



Wholehearted Leadership

FLOW WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

The research is sobering: only four in ten leaders finish well. So how do you start well, stay well, and end well, in the Spirit? Wholehearted leadership holds two truths at once. The Holy Spirit has gifted you to lead for His Kingdom purposes, *and* sin is crouching at your door, desiring to master you (Genesis 4:7). You lead in contested space. Neutral ground doesn't exist, it never did, whether you feel it or not.

So let's not shy away from either reality. Let's learn to walk honestly, with the Spirit, in both. Join us in the book of Acts as we explore four tests every leader faces, and make space for the Spirit to move in your heart today.

THE FOUR TESTS AT A GLANCE

1. The Personal Test - Acts 2/Inside you.

Tests your character, at the point of your known weakness.

2. The External Test - Acts 4/Outside you.

In things you cannot control. Tests your courage.

3. The Culture Test - Acts 5/Within the team you lead.

Tests your integrity, and the integrity of the culture you build.

4. The Growth Test - Acts 6/Within the church you lead.

The problems and complaints that growth creates. Tests your clarity of assignment and your willingness to raise up others.



Introduction

This is a workshop, so here is our heart. Like a good fitness class, you came to work out, not to watch. We're going to do some work together.

But let's be clear: in becoming more like Jesus, the Spirit produces and we participate. The wind blows; we raise the sail.

We are going to use two title descriptions, a **towel**/servant leader or a **title**/positional leader. Let us be clear. A **towel** posture doesn't mean having no boundaries, no authority, or no voice. Jesus served from security in who He was, not from a need to be needed. Serving that leaves no room to rest, say no, or raise up others can be its own form of people-pleasing. Secondly, in many cultures, using honouring **titles** is an expression of respect, not status-seeking. Having a title isn't the problem, and honouring the titles of others can be a beautiful form of respect. The question is what your leadership rests on: the position, or the person Jesus is forming in you.

From the book of Acts, after the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, we'll look at four tests every Christian leader faces in leading like Jesus.

Two qualifications before we start:

- The tests are sometimes sequential, but not always.
- You can face more than one in the same season.
- There is no neutral space. In the life of a leader, all space is contested space.

Why this matters

- 4 in 10 Christian leaders finish well. (Dr. J. Robert Clinton)
- 1 in 40 who enter vocational ministry retire from vocational ministry. (Peter DeHaan)
- The average person loses 7 significant relationships in a lifetime. The average minister loses 5–7 every year.

Acts paints a startlingly different picture of resilient leaders who finish their course. We believe God desires every leader to be a wholehearted leader.

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Wholehearted Leadership Defined

Wholehearted leaders steward well all that God has entrusted to them. They use their time, gifts, and treasure to serve others, with an unwavering commitment to God's purposes above their own. For a wholehearted leader, the towel matters more than the title.



Test 1: The Personal Test/Acts 2 (Pressure inside you)

THE PERSONAL TEST AT A GLANCE

- **Where the pressure comes from:** Inside you.
- **What it tests:** Your character, at the point of your known weakness.
- **The question it asks:** Will I depend on Jesus right where I am weakest?
- **God designs** it to grow your dependence on Him.
- **Darkness designs** it to grow your dependence on anything but Him.

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By Acts 2, Peter and the disciples have had some spectacular missteps from arguing about who was the greatest on the night before the crucifixion, to outright betrayal. In His kindness, Jesus restored eleven of the twelve.

They obeyed: they waited, prayed, and received the promised Holy Spirit. All 120 were filled. Then, to move them from waiting to action, the Lord arranged a fresh test — the very one they had failed only weeks before. The same pressure that made them run, they now face again. To grow Peter's confidence in Christ, the Spirit allowed his identical weakness to be tested a second time.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:10 (ESV)

Together: What disqualifies leaders? Let's see if we can name the top five internal pressures that have disqualified ministry leaders over the past decade.

1. Sexual misconduct
2. Abuse of authority
3. Financial misconduct
4. Dishonesty that erodes trust with those they lead
5. Character crisis (substances, lying, people-pleasing, etc.)

Weeks earlier, Peter had his own character crisis. He didn't believe what Jesus said about who he really was — he thought he was better than the others. Through failure and restoration he discovered that Jesus knew him better than he knew himself, and that life in the Kingdom isn't about being better than others; it's about interdependence with one another.

And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine." But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them... Acts 2:12-14 (ESV)

Notice: Peter, standing with the eleven. Where weeks ago he stood alone in his brokenness, he now stands with others, made whole by Jesus.

Discussion Question: Regardless of how long you've been in ministry, where do you, like Peter, feel personal pressure?

Ministry Moment: Take 60 seconds of silence. Ask the Holy Spirit, "Where is my weakness being tested right now?" Then, in pairs, pray this simple prayer over each other: "Jesus, be strong where I am weak."



WHOLEHEARTED LEADER ACTION STEP

Wholehearted leaders confess before they are caught.

- Write down the name of one person you confess both struggle and sin to.
- No one? Choose someone before you leave this conference and ask them this month.
- Name your known weakness out loud to that person. Set a check in schedule.



Test 2: The External Test Acts 4 • Pressure from outside you

THE EXTERNAL TEST AT A GLANCE

Where the pressure comes from: Outside you, in things you cannot control.

What it tests: Your courage to stand for Christ

The question it asks: Will I stand w/Jesus when I can't control what's happening to me?

God designs it to grow you through the storm.

Darkness designs it to deform you in the storm.

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The next test isn't internal. It's external.

And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. Acts 4:1-4 (ESV)

To build resilience in Peter, John, and the early church's leaders, the Spirit allowed persecution/pressure from the outside.

Christian leadership is challenging because our world is changing. We need to care deeply for those who disagree with us, not just those who agree — without becoming people-pleasers. The aim of a Christian leader is not for you to become like me, but for both of us to become more like Jesus.

Persecution can look like...

- Subtle: targeting Christianity through policy or "politeness."
- Overt: harassing Christians in ways other faiths are not.
- Aggressive: mistreating Christians simply for being Christians — even to the point of death.

External pressure can also look like...

- Slow ministry growth despite doing all the "right things."
- A personal, institutional, cultural, board, or family crisis.
- Letting God define your capacity (the parable of the talents). You can dream beyond what God has asked you to steward. Bigger is not always better — obedience is. God increases, and God prunes.

What wholehearted leaders do under external pressure.

1. **They name the pressure accurately.** (Acts 4:1-3, 17-18)

Arrested, jailed, and threatened "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." No spin, no pretending it's fine.



Naming the pressure accurately is the first act of leading through it. The enemy wants to use the storm through three Ds: **drama** (making it bigger than it is), **diminishing** (making it smaller than it is), and **despair** (giving up).

2. They know their Source/settle their non-negotiable in advance. (Acts 4:8, 19–20)

Peter answers “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Under pressure it isn’t about polish; it’s about being with the Person of the Holy Spirit and people can tell the difference.

Peter and John aren’t improvising or hoping their convictions hold. They settled their non-negotiable before the storm, not in it.

When facing external pressure, God wants to grow you through it; darkness wants to deform you in it. Jesus is in the boat. Sometimes He calms the storm. Sometimes He calms the leader in the storm. Both are miracles.

Discussion Question: What pressure are you facing right now that you truly can’t control?

Ministry Moment: Invite the Holy Spirit and a trusted Christian leader to help you name that pressure accurately, without drama, diminishing, or despair.

WHOLEHEARTED LEADER ACTION STEP

- Wholehearted leaders name the storm and settle their non-negotiables before it hits.
- Write the pressure you can’t control in one honest sentence with no drama, diminishing, or despair.
- Write your one to three non-negotiables/the convictions you will not compromise under pressure.
- Share both with a trusted Christian leader this week and ask them to pray with you.



Test 3: The Culture Test/*Acts 5* • *Pressure from within your team*

THE CULTURE TEST AT A GLANCE

Where the pressure comes from: Within the team or church you lead.

What it tests: Your integrity, and the integrity of the culture you build.

The question it asks: Will I address compromise while it is still small?

God designs it to build a trustworthy, whole, and unified church.

Darkness designs it to let hidden compromise quietly become “the way we do things here.”

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The first test was about you alone.

The second came entirely from outside you.

The last two are found in our relationships with others.

In Acts 5, a couple faces an integrity test that affects the whole church.

Theologically, Lori and I recognize two things: this is a story where God judges a situation perfectly, and it raises real questions we won't fully resolve today. Ultimately, it is a story between a couple and the perfect judgment of the Holy Spirit. But like turning a kaleidoscope to see new colours, we want to look at it through a leadership lens.

Regardless of party, one of the most common criticisms of political leaders is hypocrisy born from internal corruption — bribes, personal advancement over the good of the people. It drives trust down. In every leader, organization, party, or church, corruption has a starting point.

In Acts 5 the church Jesus is building is just getting started. Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of land, keep back part of the money, and present it as the whole gift. Ask yourself: what if, this early, the Holy Spirit — and by extension Peter's leadership — had ignored it? A lie here. A little deception there. Some people acting with integrity, others without. That's what shapes a culture.

Culture isn't what's written on the wall. It's what's really going on down the hall.

In Acts 5, trustworthiness, integrity, wholeness, unity, and team buy-in are all being tested. To grow a trustworthy church, the Spirit allowed a test of its culture to come from within — and He used Peter's leadership in it.

Pause and consider Peter. He had walked for three years beside Judas and watched Satan gain a foothold through a heart that failed its internal test (Luke 22:3). He had heard Jesus warn that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat (Luke 22:31). Peter knew firsthand: darkness doesn't stay in place. So, prompted by the Spirit, he asks, “Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (Acts 5:3).

Imagine if that deception had woven itself into the church's culture. Imagine if the couple and the leader had worked something out behind the scenes, believing no one would find out. It didn't happen here — but one look at church news tells us it does happen.



And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.
Acts 5:11 (ESV)

It doesn't take much imagination to see the damage that would have taken root had the Holy Spirit not moved in this moment.

Discussion Question: Where are you facing challenges from within your team? It could be outright sin, or it could be slow integrity drift — small compromises eroding the culture you want most.

Ministry Moment: Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind one place where your culture has drifted from your values. Then pray for your team by name: "Lord, make us the same in private as we are in public."

WHOLEHEARTED LEADER ACTION STEP

- Wholehearted leaders deal with small compromises while they are still small.
- Name one gap between what's "on the wall" and what's really going on "down the hall" in your team.
- Ask your team: "Where are we saying one thing and doing another?"
- Schedule the honest conversation you've been avoiding within the next 14 days.



Test 4: The Growth Test Acts 6 • *Pressure from growth/change*

THE GROWTH TEST AT A GLANCE

Where the pressure comes from: The problems and complaints that growth creates.

What it tests: Your clarity of assignment and your willingness to raise up others.

The question it asks: Will I stay on my assignment and make room for others to lead?

God designs it to multiply leaders.

Darkness designs it to bury you in doing everything yourself, or distract you with every good problem.

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In Acts 6 we find the final test: the pressure that growth and change bring to a church or organization.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:1-7 (ESV)

Growth creates complexity, problems, complaints and a leadership challenge. Two questions frame it:

- What is my assignment?
- What needs to be done that others can do? Creating opportunities for new leaders to grow?

Leader, how do you hear complaints and problems: as threats, or as opportunities?

There is a tension here. If you lead, you carry responsibility. If you are a servant leader, nothing is ever "beneath you" — if it is, check your posture. But being responsible doesn't mean doing everything, all the time. Growth creates space for others to rise.

Wholehearted leaders are willing to do anything, but they embrace that they shouldn't do everything.

Two wise decisions from the early church

1. They got clear on their current assignment. Assignments change; the commission doesn't.



- Assignment one: preach the Word.
- Assignment two: solve this problem in the church.

There were far bigger problems in the world than a daily food distribution. But the apostles were clear on their assignment.

2. They found the solution within the house. The problem God gave them was inside the church, and so were the people to solve it. The next challenge (Gentiles) would come with the harvest God was about to bring, and with a leader (Paul) God was about to raise up.

Discussion Question: What season of ministry are you in? Who has the Spirit placed around you? What problems is your ministry designed to solve? How do you discern between a God idea and a good idea?

Ministry Moment: Write down the names of two or three people the Spirit has placed around you who could carry more. Pray over those names now, and ask God which one to invite into leadership next.

WHOLEHEARTED LEADER ACTION STEP

- Wholehearted leaders are willing to do anything, but refuse to do everything.
- Write your current assignment in one sentence.
- List three things you do that someone else could do — and would grow by doing.
- Hand one of them off, with authority and prayer, within 30 days.

Workshop Conclusion/Recap

Test	It tests your...	Wholehearted leaders...
Personal (Acts 2)	character at your weakness	Confess before they are caught.
External (Acts 4)	courage for Christ	Name the storm accurately. Settle their non-negotiables clearly.
Culture (Acts 5)	integrity in the church/testimony	Discover/deal with small compromises still small.
Growth (Acts 6)	clarity/ willingness to raise up others	Are willing to do anything, but refuse to do everything.

Remember

Every one of these tests is contested space. And in every one, the Spirit is at work to make you whole. The Spirit produces. We participate.