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A Bible Centered Leader

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the Word of our God will stand forever. Isaiah 40:8

Fads, helpful as they may be, will come and go.¹ Effective leaders will recognize and use fads which are appropriate to the times and situations in which they lead. But there is more. My personal conviction about lasting effective ministry flows from the following two verses.

2 Timothy 3:16, 17 The Guarantee

Every Scripture inspired of God is profitable for teaching, for setting things right, for confronting, for inspiring righteous living, in order that God's leader be thoroughly equipped to lead God's people.

2 Timothy 2:15 The Proper Response to the Guarantee

Make every effort to be pleasing to God, a Bible Centered leader who is completely confident in using God's Word with impact in lives.

In my opinion we have only one guarantee for an effective life time experience as a leader. We must be people of the Word. Seminaries are good. But a seminary degree does not guarantee an equipped leader. Short term training in leadership institutes are good and helpful. But institutes that offer various leadership emphases can not guarantee equipping. Retreats, workshops, seminars, and conferences, all good in themselves and helpful in our development, can not guarantee equipping. But God does guarantee it. He insures us that this unfading Word which will stand forever can equip us. If we center our lives and ministry in the Word we have a guarantee from God that it will equip us to lead. Our job is to respond and make every effort to please God in our mastery and use of this Word for our own lives and for those we serve. Let me suggest then, that,

Effective leaders should have an appropriate, unique, lifelong plan for mastering the Word in order to use it with impact in their ministries.

¹ I consider a fad as a fashion that is taken up with great enthusiasm for a brief period of time; a craze. Frequently, behind a fad is some dynamic principle. If we can identify the dynamic underlying principle we can re-engineer other *fads* which will work later after the original fad dies out (e.g. seeker sensitive churches, various church growth fads, etc.) But the Word of God will always be eternally fresh for any time if its dynamic principles are unlocked.

I want to share with you 4 discoveries I have personally learned in my own thirty-two year pilgrimage of mastering the Word and using it with impact in my ministry.

1. A Guiding Paradigm Helps

Few leaders master the Word without a proactive, deliberate approach which plans to do so. I was challenged early on, shortly after my Lordship committal in 1964, to begin a lifelong mastery of the Word of God—an overwhelming task I thought at that time. Pastor L. Thompson, the challenger, had been in the Word almost 30 years at that time. He was my model that it could be done. My Navigator trained friend, Harold Dollar, gave me my first paradigm for doing that. The Navigators were using an illustration called *The Hand* to challenge people to study and use God's Word. The little finger represented listening to God's Word. The ring finger stood for reading God's Word. The middle finger indicated studying God's Word. The index finger reminded of memorizing God's Word. The thumb represented Meditating on God's Word. I immediately set out to use this paradigm. I learned to listen well (using Sermon Listening Sheets). I started to get tapes from Bible teachers. I started my yearly read through the Bible program. I began to memorize three verses per week. I set a goal to study one book thoroughly each year (if a long book or more if shorter books). I learned techniques for analyzing verses and doing word studies which helped me learn how to meditate. In short, I made this paradigm really work for me. I used this paradigm for 15 years with one or more of the components having more prominence from time-to-time.

During the next 10 years I found that not all the components were important to me. By this time I was well into my leadership research and was not actively teaching the Bible in a local church context. I did continue to use several of *The Hand* components as guidelines. Essentially I was struggling for a better paradigm that both fit me and my ministry.

During the last 7 years I have been working from my new paradigm. And that is what I want to share with you. It has given me new life. Everywhere I go I try to share it—one on one, in groups, in seminars, and in classes. I find that people really respond to it. They react with a fresh new excitement about studying the Bible. I know that some of my readers have really plateaued in their mastery of the Word. I know that some of you are not seeing the Word impacting your leadership. Some of you are probably seeing impact, but are looking for more. Maybe what I have found may help you.

But even if my new paradigm may not work for you, I still contend that you need some plan to move toward lifelong mastery.

2. The Breakthrough Insight—The Notion of Core

I stumbled on to this new paradigm as I studied giftedness of leaders.² In my research of leaders developing over a lifetime, I found that:

- (1) all leaders have at least one word gift; most have a set of word gifts. Word gifts include teaching, exhortation, prophecy, pastoring, evangelism, apostleship, and ruling (leadership). Sometimes either word of knowledge, word of wisdom, discernings of spirits or word of faith functions as a word gift.
- (2) there are differing levels of word gifts: foundational (teaching, exhortation, prophecy); superstructural (pastoring, evangelism, apostleship and ruling); and remote (word of knowledge, word of wisdom, discernings of spirits and word of faith).
- (3) the differing levels require a different kind of mastery of the Word—Foundational being much demanding than superstructural or remote.
- (4) all leaders have core items in the Bible which are important to them.

It was this last item that was the *breakthrough insight*. This observation can prove extremely valuable to one who (1) has a desire to establish a life long habit of mastering the Word and (2) wants to use it impactfully in ministry. The observation, expanded a bit:

Leaders usually have favorite Bible books, or special passages, which God has used mightily in their own lives to spur their growth or solve their problems or otherwise meet them. It is these books or special passages which form the basis for much of what they share with others in their ministry.

And they usually do so with added impact since these core items have meant something to them personally. This interest in and repetitive use of core items suggests a selection criterion. We can limit what should be mastered in-depth over a life time to our core items. These core items provide a definite starting place for mastery of the Bible. From this observation I have drawn two important definitions.

definition A Core Set is a collection of very important Bible books, usually from 5-20, which are or have been extremely meaningful to you in your own life and for which you feel a burden from God to use with great power over and over in your ministry in the years to come.

² These first three observations which follow came as a result of 10 years research in giftedness among contemporary leaders at the School of World Mission. See **Unlocking Your Giftedness** from Barnabas Publishers which gives the results of studies of giftedness among leaders.

definition A Core Selection refers to important passages, important biographical characters, special psalms, special values or key topics which are or have been extremely meaningful to you in your own life and for which you feel a burden from God to use with great power over and over in your ministry in the years to come.

I call these two, core sets and core selections, by the general category of core items.³

It is this breakthrough insight which makes mastery of the Bible a realizable potential for word gifted leaders. The Equipping formula suggests one paradigm a leader can use to focus his/her mastery of the Bible.

3. The Equipping Formula—four components

My new paradigm, which I call the *Life Long Bible Mastery Paradigm*, has four components.

Component 1. **Mastery**⁴ of one's Core Books

Component 2. **Devotional Input** (from Core Books and other Bible portions as well)

Component 3. When needed, **Familiarity Reading** of weak Bible Portions.

Component 4. **Situational Study**

The first two components are obligatory and should be going on all the time. The next two are contingent upon need.

All leaders need to be working on mastering core items continually. All leaders need to have God speak to them personally through the Word. All leaders need to have some minimum familiarity with the whole Word, even though they are moving toward mastery of a limited number of core items in the Bible.⁵ From time to time leaders will have situations in their leadership setting which demand a searching study of the Bible for special findings. These will come and go as prompted by situations. The equipping formula takes in to account these various needs. Its four components form the basis for planning, short term and long term.

³ A foundationally word gifted leader will have a range of 10-20 core books in a core set as well as other core items. A superstructurally word gifted leader will have a lesser range, say 5-10 books, but many core passages and topics or core biographical characters. See my upcoming book **Ministry That Lasts—A Bible Centered Ministry for You** available through my own publishing company, Barnabas Publishers.

⁴ I define mastery along a continuum (minimum, medium, and maximum) with the idea that you are continuing to master your core items over a lifetime and will return to them from time to time and move your mastery further toward maximum. See **Ministry That Lasts** for detailed explanations of How To Identify One's Core Items, an approach to working on Core Items and the notion of Mastery.

⁵ I judge familiarity to be a score of 80% or better on the Bible Mastery Proficiency Instrument (BMPI). This instrument is available in **Equipped By the Word**, Barnabas Publishers. A leader who has read the whole Bible 7-10 times will probably score 80% or more on this testing instrument. Scores below 80% will indicate needs for familiarity reading. Scores of 90% or better probably indicate core books.

This four component paradigm **builds on strength** but takes into account weaknesses. It is an **individualized** paradigm. The paradigm **allows fit** with a given leader's uniqueness. And most importantly the paradigm is **doable**.⁶ It uses a **Building concept**—a base plus advance concept—conserving what you have done in the past and adding to it. It is a **reproducible** paradigm that you can use with others. It focuses on **using** the Bible with impact, that is, you study not just to learn but to impact others. It is this last notion that is my final point.

4. Impact Communication—Studying for Ideas that Change Lives

Core items are important to a leader. They have already impacted that leader personally. Because of this, a leader can usually use the core items in ministry to impact others. I teach those who want to use this Life Long Bible Mastery Paradigm to identify the key ideas in a core book, a core Psalm, a core passage, a core topic, core biographical characters or core values. Then as part of the plan of mastering that core item, I teach them to design communication events to present this idea in 4 kinds of communication settings.⁷

Effective leaders should have an appropriate, unique, lifelong plan for mastering the Word in order to use it with impact in their ministries. We need Bible centered leaders. The Life Long Bible Mastery Paradigm is simply one of many that can be used. The real questions are, “Do you have a Bible centered ministry? Are you a Bible Centered leader.”⁸

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⁶ The paradigm carries a lifetime of challenge yet it can be done. One can master a finite number of important things in the Bible. An overwhelming challenge like mastering the whole Bible usually will not be met. In fact, it will cause one to give up altogether and most likely plateau in Bible mastery.

⁷ The four levels include a 3-5 minute informal presentation, a 10-15 minute devotional-like presentation, a 20-30 minute sermon-like presentation and a 1-2 hour workshop-like presentation. I use a technique called slot/filler to design this nested series of communication events. See my book **Ministry That Lasts—A Bible Centered Ministry for You**.

⁸ Here is how I define a Bible Centered leader. A Bible Centered leader refers to a leader who has been shaped by Biblical leadership values, has grasped the intent of Scriptural books and their content in such a way as to apply them to current situations and who uses the Bible in ministry so as to impact followers.