



The Fabric of Christian Leadership: Stretching Minds, Cradling Hearts, and Equipping Hands For Noble, Effective, and Sacrificial Service

David Gyertson

The Christian faith demands that we produce leaders with a compelling sense of Christ's Great Commission challenge to "go into all the world." It also requires that we remain anchored to His Great Commandment mandate of loving God with our total being and our neighbor as ourselves. As intentional Christians, we are called to the demanding responsibility of practicing leadership that is both relational and transactional in its formulations and applications. Rising to such a compelling and demanding challenge requires that we develop an integrated view of our leadership opportunities and privileges that is anchored to the essential elements of spiritual formation.

To that end, we need a model for spiritually formed and enlivened leadership that serves not only our own sense of mission, but contributes to the larger purposes of God in and through His human creation. To succeed in this calling, we must embrace an integrated paradigm of learning, living, and serving. At the very center of this paradigm is a commitment to becoming whole persons characterized by inquiring minds, loving hearts, and outstretched hands known for noble, effective, and sacrificial service.

The foundations of my thinking about such a leadership commitment are anchored to a process that began when I was an undergraduate university student. The initial lessons learned in that setting continue to fuel my passions and practices as I seek to contribute meaningfully to Christ's ultimate mission of engaging, redeeming, and changing the world.

This presentation describes my pilgrimage into the mission, message, and meaning of spiritually formed leadership. It is primarily a theological rather than methodological journey – a process of transformation more than information. It is not my intent to present this model as the ultimate answer for our important work. Neither is it the purpose to suggest that my thinking fully defines all of the dimensions and implications of such a sacred task. Rather, my goal is to encourage, motivate, and inspire you to take your distinctive understandings of the call to world-changing leadership to its highest levels.

Stretching Minds, Cradling Hearts, & Equipping Hands

In the fall of 1966, I began a journey of leadership formation that challenged my thinking, touched my heart, and prepared my hands for service at levels I could not have imagined. Lacking a high school diploma, but convinced that I needed an education to fulfill my sense of calling, I came to Spring Arbor University (Michigan, USA). There I encountered a call to radical whole person leading - I confronted something called the Concept.

I did not fully appreciate the Concept while I was a student. I felt leadership was more a matter of doing rather than of thinking and being. Despite my resistance, an integrated profile of those who serve God's purposes as leaders in their generation began to emerge. I became convinced that I must be a leader of the tough mind and the tender heart if I was to use my hands effectively and contribute meaningfully to the work of God's kingdom. Today, my passion for Christ, vision for service, and commitment to *let the mind of Christ* be in me Ph.2: 5 and the love of Christ show through me remains rooted in the images of a lamp, the cross, and a needy world that I first encountered as a university student.

The Lamp of Learning: Nurturing an Inquiring Mind

I was challenged to commit my life to a heads-first journey. Having come to faith in Jesus Christ out of a troubled and dysfunctional home, I needed to understand that it was necessary to become a mature follower of Christ through the disciplines of the renewed mind. I was challenged to understand that leadership, in the context of spiritual formation, requires a heads-first commitment. In order to lead others to the One who is the "light," I must pick up the lamp of learning to light my own path so that I could, in turn, enlighten the paths

of others.

I discovered that effective discipleship is driven by the Great Commission mandate to *go and make disciples teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded* Mt. 28:20. The building blocks of mature leadership rest upon the foundation of divine revelation. Those who follow the Christ see the world differently because they understand it through the mind and see it through the eyes of Jesus. He is the clearest revelation of all that is ultimately and eternally true. Effective leaders can only define reality when they have understood ultimate reality in the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

This relationship with Jesus Christ begins with revelation, the divinely initiated enlightening, that we need a Savior. *Come let us reason together says the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow Is. 1:18.* Jesus spent more time teaching than in any other single activity. The primary means He used to turn fishermen, tax collectors, harlots and zealots into revolutionary leaders able to turn their culture upside down was the transforming of the mind guided, guarded, and enabled by the Spirit of Truth. While these disciples marveled at our Lord's miracles, they were enlisted by His message – a call to a Christian-counter culture delivered with a depth of insight and level of authority they had not experienced previously. This life of the enlightened mind shaped the thinking of leaders who influenced the intellectual, social, and cultural world for centuries after Christ's death.

The early church fathers believed that followers of Christ should be broadly skilled both in and beyond the teachings of Scripture and the church in their search for truth. This heads-first leadership was fueled by the conviction that all that is "True" finds both its genesis and its sustenance in the One who is *the way, the Truth and the life* Jn.14: 6 – *that in Him we live and move and have our being* Acts 17:28. As a result, leaders throughout the history of the Christian movement emphasized following Jesus with minds transformed rather than conformed to secular paradigms. Learning and serving were anchored to the conviction that all "truth" is God's Truth.

Martin Luther, in a sermon to the political leaders of his day ("Keeping Children in School" 1530) established the central place of education in leadership formation, championing the renewing of the mind across multiple learning disciplines. He taught that children needed to study not only languages and history, but also singing

and music *together with the whole of mathematics*. The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines and, as a result, he believed, grew up to be people of *wondrous ability* subsequently *fit for anything*.

John Milton, in his “Tractate on Education” sent to Master Samuel Hartlib, emphasized the value of broad and comprehensive learning, what we know today as the Liberal Arts, when he suggested that *a complete and generous education is one that fits a person to perform all the offices, both private and public, of peace and of war*. He insisted in his treatise “Of Education” (1644) that the goal of learning is to *repair the ruins of our first parents* by knowing God and, out of that knowledge, to love Him, imitate Him, and be like Him.

T.S. Elliott picked up the theme of a discipleship that deepens when we seek to learn beyond our cultural and intellectual comfort zones. Mary Cox Garner, in *The Hidden Soul of Words* (2004 page 69), quotes Milton’s belief about stretching the mind. *No one can become truly educated without having pursued some study in which they took no interest – for it is part of education to learn to interest ourselves in subjects for which we have no aptitude*.

C.S. Lewis, in a sermon entitled *Learning in War Time* quoted in *The Weight of Glory* (1976, page 58), challenged the future leaders of his day to take time for a thorough education even in the midst of national turmoil. *To be ignorant now would be to throw down our weapons and betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered*.

One of the earliest declarations in the history of the United States of America of this conviction that true leadership is a heads-first endeavor anchored to a spiritual context are the words recorded in the statement of Harvard University’s founding purposes. *Let every student be plainly instructed to consider that the main end of life is to know God and Jesus Christ and therefore to lay Christ as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning*.

As an emerging leader, I was challenged to know God in every expression of creation and discipline of human learning. *To lay Christ as the only foundation* calls us to catch God at work in every place, plan, process, and person so that we can advance His purposes in each for the glory of Jesus Christ. I discovered a new application of a favorite childhood game. With the belief that God is always up to something somewhere and

with someone, I chose to greet each new leadership challenge with the prayer “come out, come out wherever you are.” I gave myself to the Christ-centered commitment of stretching my mind, reaching for the *highest levels* of learning so that I might lead others into the *deepest levels* of revelation.

As we master the disciplines of the stretched mind, laying hold of the lamp of learning, we honor Paul’s command *not to be conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of your mind* Rom.12: 2. I challenge you, fellow pilgrims of Christ-modeled leading, to be heads-first disciples and lifelong learners studying to show yourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth 2 Tim.2: 15. We are privileged as spiritually formed leaders to be called to model and encourage the life of the renewed mind. Only as we stretch our minds and thoughts beyond what we currently know, can we be fit to lead with the courage, conviction, and clarity required to change our world.

The Cross: Cradling the Restored Heart

One of the great challenges of heads-first leadership, however, is that left to itself, learning can lead to arrogance, isolation, and self pre-occupation. The greater the knowledge we acquire, the more critical it is that, with the learning, we nurture compassion. Knowledge is the blossom of the exercised mind. Compassion is the fruit of the circumcised heart. For me, the cross on which Jesus Christ demonstrated His sacrificing love for a broken world became the symbol of the restored heart.

The Great Commission mission of the Christian faith focuses on the heads-first calling of teaching them to obey all Jesus commanded. His other “Great,” the Great Commandment Mt. 12:30-31, is the key to employing our knowledge for the ultimate good of humanity. We must embrace Jesus’ command to love the Lord our God with our total being – body and spirit as well as mind – and love our neighbor as ourselves. The Great Commission’s *teaching them to obey* is the method of informed leadership. The Great Commandment’s call to love God, our neighbor, and ourselves is the motivation that restores and renews the hearts of spiritually formed and transformed leaders.

It became clear that while I held the lamp of learning in one hand, I must embrace the love of God demonstrated on the cross of Christ with the other. To comprehend Jesus Christ as the Truth, we must

apprehend Him as the way and the life in every dimension of learning, living, and serving. Jesus becomes our supreme teacher when we embrace Him as our suffering Savior. Loving God and humanity answers the “so what” questions of learning, providing both meaning to and motivation for the pursuit of Truth. Our leadership is enlivened when it becomes the means to change both hearts and minds. To embrace the cross is to receive Christ’s redeeming work accomplished on that “tree” following its shadow into sacrificial, risk-taking love for others.

Embracing the saving and transforming work of the cross sets us free to pick up its love lessons and challenges us to invest and spend ourselves for others. In light of the Jesus model of effective leadership, I believe that good leadership is anchored to good teaching. Good teaching is as much a factor of the heart of the teacher as it is the head. One of the most important resources for me in this quest to embrace the cross in my calling to lead by teaching is Parker J. Palmer’s The Courage to Teach (1998). Palmer lays out the following premise: *good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*. He continues: *In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood – and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning* (pg. 10).

I found a plaque several years ago whose saying sums up the challenge to embrace the cross’ perspective in our leadership calling – *to learn and never be satisfied is wisdom, to teach and never be weary is love*. I see the crucified Jesus so often in the lives of those I lead as well as those I follow. Frequently, I see their journeys characterized by *a long obedience in the same direction*, willingly embracing at any cost and consequence God’s call to love unreservedly and lead sacrificially. They are living epistles serving and mentoring in the “more excellent way” I Cor. 13. Many who had the greatest impact on my own journey are now held by the nail-scarred hands of Jesus, yet live for me as models of what philosopher Elton Trueblood calls, in his book A Life of Search (Friends United Press: 1996), disciples of both *the tough mind and the tender heart*.

This restored heart is the “value added” expected by the vast majority of those who follow us. They not only want to know what we think and what we do, but also long to know who we are and what we feel. For those of us who believe that the call to the life of leadership is a means to invest deeply in the lives, as well as the careers of those our leadership influences, the principle of self-sacrificing love rings true. In the conviction that

God so loved that he gave His Son John 3:16, and that the Son so loved that he gave His life, we find the courage to learn, work, teach, love, and lead like Jesus.

I urge you to embrace and share the liberating and enabling love symbolized by the cross with those who follow you. Look for appropriate opportunities to demonstrate that love through acts of caring, mercy, grace, and compassion. In your commitment to leadership excellence and career success, be creative and disciplined through the practice of a “tough-minded love,” speaking frankly, but seasoned deeply with caring and commitment. Be open about your personal journey. Be transparent about both your successes and failures - your honest doubts as well as your deeply held convictions. Your life, and those your leadership touches, will be changed as you lead in the shadow of an old rugged cross.

The Waiting World: Reformed Hands

With the lamp of learning in one hand and the cross of the Christ in the other, we are called to a life of leadership that produces tangible, life-changing and world-shaping results. Throughout the centuries, mature followers of Jesus not only thought clearly and loved deeply – they served nobly, effectively, and sacrificially. Transformed minds and purified hearts are manifested in and validated by the exceptional work they perform and the sacrificial service they render. Spiritually formed leadership, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently communicated by both pen and life, is usually a costly one focused on the needs and opportunities of a waiting world.

To and for what end are we enlightened by learning and enlivened for loving? It is so that we can do the Father’s business as revealed in the life of Christ. Christian leadership that changes the world is that which extends capable hands for noble, tangible, and measurable purposes. Like the Master, we are called to serve the poor, binding up the broken hearted, proclaiming release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, setting at liberty those who are oppressed, and declaring that now is the time of the Lord’s acceptance Luke 4:18-19. It is a call to demonstrate the breadth of our learning and the depth of our loving by stretching out competent, compassionate, reforming hands to serve a needy world.

I believe that enlightened and enlivened leaders develop a compelling sense of social justice and global

responsibility that calls them to touch the least, the left, and the lost. It was on a mission trip to Spanish Harlem in the inner city of New York that I touched the heart and was challenged to extend the hands of Christ. Subsequent opportunities to serve, work, and teach abroad in Europe, the Middle East, and Far East deepened my understanding that effective leadership requires a commitment to serve the purposes of God in our generation for every tongue, tribe, and nation. It is in the conflicts and contexts of cross-cultural and multi-cultural engagement that our ideas are challenged and hearts stretched to serve global leadership causes larger than ourselves.

Reforming hands, however, not only serve compassionately, but also competently. Too often, committed Christians appear to sacrifice competence on the altar of compassion. We must do what we do with all of our might for the glory of God. The need for discipline, diligence, and the commitment to achieve our fullest potential in the work at hand must guide our leadership practices. We are called to professional excellence if our loving acts are to be both credible and effective. The Christ taught with an authority and clarity that exceeded even the most skilled and learned of His day Mt. 7:29, Mark 1:22. He achieved His fullest potential through diligence and courage; we who lead in His name must do no less if the results of our leadership are to reflect the nobility of our King and Lord. He completed His task with a sacrifice of full surrender doing what no other was able to accomplish.

I encourage you to make time in your pursuit of excellence in leadership and professional service to take learning and loving to those who need it most. This cup-of-cold-water service is, as the early church understood in James 2:14-26, the tangible evidence that true wisdom is comprehended and perfect love embraced. As poet, Annie Johnson Flint so beautifully declared it:

*Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today;
He has no feet but our feet to lead men in His way.
We are the only Bible the careless will read;
We are the sinners' gospel; we are the scoffers the creed.
We are the Lord's last message written in deed and word.
But what if the type is crooked, what if the print is blurred?*

As you lift the lamp of learning in one hand and embrace the cross of Christ with the other, let your feet take you to the people and places where Jesus would be found if He were physically among us today. As you do it, do it with all your might for the glory of God.

A World-Changer's Profile: Christ-Centered Leadership that Serves the Present Age and Beyond

To achieve such a high standard, we need to integrate the elements of spiritually formed leadership into a functional whole. Ultimately, I contend, spiritually formed leadership must be centered more in a person (Jesus Christ) than in a philosophy, theory, technique, or a process.

It was through India's 2004 Kolkata Conference of the International Council for Higher Education that I found the context that informs this high calling. Using the framework of the conference's purpose statement, I am exploring a series of affirmations designed to tie the elements of spiritually formed leadership to the hub of Christ-centered learning, loving, and serving. Limitations of space will allow only a brief description of these guideposts.

Affirmation One: Christ-centered leaders are connected intimately to the purposes of God in relation to creation and, particularly, humanity. Recognizing that we are created in the image of God and given the responsibility of caring for His creation, we lead with a sense of divine calling to be good stewards of creation in general and humanity in particular.

Affirmation Two: Christ-centered leaders are holistic, striving to achieve their full potential in body, mind, and spirit. As such, their opportunities for both personal and societal transformation are unlimited.

Affirmation Three: Christ-centered leaders embrace the Christian perspective as reflected in God's Word. They are empowered to appropriate those perspectives by the Holy Spirit's gifts and graces initiating a positive, practical, and respectful dialogue with the world about the implications of such perspectives. Unfortunately, the stridency of much of our dialog, as intentional and serious minded Christians, often limits the impact of our ideas.

Affirmation Four: Christ-centered leaders move beyond cognitive learning and skill acquisition to intentional discipleship as their ultimate objective. Through the conscious integration of faith, learning, and living, Christ-centered leaders examine their professional missions and motivations asking how the fruit of their labor relates to the purposes of God. Christ-centered leaders not only analyze the outcomes of their efforts, but also explore their implied morality.

Affirmation Five: Christ-centered leaders embrace a Great Commandment motivation that compels them to address poverty, illness, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression in the world. They possess a burden for those who, for reasons of culture, social position, political oppression, economic condition, race, gender, and ethnicity, are denied the basics of life's opportunities. Spiritually formed leaders are driven by the mission and motivation of the Christ – to address and resolve human meaningless and suffering by understanding, going, teaching, serving, loving, and, if necessary, dying.

Affirmation Six: The Christ-centered leader's learning and serving reflect the major biblical themes of justice, mercy, and humility (Micah 6:8). All three of these are evidence of the transformation that comes when the mind is challenged to see and serve the world like the Christ.

Affirmation Seven: Christ-centered leaders think clearly and love deeply, providing noble service distinguished by its excellence, innovation, humility, and self-sacrifice. Spiritually formed leadership serves the present age and changes the world's future.

A Final Exhortation

With Jesus Christ as the hub, the essential elements for world-changing leadership become a creative force in both precept and application. I am experiencing new energy for and deeper understanding of my calling as I examine these in the context of the teachings and actions of the Christ. As you take up your leadership calling, I encourage you to develop such an integrated approach that stretches minds, cradles hearts, and equips future generations of leaders to serve nobly a waiting world with both compassion and excellence.

We who are called to world-changing, culture-transforming leadership have a unique, privileged, and providential opportunity to influence the destiny of future generations. Ours is a sacred calling. Let us appropriate that calling by extending our competent and compassionate hands to a world that longs for our well-trained touch and caring embrace. Let us commit ourselves to this journey of life-long leading, laying Jesus Christ as the only sure foundation. May we have a “new-every-morning” revelation of God in every place, plan, process, and person. Let us be fit for anything because the mind, heart, and outstretched hands of Jesus have become our everything. Together let us lift up our lamps of learning and embrace the cross – a needy world awaits the transforming touch of our outstretched hands!

About the Author

Dr. David Gyertson has a broad and varied background in higher education, publishing, consulting, executive coaching, ministry and media. He has held senior leadership positions in religious, charitable and business environments, including international and cross-cultural settings. Dr. Gyertson served as President of Taylor University (Indiana) for five years and Asbury College (Kentucky) for seven years. Prior to going to Asbury he was one of the founding administrators and then President of Regent University, a free standing Christian graduate university in Virginia, where he is now on the faculty of the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship. Dr. Gyertson also served the Christian Broadcasting Network in a variety of management, leadership, publishing and broadcasting roles. E-mail: dgyertson@regent.edu

Bibliography

- Beebe, Gayle D., Kulaga, Jon S., Overton-Adkins, Betty. (2004) Keeping the Concept: Christian Higher Education and the Integration of Faith, Living and Learning. Michigan: Spring Arbor University Press.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. (1995) The Cost of Discipleship. New York: Touchstone Press.
- Flint, Annie Johnson. (1980) Best Loved Poems. London: Marshall
- Garner, Mary Cox. (2004) The Hidden Soul of Words. New York: Select Books pg.69
- Holy Bible. (1996) The New King James Version. Nashville: Broadman and Holman
- Kolkata Conference. (2004) “Statement of Purpose”. Unpublished paper presented at the February 2004 Conference of the International Council on Higher Education by Victor Cole and Kenneth Ganaken. Web site www.ichenetwork.org
- Lewis, C.S. (1976) The Weight of Glory. San Francisco: Harper-Collins pg. 58

- Luther, Martin. (1530) *“Keeping Children in School”*, To the Councilmen of All Cities In Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools. LW 45:341-378
- Milton, John. (1911) Tractate on Education. New York: McMillan.
- Palmer, Parker J. (1998) The Courage to Teach. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. pg. 10
- Trueblood, Elton. (1996) A Life of Search. Indiana: Friends United Press.