



## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: WHAT MATTERS MOST?

NOVEMBER 18, 2020

Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you;  
consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.  
Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13:7-8

***Perspective.*** The lives of those who have walked faithfully before us can offer perspective to our unique journeys. It is often what we need amidst the pressures of the present and anxieties of the future. We need another point of view from which we consider our situation. What is God doing in our lives? Others' narratives of development can often provide this needed perspective. When we struggle to understand what God might be up to in our lives or when we grow tired along the way, it is helpful to see what the Spirit was up to in others' lives during similar chapters. Their insights or experiences can enable us to live more hopefully and wisely.

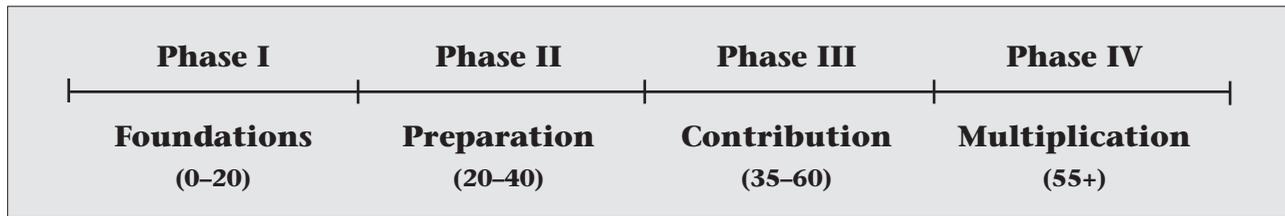
Dr. J. Robert Clinton's extensive studies, which we referred to in Stage 2, Session 1, show that Christian leaders who finished well went through similar chapters in journeying toward God's purposes for their lives. He defines these chapters as phases of development. He writes,

A development phase is a unit of time in a person's life. We identify different units by the nature of the development or the means for development in a leader's life.... Development phases are not absolutes. They are helpful, however, because they force one to analyze what God was doing during a given time in a person's life.<sup>1</sup>

From his wealth of research—biblical, historical, and contemporary lives—Clinton was able to compose a general timeline, which unpacks these major phases of development. It's important to remember that this timeline is not a record of any one person's life story or experiences. Rather, it is the distillation of the compilation of hundreds of life stories of people who finished well, and it shows with considerable accuracy the general trajectory in which God shaped people over time.

It is also important to remember that we are all unique persons. This general timeline is not meant to pigeonhole or force our life experience into these neat four chapters, whether they fit or not. Rather this timeline offers a helpful point of view from which we can prayerfully consider what God has been doing in our life or in the life of a friend or co-worker. It offers perspective on where we have come from, where we are currently, and where we might be heading.

Let's take a look at the different development phases that Clinton discovered in his research.<sup>2</sup>



*The years attached to each developmental phase can be fluid.  
In applying the framework, we must always default to the uniqueness of the person.*

**Phase I: FOUNDATIONS**—Generally this is the time of growing up as a person: childhood, early and late adolescence, and young adulthood. It is the time when our “defaults,” or habits of managing life, become instilled within us. Various factors shape our personality for the journey ahead. Family of origin, other social influences, and the historical context within which the person lives all give shape to who the person becomes. The early formation of basic skills needed for leadership may be fostered, as well as possible hints of personal destiny. God’s sovereign shaping always remains in the background of this growing-up process. For some, this will remain a difficult presence to discover and trust because these years were deeply painful. For others who look back, it will be a confirmation of who God has made them to be and what God has called them to do.

**Phase II: PREPARATION**—It is through an extended period of preparation, lasting anywhere from ten to twenty-five years, that *God’s work in us* seems to be paramount in his development of us. We initially establish a maturing commitment to God, evidenced by the continued development and testing of character growth in holiness. Along the way we develop an experiential understanding of the body of Christ. During this time a person is given increased responsibility and in conjunction with this, he or she (1) becomes more deeply aware of his or her giftedness and (2) seeks to develop skills that enhance that set of gifts. Although we are learning proficiencies and competencies during this time, we are still maturing toward *the good work God has prepared for us* to be about. God is more concerned in the preparation phase with who we are becoming, more than our competent ability to do.

**Phase III: CONTRIBUTION**—This is a person’s most highly productive and effective period of service and influence. Through the Spirit’s shaping, the person comes to terms with the reality that his or her service is inextricably linked to identity in Christ. That is, we serve out of who we are. This realization aids in the development of a mature, biblical way of life and service that is grounded in obedience to and intimacy with God. The person thereby increasingly influences others out of his or her spiritual authority. And God’s sovereign shaping moves the person toward contribution/work that provides a greater *focus* of service and greater *fit* with the person’s calling, passion, giftedness, and style.

**Phase IV: MULTIPLICATION**—The final phase of development invites us toward deeper growth and maturity in our follower-ship of the Lord, while at the same time stewarding what God has given us to do. However, in the multiplication phase a deeper concern grows within us for the investment and development of others. We are at a time in the journey when we hold the benefit of wisdom and experience to recognize others who long to be mentored, deepened and empowered for the good work God desires to do through them. Developing others for kingdom influence becomes the focal point of their efforts. We learn to lead strategically by tending to the deep work within us while, at the same time, tending to the development of others.

## LEARNING FROM OTHERS

*What is it that contributes to the flourishing and finishing well of many Christian leaders?* It would seem that being very skilled and strategically minded are not the only criteria. God's shaping work is of greatest value. A person's willingness to prioritize God's character work, to respond faithfully to the Spirit's work over time in his or her inner life, is an essential factor.

J. Robert Clinton's leadership studies offer some persistent patterns or lessons from those who in the long term ignored the character concerns in their development. These lessons can be viewed as barriers to a faithful and thriving life. Clinton also compiled characteristics of those leaders who finished well. Our own personal formation can be significantly instructed by looking at these negative and positive lessons. As the proverb reminds us, "*A prudent person foresees the danger ahead and takes precautions; the simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences*" (Proverbs 22:3 NLT).

*Lessons from those who finished poorly:*

- They misuse, mismanage and abuse finances.
- They struggle with issues of power.
- They become trapped in their own pride.
- They struggle with boundaries related to sex or issues of sexuality.
- They fail to deal with family-of-origin issues.
- They simply plateau in their development.

*Lessons from those who finished well:*

- They maintain a learning posture throughout life.
- They value spiritual authority as a primary power base for leadership.
- They recognize leadership selection and development as important.
- They work out of a dynamic and focused ministry philosophy.
- They lead from a growing awareness of personal destiny.
- They perceive their ministry from a lifetime perspective.
- They prioritize mentoring relationships for themselves and in developing others.

### LESSONS FROM THOSE WHO FINISH POORLY

#### **1. They misuse, mismanage, and abuse finances.**

Richard Foster points out that money was Jesus' second most recurrent theme in his ministry (the kingdom of God being first). Jesus seemed to emphasize money's use and abuse in a way not so common in our spiritual conversations today. Yet certainly there are plenty of contemporary examples of financial misuse and abuse. Such mismanagement and irresponsibility continues to trip up many leaders.

A leader's inability to manage money is often an expression of deeper problems, such as an unwillingness to respect boundaries or a refusal to submit to another's authority or perhaps just simple greed. In any case, the result is often a poor finish to the leader's life.

## **2. They struggle with issues of power.**

Leaders who are effective in ministry must use various power bases in order to accomplish their ministry. Unfortunately, a tendency to abuse this power often is present. Because of their perceived status, privileges can be assumed by those in positions of power. Usually leaders at the top in a hierarchical system have no counterbalancing accountability.

Leaders who struggle to properly manage power may also struggle to listen to wise counsel, because power wielded for personal gain takes no one into account but the one who possesses it. For so many leaders the exercise of power over the years can result in a certain sense of superiority that leads to all sorts of misuse and abuse of people. The leader who flourishes over the long haul learns to exercise and express his or her power generously in the service of others.

## **3. They become trapped in their own pride.**

*“All those who are arrogant are an abomination to the Lord; be assured, they will not go unpunished.”*  
(Proverbs 16:5)

Pride, and the insecurity that walks hand in hand with it, refuses to trust that what God thinks of us (rather than what other people think) is the most important thing. A first step or response in trusting God with our lives is honestly admitting that we don't have it all together, that we cannot solve our own deepest problems. Until we learn this rhythm of honesty and recognition, confession and grace, we will continue to resist God's shaping action in our life. Moreover, we will persistently ground our lives with a faulty foundation and will lead out of a shell of leadership, masking both our arrogance and insecurity. Such a mask hides who we really are and it hides our tremendous need. At the root of many other sorts of character concerns, pride certainly has led to the downfall of many leaders and the erosion of many communities.

## **4. They struggle with boundaries related to sex or issues of sexuality.**

There seems to be a persistent interconnection between sexuality and power. One whose thinking becomes skewed in regard to power can often express this confusion in sexually inappropriate ways. Repeatedly we hear of Christian leaders who have been snared in sexual and relational infidelity. As in all these other areas, there must be significant accountability for those in leadership.

It should also be mentioned that past sexual experiences, especially those that took place during the formative years, clearly have a lasting effect on a person. If a person was sexually abused as a child, then he or she might tend to lean toward and/or be trapped by that behavior as an adult. Sexual intimacy confusion often has its roots in past sexual abuse. A wise response will involve addressing the reality of these past experiences with a good counselor or therapist. It is critical for persons to deal *thoroughly and patiently* with whatever sexual issues they may have from their past if they are to continue living an emotionally and spiritually flourishing life. Moreover, a leadership context will be a very dangerous place for a person who has not addressed his or her sexual intimacy concerns.

## **5. They fail to deal with family-of-origin issues.**

Much of who we are and who we have become is a result of the context in which we grew up. As children and then adolescents we “pick up on” both helpful things and unhelpful things without even trying to. When we are young, learning is much like catching an infection. Character is more often caught than taught. Parents spread the infection, a combination of good and bad elements, which come to characterize much of their children’s way of seeing and being in the world. In adulthood if we don’t recognize and address these unhelpful things from our past, then we can often unknowingly infect the people and contexts in which we live and work.

Addressing our family-of-origin issues early in our development as a leader is critical to finishing well. This will involve an unlearning of our old patterns and ways of seeing the world passed on to us from significant folks early in our lives. It also will involve a learning of new ways of seeing and being in the world. Thankfully this is one of the things the Spirit of Jesus is up to in our lives—a patient process of unlearning our old ways, many of which derive from our family of origin.

## **6. They simply plateau in their development.**

A final characteristic of leaders who respond negatively to God’s shaping action is that they simply plateau in their development. This trait may not seem as striking as the previous five, but it can be just as destructive as any of the others to our goal of finishing faithfully and well as leaders. People’s own competence can cause them to minister at a level without really having a Spirit-empowered effect. In essence, their very strength becomes their weakness.

Formation must continue in our life if we are to become all that God has destined us and is shaping us to be. Such development requires a lifelong commitment to running the race.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, *“Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.”*

## **LESSONS FROM THOSE WHO FINISH WELL**

### **1. They maintain a learning posture throughout life.**

Poet Archibald MacLeish wrote, *“There is only one thing more painful than learning from experience, and that is not learning from experience.”*

Leaders who finish well have learned to continually apply their experiences to their lives. It’s as simple as that. However, experiential learning is only part of the learning posture. Leaders who finish well have an insatiable desire to learn through directed activities. They value lifelong education, and although they

may not all be “A” students, they are all “A” learners. They often have a variety of interests, and they see those interests as avenues to a rich and meaningful life. They have learned to enjoy the process of picking up new skills and developing new areas of their lives. And in those learning habits are the seeds of both the flexibility and purpose needed for a lifetime of consistency.

## **2. They value spiritual authority as a primary power base for leadership.**

J. Robert Clinton found that persons who finished well in Christian leadership operated out of a spiritual authority. This became the basis for their influence. And this spiritual authority flows out of a life lived with integrity, a life that is primarily concerned with listening to the voice of the Spirit. And listening to the Spirit in today’s world is not an easy task.

The eroding tide of secular culture can blur what is truth. Instead of engaging the culture with spiritual authority, many leaders quietly and subtly acquiesce to it, often using the need to be “relevant” as their excuse. It’s the difference between telling the truth in terms that are sensitive and persuasive, and molding the truth into something it’s not.

How does one go about cultivating this sort of authority? A voluntary attitude of submission on the leader’s part is a prerequisite. As we learn to submit to the directives of others in authority, we will also become more open to submitting to God’s shaping activity in our lives, which is a crucial lesson for us to learn. Our submission to God’s shaping in our lives will enable us to maintain integrity when we seek to guide others into a consideration of how God is shaping them, which is a primary task for Christian leaders.

## **3. They recognize the importance of leadership selection and development.**

Good leaders help to select and develop new good leaders. They see far enough beyond themselves to recognize that the people they lead need two things from their leaders: variety and continuity. If those who lead with us have a variety of personalities and skills, the chances will be good that those who are called to follow will be able to find someone in our leadership group they feel comfortable following. This is why variety in leadership selection and development is so important. We also will need to have developed people who can provide positive leadership after we are gone. As Peter Drucker says, “There is no success without a successor.”

Leaders who finish well have an intuitive ability to recognize the shaping actions of God in others. Because of this, they are able to notice uniquely those in their midst who need further development. They are able to view this development primarily as an opportunity for God’s kingdom purposes to be unleashed through that emerging leader, rather than simply as an opportunity to pad their own ongoing ministry with competent people.

## **4. They work out of a dynamic and focused ministry philosophy.**

Billy Graham’s daughter once indicated that her father’s good ministry was largely accomplished through his habit of asking the question, “How important will this be in 50 or 100 years?” Billy Graham was able

to avoid the fads of the day that entrapped so many people and concentrate on things that had more long-range significance.

In other words, he knew what he had been called to do, and he kept his eyes on that calling. He also knew what worked for him and what didn't. So along with his strong sense of call came a strong sense of style and method. His willingness to stick to a consistent "way of doing things" showed that he had a good handle on the way God had wired him to operate as a leader. Billy Graham has a dynamic and focused ministry philosophy, and he is in the process of finishing well because of it.

**5. They lead from a growing awareness of a personal sense of destiny.**

God destines us for kingdom purposes. Leaders have a sense that God has his hand upon them for special purposes. This personal sense of destiny means that they base their ability to influence on their identity as children of God first, and then on their specific call to ministry. They do not base their leadership on personal charisma, knowledge, or skill. Instead, their leadership flows out of *who they are* and *who they are becoming*. And this anchor keeps them focused for the long haul.

**6. They perceive their ministry from a lifetime perspective.**

We are not all that we wish to be. And yet God chooses to see us from a long-term perspective, as loved ones made worthy of his sanctifying influences because of the death and resurrection of his Son. And this requires a great deal of patience.

We need to see our lives as under God's shaping and transforming power over the long haul. Successes and failures (at least by the world's count) will come and go, and yet we must never take our eyes off of the work God is doing within us. We must never stop asking, "What next, Lord?" There may be times when life seems to be coming apart at the seams, but having a lifetime perspective helps us to see that "this too shall pass!" Such a lifelong perspective honors the journey we are on with God as we serve him in this world.

**7. They prioritize mentoring relationships for themselves and in developing others.**

Leaders who do not participate in mentoring relationships lose one of the most significant shaping tools available to them. Mentoring relationships can provide gracious contexts within which existing and emerging leaders can share the joys and sorrows of life and ministry. They also bring some accountability to bear on the lives of Christian leaders. Mentoring relationships help keep leaders from leading in a vacuum, and they empower them to become more faithful leaders. Developing a balance of mentoring relationships can help keep leaders on track through a lifetime of unexpected experiences and ensure a good finish.

**Questions for Exploration:**

- *How do you see these lessons being lived out by leaders today?*
- *Which ones of these negative lessons are you most vulnerable to? That is, what are the one or two that you must address if you are to flourish?*
- *What are the things we can do to assist in God's shaping activity in these areas of our lives?*