

Strengthen
Your Leadership
Journey

Chapter 7

THE SUBJECT

WE DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT

When was the last time
you heard a sermon or seminar
on "false leaders"?

This chapter
offers insight into
a subtle danger
that is in the air
all leaders
breathe.

My prayer is that
God will use this to
better equip you
for service in
His Kingdom.

Stacy T. Rinehart

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Chapter 7

THE SUBJECT

WE DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT

Several years ago, I started asking leaders and groups in various countries this question: “When was the last time you heard a sermon or seminar on “false leaders”?”

Experienced leaders from all parts of the world gave me a blank stare. “I can’t remember,” was the normal reply.

Then I asked, “When was the last time you talked about or taught on the topic?” They had a similar response.

Whether pastors of prominent churches, leaders of mission boards, network leaders, church planters, foundation representatives, or elders and deacons in churches, the topic is seldom, if ever, brought up. We, as leaders, seem to run from this topic. It is the subject we don’t want to talk about among ourselves and the subject we rarely bring up with those we lead.

Yet Jesus made it clear what He wanted in kingdom leaders and what was not wanted. Can you imagine being a Pharisee or scribe and hearing Jesus say, “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites” (Matt. 23)? He said it seven times. Jesus made it clear what He didn’t want in His kingdom leaders. It made a mark on the apostles.

His apostles taught about this topic. There are many references to false leaders in the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles. If it was such a big topic of discussion in the early church, we need to make it a common topic for ourselves and those we lead. (Note: see Appendix D for list of references). Teachings about false leaders in the New Testament serve as a warning to leaders. It clarifies what Jesus rejects.

Jesus will evaluate each of us based on His standards and criteria for kingdom leaders and not our own.

There is more about what kingdom leaders are to be and not be in the New Testament than there is about “church.” Consider the number of positive or negative direct teachings on leadership. How many direct teachings on “church”? Then consider that each Gospel, Acts, and Epistle was written by one of the leaders in the “church.”

We know what they did by what they focused on in their writings.

Something is wrong with us when we seldom raise this topic, address this issue, and take Jesus’s teaching seriously. Could it be that we are not leading in light of eternity? Could it be that there are more false leaders among us than we could imagine? Could it be that we are afraid of what it will do to those who follow us if we really addressed this topic? Could it be that we don’t want to lose our position or the number of followers we have? Could it be that we care more about what people think of us than what Jesus thinks of us?

Three Kinds of False Leaders

There are many passages about false leaders in the New Testament, and there are many ways to look at this topic. I suggest that there are three ways to discern false leaders:

1. Doctrinal false leaders
2. Character false leaders
3. Ministry false leaders

This is my way of categorizing false leaders. However, at some point I suggest you do this on your own. Simply look at all the passages on false leaders in the New Testament (see Appendix D for a comprehensive list) and then summarize what you see in terms of categories that make sense to you. Then begin teaching and sharing what the Spirit taught you. I offer my thoughts to prompt further study.

Jesus will evaluate each of us based on His standards and criteria for kingdom leaders and not our own. If you are a pastor or leader of any kind of ministry, I urge you to do this study on your own. Do this for your own sake and the sake of those you influence.

Doctrinal False Leaders

Doctrinal heresy is the most obvious way people identify a false leader. In our evangelical world, we are savvy as to what false teaching is. Seminaries, Bible colleges, and books emphasize correct doctrine. Some of the best Bible teachers are on TV, YouTube, and podcasts; write books; and are featured speakers at well-attended seminars and conferences. Also many false leaders broadcast their heresies far and wide.

Many think the only category for false leaders was the “false teacher” who taught bad doctrine. This is incomplete. Because we focus on doctrine and not on living out the Bible, we miss so much of the New Testament emphasis.

When we talk of doctrinal false teachers, we are not talking about the minor issues of the faith,

such as how or when to be baptized, what kind of church governance to use, or other non-central issues.

For several decades I have worked with leaders of churches, ministries, denominations, and mission boards from many parts of the world and from many Christian persuasions. For these many leaders who truly are concerned about the growth of the church in their nation, region, or town, there is tremendous unity. This is because we major on the majors of the faith and focus on the things that concern Jesus and His people.

Paul said,

Preach the word... For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:3–4)

It is the Word, the written Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, that is our authority for ministry and guide to how we lead, treat people, and minister in the name of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. The Scriptures are authoritative for us. To live under Jesus’s authority and Lordship is to live under His Word. After all, He is the Word (John 1), and when He returns, “His name is called the Word of God” (Rev. 19:13).

Many in our day seek great numbers of followers. This is the motivation of some pastors, ministry leaders, and their boards. “Success” is demonstrated by size isn’t it, they think. But in order to be attractive to so many people, they accommodate the Scriptures and make it palatable to the masses. This way of thinking is foreign to the ways of Christ and the apostles. Accommodators are really those who have historically been called “man pleasers.” They are people “who loved the approval of man rather than the approval of God” (John 12:42–43).

“Man pleasers” are prevalent in our churches. They teach people to accommodate to the culture in the name of toleration. Paul warns us about these leaders who “hold to a form of godliness but have denied its power” (2 Tim. 3:5). They use God words but reject the spirit and authority of Jesus. They teach people to tolerate and even embrace cultural norms over the teachings of Jesus and His apostles. It is sobering to recall that Satan took pieces of the Bible three times to attempt to manipulate Jesus. False leaders do the same.

Jesus spoke the word (John 6) and many left. The message to God’s people is a discipleship message. The message to the lost is one of salvation. The apostles taught the people of God a discipleship message—one of living, thinking, and relating to people under the Lordship of Jesus.

We need to be grounded in the faith as Paul said to Titus, “But as for you, speak the things fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Notice that he then focuses on character. “Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance” (Titus 2:2).

We know so much, but living what we know is another matter. This then becomes the second reason people are false leaders—their character.

Character False Leaders

Who is without sin? “If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:10). The issue is not perfection in a leader but rather the state of a leader’s heart, values, motives, and character.

Peter highlights character issues of false leaders in his second letter. Yes, they do introduce destructive heresies (false teaching), but their real

condemnation comes from their character. He points out their shameful ways of greed, exploitation, arrogance, adulterous eyes, seduction, and reveling in their pleasures. Peter says, “These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them” (2 Pet. 2:17).

Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and scribes repeatedly for their character. “Hypocrites” was His one-word summary. They said one thing and did another. They majored on the minors, twisted Scriptures to their own ends, and put on a show

to be noticed by people thinking they would preserve their religious reputation (Matt. 23).

Jude says it differently. These false leaders creep in among us unnoticed, living undisciplined, fleshly lives. They are intentional, and their actions influence people toward themselves and their way of thinking. Rebellious and arrogant in their heart, they think they know what they really do not know. They

are self-centered and ungodly in their life and with their words. They cause divisions, are worldly minded and devoid of the Spirit. They are manipulators toward their own ends and do not fear the Lord or give thought to being evaluated by Him.

How Does This Look Today?

We are tempted to soft-pedal teaching on our human sickness—sin. In our cultures we pay a cost to claim Christ as Lord and call people to live godly and holy lives. What if a teacher or pastor doesn’t teach on sin, that Jesus is the only way, and that pure and godly living under the Lordship of Jesus is expected of His followers? Is this because the teacher might offend people and he or she is afraid they won’t come back. What are his or her motives? Big crowds usually mean big budgets, big buildings, and a big salary. Though many church leaders have good hearts, some do

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not. Ambition can drive us to become masters of manipulation and skilled communicators, driven by greed for more and bigger.

The veneer of doctrinal correctness can rot our souls. Many of us hide behind our theological systems and give little attention to pursuing godliness. Yes, we need to understand and teach correct doctrine and at the same time pursue godly living and Christ like character. It is our character that validates our message. Paul made it clear that elders and deacons were qualified or disqualified by their character (1 Tim. 3). As Paul says, “Godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim. 4:8).

What if someone is caught in a character problem? Paul gives this direction: “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted” (Gal 6:1).

At any point in my life, I can be a false leader by my character failures. This thought drives me to rely on the grace of Jesus. “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory, blameless with great joy...” (Jude 24).

Ministry False Leaders

Early in my Christian life, I observed a leader who used his dominating personality to shame and subdue his followers. His approach made people timid to “challenge” him in any way. As a result he rose in his ministry organization because he was an “effective leader and got things done.” With any sensitivity and only casual observation, one could see wounded and shattered people in

the wake of his influence. Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:15–20).

This is an example of a false leader because of his ministry approach or results. Another label is spiritual abuse. It is toxic to those under this kind of leader’s influence. Those who make it out of the system often leave feeling defeated, like failures or like second-class citizens.

We are not just talking about a question of abuse. We must look at the people in a ministry over a period of time. What is the fruit coming from them? They reflect the leader’s ministry. Are these people growing in expressions of the fruit of the Spirit? Are they growing in Christlikeness? Jesus said you will know them by their fruit.

How many of us have manipulated, shamed, dominated, threatened, and even fired those who didn’t conform to our direction? If we are honest, most of us ministry leaders affirm that we have done some form of this at some time in our ministries. Our heart was not right at that point. Perhaps we only knew the way of the world’s leadership because we weren’t shown Jesus’s way.

Regardless of why we did it, whether in the flesh, in direct rebellion to Jesus, or even in ignorance, at that point we were false leaders because of the way we dealt with those we influenced. Perhaps we taught correct doctrine in our messages and sermons, but, still, we were false leaders because of the way we treated people.

I observed from a distance a “CEO pastor” who came into a church and decimated its core leaders and families. He did this in the name of making changes to be relevant to the lost that would come to the church. His goal was to make the church a “seeker church.” Result? There were spiritual people leaving the church for years. These people came to Christ through this church. Now because of the new pastor, they were marginalized and

We read about false leaders and most of us will say, “At times, that was me.” Perhaps guilt and shame are our feelings right now. I am reminded of the grace of Jesus toward the woman caught in adultery.

rejected so many left. The church was his to run and shape according to his vision.

What was the ministry outcome of his leadership? He did what he wanted and got what he asked for. He didn't seem concerned that spiritual people gave up on the church. All he seemed to care about was that the church grew numerically—and it did. He eventually got his new building on good property right off a freeway. He got his bigger numbers and his theater-quality preaching center. But at what damage to people in the process? What will those sheep he was assigned to shepherd say to Jesus? Their hurts and wounds were insignificant in importance compared to accomplishing his vision regardless of who he wounded or offended. Was he a Christ-like leader? The real question is, "What will Jesus say to him when He evaluates his ministry?"

We read about false leaders, and most of us will say, "At times, that was me." Perhaps guilt and shame are our feelings right now. I am reminded of the grace of Jesus toward the woman caught in adultery. Her accusers wanted to stone her. Jesus bent down and wrote in the dirt. "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," He said to them. They all left one by one until she stood alone before Jesus. He did not condone her sin; He said, "Go and sin no more" (John 8:1–11). I am constantly amazed at Jesus's tenderness and grace with sinners and repentant people. He gives grace and forgiveness to you and me. He did not negate the seriousness of sin. Loving the sinner and hating the sin is the way of Jesus.

Prosperity Gospel

The prosperity gospel is a movement sweeping much of the developing world. Africa and Latin

America are two areas where this movement is thriving. It is known also as the "health and wealth gospel" or the "gospel of success." It is a movement where many false leaders are evident to spiritually discerning people.

One leader in Cameroon shared with me that the prosperity gospel affects 75 percent of the leaders and churches. He said, "Pastors who want to maintain their people preach prosperity. It is what the people want to hear. It is like parents bringing candy to their children because they want it."

What Jesus values is not important, but the quantity of money you can get and give is what matters. A person's spirituality or a leader's spirituality is measured by his or her wealth and possessions."

Notice Paul's grief and sorrow when he spoke of false leaders among God's people. Also note Paul's commitment to faithfully address this topic of false leaders when he spoke to the Ephesian elders for the last time.

My purpose is not to detail this false doctrine and ministry practice but to say that false-ministry practices of all kinds have popular appeal to leaders because they attract people and appeal to our comfort and pleasure. The best thing we can do to counter this and other deceptions is to train and mentor leaders in the ways of Jesus, His teaching about false leaders, and the vision to lead in light of eternity.

How Do We Respond to False Leaders?

Now that we are more aware of the traits and categories of false leaders, we probably know a few. What do we do with them? Perhaps even more seriously for us, we see traits of a false leader in ourselves. What do we do?

The first step for ourselves is always to turn from our fleshly or evil ways. Repentance is always first. One of the deep messages of this book is to call us to look at Jesus's standards and teaching for leaders. He wants us to turn from our fleshly, worldly ways of leading and conform to His ways. Confession, seeking forgiveness, and repentance is the process. If we each truly look at ourselves

compared to Jesus's and His apostles' teachings, all of us will have some repenting to do.

What about others? Paul mentioned a false leader by name in a personal letter (Demas—2 Tim. 4:9) as did John (Diotrephes—3 John 9–11). Peter and Jude did not mention any by name in their public letters but rather by description. In His public ministry, Jesus rebuked some leaders in His presence. Everyone saw right in front of them the faces of the Pharisees and scribes present for Matthew 23. Can you imagine the rage in their hearts and on their faces at Jesus's public rebuke? He also taught about false leaders calling some Balaam, Jezebel, or Nicholaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15).

False leaders, particularly those with fleshly motives and character, are not always apparent. It often takes some time to see through them. As Paul said, "For some men, their sins are quite obvious, for others, they follow after" (1 Tim. 5:24). We are slow to pick up fleshly and ungodly motives and subtle ungodly character flaws because we qualify leaders by a pervasive model of content transfer. In Jesus's training of the twelve and the early apostles ministries, Christ-like character was first and foremost. It must become the same for us today.

Our goal is not to eradicate false leaders. Jesus taught us not to try. In the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt 13:24–30), Jesus indicated the enemy sows tares. The temptation is to rip out tares, but Jesus says let them grow together until the harvest. At the harvest the reapers will first gather tares and burn them up but will gather wheat into His barn.

Jesus also said, "Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if a blind man guides a blind man, both will fall into a pit" (Matt. 15:14).

Notice Paul's grief and sorrow when he spoke of false leaders among God's people. Also note Paul's commitment to faithfully address this topic of false leaders when he spoke to the Ephesian elders for the last time.

Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. (Acts 20:27–31)

I was in coffee a shop recently, talking with my longtime friend about this topic. He made a profound statement: "False leaders are not in the closet—it's those who are faithful who are in the closet." He is right. We need leaders working together across denominational lines to ensure false teaching isn't being propagated without a response from faithful, godly leaders. Let's get out of the closet and speak into this issue with those we influence. After all, we will stand before Jesus for our personal audit.

Several decades ago, I was an elder at a fast-growing church. We had a pastor with strong communication gifts. The church was growing quickly, and many quality spiritual leaders were joining the church. Many people were coming to Christ, but something wasn't right. A number of us elders began discussing what was going on with the pastor's character. We still couldn't put our finger on it but spent time praying and interacting. We decided to broach the subject in an elders' meeting. Our goal was to get the pastor

to spend more time with his family and focus more on his own spiritual life while giving the day-to-day running of the church to his most able associate. This caused a major blowup. Since we weren't seeking to divide the church in any way, we elders who saw this (almost half of the elder board) quietly left the elder board and the church over the next year or so.

About three years later, the pastor was caught in sexual indiscretion. Everything exploded, and the church was in crisis over this pastor's refusal to take a leave of absence to work on his character and marriage. After seeking many ways to address the issue to bring healing to the pastor, he was finally fired. Many were deeply hurt. It is hard to imagine a false leader right in our midst who influenced us each week.

Perhaps Jude's words best summarize how we should respond to false leaders: "Have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 22–23).

Should we shrink back because we are afraid of being a false leader? By all means don't do this. Instead "be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

Jesus, the high, exalted Creator; King; and Savior of the world, went down into the Jordan River to be baptized by John. John was shocked. Jesus should be exalted. John knew he was not even worthy to untie Jesus's sandals and did not want to identify Jesus with repentance and forgiveness of sins (Matt. 3).

But Jesus did this to identify with us. We have a great High Priest and Mediator who understands our weaknesses. He loves and intercedes for us.

"Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24–25).

Prayer

Lord, from my heart, I want to be a faithful undershepherd of Your people. Open my eyes to where I've been a false leader in any way. Teach me Your ways. Show me Your truth, and lead me by Your Spirit so I can faithfully serve You and Your people. (Psalm 25:4–5)

Questions for Thought or Discussion

1. Look through the list of Scriptures in Appendix D. What observations do you make?
2. How did this chapter make you feel?
3. Look over the types of false leaders in this chapter. Which ones have you personally observed in others?
4. What are some areas in your life, leading, or ministry that the Spirit convicted you of?

How you lead matters.

If God used this one chapter to "speak" to you,
imagine what He can do with the entire book.

He can use it in your life and in the lives
of those you influence.

Appendix D

REFERENCES TO FALSE LEADERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew

5:19
7:15–23
9:1–13
12:9–14, 22–45
13:24–30, 36–43
15:1–20
16:1–12, 23
21:12–16, 23–46
22:1–46
23:1–36
24:4–5, 23–25
26:3–5, 20–25,
26:47–50, 57–68
27:20
28:11–15

Mark

2:15–17, 23–28
3:1–6, 22–30
7:1–16
8:11–16, 31–53
10:2
11:15–18, 27–33
12:1–40
13:21–22
14:17–21, 43–46,
14:55–65
15:1–15

Luke

5:17–26, 29–39
6:1–11
7:30, 36–50
10:25–37

Luke (continued)

11:15–26, 37–54
12:1–3
13:10–17, 31–33
14:1–6
15:1–2
16:14–16
19:36–40, 45–48
20:1–8, 19–47
22:1–6, 47–53,
22:66–23:5
23:10

John

2:12–22
5:10–18
7:25–36, 40–53
8:1–11, 13, 48–59
9:13–34, 40–41
10:22–39
11:47–57
12:4–11, 19, 42–43
13:21–24
18:1–14, 19–24
19:1–16

Acts

4:1–22
5:17–42
6:8–8:3
8:9–24
9:23–25
13:45
15:1–5
20:28–31

Romans

16:17–18

1 Corinthians

3:1–15

2 Corinthians

10:1–18
11:4–15, 20

Galatians

1:6–10
2:4–5, 11–21
5:1–12
6:12–13

Ephesians

4:14

Philippians

1:15–17
3:17–19

Colossians

2:8, 18–19

1 Thessalonians

2:5–6

2 Thessalonians

2:1–3

1 Timothy

1:6–7, 19–20
4:1–3
6:3–5

2 Timothy

1:15–18
3:6–9, 13
4:3–4, 10, 14–15

Titus

1:10–14, 16

Hebrews

13:9

1 Peter

5:2–3

2 Peter

2:1–22
3:17

1 John

2:18–19
4:1–6

2 John

7–11

3 John

9–11

Jude

3–23

Revelation

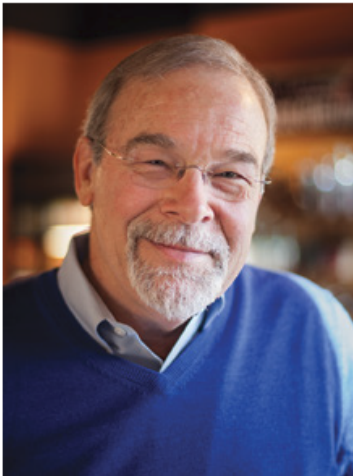
2:1–7, 12–17,
2:18–29

Suggestions

1. Scan each reference looking for doctrinal, character, and ministry false leaders.
2. Investigate the strategies false leaders use to gain or maintain influence and control.

“If you have been stirred or challenged or if you think this chapter is important, I invite you to send it via email to any leader you think will profit from it. You may also duplicate it to hand out to leaders in your ministry for thought and discussion.”

Stacy T. Rinehart



Stacy Rinehart is the founder of MentorLink International, a global ministry focused on multiplying Christ-like leaders. Stacy is a former Vice President of the Navigators and holds a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary and a D.Min. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He and his wife, Paula, reside in Raleigh, North Carolina.

More about the book:

A Look Ahead

In the pages that follow, we unfold the theme of leading in light of eternity. For now, here is a brief summary of each chapter.

CHAPTER 1

Jesus calls us to serve Him and His kingdom purposes.

CHAPTER 2

Each of us will be audited by Jesus—we are accountable to Him.

CHAPTER 3

We each have to choose whether we will lead in the natural ways of the flesh or follow Jesus's ways.

CHAPTER 4

Jesus calls us to lead from the inside out, focusing on our heart, character, values, and motives.

CHAPTER 5

We look at the Leader's Covenant as “aspirations” for living and leading like Christ.

CHAPTER 6

We delve into the principles of how Jesus took common people and made them into world-changing leaders.

CHAPTER 7

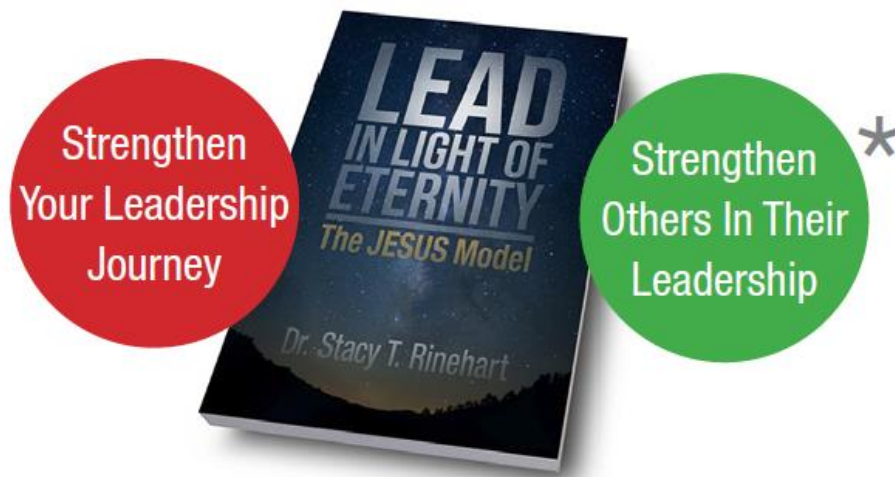
There is a subject we just don't want to talk about—false leaders—but we will.

CHAPTER 8

Like the polluted air in Beijing, we are at spiritual risk with the idolatry of organizationalism.

CHAPTER 9

We summarize the book by looking at seven distinct realities of the kingdom.



“Thank you for reading this chapter.
I encourage you to buy and read the book.
Let God change you to lead more like Jesus.

Help those you lead
by sharing the book with them.”

Stacy T. Rinehart

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