

# **THE MULTI- DIRECTIONAL LEADER**

**RESPONDING WISELY  
to CHALLENGES  
*from* EVERY SIDE**

**TREVIN WAX**

“Trevin Wax writes with keenness of insight, pastoral wisdom, and prophetic forcefulness. In this book he articulates the pressure today’s Christian leaders feel from every direction. Wax remains one of my most reliable counselors for leading in a rapidly shifting context.”

**J. D. GREEAR**, pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; president, Southern Baptist Convention

“Leadership is challenging. It requires wisdom, thoughtfulness, prayerfulness, and humility. It also requires an awareness that a one-size-fits-all leadership approach falls short as a method of engaging with different types of people and situations. As we seek to serve and care for others, we need the compelling vision Trevin Wax offers in his book, *The Multi-Directional Leader*. In whatever ways you lead and influence others—as a CEO, ministry leader, or parent—this book offers insightful questions and commentary to grow as a versatile leader, considering the needs of others as you guide those entrusted to your care.”

**MELISSA KRUGER**, author and director of women’s initiatives for The Gospel Coalition

“Calling for Christian leaders in churches, organizations, institutions, and other settings to avoid the shortcomings of a single-perspective approach to leadership, Trevin Wax, in a thoughtful manner informed by Scripture and compelling biographical examples, convincingly shows the importance for leaders to understand people, contexts, issues, and decision-making from a multi-directional perspective. Though intended only as a brief overview, this insightful volume skillfully addresses the complexity of leadership in theory and in practice. Let us pray that the Lord will use this significant resource to raise up a new generation of faithful multi-directional leaders who will selflessly, compassionately, and courageously serve church and society in the days ahead. I am delighted to recommend this timely and applicable book.”

**DAVID S. DOCKERY**, president, International Alliance for Christian Education; Distinguished Professor of Theology, Southwestern Seminary

“They say that generals fight the last war. Indeed, Christian leaders are often fighting their previous battles. All of us fall into cognitive rituals that are comfortable but don’t help us to grow, thus limiting our ability to lead. Trevin Wax reminds us of this tendency with a book that will challenge those of us willing to engage in introspection of how we may be one-directional. He writes in a manner that isn’t limited by political or theological preferences. Just about anyone in a leadership role can benefit from this book. We in the Christian community are blessed to have such a voice to help position us to be ready for the challenges we face in the 21st century.”

**GEORGE YANCEY**, professor of sociology, Baylor University; author of *Beyond Racial Gridlock*

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*For Ivan Mesa*

# FOREWORD

Jesus said, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34, ESV). The apostle Paul wrote of “our warfare” (2 Cor. 10:4). He wanted the early church to “get ready for battle” (1 Cor. 14:8). He called Timothy to accept hardship “as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:3). Conflict—for the sake of the gospel—is a clearly declared theme in the New Testament.

Because you have picked up this book, I have two hunches about you. On the one hand, you accept that advancing the gospel will at times pull you into worthy conflicts. On the other hand, you reject petty conflicts and selfish controversies as distasteful violations of the gospel. This new book by Trevin Wax will help you grow both in your courage and in your caution.

I am glad that Trevin has written *The Multi-Directional Leader: Responding Wisely to Challenges from Every Side*. We need this book. As we are being buffeted on every side—and I expect it to get worse—staying steady under multiple pressures isn’t easy, is it?

Decades ago, Francis Schaeffer taught me something that has helped me through the years. It is the wisdom permeating this book. Here’s the insight: *we rarely have the luxury of fighting on one front only*. Christian faithfulness often requires us to fight on two opposite fronts simultaneously. For example, when we take a stand against false doctrine, we must simultaneously take a stand against ugly harshness. We see the monster of heresy in front of us, and we rightly resist the error. But if we are not paying attention, we might not notice the other

monster behind us—the brutality of a censorious spirit. We can easily back right into its jaws.

If the challenges coming at us were one-dimensional, or if they came at us sequentially rather than simultaneously, we could stay focused on one problem at a time and press through more easily. But the battle rarely unfolds so simply.

Here is another layer of complication. We import our hypocritical group biases into our conflicts. Our sense of moral urgency rises when we see a failing among our opponents, and our drive for correction relaxes when we see it among our allies.

What's more, each of us has very personal inclinations. By temperament, we are naturally sensitive to some issues even as we are less alert to other truly weighty concerns. For example, some of us are naturally gripped by the standards and definitions and clearly drawn lines of doctrinal truth. Others of us naturally gravitate toward the vibe and feel and tone of warm relationships. We turn God's both-and into our own either-or—without even realizing it.

For all these reasons and others, it can be easy for us to be half-right as we contend for some aspect of the gospel. And because, at that particular point, we really are half-right, we do not see that we are also half-wrong—or, at least, incomplete. We see and rejoice in the good and true boxes we have rightly checked off. But we honestly do not perceive how many blanks we have never filled in. We can be blind to the towering beauty of fully developed, well-proportioned, mature, biblical Christianity—“the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

I will make it even worse. Fighting on one front only can reap huge rewards. It is a way to get noticed, create a platform, and generate a following. Just beat the drum loud and long for one facet of a multi-faceted gospel issue. Many people will rally to a church or ministry that specializes in being oh-so-right—in one respect. It gets likes and reposts and mentions and money. And this way of making a name for yourself does not require you to deny the gospel. All you have to do is keep repackaging your one theme within the gospel—rather than undertake the more demanding, more ennobling, more life-giving task of declaring the totality of the biblical gospel, so that the true magnificence of Christ can be seen by more and more people.

Let's all face ourselves honestly about these temptations and pitfalls. But for now, I ask that we notice just the obvious: *a half-fought battle is not a well-fought battle*. Even an apparent victory conceals the actual grandeur of our Lord, in all his grace and all his claims. Fighting a battle on one front only can, and probably will, lose the war.

This is why Trevin's book matters so much. If we will make the vision and the wisdom of this book a matter of ongoing discussion and prayer in our generation, 20 years from now we gospel-loving Christians will be more united together and more compelling to our world. We will have fewer church splits and more church plants, less controversy and more solidarity, quieter hearts, fuller praises, and new conversions to Christ, because our more mature Christianity will be a persuasive and inviting alternative to cross over into.

Wonderfully, our Lord above is for us in this very way. We do not have to hold the full magnitude of the gospel together in our own strength. If we will look to him moment by moment, he will help us transcend ourselves and our limitations and fears and prejudices. And we will, imperfectly but really, represent the glories of Christ with more and more public obviousness, as we grow into the stature of his fullness.

Ray Ortlund  
Renewal Ministries  
Nashville

## INTRODUCTION

# THE SHEPHERD AND THE FIELD

Night was falling over the fields when we first heard the pitiful cries—a combination of bleats and squeals coming from somewhere ahead of us. I was on a walk with one of the guys from the youth group in the village church where I ministered every week, a small rural community on the edge of western Romania. The sound signaled that one of the neighbor's sheep was in crisis, perhaps caught in a trap. As we picked up our pace and followed the cries, straining to see in the last light of day, we came upon two wild dogs that had seized a lamb and were tearing into its neck. We grabbed for a stick or rock—anything we could throw—and after we lunged at the dogs, they made a hasty retreat.

A little boy from the village church, Dani, no more than 9 years old, rushed to our side, saw the lamb in distress, and then ran back in tears to his home. The lamb belonged to his family, and he and his older brother were tending the sheep that day.

It was too late for the lamb. Its neck was torn; blood was everywhere. Each time the lamb tried to stand and walk, it could no longer hold its head or control its neck. Collapsing over and over, all it could do was issue those pitiful cries. I was an American from the suburban South, and though I was fluent in Romanian and knew something of the agrarian culture of this and similar villages, I had never been

in this situation before. I had no clue how to respond. It was left to the older brother in the family to come over, see the severity of the wounds, and tell us there was nothing more we could do.

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The New Testament describes God's people as a flock (Luke 12:32; John 10:16) and Jesus as the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). What an honor for a pastor to be designated the role of undershepherd—the keeper of the flock that remains God's possession, bought with the blood of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (1 Pet. 5:2; John 10:11–13). The heart of a good pastor beats with loving care for Jesus's sheep.

When I come across passages that describe the church as a flock and its leaders as shepherds, I often think back to that night in a Romanian village—recalling that flock, that field, those wild dogs, and that little lamb's fate. It reminds me of the seriousness of shepherding and what's at stake when wolves attack.

We're called to "be on guard" for ourselves and for "all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed" us as overseers, ready to fend off "savage wolves" (Acts 20:28–29). We're called to "shepherd God's flock" (1 Pet. 5:2), feed the lambs who belong to the Lord (John 21:15), and protect them when danger arises (John 10:12). Faithful shepherds remain alert, ready for battle when wolves invade the field. Taking up God's Word as a sword, we fend for the sheep and fight off threats.

Alertness requires the shepherd to remember that dangers creep up on the sheep from multiple directions. Many pastors and church leaders today assume the most dangerous threats to God's people will show up on the edges of only one side of the field. Perhaps we've grown so accustomed to challenges coming from one area that we lose sight of threats appearing from the opposite direction. We fancy ourselves as warriors who protect the sheep, alert to challenges that may arise, but our gaze is ever turned in only one direction—and so we unintentionally leave the sheep vulnerable to different dangers.

This book is for pastors and church leaders, terms I'll use interchangeably because my counsel applies not only to the pastoral role, but also to other Christian leaders in a variety of settings. I'm writing

to those who exert influence, whether in the church, or in the academy, or in a Christian organization, or through teaching or writing. Pastors are responsible for the sheep God has entrusted to their care. Leaders are to steward well the people who follow them as they follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

This book exhorts pastors and church leaders toward a vision of leadership I call “multi-directional,” which I contrast with the more common (and less effective) “one-directional” leadership. One-directional leaders are skillful in spotting and thwarting threats to the sheep that come from a single direction of the field. But because they focus on fighting battles on one front, they leave the flock vulnerable to problems from other sides. Multi-directional leaders, on the other hand, fend off threats from more than one direction. They hold up Scripture and fearlessly proclaim truths that cut to the root of our sins, failures, and dysfunctions, no matter what political or theological categories are crossed. They don’t let fear dictate their theological statements or determine their cultural posture.

To be multi-directional is to lead with dexterity and discipline—a faithful versatility that challenges erroneous positions no matter where they come from, and promotes a full-orbed vision of ministry that defends the truth and protects the flock. This book is about developing this discipline. Our goal is to learn how to better and more effectively respond with wisdom to challenges from every side.

## PART ONE

# MULTI-DIRECTIONAL LEADERSHIP EXPLAINED

My goal in this section is to explain the concept of multi-directional leadership, first by contrasting it with the more common one-directional leadership. In the first chapter, we look at the multi-directional impulse in various fields: business, parenting, and the day-to-day work of pastoral counseling.

In the next two chapters, we apply the concept to theology and practice. I offer some examples of what multi-directional leadership looks like when theology is contested, and then I give a few examples from Scripture and from church history, focusing primarily on John Stott as a recent example of someone who embodied this value. We look carefully at several ways leaders can cultivate a multi-directional sensibility in ministry.

Many cultural forces both inside and outside the church press against us and make it difficult to become multi-directional leaders. For this reason, in chapter 4, I examine some of the obstacles to multi-directional leadership—challenges that make it more attractive to remain one-directional so as not to invite criticism, rebuke, or controversy. We look at some of the barriers to growing in this skill, as well as the hurdles we have to cross if we hope to remain multi-directional for the duration of our ministries.



# **ONE-DIRECTIONAL VS. MULTI-DIRECTIONAL LEADERSHIP**

The burdens of Christian ministry are many. Faithful pastors care for the souls they shepherd. They care also for the Scriptures they are called to teach. They care about the cultural context in which they spread the good news of King Jesus. Good pastors work to preserve the unity of their congregation as they aspire to remain grounded in truth and overflowing in love. These are some of the primary burdens a pastor carries. Other Christian leaders also share in these burdens, even if the scope of responsibility and field of action look different.

Multi-directional leadership—the desire to show faithful versatility in applying the truth of God’s Word in today’s cultural context—matters most amid conflict, when dangers that threaten the flock are most prevalent. But multi-directional leadership also matters in a general sense. We need this faithful versatility in order to carry several pastoral burdens: the care of souls, commitment to Scripture, and concern for the culture.

### CARE OF SOULS

Consider a pastor's care for members of the congregation. In counseling, a one-directional leader will tend to prescribe the same spiritual medicine no matter the ailment. Warnings, admonitions, and exhortations will all sound the same. The one-directional pastor diagnoses a narrow set of spiritual sicknesses, mixes a narrow set of prescriptions, and stays alert to a narrow set of potential dangers.

In contrast, consider Paul's approach in addressing the Thessalonians. He exhorts the family of God to "warn those who are idle, comfort the discouraged, help the weak," and "be patient with everyone" (1 Thess. 5:14)—four different prescriptions. To know when and whom we are to warn, comfort, and help, we need God's wisdom and guidance. We must be versatile in our application.

Paul's instruction doesn't apply only to the pastoral role, of course, as this vision of ministry extends to members of the congregation who care for one another. He assumes this versatility—the wise and discerning application of truth to life—will occur among all church members. Perhaps the lazy person needs a tough warning about spiritual drift, while another believer needs an encouraging word of comfort. The one who is spiritually or physically weak will need others to come alongside and help. In all of these cases, patience is required.

We see in this rapid-fire set of instructions a truth central to multi-directional leadership: different problems require different remedies. Matt Smethurst puts it this way: "Paul is a physician of souls, prescribing different medicines for different maladies, and he expects ordinary church members to do the same."<sup>1</sup> The right counsel at the right time—this is multi-directional leadership in the ordinary work of a pastor or other church leader.

Sometimes, this care for souls is expressed not only through the right word, but the right emphasis. To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said two things: "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin anymore" (John 8:11). The tenderhearted person racked with guilt over lingering sin may need the pastor to emphasize Jesus's

1. Matt Smethurst, *1–2 Thessalonians: A 12-Week Study*, Knowing the Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 58.

first word of no condemnation; the *comfort* of the gospel is the note to play. But the believer steeped in sin who appeals to cheap grace in order to excuse a heart of indifference may need the pastor to emphasize Jesus's second word, the Spirit-filled command to no longer live in sin; the *challenge* of the gospel is the right note.

Caring for souls requires us to consider the right word, the right prescription, the right emphasis, and the right note at the right time.

### COMMITMENT TO SCRIPTURE

In preaching and teaching, pastors and other Christian leaders must learn to handle Scripture with care. When we find complementary truths that at times seem to stand in tension with one another, the multi-directional leader finds such complexity beautiful and doesn't shrink back from declaring the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). A one-directional leader, however, often falls back on the same biblical texts, preferring to lean on verses and passages that reaffirm the congregation's assumptions and preconceptions. As a result, some biblical truths are emphasized out of proportion, while other important truths are screened out entirely.

For example, some churches focus on the Christian's responsibility as salt and light in society, but with little emphasis on calling people to personal faith in Jesus. In other churches, congregants are assured every week of their personal salvation and exhorted to pursue individual holiness, but the Christian's social responsibility to the poor and oppressed draws scant attention.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warned about the temptation to satisfy itching ears. "People will not tolerate sound doctrine," he wrote, "but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear" (2 Tim. 4:3). It's easy to read a passage like this and assume the solution is to preach sound doctrine with passion, and this certainly makes sense as one way to apply the text. But a multi-directional leader recognizes many types of itching ears. Ear-tickling preaching can also consist of strong warnings about real doctrinal dangers—as long as your listeners enjoy hearing about problems that threaten everyone else. Your sermon may be a fiery broadside against a legitimate threat,

but if you only alert your flock to dangers they've long learned to see clearly, *you* may consider yourself a prophet, when in reality you're just a one-directional dispenser of selective warnings.

### CONCERN FOR CULTURE

Church leaders are right to show concern for the cultural context in which we're called to serve. One-directional leaders too often let the culture set the agenda for the subjects a pastor will address. Throughout history, many Christian leaders have settled for a narrow set of topics, a sliver of issues determined not by biblical emphasis but by the enthusiasm of their followers.

Take Billy Sunday, for example—a renowned 20th-century revivalist known for his fiery preaching against various sins of immorality and personal vice. His sermons certainly intended to “engage the culture” of his day. He relished his image as a preacher unafraid to take on people's sins—certain sins, that is. Curiously missing from his litany of evils was the racial injustice of the era that provided cover for the resurgent Ku Klux Klan and led to the Great Migration of black people from the South to the North.

Before Sunday's visit to Washington, DC, in 1918, an African American Presbyterian minister, Francis Grimké, urged him to confront racism. Sunday declined. Reflecting later on the event, Grimké wrote,

The members of our white churches are now, doubtless, patting themselves on the shoulder, chuckling in their sleeves, congratulating themselves upon the fact that they have passed safely through the ordeal of Mr. Sunday's diatribes, his scathing criticisms and denunciations without once being called to time by him for this sin [of racial prejudice]. . . . No word of condemnation, of disapproval fell from his lips, while denouncing almost every other sin under heaven.<sup>2</sup>

2. Francis Grimké, “Billy Sunday's Campaign in Washington, D.C.,” *The Works of Francis J. Grimké: Volume 1, Addresses Mainly Personal and Racial* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1942), 555. On a similar note, in 1886 American journalist and activist Ida B. Wells heard D. L. Moody preach. Wells praised Moody for his style and for his presentation of the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, yet wanted to ask why he accommodated segregation in the South and “never touched upon that phase of sin—caste distinction—practiced even in the churches and among

Tensions over what sins are “respectable” remain with us today. Not long ago, I heard from a pastor on the West Coast who planned to mention the evil of abortion during a time of public prayer and received pushback from members of his staff. They worried some visitors might be offended. He found it interesting that in previous prayer times, no one had questioned his stance on issues related to a Christian’s care for immigrants or our country’s racial injustice. I’ve spoken with pastors in the Deep South whose experience has been the opposite. Church members expect the pastor to pray for the abolition of abortion, but grow nervous when prayers focus on the less fortunate, the immigrant, or victims of racial discrimination.

One-directional leaders avoid these moments of tension in one of two ways. Either they claim biblical fidelity requires them to give little thought to their cultural context (in order to remain untainted by the world), or they sidestep any issues that will jeopardize their popularity with their core constituency (in order to preserve unity in the church). Neither path is best. In the first case, leaders who disavow the idea of understanding and engaging the culture may think they’ve avoided cultural assimilation. In reality they and their followers remain blind to the ways they’ve been formed *unknowingly* by their cultural context.<sup>3</sup> In the second case, leaders who sidestep volatile issues compromise the breadth of the gospel’s challenge to the culture by narrowing the scope of Scripture.

Multi-directional leaders approach the matter differently, recognizing that a global faith transcending all cultures will find points of affirmation and points of disassociation in every society. They are alert to the danger of cultural captivity, even among church leaders who brush off cultural concerns.

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Christianity.” Wells, quoted by Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74.

3. “If we never deliberately think through ways to rightly contextualize gospel ministry to a new culture, we will unconsciously be deeply contextualized to some other culture.” Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 97.

Multi-directional leadership involves faithful versatility—the ability to see and respond to various challenges no matter how or where they arise. In order to gain a better glimpse of this leadership quality, let's consider two other spheres of life in which this kind of dexterity matters: business and parenting.

### **MULTI-DIRECTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN BUSINESS**

We could look at several areas in which multi-directional leadership matters for savvy decision-making, but we'll stick with just one: how should an organization respond to an economic downturn or to a business initiative that failed to deliver anticipated revenue?

Leaders with *expertise in finance* will often urge the organization to cut expenses and manage to the bottom line until the situation stabilizes. Leaders with an *entrepreneurial spirit* will insist on investing in new initiatives that may lead to future growth. The ultimate decision-makers can't afford to be one-directional in this matter. Both paths, taken to the extreme, open organizations to significant business threats. The danger on one side is to manage expenses so tightly that opportunities for growth and investment are squashed. The danger on the other side is to invest in new initiatives without clear goals or discipline in spending. In both cases, the result could be further decline or, worse, financial disaster. A multi-directional leader will chart the more difficult course of finding ways to cut expenses *and* invest in the future.

### **MULTI-DIRECTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN PARENTING**

Faithful versatility is required for parenting as well. A good mother will recognize when her child is most vulnerable to sin and temptation. Some kids wrestle with stubbornness and pride; others are overly compliant and lack self-confidence. An observant mother will be attuned to her children's weaknesses in order to care for them well.

The same is true when we give our children biblical instruction. I've come to cherish bedtime conversations when my kids bring up questions about Scripture and theology (although at times I've wondered if their goal is to delay "lights out"). Our 12-year-old daughter

recently asked about God's purpose behind the pandemic that has upended all our plans, taken hundreds of thousands of lives, and left our country's economy weakened. Believing the virus to be a sign of divine judgment, she wondered why God caused so many people to lose their lives or livelihoods. In response, I took her to the book of Job and the story in John 9 of the man born blind, in order to guide her away from a simple correlation between particular suffering and specific sins. We don't understand all the ways of God, I told her, emphasizing what the Bible says about the mystery of God's sovereignty.

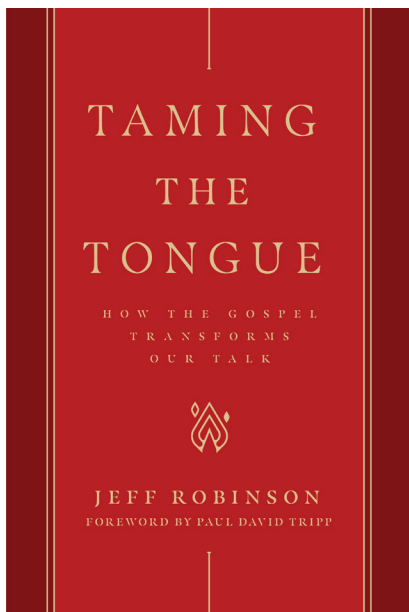
In an earlier conversation, our 16-year-old son commented on how we can't know what God is up to in this crisis or give any solid reason behind the trial. In response, I cited a number of biblical passages that stress God's sovereignty over earthly calamities and the opportunities for repentance and renewal that accompany every tragedy. I also mentioned the testimony of many Christians throughout history who had no trouble seeing God as active in human affairs, even in times of plague and other terrible circumstances.

Had someone listened to both of these conversations, they might have thought I was contradicting myself. In truth, I aimed to balance out my kids' perspectives by bringing to light other important biblical truths: an emphasis on mystery for my daughter who spoke of the pandemic in simple terms, and an emphasis on God's sovereign involvement for my son who seemed too agnostic about God's intention. Delivering biblical instruction to our children is an important aspect of parenting; being multi-directional involves a commitment to the glorious tensions and beautiful paradoxes we see in Scripture.



Whether we lead in business or in ministry, as parents or as pastors, the skill of multi-directional leadership remains vital. One-directional leaders leave the flock vulnerable and defenseless against threats from a different side of the field. Multi-directional leaders, though, spot various threats from different angles and adjust their leadership accordingly. We'll now explore some areas in which many church leaders struggle to lead in this way, and we'll look at some examples of multi-directional leadership in practice.

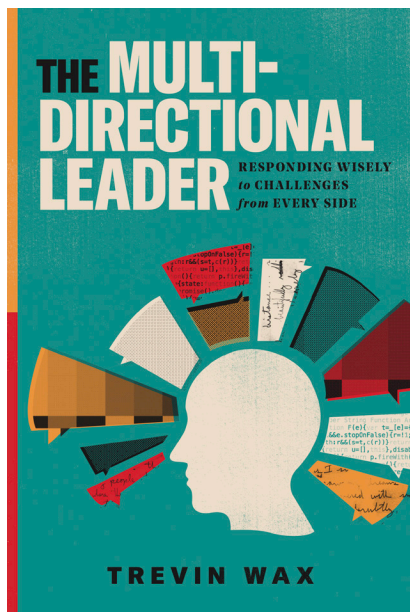
**ANOTHER TGC PUBLICATION**



“This book hit home with me, perhaps because some of my greatest regrets have come from ways I’ve misused words—confidences I didn’t keep, criticism I was too eager to offer, bragging to make myself seem important, dominating the conversation when I should have listened. I’ve also misused words by keeping silent when I should have come clean, when I should have offered praise, when I should have spoken up. These and many more insights on how we use our words are covered in this brief but wisdom-filled book—a great book to read prayerfully on your own, but even better to use to discuss with a small group.”

**NANCY GUTHRIE**, author and Bible teacher

**ANOTHER TGC PUBLICATION**



“Trevin Wax writes with keenness of insight, pastoral wisdom, and prophetic forcefulness. In this book he articulates the pressure today’s Christian leaders feel from every direction. Wax remains one of my most reliable counselors for leading in a rapidly shifting context.”

**J. D. GREAR**, pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina; president, Southern Baptist Convention



## THE GOSPEL COALITION

The Gospel Coalition (TGC) supports the church in making disciples of all nations, by providing gospel-centered resources that are trusted and timely, winsome and wise.

Guided by a Council of more than 40 pastors in the Reformed tradition, TGC seeks to advance gospel-centered ministry for the next generation by producing content (including articles, podcasts, videos, courses, and books) and convening leaders (including conferences, virtual events, training, and regional chapters).

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