

## **LIFELINE**

### *An Exercise in Spiritual Biography*

"How does my story fit into "The Story", is one of the most crucial questions that can be asked by a devout Christian. By "The Story" we mean the unfolding drama of redemption that God is bringing forth in human history including Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. While this linear progression worked out in human history on the grand scale is significant to all Christians, it is also significant for each individual Christian to have a sense of what God is doing in his or her personal and communal life to play a small but significant role in "The Story".<sup>1</sup> *Life Line* is an exercise, which will help you to reflect more deeply on how God has been shaping your life in the past so as to have greater insight into your future direction and a greater sense of how your spiritual pilgrimage is imbedded in "The Story".

Christianity is an unabashed historical religion. God's unfolding redemption is most often portrayed in Scripture through the narratives of lives of those following and those rejecting God's leading in their lives. Those who follow God in covenantal relationship are confident that God is weaving their story into "The Story" and that God is providentially going to use their unique gifts, talent, temperament and personal history to be a part of His plan. Even the evil acts against God's children are sovereignly woven into "The Story" (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:22-24). *LifeLine* is a systematic approach to exploring God's providential work in your story from your birth up until the present. Its rigorous approach will hopefully engender insight into God's providential work in your life and give clues as to future development. But before we jump into the *Life Line* process, let's explore some the theological assumptions under girding this exercise in spiritual biography.

1. God has been sovereignly shaping the believer's life calling from birth. (Ps. 139: 13-16)

Even before we had a personal relationship with God, He was sovereignly forming us to be the people that would fulfill His purposes. He was involved in the forming us in the womb and had ordained our days for us before we were born. Many biblical examples show the foundations of ministry design being laid from birth (Moses placed in Pharaoh's household; The Apostle Paul being born a Roman citizen, etc.) Clues to our ministry future are often found in God's sovereign work in the past, because God tends not to waste experience.

2. Trusting that God is directing our lives is ultimately an act of faith. (Gen. 50:20)

If you look at the front and the back of a tapestry you will see quite different things. The pattern and design are clearly seen on the front but the backside gives some clues to the pattern, but may appear indistinct, jumbled or even messy. In much the same way the plan of God as known by God is clear like the front of the tapestry. But when we look at the work of God in our lives and in the world around

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<sup>1</sup> The "my story/The Story" language is from Thomas Groome's *An Introduction to Christian Religious Education*. (Harper and Row, 1986.)

us it is much like looking at the back of a tapestry. Some pattern is discerned but much may seem unclear. Knowing that the jumble of yarn is being superintended by God might require some faith, especially for the hurtful things (note that Job trusted God even though he never got an explanation as to why tragedy befell him or why his fortunes were restored). Although we now see dimly (1 Cor. 13: 12, it does not mean that we do not see at all or that we cannot discern some of God's work in our lives as we approach our life story by faith.

3. We are wonderfully made and fitted for God's calling upon our lives. (1 Pet. 4:10; Ps. 139: 13,14)

God has made each of us wonderfully suited for what He desires to do with our lives. He does not ask us to do that for which we do not have capacity, but rather He wants to use all that we are in as a living sacrifice of service to Him. Our story does fit in His story. Therefore, we believe that it is important to look at the trajectory of your life as God has superintended it for clues as to what He desires for you to do with your life in the future. Our prayer for you as you explore your *Life Line* is that you will see more clearly the hand of God in your life, that you will be able to more fully echo the words of David in Psalm 139, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made", that you will see more clearly areas of your life that need maturing into Christ likeness and that you will be more emboldened to share God's work in your life with others. (1 Thess. 2:8)

4. Our lives recapitulate in many ways the grand themes of salvation history. (2Peter 1:3:11)

Creation, fall, redemption and hope are the grand movements of salvation history. We too have the glorious endowment of the divine image. We too know the scarring from personal sin and being sinned against. Our lives have many accounts of redemption and we cling to God's promise for a blessed future.

## OVERVIEW OF THE *LIFE LINE* PROCESS

Writing a spiritual biography such as you are doing in *Life Line* is what Paul Ricoeur would describe as "an act of testimony about one's identity". It is not a description of how you came to faith, but an in-depth exploration of God's work in the totality of your life. The process has a number of phases.

### **Brainstorming Phase**

You will be asked to list; as they come to mind, significant relationships, events and heritage factors that have an ongoing formative effect on your life.

### **Organizing Phase**

You will be asked to divide your life into chapters or phases of your life development.

### **Ultimate Author Phase**

Exploring what God has been revealing in the chapters of your life.

### **Adding Layers Phase**

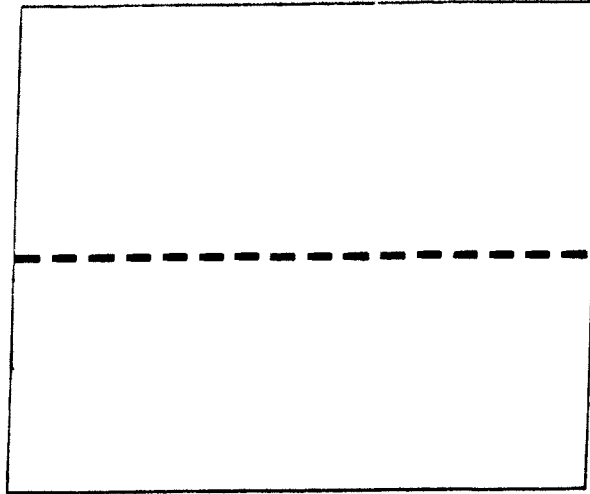
Adding insights gained from doing the assignments in the Appendices.

### **Writing the Narrative Phase**

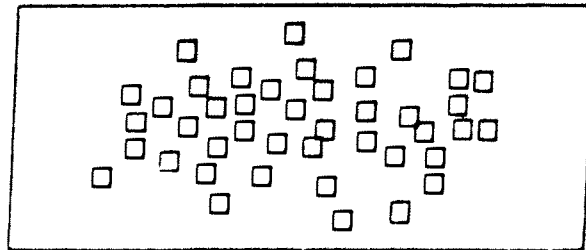
This narrative paper summarizes the insights gained in a narrative form.

## Brainstorming Phase

To begin the *Life Line* process I want you to begin to recall many facets of your life and jot them down initially without much editing. I would suggest using a **storyboard approach** utilizing half of a 20" by 28" poster board (you may want to fold this in half), which you can attach to a wall.



Then I would use different colored "Post-it Notes" (or different colored markers on a single Post-it Note color) to represent some of the key persons, events, etc. that I will ask for later in the process. Each event, person etc. would be represented on a single Post-it Note. Putting the Post-it notes on the poster board on a wall allows you to get a big picture look at your life and also allows you to reorganize easily by moving Post-it Notes. I would suggest that you have at least six different colors of Post-it Notes (or different colored markers). Below I will list different aspects of your life to be explored. Use a different colored Post-it Note (or different colored markers) for each aspect listed below. As items get put on Post-it Notes put them on the poster board in random order (usually in the order that they are remembered).



Lets look at some different aspects of your life to be explored each one being a different Post-it Note color (or in a different colored marker).

### **Identity/Heritage Aspects**

God has sovereignly determined many facets of your life over which you had little or no control. Many of these items of heritage deeply affect your identity (Acts 17:25,26). Your ethnicity, the socio-economic placement of your family of origin, the number of siblings and birth-order, the place where your personal formation occurred, and the values and atmosphere conveyed in your family, community and church all played a significant place in your heritage.

### **Significant Events Aspects**

I want you to focus on four particular kinds of events; achievements and failures, turning points, and freeze points.

***Achievements*** are not the same as being successful at something. An achievement has a number of distinguishing characteristics: 1) You enjoyed doing the achievement because it tapped into a gifting in such a way that you sensed that you were "being yourself" when you did it. You would do it again if given the opportunity. 2) You sense that it enriched the lives of others and often the achievement is acknowledged by others as such. 3) If you were a growing Christian at the time of the achievement, then there should also be a sense of God's pleasure in the achievement. 4) The achievement tended to enhance motivation. Obviously some "successes" do not fit these criteria. If your parents forced you to take piano lesson but you disliked them, then even if you have a successful recital and get accolades it would not qualify as an achievement.

***Failures*** are those things attempted that went badly, maybe even tragically so. They often caused you to pull into yourself, be less motivated and can in fact scar you. Failures if in an area of genuine gifting will probably be tried again because the motivation is present to try again. On the other hand failures can help to define our limitations, which can often be important insights into who we are?<sup>2</sup>

***Turning Points*** are those life events that dramatically alter the direction of a person's life. Examples of turning points might be conversion, a deep lordship of Christ commitment, a vocational calling, a dramatic shift in health or fortune, finding the true love of your life, or having children. They are often sudden, unplanned and at times unexplainable. They can be highly individualistic in that the same event might not have had the same life-changing impact on another person. They might be quiet or dramatic; however, the point is not about the drama but the change in life direction. Of course turning points can lead to times of transition from a previous life direction to another vision for life.

***Freeze Points***<sup>3</sup> are those traumatic events that come into our lives because others have sinned against us and in many ways victimized us usually with an abusive aspect to them. They are called "freeze points" by John Trent because they tend to result in a layer of ice being laid over our heart to protect it from further hurt, but it also diminishes our ability to love and be loved. Freeze Points always affect our relationships including our relationship with God if they are not faced and healed. But we so often block the "freeze points" out of our lives because they are difficult to talk about and because they are painful and we often feel shameful. Signs that freeze points have not been addressed in a person's life are: 1) pessimism and difficulty finding hope; 2) a critical spirit towards others; 3) procrastination grounded in fear of failure of success, of being controlled, or of intimacy; and 4) playing God because you have difficulty trusting God's love and justice. These are the most difficult Post-it notes to put on your chart and the most difficult to take down!

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<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer. *Let Your Life Speak*. (Jossey-Bass. 2000) p. 39ff.

<sup>3</sup> I got this term from John Trent, *LifeMapping*. p. 104-17.

## Significant Relationships Aspects

The number, kinds and depth of our human relationships affect much of our development and growth. Below are some types of relationships that we would like you to focus on in your *Life Line*.

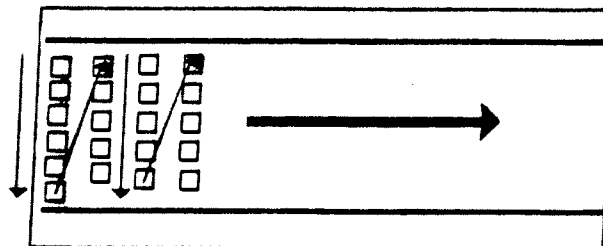
**Familial Relationships** are the first and often the most formative of all human relationships. Many of our most fundamental perspectives on God, ourselves and "the way life works" are formed very early in our lives and often in times when you were too young in your development to assess the validity of what was being conveyed. What were the tones of the relationships within your family? Were you close or distant from some family members?

**Heroes and Mentors** play a significant role in our development. A hero may be up close and personal or someone you admire from a distance either spatially or temporally. Mentors are always up close and personal showing you the way to live, act and discern the world. Mentors and heroes can be either positive in their influence or negative.

**Peers Relationships** have a deep influence on your life especially from adolescence into adulthood. Who were some of your peers that encouraged and enriched your life and perspective?

**Antagonists** are unfortunately a part of many of our lives. Their presence can cause us to grow or retard our growth, but their influence is undeniable. For some persons in some phases of their life an antagonist may play a dominant role in their life.

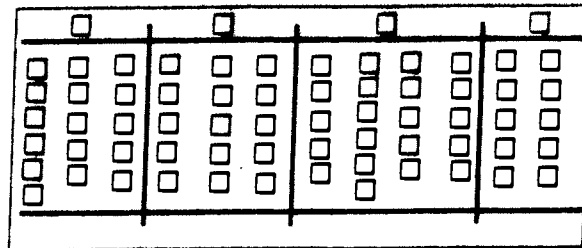
Be sure to do each of these aspects (identity, events, relationships) in different colored Post-it Notes. Once you have all of them on your poster board you should begin to **sort them chronologically** with the earliest memory on the top-left and going down until you reach 2" from the bottom, then back up to the top. Your *Life Line* moves from top to bottom and from left to right, so that you have a sense of what events and relationship occurred at different parts of your *Life Line*.



## Organizing Phase

Having arranged the Post-it Notes in roughly chronological order it is now time to clump them into **3 - 7 chapters** of your life. How you divide your life in chapter/segments can be done through a **variety of organizing filters**. For instance some who have been primarily students for most of their life might break their life into chapters around schools (preschool years, elementary school years, etc.). Some who have lived in different locations during their life might use a geographical filter to divide up into chapters. Another person might use significant relationships as the filter for their life (family of origin, marriage, children, etc.). Some might use a thematic filter for forming their life chapters. These do not begin to exhaust the filters that might be helpful to form the chapters of your life, but at this phase you must divide up your *Life Line* into chapters using the filter of your choice.

At this point in the process it would be good to give a title to each chapter that is befitting the content of that chapter of your *Life Line*. As you look at each chapter of your life you might also try to discern any particular theme(s) that typify that chapter of your life. You can identify themes to these chapters at any point in the *Life Line* process subsequent to this point in the process.



## Ultimate Author Phase

While this assignment is about your *Life Line* and it is uniquely yours, the Ultimate Author and in many ways the main character in our lives is God Himself. At this point you should reflect on your *Life Line* from the angle of what God was revealing about His own attributes and His ways of working in the world, and what He was revealing about you. Were there certain verses that God was impressing upon you during different chapters of your life?

### ***Life Line* Assignment**

Using another Post-it Note color write down insights about what God had revealed about Himself and perhaps key verses and place them in the appropriate chapters of your *Life Line*.

**Congratulations! You have completed the Poster Board/Story Board portion of writing your *Life Line*.** The Story Board of your life gives you a bird's-eye view of your life, which can be very helpful in discerning patterns of God's work in your life. The different colored Post-it Notes (or a single color of Post-it Notes with different colored markers) represent different facets of your development and hopefully have yielded insights that would have been missed had you not done the analytical process that we have done thus far. The Poster Board/Story Board and its Post-it Notes will not be turned in for grading, but will provide the foundation for the Life Line Narrative.

## **Appendix A**

### **Integrating Robert Clinton's Leadership Emergence Theory Into your *Life Line***

This overview of Clinton's Leadership theories assumes the student has read Dr. Clinton's article "The Life Cycle of a Leader" and has heard Dr. Sell's lecture on Dr. Clinton's ideas about Christian leadership development and especially the chart called "Robert Clinton's Emergent Leadership Theory"

Dr. Clinton's theory of leadership development has three key concepts to keep in mind and to weave into your *Life Line* paper, they are: 1) Leadership Development Phases; 2) Boundary Conditions; and 3) Processing Items.

#### **Leadership Development Phases**

Clinton identifies six Leadership Development Phases (Sovereign Foundations, Inner Life Growth, Ministry Maturing, Life Maturing, Convergence and Afterglow) that have been explained in detail in our lecture in class. For each chapter of your *Life Line* you should identify the phase(s) of leadership development that you were in during that chapter of your life. This should be woven into your narrative.

#### **Boundary Conditions**

Boundary conditions are the kinds of processing of life that are necessary to move from one leadership development phase to the next one. In the "Robert Clinton's Emergent Leadership Theory" chart in your notebook the boundary conditions to move from one phase to another are identified. Remember these occur in one phase and allow you to progress to the next phase. If you can clearly see boundary conditions in development, be sure to weave them into your narrative and identify them as boundary conditions.

#### **Processing Items**

A process item is a key instrument that God uses regularly to shape emerging Christian leaders. Not all Christians experience all process items in their lifetime, but each developing Christian leader should be able to identify a number of processing items that God has used to develop their devotion to Christ and their leadership development.

Below are some of the process items and their definitions that are commonly used by God. Note that each processing item has been given a two-letter abbreviation.

**Integrity Check (IC)** is the processing item which God uses to test the consistency between our inner convictions with outward actions. These can be based in temptations, making restitution, loyalties tests, conflict, persecution, or follow through when giving one's word.

**Word Check (WC)** is the processing where God tests the Christian's capacity to hear God through His Word, to clarify and apply it to his/her life, and to others and to obey what is learned. Is their commitment deepened to God's Word and commitment to it? Does the person share openly the Word even when it is costly?

**Obedience Check (OC)** is the processing item whereby the Christian's commitment is tested by obedience to God's guidance even when it is costly, confusing or even contradictory (as in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac). Common obedience checks revolve around giving, entangling relationships, putting God first in mate selection, rejecting a controlling sin, willingness to be used in ministry, trusting God to fulfill His word, willingness to confess or forgive, or willingness to right a wrong.

**Divine Contact (DC)** is the processing item whereby God brings the presence of a key person, resource, event or item "just at the right time" to ensure the ongoing growth and development of the emerging Christian leader.

**Destiny Revelation (DR)** is the processing item whereby God gives clues about the Christian leader's future ministry, and then tests the leader to see if they will realign their life and plans to fit that future. This can entail clarification about giftedness, ministry direction, etc.

**Giftedness Discovery (GD)** is the processing item whereby God brings to awareness the talents, or gift mix of the emerging leader and the leader is willing to embrace and develop those gifts for ministry purposes.

**Relational Insight (RI)** is the processing item whereby God teaches the emerging leader valuable insights about their own relational skill and insight into how to relate to Christians or unbelievers in light of ministry influence. These insights can come from either positive or negative experiences. The leader is willing to adapt their style of relating base on these insights.

**Faith Challenge (FC)** is that processing item whereby God challenges the future leader to trust God's promises and continue in their development despite obstacles.

**Negative Preparation (NP)** is the processing item whereby the Christian leader is challenged by the failures of trusted people or leaders, conflict, persecution, or experiences that focus on the negative which challenges the emerging Christian leader to reassess their commitment to ministry or may set them on a new trajectory of ministry.

**Life Crisis (LC)** is the processing item whereby God uses intense situations of pressure in human experience that test and teach obedience. They are often associated with life-and-death situations, but any pressured situation that causes one to deeply reevaluate what is important in life can be included.

**Ministry Conflict (MC)** is that process item whereby God shapes one's core values, convictions, and vision through conflict with others. These lessons can be learned by either negative or positive consequences of conflict. Young emerging leaders are often embroiled in these as their vision outstrips their relational skills.

**Isolation (I)** is that processing item whereby God sets the emerging leader aside from their normal activities so that they can hear God in a deeper way. Causes of isolation might be crises, disciplinary



actions, providential circumstances (such as war, exile, illness) or self-choice (such as training, education, or solitude).

**Mentor (M)** is that processing item whereby God brings a more mature leader into the potential leader's life to encourage the development of the younger leader. The mentor helps the protege to realize potential.

**Paradigm Shift (PS)** is that processing item whereby God uses an incident or a series of incidents to impress upon the leader a new perspective for use in ministry.

**Spiritual Authority (SA)** is that processing item whereby God allows the Spirit-anointed leader to exercise authority over followers by persuasion, example, experience or expertise.

**Ministry Structure Insight (MS)** is that process item whereby God gives insight into the organizational structure and synergies through which ministry is channeled that affects ministry impact and leadership capacity.

**Leadership Backlash (LB)** is that process item whereby God uses negative backlash within the Christian community, other leaders, or in the unbelieving world because of the actions taken by the Christian leader. The situation is used by God to test the perseverance, clarity of vision and faith of the leader.

**Prayer Challenge (PC)** is that process item whereby God reinforces the necessity of prayer empowerment through answering prayer in an unmistakable manner for a ministry or personal challenge.

**Literary (L)** is the process item whereby God uses the written works of a particular author or authors to challenge you to aspire to following and serving God.

**Flesh Act (FA)** is that process item whereby God brings negative consequences into the leaders life because the leader presumed guidance and decisions were made hastily or without proper discernment of God's direction.<sup>1</sup>

**When writing your *Life Line* narrative paper you should identify all process items that you see occurring in your life. When in the course of writing your *Life Line* narrative you write about a part of your life that includes a process item simply make reference to the process item by putting its abbreviation in parentheses after a sentence that includes the process item bolded. See sample below.**

Sample Narrative

When I was eighteen year old I was planning to attend Cornell University, but God had other plans. I was stricken with a severe case of mononucleosis and had to stay at home in bed while the rest of my friends left town for college. It was in this aloneness that God confronted me with the Gospel (I) .... In my first summer home from college, when I was only six months in the faith, I met Dutch Karickhoff who began to disciple me and form me for ministry **(DC, M)**.

As a grader, if it becomes obvious that a process item has occurred in your life, but you have not identified it as such, it will be a three point deduction for each occurrence.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Clinton does have a few more process items. The most extensive list can be found in his book *Leadership Emergence Theory*. (Altadena, CA: Barnabas Resources), 1989.

## **Appendix B**

### *Digging Deeper Questions*

The following questions are designed to make you think more deeply about your formation prior to writing your *Life Line* narrative. Not all questions will be insightful for every student, but usually a few questions will yield meaningful insight if pondered relative to the processing you have done up to this point. The insights from these questions are not to be submitted as a separate document, but rather it is hoped that some of the insights gleaned from answering these questions will be woven into your narrative.

#### **Questions:**

1. **From your familial upbringing, what messages, attitudes, values, and convictions were conveyed implicitly or explicitly about the way things are. Especially in Christian families there can be Christian values espoused verbally but a different set of values are actually rewarded and enforced.**
2. **As you examined the "Sick Side of Leadership" chart in class are there forms of sick leadership to which you are particularly susceptible given your upbringing?**
3. **How were you taught to handle conflict in your family (especially what was modeled)? Do you handle conflict in similar ways?**
4. **Can you articulate a few examples of how communion with God has challenged/changed the assumptions, biases and prejudices of your upbringing?**
5. **What truths about who God is and the way He works in the world has been most formative in your life up to this point?**
6. **Are there patterns of generational sin in your family tree against which you should build defenses?**
7. **How has your culture/subculture shaped your view of God's agenda in the world?**
8. **How have you practiced community in your life? Do you tend to be a loner? Life of the party? Do you sustain friendships well?**
9. **What range of emotions do you most regularly experience? Do you have trouble experiencing a range of emotions? Do you feel a bit emotionally numb?**
10. **Do you tend to have patterns of thinking that are self-defeating in ministry? What kind of situations do you avoid because you find them de-energizing or in them you get defensive?**

## Writing the *Life Line* Narrative

The *Life Line* Narrative tells the story of your spiritual journey up until the present, following the chapter divisions ascertained during the *Life Line* process. Insights gained from all of the phases of the *Life Line* process (including the Appendices) are to be woven into the narrative of your life. It will combine telling the story of your life, but also, and more importantly, it will share the insights you have gained into your personhood and God's work in your life up until the present. **The *Life Line* assignment in total will account for 50 percent of your course grade.**

The *Life Line* narrative will be **six to eight pages in length, (double spaced, 12 pt. font).**

Woven into the narrative should be the following items:

- Chapter divisions with a descriptive title for each chapter and themes articulated for each chapter.
- Insights concerning your concept of God in chapters of your life and what He was teaching you in the chapters of your life.
- Clinton's Leadership development phase you were in for each chapter, boundary conditions when applicable, and all processing items identified by their abbreviation in parentheses in the narrative.
- Key insights from your Appendix B "Digging Deeper Questions" should be woven into the narrative.

***Only Dr. Sell will grade the narrative and its contents will be confidential.***

### **Grading criteria for the *Life Line* Narrative paper.**

- Depth of insight into your life based on working the *Life Line* process. I am looking for insight as to who you are from your upbringing and formation to the present, not just a recounting of the events of your life. What do those events mean to you.
- Interaction with Clinton's Emergent Leadership Theory in the narrative. Can you describe your leadership development process from your life events?
- Can you identify strengths and weaknesses from your upbringing (not only from your assessment instruments, but from your narrative)? Can you engage your upbringing critically or do you have an overly idealized view of your past or overly negative view of your upbringing?
- Literary quality of the narrative. Does it flow? Are there grammar or word usage errors?
- How well are God insights woven into the narrative?
- Are there insights into your future grounded in the events of the past?