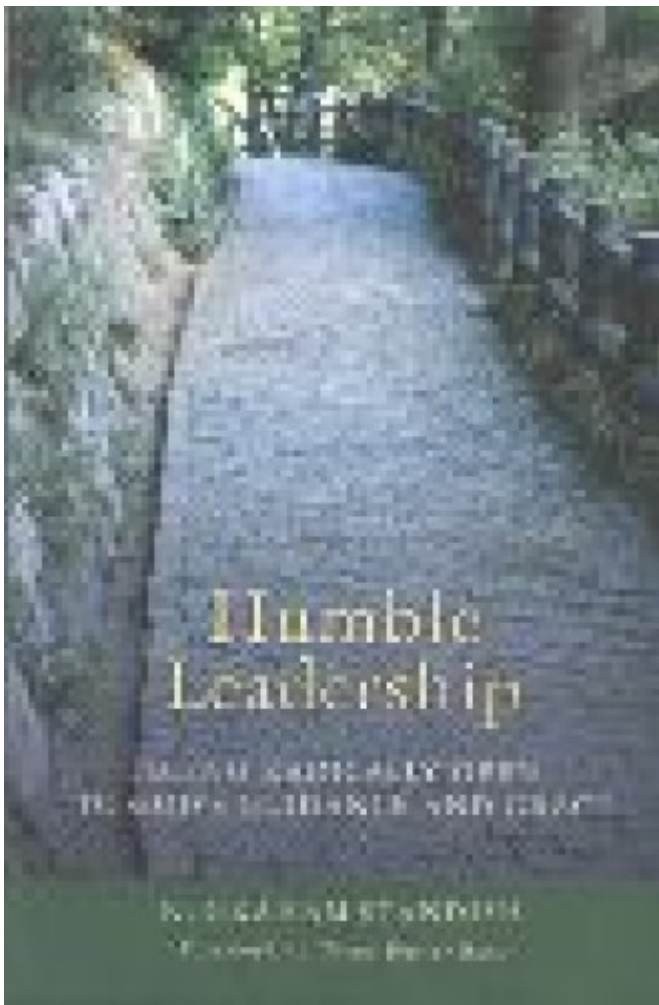


Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace

reviewed by [Wm. Michael Jinkins](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God's Guidance and Grace

N. Graham Standish
Alban Institute

As part of a comprehensive review of our curriculum at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, we recently asked laypeople from around the country what qualities they want in their pastors. Many said that they want their pastors to possess biblical and theological understanding, leadership skills and an ability to communicate clearly. No surprises there. We expected these responses. What surprised us was the large number of people who said, “We want humble pastors, pastors who are not arrogant, church leaders who listen to us and don’t just tell us what to do.”

Repeatedly we were told that too many pastors ignore deliberative processes and spurn shared decision making, preferring the speed and streamlined efficiency of autocratic leadership; show disrespect for church members who disagree with them, or simply brand them as “clergy killers”; and understand vision as something the pastor possesses rather than something that emerges from within a congregation as it responds and adapts to changing situations in conversation with its leadership.

Anyone who has looked hard at contemporary leadership in church, politics or the corporate world will recognize the kind of leaders these laypeople do not want in the pastorate. We were surprised, however, at just how unambiguously they named the problem and the solution: humility.

In *Humble Leadership: Being Radically Open to God’s Guidance and Grace*, N. Graham Standish advances a compelling argument in favor of cultivating precisely the kind of leaders that the church members in our study said they want. And he does something more. He asks why there is such ambivalence about humility in our culture and even among Christians. These days many people, especially those attracted to what has been called muscular or dominion Christianity, dismiss humility as wimpy. But according to Standish, humility is not feebleness at all but “a disposition of radical openness to God . . . that allows us to become conduits of the Holy Spirit.” Humility doesn’t get “in the way of leading a healthy and thriving congregation”; rather, humble leaders are able to “inspire, motivate, and unify” their people.

Standish, the pastor of Calvin Presbyterian Church in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, speaks with disarming modesty about his experience of discovering the thought of Mohandas Gandhi, whose spiritual pilgrimage was deeply influenced by Jesus of Nazareth and whose writings shaped Christian leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.

“God has never allowed any of my own plans to stand,” Gandhi wrote in his autobiography. “He has disposed them in His own way.” It’s easy to see why this Hindu thinker captivated Standish.

Turning to the Gospels, Standish finds the grounds for humble submission to God’s way in the teachings of Jesus. He writes: “Jesus’s humility was evidenced in his willingness to follow the leading of the Spirit, rather than his own insights and desires. Instead of trying to change the world all at once, he journeyed into the desert to become united with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The desert, throughout the Bible, is the place where people of faith and power learn the way of humble service to God.”

Standish is particularly good at exploring the spiritual and emotional pitfalls of leadership, and his training and experience in spiritual direction are evident when he writes about prayer, which is crucial for leaders, he says, because ironically it “weakens us.” Prayer does this “by centering us in God so that God’s will becomes more prominent than our own.” Leaders who pray humbly become more aware of the power of pride, and they “continually . . . question their own holiness.”

The key to humble leadership, then, is self-critical reflection. Standish is strongly (and appropriately) critical of Christian leaders who confuse God’s will and God’s ways with their own, and he is not shy about naming leaders who do this. His critique is reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s famous remark that there is an “infinite qualitative difference” between God and humanity, which church leaders forget at their own peril.

Humility is not weakness. Humility represents openness to God. Standish’s book provides a bracing corrective to a church culture that has absorbed the popular obsession with self, fame and power and has been returning to the heresy that individual and collective salvation depend on human effort.