

PETER A. LILLBACK

SAINT  
PETER'S  
PRINCIPLES



**Leadership for Those Who Already  
Know Their Incompetence**

FOREWORD BY R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

“This is a rich, wonderfully instructive and helpful compendium of wisdom on all aspects of leadership. There is nothing merely theoretical. The principles are applied with the insight and humility of one who embodies the lessons he teaches. The format provides easy access to the material, and the reminder that even our trials due to our incompetence can bring glory to God should encourage us to be ourselves and forget ourselves.”

—**Alistair Begg**, Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Bainbridge, Ohio

“This has to be the most unusual combination (in my library) of the theoretical, on the one hand, and the practical, on the other. Maybe that’s why Lillback has moved so steadily through the scholarly ranks of the academic community, and then the day-to-day administrative demands of a seminary president. His analysis of the leadership topic is saturated with Scripture, but he’s also quick to illustrate those truths with pertinent—and often self-effacing—anecdotes.”

—**Joel Belz**, Founder, WORLD News Group

“I have never read a book on leadership quite like this one. It manages to play off both Laurence Peter’s famous book, *The Peter Principle*, and the apostle Peter, with large doses of the doctrine of providence thrown in. It does not elevate a half-dozen leadership ideals and promise triumphalistic success, but begins with our incompetence and provides no fewer than 128 insights—no reductionistic formulas here! Yet precisely because of these anomalies, Peter Lillback’s book is a treasure-house of wisdom to be digested slowly.”

—**D. A. Carson**, Emeritus Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“I guess that my being asked to endorse a book with the subtitle *Leadership for Those Who Already Know Their Incompetence* may influence your estimation of my endorsement’s value. But if you’ve read past the first sentence, hear me out. I have been privileged to serve in various forms of academic and ecclesiastical leadership for about three decades. I have not attempted to write on leadership, but I have sought to read about, observe, and learn as much as I can about it. Sadly,

few books address the issue from the standpoint of a commitment to biblical principles and a Reformed worldview. Happily, this one does. Dr. Lillback is an honored colleague who has led a sister institution with wisdom and fidelity. You and I have much to benefit from the insight and teaching of such a man.”

—**Ligon Duncan**, Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary

“In these intriguingly titled pages, Dr. Peter Lillback distills the insights of a lifetime of ministry. The result is a manual that is almost encyclopedic in scope and certain to instruct, challenge, and encourage Christian leaders worldwide. Even more, since authentic spiritual leadership requires character and grace, *St. Peter’s Principles* contains lessons for everyone.”

—**Sinclair Ferguson**, Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“Dr. Lillback has done it once again—he has taken an absolutely critical subject and laid out indispensable, practical, historical lessons to solve problems. His understanding of the Bible, where wisdom resides, makes this an essential guide for anyone trying to avoid *The Peter Principle’s* incompetence on the road to becoming a foundational St. Peter on which a church, business, charity, government, or other entity can be built. It is so well organized that a potential leader in crisis can turn straight to the section that solves that particular leadership dilemma, get the answer, and head into the next meeting with the needed tools.”

—**Louie Gohmert**, Member, US House of Representatives, Texas’s First District

“This is a remarkable book, filled with practical, biblical wisdom. It consists of 128 short lessons in leadership, each supported from the life and teachings of the apostle Peter and illustrated with fascinating anecdotes of both successes and failures experienced by Dr. Lillback in a lifetime of leadership, first as a pastor and then as president of one of the world’s most influential seminaries. Every chapter concludes with

a set of challenging questions in the form of ‘Spiritual Exercises’ that will help any reader grow in personal character formation, faith in God, and diligence in prayer. Highly recommended.”

—**Wayne Grudem**, Distinguished Research Professor of  
Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“Once in a while a book emerges that is so profoundly insightful, it must go to the top of the stack. Any Christian leader will discover *St. Peter’s Principles* to be a *sine qua non* for integrating the expected results that a leader must achieve with a legacy of godly influence. Dr. Peter Lillback nails the measure of a successful life marked by leadership.”

—**Hugh Jacks**, Owner, Potential Enterprises; former President  
and CEO, BellSouth Services

“To say that Peter Lillback’s book on leadership is an encyclopedia on the art of leadership would be an understatement. It is a whole library on the subject of leadership. In the introduction, I was told that the book should not be read straight through, but I could not put it down. I don’t mean to say that I read it in one sitting. It is too big for that. But it was so fascinating that I wanted to keep reading. Dr. Lillback’s knowledge of Scripture, how to apply it to himself, and how to encourage others to grow in leadership is nothing but amazing. This book, other than the Bible itself, is the one book that all Bible teachers and missionaries should have as their guide in order to be successful in their leadership roles. I pray that God will make it possible for that to happen.”

—**Rosemary Jensen**, Former Executive Director, Bible Study  
Fellowship International; Founder and President, Rafiki  
Foundation; Founder and President, Rosemary Jensen Bible  
Foundation

“I am convinced that the dearth of leadership in the church today is of critical importance. Only the church’s need for spiritual revival has greater urgency. And in many ways, these needs go hand in hand. Dr. Lillback’s book is an excellent primer on equipping godly men to become the leaders that our churches need. Several chapters taken individually, such as ‘Formation of a Leader,’ ‘A Leader Looks at Himself,’

and ‘The Leader’s Role in Development,’ justify the purchase of the book. There are few challenges as great as that of leadership, and I heartily recommend this book to mentor those in leadership positions.”

—**Paul D. Kooistra**, Former President, Erskine College and Seminary; Director, PCA Mission to the World; President, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Dr. Lillback’s wealth of experience as a pastor, scholar, professor, and seminary president, plus his love for the Bible, has enabled him to write one of the very best, most relevant books on leadership available today.”

—**Charles McGowan**, President, McGowan Search, Inc., Brentwood, Tennessee

“Many Christians in leadership are paralyzed from time to time by ‘impostor syndrome,’ the feeling that they are, unbeknownst to those around them, really incompetent. In this book, Peter Lillback shows us that the true ‘impostors’ are the ones who think they are, in fact, competent for the task before them. Lillback is known for his mentorship and equipping of the next generation. This book will enable you to participate in such wise guidance. The hope is that this book will lead you upward to incompetence.”

—**Russell Moore**, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

“Most books on leadership pass along worldly wisdom, but Peter Lillback grounds his teaching firmly in Scripture. He skillfully applies 1 Peter, emphasizing how godly leaders do not manipulate followers but depend on the Holy Spirit. Pride among leaders regularly leads to a fall, so Lillback’s emphasis on humility—his great subtitle is *Leadership for Those Who Already Know Their Incompetence*—is also welcome. The Christian bottom line: ‘Because the Lord is over us, we don’t lord it over others.’”

—**Marvin Olasky**, Editor-in-Chief, *WORLD* magazine

“Peter Lillback has given us an astonishing book on Christian leadership. It is deeply rooted in what the Scriptures tell us about the apostle

Peter and fleshed out in Peter Lillback's years of leading others in the ways of Christ, our King. This is a book that every Christian leader should read. You will be profoundly challenged and encouraged, as I have been, by its penetrating insights and practical wisdom."

—**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

"Dr. Peter Lillback, creatively adapting the title from the leadership best seller *The Peter Principle* (by Dr. Laurence J. Peter), insightfully and faithfully unfolds for us leadership principles recorded by St. Peter in his epistles. The blessing will be unbelievably life-changing leadership insights that were not only recorded by St. Peter through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but also experienced."

—**Harry L. Reeder III**, Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

"In its manuscript form, it was hard for me to lay this book aside. The more I learn how to improve my serving and leading, the more I come to Scripture for the standard. The author has written a primer that pulls the apostle Peter's principles from the Word of God, and they inspire me to serve, lead, and live well. Dr. Lillback's stories are personal and poignant, his lists provocative and practical, and his applications powerful and preparing. I needed this decades ago but will use it going forward. I will come back to it time and again. Put this next among your books to read. I'm glad I did."

—**Loren Reno**, Lt. Gen. (USAF, retired); Senior Adviser, Office of the President, Cedarville University

"This is the book that I have long been looking for! Dr. Lillback presents us with a clear, biblical view of leadership and combines this with a multitude of wonderfully practical advice and insights. Sound theology and a lifetime of experience go together and make this work a great tool to be used in individual and group study. In an era when the church longs for leaders who wish to be servants, this book comes at the right time."

—**Herman J. Selderhuis**, President, Theological University, Apeldoorn; Director, Refo500

“Pastor Pete’ exhibits a great deal of wisdom in this wonderfully useful tome. As one who has worked closely with him for over a dozen years, I can attest to the fact that he adheres faithfully to the principles he writes about. *St. Peter’s Principles* combines keen insights with a sharp eye to the realities of leadership in Pete’s typically lucid writing style. Those who take to heart the ‘St. Peter’s Principles’ he enunciates and grapple with the ‘Spiritual Exercises’ he presents will find themselves enriched, challenged, and wiser for the experience.”

—**James M. Sweet**, Former Chairman and CEO, Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP; Executive Vice President, Westminster Theological Seminary

“‘But how??!’ is a frequent refrain within organizations. We are starving for ‘how-tos’ because means matter in today’s fast-paced, metric-driven world. Yet one can rarely do good unless one (and his team) does various things well. Doing things well requires effective leaders. Peter Lillback’s work targets the foundation, formation, and flourishing necessary for cultivating effective leadership. This fresh, readable, digestible, yet encyclopedic work uniquely exudes deep devotion, diverse practicality, and dependable axioms aimed at real-world impact, yet without the overpromise hype of typical ‘airport business books’ or the mere ‘bottom-line’ pragmatism of stodgy B-school journals. The topics covered range from the aspirational to the awkward, the legal to the legacy, and everything in between. Thoroughly realistic, yet principled, this work now sets the standard for grasping and executing full-orbed leadership, particularly for those who recognize their incompetence.”

—**Jeffery J. Ventrella**, Senior Counsel and Senior Vice President, Academic Affairs & Training, Alliance Defending Freedom

“A practical and comprehensive exposition on leadership that is firmly rooted in a biblical worldview, Pete Lillback’s *St. Peter’s Principles* is a book with transformational potential for leaders at every level of service and every career stage.”

—**Frank Wright**, President and CEO, D. James Kennedy Ministries

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PETER A. LILLBACK

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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This book is dedicated in memory of my father, Eugene R. Lillback (1923–86), who modeled quiet, unheralded leadership to me and my brothers as a husband, dad, war hero, football coach, Sunday school teacher, and university mathematics professor. His heroic leadership is illustrated by the citation below that was presented with the two Silver Stars and British War Medal he earned in the US infantry in World War II.

#### CITATION

#### MILITARY MEDAL

STAFF SERGEANT EUGENE R. LILLBACK  
UNITED STATES ARMY

On 23rd February 1945, when his platoon sergeant became a casualty near Ruhrdorf, during the assault crossing of the Roer River, Staff Sergeant Lillback unhesitatingly assumed command. Although intense enemy fire covered the area, he courageously led his men through mine fields towards the enemy positions. Skillfully deploying his men, he destroyed the emplacements with grenades and small arms fire and succeeded in killing or capturing the entire crew. The initiative and outstanding leadership displayed by Staff Sergeant Lillback enabled his company to continue its advance and reflect highest credit upon himself and the military service.



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# Foreword

Leadership has been a perennial human obsession. Among the other realities of human life across space and time and culture, the necessity of leadership is immediately apparent. In the Bible, God's people learn quickly that the absence of leadership is disastrous and that leadership is actually one of God's gifts to humanity, especially to his own people. Israel learned by hard experience the difference between a good king and an evil king. In the New Testament, Christ and the apostles were clear in their concern for the church to be rightly led and rightly fed. The biblical metaphor of a shepherd, made most powerfully in the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd, redefines leadership in a biblical frame, in contrast to the potentates of the ancient Near East or the emperors of the Roman Empire.

The reality is that the secular world is constantly questioning the value of leadership, even as it demonstrates again and again that leadership is indispensable. Years ago, in a televised debate, I was told that leadership was hopelessly patriarchal and controlling and that human liberation could come only from anarchy. My response was simply to observe that even anarchist movements eventually need leaders, presumably including the individual who confronted me with the argument. I felt as though I had fallen into the pages of a George Orwell story. I had met the leader of the group declaring leadership to be evil. So it goes.

For Christians, the quest to understand leadership is more than intellectual. We are not just curious about leadership; we are compelled to seek to understand it in biblical terms. This is why I am so glad that Peter Lillback has written this book. It is richly biblical, immediately practical, and rooted in Peter's own important leadership experience.

That experience—as pastor, seminary president, student of history, and author—qualifies him to write this book. Given his experience and the range of his thought, only he could have written it.

The only leadership that really matters is convictional leadership, and this is what Peter Lillback represents. Christ died for his church, against which the gates of hell will not prevail. God’s truth endures forever. As much as they matter now, all our earthly institutions and all our human works will pass away, but truth will remain. Thus, the only leadership that ultimately matters is leadership in the service of ultimate truth.

I really appreciate the subtitle. Authentic leaders are genuinely aware of our incompetence, and this is important for two very good reasons. First, this truth keeps us dependent on God, who alone is truly competent. Second, this awareness makes us want constantly to learn more and grow more as leaders. One way we grow is by reading the best books on leadership. You will want to read this book—and pass a copy on to others.

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Louisville, Kentucky  
January 2019

# Acknowledgments

I am pleased to identify several individuals who have helped to make *Saint Peter's Principles* a reality. First, I thank the Lord for his grace in giving to me my family, Debbie, Cara-Beth, and Priscilla, as a special part of my lifelong ministry classroom where these principles were first observed and considered.

The blessing of working as the president of Westminster Theological Seminary in Glenside, Pennsylvania, just outside Philadelphia has provided me with a series of supportive and Christ-honoring support staff. To these ladies I remain indebted for assisting from time to time throughout the years in typing, deciphering, copying, transcribing, and the like, enabling the final product to appear. I especially thank Patti Scherphorn, Abbie Daise, and Lauren Beining for their invaluable support. I am also grateful for the typing and editorial assistance of Henry Whitney.

Especially, I thank my daughter Cara-Beth for providing me with the first essay books in which I began the process of writing my initial thoughts for this study a decade ago as I was recovering in the hospital. I thank my daughter Priscilla, who has edited and organized the work at various stages of its progress. I thank my wife, Debbie, for supporting me in innumerable ways through the long, slow process of completing this project.

I am grateful to the staff of P&R Publishing for their long-suffering patience in awaiting completion of the final draft as well as for the editorial labors of John Hughes in its final stages.

Undoubtedly, many others have played a role in assisting me to write this book by sharing their wisdom and experiences that have found their way into its pages. After all these years, however, I cannot

remember them all. Yet I am sure that many of these unnamed friends who have ministered to me and shaped my thinking are from the churches I've pastored through the years: Bethany Presbyterian Church in Oxford, Pennsylvania, Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Newark, Delaware, and Proclamation Presbyterian Church in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. I am indebted to the insight and godly models I have observed at these churches by the privilege of serving together with their pastoral staff and elders.

My labors at Westminster Seminary, of course, have provided the greatest laboratory for my observations on leadership. And I thus thank the board, administration, faculty, and students who have enabled me to learn through the years how to be a more biblically conscious leader. A three-month sabbatical graciously provided by Westminster in 2010 afforded me the opportunity to begin to write the thoughts that have grown into the present work.

May God bless us with wisdom and the guidance of his Holy Spirit, who leads us into the truths of Scripture, where alone we can behold the greatest leader of all, the Lord Jesus Christ.

## PREFACE

# Ten Principles for Reading This Book

I'm so glad you're reading this work that was written little by little over a decade. To help you read it effectively, here are some suggestions and clarifications.

First, this book is not intended to be read in one sitting from cover to cover. You can certainly do that if you wish. Yet its best impact on you the leader and reader will be experienced by reading it a section at a time. There are 128 distinct sections. A possible useful method to employ is to read one section every three days for a year. Each section is around three to five pages in length. On day 1, read the section. On day 2, carefully engage the Spiritual Exercises at the conclusion of the section. On day 3 of the cycle, meditate on the specific St. Peter's Principle for the section, along with the biblical texts that accompany it. In a little over a year, the book will have been read and its message assimilated.

Second, this book can also be used as a reference book or as a handbook. Read the first few sections of chapter 1 to understand the *St. Peter* motif that is used throughout. Then consult the table of contents and turn to the sections that may be most pertinent to the issues that you are facing or are thinking about in your current leadership role. The distinct sections are designed to be generally understandable and useful regardless of the order in which they are read.

Third, because the book is written with a focus on the life of Peter the apostle with specific emphases considered in short essays, there is some inevitable and intentional repetition. This feature is not to be considered redundancy, but an attempt to maintain the themes and

structure of the work through otherwise diverse sections that can stand alone.

Fourth, if possible, this book is not intended to be read alone, although it can certainly be approached that way. Rather, since the studies are about leadership, the content and the questions throughout are designed to be addressed by a group—of friends, a business team, or a pastoral staff—reading the book together. The interaction would be useful in that it would create a community of learners in the same way that a strong Bible study does or a cohort of students in a graduate program. An individual, of course, could simply contemplate the questions from a personal vantage point.

Fifth, this work is not intended to be an exegetical study of Peter's writings or of the Gospels. There will be theological questions not addressed and passages of Peter's letters that will not be commented on. Further, the inferences drawn from the biblical text are far more application-oriented than exegetical in nature. The goal here is not so much to interpret Peter's writings as to apply them.

Sixth, the titles *St. Peter* and *St. Paul* are not meant to suggest that normal believers are not saints. This word *saint* means "holy" and is applied to all believers in the Scriptures. The use of *Saint Peter* highlights the juxtaposition in this work of the book on secular leaders entitled *The Peter Principle*<sup>1</sup> with the fact that Peter the apostle had his own set of leadership principles. But if we call Peter *St. Peter*, to distinguish him from Dr. Laurence Peter, who wrote that book, we cannot then slight Paul by not also calling him *St. Paul*. So the titles are intended to be understood solely as the traditional titles for the apostles. Readers are asked to accept this traditional nomenclature for the apostles and not draw an unwarranted inference that a theological distinction is at work and is intended to deny the principle of the priesthood of the believer, that is, the sainthood of all the saints who believe in Christ.

Seventh, the book is cognizant that there are women leaders as well as male leaders in all spheres of society. This is affirmed from time to time by use of the male and female pronouns. But this is not done

1. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1969).

rigidly, since it has the tendency to become tedious. No intention is meant to exclude women from callings of leadership. While I personally affirm the traditional role of men for pastoral ministry, this book is not written specifically for ecclesiastical leadership. The hope is that men and women alike, and even together, can engage this book as a guide to growing in biblical leadership concepts and principles.

Eighth, *Saint Peter's Principles* is intended to be read by leaders from all disciplines—church, military, academic, business, law, medicine, government, athletics, and beyond. The comments are clearly Christian, but they do not assume that everyone who reads the volume is already a believer. The discussion of the gospel appears throughout the book at different places. It is hoped that this will allow the book to be shared not only with believers but also with seekers who serve in leadership roles, believing that all who read it will be encouraged with the message of the gospel as well as in their leadership roles by the wisdom of the Scriptures.

Ninth, the book concludes with an epilogue that gives an overview of issues pertaining to the nature of pastoral ministry. Having served as a pastor for some thirty years, I want to provide a distillation of some of my insights to encourage those who are assessing their call to leadership in the church. All are welcome to read that section and even contemplate whether the Lord is calling them to the ministry of leading in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Tenth, I make no claim to have given an exhaustive study of biblical leadership, let alone of the whole field of leadership. I'm sure that because of my incompetence as an author and as a leader, there are lacunae. I do hope, however, that these lessons drawn from Scripture and from my own fallible experience will be a blessing to you as you pursue the noble calling of leading others in things that matter right now and, indeed, forever.

In his service,

Peter A. Lillback (aka "Pastor Pete")



# A Providential Prologue for St. Peter's Principles

*Even the trials due to our incompetence can  
bring glory to God. (1 Peter 1:6–7)*

First Peter 1:6–7 gives believers a splendid promise: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” These verses assure us that even though our faith is tested by trials, when the Lord returns, he will receive praise, glory, and honor from his people. Sometimes that may even begin to happen in our daily lives here on earth—in spite of how incompetent we seem to be. St. Peter here gives us the hope that perhaps even the trials due to our incompetence may in the end bring glory to God.

On July 28, 2011, I had one of those days when everything seemed to go wrong. Everything started well, even though the day had some built-in travel complexities. My wife had to take a trip to Arizona to care for her ailing aunt, so I was on call to cover our two cats and dog. We had been empty-nesters for a while, but somehow our daughters' pets decided to stay on to keep our nest from really being empty! So knowing that the cats would fend for themselves and that the dog would be okay until late evening, my wife caught an evening flight to Tucson, while I had taken a morning train to visit one of the friends of the seminary, who had just tragically lost his son.

I drove to Philadelphia's 30th Street Station, parked my car, and

caught an Amtrak Acela. I got to Union Station in Washington, D.C., and went to pick up a rental car. Now, as a professor trained in interpretation, I prided myself on my hermeneutical understanding. But somehow as I followed the signs to the rental agency, they pointed me to a wall with no exit. Finally figuring out where the elevator really was, in spite of the misleading signage, I was confused by the elevator's buttons, which weren't working well. All minor things, to be sure. But when the rental car didn't have the GPS I'd requested and there were two exits from the garage going in two different directions and the impatient woman behind me began beeping her horn before I could get my bearings, I sensed that I might be in for an interesting day.

The traffic was slow, so I was able to get my cell phone's navigation system to give me directions on the fly. By God's grace, I arrived on time and realized how God's providence had prepared me for the heart-rending conversation that I had with the grieving father. I had just been at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia with a group of scholars from China. The pastor had preached a wonderful sermon on providence, quoting the Heidelberg Catechism. I had copied the passage to share it with my friend. We both found consolation in its magnificent words:

Question 1: What is thy only comfort in life and death?

Answer: That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with His precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation; and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

Question 27: What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

Answer: The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches

and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance but by his fatherly hand.

Question 28: What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by his providence still upholds all things?

Answer: That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from his love: since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will they cannot so much as move.

I spent the day, and it was a time of encouragement and fellowship for us. Though invited to stay the night, I needed to catch the last train out in order to care for Oreo, the black-and-white striped Shih Tzu bequeathed to us by our younger daughter when she had left for college years before. As I drove back to the station, I was rejoicing in the truths of God's care and his overruling even the little things, such as misplaced garage signs, confusing buttons, forgotten GPSs, and honking horns in uncertain traffic. Somehow God has a purpose for little frustrations as well as tragic circumstances.

It was good that I had that perspective as the events of my return unfolded. I had thought the last train out of Washington for Philadelphia was 11 P.M., but I was wrong; the train was just leaving when I arrived at the station at 10:30. The next train out wouldn't be until 3:05 A.M. That meant that I wouldn't get home until almost 6 A.M. Doubting my dog's bladder capacity and not wanting to sit all night in the train station, I decided I'd take a taxi. But no normal taxi driver wanted a two-and-a-half-hour late-night ride to Philadelphia. So I decided to swallow hard and pay to hire a car to get me home.

I was glad for the nice car and courteous driver and soon fell asleep. It had been a rough stretch of ministry for the past several weeks. I had been in Australia, had given a Reformation tour in Europe and a historical tour of Philadelphia, and had just hosted about ten scholars from China. After a nap of about an hour, I woke up and began a conversation with the driver, with whom I had scarcely spoken. He was from Ethiopia and in the Muslim tradition. We spoke about

Haile Selassie, Rosicrucianism, Rastafarianism, human religions, and the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ. I wondered whether I had missed my train to tell this man about Jesus' death and resurrection to save sinners from God's holy judgment against sin.

I arrived back at 30th Street Station at 2 A.M. I was glad to be driving my own car toward home, having had a bit of a nap and not having had to wait in the train-station lobby until 3:05. But another adversary reared its head. At 2:20, driving about 60 mph on the Schuylkill Expressway, I heard a *thump, thump, thump*—the telltale sound of a flat tire.

Trying to remember the doctrine of providence, I rehearsed that I had changed the tires on my car only a year earlier. And the flat right-front tire was the same one that had had a flat before I replaced the tires. As I assessed the situation, I knew that my tire would not survive a long ride home. The expressway was dark, my flashlight was weak and flickering, and it would be highly dangerous to try to jack a car and change a tire in the night on the edge of a freeway. At least the battery of my cell phone wasn't dead.

So I found my AAA card and called for help. The representative said that someone would be there in forty-five minutes. The operator asked for a mile marker, but I hadn't noticed one for the last several miles. It was too dark and dangerous to walk to find one, since both of my auto flashlights were flickering. Cell phones then didn't have built-in flashlights, either. The best I could do was to give an approximate location on the northbound lanes.

Years earlier, I had observed one of the business leaders I admired, named Skip, make a call to verify something after waiting for only two to three minutes. He explained that if something is late, one shouldn't delay to clarify, because making a prompt follow-up call might save hours. I've called it the "Skip rule" ever since. So I called again in a few minutes, just to verify, and I'm glad I did, since I found out that AAA had taken down the wrong information! So I waited the allotted forty-five minutes, and no one came. It was now about the previously dreaded time of 3:05, and I had waited after all!

So I used the Skip rule again, and called. The operator told me that the driver had come and found no one and had been calling me at my

home number. I wondered why they were calling my home number, since I had given them my cell number and I wasn't at home with a flat tire on the road! I knew no one had come by, since I had been anxiously watching. Having clarified, I waited thirty more minutes, and still no one came. So I called again and was told that I'd have to wait thirty more minutes for the driver. At this point, I suspected that a sleeping driver didn't want to be out working at 4 A.M. After I again explained my circumstances and now the extended delay, AAA's operator responded, "I hope you have a better morning." I hoped it would be so, but as it turned out, it wasn't going to be much better.

Still thinking about providence, I was relieved when the tow-truck driver finally arrived sometime before 5 A.M. He called me "brother," which seemed endearing at first. But by the time he had done so more than ten times in five minutes, it became another frustration. He said that he didn't have with him the special wrench needed to repair the tire and that he'd have to tow it to a station for repair. So off we went in his very noisy diesel tow truck to the tire business a couple of miles or so from my house. He explained that the AAA contract provided for the tow without charge, but that there would be only one stop. This meant that I would be walking home once we got the car to the repair shop.

When we got there, he asked for my electronic key to start the car and proceeded to unhitch it from his loud-diesel-engine tow truck. We got the necessary papers filled out and left them for the workers when the tire shop opened. Given all the delays, and the indifference to my need to get home from the station, I wondered whether I should give the tardy driver a tip. Since he had so often reminded me that I was his "brother," I decided that it was the right thing to do, given the late hour of his trip to rescue me. This seemed to soften him up a bit, and he told me to get back in his loudly idling truck. So I got my briefcase and laptop out of my car in the midst of the din, and thankfully, he remembered to give my car's electronic key back to me. For all that, though, he dropped me off at a corner only a bit closer to my home than he had to drive by anyway.

I jumped out and proceeded to walk the mile or so home, lugging my bag and computer, one in each hand. I was glad to be in the

homestretch and grateful that it was a pleasant July night. I was truly looking forward to getting some sleep, given the hectic schedule I'd had and the long, frustrating night I'd just endured. I wouldn't set the alarm, since, uncharacteristically, nothing was on the schedule for the day. I was finally home at around 5 A.M., happy to see that Oreo had held his own, and I even remembered to take out the trash, since I knew I'd be sleeping when the garbage collector came in the morning. I fell into bed and was soon fast asleep.

But the morning of July 29 was to have a measure more of the concatenation of incompetencies. I woke up with a start at 7:20. Oreo was barking and the phone was ringing. When I got to the phone, it had stopped ringing, but there were two messages waiting from my wife in Tucson. She said, "The tire shop had called twice at home, but no one answered. Your car was left running, and no electronic key was left with the car! The only other number they had on file was my cell phone, so they've called me here in Tucson at 4 in the morning!" Now, having to call your wife back at 4 A.M. to apologize for having left your car running without a key combines the emotion of embarrassment with a deep sense of foolishness and incompetence! I told her to go back to sleep and that I'd take care of the unusual and awkward situation.

As I rushed out on foot for the two-mile trek to the tire shop, my mind overflowed with questions. How could I have been so foolish? How could the driver have been so unhelpful? What could I possibly say to save face when I met the mechanics? How fortunate I was that no one had driven off with my running and unattended car! What was God's providence trying to teach me? Would I ever get any sleep? I began to laugh at myself as I hurried to resolve the undignified circumstances.

Upon arrival, I found the car inside the shop with the engine still running, ready to be repaired. The employees accepted my brief explanation and apology. After all, they stood to do a fair amount of business with me. Along with the flat tire, my car had another tire with a screw in it. So I reluctantly asked them to replace all four so that they would wear evenly.

Since the job would take some time, I had the chance to walk to a local Starbucks to get a coffee to wake up. As I pondered the unlikely

events of the last day and meditated again on providence, I jotted down the order of events of this story on the receipt I got with my tall bold. Once again my mind turned to the mysteries of providence.

Had God allowed these events to happen so that I could relate them in *Saint Peter's Principles*, the book I've been working on for so many years? Maybe the protection and provision of God in my embarrassments and incompetence would prove to be an encouragement to others? As I thought again about providence, the coffee must have been stirring my synapses, because I recalled not only the teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism on providence, but also the recent Reformation tour I had taken that had allowed me to visit the city of Heidelberg, Germany.

Near the *Heiliggeistkirche*, the Church of the Holy Spirit, where Ursinus and Olevianus had written the Heidelberg Catechism, there is a remarkable visible emblem of divine providence in the vicissitudes of human war and struggle. It is the Ritter Hotel. The German word *Ritter* means "knight," and the hotel is so named because this Renaissance structure, built in 1592 by the Belier family, has the early Christian martyr St. George the Knight at its gable. According to the traditional account, he was the dragon slayer revered by the Crusaders, symbolically representing the defeat of Satan. What makes this building so special is that the Ritter is the only historic building in Heidelberg that has survived all the wars and calamities that have befallen Germany.

The mere survival of this lovely ancient building would be a story in itself. But its history adds a deeper dimension. The Beliers were a merchant family in the textile business. They were Calvinists from the French-speaking Walloon tradition, having lived in Tournai, Belgium. They had fled the city, situated in the then-Catholic Spanish Netherlands, when the persecution of Protestants began. Heidelberg was a much safer place because it was in the Protestant region of the Palatinate in Germany. Since the region was largely Calvinistic, the Beliers found a welcome in the German Reformed community of Heidelberg.

As their grand home was built, the Beliers ornamented the facade of the majestic structure. It included rams because their French name, *Belier*, means "ram." Along with the martyr Knight George at the top,

images of Charles Belier and his wife were included. But most striking are the three gilded quotations that adorn its face, placed so as to almost suggest a cross. The highest says, "Soli Deo Gloria," the classic Reformation motto meaning "To God alone be the glory." Then the middle inscription is "Invicta Persista Venus," meaning "May beauty be unconquered forever." And then the lowest text is a Latin quotation of Psalm 127:1, "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

Through the centuries, this refugee family's faith in the protection of divine providence has been honored. The beauty of their home and faith stands unmarred by war. God has been glorified through their witness as his Word's teaching has been declared throughout the years that he is the only builder who can create what truly lasts. I marveled again that this lovely house with these words is immediately visible next to the historic Church of the Holy Spirit, where the Heidelberg Catechism was composed.

So as I sipped my coffee and thought about the frustrations of the past day and night, I remembered that God's wise providence is working out his plan for good and lasting value in my life and in all our lives. This doctrine of providence means that God will be glorified in us. Be encouraged! He is working out the beauty of his sovereign plan as you trust him to use the incompetencies, the struggles, and even the conflicts of your life to bring glory to his name.

This clearly suggests our St. Peter's Principle: "Even the trials due to our incompetence can bring glory to God." Indeed, even when things don't go right, the concatenation of our incompetencies under divine providence can bring glory to God. In ourselves, we are nothing. First Peter 1:24 reminds us, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass." Yet St. Peter goes on to say in 1 Peter 2:12, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that . . . they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." Our lives will bring glory to God because, as St. Peter writes, we are

by God's power . . . being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so

that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1:5–7)

In God's providence, whatever griefs, trials, and testing you've been facing, you've now discovered *Saint Peter's Principles*. My prayer is that a faithful and disciplined look at our incompetence as leaders in light of God's wisdom and the experiences of St. Peter will bring joy to your heart, guidance to your life, and help to your service as you strive to be the leader that God is making you to be. It's encouraging to me that the frustrating day of July 28, 2011, with all my shortcomings on display, providentially turned out to be the prologue for *Saint Peter's Principles: Leadership for Those Who Already Know Their Incompetence*.



# 1

## Welcome to St. Peter's Principles

### INTRODUCTION TO ST. PETER'S PRINCIPLES

#### **St. Peter's Principle #1**

Every leader must confess with St. Peter,  
“I am a sinful man.” (Luke 5:8)

Many years ago, Dr. Laurence J. Peter wrote a best seller called *The Peter Principle*.<sup>1</sup> Professor Peter announced the potent insight that people—and leaders—are often promoted from one level of competence to another until they reach a position at which they are *incompetent*. At that point, typically the promotions cease.<sup>2</sup> Yet sometimes

1. Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1969).

2. Peter Drucker writes: “The greatest waste of resources in all the organizations I have seen is the failed promotion. Why should people who, for ten or fifteen years, have been competent suddenly become incompetent? The reason in practically all cases I have seen, is that people continue in their new assignment to do what made them successful in the old assignment and what earned them the promotion. They turn incompetent, not because they have become incompetent, but because they are doing the wrong things. What the new assignment requires is not superior knowledge or superior talent. It requires concentration on the things that the new assignment requires, the things that are crucial to the new challenge, the new job, the new task.” Peter F. Drucker, *The Daily Drucker* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004), 175.

the promotions continue because of other factors, such as fame, family, fortune, and past success, such that some people arrive at a yet higher level where they prove to be even more incompetent. This I describe as arriving at one's highest level of incompetence.

I've always liked that dictum. First, because I can see a great deal of truth in it. Second, because I "resemble that remark." That's not just because Professor Peter's last name and my first name are the same. But it's because I have experienced many times the feeling of being totally out of my league—in fact, downright incompetent to address the challenges that were facing me and the folks I was responsible to lead. But I hadn't yet risen to the highest level of my incompetence. That's because I've been asked to keep leading, leading organizations that are more complex and complicated than before.

So I began to wonder whether Professor Peter's famous principle didn't need a corollary, an adjustment, to describe the reality that I had encountered, namely, of ongoing experiences of incompetence. While reflecting on this, I was reading the Scriptures, and to my surprise, I came across some remarkable admissions by St. Peter and St. Paul, the two great founding apostles and leaders of the Christian church.

St. Peter was the one whom the Lord himself designated as the leader of his church on Pentecost (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2). He was the apostle—CEO—of the Jewish church (*CEO* here might stand for "Christian Executive Officer" or "Chief Education Officer"). Yet his real start in leadership was when he was in his field of greatest competence: fishing (Luke 5:1–11). When St. Peter encountered Christ, he admitted that he had fished all night and come home empty-handed. When our Lord told him to cast the net in again on the other side of his boat, he reluctantly obeyed—and caught the largest catch of his career. Peter's telling response was, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Peter had not risen to his highest level of incompetence. Instead, he began his ascent to leadership with a clear recognition of his incompetence as he stood in the presence of the Master.

It was there that the flickering idea of the "St. Peter's Principles" was born. We do not rise to our highest level of incompetence. No, that's where we start. We never outgrow our inherent inadequacy for

the duties that are incumbent upon us as we lead others in the ever-changing challenges of leadership.

We find the same to be true with St. Paul. Saul of Tarsus—converted to Christianity by the risen Christ himself—was profoundly committed, ably trained, and hardened for battle, possessing a superior self-esteem and unrelenting in the pursuit of his objectives. Yet St. Paul never ceased becoming more aware of how inadequate he was to serve his God. At first, in Galatians 1:1, he identifies himself as “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father.” In Galatians 1:17, he writes, “Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me.” In fact, St. Paul saw his ministry on a par with St. Peter’s. He writes in Galatians 2:8–9 that

he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles[;] and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

But later St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:9, after his third missionary journey, speaks of being “the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle.” And then from prison in Ephesians 3:8 he speaks of himself as “the very least of all the saints.” And finally, near the end of his ministry, he describes himself to his young understudy Timothy as “the foremost” of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). These ever-increasing and self-effacing statements hardly bolster Paul’s résumé or impress his followers, who may have already been wondering about his competence as a leader! Thus, “St. Paul’s Principle” of leadership is manifestly parallel to this St. Peter’s Principle. St. Paul asks with truth and humility in 2 Corinthians 2:16, “Who is equal to such a task?” (NIV), “Who is adequate for these things?” (NASB), “Who is sufficient for these things?” (KJV, ESV). The unvarnished answer of truth is “no one, including me!”

As we learn to lead from the great founding apostles of the church, we are compelled to reassess the model that asserts that we begin with

competence and climb the ladder of success by our competence, until we finally outgrow its reach. Rather, we are challenged by St. Peter and St. Paul to take a long, careful look at our fallen human natures that are marred by many inadequacies and incompetencies. The question then will not be “Are we competent?” or “Have we attained the right seat on the bus of our good to great organization?” but “Have we authentically seen our flaws, our failures, and our weaknesses that interpenetrate even our greatest strengths and our most notable successes?”

Admittedly, this first of the St. Peter's Principles may leave our self-esteem and our leadership confidence a bit tattered and tarnished. But what if, by taking the “unschooled [and] ordinary” (Acts 4:13 NIV), “uneducated and untrained” (NASB) fisherman seriously, we end up receiving a “net” profit that is too great to gather, let alone count? Wouldn't that be worth the enterprise?

If you're willing to take the more humble approach of St. Peter and seek to lead, knowing only too well your own incompetence, then I invite you to keep your seat on this bus and grow by engaging that incompetence.

### **SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:**

1. Look at this list of words that describe various kinds of leaders. Who are you? Which of these do you already hold or aspire to hold?

Leader	Director	Overseer	Vice President
Supervisor	President	Chancellor	Senior Partner
Doctor	R.N.	Senator	Governor
Judge	Minister	COO	Commander
Coach	Esquire	Founder	Ruling Elder
CEO	Partner	Prince	Congressman
Teacher	Instructor	Adviser	Foreman

Provost	Dean	Professor	Captain
Convener	General	Guide	Lieutenant
Admiral	Speaker	Moderator	Squad Leader
Principal	Chairman	Executive	CFO
Sheriff	Chief	Boss	Of Counsel
Head Nurse	Bishop	Vestryman	Teaching Elder
Regent	Supervisor	Deacon	Executive Director
Archdeacon	Pastor	Priest	Major

2. Is there another title that describes your position or aspiration? What titles for leadership positions are missing from the list and are significant to you?
3. Clearly, becoming a Christian leader is a good thing to pursue. First Timothy 3:1 assures us: "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." Those who desire to be wise leaders will learn from the wisdom of Scripture. Meditate on the scriptural texts below and consider how you can develop as a leader.
  - *Seek to grow* (2 Peter 3:18). "The Christian leader leads by what he is and by what he is becoming. He must meet the conditions of continuous growth."<sup>3</sup>
  - *Hone your gifts and training* (Rom. 12:3). "There are qualities genetically and socially inherited that incline some persons toward leadership more than others. You will do well to examine and assess this inheritance. Then there are qualities to be acquired through processes of learning and experience. These processes you need to understand and practice."<sup>4</sup>
  - *Grasp the truth that ordinary people can do extraordinary things* (Acts 4:13). The concept that the only leaders who

3. Gaines S. Dobbins, *Learning and Leading* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1968), 111.

4. *Ibid.*, 14.

can be exceptional persons are those who are unusually powerful and prominent is challenged by the Word of God. Note the lives of the disciples.

- *Do not forget that God's standard for success is not "bigness" but faithfulness* (Matt.10:42; Zech. 4:10).
4. *Strengthen your leadership skills by:*
- *Having a mentor* (2 Tim. 2:2).
  - *Making plans and goals for good purposes* (Prov. 14:22).
  - *Nurturing your spiritual life* (2 Tim. 2:15; James 5:16).  
Read and schedule time for daily Bible study and prayer. It is often said that leaders are readers. See the Selected Reading List at the end of the book. Memorize the Lord's Prayer, found in Matthew 6:9–13.
  - *Stewarding your time and resources* (Eph. 5:15–16). "Dost thou love Life? then do not squander Time; for that's the Stuff Life is made of."<sup>5</sup>
  - *Being diligent in your labors* (Prov. 14:23).

## SUCCESS IS NOT MERELY SILVER AND GOLD

### **St. Peter's Principle #2**

*A leader begins to be successful when, knowing his incompetence, he seeks to meet his deficiencies through the wisdom of God's Word.* (1 Peter 1:22–25)

Position, possessions, and problems often go hand in hand. In fact, when Professor Peter wrote his classic *The Peter Principle*, he developed unique names for various ways that leaders get promoted to their highest level of incompetence and what they experience when they get there. For example, he noted that in some hierarchical systems there are those who've made it to the top, where they are truly incompetent,

5. Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1746), [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Poor\\_Richard%27s\\_Almanack#1746](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Poor_Richard%27s_Almanack#1746).

but are nonetheless secure because of their previous success. This type of incompetent success has its liabilities, however. In his chapter “The Pathology of Success,” Professor Peter develops what he terms “the Final Placement Syndrome,” defined by the multiple physical maladies that are often experienced by people who have arrived at their terminal positions.<sup>6</sup>

But on the way up to a leader’s position of successful terminal incompetence, he often needs help to make his way up the hierarchy’s ladder of success. This can be facilitated by a patron who pulls him up or by a parent who places him in a position. The parent’s ownership of the company can clearly be of special help in placing a son or daughter in an advanced position that he or she may in fact not be prepared for or able to perform.<sup>7</sup>

It’s true that all leaders face incompetence. But it’s not just when they arrive at a place beyond which they cannot be promoted, and where they should, in fact, not be at all. Our incompetence is bound up in our fallen being and sinful nature. St. Peter was no saint when he said to his Master, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). Rather, he was showing the highest incompetence in seeking to send Christ away. But at the same time, scintillating wisdom was coruscating through his folly when he recognized that he was not worthy of Christ because he was flawed, fallen, sinful.

If success is not really defined by position, as *The Peter Principle* suggests, what is success, according to *St. Peter’s Principles*? What makes a sinful, uneducated, emotional, and impulsive fisherman leadership material for God’s kingdom, a kingdom that’s over everything on earth and whose influence reaches to the heavenly throne of God?

Ultimately, St. Peter’s wisdom was in recognizing what he had and what he didn’t have. He had sin, and because he had Christ, he was changed from loudmouth Peter to St. Peter the preacher on Pentecost Sunday. As he walked as an outcast of the Jewish temple hierarchy through that very temple as the CEO (Chief Education Officer) of the apostles, he recognized that he had no money: “I have no silver and

6. Peter, *Peter Principle*, 108–15, 170.

7. *Ibid.*, 49–52.

gold” (Acts 3:6). He knew what he didn’t have. Yet he also knew what he did have: “but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” Here was St. Peter’s wisdom—he knew his incompetence. He knew that what he needed in order to do his job was more than he possessed. But he also knew that there was wisdom, strength, and provision outside himself. He was sure that those gifts from Christ would equip and enable him to perform with extraordinary competence in spite of the limitations that seemed to guarantee his inadequacy.

St. Peter wrote of this powerful and eternal Word in 1 Peter 1:22–25, describing its impact on believers’ lives: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for ‘All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you.”

This, then, is the beginning of leadership success, according to St. Peter. It is when a man, knowing his incompetence, nevertheless seeks to meet his deficiencies through God’s gracious gift of wisdom found in his Word. To have that is to pursue success far greater than that measured by silver and gold.

### **SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:**

1. Are you willing to admit your own limitations? Proverbs 16:18 warns, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”
2. Are you humble enough to be taught by God’s Word and the wisdom of others? Proverbs 11:2 declares, “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.”
3. If so, keep reading! If you are not, why not?

## CONFESSIONS OF AN INCOMPETENT LEADER

### St. Peter's Principle #3

*Wise leadership begins by looking at Jesus Christ, the greatest leader of people in the history of the world. (John 6:68)*

St. Peter's confession that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God, was a great turning point in the gospel story as well as in the life of St. Peter himself (Matt. 16:13–20). When others were abandoning Christ because of his difficult sayings (John 6:60–71), St. Peter answered our Lord's question "Do you want to go away as well?" with the question and affirmation "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed and have come to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:67–69). Thus, the confession of our faith has been a central feature of the Christian faith.

Some four centuries after Christ, St. Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, the story of his life in terms of his relationship to God from his birth to his service as a leader in the church. This classic work is read and studied to this day because of its powerful spiritual and autobiographical insights. In some ways, Christian psychological self-analysis was given birth by St. Augustine's *Confessions*, written by a leader of the Christian church.

While I offer no confession comparable to St. Peter or St. Augustine, I believe a brief confession of why I think I can honorably write a study on leadership—incompetent leadership, to be exact—is warranted. So what follows is a quick tour of some of my personal formation, frequent failures, and ongoing frustrations as a leader through the years. It is an account of personal incompetence and personal growth. This process is not over. Incompetence is still skulking in the shadows of my soul and dancing daily in the demands of my daunting duties. My only hope is that this recital of memories will encourage you to redress your own incompetence by embracing God's grace in Christ. So here goes.

One of my earliest memories is getting into an argument with my mother over which day of the week it was. After several exchanges,

with my emotional intensity mounting, a calendar clearly proved me wrong. I learned that people can often be wrong but never in doubt!

I can remember at a cousin's birthday party being profoundly embarrassed that I did not have the spiritual gift of dropping clothespins headfirst into empty milk bottles. My wails of pain earned me my first epithet—"Peter the Pest." I learned that uncontrolled emotions can help form your public reputation!

At a family gathering, a new black-and-white television had captured everyone's attention with what I considered to be a boring athletic event. I was deeply troubled that it was showing at the same time as one of my favorite cartoon shows. (I can't even remember which one now!) So with great self-confidence, I marched up to the television and turned the channel to where it should have been. I'm not sure whether a history-making touchdown or home run was missed, but I did not miss the instant fury of a roomful of boys and men. There I learned that if you're going to make an unpopular decision, you had better be in a position of authority to enforce it!

In Little League baseball, I sometimes got off the bench to play. In center field before the watching world, I once misjudged an easy high pop-up and let it fall behind me as I ran in too far. After the moans and laughter had subsided, I called a time-out and ran into the dug-out to get my brand-new pair of glasses. I learned the embarrassment of public failure, the desire to find an excuse to shift the blame, and the need for courage to play on, even after a public mistake!

My social science class in the seventh grade had considered a case study on some aspect of the relationship of the US and the USSR on a day when I was absent because of illness. A vote had been taken, and the class was evenly divided. When I returned, the school's star basketball player asked the teacher of our class whether my vote could be cast to break the tie. Being often wrong, but never in doubt, I quickly voted and broke the tie. I also got the star basketball player upset with me. I learned that decisions and votes often have consequences that require thought and courage!

In high school, I surprisingly became a successful football player and earned all-league and all-county recognition as a lineman in spite of my average size. Physics is an important aspect of the game.

On one particular play, across from a six-foot-six, three-hundred-pound defensive lineman, I was literally knocked head over heels backward into the backfield. When the team watched the game film the next week, the coach repeated that scene multiple times with gleeful comments, evoking great laughter from everyone except me! I learned that if you act in public, your mistakes and defeats are more likely to be studied and remembered than your faithful ongoing efforts and success!

Never being a great musician, I nevertheless fell in love with the guitar and made some substantial progress—enough to help lead public singing on occasion. It was freshman orientation week at college, and I offered to play in leadership for a meeting. When I began the chorus (I still can never hear “This Little Light of Mine” without an emotional cringe), I realized that eyes were rolling, people were not singing, and some were moaning and talking. Halfway through the verse “Won’t let Satan blow it out . . .,” I decided I’d better blow out the flickering light of my musical career. I simply stopped and excused myself from the stage. That lesson taught me that if you’re not prepared to engage your public with skill and perseverance, not only will you not lead, but it will lead to laughter and a lonely departure from the public eye!

On a spring break, just before I was to be married, I sought a job to earn some extra cash. My job was an agricultural one with biblical overtones: I was hired to prune the grapevines on a local farm to get them ready for spring. After the first day and a half, I was fired. Apparently, I didn’t have the spiritual gift of pruning vines. I was destroying them a snip at a time. I learned that getting fired is not fun and that having to fire a person must be a task of self-defense with its own cost and pain!

The stories of my leadership incompetence could go on and on:

- Failing to give a football line call as the captain of the defensive team.
- Being given two directly opposite orders by bosses on a job and trying to follow both.

- Forgetting to show up for a scheduled event where I was in charge.
- Blindly accepting the wrong directions from someone.
- Running out of gas on the way to a wedding.
- As a pastor, forgetting a Saturday garden wedding service and hurriedly covering my blue jeans and T-shirt with my clerical robe just in time.
- Just a few weeks before Christmas, declaring that Santa Claus does not exist to a roomful of young families with children without having checked out their views. Oh, how the list goes on!

The traditional proverb that comes to mind is “Experience keeps a dear school, but a fool will learn in no other.” We all learn by experience and by instruction, as we gradually exchange youth for wisdom. As gray hair appears (or is camouflaged), we grow by the leadership lessons from our lives. These in turn help us guide those who are younger and follow us.

Perhaps the greatest challenges for me as a leader occurred in my first few years as the president of Westminster Theological Seminary. Depending on whom you speak with, it was a season of great folly or a time of great courage and wisdom for the future of our school. This, too, leads to a leadership lesson: hard decisions will be critiqued again and again, and only history—maybe only eternity—will give sufficient perspective to decide whether the decisions were wise (competent) or unwise (incompetent). Here’s the scenario: In an already-traumatized school, the board determined that a transition of presidential leadership was needed, and a new president was elected (me). Because the new president decided to conclude the role of the chancellor (the previous president), the new president narrowly survived a vote to have him dismissed. The leadership story continued to unfold:

- Subsequently, a tenured faculty member wrote a book that divided the faculty, alumni, board, and constituents over its value and its orthodoxy. It was simultaneously praised and condemned.
- After two years of behind-doors discussions, the faculty was

stymied. Ultimately, the faculty voted 12–8 to exonerate the professor. The president (me) disagreed and was one of the eight minority votes.

- The board was apprised and the debate continued, with the president directed to make the case why the professor's book was confessionally out of bounds and causing harm to the institution.
- Major donors on both sides of the issue were no longer giving, and financial turmoil ensued.
- Some blog sites blasted the president for his "Neanderthal" theology, while others affirmed his wisdom in staying true to the mission and vision of the founders of the seminary.
- Some alumni complained, and students assembled to protest on campus.
- The board met and ultimately supported the president and the faculty minority by a vote of 18 to 9.
- Over the next few weeks, all nine board members who had voted in the minority resigned.
- Some faculty (including the professor whose book was at the eye of the controversy) left the school during or after the controversy.
- A PR battle for the hearts and minds of students, faculty, alumni, and the broader theological world raged throughout the controversy.

Was this a case of a person's rising to his highest level of incompetence? Was this a case of competent leadership's leading through the highest level of turmoil and theological disagreement? However you decide this question, you may wish to read the Westminster Theological Seminary Board's document entitled "Affirmations and Denials on the Doctrine of Scripture" that was produced in the wake of this controversy.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of your judgment on this matter, you can see that leadership can often be a time of rough-and-tumble struggle. We must

8. See <http://www.wts.edu/about/beliefs/statements/affirmationsanddenials.html>.

recognize that a steady growth in leadership skills is needed if we are to lead well and to overcome our incompetence.

So in this opening confession, I've done due diligence in warning you that a leader doesn't just rise to his highest level of incompetence, but begins with incompetence and seeks to learn wisdom in the midst of that incompetence. By grace, leaders learn to lead well. May our God use these leadership principles inspired by St. Peter to help us answer well St. Paul's searching question: "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). No one is. That's why St. Peter was so right when he asked, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:67–68).

### SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:

1. Are you willing to admit any leadership mistakes you've made? Are you willing to identify them and discuss them with others?
2. Draw up a list of the lessons you've learned from mistakes you've made in your life. Are you willing to laugh at them? Are you willing to let others read them and laugh with you?
3. Choose a controversial decision you've made. Summarize the decision and outline the reasons why it was reached. List the positive impacts it made and the negative repercussions it produced.
4. Have you looked to Jesus Christ as history's greatest leader for wisdom for your life and for the salvation of your soul? To who else will you go, since he alone has the words of eternal life (John 14:6; Acts 4:12)?

## UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT?

### **St. Peter's Principle #4**

*God's grace will keep you from being ineffective.* (2 Peter 1:8)

We've all seen the sign "Under New Management." Whenever I see those words, I wonder what went wrong. Maybe things were going

well. But then you'd think the sign should say, "New Leaders, but Commitment to the Same Quality!" Next, I ask, "Will the new leaders do a better job, or a poorer job?" Just as businesses and restaurants need effective leadership, so do churches, schools, and families. Is your leadership bringing your community, organization, or business to the point at which an "Under New Management" sign will have to be posted when you leave?

Thankfully, St. Peter, upon assuming command of the church in Jerusalem on Pentecost, did not have to declare, "Under New Management." Instead, he clearly agreed with St. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:17: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." His great speech in Acts 2 manifests continuity with Jesus' ministry and his heavenly rule through his Holy Spirit.

A leader's goal is usually to establish or to continue an organization that will last. It is clear that St. Peter believed the church was eternal and would outlast the universe itself, safely passing through the final conflagration of all things (2 Peter 3:8–14).

Because the Christian faith was meant to last and be passed on from generation to generation, the ideas of overseeing people, managing people, and leading people were foundational principles for St. Peter. Thus, he speaks of shepherding, of elders, of kings, of husbands and wives, of brothers, and of masters. As leaders, we have as our call the fulfilling of our goals by fidelity to our mission through people. Leadership is unifying people, organizing people, equipping people, and directing people so that the desired results occur. People matter because no one can accomplish the great goals and the vast visions of life alone. St. Peter knew that his Master, the Lord of the universe, was not accomplishing his mission alone simply by his miracles, but intentionally through his disciples (Matt. 28:18–20).

When an organization is under good management, it is continually being renewed so that an "Under New Management" sign will not need to appear. Good management will employ many important skills to secure the desired success. Thus, effective leaders seek to make effective followers, effective employers, effective members. But the inverse is also true, even if not intentionally so: incompetent leaders tend to produce incompetent people.

So just what does it mean to be *incompetent*? *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines the adjective this way: "lacking the qualities (as maturity, capacity, initiative, intelligence) necessary to effective independent action." And the noun: "a person incapable of managing his affairs because of mental deficiency or immaturity"; "one incapable of doing properly what is required."

What does the noun *competence* mean? It is derived from the Latin word *competentia*, which means "agreement." The idea is that a person or a thing so well agrees with what is needed that it is sufficient to meet the need or the task. Thus, Webster defines *competence* as "the quality or state of being functionally adequate or of having sufficient knowledge, judgment, skill, or strength . . . for a particular duty."

An interesting synonym for *incompetent* is *feckless*, meaning "weak in mind or body: helpless, incompetent." *Feckless* is actually from a Middle English word, *fek*, which is a shortened version of our better-known word *effect*. In other words, when a person is incompetent or feckless, he becomes ineffective for his task. His skills are insufficient to meet the need. There is an inadequate agreement between the person's character, strength, and talent to perform the duties required. And this is what St. Peter knew of himself when he was called to follow Christ. He did not merely rise to his highest level of incompetence. That's where he started. That's where he would have remained except for the gracious provision of God's enablement throughout his life.

This, then, is the heart of leading like St. Peter. A leader like St. Peter acknowledges his feckless, incompetent heart and soul (Luke 5:8)! But then by a humble pursuit of divine wisdom and grace, he becomes effective in spite of his many besetting sins, weaknesses, and incompetencies. Second Peter 1:8 promises, "For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful."

If you have sufficient courage to admit a bit of your own incompetence to lead, you have taken a step that by God's grace will put more *fek* in your soul. Read on, then, to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Be assured that the Holy Spirit's management of your heart and life is sufficient. God's gracious Holy Spirit is competent to help you to learn to lead and to

lead better for Christ's glory. For "his divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life" (1:3).

### SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:

1. If an "Under New Management" sign were put up over the organization you lead, would people be surprised, or would they have anticipated it? Why?
2. Ask a wise and trusted friend to put up an invisible "Under New Management" sign over your business, ministry, or movement with him or her taking command. Ask what that person would do differently from what you are doing now.
3. Are you under the Holy Spirit's management? Does the Holy Spirit's grace guide you through the Scriptures as you lead and manage your followers? Are you seeking his wisdom through Scriptures and prayer? If so, how are you doing this? If not, why not?

## THEOLOGY AND LEADERSHIP

### St. Peter's Principle #5

Right theology enables right leadership. (1 Peter 1:25)

The word *theology* literally means "words about God" or "the study of God." The study of God and the words we speak about God should find their source in the Word of God. This is consistent with Jesus' prayer in John 17:17: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." First Peter 1:25 declares that "the word of the Lord remains forever." If we put these two texts together, we discover that God's Word gives us eternal truth. Our St. Peter's Principle insists that "right theology enables right leadership." If we build our theology on mere human wisdom, we are building our lives on the shifting sands of human opinion rather than the bedrock of God's eternal knowledge (Matt. 7:24–27).

As we study leadership, we must not forget that God is our true leader. As Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, he is the ultimate reality

and the ultimate leader of the universe. Jesus Christ, the God-man, is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is, as St. Peter calls him, “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). As the “chief Shepherd” (5:4), he is the ultimate guide, director, and protector of his people.

It is this basic insight that warrants an explicit link between leadership and the Bible. A Christian world and life view compels us not to study leadership—whether for business, government, or civil institutions—merely from a sociological vantage point. God’s revelation has given us wisdom for leadership from his infinite store of knowledge in the pages of the Scriptures. Thus, with full confidence in the wisdom of Scripture, this study looks to the life and writings of St. Peter as the source and inspiration for our insights. St. Peter strongly affirmed the reliability of Scripture, teaching that it is eternal and the means of our new birth (1 Peter 1:23–25) as well as the revelation of God inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:16–21).

Clearly, sociological works and philosophical studies of leadership have great value. But as Westminster’s renowned apologist Cornelius Van Til argued, human studies either consciously or unconsciously borrow truth from God. Unbelieving human thought works without reference to God. Nevertheless, such thinkers are really working with what Professor Van Til called “borrowed capital.” Ironically, worldly leaders in rejecting God’s wisdom must use God’s wisdom to build their worldview without reference to God.

This should not be the approach to any discipline conducted by true Christians, for whom all truth is God’s truth. Again, as Jesus declared, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). So regardless of your theological grid, and regardless of your sphere of leadership service, don’t live on mere borrowed capital. Instead, turn to the source of spiritual wisdom, the gold standard of truth, the eternal bank of God’s capital reserves, the Word of God. It is the revelation of the greatest leader of all, God’s eternal Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It is his will to lead his eternal, global organization called the *church* through people committed to his Word.

The risen Christ’s first human spokesman was the non-formally educated Jewish fisherman named Cephas, or Peter. In God’s plan, he

turned Peter the fisherman into St. Peter the leader of Christ's apostles. If God can do this, he can turn us into leaders as well. God's Word is the means to do the same for us. So don't determine to learn to lead by the mere borrowed capital of wisdom from the secular world that operates as though there were no God. Rather, seize the divine treasures of Scripture and thereby ground your efforts and vision in God and his wisdom. As the proverb says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7).

### **SPIRITUAL EXERCISES:**

1. Identify three different leaders from the past. How would their leadership have been different if they had always followed the Scriptures? How did their leadership careers reflect biblical teaching?
2. Have you read any books on leadership? Did they engage the biblical teachings on leadership? Did God even play a role in their message?
3. Can you observe any common leadership principles that people often use or teach that really are biblical ideas, "borrowed capital"? If so, what are some examples?

