

God eternally exists as three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The three distinct persons of the Trinity are all fully God; all of God's attributes are true of each person and together they are one God.

While the word "trinity" never appears in Scripture, it is an accepted doctrine based on the Bible's teachings as a whole. We see throughout Scripture, evidence of the Trinity.

Genesis 1:26 | Psalm 45:6-7 | Psalm 110:1 | Isaiah 6:8 | Matthew 3:16-17 | Matthew 28:19 | John 1:1-5 | John 13:20 | 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 | 2 Corinthians 13:14 | Ephesians 2:18 | 1 Peter 1:2

GOD THE FATHER

The first member of the Trinity is God the Father. He is the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

God is sovereign and infinite, meaning He has no limitations. God the Father can be intimately known but because of His infiniteness, He can never be fully known.

God the Father can only be known through Jesus.

Genesis 1:1 | Colossians 1:16 | Acts 4:24 | Hebrews 1:3 | Revelation 4:11 | Psalm 145:3 | Jeremiah 9:23-24 | Romans 11:33 | Matthew 11:27 | John 14:6

JESUS CHRIST

Jesus is the second member of the Trinity and the Son of God.

He is God incarnate as man, and He was both fully God and fully human. He was born of a virgin, Mary, and conceived by the Holy Spirit. He lived a perfect and sinless life in order to be a holy and worthy sacrifice. He was tempted as we are tempted, He suffered as we have suffered, yet He did not fall into sin.

He came to serve and not to be served. Jesus was betrayed, beaten, mocked, and crucified on the cross where He died. Jesus' life was not taken from Him by anyone; He gave it as a willing sacrifice for everyone. Three days later Jesus rose from the dead, conquering sin and death and showing His power over both.



After He rose from the dead, He was on earth for 40 days before He ascended into Heaven. Jesus will return one day to rule and reign forever, judge the world, and take those who follow Him to live in the presence of God for eternity.

Luke 24:39 | John 1:1 | John 1:18 | Romans 9:5 | Colossians 1:19 | Colossians 2:9 | Matthew 1:18-20 | Luke 1:34-35 | John 15:10 | 2 Corinthians 5:21 | Hebrews 4:15 | Hebrews 9:26 | 1 Peter 3:18 | 1 John 3:5 | Hebrews 2:18 | Hebrews 7:26 | Philippians 2:5-11 | Matthew 27:27-30 | Mark 15:24 | Luke 23:26-49 | John 19:16-37 | John 10:18 | Matthew 28:1-20 | Mark 16:1-8 | Luke 24:1-53 | John 20:1-23 | 1 Corinthians 15:20 | Ephesians 1:19-20 | 1 Peter 1:3 | Luke 24:50-51 | Acts 1:9-11 | Matthew 25:31-46 | John 14:2-3

THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is promised to those who profess faith in Jesus; the Holy Spirit is the presence of God living inside each follower of Christ. The Holy Spirit teaches and bears witness about Jesus.

He empowers those who follow Jesus in different forms of ministry; He gives different spiritual gifts to followers of Jesus for the purpose of ministry. He empowers prayer. He gives strength and empowers followers of Jesus to overcome spiritual opposition. He sanctifies followers of Jesus. He convicts the world of sin. He guides. He gives assurance of salvation to followers of Jesus.

Acts 2:38 | Romans 8:9-11 | John 14:26 | John 15:26 | John 16:7-15 | Acts 1:8 | 1 Thessalonians 1:5 | 1 Peter 1:12 | 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 | Romans 8:26 | Ephesians 2:18 | Matthew 12:28 | Ephesians 6:10-18 | 1 Corinthians 6:11 | 2 Thessalonians 2:13 | Titus 3:4-7 | Romans 8:14 | Galatians 5:16-18 | Romans 8:16 | Ephesians 1:13-14

THE BIBLE

The Bible is the authoritative and inerrant Word of God; it is God's revelation about Himself to man. It is historically accurate and internally consistent, telling one story of redemption pointing to Jesus Christ.

God used over 40 different authors to write the 66 books of the Bible, all being divinely directed by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the living Word of God, applicable to all time, and is not only the measure and standard of truth, but truth itself.

Numbers 23:19 | Psalm 12:6 | Proverbs 30:5 | John 17:17 | 2 Timothy 3:16 | 1 Peter 1:20-21 | 2 Timothy 3:16 | Hebrews 4:12

MAN

We are the pinnacle of God's creation, created in the likeness of God. We have rebelled against God through sin and separated ourselves from the glory of God; we are in need of redemption and restoration to the intended likeness we were created in that has been distorted by sin.

Genesis 1:27 | Genesis 5:1-2 | Romans 3:23 | Romans 5:12 | 1 Corinthians 15:49 | Colossians 3:10

SALVATION

Salvation is a gift from God that can never be earned through good works or self-improvement. Salvation is only given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, the redemption of our sin.

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Salvation is based on the work of Jesus on the cross where He sacrificially died, bearing the sin and punishment of all mankind, and paying the price required of sin for all those who believe in Him.

John 1:12 | John 3:16 | Ephesians 1:7 | Ephesians 2:8-9 | Romans 3:23-25 | Romans 5:6-9 |
Romans 6:23

THE CHURCH

The church is the community of all true followers of Jesus Christ. The church is the body of Christ of which Jesus is the head, set on the mission given by Jesus to make disciples and spread the love of Christ.

All true followers of Jesus should take an active part in the body of a local church to worship God, to know God more intimately, pray, to make disciples of Jesus, serve, for encouragement, and to be nurtured in order to grow to maturity in faith.

Ephesians 5:23 | Matthew 28:18-20 | Acts 1:8 | 1 Corinthians 12:12-14 | Ephesians 1:22-23 |
Hebrews 10:25 | Colossians 3:16 | Ephesians 1:12 | Ephesians 5:16-20 | Psalm 9:10 | Jeremiah
9:24 | 2 Corinthians 4:6 | Philippians 3:10 | Colossians 1:9-10 | 1 Thessalonians 5:17 | Matthew
28:19 | Matthew 20:26-28 | Luke 6:35-36 | Acts 14:21-22 | 1 Thessalonians 5:11 | Ephesians 4:12-
13 | Colossians 1:28 | Hebrews 13:17

BAPTISM

The Bible teaches that we are saved by grace through faith. Baptism is a public confession of that faith in Jesus to God, the church, and the world.

Following our understanding of Scripture, we practice baptism by immersion; the Greek word used exclusively throughout the New Testament for baptism is “baptizo,” which means to plunge, dip, or immerse. Jesus modeled this form of baptism and commanded it, making baptism a symbolic act of obedience and faith. Baptism by immersion represents the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, symbolizing our old self dying, being buried in the water, and raised as a new creation in Christ Jesus.

Anyone who has professed faith in Jesus Christ should be baptized at his or her conversion or soon after.

Ephesians 2:8 | Matthew 10:32 | Matthew 3:13-17 | Matthew 28:19 | Romans 6:3-4 | 2 Corinthians
5:17 | Acts 2:38 | Acts 8:12 | Acts 8:36-38 | Acts 10:44-48

ETERNITY

Man was created for eternal existence. Jesus will return one day and on that day all will be judged. There will be just punishment and reward. For those who are in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation, and they will spend eternity in the presence of God in real places, the new Heaven and the New Earth. Those who reject Jesus will be separated from Him by their sin in a real place of eternal conscious punishment called Hell.

Matthew 24:44 | John 14:3 | Acts 1:11 | 1 Thessalonians 4:16 | Hebrews 9:28 | Revelation 22:20 |
Romans 14:10-12 | Revelation 20:11-15 | Romans 2:5-8 | 2 Corinthians 5:10 | Matthew 25:34 |
Romans 8:1 | 2 Peter 3:13 | Matthew 25:41 | Matthew 25:46 | Revelation 14:9-11

SANCTITY OF LIFE

We believe that all human life is sacred and created by God in His image. Human life is of inestimable worth in all its dimensions, including pre-born babies, children who are orphaned, those who experience physical or mental challenges, and every other stage or condition from conception through natural death. We are therefore called to defend, protect, and value all human life.

Psalm 139

MARRIAGE, SEXUALITY, AND GENDER

We believe in the historically Christian view of marriage and sexual expression; namely, that marriage is a one-flesh covenant union between two sexually different persons (male and female) from different families, and that all sexual relationships outside the marriage covenant are sin.

God has given his people two best ways to enjoy connection in family: celibate singleness for the sake of kingdom work with undivided attention, or lifelong marriage between one woman and one man.

Biological sex is an essential part of human identity.

All forms of abuse, slander, dehumanization, or oppression toward fellow humans is an affront against God's sacred image, which has been stamped upon all people.

Genesis 2:18-25 | 1 Corinthians 6:18 | 1 Corinthians 7:2-5 | Hebrews 13:4 | Genesis 1:26-27 |
Romans 1:26-27 | Matthew 19:3-5

FINAL AUTHORITY FOR MATTERS OF BELIEF AND CONDUCT

The statement of belief does not exhaust the extent of our beliefs. The Bible itself, as the inspired and infallible Word of God that speaks with final authority concerning truth, morality, and the proper conduct of mankind, is the sole and final source of all that we believe. For purposes of Traders Point's belief, doctrine, practice, policy, and discipline, our elder team is Traders Point's final interpretive authority on the Bible's meaning and application.

Appendix – Christian Mission and Hope, Statements from Tim Keller

Reasons for hope going forward⁵³

1. ***The limits of secularism.*** Despite many signs of its strength and the growth in the U.S., as a philosophy secularism has shown severe limitations in its ability to form community and give individuals meaning, identity, contentment, and the ability to face suffering. It may not seem as compelling an alternative to religion in the future as it is now.
2. ***The strength of global Christianity.*** Outside of the West, Christianity is growing rapidly. The future leaders and theologians of Christianity will be multi-ethnic, and this will give the faith more credence with those who think of evangelicalism as mainly a white phenomenon.
3. ***The demographics of religion.*** In general, the more religious people are the more children they have, and this holds across cultures and classes. This is why some social scientists say the world's secular population will 'top out' in the mid-21st century and begin to shrink.
4. ***The subversive fulfillment of chosen religion.*** Mainline Protestantism, Catholicism, and other religions are inherited – you are literally 'born into' them and adhere to them because your family does. These churches decline more rapidly because young people do not follow a path that they have not chosen for themselves. Evangelical faith is better adapted to modern culture because it is indeed a chosen religion – it requires conversion. Yet it pushes back on the individualism of culture too. When we freely choose to follow Christ, we also choose to give up living according to our own wisdom – bowing instead to his glad and wise authority.
5. ***The translatability of Christian faith.*** There is no Leviticus in the New Testament that prescribes detailed regulations for food, dress, and other daily activities – allowing Christians to fully integrate into their culture. Cultural diversity was built into the Christian faith in the Acts 15 declaration that gentile Christians didn't have to enter Jewish culture. They had to work out a Hellenistic way of being Christian. No one owns the Christian faith. There is no 'Christian culture' the way there is an 'Islamic culture' which you can recognize from Pakistan to Tunisia to Morocco. In short, Christianity is highly 'translatable' into new cultures and situations and has the resources to remain a significant force in a fast-changing world.
6. ***The promise of Jesus.*** In G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man* there is a chapter on "The Five Deaths of the Faith." He does a brief overview of times in which orthodox Christianity was challenged profoundly - the Arian controversy and the controversy over the divinity of Christ in the 3rd century, Voltaire and the rise of skepticism in Europe during the Enlightenment, Darwin and the rise of scientism, and so on-but in each case emerged strong and growing. With a typical Chesterton twist, he concludes: "At least five times ... the Faith has to all appearance gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases it was the dog that died." Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). That is a promise-and there's no reason to believe this promise has an expiration date.

The Vision: the future that church renewal can bring⁵⁴

Introduction: Our vision for a renewed church cannot be simply for a restoration of Christian institutions to former states of strength. The church exists not for its own glory but for the glory of God (Eph 1:12), not for mere organizational health but for the growth of its members into Christlikeness (Eph 4:11-13), not to accrue power but to love God and love our neighbors in

⁵³ Tim Keller, *The Decline and Renewal of the American Church* (Gospel in Life, 2022), 30-31. A copy of the entire document is accessible at <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/decline-and-renewal-of-the-american-church-extended/>

⁵⁴ Adapted from Keller, *Decline and Renewal*, 48-51.



faithful service. So the vision for a renewed church can't begin with goals like size and finances and numbers. That is to mistake means for ends. Our vision should be that the astonishing biblical possibilities for the church as the community of the Spirit would be realized in U.S. society in ways it never has before. The church has been given divine power to radiate the infinite glory and goodness of God in our lives and relationships (2 Peter 1:3-8) renewing us in the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). It has the capacity to be a "new humanity" – a community of surpassing beauty (Eph 2:14-18; 4:15-16). In turn, under the leadership of Christ's Spirit these churches have the ability to make their surrounding communities places far better places to live (Matt 5:13-16; Luke 10:25-37; Gal 6:10) so that many are drawn to God's beautiful glory. (1 Pet 2:11-12; cf. Deut 4:5-8).

We envision a day when...

1. Cities are filled with flourishing neighborhoods that point to the churches within them as a crucial source of their life and strength.
2. Every U.S. community is honeycombed with home fellowship groups and house churches that build up the Christians within them, welcome non-believers, and serve their neighbors.
3. New churches are being planted twice as fast as churches are closing, and 2/3 of the people in the new churches are formerly unchurched and non-believers.
4. Large percentages of Christians become able to speak about their faith in their daily relationships in ways that are not perceived by most of the recipients as offensive or even awkward but instead are received as helpful and positive.
5. The movement of the young out of the churches is completely reversed. Children and youth in the church are equipped to see not only the beauty of the historic faith, but the deeply inadequate alternative identities, narratives, and answers provided by the culture.
6. Christians are famous for being the ones who show up in force first to help victims whenever there is any disaster.
7. Christian churches would be known as the most racially and culturally diverse institutions in society. The 'face' of the renewed Christian church toward society – its leading voices – are highly diverse ethnically, and the American church is tightly connected to the global church.
8. The church becomes publicly recognized as a refuge for sufferers, known for its ability to help people through grief, pain, and loss.
9. An increasing number of Christian artists – working out both the realism of the Christian worldview about sin and the confident expectation of restorative grace – produce high quality stories, music, visual art all with the results that (a) more people see the beauty and intuitive plausibility of Christianity and at the same time, (b) people in general across our society will increase in hope.
10. There is a robust, respected, and growing community of intellectuals and scholars that hold unashamedly to historic Christian doctrine who are (a) active in every academic field of inquiry, producing scholarship that contributes to and alters the field, (b) a growing presence in universities, and (c) inaugurating an entire alternate intellectual economy of study centers, think tanks, academies, periodicals, and publishing.
11. The church becomes a visible, respected (though still a minority) 'sexual counter-culture'
 - a. It is a community in which sexuality is not a consumer good conducted on a selfish, cost-benefit basis, but a means for self-donation inside a covenant.

- b. It is a community in which the health and durability of marriages and families is obvious.
 - c. It is a community for singles, and especially for women, of far greater emotional safety and clearer expectations in romantic relationships.
 - d. It is a place that is known to reject modern superficiality in spouse-seeking-Le., far less emphasis on looks and money.
 - e. It is a community in which Christian men and women who describe themselves as attracted to the same sex, but who wish to live according to the biblical vision and ethic for sex are nurtured and respected, and their wisdom relied upon.
12. Christians are known for their just use of power, so that:
- a. In business, Christians are known to be less selfish and ruthless and more generous to peers, employees, and customers.
 - b. In social entrepreneurship, Christians are known to be fueling an explosion of creative and effective non-profits that target every main social problem, leading to a measurable decrease in the poverty rate and change in other statistics of social well-being. Christians would be famous for being those most given to charitable giving and volunteering their time for those in need.
 - c. In politics and government, Christians are known for seeking the common good rather than their own electoral interests, and for being cognizant of the importance of government policies for a just society.
 - d. A growth in church planting and church renewal among the poor, supported non-paternalistically by the broader church and led by the poor themselves, would also be seen by society and credited with a change in social indicators.
 - e. All of these changes would lead to a more just distribution of money and power, and people in general would have more control over their neighborhoods and their lives.
13. Christians are known for their uncompromising stand for truth and their critique of false beliefs and narratives, and at the same time they are known for their civility and for their commitment to creating a truly pluralistic society in which all are free to voice and practice their worldviews and faith.
- a. Christians lead the way to a growing civility in society, based on an attitude of mutual respect, welcome, and kindness toward those who deeply disagree in moral convictions and beliefs.
 - b. Christians are known for being the strongest promoters of warm dialogue and intelligent debate, of defense of freedom of speech and conscience.

We envision a public gospel message...

Which gains widespread traction with people because it is neither highly rationalistic (e.g. proofs of God) nor does it assume listeners already believe in God, moral absolutes, and an afterlife. Rather, it shows that Christianity does a better job of uniting head and heart, of accounting for and explaining the world we see and the aspirations we all have-than the alternative religions and philosophies of life.

We envision a time when this evangelistic message is so well-communicated and articulated that the average person knows the following basic offers of Christianity:

1. Christianity offers an identity not based on your performance or efforts – not constantly ebbing and flowing based on your accomplishment and conduct – but based on the unchanging love of God.
2. Christianity offers a resolution to guilt, shame, and self-laceration that avoids both the minimizing of your own failures or allowing other people to define you and determine your status.
3. Christianity offers a kind of freedom (embracing the right restrictions) that, unlike the secular definition (the absence of restrictions), does not undermine love relationships.
4. Christianity offers a contentment and joy not based on changing circumstances. Our bad things will turn out for good, our good things can't be taken from us, and the best things are yet to come.
5. Christianity offers a meaning and purpose in life that suffering not only cannot take away from you but can only enhance. Suffering can only drive you more into the love of God that can enable you to face even death without any fear.
6. Christianity offers a basis for morality and justice that avoids the twin dangers of relativism and oppression. (Though we freely admit that many Christians veer toward relativism or oppression.)
7. Christianity offers a unique view of power. The incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus shows us power both voluntarily relinquished and yet deployed for service to others. (Though we freely admit that many Christians have abused power.)
8. Christianity offers a unique account of truth. Not subjectivism that says no one can know any truth or scientism that sees only the empirically provable to be true. Rather, a view that truth can be known and certainty attained through both reason and faith.
9. Christianity offers a unique hope for the world-not eventual nothingness (secularism) and not even mere spiritual paradise (other religions). It promises a renewed, perfect physical world-a new heavens and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.
10. Christianity offers a unique approach to repairing relationships. It neither privileges the forgiven (so that justice is not done) nor privileges the forgiver (so forgiveness is withheld). Without both we can't maintain human social relationships.

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For Further Reading

Basic trilogy for understanding self-differentiated leadership, the non-anxious presence (often labeled “resources on churches as emotional systems”)

- To understand self-differentiation in congregational leadership – Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Alban Institute, 2006. No one has improved on this standard volume. It hits all the important topics. As follow-ups, read two of his other volumes, *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*, and *How Your 21st Century Church Family Works, Second Edition* and *Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems*.
- To understand how anxiety affects culture and churches, and creates challenging conditions for leaders – Mark Sayers, *A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders*. Moody Publishers, 2022. Sayers has two other excellent volumes, *The Disappearing Church*, and *The Re-appearing Church*, but they are advanced, and will not be as helpful for congregational leadership. Sayers is the best introduction to the work of Edwin Friedman. He essentially translates Friedman to the present day. Go here first, then go to Friedman.
- To grow in self-differentiation – Jim Herrington, Trisha Taylor, and R. Robert Creech, *The Leader’s Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation. Second Edition*. Baker Academic, 2022. Unsurpassed since 2003.

For an excellent “live” example of how self-differentiated leadership plays out in congregational dynamics and decision-making, see two videos developed by Peter L. Steinke. They show a church in the middle of a controversy over worship styles. The point is not to advocate for their change or congregational character, which is only illustrative. The first video, *The Anxious Congregation*, shows the chaos that ensues when the key influencers behave anxiously. The second video, *The Responsible Congregation*, shows the same church at the same point in time, but portrays a completely different outcome when the key influencers are less anxious. The instructive value is to show how the principles of less-anxious leadership truly make a difference in these situations. The videos are a bit dated in style, but they are still great learning tools. To order them, go to <https://www.healthycongregations.com/product-page/dvd-volume-ii>.

Other popular volumes on self-differentiation:

- Classic – Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Processes in Church and Synagogue*; also the follow up, *Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick-Fix*. The standard applications of the family systems theory of Murray Bowen to congregational life. But the combination of Sayers, Steinke, and Herrington above are the best places to start. Read them first, then go to Friedman down the road. You will thank me for this recommendation.
- More recent – Steve Cuss, *Managing Anxiety: Yours the Theirs*. I debated whether to list this in front of Sayers. Cuss covers how to manage your own anxiety as a leader.
- See my Resource Guide, “Emotional Systems, Self-Differentiation, Non-Anxious Presence,” on my website, LifeandLeadership.com, <https://lifeandleadership.com/ministry-resources/leadership-approaches-emotional-systems-self-differentiation/>.

About the Presenter

Dr. Carlus Gupton is Professor of Ministry and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Lipscomb University, Hazelip School of Theology. He held a similar position for many years at Harding School of Theology (2014-2021, adjunct 1996-2013). Previously he was a professor at Johnson University (2001-2013) teaching ministry, Bible and theology, and also taught at the University of Tennessee School of Communication Studies (2001-2011). Prior to this, he spent twenty years as a preaching minister for congregations in Tennessee and Alabama.

Carlus teaches courses in church leadership, spiritual formation, change, and conflict on both masters and doctoral levels, and has also taught New Testament, theology and communication. He also maintains an active schedule of consulting and coaching.

Dr. Gupton is the founder and publisher of LifeandLeadership.com, a website with over 1,500 pages of resources for church leaders. The website also features the popular DISC Profile System.

He and his wife, Ann, have two grown daughters, Erin Gupton and Katlyn (David, Jr.) Nowers, and two grandsons, Oscar and Thomas. Ann and Carlus live in Nashville, Tennessee.

For more information:

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