

GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Finishing Well

Dr. J. Robert Clinton conducted foundational research in the field of Christian leadership. Following his study of 300 leaders described in the Bible, he discovered that few leaders finish well.

Of course some leaders in the Bible receive little comment, while others major treatment. About half of the leaders have enough information to know how they finished. Clinton identified four categories of finishes: First, some leaders were cut off early in their lives. They were taken out of leadership in several ways, e.g., assassinated, overthrown, killed in battle, etc. Second, some leaders finished poorly. Such leaders often declined in skill, competence, and/or relationship to God. Third, some leaders finished so-so. They did not accomplish what they could have or should have done. Fourth, some leaders finished well. They continued to walk closely with God, and accomplished his purposes.

The major finding from this research was that only about 30% of leaders described in the Bible finished well. For many of them, there were pivotal times when decisions impacted the rest of their lives and ministries.

Pivot Points

Most leaders face a time (or times) in their lives when they must make decisions that will impact them for the rest of their lives. These choice-points or pivot-points usually take place during a time that God is dealing with them. The leaders response to God's work in their lives often marks their ministry for years to come. Clinton found that the pivot point can . . .

- curtail further use of the leader by God (or at least curtail expansion of the leader's potential);
- limit the eventual use of the leader for ultimate purposes that otherwise could have been accomplished;
- enhance or open up the leader for expansion or contribution to the ultimate purposes of God's kingdom.

Leaders typically face 1-3 major pivot points in their lives. Reflecting on the pivot points of biblical leaders makes us sensitive to the importance of integrity and obedience.

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How to Finish Well

Moses reminds us that we should “number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” Clinton paraphrased this reminder as “teach us to wisely apply ourselves so that our lives count.” Like Moses, Christian leaders should seek to finish well so our life isn’t wasted in spite of our human mistakes.

1. To finish well, we must study biblical leaders to understand how God worked with them toward His purpose in their lives.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us to “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:7-8). By accessing the lessons learned from past leaders—positive and negative—we can discover how to finish well.

2. To finish well, we must build renewal experiences into our lives.

Leaders who finish well experience times of renewal. In the USA times of renewal are most important in the mid thirties to mid fifties (often labeled a mid-life crisis). However, I’ve found through my research that pastors need a regular time of renewal every 7-10 years. Without such renewal, Christian

leaders tend to plateau in life and ministry, and there is usually a sense of confusion regarding achievement and future direction. Being open to God’s renewing, and initiating personal times of renewal, are important aspects of finishing well.

3. To finish well, we must guard our inner lives.

At the end of his life, when the Apostle Paul was about 65 to 70 years old, he encouraged Timothy to “train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way” (1 Tim. 4:7-8). Leaders must assess their spiritual lives on a regular basis. Godly habits can shape character and increase the potential of finishing well.

4. To finish well, we must maintain a learning posture all of our lives.

Paul’s closing words to Timothy were to “bring the books” (2 Tim 4:13). Paul was still learning late in life. Maintaining a learning culture usually involves reading. Of course, participating in other learning activities, will help leaders finish well, too.

5. To finish well, we must establish relationships with mentors.

One of the key discoveries from leaders who finished well is that they normally had mentors who were able to speak into their lives at pivot points of life. Find and meet with a person who can help you finish well.

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