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“What Can You Do to Become a Better Leader?”

Why being honest about our struggles is the best place to start

Being a pastor or Christian leader is very demanding. I’m not just talking about how much work there is to do. I’m referring to the pressure that comes from being in a position of responsibility. How can we live up to God’s standards? How can we meet the expectations of others? How can we earn the respect of our peers and elders?

It’s not just the workload and expectations of the people. As sincere, dedicated leaders, we put a lot of pressure on ourselves, too. We want to honor God. We want to be worthy disciples and servants of Jesus Christ. We want to do our best and make our contribution. We want to live up to our own standards. But there are so many demands and so many limitations. Many of us try our best, but too often feel ill-equipped, inadequate, under-resourced, and overwhelmed.

On top of it all, we may have no one to talk to about our struggles. We may feel we have to hide our weaknesses and failures from others. The church people put us on a pedestal, expecting us to be perfect or to be nearly as gifted and available as Jesus. We don’t want to disappoint them. We

may even fear their judgment. We're already disappointing ourselves, why expose our weaknesses to others and make things worse?

So, what should we do? From a biblical point of view, the answer is not to try harder and harder to impress others. Such efforts may seem logical, but they are usually born of pride and produce the opposite result. We may develop great skills, but others will detect our pride and lose respect for us. Especially for those of us in Christian leadership, the more our pride comes out, the less others will trust or admire us as spiritual leaders.

No, the biblical answer is just the opposite of our normal human instinct. Jesus and the writers of the New Testament taught that the way to advance in the Kingdom of God is via humility.

Humility before God and openness to the Holy Spirit is the right attitude for a Christian leader who hopes to fulfill the awesome responsibilities of Christian leadership. We must approach God from a place of honesty, ready to hear whatever the Spirit wants to show us. We must then be eager for the Spirit to help us to be and to do what we cannot be or do in our own strength. We should not be afraid of what God might say to us, because we can trust that God always acts in loving ways to those who sincerely seek Christ's will and help. God will respond to us in whatever way best fits with God's good purposes for our lives. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us to heights we cannot reach on our own.

This practical article is written for Christian leaders (pastors, teachers, administrators, and all those in positions of influence), who are willing to admit their weaknesses and shortcomings but also want to grow and become better leaders. In it, I offer some insights based on spiritual life coaching work I did with an American Baptist Church pastor and denominational leader several

years ago, a man whom I will call Pastor Frank. I will also discuss many biblical texts that explain why being humbler and more open is so important for us as Christians, in general, and especially for Christian leaders, in particular. Indeed, without humility and openness, we cannot experience the fullness of God’s power and transformation in our lives, ministries, and leadership roles.¹

Pastor Frank’s painful truth

“Frank” felt like a fool. As the senior pastor of his church, he felt like he should be the most spiritually mature member of his congregation. He wanted to be the kind of person and leader who could draw from a deep well of wisdom and self-understanding. Instead, he felt shallow. He was embarrassed because he couldn’t come up with any ideas for writing an article for his denomination’s journal. Whenever he compared himself to other leaders at his level, he felt inadequate and inferior.

At first, Frank tried to cover up how discouraged he really felt. In entering spiritual life coaching with me, he simply wrote, “I am at a point in my call and spiritual life where I need focus and direction. I believe I need help in going deeper to discover how and where God has called me and desires to use me in mission.” Everything he said was true and important, but to actually make real progress toward these goals, Frank also had to look inward as well as look forward. He had to face how he truly felt about himself. He needed to put aside whatever bravado he might be tempted to exhibit to impress me or shield himself from pain. He had to admit that when it came down to it, he simply didn’t feel—as he eventually articulated himself—good enough, smart enough, or holy enough to serve in the position he held.

¹ This article is excerpted, with some modifications, from chapter 2, “Be Humble and Open,” in *Saying Yes to God: How to Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 38-50.

These were very hard things to admit to himself, let alone to anyone else. Yet, doing so made all the difference in Frank's ability to hear the voice of God and receive the help that he needed. Such humility and openness gave him ears to hear what he never could have heard otherwise. Had he put on a front or let his pride keep him in denial of his pain, we would still be talking about his goals, but he would never find the heart to pursue them.

What it takes to be able to listen to the Spirit

To get in step with the Spirit, we have to first be listening. To be able hear, we have to first be humble and open. Frank and many others I have known in similar situations come to experience God in amazing, life-changing ways not because they are spiritual giants or accomplished leaders, and certainly not because they have big egos or are good at controlling their environments. No, those whose lives are transformed by God's presence and power are those who experience God in their weakness, need, and vulnerability. They often have reached the end of their own capacities and are facing the truth about their inadequacies. They are lifted up by God precisely because they humble themselves before God (or are humbled by something they experience) and are now truly open to whatever the Spirit might want to reveal to them.

Be humble

For many of us, we don't have to work at being humble. Life does it to us! Yet, at the same time, sometimes it can be hard to face the truth about our own failings or weaknesses. We are too embarrassed or afraid that we can't bear seeing ourselves in such a light.

However, when we resist humility, we create barriers in our relationship with God. Our pride may create an artificial sense of well-being. Holding an inflated view of ourselves may

make us feel better in the moment. Grandiose thinking may energize us as we imagine ourselves to be powerful, accomplished, or highly valued by others. These things might be partly true, but exaggerated notions of ourselves can lock us in our fantasies. When we distance ourselves from reality, we block our ability to ask for and receive from God what we need. In other words, whenever we seek to relate to God from our perceived strengths or assumed superiority to others, we may succeed at burying some of our self-doubt, but the result will be disconnection from ourselves, others, and God.

Jesus warned against holding a prideful, arrogant attitude in his parable of the Pharisee and publican. He taught that it is only the humble who are helped by God.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Similarly, James and Peter each independently expressed what Jesus was teaching in his parable, when they said: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”²

The flip side of feeling one up to others is feeling one down, seeing ourselves as inferior to others or being preoccupied with our failures and all the ways we don’t seem to be as good, as talented, or as successful as someone else. But this too can be a symptom of pride. If we are distressed to be one down from someone else (even if it is only in our imaginations) and to not be living up to our ideal selves, it may very well mean that our pride is distorting our ability to see and accept ourselves as we are. In other words, if we weren’t so full of pride, it wouldn’t

² Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5; cf. Prov 3:34.

bother us so much that someone else seems to be “better” than we are. It wouldn’t grieve us so much when we see flaws in our lives, faults possessed by every human being on the planet.

Humility neither compels us to keep up appearances falsely nor disparages us in our own eyes because we cannot compete with others as well as we think we should be able to do.

Choosing to be humble is simply being honest about who we are and where we are struggling.

We acknowledge our limitations and need for help. We admit that sometimes we are not the persons we would like to be or that other people think that we are. We face the unflattering truth about ourselves that we would rather not see and that we sure hope no one else is seeing either.

For example, if we choose the path of humility, we may have to admit that our work sometimes isn’t up to par. We may have to concede that we do not always reflect Christ well in our thoughts and behaviors, and in fact do a disservice to the cause of Christ at times. We may have to acknowledge how the mistakes we’ve made are adversely affecting others, whether we made them knowingly or not. We will stop trying to bluff our way through hard conversations with others to avoid being exposed or taking responsibility. We will accept that we need others in order to accomplish what God has called us to do or to be more effective in whatever we’re doing; and we will be willing to ask for the help we need.

Yet, choosing humility is not self-denigration. Humility before God is simply being honest with ourselves. We will acknowledge both our strengths and victories as well as our limitations and failings. We will appropriately give God credit for the good work God has done in our lives, and we will admit our need for the mercy and grace (help) of God in so many other ways. That’s where it starts. Where it goes is a richer, deeper relationship with God, stemming from a beautiful combination of humility before God and confidence from God, a boldness built upon the greatness of God’s love and magnitude of God’s provision for our spiritual needs

through Christ. We bend our knees, and God pulls us to our feet. We acknowledge our unworthiness to demand or expect anything from God and find that we can now hear the voice of the Holy Spirit who wants to minister to us and to lead us.

In admitting the truth about how much he was denigrating himself and how distorted his self-image had become, Frank became better able to hear God's voice again. He humbly exposed the darkness and doubt within himself and opened himself to hear whatever God wanted to say to him. As he did so, he suddenly was able to "focus," "find direction," "go deeper," and "discover God's calling" (his current goals for his life). Only now, instead of trying to slog forward out of a sense of shame and obligation, he experienced a "breath of fresh air" from the Holy Spirit.³ He neither suppressed what he was struggling with nor affirmed his negative self-image as "true." Rather the oppressive negativity he had been experiencing was swept away by a greater truth that came from God's perspective. When Frank began to look at himself as God did, he was better able to "right-size" his perceptions of his limitations and failings. He was suddenly able to receive the words of mercy, grace, love, and affirmation that he needed to move forward again.

Be open

From genuine humility comes openness. Being open to whatever God might want to say to us and open to however God may want to change us through our encounters with the Holy Spirit are critical on the spiritual journey. Openness includes being willing to hear what we may not want to hear or see what we don't want to see. If we're truly open, we will ask the Holy Spirit to show us things about ourselves that are getting in the way of our relationship with Christ and show us the way forward.

³ I am indebted to Jack Levison for this way of speaking about one's experience of the Holy Spirit. See Levison, *Fresh Air*.

In coaching, Frank quickly learned that his struggle for greater depth and for hearing God's call in mission was rooted in misperceptions about himself and about how God wanted to meet his needs and lead him. First, Frank needed to accept himself for who he was and believe God had every intention of working through him fruitfully, in spite of Frank's perceptions that he wasn't good enough, smart enough, or holy enough. He needed to be open to see himself differently than he had, namely that he had a great deal of depth already. The key to his growth was not to develop depth as much as it was to learn how to access what was already there. When it came to confidence and affirmation, he needed to reorient his thinking and find a better source of grounding for his life and ministry. Instead of looking to the praise and attention of others to validate himself, he needed to spend more time with God to sustain and nourish him spiritually. And this is exactly where the Holy Spirit led him.

Frank's experience illustrates the importance and value of humility and openness before God. The Holy Spirit had every intention of ministering to him and strengthening him. The Spirit wanted to build his confidence by first re-orienting his self-reliance (which was sagging noticeably) to become more God-reliant, and in so doing help him to see all the reasons he could lead with boldness instead of shame and fear. Yet, none of this would have been possible without Frank's willingness to admit where he was struggling and to open himself up to whatever the Spirit might want to say to him and do in him. And the results were the opposites of his fears, and far exceeded his hopes.

Biblical teaching: The truth sets us free

Jesus taught that all those who sin are slaves to sin and need to be set free. (John 8:34) To experience freedom, we need to be open to whatever truth the Spirit wants to show us and

convince us of—the truth about what God wants for our lives, the truth about what’s really going on that may be hindering our relationship with God, and the truth about God’s plan to save us from ourselves and our sins.⁴ And then comes freedom. As Jesus put it, once we see and embrace the truth God reveals to us, “the truth will set [us] free” (John 8:32). In context, the truth Jesus principally had in mind was to see that he was from “above,” i.e., sent by the Father, that salvation comes to those who put their faith in him, and that his true disciples “hold to his teaching” (8:23-31).

Sometimes, our biggest need, then, is for the Holy Spirit to break through our denials, resistance, and blindness—whether unintentional or willful. When we resist and or simply can’t face the truth about something that’s gone awry in our life, the Holy Spirit can help us to face what we need to face, to repent of our sin, and to be delivered from its crippling power.

In Romans 7, Paul teaches that on our own (by our “flesh”), we do not have the ability to do the good we desire or to resist the pull of our desires toward sin. In chapter 8, in light of our helplessness in the face of the power of sin, he goes on to explain that only faith in Christ enables any of us to escape condemnation. However, that is not the end. The salvation God offers through faith in Christ takes on a practical form in the here and now through the Holy Spirit, through whom we have real power to overcome temptation and sin. Our part is to focus our minds on the Spirit and follow the Spirit’s leading, as opposed to focusing on the self-centered, self-gratifying mindset characteristic of our “flesh.”⁵ As we do so, we will experience more freedom from the power of sin, which leads to “life and peace” (Rom 8:6).

⁴ Cf. John 16:7-11, where Jesus explains to his disciples that after he has “gone away,” the Counselor (probably a reference to the Holy Spirit) will come to “prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment” (16:8, NRSV). In other words, one of the roles of the Holy Spirit is to reveal spiritual truth to us when we resist it, and to convince us of our need for repentance; this is in addition to the Spirit’s roles of leading us to Christ and guiding us ethically, vocationally, or in any number of other practical ways.

⁵ Craig Keener explains that “the ‘way of thinking involving the flesh’ is a chronic perspective or disposition from mere human, bodily existence as opposed to a life perspective and disposition informed and led by God’s presence.

In Galatians 5, Paul talks again about what role of the Spirit in the life of believers in Christ. First, he spends a good deal of space describing the contrast between the desires of our “flesh” and the leading of the Spirit. He draws the conclusion that only the Spirit can set us free from the tyranny of sin in our lives and can produce love, joy, peace, and many other wonderful qualities and experiences that can only come from God’s activity within us. To be set free from the power of sin by drawing on the Spirit and to experience a new quality of life through the Spirit’s influence in our lives is what it means to “live by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16-24). Inasmuch as we can and sometimes do experience this kind of life in the Spirit, he concludes, those who live by the Spirit ought to consciously seek to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Gal 5:25). In other words, since we know what it is to experience new life through the Spirit, we should actively draw upon the power of the Spirit to consistently live in freedom (from sin) and to do whatever good the Spirit might prompt us to do.⁶

We can wait until truth comes crashing down on us, such as when life falls apart in some way or when others we love and care about suffer serious consequences of our living in denial. Or, as a much more helpful and less painful alternative, we can pro-actively seek to know and live by the truth in every aspect of our lives. We can humble and open ourselves to whatever God wants to reveal to us. We can ask God to help us to see whatever truth we need to see, and to give us the strength we need to keep in step with the Spirit.

The key to transformation: The Word of God

Those whose ultimate interests are purely temporal, satisfying their own desires, contrast with those with interest in and divinely provided access to the eternal God” (*The Mind of the Spirit*, 117).

⁶ See my article, “What It Means to ‘Keep in Step with the Spirit’—A Careful Interpretation of Galatians 5:25 and Its Implications for Practical Christian Living,” *Chin Christian Journal* (Volume 5, May 2017).

When we are truly open to God and are actively listening for God’s voice, the Holy Spirit will often reveal truth to us and change our hearts and minds through the Word of God. The universe was created by God who “spoke” the world into existence. (Gen 1) Over the centuries, God’s Spirit has spoken through prophets to reveal the will of God to his people (e.g., see 2 Pet 1:20–21). “God-breathed” Scripture leads believers to salvation and equips them for spiritual maturity and doing good work in the world (e.g., 2 Tim 3:15–17). According to John’s portrayal of Christ, God revealed himself to humanity when the “Word” (Greek, *logos*) became “flesh” and lived among other human beings.⁷ Through an encounter with Jesus Christ, the Logos, and by putting their faith in him, believers become children of God (John 1:10-14).

In other words, whether it is the creative activity of God, the spoken (and written) words of God, the very person of God, or the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God works powerfully to reveal truth and create something good and beautiful throughout the universe, especially in human lives. Life comes through the Word of God, we know who God is by the Word of God, we know better what God wants for our lives by the Word of God, and we experience spiritual transformation through our encounters with the Word of God. There is no other resource that comes close to the Word of God in its ability to help us know, love, and serve God as followers of Christ.

We can see how early Christians thought about and relied on the Word of God particularly in the book of Hebrews. Over and over again, both explicitly in the author’s teaching and implicitly in how he used Scripture and preached to his readers, he pointed to the Word of God and relied on the Spirit of God to touch and change his readers’ lives.

⁷ John 1:1, 14. Paul similarly described Jesus as the very “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Jesus Christ participates in the work of creation and reveals to us the “fullness of God” (Col 1:16-20). Likewise, the writer to the Hebrews describes the Son as “the radiance of God’s glory and exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).

In the very opening verses of the letter, the author to the Hebrews presents the Son of God, by whom he means Jesus Christ, as the latest and greatest way God has spoken to humanity. He does not use John's language to explicitly refer to the Son as the "Word" (*logos*) of God, but instead links him to the Word of God by saying that "in these last days [God] *has spoken* to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe" (1:2, italics added). The author then spends more than two chapters explaining how God is working through the Son in order to establish God's kingdom and provide salvation for humanity. (1:1-3:6)

In chapters 3 and 4, the author to the Hebrews quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures extensively and refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit as God's voice (words) to lead hearers to repentance, belief, and salvation. (3:7-12) He eventually links the past to the present, the Word of God in history and the Spirit of God in the moment, when he suddenly moves from Old Testament prophecy to its fulfillment in his own time in chapter 4. He explains that what God said to David about a certain day called "Today" is now this day, the time inaugurated by the coming of the Son of God when the message spoken by God in history is suddenly God's Word for the present moment. "Today, if you hear [God's] voice, do not harden your hearts," he preaches (4:7). What is he doing? He is affirming the critical role of the Word of God both through the Holy Spirit and in the written Scriptures to change people's lives, a point he then makes explicit in verses 12–13:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb 4:12-13)

The writer to the Hebrews does not distinguish among the various meanings of the Word of God in these verses, no doubt because he believes that God's powerful Word comes to us in many different ways. When we encounter the Word of God, all pretense, denial, self-deceit, pride, and shameful secrets are suddenly exposed for what they are. The Spirit of God sees right through us and reveals truth about us. There, humbled and vulnerable, the Word of God also heals our wounds and shows us the way forward. In a word, that healing is in Jesus. The way forward is by faith. In a true encounter with the powerful Word of God we may begin in terror, but we end up with true hope. Our response is not one of pride, negotiation, debate, or bargaining. It must be surrender to the truth that the Word reveals about ourselves and our need. Our faith response is our acknowledgement that God in Christ is the only source of real hope available to us. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. (Heb 4:14–15)

Once we understand the truth about both our need and the source of our help, we will know what to do—pray earnestly with our whole hearts and minds! But the prayer we offer is not one of desperation—though at times we may certainly feel desperate for God's help—or hoping against hope for mercy. No, that would be bad theology and contrary to the whole tenor of the New Testament. God's love is so great, and Jesus's sacrificial act in dying for humanity on the cross so complete and effective, that the writer to the Hebrews can insist that we who have faith in Christ may "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16).

In context, these few verses in the middle of Hebrews chapter 4 (verse 14-16) tell us so much about what we need to know to help us in our spiritual life. They indicate that the help we

need in our day by day journey to better know, love, and serve God as followers of Christ is all found in what Christ has done for us and in our personal relationship with God. Our creator and Savior, who sits on a metaphorical throne representing his rightful place as ruler of the universe, awaits our prayers with open arms. God's kingdom is marked by grace for the needy, not reward for the mighty. It's marked by mercy and forgiveness, not judgment and rejection.

The Word of God elevated, preached, and experienced in the book of Hebrews points us to practical answers to our deepest existential questions about who we are and how to go forward when we feel defeated, lost, or stuck. We know who are in God's presence because we can finally see ourselves as God sees us—dearly loved, accepted, forgiven, and valued. We find what we need—mercy and grace—so that every barrier to our relationship with God is removed, and we have access to the power we need to live according to God's will. We may not yet know how to fully draw on this power to overcome our weaknesses and handle our challenges, but in God's presence we will know that we have come to the right place. Here, at the throne of grace, where our confidence comes from what Jesus, our Savior and High Priest (which to Jewish ears would have meant, supreme advocate on our behalf before God) has done on our behalf, there is real hope.

In the case of the Hebrews, the grace they needed from God was to be able to hold firmly to their faith and to persevere in faithfulness. In the face of pressure from Jewish evangelists and teachers, the Hebrew Christians needed help to “hold unswervingly” to their faith in God's new covenant, grounded in Jesus Christ as the object of their faith and source of their hope.⁸ They also needed help to press on toward greater spiritual maturity, to not lose heart in serving Christ's purposes among their fellow believers, and to live honorable and moral lives.⁹ As is

⁸ Heb 4:7, 11; 8:6, 13; 10:18-39.

⁹ Heb 6:1, 9-12; 13:1-19.

often true for us, the congregation to whom the author to the Hebrews was writing was in danger intellectually, morally, relationally, and spiritually. They needed God's help in order to face these challenges and come out victoriously on the other side.

The author to the Hebrews, then, shows us by example as well as teaching how much believers must depend on the Word of God—in scripture, directly through the Spirit, by the Son, via preaching—for salvation and to live out the Christian life.¹⁰ Through the Word of God, believers may experience movement from ignorance to deeper understanding, from humility to healing, from hopelessness to confidence, from alienation to fellowship.¹¹ This Spirit-led process prods us out of our hiding places and shakes us free from our bondage to self-denial, fear, and sin. The Word of God in the hands of the Holy Spirit brings us into a right relationship with God and prepares us to be able to better listen to and cooperate with the Spirit's voice going forward. This process does not apply only to conversion, where we move from disbelief to belief and trust in Christ but is a recurring pattern that describes what happens within believers over and over again. Whenever we become aware of our need for God or of something God is calling us to in some new way, the Spirit is drawing us to God and helping us to mature. Our part is to be humble and open to the Spirit's promptings (i.e., listen), and to seek God's help to hold on to our faith and persevere in faithfulness (i.e., cooperate).

¹⁰ Not infrequently, the Spirit also attempts to lead us to important truth and to transform us through our encounters with "others," especially those whom we perceive to be different from us or those who make us feel uncomfortable for some reason. Along these lines, retired Professor of Theology and Methodist minister, Frances Young, discusses what she learned from grappling with a disabled son and other painful life experiences in her book, *Brokenness & Blessing*. She observes, "A biblical spirituality necessitates openness, receptivity, and mutuality," attitudes that lay the groundwork for transforming our understanding of ourselves and our relationship with God. She concludes, "The rediscovery that God is beyond us, yet reaches out to us in Christ to grasp our hands in the midst of the struggle, even to wound us with his arrow of love, might enable us, both individually and as the body of Christ on earth, to live the way of love and true humility in following Jesus" (121–22).

¹¹ See Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*, where he discusses various "movements" that are markers of spiritual growth. Specifically, he speaks of the spiritual life as the continual movement between three polarities, "the poles of loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, illusion and prayer" (18).

Conclusion

To serve effectively as a Spirit-led, Christian leader is very difficult, for many reasons. All of us struggle with the magnitude of the awesome responsibility. Every one of us fails at times and lacks many qualities, skills, or maturity to do everything that is required of us. However, there is hope. We will never be perfect, but the sincere, dedicated follower of Jesus Christ can always expect God to keep working in their life. We can count on God to help us to grow and to learn from our failings. Over time, we can learn how to become more effective, Spirit-led leaders.

However, in order to benefit from God's work in our lives, we first we have to be willing to listen to what God wants to say to us. And to listen, we have to be in a state of mind that is truly humble, open and ready to hear whatever the Spirit wants to say. Learning to get our own selves out of the way, to quiet the competing voices in our heads, to be willing to stop and change course, to be patient to wait for the voice of the Spirit, or to be willing to step out of our comfort zones is all hard work. We may feel uncomfortable or unsure of ourselves when it comes to listening to the Spirit. We may be unsure how to differentiate between the voice of the Spirit and our own voice. We may be afraid to hear what the Spirit wants to say to us. I often am.

But, with God's help, we can learn. By exposing ourselves more and more to the Word of God, in all its forms, we will hear God speak to us. We will grow in our ability to recognize the Spirit's voice. We will learn to listen without so much fear. At times, the Holy Spirit will indeed convict us of sin and point out uncomfortable truth to us that we need to face. At other times, God is just as likely to bind up our wounds and speak a word of comfort or nourishment when we pour out our hearts in prayer. Our job is not to try to control God's response to our prayers, as if we ever could. No, the Spirit's call is to humble ourselves, open our hearts and minds, and

stand ready to respond in whatever ways are most appropriate to the situation at hand. Then we will be much better able to hear whatever we most need to hear, and to experience the Spirit's moving and power to enable us to fulfill God's will and serve Christ's good purposes for our lives.

Frank's humility and openness led him to identify the questions that mattered the most to him and gave him the courage to ask them. Contrary to his fears, the Holy Spirit did not respond by confirming his low self-image. Just the opposite happened. The Holy Spirit surprised him with wonderful words of affirmation, love, and support, leading him to a place of peace and joy that he hadn't known in a long time. Then, over time, the Spirit also helped him to see what changes he needed to make, and could make, in order to serve more effectively. Yet, it was never a shaming or discouraging experience, but rather "ah ha" moments of new clarity and energizing insights that propelled him into action and greater effectiveness.

More humility and openness are two of the keys to personal transformation. They are essential to effective Christian leadership. They are needed everywhere in the Church today.

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