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THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

LEAD SO OTHERS CAN FOLLOW

12 PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES FOR MINISTRY

James T. Bradford



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SECTION 1

Spirituality and Servanthood

On the first Sunday as a new pastor at my previous position in Springfield, Missouri, I made five commitments to the congregation . . .

- To be a spiritual leader
- To be a growing person
- To disappoint them, somehow, sometime
- To build a people-centered, team-based approach to ministry
- To believe with them for the future of Central Assembly

My understanding of servant leadership doesn't make me feel less of a leader. It does, however, obligate me to make commitments to others before I expect them to make commitments to me. To do otherwise fosters a sense of leadership entitlement that puts me and what I think I deserve at the center, eventually alienating the people I most need around me.

Of course, that third commitment—to disappoint them—is

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the one that everyone remembered. Such is human nature. But I reminded them on that first Sunday that there would probably be moments when they, too, would disappoint me. We just needed to face it, get over it, and move on together. And although some people seemed to take perverse delight in reminding me whenever I was, indeed, “keeping my third commitment,” there was generally an underlying trust still there—in part because I was not *demanding* that trust but rather had placed myself in a position to *earn* it through the commitments I took responsibility to make.



This is the foundation of spiritual leadership—walking in the Spirit’s life, making and keeping life commitments, earning trust, demanding little for ourselves, and lifting others up.

CHAPTER 1

Core Commitments

“Watch your life and doctrine closely.”

1 TIMOTHY 4:16

As a kid I was short, shy, and definitely not the dominant personality on the playground. By the time I was off to college, the thought of being a leader was terrifying to me. But that fear, as with many fears, turned out to mean nothing. After years of open doors and stretching experiences, leadership eventually became a part of who I am. No one is more surprised than me.

Thankfully many wonderful people walked with me during that process. Their encouragement had a refining power in my life, helping me to change the way I saw myself. Meanwhile the Lord, who is strong in our weakness, would patiently remind me that I did not choose Him, He chose me (John 15:16).

Along the way, I came to appreciate the New Testament book of First Timothy as a biblical leadership manual. In 1 Timothy 4:16, the apostle Paul specifically coached Timothy to “watch your life and doctrine closely.” Why *life* as well as doctrine (ministry)? Because Paul continues, “if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Public leadership can be brutal. But it’s our personal life commitments and habits that both sustain us and shape what

we become. When it comes to influence, people will follow *who we are more than what we say*. To “watch your life” in this context is not selfishness or mere survival; it’s the process that earns us credibility as leaders. This isn’t about good looks or extroverted personalities but the content of our lives—character and conviction.

I have long believed that what we are ten years from now is largely the sum total of every today that we live. Entertainer Eddie Cantor once quipped, “It takes twenty years to make an overnight success.”¹ Or, as I once heard leadership expert John Maxwell put it, “The things you do every day will eventually show.” Ultimately, life is pretty daily, and that is where we start.

Several years ago, as I pondered the “watch your life” implications of 1 Timothy 4:16, I decided to write down seven phrases, two words each, that would capture the core commitments I needed to make in my own life on a daily basis. I later added to each phrase a diagnostic question to help keep my feet to the fire. (Each person can develop their own core commitments and self-test questions, but here are mine.)

1. KNOW GOD: *If ministry activities were taken away from me, would I still have a growing, intimate relationship with Jesus?*

My friend Chuck Miller, in his book *The Spiritual Formation of Leaders*, describes the two rooms that every minister needs to manage—the soul room and the leadership room. He observes that “the church has tended to move type A people into leadership and the more reflective people toward prayer and spirituality. We end up forcing people to make an unnecessary choice between spirituality and leadership.”² That’s a choice we shouldn’t have to make.

Do I really want my ministry to grow without my relationship with Jesus also growing? What would I want people to write on my gravestone someday: “He pastored a great church” or “He knew God”? The soul room calls us to intimacy *with* Christ apart from activity *for* Christ. This is what keeps ministry from reducing us

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to mere performers. Our churches are full of people who, above all, want to know that their leaders actually walk with God.

If we take care of the depth of our lives, God takes care of the breadth of our influence.

Men and women who've been used by God throughout history have long known that if we take care of the depth of our lives, God takes care of the breadth of our influence. This is deep before wide, walk before work. It's pursuing brokenness more than happiness and depending on anointing more than adrenalin. It's reading and meditating on God's Word apart from the texts we are preaching on. It's seeking out fellowship with God when nobody else sees us and focusing on whatever it takes to walk in the conscious presence of God throughout the day.

No one can do this for us and no ministry success can make up for it. These are first commandment, first love issues that confront the sinister tendency within us to love leading more than we love Jesus.

2. PURSUE INTEGRITY: *Are there areas of ongoing secrecy in my life that I'm intentionally hiding from those closest to me?*

Are there questionable behaviors in our lives that might trigger thoughts like *I hope my spouse never sees me doing this* or *I wouldn't want to run into anyone from church right now*? These ought to set off alarm bells inside our heads and shake us into ruthless honesty. In mathematics an integer is a whole number as opposed to a fraction. *Integrity* carries the meaning of not being fractionalized. There are no secrecy-cloaked patterns of behavior that are out of sync with our ministry roles or the God we serve.

When it comes to behaviors that compromise our integrity, the list is long—all the way from prejudice, arrogance, manipulation, lying, breaking confidences, and not keeping

promises, to pornography, adulterous affairs, alcohol, illicit drugs, gambling, financial mismanagement, and embezzlement, just to name a few. Add to that demonic oppression, exhaustion, boredom, or unbridled success, and our vulnerability is only magnified.

Unfortunately, the casualties are many. The first is our own souls. It's more than a cliché to say that our secrets keep us sick. But the victims don't stop with us. The people we love and lead desperately need to be able to trust us. Where trust is violated, leadership will never work and people are always hurt. Integrity and trust are inextricably linked.

Yet in the very center of our dark, secret places God planted the cross and hung His Son on it. This is our hope—a God who meets us at our worst, calls us to the painful honesty of confession, forgives us freely, and then recreates our inner being with His resurrection Spirit. Integrity *is* possible because of this.

3. BE YOURSELF: *Am I living under the self-imposed pressure of always having to prove something to somebody?*

When we serve that relentless internal pressure to prove to others that we are good leaders or spiritual persons or able preachers, then the spotlight is still on us. We try too hard, depend on ourselves too much, and, ultimately, do foolish things. That pressure to always prove something to others about ourselves causes us to lead out of our insecurities rather than in true humility.

At some point we need to learn from each other,
but stop short of trying to be each other.

Yet the struggle to not idealize and idolize other people but to relax and be who God made us is a difficult one for most of us. The celebrity culture in the church at large doesn't help. But in

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the words of a rather prophetic friend of mine, “Every one of us is one of God’s originals.” At some point we need to learn from each other, but stop short of trying to be each other. It took me years to even come close to this place.

One of the litmus tests I have is to listen for the number of times I hear people say, “Pastor, thank you for your authenticity” or “It really helps me that you are willing to be a real person” or “I appreciate your transparency.” If too many weeks go by without hearing someone say that, I know I’m slipping in the battle between image-centered professionalism and authentic, love-centered service.

When I’m winning that battle, however, I feel less pressure to perform and more freedom to just be who the Lord made me to be, without having to prove anything to anyone.

4. OWN RESPONSIBILITY: *Do I acknowledge my mistakes or do I project blame and use the pulpit to vent unresolved anger?*

Years ago, I came to the conclusion that my biggest problem in spiritual leadership is my own heart. It’s not a budget shortfall or an annoying critic or a parishioner who could seriously complicate any given day in my life. Consistently, my biggest challenge is managing my heart and taking responsibility for what goes on inside of me without blaming people and circumstances for my feelings and behaviors.

When we defer responsibility for our spiritual and emotional health to others, by blaming them, we actually turn ourselves into the victims. Because we usually can’t control what we blame, we end up feeling powerless and frustrated. That produces anger, which often expresses itself in destructive, self-serving leadership behaviors. People get hurt, and we stay unhealthy, as do our ministries. Only health breeds health.

Do we admit personal mistakes to our peers, or even to those we lead? Is the passion that we have when we preach the pure flow of God’s Spirit, or a tainted stream of God’s heart mixed with our own unresolved anger? Do we solve problems, or are we

passively letting them fester? Are we always blaming our church members and our denominational leaders for everything that is wrong? Or do we own our own issues?

It takes an immense amount of spiritual courage to be truly honest with ourselves. But if we are to be people of influence, we must stop trying to control what we can't while taking responsibility for what we can—our own attitudes and behaviors.

5. EMBRACE CHANGE: *Is my attitude faith-filled and future-focused or am I overly nostalgic of the past and fearful of taking risks in the future?*

Given that change is always with us, and no growth happens without it, effective leaders choose to embrace it for what it is and determine to help others through it as well. Constantly resisting change has the reverse effect. No one grows and opportunities slip by. Nostalgia and fear take their place. Nostalgia, as wonderful as it is, can lock us into the past and make us too rigid to flex with the present. Fear, meanwhile, can paralyze us for the future. Nostalgia and fear make terrible prisons.

It takes immense personal courage to do what is best for the ministry as a whole, personally embracing the kinds of change that will bear fruit for Christ.

Faith and risk-taking, on the other hand, are much more consistent with the activity of the Holy Spirit. Both require change. They demand an attitude that never settles for the predictable, the mediocre, or the safe. The test I use for monitoring the “creeping rigidity” that can immobilize in my life is whether or not I'm willing to take risks, especially as I get older. In other words, what am I planning to do next for which I am uncertain of the outcome and will need to trust God?

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Unfortunately, we as ministry leaders often expect everyone to change except us. A pastor of a revitalized church once told me that what amazed him most about the church's turnaround was the degree to which he as the pastor had to change before anything else changed. It's easy to fall into the trap of expecting more of others than we do of ourselves. When we refuse to change, we will lead only in ways that meet our needs and conform to our familiar routines and blind spots. But it takes immense personal courage to do what is best for the ministry as a whole, personally embracing the kinds of change that will bear fruit for Christ.

For most of us constructive, personal change requires that others walk with us, speak into our lives, hold us to our priorities, and constantly keep the big ministry perspective in front of us. It's a hard journey to take alone.

6. LOVE LEARNING: *Am I coasting intellectually, or am I applying myself to the disciplines of personal study and reflection?*

When he was languishing in prison, Paul asked for his books (2 Tim. 4:13). We easily forget that Paul was a ministry leader, yes, but a scholar as well. He was extremely well educated for his day and, judging by the way that he thought and wrote, likely had a genius level IQ. Unfortunately, our church experiences have sometimes communicated the subtle but erroneous impression that a person cannot be spiritual and smart at the same time.

The Scriptures, however, call us to the *renewing* of our minds, not the neglect of our minds. I will never forget hearing one of my spiritual leaders say, "I want to live 'til I die." We probably all know people who have stopped living a long time before they actually died simply because they stopped being curious about people, about the world the Lord has created, and about the great theological truths He has revealed.

By the time I reached my mid-forties, it was surprising to me how strong the temptation had become simply to coast the second half of my ministry life. It's distressingly easy to let up on personal and intellectual disciplines, replacing them with

too much television, social media, preoccupation with sports, and low-effort activities that waste time and require nothing of us. But we can do better than preparing messages with minimal study and wasting our minds on idle things.

We can read books, connect with people who have accomplished more than we have, ask questions, always listen, write down ideas, keep files, learn from life experiences—these are some of the more productive and fulfilling ways we can live and continually grow as leaders. A lot of the reading and learning I do are related to my leadership responsibilities, but it's especially fun when it doesn't stop there. On vacations I like to read physics books as well as biographies of American presidents. Keeping up with the news and current events is also a fairly daily activity most of the year.

While we need to rely entirely on the Holy Spirit, there is no excuse for shallowness on our part. Jesus told us to love the Lord our God with, among other things, “all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).

7. LIVE JOYFULLY: *Do I love what I'm doing or have I taken the pressures of ministry onto myself?*

While I was studying engineering at the University of Minnesota, I was also leading an Assemblies of God campus group (Chi Alpha) that had shrunk from twelve people down to three by the end of my senior year. But during my second year of graduate school the Lord gave us a supernatural breakthrough, and we grew overnight to over sixty students, then a hundred.

Unfortunately, still being a novice leader and a full-time student, my insecurities got the best of me. I began to feel immense pressure for everything that went on. If anything went wrong, I took it as evidence that I wasn't a good leader. Yet the group was growing and the imperfections were multiplying.

Late one night, as I was worrying and beating myself up again, I sensed the Holy Spirit direct me to start praying differently whenever a problem in the ministry came up. Some of my friends call it the “Bradford prayer,” and it goes like this: “Lord, You have another problem in Your ministry. So what are You going to do

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about it? And, by the way, if You need any help, I'm available.”

In other words, God was helping me to off-load the pressure from myself onto Him. Trite formulas usually aren't much help to me, but this simple prayer is potent. The ministries God calls us to aren't ours—they belong to Him, and He can carry them. We take responsibility to watch our hearts and steward His calling on our lives, but He carries the weight. He bears the yoke with us and makes it light (Matt. 11:28–30).

Our ministries may not be perfect, but we can still serve with joy because the pressure is on Him, not us.



No matter what they are, the core personal commitments we make define the things that will shape who we become and how we lead. Let's take care of our own hearts before we try to fix the hearts of others. Who we are will take us further than what we do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. James T. Bradford is the general secretary of the Assemblies of God. Prior to his election as general secretary in 2009, Bradford served as senior pastor of Central Assembly in Springfield, Missouri.

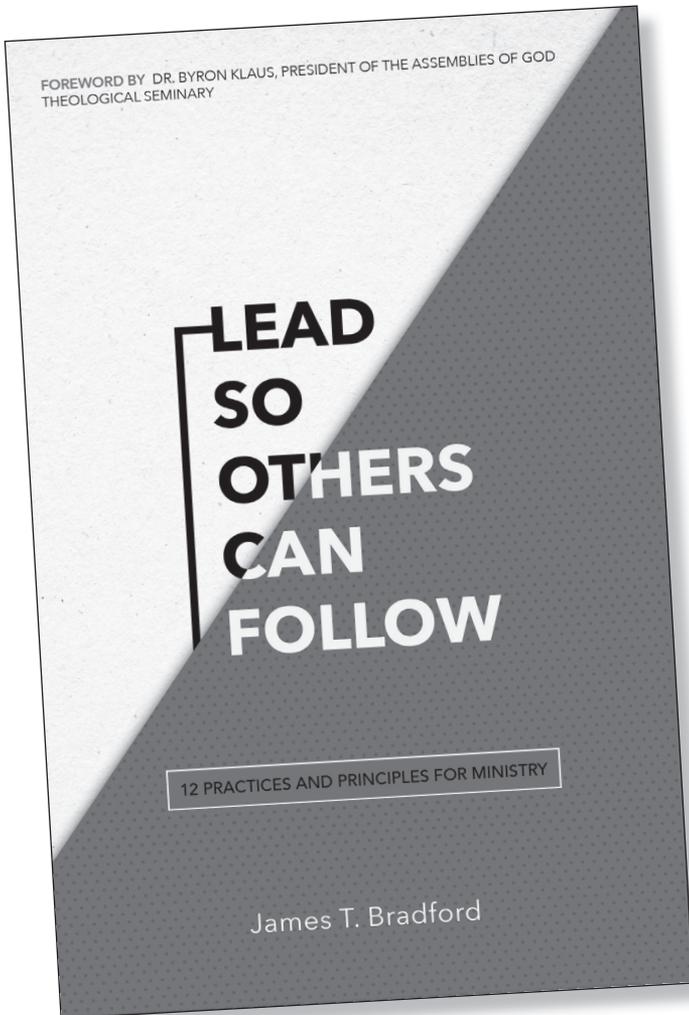
Jim holds a PhD in aerospace engineering from the University of Minnesota. As a student he led a small Chi Alpha campus Bible study that eventually grew into a university church. Upon graduation in 1979, Jim stepped into full-time ministry with that campus outreach. In 1988, Jim and his family moved to southern California where he pastored Newport-Mesa Christian Center in the heart of Orange County.

Twelve years later, he transitioned to Vancouver, BC, to pastor Broadway Church. In 2003 Jim and his family moved to Springfield to assume the pastorate of Central Assembly.

Bradford has also served on a variety of executive boards including that of Vanguard University, the Southern California District Executive Presbytery, Evangel University, and the General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God.

Bradford and his wife, Sandi, have two daughters, Meredith and Angeline.

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