

Spiritual Leadership in a

Frenzied

DEMOLISHING TODAY'S TOWER OF BABEL.

By Robert Fryling

World

"A gazelle wakes up every morning knowing that it will have to run faster than the fastest lion in order to stay alive. A lion wakes up knowing that it will have to run faster than the slowest gazelle in order to stay alive. Whether you are a gazelle or a lion, you wake up every morning knowing that you will have to run faster to stay alive."

AFRICAN PROVERB

AS I SPEAK WITH PASTORS and other Christian leaders, I find that they readily identify with both the lion and the gazelle. Perhaps you do too. We feel like a lion that has to keep running faster with vision casting and leadership strategies and social networks. Yet we also feel like the gazelle that is always being chased by personnel problems, financial needs, and organizational demands. We wake up every morning feeling the frenzy of our culture and our job responsibilities.

Why is this? Why are we so "captured" by our busyness? Why can't we slow down? Why do we have "hurry sickness" or flippantly talk about our "hurry-go-round"? Let me suggest that there are two basic reasons for our over-stretched lives.

EXTERNAL COMPLEXITIES

The first reason comes from outside pressures and even our American culture. The French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in 1840 about "the feverish ardor" with which Americans pursue material gains and private pleasures. Our capitalistic drive has been an economic strength for our country, but the need for continual growth can be exhausting.

Another external complexity is the increasing demands on organizational life—whether in a parachurch ministry or a local

church. In the wake of the Enron scandal, the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation has extensive requirements for compliance. The same can be said for the Patriot Act after 9/11. We want to be safe from corporate greed and terrorists, but this demand for more external controls creates great weariness for us as leaders.

INTERNAL COMPULSIONS

However, the other major reason for our frenzied lives comes from within. Listen to the compulsions expressed in the following poem:

If an expert does not have some problem to vex him, he is unhappy!
If a philosopher's teaching is never attacked, she pines away!
He who wants followers seeks political power.
She who wants reputation, holds an office.
The strong man looks for weights to lift.
The brave woman looks for an emergency in which she can show bravery.
Where would the gardener be if there were no more weeds?
What would become of business without a market of fools?
Produce! Get results! Make money! Make friends! Make changes!
Or you will die of despair!

This poem, called *The Active Life*, sounds like it was written yesterday by the way it describes a compulsive drive toward achievements and recognition. Yet it was actually written in the 4th century B.C. I interpret from this that we can't just blame our busyness on our culture, our upbringing, our church, or organization. There is something deep within each of us as human beings that makes us want to be the creator rather than the created. This sinful orientation is the real root of our compulsions.

What complicates things for us as Christian leaders is when even our commitment becomes an unhealthy compulsion. We are indeed called to "take up our cross" and live lives of obedience to the Lord. Yet we also need to be very aware of how strong dedication and intentionality can unconsciously become a self-absorbed and destructive leadership style. I suspect we all know people who

to be a tremendously helpful spiritual discipline in resisting a frenzied life. Just taking time to do so provides an oasis from both the external complexities and the internal compulsions in my life. But this teaching of Jesus also instructs my soul in what to pray for. Let me mention several dimensions of this familiar prayer that gives perspective for our leadership.

The first is when we pray for God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven." A current leadership principle being promoted in many books is that of organizational alignment. Like a car that needs its tires aligned for a smoother ride, so too do organizations need to have all of their parts aligned in the same direction. The Lord asks us to pray for our spiritual alignment with God's kingdom and his will. Our lives as Christians are part of God's work on earth. Praying for God's kingdom is a conscious spiritual antidote

Why are we so "captured" by our busyness? Why can't we slow down?

have a strong sense of personal vision, but they hinder the work of God as they trample over those who stand in their way. What we may not know is how we do that to others.

Perhaps the more dangerous challenge to spiritual and organizational life is what I call "the Tower of Babel complex." Just as those ancients in Genesis 11 wanted to build a tower that would reach to the sky and make a name for themselves, there seems to be a compulsive drive in all organizations to build a name for ourselves as well. Stockholders demand it, boards of trustees expect it, mission agencies cannot raise money effectively without it, and pastors feel pressured to produce it. This is fueled by that driving source of pride within us that wants us to raise our index finger in the air and collectively shout, "We're number one!" The kingdom of God can sometimes look more like a football game of strategies, cheerleading, and posturing than the presence and rule of Jesus.

When this occurs, our Tower of Babel falls into confusion and fragmentation. We become top-heavy with our ego and self-centered vision. This happens to some extent in all organizations, including those with the highest conscious motivation of serving God. In fact, sometimes our inflated sense of importance in doing the work of God hinders us from seeing what is happening within our own structures and our own souls. We become exhausted in our self-promotion. We become consumed with the compulsions of building our personal and organizational towers.

Consequently, the solution to our problems is not just better time management or greater managerial competence. Organizational leadership and management is very hard, professional work, and we need all the help we can get. Although professional expertise may be necessary at times, it is never sufficient to help us with our deepest spiritual needs.

So how do we resist and overcome our external complexities and our internal compulsions?

to the temptations for our kingdoms to prevail.

A second and very simple request is praying for our daily bread, which delivers us from being anxious about the future. I think of the Old Testament bread or manna as being symbolically significant for us. Manna was only good for one day. The Israelites could not hoard it; they needed to trust in God. As we face the overwhelming demands of our jobs, we need to pray for our daily needs with a confidence that God is trustworthy for tomorrow as well.

I heard a great illustration on this perspective of dependence about the late Pope John Paul II. One night at the end of an exhausting day, he was heard to pray: "Lord, this is your church. I'm going to bed!"

A third part of the Lord's Prayer that has deeply affected me is the request to "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." This doesn't sound like good time management unless we honestly acknowledge how much time we spend being angry or critical of others because we are unwilling to forgive them. We play the tapes in our heads of what we want to say to them or what we wished we said to them. We resist forgiving them because we then lose power or control over them as they are no longer in our debt.

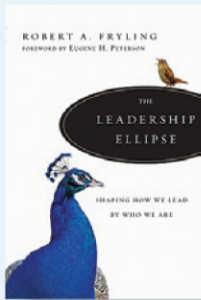
Furthermore, when we don't forgive others, we then live feeling guilty and unforgiven ourselves. This can lead to spiritual discouragement and a strong sense of inadequacy. Confession and forgiveness are two of the most powerful spiritual disciplines to dissipate our internal compulsions. They also release us from the time burdens of living either in conscious or unconscious conflict with others. As Lewis B. Smedes said, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

The Lord taught us to pray—to pray for his kingdom, our daily needs, and for forgiveness. Such prayer gives us perspective and purpose in our lives. It also helps us to lead others in our frenzied world. ●

THE LORD'S PRAYER

I have found praying the Lord's Prayer in a slow meditative fashion

ROBERT FRYLING is publisher of InterVarsity Press and author of *The Leadership Ellipse: Shaping How We Lead by Who We Are*.



Robert Fryling, publisher of InterVarsity Press (IVP) and senior vice president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, is author of *The Leadership Ellipse: Shaping How We Lead by Who We Are* (IVP, 2010). In this insightful book, also available in audio, Fryling says that leadership has more in common with an ellipse than with a bull's-eye with a single target.

Of *The Leadership Ellipse*, Dallas Willard, author of *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, said: "What makes this book especially valuable among writings on leadership is the richness of detail concerning the fine texture of the leader's life and personality. The weight the leader must bear, in order to carry through with the calling upon his or her life, simply crushes the person who is not, throughout their being, solidly joined with what is good and with God's grace upon all of it. So joined, in ways the author makes clear, there is joy and love, space and creativity, no matter what."

Al Lopus, president of Best Christian Workplaces Institute, said, "Bob gives us tremendous insights and understanding toward living an integrated, authentic life. *The Leadership Ellipse* is a thoughtful and challenging guide to help us shape our own journey and calling."

The following is an excerpt from the introduction to *The Leadership Ellipse*, used by publisher's permission.

The Leadership Ellipse

Shaping how we lead by who we are.

Spiritual leadership can be understood as an ellipse. One focal point is our inner spiritual life, our longings, our affections, and our allegiance to God. The other focal point is our outer world and organizational life, what we do and how we do it. Together these focal points define an ellipse that circumscribes our true spiritual leadership. It represents the dynamic tension between our soul and our actions and gives us a mental image for our personal, spiritual, and professional integrity in who we are and how we lead.

Historically, God's people have emphasized different focal points of their inner and outer lives. For instance, the desert fathers and mothers in the early church practiced their spirituality by retreating to a desert and experiencing extended times of isolation. They wanted

We cannot successfully separate or isolate our interior life from our exterior life. Both are part of who we truly are.

to nurture their inner life of the soul away from the temptations of the outer world. Their dedicated example of prayer and solitude is part of our Christian heritage and understanding of spiritual formation.

Many centuries later the Jesuits practiced a far more active involvement in the world of business and education, which was the external focal point of their spiritual calling. Their spirituality can be characterized as 'contemplatives in action' and 'seeing God in all things.' Faithfulness to God was reflected by their advances into the world rather than retreat from it.

Jesus' life was characterized by these contrasting practices of piety and activity. He spent time alone in the desert praying, but he also got exhausted in feeding and healing the multitudes. His life was not limited to a singular way of spiritual behavior, yet he always exhibited a consistency or integrity. His teaching and his life were shaped by his relationship to God the Father.

INNER AND OUTER WORLDS

Christian leaders today need to embrace and embody both spiritual focal points of our internal relationship with God and our external relationship with others. We cannot successfully separate or isolate our interior life from our exterior life. Both are part of who we truly are. The more there is harmony and integrity between who we are in the deepest recesses of our being and in the most visible expressions of our lives, the more we will be authentic to both ourselves and others. ●

To learn more or to order a copy of *The Leadership Ellipse*, visit ivpress.com.

