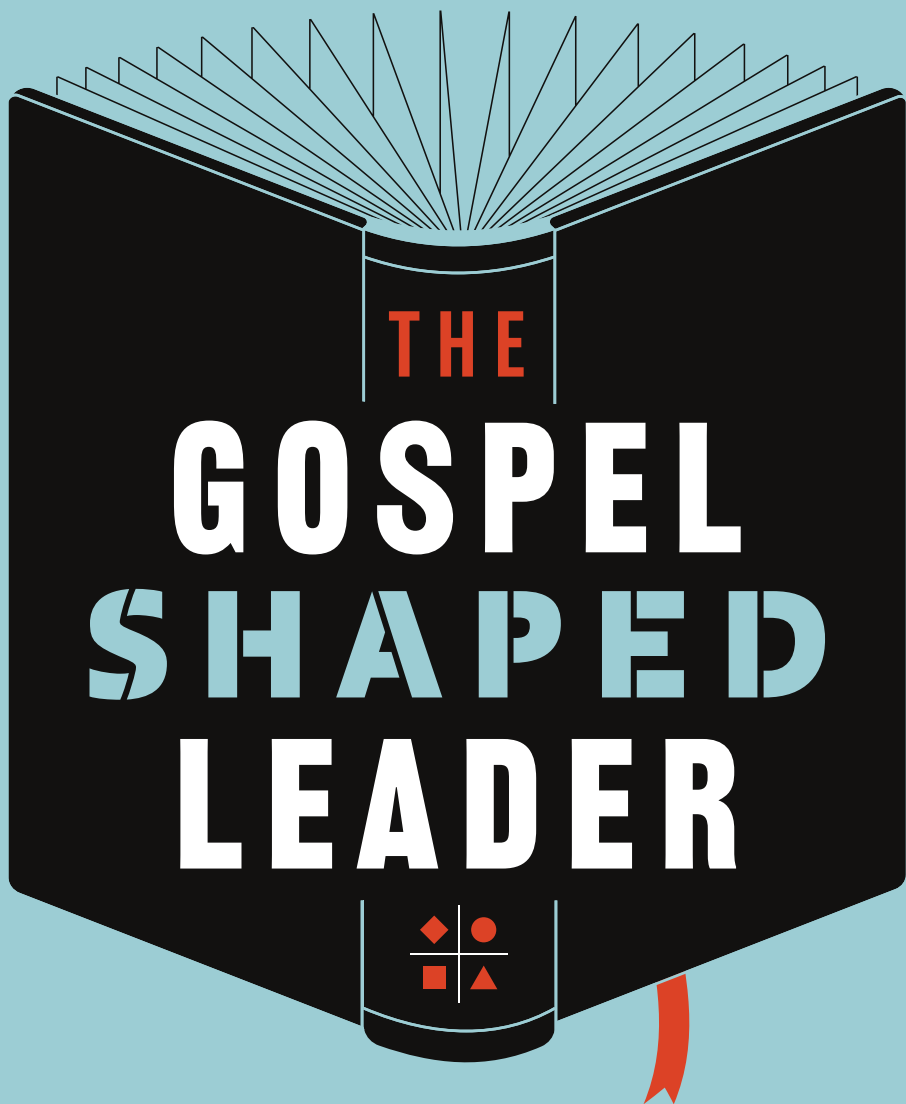


SCOTT THOMAS



LEANING ON JESUS
TO SHEPHERD HIS PEOPLE

“In a time of burnout after burnout in church leadership, it can seem like practical questions of leadership can sometimes come too late, if at all. In this book, Scott Thomas helps the reader frame a healthy life, Christlike leadership, church accountability, and gospel-rooted productivity. This is not a book of quick fixes or productivity hacks; we have enough of those. This book speaks first not to the week’s calendar or to a life’s résumé but to the soul of the leader. This book will come as good news to those who want to model healthy leadership that can last.”

Russell Moore, Public Theologian and Director of The Public Theology Project, *Christianity Today*

“Scott Thomas does a wonderful job of giving us practical and biblical descriptions intended for those God called into leadership. Though many books have been written on Christian leadership, Thomas’s book offers thorough insight on being a leader that comprehensively follows and leans on the beautiful example of Jesus.”

Doug Logan Jr., President of Grimké Seminary and Dean of Grimké Urban; associate director of Acts 29; author of *On the Block: Developing a Biblical Picture for Missional Engagement*

“Drawn from over three decades of ministry, Coach Thomas supplies twelve principles, reminding us that souls formed by the gospel become leaders who finish the game. Leaders, if you want to run strong and last long, start training with *The Gospel Shaped Leader!*”

Dave Harvey, President of Great Commission Collective; author of *When Sinners Say I Do, Am I Called?*, and *The Plurality Principle*

“In a day of almost constant bullying, burnout, and moral demise, it is heartening to know that there is one volume to which I can always turn and direct others for guidance. The way Scott consistently tethers leadership principles to the truth of the gospel has led to a wonderfully helpful and hopeful book for those involved in local church life. Highly recommended!”

Sam Storms, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, OK

“Scott Thomas understands the unique challenges of ministry and what prevents churches (and their leaders) from flourishing over the long haul. He teaches us how ministry flows from intimacy with God and directs us toward skills we often neglect—things like self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and relational intuition. Whatever ministry role you are in, this wonderful book will help you find pathways to long-term health and vitality. Get a copy for your staff and elders!”

Gavin Ortlund, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Ojai; author of *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*

“I can’t think of a more timely resource on authentic, Jesus-shaped leadership. Experienced and would-be pastors alike will find much here to encourage and help. We really need the lessons of this book in our churches today.”

Sam Allberry, Pastor; apologist; author of *7 Myths about Singleness*

“Leaders must keep an eye on their own souls if they are to endure long, difficult seasons. Scott’s book will help leaders embrace and embody these commands, so they might not only endure but enjoy leading in difficult seasons.”

Brian Lowe, Lead Pastor, Exodus Church, Belmont, NC

“Too often, pastors labor and sacrifice without all the necessary tools they need to survive and thrive within the internal demands and emotional stressors of ministry life. This work from Scott Thomas is written in a way that is approachable, personable, readable, challenging, practical, and life-changing. I predict that many church leaders will keep their copy of this book within close reach as a source of comfort, guidance, healing, and hope.”

John West, Licensed Professional Counselor; National Certified Counselor; lead author of *Emotional Intelligence for Religious Leaders*

“By paying attention to how we lead ourselves and the impact that we have on others, *The Gospel Shaped Leader* reminds us to see ourselves the same way God does: as his beloved children serving a heavenly Father who delights to use weak people to accomplish his mighty purposes.”

Bob Osborne, Executive Director, Serge

“I have the privilege of serving alongside Scott in pastoral ministry, and I see him live the truths in this book and pour them into the lives of younger, less experienced ministers—like me—constantly. I am eager for other church leaders to benefit from his wisdom and faithful ministry through these pages. It will be a blessing to their souls and their ministries.”

Barnabas Piper, Assistant Pastor at Immanuel Church Nashville; author of *Help My Unbelief*, *Pastor’s Kid*, and *Hoping for Happiness*

“The mark of a great book is accessibility and depth—this book displays both. You will be encouraged and challenged from the wisdom of a mature pastor who has walked this path with others. I can’t wait to reread this book and process the coaching questions!”

Mark Reynolds, Senior Strategic Advisor, Redeemer City to City

THE GOSPEL SHAPED LEADER

Leaning on Jesus
to Shepherd His People

Scott Thomas



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Contents

Foreword.....	vii
1. WATCH: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Pay Careful Attention to Their Souls	1
○ Part One: Self-Awareness	19
2. DIE: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Sacrifice to Make a Difference	20
3. WALK: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Embrace Their Father’s Love	30
4. PLAN: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Design Their Lives with God’s Purpose.....	41
◇ Part Two: Self-Management.....	55
5. STAND: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Pursue Integrity	56
6. LEARN: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Explore New Ideas.....	71
7. REST: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Commit to Sabbath	82
□ Part Three: Relational Awareness	95
8. LOVE: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Love the Church.....	96
9. SERVE: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Lead with Humility ...	105
10. SPEAK: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Communicate with Grace-Filled Candor.....	115

△ Part Four: Relational Management.....	130
11. GUIDE: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Relate as Family	131
12. COACH: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Develop Other Leaders.....	143
13. YOKE: Gospel-Shaped Leaders Pursue Meaningful Friendships.....	151
Conclusion: Where Are the Gospel-Shaped Leaders?	160
Endnotes	162

Foreword

One of my favorite lines, in one of my favorite movies, comes from *Rocky*. Rocky is about to go into the fight of his life with the world heavyweight champion. There is no point in bravado or swagger, and Rocky knows it. So, he says to Adrian, “I just want to go the distance.” Whether he wins or loses, Rocky longs to fight well all the way. That’s exactly how I feel, and I’m guessing you do too. Wherever you’re serving the Lord, however you’re advancing the gospel, you want to go the distance, you want your life to count, you want to bear “fruit that will last” (John 15:16 NIV).

How could you not feel that way? God created you, Christ died for you, and the Holy Spirit indwells you, for a *magnificent* purpose—that your life will display his glory now and forever. He sure isn’t asking you to settle for mediocrity.

But let’s *all* admit it. Sometimes we who sincerely want to serve the Lord can diminish our influence through patterns of leadership that just don’t look like his glorious gentleness and wisdom and love—for starters.

Here’s one way I try to stay focused on what’s at stake in my high calling. These days I am blitzing through the Bible on a six-month reading plan. As I plow along day by day, I keep my place with a 3-by-5 card. On one side of the card I have written these two verses: “Now in a great house there are

The Gospel Shaped Leader

not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Timothy 2:20–21).

I love those verses. They remind me to stay open to the Lord, so that I can grow as a “vessel for honorable use” in his gracious hands.

My friend, whoever you are, by God’s grace, you *can* go the distance—all the way. You *can* serve the Lord honorably. You *can* bear fruit that will last, both in this life and throughout the next—forever.

That is why my friend Scott Thomas wrote this book: to help you get there, and stay there, and enjoy the journey. *The Gospel Shaped Leader: Leaning on Jesus to Shepherd His People* comes from Scott’s many years of experience in pastoring and leading. He knows what he’s talking about. And he’s good at it. The proof of his ministry is wonderfully obvious to all of us at Immanuel Church in Nashville.

I commend to you Scott’s insightful book, not merely for your survival in ministry but for your joyous flourishing in ministry, and for the joy of the people you lead. If you’ll keep leaning on Jesus to shepherd his people, how can that not go really, really well for you and everyone?

God be with you!

Ray Ortlund
Pastor to Pastors, Immanuel Church
President, Renewal Ministries

1.
WATCH

Gospel-Shaped Leaders Pay Careful Attention to Their Souls

Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.

Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*

It's time to change how we lead our churches and Christian ministries. The current leadership model is not working. I'm not suggesting a new model, I'm calling for a return to the original plan demonstrated by Christ and commanded in Scripture. I'm writing to pastors, elders, deacons, church staff, small group leaders, and leaders of Christian ministries. Let's lead the Lord's church in the Lord's way. In short, we need gospel-shaped leaders leaning on Jesus to shepherd his people.

I watched an intelligent church leader self-destruct over enviousness, boastfulness, arrogance, and manipulative bullying. He had extraordinary success in ministry, but his spiritual immaturity capsized it. After years of browbeating his staff, church officers, and members, the church board finally enacted disciplinary action against him. The church removed

The Gospel Shaped Leader

him and it left a mess. I wish this were an isolated case. A church leader doesn't typically lose their role in a church for failing to fill the pews but, rather, for failing to get along with people. Gospel-shaped leadership is about guiding and managing others by using intertwined spiritual, emotional, and relational wisdom. Unfortunately, this isn't always taught in seminary, even though it is taught throughout Scripture.

Church leadership begins with how well leaders manage themselves according to the gospel. The gospel is good news that a holy God yearned with love for people guilty of disobedience against him. The compassionate Father sent his Son to live a sinless life and die to take our punishment. God raised him from the dead to secure the forgiveness of sins. Salvation and eternal life are for all who, by faith, repent and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Through the return of Jesus, God will restore the creation to enjoy our new life with him forever.

As leaders shaped by the gospel, we are continually transformed from the inside out. We don't just proclaim the good news, we embody it through our life and how we lead others. In Jesus's economy, every Christian leader must demonstrate a changed life. William Tyndale describes the gospel as good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings that make our hearts glad and make us sing, dance, and leap for joy.¹ That's the good news we need in our churches. It emanates from the Spirit of God through his leaders.

Gospel-shaped leaders, therefore, would benefit from a daily examination of the condition of their soul. Our spiritual health affects us and everyone around us. Paul urged his protégé, Timothy, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). Notice the

words “close watch,” “persist,” and “save.” These are not casual suggestions. These are wartime commands. Jesus said, “*Watch yourselves* lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. . . . *Stay awake* at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34, 36, emphasis added). Leaders must stay alert and be aware of their lives and those they lead.

Every church leader must engage in this spiritual battle with sober-mindedness, knowing the enemy seeks to destroy both shepherds and sheep. The prophet Zechariah warned, “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones” (Zechariah 13:7 [cf. Matthew 26:31]). Church leadership is not a position, nor is it a picnic. It is a spiritual war zone, and gospel-shaped leaders must come prepared with Christ’s mind (Philippians 2:1–5) and the power of the Spirit (Romans 8:3–11).

When I first became a lead pastor thirty years ago, I pushed myself and others to achieve *my* goals for the church. I led the church with the business and marketing principles I knew. I emphasized numerical growth at the expense of spiritual growth. It wasn’t until I discovered a consistent thread in the Bible of gospel-shaped leadership that I had a new perspective on how to lead. I regret not finding it earlier.

Formed by Something

Something is always forming our leadership. It may be success, control, approval, comfort, security, or something else. I worshiped success and it was forming me. Everybody worships something or someone and what we worship is what

The Gospel Shaped Leader

forms us. Acts 20 was instrumental for me to get gospel perspective. Paul's appeal to the Ephesian elders was twofold: pay careful attention to your lives as leaders and pay careful attention to those you lead (Acts 20:28). Simply stated, if as leaders we're unable to properly direct our own lives, we can't lead others. We best serve ourselves and others when we remove the mask and reveal our true selves to a gospel-reflecting mirror to measure our spiritual, emotional, relational, and vocational life. No leader has perfect health. I wasn't properly directing my own life, and I needed the gospel to reshape me.

Church leaders often cite ministry demands as a significant contributor to a lack of health in their family, finances, relationships, emotions, and bodies. But that's only an excuse to disregard self-leadership. We must see the extent of our leadership. If we merely pay careful attention to the flock (Acts 20:28), we're only doing half our job. What is missing, however, is life-threatening. Church leaders that make a wreck of their lives will inevitably make a wreck of the flock. Church leaders must pay careful attention to themselves while paying careful attention to those in their care.

This book is far from five steps to become a famous leader; it is about becoming a leader who reflects the gospel. Frankly, I prefer the term serving over leading to describe our role. Jesus said, "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:11). I believe the posture of a leader reflects Christ's servanthood. If we apply these principles, it can help to bring meaning and beauty to our lives as we lead others. Every leader or aspiring leader can become more fruitful with focused intentionality on these principles. As it's been said, "This ain't rocket surgery." These principles are so simple that anyone can abide. That is the point. Leaders need to govern

their lives based on reproducible and repeatable life principles. If we focus on productivity, we may compromise our principles. But if we focus on allowing the gospel to form our lives, we are more likely to be productive. It might even redefine how we measure productivity. Hopefully, it generates some rethinking of our practices and priorities because it is time to change the way we lead the church.

Healthy Soul

Only gospel-shaped Christian leaders can produce God-glorifying ministries. Formal education is critical to Christian leadership. However, I am convinced that traditional theological education *alone* is not enough for long-term, sustainable ministry. Christian leadership requires both spiritual maturity and emotional maturity to care for the church of God. An emotionally unsound leader or board member can derail an entire organization. I have seen it happen more than once. One pastor told me he had recently left his church because of illness. “Oh,” I said compassionately, “what was the illness?” He responded, “The congregation got sick of me.” This downfall wasn’t his failure to apply the gospel to his preaching, but his failure to apply the gospel to his leadership and relationships. This, I have observed, is the missing factor for many church leaders.

Leaders always set the tone of an organization. An emotionally or spiritually weak leader will influence everyone else around them. We train everyone in our organization to be just like us (Luke 6:40). Caring for God’s church (Acts 20:28) demands that we pay careful attention to ourselves and the people who the Holy Spirit entrusts to us.

The Gospel Shaped Leader

I obtained a smart bathroom scale that revealed how naïve I was about my health. A non-smart scale measures your weight. That's it. A smart scale, on the other hand, provides data that can help you to get healthy. It enabled me to closely monitor my weight, body-fat percentage, muscle, protein, water, and stuff I didn't understand—like visceral fat, whatever that is. More than that, it helped me to lose body fat and gain muscle. This insider information led to action, which produced a more physically healthy person.

This book introduces twelve principles that can serve as a healthy gospel leadership smart scale. It is not enough to merely *know* the gospel. We must passionately, actively, and intentionally *live* the gospel in all facets of life, including our leadership. Paul prays that his reader would be “filled with the knowledge of [God's] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9b–10). We have to measure our behavior, attitudes, and emotions in the less visible areas of our lives. This book will help us develop an action plan based on our self-examination. It might also provoke more profound contemplation through honest discussion with other believers. Staying honest with others will prompt us to become gospel-shaped leaders. And this desire to become a better leader leads to actions that open the door for change and gospel-shaped leadership.

Watch over the Church of God

Paul tells the elders at Ephesus, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has

made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The main idea in this passage is not to pay careful attention to yourselves or to pay careful attention to all of the flock. It is not even to defend against attacking wolves (Acts 20:29). The main idea in this passage is to care for the church of God—the church belonging to God that he obtained through the blood of Jesus. Care is the verb form of the Greek word translated shepherd or pastor. The leading biblical metaphor for church leadership is shepherding, although it’s not always popular among Western churches. Have you ever seen a sheep in a pasture, after all? When church leaders embody a caring shepherding posture, they glorify the Chief Shepherd, Jesus, in their leadership. The apostle Peter adds to Paul’s metaphor of a shepherding approach:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: *shepherd the flock of God* that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but *being examples to the flock*. And when the *chief Shepherd* appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1–4, emphasis added)

Paul and Barnabas appoint elders at every church during their travels through Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:23). The Holy Spirit appoints overseers (*episkopos*) through the affirmation of the local church (Acts 13) to

The Gospel Shaped Leader

shepherd the souls of those in their oversight (Acts 20:28). Overseer is a literal translation of the word *episkopos* (*epi* = over; *skopos* = seer). Paul elsewhere uses the word as a designation for elders or pastors (1 Timothy 3:1), so it seems to have become a technical term that is not inclusive of all church leaders. God's people are his beloved sheep, entrusted to the care of God's shepherds. Leaders must feel the sacredness of that charge before they can obey this calling to lead. The precious souls of our churches belong to God, obtained by the blood of Christ. Church leaders work under the authority and accountability of the Good Shepherd, Jesus (John 10:11, 14).

The North American church often celebrates the success of a church leader over their character, and their influence over their integrity. The Bible does the opposite. When our talent outweighs our character, it will eventually crush us. Spurgeon advised his students, "Our character must be more persuasive than our speech." He further accentuated, "It is not great talent God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus."² Danger is always nearby when we celebrate greatness over godliness. Godly character will produce fruitfulness in ministry.

Church leaders must take caution not to spend excessive time and energy attending to the flock's needs at the expense of their souls. Ministries are prone to celebrate performance-based metrics. Only spiritually vibrant leaders can lead the church God's way. A leader's ministry is to demonstrate how to be passionately dedicated to the Lord without self-centered obsession. In this way, the gospel shapes the leader.

Paul doesn't just say pay attention, but rather pay *careful* attention. The term is used elsewhere by Luke in the New Testament and translated "watch yourselves" (Luke 21:34–36), "beware" (Luke 12:1), and "pay attention to yourselves"

(Luke 17:1–3). Jesus uses the term to warn believers to “*beware* of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15). And he cautions that he will send them out as “sheep in the midst of wolves. . . . *Beware* of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues” (Matthew 10:16–17). Followers do not naturally take careful thought of others around them; leaders do. Consider how you would pay close attention to the activities of a two-year-old child near a busy street. You would not take your eyes off the toddler. In a similar way, we must pay careful attention to ourselves and to those we lead.

Paul urges the elders at Ephesus to pay careful attention to *ourselves* while we pay careful attention *to the flock of God* the Holy Spirit entrusts to our care. We cannot neglect others, and we cannot neglect ourselves if we want to properly care for those in the church.

Significance of Emotional Health and Leadership Effectiveness

One way those outside the church try to explain leadership maturity is through what psychologists describe as emotional intelligence (or EQ), which is fundamentally biblical wisdom and gospel formation. Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify, comprehend, and manage the emotions in self and others. This ability guides one’s attitude and actions. Ministry is all about managing self and relating to others. Emotional intelligence is not taught in the church or seminary but is central to church leadership effectiveness. The leadership principles that follow rest on the gospel’s foundation and view it through the secondary lens of wisdom about our emotions. I believe the gospel is necessary to understand our emotions.

Dr. Daniel Goleman is a psychologist and author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* and *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*. Goleman posits that emotional intelligence is the prerequisite of leadership. He writes, “Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he [or she] still won’t make a great leader.”³ Church leadership requires gospel-shaped values like gentleness, humility, and ongoing repentance.

In an interview, some church leaders asked my wife how she was handling her chronic kidney disease. She tearfully shared her traumatic and prolonged journey. One leader interrupted her and proceeded to tell about a medical condition that he had experienced many years earlier. The group stared at him in shocked disbelief as he unwittingly hijacked the conversation and redirected it away from her and toward himself. He never acknowledged her emotional pain and openness in sharing it. He appears to be competent; yet it’s unlikely he will be useful to the degree he could unless he learns to exercise gospel compassion.

Leaders unable to empathetically join in another person’s story—good or bad—will not influence at the deepest level.

Improving Emotional and Spiritual Health

Emotional intelligence is the willingness to process our emotions and experiences. Church leaders often lack an outlet to share their painful experiences. It is healthy to navigate our spiritual and emotional journey with others. Church leaders need a safe place to share their struggles. It is my prayer that

this book will open that door between friends. Church leaders need a coach, mentor, or friend with whom they can share their challenges.

Sometimes highly intelligent leaders are perplexed as to why they do not experience the level of success they would like to see. They seem to lack the “right stuff” necessary for the outcomes they desire. It is not technical skills, like parsing Greek verbs, they lack, but more like the ability to express love, joy, and grace. Goleman believes that effective leaders *all* have emotional intelligence.⁴

Goleman went through several iterations to explain emotional intelligence, eventually refining the model into four domains: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-management, (3) social awareness, (4) relationship management. We will explore these concepts throughout the book as they apply to the context of leading with the gospel.

Four Emotional Intelligence Domains

Emotional intelligence is not the foundation of healthy, biblical leadership; the gospel is the foundation. But we will use an EQ metric to see the gospel with clarity and identify areas where we might not be walking in step with the gospel (Galatians 2:14). In the following table, the first two domains (left column) fall under the category of paying careful attention to ourselves (Acts 20:28). These competencies are tools to measure how well we pay careful attention to our souls. The second couplet of domains (right column) addresses paying careful attention to the flock. These competencies are tools to measure how well we pay careful attention to the flock that God has entrusted to us.

The Gospel Shaped Leader

Pay Careful Attention to Yourself

Self-Awareness

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3).

I am growing in my understanding of my emotions and moods (1 Cor. 13:12) and allowing God to test and refine them (Ps. 26:2). I am learning how they affect others around me (Lam. 3:40). I know my limitations and can assess my strengths by faith (Rom. 12:3; 1 John 1:8). I am confident in the Lord’s redeeming work in me and am patient in my progress (2 Tim. 1:6–7).

1. DIE: Sacrifice to Make a Difference
2. WALK: Embrace Their Father’s Love
3. PLAN: Design Their Life with God’s Purpose

Pay Careful Attention to All the Flock

Relational Awareness

“For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal. 5:14).

I am thoughtful of others around me and am compassionate about their needs (Matt. 9:35–38). I listen to others as an act of love and can discern their unspoken actions, attitudes, and emotions (1 John 4:1; Phil. 1:9–10). I seek to communicate with straightforwardness, transparency, and honesty (Matt. 5:37).

7. LOVE: Love the Church
8. SERVE: Lead with Humility
9. SPEAK: Communicate with Grace-Filled Candor

Gospel-Shaped Leaders Pay Careful Attention to Their Souls

Self-Management

“[You were taught] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22–24).

I am submitting my mind, will, and emotions to the desires of the Spirit and not to the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16–26). The gospel is continually shaping me (Phil. 1:27) through the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:4–11), and I am confessing my sins and acknowledging my weaknesses (1 John 1:7–9). I am striving for holiness and the renewing of my mind that leads to a transformed life (Rom. 12:1–2). With my hope in Jesus, I’m patient in my hardships and constant in my prayer (Rom. 12:12).

4. STAND: Pursue Integrity Always

5. LEARN: Explore New Ideas

6. REST: Commit to a Sabbath

Relational Management

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3).

I can apply biblical wisdom in relational circumstances (James 1:5). I commit to develop other people to build up the organization (Eph. 4:11, 16). I seek to resolve relational conflicts (Phil. 4:2). I seek to reconcile my broken relationships (Matt. 5:23–24; 18:15; Rom. 12:18). I can build relationships to accomplish goals (Heb. 10:24–25).

10. GUIDE: Relate as Family

11. COACH: Develop Other Leaders

12. YOKE: Grow Meaningful Friendships

Google’s Shocking Revelation

Google revealed a shocking fact about its employees when it tested its hiring hypothesis dating back to the company’s

incorporation in 1998. It analyzed every bit and byte of hiring, firing, and promotion data through Project Oxygen. The results were shocking. Expertise in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) came in dead last in a list of the most important qualities of Google's top employees. The six characteristics of success at Google, according to this research, are all soft skills:

1. Coaching
2. Communicating and listening well
3. Possessing insights into others (including others' different values and points of view)
4. Having empathy toward and being supportive of one's colleagues
5. Being an excellent critical thinker and problem solver
6. Being able to make connections across complex ideas.⁵

Google may have identified the value of soft skills. However, Scripture already codified the importance of these gospel expressions. For instance, I grew up in a home where I was encouraged to be aggressive and successful. I brought those values into church ministry and quickly realized they didn't work. However, when I studied the ministry of Jesus, I noticed that he asked questions and approached people with gentleness. When I became aware of my emotions and how they affected others, it was a game-changer ministry-wise.

The apostle Paul disparages those who may possess abilities and skills but are devoid of love (1 Corinthians 13). Paul describes love in ways that resonate with sixteen characteristics typically associated with Bible-based soft skills. He describes love as:

1. Patient
2. Kind

Gospel-Shaped Leaders Pay Careful Attention to Their Souls

3. Compassionate (not envious)
4. Modest (not boastful)
5. Humble (not arrogant)
6. Gentle (not rude)
7. Tolerant (not demanding)
8. Good-humored (not irritable)
9. Pleasant
10. Forgiving
11. Virtuous
12. Truthful
13. Protecting
14. Trusting
15. Hopeful
16. Persevering

These foundational characteristics describing love will benefit leaders. A gospel-shaped leader will radiate the essential characteristics of love. Love is the one verifiable characteristic that demonstrates our connection to Christ, the one who loves us (John 13:34–35). Ray Ortlund Jr. recalled that his father used to say that a person comes into a room with the attitude of “Here I am” or “There you are.” The difference is stark. The two postures demonstrate where our love resides: in ourselves or in Christ toward others.

Another example of Bible-based emotional intelligence is found in the Beatitudes. Jesus promises a flourishing life to those who are poor in spirit, mourners, meek, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and able to rest in God amid challenges (Matthew 5:2–12).

Become a Gospel-Shaped Leader

What is foremost in Paul's mind in Acts 20 seems to be guarding against false teaching. Paul's concern is with "men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). Paul encourages Timothy, "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Others are counting on us. Paying careful attention and keeping a close watch is hard work, but we and others will benefit immensely. We can't do this alone. Other than family, I believe we as leaders need four people in our lives:

1. A friend to have fun together. "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). Don't miss this vital relationship.
2. An advocate to look out for our best interests and one who will open their mouth when we need something (Proverbs 31:8–9).
3. A coach to help guide our life and ministry (Hebrews 3:12–13; 10:24–25).
4. A confidant with whom we can be completely honest without consequence (1 John 1:7).

The church leader mentioned at the beginning of the chapter had none of these people in his life. He pushed friends away, he advocated for himself, and misused church funds. No coach was good enough or smart enough in his perspective, and the only confidants he had were employed directly under him, which never works.

Christ shapes our hearts and character with the gospel. He uses others to help watch the condition of our souls. But

we have to be daring enough to take off our masks and let others see our true condition.

Your Turn . . .

Prayer for a Healthy Soul

Lord, I have weaknesses that invade my heart and mind on a regular basis. They invade me with such fervor that I tremble at their persistence. You are Lord over every one of your church leaders. You created me to care for your flock and want me to care for my soul. Empower me to shepherd the flock of God that is among me and to be an example to the flock. You are the Shepherd and Overseer of my soul. When I stray, draw me back into your fold.

Coaching Questions

You will benefit from reflecting on what you read. We don't usually do this because our goal is often to finish what we're reading. This book aims to prompt you to think differently about an idea or concept and then take specific action steps. Inspiration gives birth to contemplation. Contemplation leads to action. Action opens the door for change. And change leads to influence.

Several questions are included at the end of each chapter. These questions work best when you interact with other people around the subjects. By doing this, you will analyze the leadership practices in your life even as you deepen friendships. This book could serve as a resource for a group of people to be "mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Romans 1:12). It might also grow meaningful friendships (see chapter 13).

The Gospel Shaped Leader

Questions:

1. What do you believe are the essential characteristics of a leader who embodies the gospel?
2. How does the concept of shepherd leadership change the way you would approach practical leadership?
3. Read the healthy leadership descriptions on the table in this chapter and rate your emotional intelligence in each of the four major domains from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Explain your ratings.

Self-awareness	1	2	3	4	5
Self-management	1	2	3	4	5
Relational awareness	1	2	3	4	5
Relational management	1	2	3	4	5

4. Which of the twelve principles on the table do you need to focus on the most at this time? How is the gospel evident in these principles?
5. Why is a gospel-shaped leader crucial to the church?
6. What is your first step to becoming a healthier leader who pays careful attention to the condition of your soul? Be specific.