

A silhouette of a person rappelling down a rock face against a sunset sky. The person is wearing a blue shirt and shorts, and is holding a rope. The sky is filled with colorful clouds in shades of blue, orange, and pink. The rock face is dark and textured.

Leadership

Courage

Book One

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Introduction

My name is Kirk Kirlin. I'm a leadership coach for pastors and executive leaders. My passion is to champion Christian influencers to live their lives **all-in**. The thing is, most of us don't. Mark Twain once said: "*Most men die at 27... we just bury them at 72.*"

Man or woman, you may have sprinted into your 20's with great aspirations, brimming with confidence, and filled with hope to change the world. Yet, somewhere between then and now, most of us have pulled back. Back from our hopes, our dreams, our noble ideals, our best intentions. If our society is to be rescued from its own self-consumption, the Church in the US will have to be vastly different—from the inside out. This can only happen when she is guided by clergy who lead courageously.

This e-Book opens the lid on Leadership Courage. It is a series of articles that were originally posted as blog entries. Several more eBooks follow, which I hope you'll also benefit from. More than that, I hope that what you think about *as you read and reflect* will fundamentally change you.

In this e-Book we cover four ideas. Leadership is, above all else, a matter of the heart. To lead courageously is an expensive proposition—just as expensive as love. It is C. S. Lewis who said: "*To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.*" The same could be said of leadership.

Your relationship to responsibility is important if you are to lead anyone. I think you'll be surprised when you recognize the mischief that the common view of responsibility makes in the lives of leaders and followers—particularly in the Church. Finally, I suggest that the Church in North America has embraced a culture of cowardice.

As you will read, I am indebted to Edwin Friedman's seminal work: *A Failure of Nerve* which has inspired much of the thought behind what you'll read here. Please feel free to share this e-Book with others, especially your pastor and anyone in Christian leadership. As always, I invite your feedback. Please visit my website www.kirlincoaching.com to contact me and subscribe to my free email newsletter. I look forward to hearing from you!

The *Heart* to Lead - living courageously

The topic of this e-Book is Leadership Courage. I suggest that **courage is integral to leadership**. The link between the two is inseparable. To attempt to lead anyone, without employing courage, will undermine the possibility of the enterprise you hope to lead others in.

Management is another bird entirely. A manager does not a leader make. I hold a management degree. An advanced degree. From a pretty good school. We learned and practiced sophisticated problem solving techniques. We got pretty good with multifaceted analytic tools: market, cultural, financial, logistical, and competitive analysis just to name a few. Maybe most importantly, we developed our abilities at strategic reasoning and planning. In no way is my objective to denigrate management or management education. Yet, leadership is an altogether different matter.

See, **leadership is the visible employment of courage in a way that changes people**: their thinking, behavior, and the impacts of those changes. So what is courage? A friend and mentor defines courage this way: “*Courage is not the absence of fear. Courage is moving forward in the face of fear.*” So, what is it that moves one forward in the face of fear? The answer, I think, can be found in the etymology of the word itself.

Our English word “courage” comes from the French cor which means “heart”. Courage, literally can mean “with heart”. **To live courageously is to live with heart.** With your *whole* heart.

Your *whole* heart engaged.

Your *whole* heart invested.

Your *whole* heart at stake.

Your *whole* heart exposed.

Your *whole* heart vulnerable.



And, **what makes this whole-heart living so elusive is this:**

we've all had our hearts hurt! You cannot live, be in relationships, and love without having your heart broken... rejected... crushed. In short: hurt. Since you're not stupid, you learn from each heartbreaking experience not to play so fast and loose with that heart of yours. You've learned to be cautious. Protective. Watchful.

Once, you lived with your heart in your hand. You put it out there where someone could embrace it as a marvelous, generous, precious gift. And, sooner or later it was rejected, repelled, repulsed. That hurt. A lot.

And, since you're no fool, you made sure not to make that “mistake” again. So, you pulled your heart back. You weren't quite so willing to give your heart away. A person would need to prove himself before you'd loosen your grip on your heart. And, at the first sign of trouble, you'd retrieve it ASAP!

Then, maybe later, an opportunity presented itself. A good opportunity. A really, really good one. Possibly it was a venture, a business idea, a ministry, a job, a project. You might have been skeptical at first, but the idea grew on you and, as it did, you became more and more passionate. You began to see yourself *in* this. You decided that you could actually see this working out! As you gave yourself to this possibility other priorities fell aside. You invested more deeply. Past the point of “no return”...



Then, somehow, in some way you hadn't anticipated, the bottom fell out. Words were spoken. Hard words. Harsh words.

Again, you and your wounded heart retreated from this “folly”—and any future follies as well. From now on, you'd be playing your cards a little closer-to-the-vest. What a fool to risk like that! What an idiot to trust so indiscriminately!

With each experience, you pulled your heart back.

Back to a place less vulnerable. A little further from other people. Not so susceptible to their whims and vacillations. And, a little farther from your dreams. Closer to your chest. Eventually, you took that heart of yours and stuffed it back inside your rib cage. Back where you decided it should've been all along. Safe. Unexposed. Invulnerable. Impenetrable. Like everyone else.

Well... most everyone else.

In AD 185, St. Irenaeus of Lyons in his theologically important treatise *Against Heresies* is said to have written: *Man fully alive is the glory of God.*

A human *fully alive* is the glory of God. When you take your heart out of your chest and extend it at your arm's full length to those you have affection for, are you not becoming *more fully alive*? When you put your heart in play, at stake, at risk for some great, worthwhile heart-engaging endeavor, do you not become *more fully alive* in the process? A human *fully alive* is the glory of God.

So, what does all this have to do with Christian leadership? **When you lead with your whole heart fully invested, you inspire the rest of us to join you.**

THAT'S leadership.

When you are fully at stake, with your eyes wide open and yet you are still “all-in”, you invite us in, as well. In fact, when you are engaged like that, you exude an almost irresistible magnetism that pulls others to get in with you. You and those you inspire become *fully alive*.

The glory of God.

The *Heart* to Lead - opening your heart

This e-Book is about courage... living *with heart*. It's written as an invitation for you, as a leader, to live and lead with your heart fully engaged. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Christ-followers in the commercial and cultural center known as Corinth:

"We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also." -2 Corinthians 6:11-13

As in all affairs of the heart, there is risk. To me it seems one question is always: "Who goes first?" Who gets to be first to love, to risk, to reach, to be vulnerable?

Paul settles the issue for those of us in ministry: **I get to go first!** In doing so, I model the way of love for all those around. "We have opened wide our hearts to you", Paul says. "We are not withholding our affection from you..."

Of how many in Christian leadership could that be said?

How generously, how obviously, how daringly do we love?

How careful are we to not withhold our affection from those we lead?

Most pastors would probably say they love their people well, sacrifice for them, work tirelessly, always try to be accessible, etc. Yet, Paul speaks of his heart being wide open to them.

That's intense.

A heart wide-open! A big, gaping opening that can be exploited, disappointed, rejected, maligned. And, not just the young, wide-eyed church planters that haven't yet taught themselves to distrust their congregations and to bury their affections behind a mask of professional, religious niceness.

I mean *you*: the veteran of betrayals, abuses, attacks, and back-stabbings... by many who you'll no doubt find in Heaven. You, who've been around the block a few times. "We've not withheld our affection..."

Heck, how challenging has it been to keep your heart wide open *to your spouse*?? What struggles have you encountered to not withhold your affection from your own husband or wife??





How stingy are you with your heart, these days?

Francis Frangipane asks in *The Three Battlegrounds*: “Is your love growing and becoming softer, brighter, more daring, and more visible? Or is it becoming more discriminating, more calculating, less vulnerable and less available? This is a very important issue, for **your Christianity is only as real as your love is**. A measurable decrease in your ability to love is evidence that a stronghold of cold love is developing within you...”

Paul, with all that was at stake in Corinth, shepherded his own heart so that it remained open wide, and his affections so that they were not withheld from them. So rigorously and openly did he give his heart to them that he was able to call them to reciprocate—**his leverage coming from his having gone first!**

He called them to a “fair exchange” of affections.

I wonder if, on those occasions when I have been stunned by the absence of affection I’ve encountered, it could actually have represented a “fair exchange” of the hiddenness-of-heart and the stinginess of affection that I’d sown into the relationship. I too have trained myself to keep my heart carefully cloistered away where it can’t be hurt—much. Yet, this protection comes at a great price. **As humans, let alone Christ-followers, we were made for love.**



Made to love.

Built to access and share affection readily, easily, generously.

Like little kids do.

Remember?

Living with and among imperfect human beings, I’ve been hurt and I’ve seen others hurt, over the years. In the movies and on TV we see characters that give the appearance of being deeply satisfied, fully alive, and relationally connected without the risk of hurt and heartache that love requires. Smooth operators. Cool customers.

Cold lovers?

I once taught myself to be in life that way. Denying what I was, and what I was made for, ‘till Christ captured my heart and taught me another way: a risky way, a vulnerable, dangerous way. Since then, there’s been an accordion-like opening and closing, expanding and compressing of the affections my heart was meant to exude.

This past decade I've been intentionally entering the rigor to open my heart wide and to war against the regular impulses to withhold my affection from those I influence. **Imperfectly and purposefully I'm giving myself to this dangerous and delightful way of life.** Calling

others to engage in a "fair exchange" of affection.

What might God do among those you lead, if you were to give up trying so hard to keep your heart "safe"?

What if you were to trust God and opened your heart wide to those you lead?



Leveraging your love with them.

The Price of Love

Courage, I've suggested, is living *with heart*. With you heart fully engaged. Fully invested. Fully in play.

Some would argue that **to live this way is expensive**. Costly. Reckless. Even dangerous.

I agree.

To live with your heart withheld is costly, too.

There's no living without paying prices. Give your heart; there are prices.

Hide your heart from your own life and *other* prices are paid.



So, let's examine prices that living *with heart* exacts. Just to be clear about it. **Whenever you care about anyone and anything, you invest some of yourself.** The more deeply you care, the more of you, you invest.

Initially, maybe, all you invest are thoughts and ideas about what could be. What this could mean. What it could become.

Before long, you begin to entertain how you might be affected. How you might

contribute. The good that could come out of it all. How you might benefit... if it all works out.

As you do, you give yourself permission to see it. To see as possible what this could lead to. What it could turn into...

And, **as hearts are wont to do, your heart gets gripped**. Not only do you see this as *preferable*, you begin to *love* what this might be. Now wanting it, you give yourself to it, a bit at a time. Giving more of yourself as you go. Your time. Your focus. Your attention. As you pour yourself into having it happen... *you are changed*. Some of what used to hold your attention no longer does.

People notice.



No longer repressing your enthusiasm, you invite others in with you.

Some back away. They want nothing to do with your stupid dream.

Many others are satisfied to stay on the slide line, amused maybe, watching to see what will happen...

whether your dreams will be dashed or fulfilled...

waiting to see if it's "safe" to join you.

And, a few are enrolled. They choose in. Into the possibility of what could be. As they do, your relationships change. **The stakes are now higher.** Greater. "If this thing goes south..." you catch yourself thinking, "a lot of people could get hurt." "And, if we succeed..."

Momentum seems to come from nowhere. Connections appear in surprising ways. Provision arrives unexpectedly. It's like there's a wind at your back, propelling you forward. You feel alive. Energized. Hopeful. Life seems to open up before you, to expand.



At the same time, loved-ones caution you not to get in too deep.

Remember the movie Rudy? The scene at the bus station when Rudy's decision to try to get into Notre Dame is confronted by his father: "*Chasing a stupid dream causes you and everyone around you nothing but heartache...*"

You've heard the message, too: Don't go too far. Don't move so fast. What about the risks? What if this doesn't work? Don't you care about *us*?

All along the way, with your heart engaged, you are paying prices. You set aside the predictable, the familiar, the safe. You wade into foreign waters. So much is unknown, untested, uncertain. Disappointments come, as they must. Setbacks catch you off-guard. Betrayals stun you. Backlash comes from unexpected sources. Supporters withdraw. Criticisms that began as a whisper grow in ferocity. You feel alone.

Each time, your hopeful heart is nicked. Lanced. Pierced. Wounded. Assaulted.

You *want* to pull back, dis-invest, protect yourself, be reasonable, find balance, cut your losses. Most of all, you want to rescue your heart from the hurt.

C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves*, writes: *“Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one...”*

To live and lead with courage is to love so much that your heart is vulnerable to being “wrung and possibly broken”. And yet, when your heart *is* wrung, or broken, you choose to keep it engaged. Silencing your survival instincts, trusting God to heal and strengthen your heart, you keep giving yourself -- fully -- to your life.

This is no small matter. If it were, the world would be full of powerfully courageous leaders. Imagine if the Church – even *your* church – was a gathering place, an equipping place, a sending place for leaders like this.

The Responsibility Riddle

QUESTION: Pastor, who is responsible for your spiritual maturity and vitality?

ANSWER: I am, of course!

Ok, fine. Now answer this...

QUESTION: Pastor, who is responsible for the spiritual maturity and vitality of your congregation?

ANSWER: Again, I am!

Really? Are you sure?

If *you* are responsible for your congregation's spiritual maturity, what are *they* responsible for?

Er... Um... Uh...

Ask me that again??



There's a troubling trend in the Church these days. We, in ministry, see the evidence of this all the time. It can be found in a complaint, and more often than not, the complaint sounds something like this: "I'm just not getting fed, here..." "I don't experience the presence of God here..." "The worship no longer ministers to me..."

And then off they go, out the door, on to another church, or maybe to no church at all.

The thinking, both of the pastor and the complaining congregants flows from the same fallacy: that the pastor, the church, the elders are somehow responsible for the spiritual condition of those they serve.

Thinking like this, it's no wonder the Church is diapered in perpetual spiritual infancy.

Isn't it?

So, you who are reading this e-Book, who is responsible for *your* spiritual maturity and vitality?

You are.

Only you.

The responsibility riddle can be solved in this important, seldom recognized distinction: **Your pastor is responsible to you, but is not responsible for you.**

Think about it. A pastor is responsible *to* the congregation to model mature faith in action, to proclaim God's Word faithfully, to represent Christ ethically. Each believer is responsible for what they do with the Word of God: both the preached Word and the Word that sits in their lap, on the bookshelf, or on the coffee table gathering dust.

Are you responsible for your spouse's happiness? Of course not! How could you be? If your husband has handed you "the keys" to his emotional well being- **give them back! Now.**

When you notice that someone has tried to make you responsible for whatever it is that God has made *them* responsible for – their attitudes, their feelings, their behavior, their "stress", their decisions, their depression, their optimism – invite them to embrace this reality: you may have a responsibility *to* them, but you can never be responsible *for* them.



Do I have a responsibility *to* Annie, my wife? Absolutely! I am responsible to keep my promises to her. I've promised to value her above every breathing human being. I've promised to honor her whether she deserves it or not. I've promised to pray for her. I've promised to champion her toward all God's called her to be. I've promised to be faithful sexually and emotionally. I've promised to walk with God and to submit my life to Jesus and his Word. And, I promised to treat her better than she deserves.

And, she is responsible *for* herself. Completely.



When our kids were small and *unable* to take responsibility for themselves, as parents we bore the responsibility for them.

When our pre-teen had a friend over, and they snuck out at night and lit a porta-potty on fire, we were legally responsible—because they were minors and under our supervision.

Now that he's in his twenties, it would be foolish for Annie and me to take responsibility for his decisions. In fact, it would be *irresponsible* of us to do so. **To take responsibility for another**

adult is a violation of his or her autonomy. It is an invasion of their sovereignty. And, I believe it represents a kind of abuse.

Yes. Abuse.

When you are with an otherwise capable adult *as if* they were incapable of adult choices and incapable of bearing the adult consequences for those choices, what is your impact – *really* – on that person? What is the “fruit” that is produced when you persuade another to live irresponsibly?

The distinction of being *responsible to* vs. *responsible for* is central for any of us in leadership. There’s actually great freedom when you are clear about this distinction, and lead in such a way that those you influence are clear about it too.

To stand in life responsible to others and responsible for your own emotional being and destiny may call for courage you’ve not been willing to summon, up ‘till now.

I say, it’s time to call it up!

A Culture of Cowardice - The Condition

Who are the exemplars of courage in our culture? To whom does America look when seeking heroes to serve as role models? Lady Gaga? Bill Moyers? Dennis Kucinich? Robert Downey Jr.?

It seems to me that the courageous have become an endangered species...and not just in society-- but in the Church.

Think about it.

Wikipedia defines an endangered species as a population “*at risk of becoming extinct because it is either few in numbers, or threatened by changing environmental or predation parameters.*” Can you see that all three conditions are true of the Church today?



We're left with what I call a *Culture of Cowardice*.

Back in the early 1990's Dr. Edwin Friedman described America as “**a seatbelt society**”. A society oriented more toward safety than adventure. In *A Failure of Nerve* he notes that America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to courageous, well-defined leadership. One effect of societal anxiety is a reduced pain threshold. The result: comfort is valued over the rewards of facing challenges.



A culture like this has no stamina in the face of difficulty and crisis.

How like the contemporary Church this is! **In our commitment to “being nice” we prioritized togetherness over actually making a difference.** In our desire to *feel good* we bury our heads in the proverbial sand while the culture around us sprints toward its own destruction. According to Friedman dissent is discouraged, feelings take precedence over ideas, peace over progress, comfort over anything new, and cloistered virtues over adventure.

The press within church for togetherness smothers bold, daring, world-changing action – like we see in the Book of Acts – and those who are courageous enough to engage it. What emerges, stunningly, is a culture that is so “nice”, so fixated on empathy that it organizes itself around the most immature, most dependent, most dysfunctional members.

Or, haven't you noticed?

On average, churches in America have fewer than 80 in attendance, are in decline, have fewer than 5% of their membership who tithe, and most fail to see a single convert to the Christian faith a year.

Who has hijacked the agenda in *most* of America's churches? The least courageous, least responsible, and least emotionally and spiritually mature have taken most churches captive.

Courageous leadership, by nature, is *decisive*. And, the Latin root of *decisive* means "to cut". But, it is not "nice" to cut anything away, to cut anything off, to cut anything out—even a toxic presence that – like a parasite – survives by sucking the life out of those who are more healthy. To lead *with heart* is to stand for what's best, simply because it *is* best—even when it is unpopular. Even when it *provokes* opposition from misguided stakeholders within the Church.

Courageous leadership, by nature, is *clear*. Such a leader is unapologetically clear about who she is, the difference she is committed to make in the world, her values and priorities. **The clearer you are as a leader, the clearer people around you will be.**

And, therein lies the problem. As pastors, we don't always like what that clarity reveals. As you become more and more clear as a leader, more and more people will decide they're not "up" for going where you're going. Stay foggy and many will stick with you, wandering around in impotent ambiguity.

Courageous leadership, by nature, is *disruptive*. Courageous leaders routinely disrupt dysfunction. They regularly challenge their own preference for comfort—and that of those they lead.

Many interpret their leadership as crisis-inducing.

Friedman notes that **crises are normative in leaders' lives**. These crises come from two sources: those that just arise, imposed on the leader from forces outside that leader's control **and crises that are initiated simply by the leader doing exactly what he or she should be doing**. Yet, how reluctant is *anyone* in church leadership to lead in such a way as to *invite a crisis* for long-standing church members?



As a leadership coach and consultant to pastors, **my life's work is to champion Christian influencers to *find their hearts and to fully re-engage them*** in this great,

important struggle to stir the Church from its slumber. There is no altogether “nice” way to do this.

Just five verses into his story, Jonah is sound asleep below decks, aboard a ship imperiled by a brutal storm. The terrified captain races below, is stunned to find Jonah asleep -- in so important a moment – wakes him demanding: ***“How can you sleep? Get up and call on your God! Maybe he will take notice of us, and we will not perish.”*** [Jon1:6] Get this: it was not a follower of Yahweh who stirred Jonah from slumber—calling him to take action with God lest the “community” they were part of be plunged to ruin.

Look around you. **Is not the community around your church caught in a destructive storm? A moral, ethical, spiritual, relational hurricane** that wills to destroy the fabric of American society? Don’t you see the storm buffeting the Christian faith—driving it to the very edges of the culture?

To awaken the Church, her leaders must *first* rouse themselves. Then, embracing the opportunity provided by this life, they can stand clearly, decisively, and disruptively to awaken their churches to enter the glorious and dangerous fight for the redemption of un-churched near them.

What else would a courageous Christian do?

A Culture of Cowardice - The Resistance to Change

In the previous segment, I introduced what I believe to be a pervasive cultural condition in so many churches that it has become characteristic of the Church in America. I call it **A Culture of Cowardice**. While there are many wonderful exceptions, compared to the whole, these exceptions are so exceptional that the moniker deserves our attention—particularly when our topic is leadership courage.

Edwin Friedman, in *A Failure of Nerve* diagnoses American society as chronically anxious. As he describes the features of systems under the condition of chronic anxiety—the Church in North America *even more than American society* seems to fit the description.

One feature of such systems is that they are toxic to courageous, well-differentiated leadership. So acute is the culture's abhorrence of discomfort that it **"knee-jerks" its way from one perceived threat to another, clamoring for almost instantaneous relief from her ministers**, who are pulled in all directions at once. While a pastor may have begun with a clear sense of mission, in short order the mission is overwhelmed by the demand that the "crisis du jour" be averted with all haste.

Ministers then, **instead of challenging the congregation to mature and leading them to take important new ground**, become consumed with smoothing out the never-ending ruffled feathers of the flock.

Caretaking is not leadership. A constituency that is so developmentally-regressed requires that a clergyperson do little more than immerse one's finger in the mouth, stick it up in the wind, and move in the path of least resistance which, according to Friedman, will be to accommodate the low frustration tolerance of the most immature. And, to do this, all they need to do is answer the phone!

Ministry, for many, resembles the role of a caregiver in an overcrowded orphanage, wearily scurrying to soothe the baby screaming most loudly before she can comfort the next infant to let loose. **The priorities of one's ministry are based more on responding to the immediate needs of church members than in steadfast obedience to the Audience of One.**



A leader who remains resolute in pursuit of a cause greater than the good feelings of the congregation -- for example, the maturation of the disciples and the mobilization of the membership for ministry to those outside the church -- is seen as heartless, unresponsive, deaf to the cries of the downtrodden, and out-of-touch with "real

people” within. **Emotionally and spiritually emaciated church members have no stomach for a *real* leader...like Christ.**

So, what if *Jesus* were a member of the typical American church today?

To a member of a beleaguered minority he declared: “You have no idea *what* you’re worshipping!” [Jn 4:22] Embarrassed by Jesus’ insensitivity, the Church might howl:

“How cruel, abusive, and bigoted! Our all-loving heavenly Father is *nothing* like that!”



In the aftermath of freeing the Gadarene [Mt 8:32], imagine the uproar from the typical church today at the brutality shown the pigs. P.E.T.A. members throughout the Church would be calling to have Jesus locked up. “Better that one mentally-disabled person remains as he is than that innocent wildlife be so maliciously mistreated!”

To a fellow Jesus invites to follow him, he says: “Let the dead bury their dead” when they guy asks to first attend the funeral of his father. [Lk 9:60] To this, the church would smugly declare: “How unfeeling, cold, and heartless! A merciful God would *never* say that!”

When Jesus comes upon the merchants in the temple, *he goes nuts*: vandalizing their property, abusing the animals (again!), and misappropriating their funds. [Jn 2:15] Surely, the church would get a restraining order against Jesus—after his 5150 had expired. “God is a God of order—not chaos”, they might intone.

Jesus is revealed in scripture as clear, decisive, and disruptive. You might think Him a study in contrasts: compassionate to the adulteress and hair-triggered to undermine the religious leaders of his day. He would be branded a troublemaker in most US churches today.



Jesus was resolute in His commitment to model, bring, and defend the Kingdom of His Father.

Are you?

A Culture of Cowardice - The Challenge of Change

I believe a **Culture of Cowardice** has dominated much of the Church in North America. I've confined my comments to North America because I have very little exposure to non-Western churches and leaders. Since the US has been exporting what we call "the Gospel" in earnest since WWII, no doubt we've packaged and shipped our cultural preferences along with it.

Regrettably, we may have exported a Culture of Cowardice, to the foreign field. You who minister cross-culturally can offer your observations from around the globe, by commenting at www.KirlinCoaching.com.

Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve* has been eye opening. He identifies characteristics of chronically anxious families, communities, and societies. While I see ample evidence of these features in American society -- just look at our national response to the "Crisis in the Gulf" not long ago -- it has been stunning to consider how applicable these traits are to Christian churches in our day.

Two chapters ago, I suggested that **the insipid capacity of the typical congregation to tolerate discomfort** has accelerated our orientation away from bold, courageous leadership and centered it on the most needy and emotionally-regressed among us.

Last time, I opined that religious political-correctness has become so toxic to courageous leadership that **Jesus – not the "Flannelgraph Jesus", but the historical Jesus of the New Testament – would embarrass many in church today.**



Do you find this stunning?

It is my privilege to work with pastors in dozens of denominations—each with their own peculiar polity and priorities. Some systems locate leadership responsibility *and* authority with the pastor. Others load the pastor with leadership responsibility yet deny her or him the authority to lead. Still others withhold both leadership responsibility *and* authority from their ministers.

Regardless of denominational polity, it has been my observation that no one has as great an opportunity to influence the culture and values of a local church than the Senior Minister. That is why I've dedicated my life to standing with and strengthening *them*.

You who stand in pulpits determine – more than anyone else – what your congregants talk about. To the degree that you choose your title or topic or text when you preach, you inject that into the "congregational conversation" that takes place in



the cars and restaurants and kitchens of those who hear. **Now, you don't get to determine *what they say* about your topic, but you do get to decide what that topic is.**

Think about it.

Does your preaching provoke people to think? Do your sermons unsettle the status quo? Do your messages undermine the meaningless mediocrity of most of your members' lives? Do you challenge your congregation to change?

If not, why not?

Read the Gospels—just the words in red—and notice how often Jesus did exactly *that*. **Jesus stood as an interruption to everything that came between his hearers and the Kingdom of God.** Jesus constantly provoked, unsettled, undermined, and challenged those he was with. Didn't he?

Jesus loved them enough to offend and oppose that which would do them harm—even when they cherished it as good, nice, or comfortable. He loved the rich young ruler enough to spell out exactly what it would take for him to inherit eternal life. [Mk 10:21] **Love motivated Jesus to challenge the rich guy.** Love-- not for himself, his own comfort, or reputation-- but love for the other moved Christ to risk offending him.

I assert that it, too, is love that motivates you to *retreat* from challenging and offending and opposing the nonsense and mediocrity your parishoners hold as true. **Trouble is, it is not love for them that keeps you from goring their sacred cows of compromise.**



No. It is self-love that fuels your commitment to censor your voice, isn't it?

You don't want to put up with the push back. There's no point in stirring up a hornet's nest. You're already on thin ice with several stakeholders in the church. No need to rock the boat. You're already tired enough. Besides, they've made you pay *big time* when your preaching got too personal a while back.

Thank God that Jesus didn't fear offending the woman at the well—maybe she and her whole village would've perished--had he played it safe. What if Jesus chose to quench his zeal [Ps 69:9, Jn 2:17] rather than go after the powerful and popular merchants in the temple?

Courageous leadership is leadership with heart. With **your** heart fully exposed, fully engaged, fully at-stake. There is no virtue in being a jerk. **I'm not advocating that you be oppositional just because you can.** Nor am I suggesting that you blast away at whomever and whatever bothers you, just to get something off your chest. No, that would be selfish.

To risk your own security, your comfort, the way others regard you *for another's benefit*—that is love. **To stand powerfully resolute, because of love for someone else, in the face of ridicule and rejection—is exactly what Jesus did.**



Didn't he?

A decade ago, I attended a series of character development trainings. Each was designed to serve both as a crucible and a spotlight—to allow me to see aspects of my character and my impact on others that I was blind to.

Jean Marie is a powerfully incisive woman who had trained four of my children. She'd heard first-hand what it was like for them to have me as their dad: distant, demanding, disconnected, self-consumed, rigid, judgmental, severe, angry, cold. Then, she facilitated a workshop that Annie attended. She learned of Annie's frustration, disappointment, loneliness, and anguish with a spouse like me.

For the next five years, Jean Marie served as a coach and trainer for me. **I had never met anyone like her.** Her love for my family and me was palpable, remarkable, undeniable, and unrelenting. And, so was her full-court press to challenge my self-consumption, to provoke me to consider my true impact on those I love, to undermine my commitment to remain clueless, to interrupt my many excuses and the beliefs that supported them, to oppose my hiding from life when I didn't know what to do, to offend the arrogance of my belief that the way I viewed life was, in fact, "right", and to unsettle the confidence I'd placed in my innocence and virtue.

Up to that time, there were people who loved me and overlooked my childishness, selfishness, and playing small. Others, recoiling at the putrid odor of my self-righteousness would have nothing to do with it—or me. **Jean Marie was different.** She was sickened by the offensiveness of my hypocrisy, and yet she loved me steadfastly. It was her love that held me in the cleansing fire she brought.

Oh, that I would love so well! How about you?

A Culture of Cowardice or Changing Lives?

For the last few entries, I've invited you to consider whether, and to what degree, a **Culture of Cowardice** has taken hold in the Church. My purpose is to invite you, Christian leader, pastor, denominational executive to a place of uneasiness, even painful discomfort.

Why?

Pain is necessary for change.

We'd prefer to believe that an appropriately reasonable rationale, cloaked in kindness, is all that is needed for humans to embrace the adventure and uncertainty of the unknown. Since the Enlightenment, I suppose, societies have assumed that *knowledge* of what's better will result in people making the reasoned choice to change. But, do they?

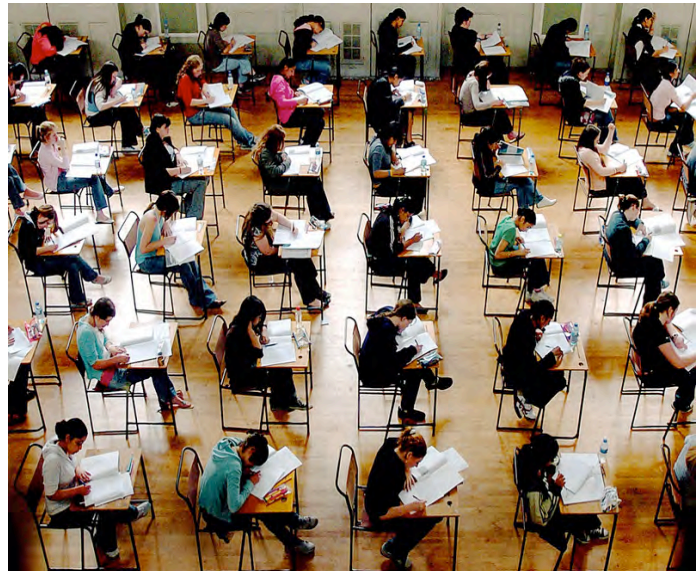
More to the point, do you?

Really??

One condition that's welcomed the stagnation common to the church experience of most is that **we who are in ministry leadership have forgotten what business we are in.**

Now, I'm no historian, but my understanding is that the Protestant Reformation occurred in the sweep of the Enlightenment—the Age of Reason—and we've been reasoning with our congregations ever since. Reasoning kindly with them about the truths of the Bible. We've been teaching the Word—as if we're in the education business.

The problem is, education is not an end and an educated church person is not an end either. No more than an elevator is an end. An elevator is a means to the 11th floor. Teaching the Bible is a means to an end.



I assert that **the Church is in the life-change business.** When someone approaches you with “nice message, Pastor”, what is your reply? “Thank you”? More often than not, when someone approaches me with a similar encouragement, my

reply is “Why?” I listen for how the person has been impacted. Then I want to know: “So what?” “How will you live differently?”

You see, if my teaching and preaching (or this e-Book, for that matter) is not changing the way you live, I am wasting your time and mine.



If you’re not changing lives in identifiable, maturity-inducing ways, aren’t you wasting your time and the one who hears you? Multiply this by the 90 or 390 people in your church, then multiply *that* by the months and years and decades that you’ve been educating people whose lives are not radically changing and what do you have??

The Church in North America.

Which brings me back to pain. Minister, if you are in the life-change business then, I assert, **you are in the distress-bringing business** as well. Many will argue that to bring distress to your congregation is unkind. But, is it?

The Message renders 2 Cor 7:8-9 this way: *“I know I distressed you greatly with my letter. Although I felt awful at the time, I don’t feel at all bad now that I see how it turned out. The letter upset you, but only for a while. Now I’m glad—not that you were upset, but that you were jarred into turning things around. You let the distress bring you to God, not drive you from him...”*

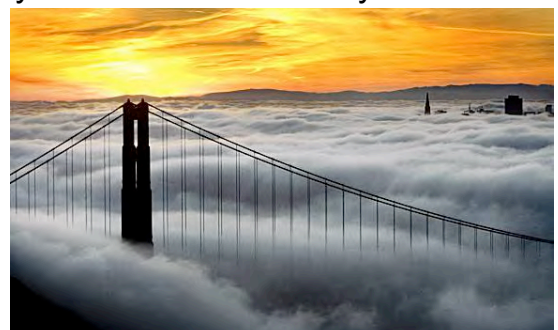
Paul wrote to change their lives. He explains that his previous letter was to see if they’d take responsibility for the church. [2 Cor 2:9] Notice that Paul’s discourse produced distress, upset, and it “jarred” them into turning things around.

When was the last time you “jarred” your people, pastor? How long has it been since your preaching provoked such sorrow in your people that it ignited a change-of-life the Bible calls repentance?

Would you love your people well enough to provoke them to suffer—unto repentance?

In The Problem of Pain CS Lewis wrote: *“Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness. Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering.”* So consider: do you love your congregation sternly and splendidly, or has it been your aim to ceaselessly rescue them from suffering?

This, I think, is a second condition that’s invited the spiritual lethargy that’s settled over the



Church like the marine layer that engulfs San Francisco Bay.

Our *commitment to be kind* has left our people immature and shallow.

Edwin Friedman suggests what Paul modeled: **it is through *challenge* that we promote responsibility in our people.** To be a leader who will jar your people to maturity you must raise your pain threshold.

And, here's another jarring insight from Friedman's A Failure of Nerve: **you must raise *your* threshold for the pain you cause in others.** And, Friedman says, you need to de-sensitize yourself to their maturity-repressing sensitivities.

What??

De-sensitize yourself to their maturity-repressing sensitivities.

Unless, of course, you care not whether those you lead become like Christ.

A Culture of Cowardice - Turn On the Light

How is it that when a prominent Christian leader falls, the whole affair is so often shrouded in darkness? The secrecy seems to persist until the police, the media, the offended party (for example, in a sexual affair), or the victim of the leadership abuse (for example, when money has been misappropriated) brings it into the light. How often are those illuminations met with skillfully-articulated denials or a minimizing reinterpretation of the offense?

Is it just me, or do you see it, too?

We who are Christian, are fond of reciting John 8:32 *“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”*, particularly when the topic is evangelism. **Trouble is, our behavior – at very important times and in very important ways – covers up truth.**

The Greek word translated “truth” is *aletheia*, meaning “reality”, or “what is”. Yet, in times of crisis -- like when a minister falls in sin -- we seem to invest ourselves in elaborate cover-ups. One reason we do, I think, is we’ve forgotten what business we’re in.



Is it any wonder those outside our faith community scratch their heads? **What are they to think when we froth at the mouth about the “truth” of our Gospel and then behave in ways that endeavor to keep truth hidden away?**

Were the roles reversed, what would *you* think? How likely would you be to consider their faith claims?

Andy Stanley in *The Next Generation Leader* correctly identifies courage as central to leadership. One way leadership courage expresses itself, he says, is in recognizing and declaring current reality—regardless of how embarrassing or discouraging it is. **When a prominent pastor falls, the courageous around him or her will honestly and forthrightly communicate the truth** of what happened.

Why?

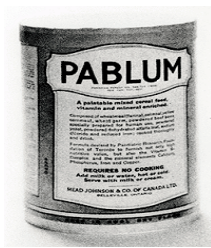
In the people-development business, rather than the keep-the-people-comfortable business, they recognize this as a critical character-development opportunity.

A leadership failure is “ground zero” to anchor the values that are central to how we, as Christ-followers, are committed live.

When Paul instructed Timothy: **“Those [elders] who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.”** [2 Tim 5:20], he placed the benefit to “the others” above whatever prices the leaders or the fallen elder would experience. And, I invite you to consider that “the others” who are warned are not just those in Church.

And yet, for centuries, we in the Church routinely sweep these humiliations under the rug: the priest is relocated to a new parish, the pastor takes a seminary position, the missionary goes on furlough, and the youth leader enrolls in graduate school. **Those close enough to the transgression to have been among the collateral damage most of the time just leave...the church...the Faith...and the stand for liberating truth.** [Jn 8:32]

Paul counsels Timothy against favoritism in leading the church and administering discipline. And yet, isn't that *exactly* what we do?



Several years ago, I became aware of an egregious ethical compromise by a nationally visible leader with whom I had worked. When my attempts to influence a correction were uniformly thwarted, I resigned. The public explanation provided by that leader was an example of the positive-sounding pablum of most such announcements. It said ... nothing.

And, saying nothing, it succeeded in saying one thing clearly: **“This is *not* the truth.”**

So, when people close to the situation asked why I'd resigned, I told them. I shared my errors in judgment, my failures to act on the prompting of the Holy Spirit years before, and my mistakes—the ways I'd contributed to the mess. And, I shared, honestly as I know, exactly what those in leadership, including this respected national leader, had done.

When we claim to be “children of light” and yet switch off the light when what it reveals is unpleasant or uncomely or uncomfortable... are we not strengthening the darkness? Does not the darkness thicken when the Church fails to stand as light in life?

Paul, to the church in Ephesus wrote: *“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing*



to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them... But everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for it is light that makes everything visible.” [Eph 5:8-14]

Living within **A Culture of Cowardice**, we find it awkward to expose darkness the way Paul instructs. Orienting ourselves around the least mature, our response to a moral failure is to make it easy for the fallen leader. We tell ourselves that the “restoration” of the fallen leader is most important. So we keep the indiscretion secret. **We keep it in the dark.**

Paul didn’t see it that way.

In the business of making mature disciples, courageous leaders will mourn with those who fall *and* warn everyone else, lest we disavow the truth we profess by the way we lead.