

BEGINNING WITH SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

*Discernment in its fullness takes a practiced heart,
fine-tuned to hear the word of God and the single-mindedness
to follow that word in love. It is truly a gift from God,
but not one dropped from the skies fully formed.
It is a gift cultivated by a prayerful life
and the search for self-knowledge.*

ERNEST LARKIN



The leadership team of Grace Church wanted to learn how to discern God's will together as they made decisions. They were part of a large, well-established church in a busy suburb of a major city in the Pacific Northwest, and they had a passion for becoming a gathering place for spiritual seekers. And their vision had become reality! They had been able to assemble a top-notch team of individuals who were gifted and experienced in ministry, and they wore cool jeans. Most did not have any formal theological training, but they had innovative ideas, bright minds and a passion

for Christ; through a variety of life experiences and marketplace opportunities, they knew how to develop and market their ideas effectively and implement them with excellence.

The elder board comprised leaders experienced at running successful businesses through good strategic planning processes and sound financial practices. There was also an attorney in the mix to make sure they always had good legal counsel, plus a brilliant strategist who had come to Christ through the church and was brimming with ideas about how to "take it to the next level." Since these individuals were well-connected and successful in their careers, they also had the funds to back whatever plans and visions they agreed on. They found it deeply fulfilling to be able to connect their financial successes with the opportunity to help fund such a significant spiritual endeavor. What had started out as a small group of families with a shared vision had now mushroomed to around two thousand in attendance on Sundays. In addition, many in the local community were benefitting from their wide array of ministries. They had been able to purchase a large warehouse, which they had renovated into a multipurpose space used for worship as well as for housing the many ministries that kept the place bustling with kingdom activity seven days a week. On the surface, it was all good.

Beneath the surface, however, there were other realities that needed attention. The staff was exhausted from continually trying to meet the needs of the community in ways that were bigger and better. There had been a moral failure involving one of the founding members, and although appropriate disciplinary action had been taken, there had not been open communication with those close to the situation. He and his family left the church abruptly, and many were still grieving the loss of their friend and colleague.

In addition, there had recently been a disagreement among the elders about purchasing a piece of property and expanding the ministry. This had created two factions in the congregation, one of which eventually left, bought the property and started

another church several miles away. Public statements about how this would “expand the work of the kingdom” did little to heal the disillusionment among those who had been caught in the relational crossfire.

There were also stress cracks between the elders and the staff as relationships became increasingly hierarchical and businesslike. The staff felt that the elders wanted to see more bottom-line growth (attendance, offerings, new and innovative programs), but they weren't convinced that the elders really knew what it took to pull this off. The elders were now asking whether they had “the right people on the bus.” Staff members were aware of conversations in which people's leadership “capacity” was questioned, and they feared being fired.

The senior pastor, the only staff person who was also an elder, carried the weight of being the one who continually represented the two groups to each other; this often resulted in miscommunication and misunderstanding. Several staff marriages were troubled due to pace of life issues and unresolved tensions. Those who were observant noticed that these couples attended fewer and fewer events, and when they did, they were aloof and guarded.

All of these dynamics created a prevailing mood of fear and uncertainty. Although staff and elders rarely got together as a group, the interactions they did have were characterized by posturing and maneuvering. Things were still going well externally, but there were aspects of the church's life where real wisdom was needed. How were they to discern what the real issues were, let alone God's will regarding them?

WHEN HUMAN WISDOM ISN'T ENOUGH

This is one kind of situation in which a leadership group might realize that they have reached the limit of what human wisdom has to offer and acknowledge their need for discernment. Something is not quite right. There is a realization that the methods

they have used to make decisions in the past are not adequate for what they are facing now. Everyone is running so hard and so fast that no one has time or space to listen to God. They realize that even though they might have discerned God's will in the beginning, and that was how the whole venture got started, along the way something shifted. As things got larger and more complicated (or remained small and still became complicated!), they relied more on the wisdom of “experts” than on a mutual commitment to discern and do the will of God together. They might even have elevated leaders who were wise by human standards but were ill-prepared for spiritual discernment.

It could also be that everything in a church or organization is just right, and yet their leadership group is facing important and far-reaching decisions—such as an expansion of the physical plant, adapting a multisite strategy or making an important new hire—that require discernment rather than their own thinking and planning. How does a group of leaders discern God's will together on such matters?

BEGINNING AT THE BEGINNING

Leaders are often a bit surprised when I tell them where we need to begin. They usually have the idea that there is some sort of a technique I can teach in a weekend that will send them off and running. But what I tell them is that *corporate discernment begins with attending to the spiritual formation of each individual leader*. We start with the book of Romans, which contains Paul's clearest instruction that we are to “be transformed” so we can discern the will of God. We note that this passage was not addressed primarily to individuals but to a *group* of Christians who needed basic teaching about the Christian faith and how it is to be lived out. Romans 12–15, in particular, is focused on how we are to live out our faith in practical ways with each other in community, and it is in this context that Paul says: “In order for this thing called the body of Christ to work, each of you

must resist the process of being conformed to this world and enter into a process of spiritual transformation so that together you can discern and do the will of God" (my paraphrase).

Groups determined to pursue God's will together must begin by focusing on the dynamic of spiritual transformation in the lives of individuals who comprise the group. The temptation, of course, is to skip the necessary prework and get on with the business of discernment. No doubt some groups will try to do this. Not to worry; some lessons are best learned the hard way. A group's initial attempts at discernment can actually clarify the need to enter into a more intentional process of spiritual transformation as they encounter their first obstacles or experience the limits of their spiritual readiness.

A group might start out strong but get stuck when they discover that while the individuals involved are intelligent and committed Christians, they do not have the spiritual practices in place that enable them to stay open to God in the context of a discernment process with others. Or when the discernment process becomes more difficult than they expected, they might observe people capitulating to what is worst within them—bullying, powering up, resorting to subtle manipulations, shading the truth, leaving in a huff and so forth.

Even then these initial failed attempts at discernment are fruitful because they help us *experience* the fact that spiritual transformation is indeed the necessary preparation for discernment. Failed attempts at discernment can provide the needed impetus to give focus to the spiritual formation of the leaders.

Discernment at the leadership level begins, then, with the spiritual transformation of each leader as they engage the disciplines that enable them to regularly offer themselves—body and soul—to God.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES FOR DISCERNING LEADERS

Given the importance of spiritual transformation as a prerequisite

for discernment, it can be helpful for the leadership group to share an understanding of the process of spiritual transformation and how it takes place so they can all be on the same journey. (For a biblical and theological perspective on spiritual transformation, see appendix one.) There is no shortcut for this. Those who want to become discerners must have some basic spiritual practices in place to keep them in a posture of willing surrender to God. Sharing some understanding of key spiritual disciplines is essential for leaders seeking to pursue God's will together.¹

Solitude and silence. Solitude is the foundational discipline of the spiritual life; it is time set aside to give God our full and undivided attention. In solitude we withdraw from our lives in the company of others and pull back from our many distractions in order to give God complete access to our souls. Devoid of the normal interruptions, silence deepens the experience of solitude. It enables us to withdraw not only from the noise and distraction of the external world, but also the "noise" of the inner compulsions that drive us. In solitude and silence, we become quiet enough to hear a voice that is not our own. This is the Voice we most need to hear.

Spiritual leadership starts with listening for the one true Voice and learning to distinguish it from all the other voices that clamor for our attention. Unfortunately, many leaders today preach solitude better than they practice it. Ironically, the more we get involved in Christian leadership the more difficult it can be to carve out time for God and the more subtle our excuses become. Perhaps we think that being at church or being so involved in God's work can somehow take the place of time alone in God's presence. Perhaps we think that leading prayer meetings and praying publicly is the same thing as having a prayer life. Or perhaps we are convinced that our presence and action are so critical for God's work to go forward that everything will come to a grinding halt if we let go and let God and others handle things while we take time in God's presence.

Maybe we have even become so addicted to the noise, activity and performance-oriented drivenness that characterizes so much of the church today that we don't know who we would be if we stopped to listen and receive. We might even think that reading the latest *New York Times* bestseller or the latest blog on leadership is more important to our leadership than receiving a word from the Lord.

Whatever our reasons for avoiding solitude, leaders more than anyone need to stop the flow of our own words and ideas long enough for God to get a word in edgewise. We need time to cease striving. We need to know something at a different level than just our intellect. We need time to listen to the still, small voice that is qualitatively different than any other. We need to hear those things that cannot be taught by human wisdom but by the Spirit. We need concrete ways of giving up control—at least for a time—so that God can be more in control of our lives and our leadership. Without this kind of listening and presence to God, it is impossible to cultivate leadership that is distinctly spiritual.

Personal Reflection

*What is your experience of solitude and silence these days? How are you experiencing God's transforming presence in the context of these key spiritual practices?*²

Engaging the Scriptures for spiritual transformation. As we cease striving in times of solitude, we realize that there is a difference between reading the Scriptures for utilitarian purposes—such as gaining information, preparing a sermon or proving a point—and engaging the Scriptures for spiritual transformation. There is a difference between approaching Scripture with our own agenda in mind (no matter how worthwhile that agenda might be) and approaching Scripture in order to wait on

God for what he knows we need. There is a difference between knowing the biblical stories and finding *ourselves* in the story in a way that helps us make sense of our lives and know God's guidance for our next steps.

Silence is the best preparation for hearing from God through Scripture—whether we are alone or together. “There is a wonderful power of clarification, purification and concentration upon the essential thing in being quiet,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes. “Silence before the Word leads to right hearing and thus also to right speaking of the Word of God at the right time. Much that is unnecessary remains unsaid. But the essential and the helpful thing can be said in a few words.”³

One approach to Scripture that fosters this kind of openness and receptivity is *lectio divina*, an ancient method of reading Scripture developed by the desert mothers and fathers to allow God to address them directly through the biblical text. (For a brief description of *lectio divina*, see appendix three.) Another way of opening to God through Scripture is to practice “finding ourselves in the story” like we did in John 9. In this practice we imagine ourselves in the historical setting and then listen to the story, allowing God to show us where we are in the story and to interact with us in that place. Or a designated person can read a relevant Scripture or the lectionary passage for the day and invite the group to remain silent for a few moments to allow God to speak personally to each one before anyone comments on the passage.

Leaders who place themselves before the Scriptures in a way that allows God to speak to them personally are more disposed to hear from God in ways that affect their decision making when they are with others. Because they regularly open themselves to God in Scripture as part of their own private devotion, they welcome the opportunity to be open to Scripture in a leadership setting. They don't experience the group devotional time as a pre-

cursor to "getting down to business." Instead, they are comfortable with using various approaches to Scripture as a way of inviting God to "speak into" meeting agendas as the discussions unfold and decisions take place. Whatever practices we use, cultivating patterns of listening to God in Scripture alone and together is essential to the fabric of spiritual leadership.

Personal Reflection

What is your practice these days for engaging Scripture for spiritual transformation? How is God speaking to you through Scripture? What kinds of things is he saying?

Prayer. Discernment takes place in the context of friendship with God as it is cultivated through prayer. Prayer encompasses all the ways we communicate and commune with God. The further we travel on the spiritual journey, the more we discover that all of life is prayer and holds the potential for deepening our intimacy with God. That said, there are three kinds of prayer that are particularly pertinent to discernment. The first is the *prayer of quiet trust* described in Psalm 131. In this silent prayer we acknowledge our utter dependence on God and trust in God when things are "too great and too marvelous for me." This is the kind of quiet trust that we might observe in a young child who is content to just be with his or her mother after weaning. It is only as we learn the prayer of quiet trust in the face of our own personal questions and complexities that we can enter into this kind of prayer in a leadership setting.

Another kind of prayer that is associated specifically with discernment is the *prayer for indifference*. In this prayer we ask God to work in our hearts to make us indifferent to anything but the will of God. This kind of indifference and willingness was Mary's response when the angel came to her and told her that she would

give birth to the Messiah. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). It was Jesus' prayer after he had struggled in the garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). We will explore this prayer more fully in chapter three.

When we have come to a place of indifference, we are ready for the *prayer for wisdom*: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you" (Jas 1:5). We often pray for wisdom while we are already attached to some outcome we think is best! Indifference is an important prerequisite to the prayer for wisdom precisely because the wisdom of God is the foolishness of the world. When we have become indifferent to our need to be seen as wise in the eyes of others, then we are ready to receive wisdom from God. It is essential that elders, staff and ministry leaders are personally *on the journey* to this kind of surrender to God as part of their spiritual preparation for leadership.

Personal Reflection

What is your experience of the different kinds of prayer described here? Which are new? Which ones are you already practicing? How is God working in your life through these prayer practices?

Self-knowledge and self-examination. Parker Palmer makes this very sobering statement about leadership: "A leader is a person who must take special responsibility for what's going on inside him/herself, inside his or her consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good."⁴ This statement explains, at least in part, Paul's confession in Romans 7 that "when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."

Certainly no one understood the dangers of unexamined leadership better than Paul. After all, as Saul he was zealously com-

mitted to doing what was wrong while believing he was doing what was right. Some of us are like that! If we are not growing in self-awareness through honest self-knowledge and self-examination, there is every possibility that our leadership may in the end do harm where we had hoped to do good.

Palmer observes that people rise to leadership in our society based on their extroversion, which means they have a tendency to ignore what is going on inside themselves. These leaders rise to power by operating very competently and effectively in the external world, sometimes at the cost of internal awareness. He says, "I have met many leaders whose confidence in the external world is so high that they regard the inner life as illusory, as a waste of time, as a magical fantasy trip into a region that doesn't even exist. But the link between leadership and spirituality calls us to re-examine that denial of the inner life."⁵

The tendency to appoint leaders who have found success in the external world but who have somehow managed to ignore what is going on inside themselves is prevalent in the church and Christian organizations—especially in those that have grown large quickly. We assume that success in the world of business and commerce means a person is best qualified for leadership in the complicated environments of large churches and ministry organizations. While there is no question that great wisdom can be gained from experience in commerce, if spiritual preparedness is seen as secondary to skill, there will almost certainly come a time when that person's lack of self-knowledge and spiritual depth becomes a limiting (and even a debilitating) factor in his or her ability to provide spiritual leadership.

Gifted leaders—Christian or otherwise—can function effectively for a while on the basis of natural gifting and knowing how to maneuver in the business world. This does not necessarily qualify them for spiritual leadership. The destructive results of a lack of self-knowledge may not become evident until the person

has been in leadership long enough for the public persona to fray around the edges when the pressure is on. When pushed against the wall, such leaders will capitulate to old, unresolved patterns.

Many leaders have been so shaped by work environments that are competitive, harsh and punitive that all they know to do is function in self-protective ways. When they become part of a spiritual community in which individuals are expected to be able to take responsibility for their mistakes, face their own character issues and confess their sin one to another in a way that fosters deeper levels of transformation, they honestly don't have the skills or spiritual capacity to do it. When spiritual leadership requires them to move beyond mere professionalism to "the more excellent way," they are not able to make the adjustment. They may even dismiss the call to grapple with issues of love, trust and transformation in a ministry setting as a lack of professionalism rather than seeing it as part of our calling to lead in ways that are distinctly Christian.

Personal Reflection

How do you practice self-examination these days? What is God revealing as you invite him to "search me and know me," as David did in Psalm 139? What is your awareness of the sin patterns, false-self motivations or character issues that might affect your leadership if they are not dealt with?

Discernment requires, first of all, that we are able to discern matters of our own heart. A leader cannot be discerning about external matters if they are not able to discern what is true and false within themselves. They become dangerous in the leadership setting because they are subject to hidden motives and defense mechanisms that are unknown even to themselves. In the preparation and selection of leaders, we need to look for those who are growing in self-awareness, who are willing to take responsibility

for themselves and what drives their behaviors, *and* who have the courage to bring that self-knowledge into the leadership setting.

THE BEST THING YOU BRING TO LEADERSHIP

Just because an individual has been a Christian for a long time, attends church, went to a Christian college, has a Ph.D. in psychology or has been a leader in other settings does not mean that person is experiencing transformation at a level that will enable him or her to effectively engage in discernment with other leaders over the long haul. Just because people have natural gifts or share your passion for ministry does not ensure that they are practiced in the kind of prayer that leads to discernment. Just because they are successful businesspersons does not mean they are good at listening and responding to the still, small voice of God. Just because someone is a pastor or elder doesn't mean he or she can tell the difference between the true self and the false self, or is willing to die to what is false in order to respond to what is true and best. Being well-taught is not the same thing as being transformed.

The good news is that people can be shaped and educated within the group they are a part of, if they are willing. A group that understands itself to be a spiritual community that exists to pursue God's will together can and should, by its very nature, have a shaping influence on its members. In fact, this can (and should) be a stated goal of the group—to be a transforming community where this kind of formation for leadership can take place.

THE JOURNEY OF GRACE

With all of this in mind, the Grace Church leadership group decided to pause from adding any new ministry activities and spent six months focusing on their own spiritual lives. They wanted to move from decision making to discernment in their work together. They were convinced that their own transformation was prerequisite to this.

They began the process by creating space in a retreat setting for

experiencing spiritual disciplines and listening to God together. They engaged a wise teacher to facilitate healing conversations about their pace of life, about how the relationships between staff and elders had deteriorated over the years, and about developing realistic expectations for people in ministry. They began to communicate openly, grieved past losses and brought some closure to the painful experiences that were part of their history.

As the retreat came to a close they were hopeful: they had released some very heavy burdens and were replenished and more aware of God's presence both personally and in community. But they didn't want this retreat experience to be a one-time mountaintop experience. They wanted this awareness of God's presence and the relational healing they experienced to be an ongoing reality, so they determined to spend the next six months reading about and practicing some basic spiritual disciplines. They agreed that the different ministry teams (including the elders) would devote at least part of their meetings once a month to sharing what they were experiencing in their spiritual practices. Six months later they would reconvene for another retreat in which they would be guided more specifically in the practice of discernment.

They were convinced that this attention to their own transformation as leaders was not a luxury or something they did when they had leftover time. It was the heartbeat of their shared life, and it was the only way to get on the path of pursuing God's will together.

In Community

PRACTICING TOGETHER

Take time as a group to reflect on the connection between spiritual transformation and discernment. Do you see it? Do you believe it? As a group, do you agree that spiritual transformation is a prerequisite to discernment?

Give time for each person in the leadership group to (1) talk about the spiritual rhythms they have in place, (2) how they are experiencing God in the midst of these rhythms and (3) what they still feel they need. Ask, What are the life rhythms that keep you healthy, growing and transforming? Have you established rhythms or patterns of spiritual practices that are shaping your spiritual lives *and* your collective leadership?

If everyone in the group is experienced in the spiritual disciplines described here and practicing them regularly, go on to chapter three. If some aren't, determine which disciplines the group needs to understand and practice more consistently. Then plan for a way to "get on the same page," either through reading and practicing on your own, scheduling a retreat for exploring the needed spiritual disciplines, or bringing in someone to teach or help guide the process. If the spiritual disciplines described here are relatively new to everyone, take time to study and experience some of the basic spiritual disciplines before going on. (If your group needs foundational teaching and experience with spiritual disciplines, *Sacred Rhythms* would be ideal, as it contains teaching, guidance for practicing each discipline and a group guide for processing your experiences together.) Another option is to identify the specific discipline(s) you need and take time between this meeting and the next to explore that one discipline. You might also consider using *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*; it too connects spiritual practices with leadership specifically, and can serve as a helpful resource. Close your time by praying together.

CLOSING PRAYER

O God,
*let something happen to me,
 something more than interesting
 or entertaining
 or thoughtful.*

O God,
*let something essential happen to me,
 something awesome,
 something real,
 Speak to my condition, Lord,
 and change me somewhere inside where it matters,
 a change that will burn and tremble and heal
 and explode me into tears
 or laughter
 or love that throbs or screams
 or keeps a terrible cleansing silence
 and dares the dangerous deeds.
 Let something happen in me
 which is my real self, O God.⁶*