

# Fear of Failure

LEADERS & STAFF



# Fear of Failure

<b>Contents</b> .....	PAGE
<b>Leader's Guide</b> .....	2
<b>Bible Study</b>	
MOTIVATION FOR THE LONG HAUL	
<i>by Roger Thompson</i> .....	3
<b>Interview</b>	
THE APPLAUSE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH	
<i>an interview with Max Lucado</i> .....	5
<b>Assessments</b>	
FAITHFUL DESPITE FEARS	
<i>by Stuart Briscoe</i> .....	9
TOO IMPRESSED WITH SUCCESS?	
<i>by Ben Patterson</i> .....	11
WHAT CAN I HANDLE?	
<i>by Terry C. Muck</i> .....	12
<b>Case Studies</b>	
FINDING HOPE IN FAILURE	
<i>by Andre Bustanoby</i> .....	15
<b>Devotionals</b>	
OVERCOMING SELF-DOUBT	
<i>by Richard C. Halverson</i> .....	17
AMBITION CRIPPLER	
<i>by Richard Doebler</i> .....	18
BETWEEN FAILURE AND FRAUD	
<i>by Mark Labberton</i> .....	19
<b>How-To Articles</b>	
SLAYING SPIRITUAL SKEPTICISM	
<i>by John Ortberg</i> .....	21
GREAT IS THY EFFECTIVENESS?	
<i>by Skye Jethani</i> .....	25
<b>Activity</b>	
DEFINITION OF SUCCESS	
<i>by Tyler Charles</i> .....	27
<b>Resources</b>	
FURTHER EXPLORATION .....	29
<b>Retreat Plan</b> .....	30

## Leader's Guide

How to use “Fear of Failure” by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.

Welcome to BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of Christianity Today International, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

*Building Church Leaders is not just another program. Each theme contains materials on the topic you choose—no tedious program to follow. The materials work when you want, where you want, and the way you want them to. They're completely flexible and easy to use.*

You probably already have regularly scheduled meetings with board members or with other committees or groups of leaders. *Building Church Leaders fits easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use Building Church Leaders at the beginning of a board meeting or committee meeting:*

**1. Select a learning tool.** In this theme of “Fear of Failure,” you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- ◆ Bible study
- ◆ case study
- ◆ activity
- ◆ interview
- ◆ devotionals
- ◆ resources
- ◆ assessment tools
- ◆ how-to articles
- ◆ retreat plan

**2. Select a handout.** Suppose, for example, you want your leaders to evaluate their definition of success and their fear of failing. You could select one of three assessments in this theme: “Faithful Despite Fears” (pp. 9–10), “Too Impressed with Success?” (p. 11), or “What Can I Handle?” (pp. 12–14). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

**3. Photocopy the handout.** Let's say you selected “Faithful Despite Fears.” Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do *not* need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from Building Church Leaders (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

**4. Prepare for the discussion.** We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific decisions your church is making?

**5. Lead the discussion.** Most handouts can be read within five minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion on to specific issues your church is facing.

Most BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes (except the Bible study, which may take longer). Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

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# Motivation for the Long Haul

*Building blocks for a strong foundation*

Matthew 10:27

*So send I you to labor unrewarded,  
To serve unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown,  
To bear rebuke, to suffer scorn and scoffing,  
So send I you to toil for me alone.*

As much as we might admire the courage of that hymn, we ought to question its biblical realism. To labor alone, without reward or encouragement, is more the theology of the High Plains drifter than the biblical Christian. Jesus, Paul, Titus, Timothy, Elijah, Moses, Joshua—to name a few—needed support. They found it in their common life with others of the same vision.

Examining the New Testament, it becomes obvious that God designed the church to ensure a context of support. Yes, there are exceptions, and some callings are more lonely and difficult than others, but loneliness and futility are not the earmarks of the Holy Spirit's power through us. What makes us think we can maintain a high level of motivation all alone when God did not design either individuals or the church for that purpose?

When planning to launch a ministry, either in the local church or overseas, we do well to ask: *Who supports me? Who has affirmed my gift for this ministry? Who has urged me to go in this direction? Who is willing to go with me? Who will guard me against myself?*

The fastest way to burn out is to tackle a tough task alone. Though you may survive the gauntlet, rarely will vibrancy or creativity remain intact.

The following are some practical building blocks from which to construct a motivation foundation:

**1. Invest in an affirmative outlook.** Like love, motivation needs to be given away before it can be received. Practice giving confidence and support to those around you. Begin with your family. Too often, especially with our children, we develop a degenerative spiral of griping and fault finding. This is cancerous to the freedom of the Spirit. Far from motivation, this produces the “exasperation” in children mentioned in Ephesians 6. Nor do radiant wives or respected husbands come from a context riddled with criticism. Break this cycle, whether in the family or in the ministry, by catching people doing something right and rewarding them for it. Invest in an affirmative outlook, and the greatest educational force known to humanity—imitation—will be unleashed.

**2. Fuel the fire with like-minded people.** “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). There is something gregarious about human beings who are excited about something. They form clubs: T-bird clubs, motorcycle clubs, cross-stitch clubs, chess clubs, computer clubs, photography clubs, *ad infinitum*. When motivated by an idea or project, people publish newsletters, form societies, and write books. They do it for the most frivolous causes—as perennial as a suntan, as trendy as a Cabbage Patch. But the point is that God has designed us to seek out like-minded people and share our experiences. For the greatest cause on earth—the gospel—have you become known and supported by a small group, a fellowship of pastors, a periodic meeting of colleagues? Have you participated in a timely seminar, attended a retreat, or formed a ministry team?

Ministry was never meant to be sustained on the sheer abundance of its content. Dumping more data on weary Christian workers does not encourage but defeats them. What is usually needed is the sharpening challenge of another colleague. In the context of cohorts, we can sustain ourselves through the “flat” times and learn from others’ failures and successes. Experience may be the best teacher, but it is also the slowest and most severe. What we gain from like-minded friends is not just truth but fuel for the journey.

**3. Clear up conflicts quickly.** Nothing is more destructive to drive and purpose than the grit and friction of conflict. The most consuming mental quagmire is an unresolved personal problem. Conflict saps energy, stifles freedom, and undermines motivation. Deal with conflict quickly, especially if it involves you personally, by repentance or forgiveness, so freedom can return to your life.

**4. Be alert to deficit motivators.** Be careful that your own enterprise is not being fueled by the wrong motivation. Guilt is a deficit motivator—it fuels a hundred-yard dash but not a marathon. The same is true of anger. Though God may instill righteous anger for a time, it too runs us into oxygen debt if it does not yield to biblical motivation. The anger of man does not bring about the righteousness of God. Beware of a crusading spirit on a single issue, which may leave you wasted and gasping. Fear is a close cousin to guilt and anger. Fear of failure is not sufficient reason to take on difficult tasks long-term. Face your inadequacies and avoid trying to prove to the watching world that you are omniscient.

**5. Get your hands on front-line issues.** Involvement in corporate and private prayer is front-line spiritual warfare. So is personally sharing our faith with a non-believing friend. Nothing fuels our lives like direct involvement in the basic spiritual issues. Stay close to evangelism as a lifelong endeavor. Keep your hands in the reproductive process of making disciples. Remember that the kingdom of God is in the hearts of men and women, and stay close to that noble work.

— ROGER THOMPSON; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership* journal, © 1985 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

### Discuss

1. In ministry, do I ever try to “toil alone”? Has it been effective? Would it have been more effective if I had support from others?
2. Have I been willing to seek support, or do I prefer to try to do it alone?
3. Have I considered what is motivating me? Am I prone to any of the deficit motivators mentioned above? Do I feel compelled to prove that I’m “omniscient”?

## The Applause of Heaven and Earth

*An interview with Max Lucado*

Matthew 18:1–9

*Success and failure—Max Lucado has tasted both. He is widely known for his best-selling books and is the minister of preaching at Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas. Lucado has also known discouragement. After serving a church in Miami, Lucado became a church-planting missionary in Brazil. He returned to the United States after three years of “the most challenging time in my ministry.” LEADERSHIP editors Marshall Shelley and Brian Larson visited Max and talked to him about the dangers and glories in the mountains and valleys of ministry.*



### **Do you consider yourself a success? A failure? Or do you even use those words to describe ministry?**

I was taught to measure whether you're a successful minister by footsteps and checkbooks, by the number of attenders at your church and the amount of money they give. So I've tended to take pride when we've done well and been ashamed when we haven't. But I know there is more to it than that.

Success is relative. Some people have used what God has given them better than others. Perhaps the best way to measure success, then, is to determine what God has called you to do and how well you have followed that calling. In other words, measure success by obedience.

Especially, obedience to the very end. The Brazilians describe a person who sticks with something with the word *garra*. If you look up *garra* in a Portuguese dictionary, you see that it means fingernails. If someone has *garra*, he has nails, he hangs in there. That to me is one definition of success because Jesus said, “He who endures to the end will be saved.” He who has *garra* will be saved.

### **Was there a time when you had to remind yourself that earthly success and obedience may be two different things?**

Our work in Rio de Janeiro was both my most fulfilling and challenging ministry. My wife and I went with nine other families to plant churches, but it proved harder than we expected.

We started with little—renting a small facility, distributing evangelistic tracts. We did everything from preaching to typing to sweeping.

I wanted a big church overnight. The church took root, but our growth didn't match my expectations. Like most ministers everywhere, I was frustrated with financial limitations and disappointed when new converts continued to succumb to besetting sins.

But Brazil was good for me because it taught me that my view of success and God's view aren't always the same. Obedience meant faithfully carrying out what God had called me to do even while I couldn't see the fruit, going out at night and visiting people though I didn't see them mature, teaching evangelistic Bible studies though we saw few converts, preaching in Portuguese though I knew I was boring the people.

### **Our sense of success or failure is often tied to our expectations. When you went to Brazil, what did you feel God expected you to do, and how was that calling communicated to you?**

I felt God calling me to Brazil to build a great church. My heroes, men a generation ahead of me, had gone to São Paulo, Brazil, and built strong churches. I wanted to follow their example. As a young man, I observed them, and their success seemed to come easily and naturally.

When I returned to Brazil as a missionary, I thought, *If I do A, God will do B, and X will result*, but it turned out to be a hard time—a time of endurance. When the success I'd seen in my heroes proved difficult for me, I was discouraged. I loved the people, the culture, the language, but I didn't like the slow progress. God wasn't

working according to my timetable. I was confused. I felt as if I had failed.

I still look back on that with a what-if, should-have syndrome.

***How did you know you were being obedient, that you were not spinning your wheels in some endeavor God never intended?***

It needed to be done. My mistake was I didn't recognize what stage we were in. I thought we were in the roofing stage when actually we were building the foundation. A lot of work goes into a house's foundation, but it's not visible. The foundation is the slowest, toughest part of a ministry, and I greatly admire those who spend a lifetime at it.

Here in San Antonio, I'm building on a foundation that was already here. Although we've seen the congregation double, the staff increase threefold, and our giving increase, I know the foundation was laid before I arrived. I'm enjoying the fruit of someone else's labor.

To change the metaphor, ministry is done in chapters, and wise is the minister who knows his page number.

***Have you ever been tempted to lean toward earthly applause rather than obedience?***

When two speaking invitations for the same date come in the mail, one to a rural, small, struggling church, the other to a convention of 4,000 that will give a great honorarium, I can certainly justify speaking to the larger numbers. But God may want to use me in that small church that desperately needs encouragement.

I don't know if I have always made the right decision. I have gone to some places that weren't glamorous, where I slept on a couch instead of in a motel room because they couldn't afford one. Every time it has been rewarding.

***The writer Tennessee Williams once said, "Success and failure are equally disastrous." Which is the greater threat to a pastor?***

Success. With success you can start depending on yourself, believing the praise.

Spurgeon said, "Every man needs a blind eye and a deaf ear," so when people applaud, you'll only hear half of it, and when people salute, you'll only see part of it. He also said, "Believe only half the praise and half the criticism."

Many people at conferences assume that everything an author says must be right. They think you're pretty neat. If you speak at enough conferences, you start thinking you're pretty neat. That's intoxicating.

In fact, that's the reason I don't plan to ever be just an author and conference speaker. My church keeps my feet on the ground by seeing me as I am, not as an author but as Max.

When success goes to your head, the quality that attracted others to listen to you in the first place is lost. What makes a messenger appealing is his honesty—honesty about his own salvation, his own sinfulness, his own brokenness. If I start believing the wonderful things people say, I lose that honesty about my own sinfulness, my own relationship with God. I leave the impression that I'm a red-hot zealot, that God's lucky to have me on his side. And pretty soon I'm out of touch with people.

***When have you seen failure be redemptive?***

Failure taught me to pray. The closest I have ever come to hearing God's audible voice was one night in Brazil as I was praying, "God, you have to help this church!"

It hit me, "It's my church, Max. It's my church." God was letting me know through one of those mystical, easily misunderstood experiences in life that he'll nurture the church.

Prayer only makes sense when you have quit trying to do ministry yourself. I've learned that as things go smoothly, I pray less. As our goals shrink, I pray less. As things become more manageable, I pray less. But as we reach out, stretch ourselves, and tackle God-sized dreams, I pray more.

**How should pastors measure their success?**

I limit the areas in which I measure success to (1) what I can do well, and (2) what I can control.

I quit beating myself over the head because I don't do counseling well, for example. I can give a good listening ear, but I'm not a therapist.

Someone can be a good third baseman, but not a good pitcher. If I'm called to play third base, I'm going to be the best third baseman I can be. It was a liberating moment when I realized I didn't have to be great at everything.

And then I try to control what I can control. I can't control how everyone responds to my sermons. I can't control whether everyone will be happy with my ministry.

**Do you set numerical goals?**

I flip-flop on whether we should set numerical goals. Goals strongly affect our sense of success or failure, of achievement or frustration. Is it a bad year if we don't grow? A year of deepening our roots could be exactly what we need. If we are barely managing who we have, the worst thing that could happen could be an 18 percent annual growth rate. A good farmer won't plant a field every season because there's a time to let the soil rest.

We can't control response; we can't control numbers. We may set a goal for conversions but discover that God gives us growth in other ways. A lot of salesmen set call-goals rather than sales-goals since they can't control whether people buy, only how many people they contact.

The upside of a goal is it inspires a dream, a common focus. We can lay that dream before the Father and say, "Lord, we want to be baptizing people every day like the New Testament church." The downside of goals is if you don't reach them, you feel like a failure.

We focus on plans more than goals. Instead of looking at the year ahead in terms of "How much growth will we have?" we ask "How many new opportunities will be created to serve people?"

**What is a successful church? When have you been able to say, "We've done it right. This is what church was meant to be"?**

We have felt most successful when we've had a clear understanding of God's unique calling for our church.

There are so many good things to be involved in, everything from campaigning against abortion to fighting world hunger, that we have to stop and ask ourselves, *What is our unique calling?* We have had to say no to worthwhile projects to be effective.

Our church in San Antonio is in a middle-class, suburban neighborhood, so we probably shouldn't hound ourselves for not running a powerful ministry to the underprivileged. Whereas, when I served the inner-city church in Miami, we had a strong one.

One of our greatest growth areas in San Antonio has been singles ministry. The church never even considered a full-time singles minister until the demographics showed us that we are surrounded by 25,000 single people within a 15-mile radius. When the elders saw that, they decided that God was calling us to reach them.

We also feel most successful when we are at peace with our church's personality. Every church has a personality that is a reflection of its leadership and heritage.

**What role does God play in success and failure?**

When Charlton Heston was training to drive the chariot in *Ben Hur*, he said to Cecil B. DeMille, "I can barely stay on this thing. I can't win the race."

DeMille replied, "Your job is to stay on it. It's my job to make sure you win."

That's what God says to us. The gospel will be preached. We are co-workers with the Lord. I am in a partnership with God, and the Holy Spirit is the one who takes what I do and makes it work.

The guy who feels the incredible burden of success or failure thinks, *It's up to me to get the gospel preached.* It's much more biblical to remember that the job is going to get done. The race is going to be run. It's my job to get on the chariot, point it in the right direction, and hang on. It's God's job to get me to the finish line and declare the victory.

— MARSHALL SHELLEY and BRIAN LARSON; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 1992 Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

### **Discuss**

1. Have my expectations for ministry ever led to a sense of failure? Have I shared this feeling with others?
2. Do we set numerical goals? Why or why not? Has this decision had a negative or positive effect on my perception of ministry?
3. Have I experienced any times when failure has been redemptive?

## Faithful Despite Fears

Seeking a new understanding of “success” in ministry

1 Peter 1:13–25

*The issues of size and success are inseparable for many pastors. For some, bigger is better, with success defined as continued growth in membership, giving, and attendance. The larger the church, the more reason, the more people reached with the gospel. These leaders exhibit the creative, pragmatic, and aggressive entrepreneurial spirit that has characterized American society.*

*Others equate success with “quality” ministry—in particular, satisfying personal care and nurture. Such leaders worry that increased growth will diminish the close-knit nature of the congregation. Their primary concern is that the sick are visited, the hurting are comforted, and that everyone knows each other’s name on Sunday morning.*

*Which paradigm represents “successful” ministry? Use this assessment to gauge your preconceptions about what makes a ministry successful.*

**What have I done, even if I didn’t particularly want to, that I knew I should?**

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**As leaders, we’re often expected to fill many different roles within our leadership position. When we begin to doubt our abilities, it sometimes helps to focus on our primary roles. What are my primary responsibilities in my leadership role?**

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**Two dangers exist for leaders when it comes to setting standards for success. One is to shoot for the moon. The other is to throw in the towel. Which of these responses comes most naturally for me? If it is “to throw in the towel,” why am I prone to giving up hope? If it is “to shoot for the moon,” how do I respond to disappointment?**

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**Instead of viewing everything through the lens of “success” or “failure,” am I willing to recognize “progress”? What have I seen in my ministry that fits in this category?**

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— STUART BRISCOE; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 1993 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

**Discuss**

1. Do I tend toward the “bigger is better” or “quality” ends of the spectrum in my ministry thinking?
2. Have there been times when my goals or motives suggested otherwise?
3. What are the dangers in striving for either “bigger is better” or “quality” ministry?

## Too Impressed with Success?

Could our fear of failure stem from a misunderstanding of success?

1 Corinthians 4:2–4

*How do I evaluate myself? The short answer is I can't, or shouldn't. If I read the New Testament, to do so may border on presumption. The apostle Paul counseled a pious, even belligerent agnosticism regarding self-evaluation: "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."*

*So much for self-evaluation or any human evaluation. God is the judge, not us—case closed, end of discussion, end of chapter, and end of the personnel committee of my church.*

*But the long answer starts with the short answer and then proceeds delicately to reopen the discussion and perhaps reestablish the personnel committee by asking some hard questions about faithfulness. Paul said that because he understood himself to be a steward of the gospel. A steward is someone who has been entrusted with another person's property and charged with managing it in the owner's interests. Faithfulness is the measure of the steward, says Paul: "Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful."*

*All that matters to him is that he be able to answer yes to the question he knows he and every human being will one day be asked by God: "Were you faithful?"*

*So how do I evaluate myself? I start by recognizing, up front, that only God knows the score and that I should not weigh too heavily or take too seriously what I or anybody else thinks of me. But since he will one day ask me the Big Faithfulness Question, I'd better ask myself a few like it until that day.*

I want to impress others with my "success."

Often     Sometimes     Never

In ministry, I subscribe to "bigger is better."

Often     Sometimes     Never

I value "faithfulness" over "success."

Often     Sometimes     Never

My motivation comes from my desire to succeed...more than my love for others.

Often     Sometimes     Never

I have, at times, associated my value with my salary, possessions, and accomplishments.

Often     Sometimes     Never

I struggle to love those to whom I've been called to minister.

Often     Sometimes     Never

My expectations differ from those to whom I minister (or from those serving alongside me).

Often     Sometimes     Never

In my desire to be successful (even in ministry), I have overlooked the importance of time in prayer.

Often     Sometimes     Never

I consult my peers (a covenant group, support group, small group) and take their advice to heart.

Often     Sometimes     Never

My work points away from me and toward God.

Often     Sometimes     Never

— BEN PATTERSON; adapted from *Mastering the Pastoral Role*, © 1991 by Christianity Today International.

### Discuss

1. Do I need to realign any goals in my life? For my ministry?
2. How much emphasis have I placed on faithfulness?
3. How have I evaluated myself? What adjustments, if any, should I make?

## What Can I Handle?

*Understanding our basic response to risks helps us determine whether our fears are justified.*

Proverbs 28:1

*D. Thomas, in A Word from the Wise, tells the story of a Georgia farmer living in a dilapidated shack. He hadn't planted anything, so nothing needed to be cultivated. The farmer just sat, ragged and barefoot, surrounded by the evidence of his laziness.*

*A stranger stopped for a drink of water and asked, "How's your cotton doing?"*

*"Ain't got none," replied the farmer.*

*"Didn't you plant any?"*

*"Nope. 'fraid of boll weevils."*

*"Well," continued the visitor, "how's your corn?"*

*"Didn't plant none. 'fraid there wasn't gonna be no rain."*

*"How are your potatoes?"*

*"Ain't got none. Scared of potato bugs."*

*"Really? What did you plant?"*

*"Nothin'," was the reply. "I jest played safe."*

*The church leader who never takes risks quickly finds: No risks, no returns.*

### Defining Your Style

*Ellen Siegelman, in her book Personal Risk, has developed an informal self-test that measures risk-taking style. She defines three categories: anxious risk takers, balanced risk takers, and careless risk takers. Knowing your style can help you prepare for a risk. For example, an anxious risk taker needs to push himself to make the decision. A careless risk taker, on the other hand, needs to slow down and do more research before taking action. Following is Siegelman's self-assessment exercise:*

*Although people are rarely consistent in their decision-making styles, most of us can detect some regularity in the way we make important decisions. Think of the important life decisions you have made (e.g., marriage, divorce, major moves, career changes), and then answer the following questions. You may not answer some with complete confidence, but give the answers that come closest to what you believe. This is not a test; it is just a device to help you understand your own decision-making behavior. For each dimension, choose the one response out of three that best describes how you usually respond in making a big decision.*

#### I. Attitude toward change

1. I prefer security to novelty.
2. I value security and novelty about equally.
3. I prefer novelty to security.

#### II. Search strategy

1. I make a quick overall survey of possibilities hoping that something will hit me.
2. I keep producing and then going over my possible choices.
3. I think of a number of alternatives but stop after reasonable search.

#### III. Attention to feelings

1. I decide among alternatives not only by reasoning but by taking my feelings into account.
2. I make major decisions almost exclusively on the basis of my feelings.
3. I mistrust my feelings as a basis for a major decision; I try to use reason almost entirely.

#### IV. Decision rule

1. I believe there is one right decision, and it is my job to dig it out.
2. I believe there is no one right decision; I just need to find one that is good enough.
3. I believe in choosing the first decision that really grabs me.

**V.** Sense of consequence

1. I don't try to predict the consequences of my decision because I expect things will work out okay.
2. I do think about consequences, tending to focus on the bad things that might happen.
3. I try to think of both the good and bad consequences of my decision.

**VI.** Pre-decision emotions

1. In thinking about taking a risky step, I feel mostly anxiety.
2. In thinking about taking a risky step, I feel a mixture of anxiety and excitement.
3. In thinking about taking a risky step, I feel mostly excitement.

**VII.** Time expended in decision-making process

1. I usually make decisions—even big ones—quickly.
2. I usually take a fairly long time to make big decisions.
3. I usually take a very long time to make big decisions.

**VIII.** Attitude toward new information

1. I will consider new information even after I've arrived at a probable decision.
2. I'm not interested in getting new information after I've made a probable decision.
3. I feel compelled either to seek out new information or to shut it out after I've made a probable decision.

**IX.** Post-decision strategy

1. Once I've made a decision, I usually don't think about it before launching into action.
2. Once I've made a decision, I often experience serious doubts and may change my mind.
3. Once I've made a decision, I usually rally behind it after rechecking.

**X.** Evaluating the outcome of a risky decision

1. After I have acted on the decision, I tend to worry or regret that I didn't do something else.
2. After I have acted on the decision, I tend to put it out of my mind.
3. After I have acted on the decision, I tend to think about what I have learned from it.

**Scoring:** In the table below, circle the corresponding letter—A, B, or C—for each of your responses above. Then tally the number of A responses, B responses, and C responses.

Question	Response 1	Response 2	Response 3
I.	A	B	C
II.	C	A	B
III.	B	C	A
IV.	A	B	C
V.	C	A	B
VI.	A	B	C
VII.	C	B	A
VIII.	B	C	A
IX.	C	A	B
X.	A	C	B

A	B	C

**Style A:** The anxious risk taker makes big decisions with great effort, is afraid of making mistakes, takes lots of time, and tends to ruminate and worry about the outcome.

**Style B:** The balanced risk taker makes big decisions fairly slowly, is more concerned with reasonably good outcomes than with fear of failure or the need to make a good decision, and tends to plan and to review but without worrying too much.

**Style C:** The careless risk taker makes big decisions quickly with little experience of mixed feelings, may feel “inappropriately optimistic,” and spends little time in introspection or evaluation.

Most people evidence a mixture of styles. The average number of A responses is **6.7**. The average number of B responses is **2.3**. And the average number of C responses is **1.0**. The goal is to be balanced.

— TERRY C. MUCK; adapted from *When to Take a Risk: A Guide to Pastoral Decision Making*, © 1987 by Christianity Today International.

**Discuss**

1. What did you think of the results? Did they surprise you? Why or why not?
2. Can you see ways your risk-taking style may have affected your decision-making? Your ministry?
3. Have you ever been like the Georgia farmer in the opening illustration? How so?

## Finding Hope in Failure

*How one pastor learned ministry isn't about "winning"*

Hebrews 6:10–12

### The Background

My personality is much like Simon Peter's: bold, driven, impetuous, with a must-be-right attitude and the need to win at all costs. This gradually eroded my relationship with my wife, Fay, and eventually, all communication broke down. We couldn't talk about anything without my having to prove she was wrong and I was right. Inevitably, she responded by withdrawing into silence.

As a pastor, this especially troubled me because I believed I had no business leading God's church if I couldn't lead my own household. In desperation, we sought marriage counseling, where I began to discover something I had never understood: I behaved as I did to protect myself. I was most secure when I was competing and winning. I couldn't admit I was scared and so tried to win by intimidation.

The day this became clear to me, I had just returned from a week-long encounter group. I had listened to 15 peers tell me day after day how they "experienced me" as a driving, smug, righteous person who always had to win. When I told this to Fay, she softened, put her arms around me, and said, "Honey, I've been trying to tell you for years."

That was the first time in a long time I felt acceptance from her. And it came when I was weak and vulnerable. My defenses began to crumble. I broke and sobbed as I faced the terrible reality that my encounter group and my wife were right. I didn't change overnight, but I started to see I needed to stop trying to control others just so I could feel secure.

### The Case

This new awareness brought clarity to another issue: I was pastoring a church in turmoil. A powerful faction was determined to get rid of me. Because the majority of the congregation was behind me and had given me a vote of confidence, I continued to press on.

For months the factional struggle continued. One night we were having yet another congregational meeting with the usual ugly scenes—a trustee exchanging heated words with a deacon, the moderator barely able to keep order. It suddenly dawned on me that I was still fighting. I still had to win. But here was a marvelous opportunity to do something about it. I could stop the bloodshed by resigning. So I did.

Even then, my old behavior still hung on. My supporters and I left the church and established a new one. At first I felt good about it. But as time went by, I began to have reservations about what I had done. Even though these people probably would have left the church when I resigned, wasn't I doing what I had always done? By starting a new church, wasn't I still trying to win?

These thoughts troubled me. Then I discovered the faction at the church I left was smearing my name with rumors that my children had gotten in trouble with the law and my wife and I were getting a divorce. I felt that as long as I stayed in town, the warfare would continue.

I knew I was not ready to pastor another church. Yet, how would I support my family?

### What Would You Do?

- ◆ Pursue a less visible ministry role in the area.
- ◆ Step away from ministry entirely and find work in the secular sector.
- ◆ \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)

## What Happened

A good friend in Washington, D.C., offered me a job at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) as a maintenance man—actually, a glorified janitor. My job was to unstop commodes and fix leaky washbasins and urinals. That work seemed suited for me at that time. Perhaps by trading the pastor's scepter for a plumber's friend, I might get my narcissism under control.

I left California in a U-Haul truck to drive cross-country. My wife and our boys in grade school stayed behind to finish the school year. Alone, I started my trip to a new life.

As I drove, the tears flowed as a terrible sense of failure overwhelmed me. I had not made it in the pastorate!

At one time my seminary professors had high hopes for me. What would they think now? Often my professors would warn us about the pitfalls of the ministry and illustrate their point by naming graduates who had dropped out of the ministry. The doleful commentary usually ended, "And now he's selling insurance."

I thought, *If selling insurance is the epitome of failure, what would they think of me?* Not only had I failed in the pastorate, I also had committed the unpardonable sin of splitting a church. The next time the professors needed an illustration of failure, their commentary could end with, "And Bustanoby wound up as a janitor!"

Though I was still hurting when I got to Washington, D.C., I was anxious to go to work. The only thing that sustained me in those difficult days was the conviction that God knew what he was doing, because I was sure making a mess of things.

About four months after starting work at the SEC, I felt I needed some kind of ministry. I was not unhappy with my work, and the pay was better than I had ever received in the ministry. But I felt I needed more challenge.

While in California, I had earned a master's degree in marriage and family therapy, so I thought of establishing a counseling practice. After much prayer and deliberation with Fay, who by then had joined me, I began a practice in my home. I worked my maintenance job during the day and built my counseling practice in the evenings and on weekends.

My clients were responsive and seemed to be helped, and the work was therapeutic for me. It was not, like the pastorate, a public ministry. It was private and enabled me to maintain obscurity, which helped develop new behavior. It also required that I listen, be empathetic, and care about the pain of others, something I lacked in the pastorate. As a pastor, I could be warm and empathetic with people who liked me and whom I liked, but it was a new experience to truly care about people I didn't know, some of whom were positively unlovely.

God blessed this new work, both in terms of those it helped and in terms of fulfillment and financial remuneration for me. In two years I was able to quit my maintenance job and devote all my energies to my practice.

Now as I look back over many years of counseling practice and the personal growth I have experienced, I am amazed at what God has done. Success did not come through ruthless competition, insistence on being right, and winning at all costs. God has shown me the behavior I thought I needed for survival actually was getting in my way. It was getting in his way, too.

Though I haven't come to the place of relishing trial as "pure joy," failure doesn't hold the terror it once did. Indeed, God's working through my failure to begin making me what he wants me to be is what gives me hope.

## Discuss

1. Have there been times when I've been preoccupied with "winning" in ministry?
2. Have I experienced growth from failure?
3. Could it be that the failures I've feared could be God's way of redirecting my ministry?

— ANDRE BUSTANOBY; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 1987 by Christianity Today International or the author. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

## Overcoming Self-Doubt

*Even the most outwardly confident achievers often struggle with self-acceptance.*

1 Corinthians 15:8–10

For years I struggled with a low self-image. Mother married my father against her parents' will. My father was an itinerant worker. He'd ride railroad freight cars to the Midwest, where he worked as a harvest laborer. Then he would return to his home in St. Paul and live on his wages. He was a kind person, soft-spoken, gentle; but my mother soon discovered that he was completely irresponsible. He never did support the family. My mother's father set him up in business twice, but he never made it go.

When I was 10 years old my parents divorced—in a little North Dakota town where nobody got divorced—and we moved into a flat where we shared a bathroom with 20 families. I can still hear the cockroaches crush in the door jamb when I closed the door.

I've been afraid of my father's traits all my life. To this day, I feel there is something in me that wants to run as far away from responsibility as I can get.

After I became a Christian, a pastor helped me see my arrogance—that there was no substance to it, and I was covering up all those awful fears I had about myself and my inadequacy. He showed me how to study the Scriptures.

The verse that helped me turn the corner was Paul's marvelous testimony that in his weakness Christ became strong. In an incredible passage (1 Cor. 15), Paul said, "Last of all [Christ] appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am."

I grabbed that truth with both hands as my valid place of self-acceptance; by the grace of God, I am what I am.

— RICHARD C. HALVERSON; adapted from our sister publication LEADERSHIP journal, © 1980 by Christianity Today International. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

### Discuss

1. Do you struggle with self-acceptance and doubts? In what ways?
2. How can you apply that passage from 1 Corinthians 15 to your life? Like Richard, do you find those words reassuring?
3. Have doubts gotten in the way of your ministry? How have you overcome these fears? Have you?

# Ambition Crippler

*Dealing with past failures*

Exodus 4:13

The first step on the road to success begins inside our heads. Until we grapple with our past failures and conquer our sense of inadequacy, we will never be able to handle success. But once we get the negative past out of our heads, we're able to journey toward a meaningful, fulfilling life.

Many typical motivational speeches—even sermons—skip this important mental step. But the negative, dream-crushing defeats in our past can drown out positive, faith-building talk. Our disappointments and failures can corrode our dreams for the future. Sure, we want to make a difference with our lives. But before we can develop a healthy ambition and a passion for God's purpose for us, before we can set our sights on God-honoring, God-pleasing success, we have to deal with the baggage of our humanity.

When Moses was young, he made a huge mistake. He tried to take hold of his destiny and accomplish something great for God. But his timing and his methods were off, and he failed miserably. With a dead Egyptian buried in the sand and a price on Moses' head, he retreated to the backside of the desert. As Moses watched the sheep and replayed his mistakes in his head for forty years, he allowed his dreams to wither away.

Still carrying the shame and disgrace of his past, Moses wasn't ready to volunteer when God called him at the burning bush. He had no more ambition to do anything great for God—no passion for significant success. In fact, as God urged Moses to see the possibilities, Moses protested repeatedly.

“Who am I?” he asked ([Ex. 3:11](#)). He had lost the advantage of being raised in Pharaoh's household. Now he was merely an unknown, insignificant shepherd.

“What should I tell them?” he asked (v. 13). Moses couldn't imagine himself back in Pharaoh's courts, much less debating successfully with the most powerful leader in his world.

But in spite of his protests, feelings of inadequacy, and past failures, this insignificant, stuttering shepherd without a message finally bowed to the call and will of God. And with God's help, Moses became a leader for all time.

— RICHARD DOEBLER; adapted from *Leadership Devotions*, © 2001 Tyndale.

## Discuss

1. Like Moses, have you ever tried to “take hold of your destiny” on your own terms, instead of in God's timing? What was the result?
2. Has a failure (or failures) in your past scared you away from pursuing your goals (in life or in ministry)?
3. Are you afraid of making similar mistakes? How can you move past these fears?

## Between Failure and Fraud

*Finding a balance between two different voices—the assessing and the accusing*

Romans 3:23

Pastors have always been Sunday fare, but performance expectations can arrive by special delivery any day of the week. On one such day, a congregant arrived in my office to tell me just what she made of my performance as a pastor. In summary, not much.

She was expansive in the adjectives she used to describe my deficiencies. As I listened, I recognized some truth in what she said. But she wanted more than my agreement, she wanted my resignation. Her logic was simple: “If you are not who you should be, you shouldn’t be a pastor.” By grace, I realized there was another logic worth considering. It says, “You are not who you should be, and God wants to use you anyway.”

God’s mysterious strategy is to use fallen people to witness to a gospel of hope and transformation. That means underperformance is built into the paradigm. It means those who do not live up to expectations are the very people God uses to call others who don’t measure up either. This approach is completely counterintuitive, but then so is grace.

Grace is not an excuse to hide our deficiencies or deny our failures, and it’s not a heat shield to protect us from getting burned. But grace does mean our failures don’t have to paint us into a corner where the only way out is to abandon our call. Grace sets our lives in what the psalmist calls “the broad place,” off the knife-edge of judgment, and nowhere near the winner-takes-all option some may offer us.

I tried to respond gently to the outspoken critic in my office. “You are more right than you know,” I told her. “I don’t have many of the qualities of a gifted pastor. But you have the wrong list of deficiencies. The real list is far worse. God knows the real list, and God, by his grace, has still called me to be a pastor.”

I believe what I said, but living it is far more difficult. The temptation in ministry is always to focus on expectations rather than grace.

In a very difficult season when finances were tight, I was driving a dilapidated car that had been donated to the church. It had lots of problems, including a ceiling lining that drooped down and grazed my head every time the broken shock absorbers launched me from the seat toward the roof. The car began to speak to me. It said, “Failure.” Why couldn’t I get my life together? I was getting older every year, I had a family, this car was humiliating, and I felt like a failure.

This continued for months until the day I took the car to the airport to pick up my nieces. It was a very hot day and the air-conditioning in the car didn’t work (surprise), so all four windows were down. Only later did I realize vinyl flakes from the sun-scorched dashboard were being blown into the backseat and covering my sweet nieces.

That day, still without the funds to buy a second car, we leased a new car. It was wonderful! No flakes, no droopy ceiling lining, no broken shocks. I was thrilled until the day this car also began to talk. Its message was also just one word: “Fraud.” I was no more put together, no more successful with this new car than with the scuzzy borrowed one. It just looked better. I was a fake.

My life swings between voices calling “failure” and “fraud.” The key is not listening to either. I’m not as bad as my critics accuse me of being, but I’m not as good as I’ve led some to believe. And right there, in the truth somewhere in between, is where we hear the voice of God. He still says to me, and to everyone called to follow Jesus, “I want you and I will use you.”

In ministry performance matters, but grace matters more.

—MARK LABBERTON; adapted from LEADERSHIP journal, © 2008 by Christianity Today International or the author. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

**Discuss**

1. In what ways have I felt like a failure in ministry?
2. In what ways have I felt like a fraud in ministry?
3. What is the “truth in between” these feelings of failure and fraud for me? If I ignore those two voices, do I hear God saying, “I want you and will use you”?

# Slaying Spiritual Skepticism

*Taking special care to combat skepticism*

Job 9:16–23

Some people seem predisposed to accept stories about mysteries or the inexplicable. I'm just naturally skeptical. This skepticism is not an altogether bad thing. If I trusted every offer that came along, I would have re-financed my house every day for the past two years.

But it is not altogether helpful, either. It gets in the way of prayer. It can create barriers in my intimacy with God. It can corrode my vision for the future. And I don't think that I'm the only one who suffers from it. In fact, I think that those of us involved in pastoral ministry are especially prone to it.

## Seen This Person?

He is a high-profile guy. He has been a successful pastor. Sought-after speaker. Church consultant. He has the kind of ministry to which people in our profession generally aspire. He is in demand. He is important.

One of the striking things about him when he speaks is his impressive certainty. He tells many stories about answered prayer and growing churches. He is wonderfully assuring to the people who listen to him, who want badly to believe, and who *do* believe, but who don't believe perfectly, not all the time.

I heard him some time ago at a Christian college conference discussing "world views" of well-known people. He quoted a poet who said she periodically surveys the world and asks herself if there is meaning and hope beyond cruel, physical reality, and finds that she answers yes about 70 percent of the time. The speaker quoted her in a contemptuous way, as if to say to the audience, "How sadly typical that a member of the so-called intelligentsia would go through life without 100-percent, full-time assurance of supernatural truth."

But when he is behind closed doors, the closed doors of his hotel room if he's talking with someone he knows well, or behind the closed doors of his heart, he is a different man.

He is deeply cynical. He is cynical about the people to whom he speaks. He is cynical about the organizations with whom he consults. The kinds of things he says publicly about God and faith do not play out in his private conversations, and they would sound hollow if they did. There is little sense of wonder in him—about God, life, or people. He is cynical about other church leaders because he believes them to be as ego-driven and career-obsessed as he is.

He prays sporadically, mostly in crisis. There have been moments when he thinks his prayers really have been answered. However, for the sake of the ministry he tells the stories of these answered prayers, tells them often, and embellishes them slightly with each retelling until eventually he no longer believes in them himself.

One gets the sense that he speaks about God in his professional capacity, but that when he is offstage and relaxed and speaking candidly about "reality," he thinks in terms of money and positioning and rivalry and success. He is like the title character in the *Wizard of Oz*. He lives behind the curtain. He pulls off the special effects and gets people to believe. They see the fire and smoke; they tremble from a distance. But he knows the truth. It's a show. There is no magic. There is impressive technology but nothing supernatural. He lives behind the curtain.

What he really trusts in is hard to sum up, but the word success might come close.

I will tell you his name. It is Legion.

He is no one person in particular. I have met him, in one form or another, many times, and so have you. What is worse, of course, is that I meet him from time to time in myself.

## Why Are We Skeptical?

I suppose we are skeptical partly because we minister as finite, fallen people in a fallen world where much goes unexplained.

A couple comes in for counseling. They desperately want a child, they have prayed fervently, they have waited 12 anxious, doubtful, barren years. Then one day it happens: the liquid in the test tube of the home pregnancy kit magically changes color, and their prayers are answered, and they have a perfect, healthy baby. A little boy. And they believe.

When he is three years old, this answered prayer is playing with an orange soccer ball. It lands on a crack in the sidewalk and bounces crazily to the left. It didn't have to happen that way; a little more breeze, a little nudge from God, and the ball would have missed the crack. It could have bounced to the right, but it didn't; God didn't nudge it; it went to the left. And to the left meant into the street. He never saw the car.

And now they are alone again, his mother and father. Their world landed on a crack and bounced away with an orange soccer ball. And now their answered prayer hurts more than their unanswered one.

Pain is not the only story in this world, not by a long shot. But it is part of the story, and it is not safe to gloss over it too glibly, too quickly. Honest ministers never have. Old Testament scholars tell us the most common form of psalm is the lament. A few thank-you notes are thrown in here and there, but more psalms are addressed to the complaint department than anywhere else. It may be that our skepticism is not too strong but too weak, or at least that we are too afraid of the consequences to face it as fearlessly as does the psalmist.

Frederick Buechner writes:

“There would be a strong argument for saying that much of the most powerful preaching of our time is the preaching of the poets, playwrights, novelists because it is often they better than the rest of us who speak with awful honesty about the absence of God in the world and about the storm of his absence, both without and within, which, because it is unendurable, unlivable, drives us to look to the eye of the storm. The absence of God is not just an idea to conjure with, an emptiness for the preacher to try to furnish, like a house, with chair and sofa, heat and light, to make it livable. The absence of God is just that which is not livable. It is the tears that Jesus wept over Lazarus and the sweat he sweated in the garden and the cry he choked out when his own tongue filled his mouth like a gag.”

This is surely a part of the story. It is important to speak honestly about prayers that don't get answered (at least in the ways we want), and hurts that don't heal, or else we place ourselves and our hearers at risk for skepticism when we bump up against the real, fallen world.

## What's the Deeper Reason?

However, the truth about my skepticism is that it does not result purely from a courageous decision to look life squarely in the eye. I said earlier I am a skeptic by nature. That may be getting me off the hook too easily. There is not (at least yet) any evidence of a genetic predisposition toward skepticism.

There are darker sides to my skepticism. Skepticism carries with it a kind of built-in excuse for spiritual entropy. It provides a twisted kind of justification for a failure to love, and love is, after all, hard work.

This more destructive form of skepticism is a disease not so much of the intellect as of the will. It is not the doubting of Thomas that leads to a search for the truth; it is the doubting of Pilate (“What is truth?”), which is less a question about truth than an affirmation that truth cannot be found, an excuse to wash my hands of the whole thing and simply pursue my agenda.

Partly, this is a risk of education. When I was growing up, I had a vague idea that to become a pastor more or less conferred spiritual maturity on you. There were simple answers to difficult questions, and pastors were well informed and quite certain about them. The discovery that this is not so produces a kind of disillusionment that may lead to a much deeper and more informed faith, but may also lead to a shallow skepticism that ceases to search for truth at all.

I long for the former. But I am vulnerable to skepticism because I too live behind the curtain. I see the fight between the soloist and the keyboard player. I preach sermons on intimacy while still in an unresolved (and sometimes, on my part, unfairly fought) conflict with my wife.

I am in danger, I suppose, of becoming skeptical about the church because I am so close to it. The first time I was invited to take part in a public worship service I remember hearing the pastors joke beforehand about which one brings in the biggest offering when he preaches. For me, the offering had always been an awesome thing (partly because it was the only time I saw that much money in one plate). I don't think it's necessarily wrong to make jokes about the offering. I have been at churches where on some Sundays the offering is very nearly a joke in itself. But the notion of the offerings—grateful people yielding to God a tangible part of their lives—contains elements that should awe us. And our sense of wonder and awe is sometimes worn down by sheer familiarity. My faith is probably in more danger of being de-sensitized than de-mythologized.

I suspect that many times the reason I can be cynical about other people's motives is because I am so intimately acquainted with my own. To the degree that I am in ministry to win applause, it will be difficult for me not to project the same intentions on others.

### **What Can I Do?**

However, I am not a helpless victim of skepticism. One of the prayers that has become most important to me is the prayer of the desperate father in Mark 9:24, "I believe; help Thou my unbelief."

One of the things that helps me most is to talk about my doubts and skepticism and criticism with a few close friends. The first time I did this was pretty threatening: I was afraid the friend with whom I shared my doubts (we went to seminary together) would be shocked. Instead his response was, "What? You too?" The honest discussion of our questions that day had the effect of deeply affirming my faith. Much of the power of my skepticism gets drained in the simple act of confessing it to somebody else.

It also helps to let people in my congregation know my faith is not perfect. This is not to say it's appropriate to ventilate in the pulpit every doubt that comes along. For a pastor in a major faith crisis to get up and say, "I'm not sure today that God even exists. Sermon's over; go home" would be clergy malpractice of monstrous proportions. But I will occasionally say, "It's important to me that you understand my faith is not perfect. Sometimes I have questions I can't answer. I don't always give my trust easily." This helps lessen my temptation to pretend. It also gives people who listen permission to discuss their own doubts.

One step that has aided me much was to find a spiritual director who could help my prayer life. I shared with her one time how my doubts could make it hard for me to receive anything from God in prayer. For instance, when praying I would have doubts that God could be really speaking to me since my life was so imperfect. Or I would wonder if this was really God speaking or simply my own thoughts and feelings.

"You need to practice discernment," she said. "When you pray and sense God may be speaking, and then doubts come up—do these doubts move you closer to love and joy and intimacy with God, or farther away?"

The answer was clear: these doubts were keeping me from receiving anything from God in prayer.

"Then it would appear that these doubts are not of the Spirit," she said. "It may be wisest simply to set them aside in prayer and open yourself to the possibility that God really is speaking to you." As simple as that advice was, it freed me to believe that prayer—my prayer—really was an interactive, personal conversation in which God was not just listening but participating.

The early church fathers had a standard spiritual discipline for the cultivation of greater faith that applies especially to pastors: silence. One of them put it like this: "When the door of a steam bath is continually left open, the heat inside rapidly escapes through it; likewise the soul, in its desire to say many things, dissipates its remembrance of God through the door of speech, even though everything it says may be good."

Sometime ago I had an experience in prayer that was, for me, a powerful and unusual thing. I told several people about it, but this had an unexpected consequence. Gradually, the experience became less a shared moment between God and me and more an impressive moment I could use to demonstrate to people how

spiritual I was. The mere talking about it changed it, robbed it of its value to help me. Silence, as Henri Nouwen says, is a way of tending the inner fire, which protects us from the coldness of skepticism.

Martin Luther once told of a woman tormented by doubt who said to him, “Dear Doctor, I have the idea that I’m lost and can’t be saved because I can’t believe.”

Luther replied, “Do you believe, dear lady, that what you say in the Creed is true?” She answered with clasped hands, “Oh yes, I believe it; it’s most certainly true!” To this he responded, “Then go in God’s name, dear lady. You believe more and better than I do.”

Luther reflected on this encounter: “It’s the Devil who puts such ideas into people’s heads and says, ‘Ah, you must believe better. You must believe more. Your faith is not very strong and is insufficient.’ In this way he drives them to despair. We are so constructed by nature that we desire to have a conscious faith. We’d like to grasp it with our hands and shove it into our bosom, but this doesn’t happen in this life. . . . We should hold to the Word and let ourselves drag along this way.”

Sometimes the best way to deal with my skepticism is with a healthy dose of perspective and humor. Luther noted that he was often tempted by the Devil to doubt because he knew his sinfulness: “I am of a different mind 10 times in the course of a day. But I resist the Devil, and often it is with a [synonym for flatulence] that I chase him away. When he tempts me with silly sins I say, ‘Devil, I broke wind yesterday, too. Have you written it down on your list?’”

I don’t mind being skeptical about some things. But when it comes to God and the church, I don’t want to go through life a skeptic. I want to leave a legacy of faith.

— JOHN ORTBERG; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership journal*, © 1994 Christianity Today International or the author. For more articles like this, visit [www.Leadershipjournal.net](http://www.Leadershipjournal.net).

### Discuss

1. When I am afraid of failure, could it be that spiritual skepticism is at the root of these fears?
2. When I am filled with doubt, have I been too afraid to share these doubts with my friends, family, or fellow leaders? Have I ever shared doubts with someone, as Ortberg did, only to be surprised to realize I’m not the only one who has doubts and fears?
3. In this article, Ortberg advocates sharing doubts with others, but he also lauds the spiritual discipline of silence. Have I found a balance between these two practices—seeking counsel and staying silent? In which of these two areas do I most need to improve? How can I start doing that now?

## Great is Thy Effectiveness?

*There's danger in rooting our identity in ministry rather than in Christ.*

John 15:8

Something's wrong. We pastors are the stewards, the spokespeople, the advocates of a message of hope, life, and peace. And yet so few of us seem to be experiencing these qualities in our own lives. Something's wrong. In a world saturated with fear, insecurity, and stress, we are to show a different way. And yet those at the center of the church are burning out and leaving ministry at a rate of 1,500 per month. If that's what's occurring at the heart of the church, why would anyone on the fringe want to move in closer?

I recently read an article by two Christian counselors about the soul-killing impact of church ministry on leaders. (The statistic above comes from them.) They note that the pressure to grow the church is a significant factor leading to pastoral burnout. And some pastors “admitted they promoted growth models that were incongruent with their values because of a desperate need to validate their pastoral leadership.” It seems too many of us have our identities wrapped up in the measurable outcomes of our work rather than in the life-giving love of the Christ we proclaim. Something's wrong.

Recently, I spent a week in western Iowa and met many wonderful pastors and church leaders. These men and women don't lead megachurches. They're not in chic urban or suburban communities where new cultural trends are born. In other words, they're not the people you're likely to see on the platform at a ministry conference. More than one church leader approached me during the week holding back tears. Each confessed he was on the verge of mental/spiritual/emotional collapse. The cause cited by all: the pressure to perform.

Some might say these leaders have failed to nurture their souls sufficiently. We usually want to blame leaders for their own burnout, but when I see the pervasiveness of this problem I wonder if there isn't also a systemic factor. Could contemporary church ministry itself be the problem?

When I attend conferences or peruse ministry books, websites, and magazines, I'm bombarded with one overwhelming message: great ministry results are the product of great ministry leadership. If a church is growing, if lives are changing, if budgets are burgeoning—it must be because the leader is doing something right. Conversely, if the church is shrinking, if lives are struggling, if budgets are busting—it must be because the leader is inept. As a result, a pastor's success and self-worth is inexorably linked to his or her measurable performance. Stewing in this toxic brew, is it any wonder why pastors' souls are shriveling? Something's wrong.

Consider a chapter titled “Bigger is Better” from a popular ministry book. The authors write, “A church should always be bigger than it was. It should be constantly growing.” Talk about pressure. The problem is this standard doesn't hold water when applied to Jesus himself. John 6 describes the scene where “many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” After teaching some weird stuff about drinking his blood and eating his flesh, the crowds who were drawn by Jesus' miracles decided they had had enough. Did Jesus' shrinking ministry mean he was an ineffective leader? Why do we hold ourselves to a standard that Jesus doesn't apply to himself?

Or consider one of my favorite stories from the Old Testament. In Numbers 20, Moses performs a miracle by drawing water from a rock to nourish the Israelites. By any human measure, Moses' ministry was a success. It was God-empowered (he performed a miracle) and it was relevant (the people were thirsty). If Moses lived today, we'd all be reading his ministry book titled *How to Draw Water from Rocks: Effective Strategies to Refresh Arid Churches*. There was just one problem: Moses' effective ministry was rejected by God. Moses had disobeyed the Lord's command by striking the rock rather than speaking to it. For this sin he was forbidden from entering the Promised Land. It turns out God performed a miracle in spite of Moses, not because of him.

Might God be doing the same thing today? Is God allowing some powerful, effective, and relevant ministries to grow in spite of leaders rather than because of them? If Scripture shows that faithful and godly leaders can have shrinking ministries (Jesus in John 6), and sinful leaders can have successful ministries (Moses in

Numbers 20), then why do we persist in measuring our success simply on the measurable outcomes of our work?

Brothers and sisters, you are more than the measurable outcomes of your work. I've come back from my time in Iowa with a renewed commitment to help us all understand the mysterious calling we have in Christ. I want to be at least one voice countering the soul-killing noise surrounding church leaders today—noise that tries to convince us to ground our identities in effectiveness rather than faithfulness. Yes, we need to work diligently and serve Christ with our very best—this is our worship to God. But how we define success should look very different in the economy of God's kingdom from the tangible stats the world celebrates.

Some of us are called to plant; some of us are called to water. Unlike contemporary business, ministry involves the baffling interplay of the human and the divine, the spiritual and the material. There is a mystery to what we are called to do. Embracing this mystery and releasing the outcomes of our work to God is what we must do if our lives, and not just our ministries, are to be filled with his grace.

— SKYE JETHANI; adapted from [OutofUr.com](http://OutofUr.com), © 2008 Christianity Today International.

### **Discuss**

1. Have I ever been on the verge of ministry burnout? Am I right now?
2. Have I ever felt like nothing more than the “measurable outcomes” of my work?
3. What does it mean to “embrace the mystery of what we are called to do” and “release the outcomes of our work to God”? How can I do that?

## Definition of Success

*Re-evaluating your views of success and failure*

John 12:42–43

**Introduction:** Everyone has fears. Some of them are more common—and easier to talk about—than others. Being afraid of heights or spiders or the dark—all of these fears are, though not shared by all, at least easy for everyone to understand. A common fear that is tougher to categorize, however, is the fear of failure—something everyone has experienced at some point. But in order to be afraid of failing, one must have a preconceived idea about what it takes to succeed. And yet, not everyone shares the same definition of success.

Use this activity to help your leaders reach a mutual understanding of what “success” should look like in your ministry.

**Past Failures:** Ask for volunteers to share a time from their childhood when they were afraid to fail. (Clarify that this shouldn’t be a fear of injury; for example, the first time they jumped off a diving board, they probably weren’t scared of “failing” as much as they were afraid of getting hurt. Some examples could be: striking out in Little League, misspelling a word in a Spelling Bee, asking a girl to prom, taking their driver’s test, etc.)

Whenever someone shares a memory, respond with these questions:

- 1) What was your definition of success in this endeavor?
- 2) And were you successful?
- 3) If so, did that “success” have a lasting impact? What would have been different if you had failed?
- 4) If not, what *could* have happened if you had succeeded? Would your life have been significantly different?

(**Note:** Depending on the examples they share, these questions might not apply. But they should be relevant for most scenarios.)

**“Success” in Ministry:** Inform the group that you are going to focus on what success should look like in your ministry (or ministries).

(**Note:** If you have a shared mission statement or vision statement, you may want to read that together—using it as measuring stick for what should be viewed as “success” in your ministry together.)

Write the following scenarios on individual strips of paper, and then distribute them to the group (feel free to disregard any scenarios that do not relate to your group):

- The church does not meet its budget for the year.
- Vacation Bible School attendance is down (and you learn that this is due to another church’s more successful VBS that same week).
- A new program is met with discouraging feedback from church members.
- Despite continually encouraging the church to become involved in Sunday school (or small groups), members are still not participating.
- A well-planned outreach event only attracts limited involvement from church members.
- Church attendance is decreasing.
- Pledges for a building project are far short of expectations.

Have people take turns reading their strip of paper. After each person shares the “failure” on their piece of paper, ask the following questions to the whole group:

- 1) Do you think this would be a failure in our ministry? If so, raise your hand.

- 2) Why would this be a failure for us? If you don't think it is a failure, why isn't it?
- 3) In this scenario, what potential positives could we focus on instead of dwelling on what some might perceive to be a failure?
- 4) Would we have been better off if we hadn't attempted this at all? (For scenarios that apply.)

**Going Deeper:** Ask the group to share: 1) times when they have been afraid of failing in ministry, or 2) things they are still afraid to pursue because they're afraid of being unsuccessful. Without belittling their fears, allow the group to discuss these concerns.

(**Note:** Not everyone needs to share, but allow time for at least a few responses.)

**Prayer:** If your group is large enough, divide into smaller groups (three or four). Encourage the groups to pray together for the following things:

- Discernment regarding God's will for your ministry or ministries.
- Courage to take appropriate risks.
- Faith (and faithfulness) concerning the direction you feel God is leading your ministry.
- A God-honoring understanding of "success."
- A community that encourages and supports one another and works together to succeed in the things that truly matter to God.
- Freedom from the desire to be "successful" in the eyes of others.

— TYLER CHARLES; © 2010 Christianity Today International/[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com)

## Further Exploration

*Helpful resources related to fear of failure*

### Websites:

**BuildingChurchLeaders.com**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

- “Vision & Strategy” Assessment Pack
- “Finding Focus Through Spiritual Disciplines” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Soul Care” Practical Ministry Skills
- “How to Prevent Ministry Burnout” Survival Guide
- “When You Feel Like Quitting” Survival Guide
- “Redefining Success” Training Theme
- “Vulnerability” Training Theme

**LeadershipJournal.net**: This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

### Books:

**Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power—and the Only Hope That Matters** by *Timothy Keller*. Keller encourages people to rid themselves of the idols in their lives that will inevitably disappoint them. (Dutton, 2009; ISBN 978-0525951360)

**Failing Forward: Turning Mistakes into Stepping Stones for Success** by *John C. Maxwell*. In this book, Maxwell suggests that what distinguishes successful and unsuccessful people is the way in which they respond to failure. (Thomas Nelson, 2007; ISBN 978-0785288572)

**Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear** by *Max Lucado*. This inspirational book challenges readers to be faithful instead of fearful. (Thomas Nelson, 2009; ISBN 978-0849921391)

**Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome** by *Kent and Barbara Hughes*. Pastor Hughes and his wife, Barbara, share examples—and biblical support—to suggest that success should be measured by service and faithfulness. (Crossway, 2008; ISBN 978-1581349740)

**Success God’s Way: Achieving True Contentment and Purpose** by *Charles F. Stanley*. Dr. Stanley recommends specific principles for success while also identifying the things that hinder Christians from being successful. (Thomas Nelson, 2002; ISBN 978-0785265900)

## Retreat Plan

*How to create a weekend retreat on the theme of “Fear of Failure.”*

*BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS expands easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the “Fear of Failure” theme. The purpose of this retreat is to help leaders come to terms with their fear of failure and their functioning definition of success, both within the church and in the community at large.*

### Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 p.m. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “The Applause of Heaven and Earth,” the interview with Max Lucado on pages 5–8, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the end of the interview. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments and consider what that may mean for the church.
- ◆ 9–9:45 p.m. **Bible Study:** Close the evening with “Motivation for the Long Haul,” the Bible Study on pages 3–4. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.

### Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9–9:45 a.m. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out (or presenting) “Overcoming Self-Doubt” (p. 17). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page, and have a time of honest prayer—whether it’s individual or group prayer.
- ◆ 10–11:00 a.m. **Activity:** Use the activity “Definition of Success” on pages 27–28 to explore how your group does (and should) define success and failure.
- ◆ 11:15–Noon. **Assessment:** Hand out the assessment “What Can I Handle?” on pages 12–14 to each participant. After everyone has read and completed the assessment, have them discuss their responses and talk about their risk-taking style.
- ◆ Noon. Lunch

### Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 p.m. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the case study “Finding Hope in Failure” on pages 15–16. Have each person spend some time alone to quietly read and respond to the questions on the handout. Have the group come together to share what God has taught them. Then pray together, asking God for guidance and wisdom as you take new steps together.

You can create similar retreat plans for any of the other BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS themes. Simply decide what you want to accomplish and choose the handouts that support your goals.