

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. A podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. And now your host Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Well, hey everybody. And welcome to episode 434 of the podcast. It's Carey here. And I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. Well, we have a wide ranging conversation with Steve Carter. Steve was the teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church until 2018. We are going to talk about what happened and his perspective on it. And I'll have some things to say at the end of this podcast. Just a warning, there's some sensitive matters. And if you know the story, you know what I'm talking about, we'll get into it in a minute. But we're going to go beyond that as well, what the crisis taught him as a Millennial leader, why character matters so much and what Steve's up to now as a leader as well. This episode is brought to you by World Vision. You can sign up for their free web series, Right Side Up Soul Care, with one of my heroes, Danielle Strickland, over at worldvision.org/carey.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And by CDF Capital, you can learn about their XP Summit cohorts and sign up today by going to cdf.capital/cohorts. So Steve and I are going to talk about, well, what happened at Willow Creek a few years ago. And if you've been following that story, it was in all the national press. Very sadly, very tragically on every front. It was revealed that Bill Hybels had a series of unwanted and completely inappropriate interactions, relationships, and even dynamics in his relationship with a number of female employees and people at Willow Creek. It was heartbreaking and devastating for all involved, for the women, obviously, but also for the whole church and everyone who put their trust in a church leader. And Steve and I talk about that. Steve was actually named as one of Bill's successors. He was going to take on the teaching role. And then of course the news of what had been going on broke.

Carey Nieuwhof :

It surprised Steve. He did not know. Most people did not know. And we journey through that, we can't do an exhaustive treatment of what happened, that's not the purpose of this podcast, but Steve is going to bring his perspective. And one of the reasons I wanted to have this conversation is I've talked to so many leaders who have ended up in a similar situation. Now, not making national headlines like that, but perhaps you're a younger leader, and Steve was 38 at the time, who has had to deal with indiscretions or inappropriate or abusive behavior by someone else, maybe your successor, maybe your boss and Steve's perspective is really helpful. Or perhaps, and if this is the case, I am so sorry, perhaps you've been a victim at the hands of someone who abused their power, abused their position. And if that's the case, I hope that this episode isn't triggering to you, I did share it with a number of people to run it through a filter to make sure I wasn't missing anything.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And I hope that's the case. And I just also want to say I'm so sorry. That is not how leadership should operate. That is not how the church should operate. I have some thoughts at the end of this episode in the What I'm Thinking About segment where I will talk not specifically about Willow, but just why do these things keep happening and how can we stop it in our lives? So, anyway, that's a bit of an extended introduction on this one. Let me tell you a little bit about Steve. Steve is a pastor, speaker, author, podcast host and former lead teaching pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. He hosts

the Craft and Character Podcast where he helps people get better at the art of communication and at their character, obviously. His desire is to bring Jesus into every conversation. He also co-hosts one of the top sports podcasts, The Home Team Podcast, where NFL players, Trey Burton and Sam Acho.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Did I pronounce that right? This is how much I know about sports. Which unpacks the intersection between faith, culture, sports and family. His latest book, which we get into, The Thing Beneath the Thing, is so good. If you want to finish strong, I would encourage you to pick up that book. And if you want to lead better, it's a great book. Hey, today's episode is brought to you by World Vision. The deepest truths about living like Jesus, which is the goal, come from leaders who are often suffering, persecuted and living in a hostile environment. So World Vision has put together a series with Danielle Strickland, it's called Right Side Up Soul Care. It is about your soul, which is so important. It's free. And you can sign up today at worldvision.org/carey. And if you're an executive pastor, I know we have a lot of executive pastors listening, CDF Capital is running some executive summit cohorts.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And as a member of a cohort, if you join, you're going to grow personally and professionally, you'll engage in three in-person experiences with a world-class mentor to see his or her ministry firsthand, you'll connect in monthly coaching sessions with a ministry professional who knows you and can speak to your ministry with accuracy and insight and enjoy conversation and community with your peers across the country. Cohorts are really important. I've participated in different ones hosted by CDF. I highly recommend them. You can go to cdf.capital/cohorts to sign up today. Well, with all that said, let's move into my conversation with Steve Carter, which went all over the place, including his final years at Willow, what he learned as a young leader, some time in the desert as he rethought his life and what his plans were going to be, and reflect on so many things. I hope you find it helpful. Here we go. Steve, I've been looking forward to this conversation for a long time. Welcome.

Steve Carter:

Thank you so much, Carey. I just absolutely love you and the stuff that you put out. I just got to tell you, you are an absolute gift to the kingdom, so it's an honor to be with you, my friend.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Well, I appreciate it. I feel the same way about you. So I want to start here. I think we probably should start here. So three years ago you were positioned to be one of the successors, the key teaching pastor at Willow Creek Chicago, then everything changed as the allegations of long-term sexual abuse and harassment by the senior pastor, Bill Hybels surfaced, precipitating a crisis for everybody involved, and for the victims and just the sadness that created. So many things happened at once. What was it like to go through that as a leader? I know that's like it's such a simple question, it's so loaded, but man, you were there in the middle of it.

Steve Carter:

Well, okay. So this is fascinating because on multiple levels, first off, three years ago you released a book about a month after I resigned and it was called Didn't See It Coming, which...

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah, you're right.

Steve Carter:

So I am somewhere after I've left Willow and I run into your agent...

Carey Nieuwhof :

Esther.

Steve Carter:

Esther, and she's fantastic. She comes up to me and she goes, "Steve, I can't imagine what you're going through. Carey's got a book coming out in two weeks, you've got to read it." And I'll just be honest, that book, and again, the season, God surprised me with a lot of different voices, and that book though I think encapsulated a lot the feeling of I didn't see this coming. I did not.

Carey Nieuwhof :

You didn't know. You weren't sitting on a scandal.

Steve Carter:

And so this in so many ways, this was my dream job. This was the story of Dr. B pouring into Bill and then Bill going to pour into me, and I think any leader, whether in the marketplace, whether as a pastor, you can have these moments where you get out ahead and you start playing it out, "Well, someday I'm going to be able to be a Dr. B for somebody else." And I had just bought in. I bought into the values. I fell in love with the congregation. I loved Chicago. And then you don't see something coming that ends up being an earthquake of just culturally, within the kingdom, the layers to all of it, you had women who were being so brave and honest and human.

Steve Carter:

You had just decision-making that was just wrong. You had self preservation. In an organization that's almost a third of a billion dollars in assets and self-preservation is kicking in, and I'm in the middle of this trying to figure out... Number one, they don't prepare you for this in seminary. They don't go, "Hey, when a big, massive crisis comes and there's people on Twitter and there's... This is what you do." So you're learning and I am trying to make sense of what do I do? There's no win. And I'm a three on the Enneagram. And I felt like any decision I make I was going to hurt people, which for me forced a level of what are the most important values? What are the most important principles? And that's where words like character, which you, again, talk about in Didn't See It Coming, integrity, just start rising.

Steve Carter:

And I think really going, "What's the right thing?" And what I saw with these women as I started to hear their stories from them personally, I realized we've got to make some decisions. So it was a mixture. It was a bad cocktail of emotions of sadness, just anger at moments, feeling betrayed, trying to put myself in the position of women who were coming forward and for them not to feel seen or heard, or their allegations taken seriously, just all of that and having the responsibility to go, "I have to represent Christ. And how do I shepherd people through this as a pastor of a congregation I absolutely love?" And you just get into this reality of I've never been paid more. I've never spoken to a larger room. I've never had more influence. I've never had more, all of my dream job and achiever dreams had been made.

Steve Carter:

But if I'm just going to play church, if I'm going to play a role, if I'm going to go against these women's story, what am I doing? It's not what I set out to get into this calling for. It was to represent Christ well, and I just felt like we weren't doing a good job. And it wasn't the Willow that I knew. The Willow I knew was one that actually would be able to do that and have the honest conversation. And that's what I had been hoping for, but in some organizations at certain times I think a lot of people were trying to make sense of this and self preservation and organizational protection, I think, began to creep in almost and become more important than the mission.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah. It's almost like talking to you, and again, this is not a complete exegesis of what happened at Willow, and that's not the purpose, that is much beyond the purview of this conversation, but it was just tragic at every level. I felt for the women and you keep thinking, "Well, maybe this was one incident." And then you realize, "Oh, this appears to be a serial pattern over many decades." And it was sickening and just heartbreaking on every level for the women, for people who put their faith in a leader. I don't know. Words are still difficult to wrap around that. And you're in the middle of that.

Steve Carter:

Yeah, and I think partly recognizing too is I didn't do everything right. I had to come back and actually recognize oh man, there were parts of me that didn't want to believe. There were parts of me that wanted to protect. And I think having to begin to be really honest and really human about those parts in me, and I think what ends up happening is you start to find stuff out that have been buried or kept for many years or decades. And every leader knows this, but the violation of trust is one of the hardest, single most hardest things to restore and rebuild. And especially in the midst of a crisis when you don't know, "Who can I trust? Who's going to tell me the truth?" And I think that piece, I think, for everyone in the midst of it, you are having to wrestle with what is the truth, who can I trust and what is the next best right step forward?

Carey Nieuwhof :

That's a really interesting point. I hadn't thought about that, but I'm sure from the outside looking in, it's very easy to analyze and think you've got this figured out, but I'm sure when you're in the middle of that, you're like, "Wait, I've trusted the board. I've trusted Bill. I've trusted these people." That must've been deeply confusing. You hinted at something, you said, "I didn't do everything right." You got a couple of years distance now, looking back on it. Is there anything you wish you had done differently?

Steve Carter:

That's a great question. I think there's a handful. Right from the jump of I remember the Thursday night when The Tribune article dropped and the executive team, Hybels family, is just basically reading that article. And it was a long article. I think it was the longest article I'd ever read in a paper and it's almost 7,000 words. And the next day we ended up having a family meeting and I wasn't supposed to be...

Carey Nieuwhof :

By family you meant church or?

Steve Carter:

Yeah. It was the church congregation meeting to talk about the allegations and I wasn't supposed to be on that stage. And that day, that Friday, a couple people just came up to me and said, and Bill being one of them, going, "Hey, would you be on the stage? It would mean a lot to me." And part of it, I was like, "I don't really know all these stories, but I cared for him, I cared for our congregation and I had trust with the congregation. I should not have been on that stage."

Steve Carter:

And I had a check in my spirit going, "I don't think this is the wisest thing." But being on there, I wasn't aware enough of what that would communicate, one, to the women, and then, two, you know what it's like when you're onstage with multiple people? Sometimes you will see the energy level being different so you use humor or you try to ask a question to try and bring people down, so it's the right tone, it's the right spirit. And so much of this was B sensibilities versus Millennial sensibilities. And I was going, "This is not working."

Steve Carter:

"This is not going to work. This is not going to play well on social media." And I made a couple of jokes that I had to go to the women a month later, a month and a half later, and apologize for. What I say is I tried to bring the energy back down and the tone back down in those family meetings. But by making a joke, I minimized what the women were experiencing. I wish I didn't do that.

Carey Nieuwhof :

The story and the credibility.

Steve Carter:

The credibility, and that's on me. And then two, I think the trust piece, I didn't know who I could trust. And so one...

Carey Nieuwhof :

A huge lesson in that.

Steve Carter:

Yeah. And one of the things I ended up doing, because I didn't feel like I was getting the whole story is I went rogue. And meaning I ended up going to reach out to each of the women to basically say, "Hey, there's no reason for you to trust me, but would you tell me your story, because I don't feel like I'm getting it all?" And these women courageously did that two, three months in. That really helped me see how long they had been carrying this, what they had been walking through, what they had endured, which caused me to then have to respond but because I lacked the trust of certain people, I went rogue.

Steve Carter:

And I don't know if I could have done it differently because when you have a breakdown of trust, I just... But I wish I would have trusted a couple of more people who now I know were probably closer in alignment with me, but in that moment I didn't know and I just needed to get to the bottom of the truth. I mean, I had turned my basement into... It looked like the set of Scandal, the show, with the pictures, and I was trying to figure out all these stories, because many of the women I had never actually met. I knew of their names but I didn't know them. And so I didn't have personal relationships with

them. So part of it was the, "I got to figure this out. What is actually true? And who can I trust? And, again, what's the next best right step forward?"

Carey Nieuwhof :

So you think it was a mistake to talk to the women or you wish you'd talked to them sooner, or what?

Steve Carter:

No, not that I think it's a mistake, I think it was a piece that I went at it alone and I wish I would have trusted two elders in particular. I think they were closer in alignment that I could say, "Hey, you need to trust me, but I got to get to the bottom of this." I had just was getting these rumblings. And I felt like for a few months every day I was learning something new, a new fact, or a new allegation, or a new story or new conversation, or a new way something had been interpreted. And I was going, "Why is this happening?" And here's, again, another worst spot for any young leader to ever be in is when you have all the influence, but with no actual authority.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Because you were how old in 2018?

Steve Carter:

I was 38. Bill stepped down, I have the influence of the congregation. We loved each other. There was something beautiful there, but I wasn't an elder. I did not have authority for this is what needs to happen. And people had probably believed I had more authority than I did, but I think that that was a hard piece for me to navigate as well, having all of that influence and trust from the congregation to do the right thing but not actual the decision-making power to see it all the way forward. So I just wish today, if I could go back, I could have found just some space in me to go, "I'm going to trust you. And it might not work for me, but I need you to know I'm going to speak to these women." And I think I wish I would have not been on that stage. Those are two easy ones for me that I look back and go, "I wish I would've done that differently."

Carey Nieuwhof :

So is it speak less, listen more in a situation like that? Is it that, or is it different than that?

Steve Carter:

Well, I think in this culture today, it's a little bit guilt by association, but I think more than that, by being on that stage I represented that I was in solidarity to what was coming out of the mouths of other people, and I think not knowing the full story. If I had known the full story and I was in full backing, then I should be on the stage, but not knowing the full story. What it did was I felt like it was using my trust chips to almost go out to the congregation to go, "See, look at all of these people are in alignment, so you can trust us." There were parts...

Carey Nieuwhof :

When you didn't have an independent ability to verify that, which you then got later, but by that time...

Steve Carter:

Damage was done.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Those moments had happened. One of the things and, for the record, I wrote Didn't See It Coming, the manuscript was turned in long before the Willow scandal broke, but you're right, I was very concerned about the moral failure I had seen in leaders. I was concerned about burnout, cynicism, pride, all those things in leadership that honestly, I think, at some level we all have to battle.

Steve Carter:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And there isn't a section on affairs or abuse, but there is a section on cynicism and irrelevance and emptiness, which I think leaders bring. Because it's not just Willow, sadly these stories keep coming, they keep surfacing, I mean, I feel sick as I ask this question because you always think, "Okay, it's going to be over." And then it's not over. There's more and it's all kinds of denominations, all kinds of leadership. What is it in your mind about why moral failings by pastors and leaders is such an epidemic these days?

Steve Carter:

Man, I think that's something I've wrestled with myself.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Steve Carter:

Just trying to, trying to make sense of, because there was a run the past year where it felt like every month a-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Somebody new.

Steve Carter:

Spiritual giant, yes, somebody new and I don't think anybody just wakes up one day and goes, "You know what today I want to do, Carey, I want to train wreck my life. I want to sabotage every relationship, every ounce of integrity, every gift that has been entrusted to me. I just want to do that." I don't think it happens, but it really... I feel like seems to happen slowly but surely. Dave Chappelle the comedian, he signed a \$50 million contract with Comedy Central. Episode five he tells a joke and the room erupts in laughter and he doesn't think the laughter is worth that actual delivery of his joke.

Steve Carter:

He thinks it's off. And he has a moment where he's like, "All they see is dollar signs," and he walks off the set, calls his driver. Driver's says, "I'll be there in two minutes." Walks out. Driver goes, "Where you want to go?" "Take me to the airport." On the way to the airport he's looking for flights. Gets there, American, Delta, wherever he goes, "Take me to the farthest place." They find out that you can go to South Africa. He goes to South Africa in three hours. Hasn't told anybody. He goes to a monastery. He stays there for a month. And then six months later, like every celebrity who's trying to return, he finds himself on a couch with Oprah.

Steve Carter:

And I don't know how Oprah does this, man. She looks into his eyes. He starts to cry and she just looks at him and goes, "Why'd you do it, Dave? Why?" And he says this line, I'll never forget it. He says, "Because sometimes success can take you places that character cannot sustain you." And I come back to that. You hit it again. I feel like I could plug Didn't See it Coming again and again, but you talk about character development.

Carey Nieuwhof :

I got a whole section on character.

Steve Carter:

And we push competency again and again, over the development of our character. And I think what ends up happening with a lot of these young leaders and again, in the mega church world, is you have people who are vying for your attention. You have book deals, you have conferences, you have side hustles with other organizations that you've started. You've got speaking, you've got the pressures of leading a church.

Steve Carter:

And again, this world just gets bigger and bigger and bigger than what your character can sustain. And so the natural response is, "Take a shortcut." And the natural response is, "Nobody understands how hard it is and nobody gets what you're doing. You're the only one who cares about this." And slowly but surely you will look for a release. It's just human nature. You are going to look for a place to put that sadness, a place to escape, and it can be in food-

Carey Nieuwhof :

It doesn't have to be sex.

Steve Carter:

Right? Right. It can be in money. It can be in more power. But again, it is a addiction that often takes people into places. And then I think sometimes, I think some guys actually want out and they don't know how to actually do it well. And it's easier for them to blow it all up.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Had that conversation. I think I did tell the story in Didn't See It Coming very anonymized. But when I was a young leader up here, I've been in the same place for over 25 years. Same people, same community, same bride, all that stuff, just awesome. After a while, it just becomes awesome, right? That you're doing decades-long relationships with these people.

Carey Nieuwhof :

But I remember as a young leader, our church had started to grow, but the big church was in a town nearby. And it came out that the pastor had an affair with his assistant, ended up in the back row of our church. And I took him out for lunch one day. And I just said, "Why did you do it?" And he said the pressure of... And it wasn't like thousands, it was hundreds, but the pressure was so great. He said, "I just didn't know what to do, and this was easier. It was easier to step back because I did something immoral than to say, 'I don't know how to lead this thing anymore.'"

Carey Nieuwhof :

I've never forgotten that. That was over 20 years ago. And I'm like, "Wow." And that put in me... You think about it, you're right. Platform has its challenges. I have a moderate-sized platform, and it's not huge, not household names, but I'm so thankful I didn't have that in my thirties because I don't know what would have happened. I just had my hand to the plow trying to figure out every day, right?

Carey Nieuwhof :

And working with the people in my immediate site rather than a larger ministry. But man, it's hard. And I get those pitfalls. Do you think governance... I mean, governance has been part of the Willow story, but not just Willow, many other churches. Do you think governance can stop that, better governance, different governance? Or do you think it's a personal thing? Can you just cheat any system you happen to be in? It's a question I ask.

Steve Carter:

I think so. I think you can cheat. You can cheat anything. I think you can... I think unless you are walking in a level of humility that you have given permission and you are so clear, "Hey, I have this propensity to make this about me or to create the easiest pathway or to put people who are just yes people on my board," unless you're able to really interrogate the decisions you make, I think you can gamify anything. You can make anything work for you. And even the system at which... For me, one of the breakdowns in the governance model was... And I love the Carver model. That's what Willow was doing. And I had done and been a part of that in a couple of other organizations, but the way that it was interpreted is different from the other places that I had been.

Steve Carter:

And what I mean by that was the CEO would talk to the staff and the CEO would only talk to the CGO and that would be the board chair. And the CGO then would only talk to the other elders or the other board members. So what it did, was it created a one-on-one dynamic, which I think loses the essence of robust dialogue. It loses the essence. So I think then that puts it, who has the more power in a one-on-one conversation? And it plays to one person's strengths over another.

Steve Carter:

So I think what we have to do is really take into account our shadow sides. We have to take into account our natural giftings and go, "How do we almost create a board that protects us from ourselves and protects the mission and the vision and the beauty of what is trying to be accomplished?" Whether in a local church or in the marketplace or another great NGO.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah. I'm not saying there are better or worse forms of government. Clearly there are terrible forms of government and great forms of government, but I would probably be with you on that. And I think the key word in what you said for me is humility. If you're willing to submit yourself to someone else, because you can look great on paper, but you can basically set something up where everybody serves you.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And as Andy Stanley said many times, "Unless you're in the kingdom of God, power flows up." All the benefits flow to the person at the top. In the kingdom of God that gets reversed. But yeah, you use your power to serve others and you're accountable. And that's a very different reality. Any other thoughts on why all the... You kind of get into it, we're going to talk about your book, *The Thing Beneath the Thing*.

Carey Nieuwhof :

So maybe we can save it for that, but this is part of the reason I wrote *Didn't See it Coming* and do some of the other work I do is I'm concerned. And I'm seeing a counselor right now to make sure that I finish well, right? I don't want to blow it. I don't want to end up... How do you end up there? Right? And I think when you think you can't, maybe you do, I don't know. Trying to figure that out.

Steve Carter:

Well, it's funny, going into this interview, I just went back through some of my journals and after I read a book, I usually will just kind of quotes for notes is what I'll do. And I wrote down 11 back in I think September 15th, 2018 after I'd read your book, but you had one quote in there. "No matter how hard you try, you can't escape you." And I think often-

Carey Nieuwhof :

I've been trying for many years, singularly unsuccessful-

Steve Carter:

Right. Me too. And I think it's, we try whether in performance, we try in so many places to escape the pain points of our life. And we actually think the more good that we do will give us a free pass or we don't have to address. And you talk about this, you can't address what you don't... Are unwilling to confess. I think the level of humility that is required to finish well is being able to not just say, "I was wrong," when we say yes to Jesus, but to live a life that can be clearly, "I was wrong in that meeting. Hey, I was wrong with how I quoted that. And didn't give actual name recognition to that idea. I was wrong."

Steve Carter:

I think leaders have to be quicker to saying that they were wrong. And if they're not, then they're that power flowing up. Like you mentioned, with Andy Stanley, we will find ourselves justifying... You talk about this again. I feel like we should just make this about *Didn't See it Coming*, because everyone needs to read that book. It's a great book, but like literally you will start to justify your actions and the way-

Carey Nieuwhof :

You won't explain it, you'll excuse it and justify it.

Steve Carter:

Exactly. And when you start moving that, it's only a matter of time until you don't finish well.

Carey Nieuwhof :

I hear you on that. And one of the things that I'm encouraged... A lot of young leaders listening, I think I see more humility in Millennials and in Gen Z than perhaps I see an older Xers and Boomers, and that's a broad categorization, but the ability to say, "Yep, I'm still struggling." The ability to say, "I make

mistakes." The ability not to defend and try to preserve is really hard if you've had any modicum of success along the way.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And I remember a conversation we had maybe, correct me on the timeframe, maybe a month after you resigned from Willow. And I think you were literally in the desert. If I remember, I can't remember where I was. I was in my driveway when I took that phone call and we talked for a while. A month or two later, what emotions are you unpacking as your dream job, which you thought you had in succession appeared to be going well until this sick underbelly got revealed of what was really going on. And now you've got a whole new life, whole new future. You're still reeling. What's going on inside you, Steve?

Steve Carter:

I'd go to a local Starbucks. We live two minutes from Willow, three minutes from Willow. And I think for a lot of people in that congregation, they didn't know the actual story. So then all they had was just news reports. And this was a place where there's sweat equity. There was people who had given their--

Carey Nieuwhof :

They'd invested for decades.

Steve Carter:

Decades. You know what I mean? So this just didn't make sense. There was so much... And I think what was so tricky was people were so pot committed to the idea of this church. They had such pride in their church and this was just hard because this dealt with people that they loved, they respected. And I remember waking up in the middle of the night and I felt like God said, "Go to the desert and wait for instructions." And it hit me. I got up, grabbed my journal. I started to write more, "What does it mean?" I'm thinking metaphorically.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Not a lot of deserts near Chicago, right?

Steve Carter:

So I just start writing and I feel like I write this phrase. "You can't achieve your way out of this. You can only grieve your way through it." And I had all the muscle in the world to achieve. I was a guy who created goals, I'm a 5'11 guy with no jump shot. I had a goal to play division one basketball. Play's probably not the right word, because I sat on the bench, but I got free shoes. And I played division one basketball. I was a guy who had goals and went after it. I had no muscle when it came to grieving and to sitting in my sadness.

Steve Carter:

And so the next morning my wife wakes up and I tell her, "Hey, this is what I felt like I heard." And she teared up and she said, "Steve, I've been sensing the same thing. I just want to go home." And she was from Arizona and I realized, "Oh, this is literal. We are going to the desert."

Steve Carter:

And so I ended up buying as many books about the desert fathers and desert mothers. And just because like Eugene Peterson will teach us, your geography is so connected to your understanding of theology and how the desert had really shaped some of these first Christians, and desert comes from the idea of the deserted place.

Steve Carter:

And I felt like in many ways, that sense of... The dreams I had were deserted and the desert became this great untangling for what I thought was true, that wasn't, what I believed to be false, but was actually true. I mean, it untangled stuff about my identity. It untangled stuff about how I viewed my gifting, my worth. It got me to the core and with a crazy piece about the desert.

Steve Carter:

And you read Deuteronomy 8. You see the gift that the desert is, is you realize we are desert people and there is a stripping away. There is a reshaping of the heart in every leader. Doesn't matter if you're in the marketplace, it doesn't matter if you're in a church, you will go through these desert seasons. And I realized, if I can't do the desert well, I'll never be able to do the promised land well.

Steve Carter:

And for many of us leaders, we're trying to bypass the desert, bypass the wrestling, the stripping away, the confessing, the grieving, and almost the recognizing how we've just drifted. And I think for me, the desert has saved me. I would not have chosen it. And I'm so grateful it chose me because it has taught me so much and allowed my roots to go so much deeper than any stage could have ever done.

Carey Nieuwhof :

I think John Mark Comer says, "We often romanticize the desert," but he says, "It's actually our spiritual fathers and mothers." Now that was a place of torture. That is the dark night of the soul. That is the ripping apart. I'm not going to make it. And what were one or two lessons that God seared on your heart during your desert time?

Steve Carter:

Yeah. I think one of the easiest for me was realizing there's... We live in this time right now with simple tweetable phrases, "God is with me," and we love that. It's fantastic. And then it goes through a struggle and it's almost this kind of three-stage discipleship formation. We go through this simple statement that then ends up going through this struggle. And we wonder, "Is God really with me here in that dark night of the soul? Is God really with me in this deserted place?"

Steve Carter:

And then all of a sudden you recognize he is, and he starts to surprise you. And now that simple phrase has gone through the fire and the struggle, and it becomes something profoundly sacred. And I realized some of these statements, these theological realities that I had believed, but they had been removed from struggle.

Steve Carter:

And then, as I went through the struggle, they have a level of meaning and depth to them that I go, "Gosh, this is what is preparing me for what God has next." I think, secondly is when you're in the

desert, you have to focus on what you can control. There's a lot you can't control. And I think being able to control, "Okay, this is what I need to bring for this hike up Camelback Mountain, or this trek. This is what I can control."

Steve Carter:

The more that I began to become so familiar with, "I can't control what they're saying, what they're tweeting, what they're thinking, what people are messaging me. I can't control the next phase of outcome at Willow, I can't control. Here's what I can control. And let's just focus in on that and let's work towards that."

Steve Carter:

And I felt like for me, I stopped looking at other people's yards and I was able to focus in what God had entrusted to me and start to create in my opinion, some beautiful things. And that's been a real gift that I think before my head was probably way too much on a swivel, wondering, "What are they saying? What are they thinking? What's this? What's this?" And I think it's hard to keep the remain thing... The remaining and abiding in Christ when your head's constantly on a swivel.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah. A couple of thoughts. It's exactly what Tim Keller said in a recent interview that I had the privilege of doing with him, that when he was rethinking suffering in light of his cancer diagnosis and treatment, he didn't have new beliefs, but he went over the beliefs he had had for all of his life. And he's like, "I wrote a book on suffering, but then all of a sudden it meant something." I'm like, "These were intellectual truths." But he goes, "Now all of a sudden it gripped me in a way it hadn't." One thing that might be... We can move on if it's not helpful, but I just thought about it, and what you said, people are probably writing all kinds of things about you and your role on the internet and hitting you up for comments.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And every time you look at your phone, there's dozens of new DMs. What did you learn about responding or not responding or how to respond, or... I don't remember you being particularly active in those few months after. Was it better just to get your own soul in shape, or what advice would you have for leaders? And I'm not interested in a spin angle or anything like that. That's not where I'm going. I'm just like, how do you, as a human deal with that kind of unnatural attention for a situation that arguably you didn't even know existed?

Steve Carter:

I think that's the hard part, is all of this will bring to light your unchecked motivations. And as a three, image management is there. Protecting how people perceive you. You can say that you're not the hero, but somehow you can slowly, but surely over time, create narratives and stories where that threes tend to do this. And I think I had to be really, really aware who were the heroes, the brave women, the women who did the right thing.

Steve Carter:

Why did I do what I did? Simply because I had a value of integrity and two, I thought it should be handled differently. And three, I just wanted to actually support what I felt like the women were bravely doing. So I tend to live my life with... If I don't understand it, how do I put it into a basketball play?

Steve Carter:

Because I understand basketball. Or how do I put it into a framework? Because a healthy framework will make my life work. And I think as all of this was coming at me, I had to make some values. "You're not the hero. So do not post anything you might want to, but make sure you reread that. And who's the hero in this story? It's not you. It was the women, it was the women. Hey, what in you is trying to take revenge. What in you is trying to... Because people are saying negative things about you, to try and deflect it?"

Steve Carter:

And I'm not saying I always did that well, but man, I had to internalize and find healthy outlets to channel it. I think this is like the power of the Psalms. Because you read the Psalms and they are graphic. David going, "Man, I am so angry at my enemies. God, I wish you would just crush their heads with a big rock. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Steve Carter:

But I think what David knew was, "I don't need to put that on Twitter. I need to give that to you." And I think for me, it was, "What is the healthy response that's going to help the cause of the women? And then what is the unhealthy response that's going to help the cause of Steve? And hey, if that's unhealthy, I have someone I can bring that to. One that is free, that's God. And one that costs money and that's my counselor. And I can do that."

Steve Carter:

And so I looked for, I think, helpful and healthy responses. Again, I didn't always do that right, but I'm trying to step back and go, "When crisis comes, you have to change adversity into an opportunity and it will be an opportunity for your brokenness to be more exposed, your fear to be more exposed, or it will be an opportunity for you to demonstrate the kind of person that you want to be and the kind of person that you truly are." But that's where the character formation and the desert and the trusting is truly showcased and exposed.

Carey Nieuwhof :

So your new podcast Craft & Character, which I'm a subscriber of, really enjoy it. I love how it's the craft of preaching, the craft of sermon writing, but also about character. So you've embraced podcasting, which I'm really excited about. You got a book, which we'll talk.

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Carey Nieuwhof :

How did you decide what the next chapter held?

Steve Carter:

Man, honestly, I was spinning. I knew church leadership. I knew church world. You tell me the day of the week and the time of the day, I could tell you what I was doing. My structure bred freedom for me. And now I'm my own CEO. And I don't have anybody else telling me what to do. I don't have any structure. And I kind of was like swirling a little bit. And I have some friends over at the Patterson Center and a buddy of mine, Neil does a life plan. And he said, "Hey, let's do a life plan. It's 48 hours. You run through your life. You come out with a calling statement." And I ended up coming up with four buckets and the buckets simply were preaching, coaching, writing, and sports, because I just love sports.

Steve Carter:

And then the question became, "Okay, well, how are you going to actually monetize this? How are you going to give yourself through this?"

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah. You've got to eat at some point. Yeah.

Steve Carter:

Exactly, right? And so I think what ended up helping me was, again, "What can I control? This is what I'd love to do. This is what I would do wherever I was. Now, how do we take steps to do that and build a schedule and build a life that actually works and who are some models of this?" And I started reaching out and getting some real great coaching and help. But I was able to say, "This is what I would love to do in this season." Part of the values where I wanted my family to heal well, I wanted to heal well, and then I wanted to do good church work. But I also knew me running to another senior pastor role would be me escaping the pain. And I would probably transmit my pain on somebody else. And so, I wanted to make sense of that.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Why didn't you leave ministry altogether? You're still in ministry, but why didn't you just quit the church, stay a Christian and quit the church?

Steve Carter:

Because the church didn't do me wrong. Five people did. Willow didn't hurt me. Five people did. So, deep down Jesus didn't let me down. God didn't let me down. Holy Spirit didn't let me down. For me, it's very, very practical. Five people, five good people did evil. A lot of good people got played. And a lot of good people got left holding the bag. This is what happens in crisis, but none of those people were God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Now, five of those people represented the church. But for me, I saw it there. And that became my own spiritual process to say, "Oh, this isn't the institution's fault." Now, there's a lot of institutions stuff that we can talk about, deconstruct, reconstruct, but for me, it was really, really basic and practical and allowed me to actually practice forgiveness, practice my own issues and practice what I've been preaching hopefully for the last 20 years about the gift and how forgiveness truly is a solo sport.

Carey Nieuwhof :

It's helpful to think about that. I did an Instagram poll, highly scientific, but lots of people... I'm joking, 77% of people thought about quitting in the last year, which is crazy to me. And there's a Barna stat which cited it, I've cited it. 29% of senior pastors seriously thought about quitting without a scandal,

crisis, abuse, anything it's just like, "Leadership is hard." So, it's good to know you're teaching at churches. You have a podcast and let's talk about your book. I love the title, The Thing Beneath the Thing, it's genius. What does that mean?

Steve Carter:

Yeah. So, I had a moment in probably 2008 and I was on the verge of moving from Grand Rapids, Michigan to take a role at Rockharbor Church in Costa Mesa. And it was a kind of crazy weather day, very stormy and someone as I was driving back with my wife and nine-month-old, threw a chunk of ice at my car and it hit our car and I swerved and I didn't know that someone had thrown something. Then I started thinking about it as the cortisol is rushing to my head. I'm like, "Someone just threw something on us." I pull the car over, I leave my wife and my kids on the side of the road. I see somebody running and I take off like a crazy person. I call it my moment of madness and ends up, you fast forward, like I am freezing cold.

Steve Carter:

I run into a pond. I'm chasing these people through a field, into a suburban neighborhood and ends up, I knock on the door that I see them run into. And an older gentleman comes and I'm like, "Hey, did someone just run into here? I just need to talk to him for a second." I got soaking wet pants. The guy looks at me. He goes, "Oh, my grandson and his friend did." Door opens up a few minutes later and it's two junior highers. And I'm having this moment where I feel like, "God whispers to me." He's like, "Who's the crazy one now? You left your wife and nine-month-old on the side of the road, you ran, what is going on?" And I realized that was the last time I was going to see my grandparents.

Steve Carter:

And it was last time I was going to see my dad for a while who had leukemia, the buyers who said they were going to buy our house had backed out that night. And all of this was in me. All of this energy, all of this sadness and a junior higher gave me a place to channel that energy when they threw a chunk of ice. And I called a mentor the next day. And I said, "Rob, what do I do with this?" And he laughed and he said, "Hey, welcome to the endless pursuit of getting after the thing beneath the thing. Getting after what is really going on." And that just stuck with me. And fast forward, a few years, I just always used that phrase because it made me become more emotionally conscious and aware of my feelings. And I realized that thing slowly but surely became this acronym for me to go, "Gosh, I have this energy inside me and if it goes unchecked, it's going to go somewhere. It's going to go somewhere."

Steve Carter:

So, that's kind of the heart of the book is getting after what's really going on and why we do what we do and what to do about it?

Carey Nieuwhof :

You sent me an early copy and I had the privilege of endorsing it, but it was a laugh-out-loud, funny, it was perceptive, it's theologically sound, a rare combination there, but my life, I kind of realized that, right? You get upset in a meeting. You think about how this impacts leadership. Your boss goes crazy on you one day. And you're like, "What was that about? It wasn't about the report. It wasn't about Sunday service. It wasn't about last month's sales and business." It's like, "Well, maybe his wife hates him and his kids aren't really fond of him right now." Or, "He's got financial problems you don't know about." And it just kind of comes out. There's a thing beneath the thing.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And I look at my life, I think I could probably narrate my whole life's about control and trying to Enneagram 8. The whole narrative is about control. And how do you unpack that? And why do you hesitate to delegate? And why do you hesitate to... What is that? It's a thing beneath the thing. It's just so helpful for leaders. So you write. You said, "For the first time, in a long time, I was in touch with my body, my feelings, my sadness, the deeper parts of me, and I absolutely hated it." So I'm like, "Yeah, I've been there." Can you explain that moment? That observation, that insight?

Steve Carter:

I think we always have this sense, especially as a preacher and teacher that Sunday's coming. I often don't want to have to spend time getting after the thing beneath the thing, because I literally know I got to stand up in front of people and I want to make sure that I can do that well. And again, it's in capacity of like, "I got to be able to have competency at what I do." But truth be told, if I'm not giving attention to my character and it's going to limit my actual ability, it's going to be a lid on it. And what that quote you referenced to, kind of came out of, I did a detox and for a month, my wife and I really tried to eat really, really clean and healthy. And I took away Dr. Pepper, that was like a Trinity for me, Father, Son, and Dr. Pepper. That would give me a lift.

Steve Carter:

I used food as an escape. And I realize that as I started to take things away, I could feel it in my body, these toxins that were there. And I could feel these urges that I had somehow suppressed. And what I began to realize is, "Oh my goodness, this is what I'm pumping through my body. This is what I am..." Whether through just chasing success, whether through food, whether through experience, it is all in me. And now I was becoming aware of, "What's really driving you, Steve? What's the real motivation." And I think as I got really clear and honest about that, I had to look back and go, "Oh, I don't like this. I don't like this one bit." And again, if my dream is to finish well, man, there are some stuff that needs to be cleaned up and needs to become more aware and brought to the surface, or it's going to affect every relationship and every potential possibility that God puts before me, for me to step into well and honor him or dishonor me and my family and dishonor him.

Carey Nieuwhof :

What were one or two of those things that you're like, "Man, I got to clean this up in my thirties or it's going to be a big issue by the time I get to my fifties?"

Steve Carter:

What's funny is a buddy of mine and I were talking and his mentor told him that the three hardest years for most men, most leaders is 38 through 41.

Carey Nieuwhof :

You're right there. It's your last few years.

Steve Carter:

Exactly. And so I was like, "Hey, thanks for telling me this." It was like right when I turned 38 and he's like, "Just think about this." And then the mentor said, "You typically have to wrestle your ego to the ground. Your body's changing. You're realizing you probably aren't where you thought you would be.

You're kind of leaning more closely to a specific lane that this is what your life's going to be. You're going through a level of sadness because of some of that stuff, but also a parent dying. And you're going through like kind of the uniqueness of fathering and mothering in this time." And I just realized like, "Oh, my goodness." The level of story work that I had not done, and my dad ends up dying six months after I leave Willow. There was just a level of thing after thing that I could feel the temptation to want to escape, want to numb out, want to just... Because I didn't have the muscles to grieve.

Steve Carter:

And so, part of that is I just had to recognize my propensity to achieve at all costs. And my wife and I we've had to process this, I had this one moment with Pete Scazzero back in the day and he had come and spoken at this church I was at in Michigan and I got to drive him from Grand Rapids to Holland. And again, in my Honda Civic and driving and he is asking me questions and I don't think he liked the answer I gave him. And if you don't know Pete Scazzero, he wrote Emotionally Healthy Spirituality-

Carey Nieuwhof :

He has been a guest. I'm going to link him in the show notes. Yeah.

Steve Carter:

Yeah. He's a deep, deep thinker, but he told me to pull the car over on the freeway. I'm like, "What?" And he's like, "Pull it over right now." And he's from Queens, he's got a great New York accent.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Oh, yeah. He's got that vibe.

Steve Carter:

Yeah. And he's like, "When did you get married?" And I, "March 6." And he's like, "Who did you marry?" And I'm like, "Sarah." And he goes, "That's right. You didn't marry Mars Hill Bible Church. You married Sarah." And he just went after me. And then he gets done after five minutes of just kind of pouring into me, but convicting me and challenging me. And then he's like, "Now you can take me to Holland." And I just remember this moment going, "He was right." In my thirties, I had my brides confused. And it didn't have partnership. I had like, "I got to actually provide for my family. This is the best way." So I think part of thirties for me, it was wrestling down the ego, wrestling down my just need to achieve and having to like actually really discover what true partnership in a marriage is all about.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Interesting. 38 to 41 for the record, my hardest years, for sure. There was a slide into burnout. I burned out when I was 41. And I feel like that's a hinge in my life. Like 41 to now is 15 years. The prior 15 years were law school. And the first decade and a half of ministry, whatever. Here's an academic question, maybe a bad one. You've been through a lot over the last three years. Let's say the succession plan at Willow had gone as planned. There was no abuse there. Like don't we wish that that had happened, that there was none of that story was true. So let's just say for some reason you ended up taking over as the original plan was, do you think your character, as it was developed then would have been able to withstand the pressures of ministry from what you know now?

Steve Carter:

Wow, that's a great question. Here's the one thing I would say is Willow had the resources to provide coaching and to take care and help out. So, I think-

Carey Nieuwhof :

And you take Willow out of it. Put yourself in any megachurch at 38 being the successor and you're speaking to 20,000 people on a weekend.

Steve Carter:

Yeah. I want to say I hope so, but-

Carey Nieuwhof :

That's a good answer.

Steve Carter:

... I think it's a... One of the things I say every weekend that I'm done teaching and I'm walking to my car is I'm one weekend closer to finishing well, and I just broke it down to weekends. There is one weekend closer. There is one weekend closer. And 41, if I do this until I'm 65. I got another 24 years, but that's just from a teaching standpoint. If I make it to 82, I'm like halfway there. And so, it's like one weekend closer. One weekend closer. So, I think it's like living in front... Having that reality be in front of me, but I'll tell you, man, I don't think anyone felt prepared for 2020. The level of criticism, like everything changed-

Carey Nieuwhof :

The anger and the vision, the bitterness online.

Steve Carter:

I think that would have been really hard for me. It just would have been really hard to me. And I think some of my more, the edges of people-pleasing, the edges of trying to not be able to see people, becoming more digital, the division, having to speak up, what speaking up enough or not too much, like all of that, that would have created a lot of stress and gray, but I think it would have been really, really refining in a lot of ways as well. So, I hope so, but I think it would have exposed a lot in me.

Carey Nieuwhof :

I think that's a really good answer, man. Like if you ask me, "Are you going to finish well?" It's like, "I hope so. I'm working on it every day." I don't know. I don't know that you could ever say, "Oh yeah, absolutely." Because boom, there you go.

Steve Carter:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Or, "No, I'm a disaster." Well, it's kind of true. Believe in total depravity, I've lived long enough to have some truth there. Now, these are the deep questions. And one of my heartbeats is I just want to see leaders lead well and I want to see them be well.

Steve Carter:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Do you know what I mean?

Steve Carter:

Yes.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Forget lead well, just be well. Just be well and out of being well, you will lead well. And that's why I love conversations like this. Okay. You talk about your book, you talk about hiding, where do leaders go to hide? How do we hide?

Steve Carter:

Yeah. So, the acronym for the Thing Beneath the Thing is you have triggers and that's the setup that's going to set you off. So there's that energy and what I've just come to find out from 20-some years of ministry is that you're typically going to go to a few different places. And the first place that most of us go, we see it in the garden-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah, walk us through the acronym. Just take us through the thing. Yeah.

Steve Carter:

Yeah. So, we often see like when people get triggered, they're going to go somewhere. I was in a meeting yesterday and somebody said something and I could feel myself getting triggered. And oftentimes, we carry that in our bodies and we go home and we look for a hideout. And that hideout is just where we are escaping that moment. And what that moment references, that trigger is a clue that there is some other pothole or wound that has gone untended to in our story.

Carey Nieuwhof :

So where would you go? Do you go to the fridge? You mentioned food. That's where I will often go.

Steve Carter:

Yeah. I typically... Food is a big one. Too oftentimes, I'll purchase something. That whole Amazon 1-Click guy-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah, swipe, 1-Click. Yeah.

Steve Carter:

Oh, it's just like, I have to-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah.

Steve Carter:

... Yeah. I have to walk away from that. And I think, again, that's just something that I can escape to. Or for me, it's escaping to experience and just, I almost need some kind of story that's going to lift me out of this place instead of just being honest and human to go, "Hey, why did you get triggered? Get curious, get humble. What's going on there?" The second place that I think a lot of us go is to insecurity. And so you get triggered, you got to hide out, the I, you go to insecurity. And insecurity, I think we often think about is playing less than, which is true. We often, "I'm so lame." We create false stories about ourselves. Like, "I should know better. I should be better." Shame storm just comes over.

Steve Carter:

But also insecurity comes in our envy and we start to kind of compare my life where I'm at, at 41 with somebody else who's where they're at 41? And it's a level of comparison. Or you see this happen a ton is you get triggered and it's a form of insecurity, but it's not powering down, it's literally powering up-

Carey Nieuwhof :

"I'll show you."

Steve Carter:

"I'm going to gain control of this situation." And you see that happen in organizations, which now that I see it, I go, "Ah, something triggered them." And then the other one is, and we see this on Twitter. We see this in news. We see this just in real life more than ever is we get triggered and then we create a false narrative about others. And the end is narrative. And, "It's those people. It's blue state, it's red state. It's those... It's everyone who listens to this syndicate. It's dah dah dah." And all of a sudden we don't again, get humble and curious. But the easier thing is to channel all of that toxic energy or that sadness towards those people. And if you ever read like Esther Chapter 3 and just read it backwards-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Love Esther.

Steve Carter:

Oh, it's such a great book, but you read it backwards. Chapter 3, the last verse of Chapter 3 says, "The king and his right-hand man sat down for a drink and all the people were bewildered." Which makes you wonder if you're reading it backwards, like in a mental style go, "Oh, why were they bewildered?" And you realize two verses earlier, a massive genocide was decreed. And you go, "Well, why was the genocide decreed?" And you start to back it all the way up. And it's because one guy doesn't bow fully to the King's right-hand man and he gets triggered and he goes, "I'm not just going to kill you. I'm going to kill all your people." And he creates this false narrative. Now, when we get triggered, we're probably not going to try and have a massive genocide happen, but we do this. We villainize, we create stories-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Haman is the guy and he is a fascinating character study. Oh my goodness.

Steve Carter:

It is. Yeah. And so, again, it's just in that, but then I think the greatest leaders that I know when they get triggered, they see this as an opportunity for grace. And grace is what makes us whole, holy, and spiritually healthy. And John Wesley had three stages of grace. And a word that I think has kind of gone out of style for my generation is sanctification, which is the process that makes us whole and holy and spiritually healthy. And so I just go, "If we're being triggered, it's usually connected to an older wound, and this is an opportunity that God loves us so much, that he wants to keep bringing people into our lives until we honor this pain, this wound, this potholes truth." And when we're able to invite grace in, man, we become better humans. Like you just talked about, we become well. And when we are well, we're better leaders, we're better followers. We're better husbands and wives and fathers and mothers. We're just better people, better leaders.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Yeah. It was Haman. I'd love to write something on Haman one day, but kind of triggered this thought in me that a life devoted to self, he was all about him ultimately leaves you alone-

Steve Carter:

Yeah.

Carey Nieuwhof :

... which is just so much irony in that story. And it's so, wow, fascinating. Anything else? So the thing, anything else on the acronym? So, that's a narrative and-

Steve Carter:

Yeah. And then G is just grace-

Carey Nieuwhof :

Grace, gotcha.

Steve Carter:

... and I think it's grace... Yep.

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:09:04]

Steve Carter:

And so you've got the triggers, hideouts, insecurity, narratives, grace and it's just, it's an opportunity to help people really become aware of what triggers you but also become aware of what are those hideouts? What are the stories you tell about yourselves? What are the stories that you tell about others? And then what might God want to do? Last thing I'd say about it is just, when I read that Paul writes, basically, "Why do I do the things I do? The good I want to do, I do not do but the stuff I don't want to do or the stuff I hate, I keep doing." And I think every leader, every pastor, every human has had moments where they can feel so connected to the words of Paul. And I think the more that I've gotten curious, the more I realize, "Oh, I know why I did that."

Steve Carter:

The bigger question is, "Why did I want that? Why did I want that?" You do what you want to do, the bigger question is, why? I wanted to fight with my wife so that there'd be a little bit of angst so that I could go buy what I wanted to buy. Let's talk about that. Why did you do what you do? Getting curious about that and what are you running from? And if you don't have the courage to actually lean into that, man, it's going to be harder for you to lean in when crisis comes, when struggle comes, when pain comes.

Steve Carter:

And so again, like you so beautifully said it, you can try to run away from you, but you can't hide from you. And the more courage you have to lean into this, just the better leader, more grace filled, more healthy and whole person you will and people are going to want to follow you. People are going to be one around you. And that's what my hope and desire is that as Christ followers, as leaders, as pastors, people can grab hold of this concept and really apply it to their life.

Carey Nieuwhof :

I love this conversation. It sounds like we till the same field these days, Steve. And honestly, I think the questions you're asking, the observations you have, the self examination you're looking at in many ways is moral failure prevention. Do you know what I mean? Because I think you're right. People don't wake up and go, "I'm going to completely blow up everyone's life, including some victims and my own and the church." People don't. I'm sure it's happened once or twice, but most people it's subtle, let's start small and the cracks get bigger and the risks get bigger. And it's the unwillingness to ask these questions, to humble yourself, to put yourself under the microscope, not just you, but other people and to look at the soul because in there are the ingredients for life and death. Both of that.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Point us a little more toward the solution. I think honestly, having the conversation. I remember a Keller sermon where I forget what he was saying, but it was something like, "How do I know? Why do I keep messing up? And how do I know if I'll ever be spiritually mature?: And he goes, "The fact that you're asking the question is actually a sign of spiritual maturity." Which is good rather than looking at how mature I am. What are some more thoughts, insights, strategies that can point us toward greater health?

Steve Carter:

Yeah. My wife and I, we ended up with my in-laws buying a little cabin up in the mountains and it had really, really great bones, but just the flooring, drop down ceilings all of it was just a bit of a train wreck. And so I'm not very handy, but we just started demoing this place. And what is amazing is they had all of these ceilings in there that blocked the natural light. And as I started to remove these ceilings and all of a sudden this new light just started to come in. And I realized as I was doing this, it just felt like in my journal time, God was saying, "This is what I want to do in your heart." And it was almost reminded me of Dallas Willard's Renovation of the Heart. And he talks about how grace is opposed to earning, but it's never opposed to effort.

Steve Carter:

And I think sometimes for many of us, we think words like the fruit of the spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control, all of that, that we're just going to naturally drift towards that. But the truth is it takes work. It takes effort. And again, it might just be the

basketball player in me is for me, I started to have to almost create a vision statement and Dallas will talk about this, vision, intention and means. But my vision for the last six months is, "A life anchored in Jesus is one that has nothing to prove, nothing to lose and nothing to hide." Now, underneath that, the intention to go, "Every day with 35,000 choices coming before me, how am I going to choose that? How am I going to choose to actually live a life where I'm not trying to prove my existence or prove my ability?"

Steve Carter:

I'm trying to trust Christ. I'm not trying to live like where I'm hiding or losing. No, no, no. I have nothing to lose in the kingdom of God. How do I walk in freedom? And it's not just going to happen. I've literally got to create practices, spiritual exercises that are going to help me." And so each month I've just been choosing one new practice to almost learn how to run that vision play of nothing to prove, nothing to lose, nothing to hide. And it's been helpful for me.

Steve Carter:

Again, for me, it's not just knowing theology, but it's the orthopraxy. It's, "How am I now being shaped by these ideas? And how are they getting those 18 inches down from my brain to my heart, down to my hands, to what I see, what comes out of my mouth, how I live my life?" I think for me in the end of that book, I just try to really give people some real handles and practicals where they can have their own, in Dallas language, renovation of the heart and live a life that's truly anchored in the way of Christ and watch how God's spirit makes them more whole, holy and spiritual healthy.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Can you give us one or two of those practices that have been meaningful to you, Steve?

Steve Carter:

Yeah. Okay. I'm such a storyteller so sorry about this. But we had a buddy of mine we wanted to throw a party for who was a pastor in his sixties. We had a whole bunch of pastors around him and we just shared stories. One guy shares this story and I don't know the guy, but he's really close friends with this pastor that we're honoring and the guy says that seven years ago, he and this pastor every morning at 5:50 AM would call each other because this pastor initiated this and they would call and they would confess their sins to each other from the prior day. They were short with their wife. They weren't present in a meeting. And the first time that this pastor called this guy, he was like, "This is the dumbest idea." But the pastor was so like, "Please would you do this for me? It will really help me." And they said, "Yes." I think they've missed seven days in the course of seven years.

Steve Carter:

He said it was the most transformational experience. They'd end the call with each person saying to the other, "Your sins are forgiven." And they would talk not just about the confession, but then what are they going to do differently in the days ahead? And this guy was like, "My sin pattern changed. My life changed, but it required me getting up at 5:50 AM." My buddy and I were there and I'm like, "I have this statement, nothing to prove, nothing to lose and nothing to hide. I'm really good at hiding. I think I got to practice this." And so we did it for two months and I'll tell you, we missed three of the mornings because I slept in but literally just putting that into practice and learning the art of confession and hearing a friend of mine say to me and as a pastor, I'm usually proclaiming this from a stage, "Your sins are forgiven."

Steve Carter:

Somebody saying this to me, "Steve, your sins are forgiven. Go walk in freedom." It was like, "Yes." And knowing that I was going to have to say that to somebody. I was like, "I don't want to." It made me really question, "Do I want to actually escape or go hide out here or think this thought or power up or create this narrative? Because if I'm going to have to confess that." No, no, no. And so that was one practice. The second one I'll just say is just in solitude and that was just through hiking, just being silent, being alone. Not isolating, but being and having and walking in solitude with God. It was so refreshing, me getting after not trying to prove something, but just being still and present in the presence of God.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Steve, this is resonating so deeply. I'm so grateful. Where can people find you online these days and learn more about you and the book?

Steve Carter:

Oh, thanks so much. You're going to go to thethingbeneaththething.com. You can get a free chapter. Also, you can go to stevecarter.org and then on social media, it's just @steveryancarter, Steve Ryan Carter.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Steve, you're a gift. Thank you for this conversation, for all the processing and I'm really, really grateful for you.

Steve Carter:

Carey, thank you for you. Honestly, I think I speak for so many pastors and so many leaders, one of the greatest parts and people don't see this behind the scenes that they get the privilege to learn from you from blogs and books and podcasts. But I don't forget that conversation that we had when I was in the desert and I just said, "Hey, I don't think I'm ready to talk about it." And you said, "That's great. I'm going to keep checking in. And I just want you to know, I love you and I'm for you and I'm here." And I just, I've just watched you the last four years just say what you mean, mean what you say and you are a gift to a lot of younger leaders like myself. And thanks for being a guy who I know is going to finish well, but a guy who is an example and a role model to so many of us. Blessings to you and keep doing what you are doing. You are truly a gift, brother.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Thank you, Steve. Thank you so much.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Well, I hope that was constructive. Steve, I'm so grateful for your voice in all of this and I'm going to talk a little bit about why we keep seeing so much moral failure in leaders in ministry. It happens in business too, but I think it's particularly devastating when it happens in the church, which it's not supposed to. First, I want to tell you a little bit about what's coming up next. I have been looking forward to this for a long time. I have been reading the work of Jean Twenge for a number of years. She's a professor of psychology at San Diego State University and she's a global leader in generation research. And we talk about Gen Z and we talk about mental health and young leadership and a well here's an excerpt.

Jean Twenge:

Kids say, "I had to take the final late, because I'm going to Vegas for my birthday." I'm like, "Oh really? Well, we've got 300 other people in this class and I can't give 200 make up exams so that's not really valid excuse, dude." And as a college professor, you're not just teaching college students, you're teaching future workers. And the reality is, they are going to have to be prepared for that world. And too often, I think as parents, we're not preparing them for that world. As teachers, we're not. And I think that that can be a problem when they end up in the workplace with some of these attitudes and lack of experience that is not going to serve them well. I think it's a huge challenge for this generation and for leaders.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Okay subscribers, you know that that comes automatically to you if you subscribe. If you haven't done that yet and you're new to the podcast, please, please do. Also coming up, we have Pete Scazzero about soul care, something I'm really committed to talking about. Kendra Adachi, Chris McChesney, Four Disciplines of Execution, what a powerful conversation. Amy Porterfield, Horst Schulze, Scott O'Neil, CEO of the Philadelphia 76ers and so much more. And starting right around the corner, we've got an Ask Me Anything About Productivity. If you are interested in me coaching you, head on over to careynieuwhof.com/podcast and let me know what your time management, energy management, time at work, time at home, whatever it is about your life. Ask Me Anything About Productivity. You can record your message. We will start that coaching ASAP on this podcast.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And let's talk now about why we keep seeing so much moral failure and abuse of power, et cetera, in the church. I get to share just some thoughts with you. The episode today is brought to you by World Vision. Do care for your soul. You can get their free series, Right Side Up Soul Care with Danielle Strickland at worldvision.org/carey. And you know that one of the real predictors of success is who are you doing life with? If you're an executive pastor, check out the XP Summit Cohorts with CDF Capital, by going to cdfcapital.coHORTS, and they'll be able to help you there.

Carey Nieuwhof :

I am not, by the way, in this section talking about what happened at Willow Creek. That's not it at all. There have been so many failures, but what I'm trying to figure out is why do they happen? And how can I prevent that from happening to me? How can you prevent that from happening to you? How can you prevent that from happening in your church? And I just want to share a few thoughts. These are drawn from an article that's been cited many, many times and I've shared it before. It's called, Some Thoughts on Why Mega Church Pastors Keep Failing. You can see a written version of that over on my website, over at careynieuwhof.com. And again, this is not an explanation of any particular situation, but I'm thinking, "Okay, how does this actually happen?" And just so you know, earlier this year, I hired a performance coach slash counselor to try to figure out how I can finish well.

Carey Nieuwhof :

How do we do this? How do I do the next 25 or 30 years? And do it well with integrity and honesty and humility. And how do we stay out of those traps? And what I would say is, we're all broken. We all make mistakes, but there is a line you just shouldn't cross as a leader when it comes to an abuse of power or certainly sexual indiscretions or improprieties. There's just lines you should not cross. Why do people keep crossing them? One thought is simply this. You can easily create a world, particularly when things

grow, where nobody challenges you. And I've seen this happen again and again. It's not just surrounding yourself with yes people, you can create a culture of fear, you can create a culture of intimidation, you can create a culture where basically nobody gets to speak the truth into your life.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Now, listen, I get it. As a leader, I don't like critics either. I do not enjoy criticism, but it's really important to have around you people who will tell you the truth. People who will help you see what you don't see. But if you're a senior leader, you can often create a situation where everybody just says the things that you want them to say to you and that can be really, really challenging. You'll be tempted to tune people out who have different views on your board, on your team. Don't. Keep them close.

Carey Nieuwhof :

You'll be tempted to tune out friends who say, "Carey, are you seeing this right? Hey, was that appropriate? Was that inappropriate?" Don't tune them out. Keep them close. Encourage their feedback, encourage their critiques. To help you win, your friends have to call out your sin and so does your team. And that doesn't mean everybody gets to do it. You should have some people around you who are able to speak the truth into your life. And that gets hard and you have to cultivate it. When you hear something you don't like, what do you say as a leader? I'll tell you this. You say this, you say, "Thank you. Thank you." And then you pray about it. You take it in and as much as it hurts, you try to listen and say, "Is there a grain of truth in this?"

Carey Nieuwhof :

Okay, second thoughts. Sometimes the platform gets bigger than your character can handle. Your platform outgrew your character. Leading something large is not inherently bad. It's just not, but I never thought I'd be leading something the size of what I'm leading today. And what happens is your character has to keep up or outgrow your platform. And too often your platform will outgrow your character. You got to remember a few things. Number one, your platform isn't yours. It's God, it's not your church. It's not your organization, it's his. You don't have a ministry, but God does and your life isn't your own. Are you allowing God to loosen your grip on your life? I try to remind myself of those things and then I work really, really hard on character development. And I remind myself, my platform is not a pedestal. Pedestals are about ego and adulation, platforms are designed to be shared and used for the benefit of others and hopefully this platform is helping you.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Third thing and this is really interesting. There was a book by Stephen Mansfield a few years ago who shared 10 signs a leader is heading toward a leadership crash. Number one sign, the leader stayed too long and that's sort of the final thought I want to leave with you today is leaders can stay too long. Now how long is too long? I don't know. Some leaders stay 40 years and they do a great job. Others stay a little bit too long, they're there for five years and they've just overstayed their welcome. And I think you start to get some signs that perhaps you're spending too long in a role. Your passion isn't the same. You get bored. You're under challenged. You start to feel entitled to things. And when that happens, it's a real challenge.

Carey Nieuwhof :

We have members of parliament in Canada and a guy knew won a seat in the national legislature and so he invited me to fly up to Ottawa with him. And I flew up and we walked up Parliament Hill, just like I've

walked up on Capitol Hill in the past in the United States. And I remember one of his aides had been there for a while and he said, "It's still a privilege to walk through this door every day." And that was into the national parliament. And he said, "When it stops being a privilege, I need to quit."

Carey Nieuwhof :

And I think that's true. If you start to really sense that you're entitled to leadership, to the spoils of leadership, you've stayed too long. And Mansfield makes the argument that when you do that, you end up in trouble. You end up in trouble. That's why I kind of left as lead pastor of our church six years ago when things were at their peak and I felt really good about serving because I didn't want to stay too long because if you do somewhere along the way, you can end up losing your soul. And man, I'll tell you, you don't want to do that. You really don't want to do that. You want to nurture your soul. You want it to be more alive 20 years from now than it is today.

Carey Nieuwhof :

And that leads me to the final thought, which is just live in a way that the people closest to you become the most grateful for you. I want my wife to have the best opinion of me. I haven't met most of my listeners, if you think I'm awesome and my wife hates me, how is that a win? Or if my kids won't talk to me or if my staff are just tired of me yelling at them, which I don't do generally as a rule, but if you know how sometimes you can just let loose on the people close to you and I've done that in the past. And it's like, "No, that's not good." That's an abuse of power. It's an abuse of the role. And so I want to live in a way in these next few decades where the people closest to me who know me the best become the people who have the best experience of me. And what does it matter that someone in California thinks you're awesome if the people who know you well don't.

Carey Nieuwhof :

Anyway, those are just a few thoughts. I hope that's helpful. I hope this episode as a whole has been helpful. Again, if you've been the victim of an abuse of power or sexual improprieties, I am so, so sorry and please know that we are praying for you, we're with you. And I hope, and this is one of the reasons I do this, that we see a better day in leadership and that's true in business, it's true in the church and I hope that we move into a new era of leadership. Really appreciate you. Thank you so much for listening to this episode, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change and personal growth to help you lead like never before.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:29:45]