**KEYS TO A LONGER MINISTRY LIFE**

This listing is unique to my experience. I have tried to place the keys in some kind of descending order with what has most impacted me at the beginning. My order won’t be your order. Sometimes the difference in impact between the various points has been so slight that to separate them numerically might be misleading.

Two further points of explanation. First, I was born and brought up in Australia. An earlier printing of ‘Operation World,’ the well-known prayer manual for the nations, mentioned that Australia is slightly unique in having more ex-full time Christian pastors than present day pastors, the inference being that Australia’s spiritual climate is as harsh as our natural climate.

Second, the 17 year-old who came to Christ in his last year of high school was timid, had a

pronounced stutter, and coming from a partly dysfunctional family, was to the natural understanding, not a good candidate for ministry of any kind, let alone leading a church. That was more than 50 years ago and those 50 years have included more than 40 years of local church leadership

(1) understanding my part in God’s master-plan

***12****We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.****13****We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you.****14****We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ.****15****Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand,****16****so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in someone else’s territory.****17****But, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”* ***18****For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

2 Corinthians 10:12-18 (NIV)

Paul believed God had ‘*assigned to’* him a ‘*sphere of service*.’ He uses the Greek word ‘*metron*’ for this ‘*sphere of service*.’ The word was used for “a graduated rod or rule for measuring”[[1]](#footnote-1) and, as used here, defined “that which is measured, a determined extent, a portion measured off” (Vine).[[2]](#footnote-2) Frank Damazio adds “It means a portioned-off section, a boundary that has been set, a parameter that should not be exceeded. A metron is a measure of capacity or limit. It is an assigned scope of ministry grace and ministry influence within the limits of appointed lines drawn by God”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Charles Simeon, the great English evangelical leader in the very early 1800’s, used the illustration of two inter-locking cogs to explain his part in God’s plan. The first cog was God’s sovereign purposes and was massive. The second cog was tiny and was his part. The tiny cog only moved because the far greater cog moved it. If the far larger cog stayed still, nothing moved at all. It was impossible for the small cog to initiate any movement. Simeon noted that the tiny cog moved in the opposite direction to the far greater cog but still brought about the greater cog’s purpose.

John the Baptist saw his part in God’s extraordinary plan. When told that Jesus’ disciples were baptizing more people than he was, John answered ‘*A man can only receive only what is given him from heaven’* (John 3:27). We receive only but what God has given us.

Living with this understanding has made undertaking the truth of C. S. Lewis’ words easier: *“Learn to play great parts with humility and lesser parts without shame.”*

I was not called to do everything but I was called to do something. Finding that ‘something’ and walking in it has been the single most important safeguard over my life over the years.

(2) being content in my temperament

In earlier days in ministry, I wanted to be very different to the way I was. It seemed everywhere I looked I saw God using bolder, ‘gifted’ people. They spoke confidently and had no trouble gathering followers. In contrast I was quiet, laid back and didn’t seem to have any ‘outstanding’ gifts.

But over the years, like the hare and the tortoise, I kept going while many who I envied dropped out of ministry roles. There was no single reason for their change of focus. But now my phlegmatic temperament came to the fore. It helped me be patient, not only with others but with myself. It helped me persevere. William Carey’s famous “I can plod” took on new meaning.

The older I’ve grown, the more thankful I’ve become that God made me just as I am. Every temperament has strengths and weaknesses. If we work on the weaknesses, the strengths come to the front and begin to shine.

(3) a single-eyed, grace-filled wife

I have been married twice. My first wife, Susie, (who died from cancer) had a very public profile as a creative leader, speaker, singer-songwriter and pastor. She was visionary and continually broke new ground.

After her passing, God gave me a second wife, Theresa, but here was someone with a completely different temperament. Theresa is quietly passionate for God and people. She serves out of the limelight.

In earlier days I needed to be prodded and pushed and corrected to get me moving. Susie did just that. But in the latter days, I’ve needed someone who was willing to lay down so much of her own life to build into mine. Theresa has done just that.

I could not have maintained my walk with God and resultant ministry without the input of a single-eyed, grace filled wife.

(4) an on-going passion to know God

I’ve always wanted to live a fruitful life. But at the back of my mind I’ve long recognised that, like Israel in the wilderness, I could know God’s provision without really knowing Him.

Over the years scriptures that encouraged the reader to know God very personally have taken a stronger grip of my heart than scriptures describing ministry “success.” *‘This is what the Lord says; “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD’* (Jeremiah 9:23,24).

Great giants of the faith like A. W. Tozer, A. W. Pink and many others have written extensively on God’s nature and character. Systematic theologies have wonderful treatments on these inexhaustible themes.

In the 1970’s I was introduced to the charismatic movement with its newly discovered emphasis on knowing the person and power of God the Holy Spirit.

In the 1980’s there was a marked rediscovery of the person and power of God the Father. I joined hundreds of thousands of others in coming into a liberating knowledge of the father- heart of God.

Before, during, and since these times, Christ has been pre-eminent in my thinking. With Paul I’ve cried ‘*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death’* (Philippians 3:10).

(5) a strong devotional life

God has helped me build spiritual disciplines into my life, particularly in reading the Scriptures and in praying. Spurgeon referred to them as ‘breathing in and breathing out.’ We need both to live.

Breathing in is allowing the truths of Scripture into our heart. Our love for Christ as the Son of God always goes hand in hand with our love for, and keeping of, the Scriptures, the Word of God. Clearly God reveals Himself to us as we embrace and learn to live in the Scriptures.[[4]](#footnote-4)

George Washington Carver is famous for many sayings but this one has most touched me: “If you love anything enough it will reveal its secrets to you.” Loving God for me has meant loving the Bible and that love has opened wonderfully rich veins of golden understanding over the years.

Gordon Fee has impacted me more than any other Bible commentator. His work overflows with understanding. His golden rule that “a text cannot mean what it could never have meant to its author or his or her readers”[[5]](#footnote-5) has kept me on a straight and narrow pathway.

Associated with this has been learning to distinguish conviction from preference. Convictions are unchanging. They are true in all cultures and at all times and cannot be compromised. We might go to war over convictions but we should never go to war over preferences. I can live with my preferences being overturned but I can’t do that with my convictions. Learning the difference has helped me choose my battles wisely.

‘Breathing out’ is our prayer walk with God. I was privileged to learn in earlier years to maintain a more tenacious prayer life. This hasn’t been constant but God has given me a certain ‘grunt’ to keep asking, and a fighting spirit to engage the enemy.

Waiting on God and worshipping Him have been a continuing thread over the years, along with fasting, although I’ve always found longer fasts difficult.

(6) a settled understanding of the continuity in God’s redemptive plan

God saw from the very beginning both the outcome of giving His creation freedom to respond to His love, and the only way humanity’s resultant fall could be restored in conformity with His perfect character. The outworking of that plan of redemption began in the Garden and will continue as long as time continues.

God’s ultimate purposes have always revolved around the exaltation of His Son to be the King of His Kingdom. The Old and New Testaments are two sides of the same coin and not two different coins. Seeing where Israel and the church fit into the continuity of God’s Kingdom plan has been wonderfully freeing

(7) success in life is measured by how well I do in what God has specifically called me to do

‘*Therefore since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses … let us run with perseverance* *the race marked out for us’* (Hebrews 12:2)

While the Christian life is often pictured as a race, this scripture notes that we each run ‘*the race marked out for us.’* My race is not the same as anyone else’s race and their race is not the same as my race. My ‘success’ in life will be measured by how well I do in what God has specifically called me to do. This means running according to my ‘metron.’

Faithfulness in what I have increases what I have (Matthew 25:19-23); a lack of faithfulness decreases what I have (Matthew 25:24-27)

(8) spiritual fathers (and mothers)

I have been blessed through my ministry years with ‘spiritual fathers’ and to a lesser extent, ‘spiritual mothers.’ My experience has been that the spiritual fathers were more formative in my ministry life and character, while the spiritual mothers were more prayerful and impactful from an unheralded place.

There have been countless times though when I’ve felt alone (2 Timothy 4:6,7), not through being abandoned, but having to prove Christ in the conflict without obvious help and support from others.

(9) protecting my heart/keeping it free from dark shadows

‘*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life’* (Proverbs 4:23 NIV). We are to ‘*guard’* our heart, guarding what we let in and what we let out (our words and actions). The word ‘*wellspring’* is the common Hebrew word for ‘borders.’[[6]](#footnote-6) Borders mark the extremity, the farthest edge of claim or ownership. Our heart determines the borders of our life, the extremities, the farthest point of ownership. A small heart results in a small area of ownership while a bigger heart means a larger area.

Deuteronomy 8:2 has been pivotal in my understanding of how to grow my heart’s borders. ‘*Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.*’ God tested Israel in the wilderness. Their reaction to the tests revealed their heart. God wanted the people to recognise their heart reactions and cry out to Him to change them. I’m wanting to do better than they did when life’s testings reveal my own heart reactions.

(10) identity in Christ and not in ministry

The lack of healthy ‘fathering’ and multiple other factors are creating a void in knowing who we are, knowing our identity. A growing problem is the increase in Christians finding their identity in ministry rather than in Christ. Stature in Christ should lead to status in ministry but the opposite is too often true where we determine someone’s status in Christ by their apparent stature in ministry.

“God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him” (John Piper)

* “Healthy ministry gives value to others” (John Maxwell)

(11) significant prophetic input

A clear prophetic word has more times than I could count encouraged and challenged me to keep running my race. I have kept relational contact with highly prophetic people.

(12) recognising seasons

God has placed seasons in the earth – spring, summer, autumn and winter. Similarly, we face seasons in our lives. And just as the earth is replenished by these seasonal differences, we can be too – as long as we recognise what’s happening and use the different seasons to advantage

Disraeli, the English Prime Minister in the 1860’s and 70’s, was famous for many sayings, but none greater than this: “*The secret of success is constancy of* *purpose.”*

1. Vine, W.E. ‘Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words’ (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996) p.399 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Vine, W.E. op. cit. p.399 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Damazio, F. ‘Life Changing Leadership’ (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2013) p.14 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Prince, D. ‘Foundational Truths’ (Charisma House, 2006) pp.9-16 for a strong treatment of this theme [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fee, G. D. and Stuart, D. ‘How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth’ (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003), p.74 and repeated constantly throughout his writings [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wigram, J. P. The New Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts) p.1342 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)