



Weaving Strong Leaders

*How Leaders
Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together*

BOB DALE *and* **BILL WILSON**

© 2016

Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,
www.nurturingfaith.net.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-1-63528-000-5

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America



*Healthy Church Resources are provided by the Center for Healthy Churches
(chchurches.org) in collaboration with Nurturing Faith Publishing (nurturingfaith.net).*

“My single disappointment with this book is that it wasn’t written 30 years ago. To all of us who are drowning in books about ‘how to do such and such’ and ‘10 steps to this and that,’ Bob Dale and Bill Wilson have issued a life preserver. Reading this book was for me a profoundly spiritual experience.”

—*Julie Pennington-Russell, Pastor, The First Baptist Church of the City of Washington, D.C.*

“This book is an essential field guide for anyone who is serious about personal transformation as a leader. Bob Dale and Bill Wilson are thoughtful and seasoned guides in this journey, marking out a path for such a pilgrimage that is grounded in God’s story and shaped by our own experiences.”

—*Jayne Hugo Davis, Associate Pastor – Discipleship, First Baptist Church, Wilmington, N.C.*

“Reading this book is like having a series of conversations with wise friends, skilled leaders, and caring mentors. Bob Dale and Bill Wilson weave together solid scriptural and theological reflection, keen insight into the human journey, broad awareness of leadership theories, and abundant practical experience to provide a rich resource for leaders’ personal and professional growth.”

—*Guy Sayles, Assistant Professor of Religion, Mars Hill University*

“It is fitting that a leadership book with the guiding image of ‘weaving’ is a product of two authors who bring vast experience and wisdom in the area of leadership in the church. Bob Dale and Bill Wilson weave together their personal stories, decades of experiences, and key insights that form an outstanding guide for church leaders today. Their description of the different life stages of a leader who ‘grows up’ into personal maturity will make this book an outstanding resource for leaders of all ages and experience levels. I highly recommend it and will plan to use it in the seminary leadership course I teach.”

—*David Hull, Southeast Coordinator, Center for Healthy Churches; Adjunct Professor, McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University*

“From two of the best leadership teachers and coaches comes this personal and practical handbook on leadership development and maturity. Rather than a ‘how to’ book on practices, this is a ‘who we are’ book from the practitioners of leadership. It focuses on a theology and trajectory for leaders and is full of biblical examples. It is highly readable with personal stories, dialogue between the authors, and probing questions for personal reflection. I heartily recommend it.”

—*Craig Sherouse, Senior Pastor, Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.*

“I’ve known Bob Dale since my seminary days in the mid-1980s, and Bill Wilson since I was a young pastor. Both are leaders among leaders. They are rare leaders who not only practice leadership with excellence, but also can teach others to lead. This book brings old and new wisdom to the topic of leadership, specifically Christian leadership. Emerging leaders and established leaders will find it to be a valuable addition to their library and their leadership.”

—*Larry Hovis, Executive Coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina*

“The leader’s journey is long and arduous and ought not to be taken alone. In this book Bob Dale and Bill Wilson prove themselves faithful guides. It is a reminder that what our churches most desperately need right now cannot be downloaded from the internet, but must instead be woven into the soul.”

—*Ryon Price, Senior Pastor, Second Baptist Church, Lubbock, Texas*

“Leaders may be born, but leadership is crafted. Effective and lasting leaders learn to take the successes, disappointments, and insights from others along with their own journey in Christ and weave them together into a comprehensive understanding of their calling and their culture. Bob Dale and Bill Wilson, both effective leaders in their respective fields, have given us a realistic understanding of how leadership comes together in our lives and then how our new understanding of leadership can best be used in our communities. Both challenging and affirming, Dale and Wilson have given us a readable and realistic understanding of how authentic leadership is woven together in our lives.”

—Mike Glenn, *Senior Pastor, Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tenn.*

“Bill and Bob have turned the leadership art and skill inside out. Focusing on the source of leadership rather than the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of leadership, they reveal the blind spot of most leadership paradigms: the person of the leader. Using their personal narratives, Bill and Bob deepen the well from which authentic leadership is drawn.”

—Steven N. Scoggin, *Assistant Vice-President, CareNet and Behavioral Health, Assistant Professor in Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine, Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center*

“This book is the kind of resource church staff, leadership teams, and all youth and young adults should read for the profound insights it contains. Bob Dale is a masterful storyteller of his life pilgrimage around the framework of the tapestry of life development. He can take a concept and illustrate it with a narrative in amazing ways. Equally helpful are the consultant/coaching insights of Bill Wilson as he applies concepts and stories to the realities of congregational life. Buy a copy for each leader in your church, whatever his or her age!”

—Larry L. McSwain, *Professor of Leadership, Retired, McAfee School of Theology*

“Buy, read, reflect upon, return to, and share this book. Dale and Wilson reframe Christian leadership, freeing it from ‘copycatting’ secular techniques and turning it toward core developmental, theological, community, and heritage concerns. Seasoned and developing congregational leaders will find what they need here.”

—Michael A. Smith, *Senior Pastor, Central Baptist Church of Fountain City, Knoxville, Tenn.*

“While guiding the reader on a reflective journey to determine our affinity to ‘mystery or mechanics,’ the authors share personal journeys of success, struggle, failure, and a time of cultivating one’s soul, calling, and professional identity. Not only do they help us explore the deeper why’s of leadership, but they also challenge us to keep growing and mining truths in the context of today’s world. Without minimizing the growing diversity of our culture and the steep challenges of ministry in today’s world, the authors provide biblical and historical frameworks and landmarks to assist the leader’s journey of self-awareness, spiritual and relational growth, and effectiveness. This is a great book for seminary students, pastors, and lay leaders.”

—Edward Hammett, *President, Transforming Solutions*

“The legacy and wisdom of Bill Wilson and Bob Dale shine through in this book. They effectively recognize that leadership is a lifelong pilgrimage where leaders exhibit different threads as they weave their lives and ministry. This is a book to read not once, but several times along your journey as a lifelong leader. Keep it close by.”

—George Bullard, *Leadership Consultant/Coach, The Columbia Partnership, FaithSoaring Churches Learning Community*

Contents

Dedication	vi
Acknowledgments	vii
Preface: Selecting Leadership’s Threads	ix
Introduction: Weaving Leaders and Lives	1

Part 1

Threading the Loom: Identifying Our Theology for Leadership	
Putting First Threads First: Leading from the Master Threads	11
Bridging Timeframes: The Father’s Kingdom Threads	15
Connecting Personalities: The Son’s Relational Threads.....	25
Transcending Polarities: The Spirit’s Power Threads	37

Part 2

Weaving Leader Maturity: Leading from Threads of Growing Wisdom	
“Launch” Threads: Leader Maturity for Teens and 20s	51
“Hustle” Threads: Leader Maturity for 30s and 40s.....	65
“Legacy” Threads: Leader Maturity for 50s and 60s	79
“Wisdom” Threads: Leader Maturity for 70s and Older	93

Part 3

Weaving Leader Teams: Growing Down, Growing Up, Growing Together	
NOW, NEW, NEXT, and NEAR: Blending Leader Strengths.....	107
Down, Up, Together: Practicing a NOW-NEW-NEXT-NEAR Mix ...	119
Weaving in Loose Ends: Final Thoughts on Leadership.....	125

*Dedicated to all leaders
who are ready to
grow down, grow up, and grow together*

Acknowledgments

We owe our leadership trajectories to the influences of many others—parents and families, spouses and friends, teachers and mentors, critics and truth-tellers. We thank each and all of them.

In the pages that follow we'll weave threads from our personal and professional stories. In the process we'll trace our leadership stories that give context and make meaning for us. Hopefully these stories will give guidance to you, too. These varied threads have woven themselves together into the stories we live.

Writing this book became a weaving process, with each of us contributing different parts. Bob drafted Parts 1 and 2. Bill drafted Part 3 and “The Consultant’s Loom” commentaries.

The leader theology in Part 1 “grew down” when Bob taught a seminary readings course with Rose Mary Stewart on how Trinitarian theology undergirds the work of leaders.

The maturity pilgrimages for leaders in Part 2 “grew up” from a family history Bob wrote with his wife Carrie for their own children.

In Part 3, the applications of how teams and clusters of leaders “grew together” emerged from Bill’s consulting ministry. The result is an actual weaving of leadership.

Both of us have had varied ministries. We’ve served as pastors, teachers, lay leaders, volunteers, consultants, counselors, and coaches. We’ve led new church starts and guided transitions in older ministries. We’ve served on boards for divinity schools, pastoral counseling centers, newspapers, and denominational groups.

We’ve both succeeded and failed. We’ve both dusted ourselves off and tried again. We’ve both learned on the fly.

So, we apologize in advance for our biographical stories in these pages. Our stories are the ones we know and understand best. We’ve lived them inside out—warts and all. Over time, God, as weaver of our lives and stories, has formed us for his work.

Now, we move on to those stories of growing up, growing down, and growing together.

*Bob Dale
Bill Wilson*

Preface

Selecting Leadership's Threads

Welcome to the inner lives of leaders. Current leadership literature is more apt to feature practices than practitioners—what leaders do rather than who leaders are. Much of today's leadership literature seems to assume leaders burst forth ready to lead with little introspection or no struggle.

We know better. Our best leaders are anchored in clear values and considered beliefs. They have grown down. And, our best leaders have cultivated their own maturity. They have grown up and are comfortable in their skins. Growing down, growing up: In the pages ahead we trace and weave together these two master threads.

Lessons from the Loom

Our lives, as effective leaders, are woven threads. What we believe, how we mature, the ways we work together: All are related.

Navajo weavers, gifted artisans who craft beautiful garments and durable rugs, have much to teach church leaders. These weavers create their unique art with both traditional and mystical methods.

Like other weavers, Navajos use the vertical threads, or the “warp,” to establish strong and lasting foundations. Then they interlace the horizontal design threads, or the “woof,” to feature texture and beauty.

Strength and beauty: By selecting and using these two basic threads, Navajo crafters make weavings that both endure and inspire. Like weavers, church leaders understand the fundamental importance of combining anchoring strengths with beautiful practicality.

Faith and Flaws

For leaders of faith there's an intriguing and mystical element in Navajo woven products. In each item the Navajo weavers include a deliberate flaw—an escape portal for any evil that's been accidentally trapped by the threads. That makes deep sense to those of us who lead. We recognize the constant tug-of-war between good and evil inside us and within our faith communities. We want evil on the outside and good on the inside of our leadership efforts.

When my son, Cass Dale, professed his faith in Christ back in the mid-1980s, our pastor asked what he had decided. Cass asked the pastor if he'd seen the *Star Wars* movie, and he discovered the pastor knew that story. Cass said, "That's my story too. There's a battle between good and evil in the world. I'm joining the side of good."

More perhaps than pacesetters without exposure to theology, congregational leaders know that faith and flaws coexist in our own lives. No one is perfect, including leaders, so we cultivate faith and maturity constantly—to help us see, face, and overcome our flaws. We acknowledge our shortcomings, lean on God's grace, and try to live and lead with humility. We rely on our faith to provide a foundation for us and to open futures to us.

Threads for the Future

The fabric of Christian leadership weaves two threads together in practice: (1) faith—deepening, transforming belief; and (2) maturity—stabilizing, unfolding selfhood.

We believe the strongest church leaders are belief-based. With a theological foundation, we are anchored against storms. We have a place to stand. When we're comfortable with and confident in our basic beliefs and values, our behaviors flow consistently from a solid faith.

We believe the best church leaders are mature and well-defined. Mature leaders know where we begin and end. We're clear about "me" and "not me." Secure and anchored egos aren't under threat or at risk. Effective leaders have strong, not big, egos. And, our most mature church leaders play well with others. We gladly blend and match our strengths and experiences with others' talents and backgrounds.

These two themes—believing and maturing—are threads interwoven throughout this book. At the end we'll suggest how leader teams are woven together to make the most of believing and maturing. Are you ready to weave your life as a leader?

Introduction

Weaving Leaders and Lives

Leaders are on a personal and professional pilgrimage, deepening theology and maturity. It's a lifelong journey. Our life's threads continue to be woven together.

Life is an uneven journey. Over our lifespan we lurch along between seasons of stability and times of change.¹ We oscillate back and forth, around and around. Sometimes change moves smoothly for us; on other occasions, change becomes an extremely bumpy ride. The rhythms of our lives often remind us of the airline pilot's description of commercial flying: hours and hours of sleep-inducing tedium punctuated by moments of sheer terror.

Growing our beliefs and cultivating our maturity are two of life's unending processes. Over time we fold our discoveries into the fabric of our lives. We choose what to keep and what to jettison. We decide how to be stewards of our deeper resources, to cultivate and use them. We apply life's lessons. As we mature in soul and self, our identity and values become steadying anchors for us:

- We find faith and persistently grow deeper in it.
- We learn whether our faith is a buoying resource or a guilt-inducer. (Then we cooperate with God in developing a positive faith that moors us.)
- We learn how we were shaped and launched by our families and mentors.
- We discover how to put success and failure into balanced perspective.
- We find how to grace ourselves with the gift of second chances.
- We learn how to step back and mull over what has happened and to use what's happening around us now.
- We discover whether our family and friends are encouraging cheerleaders or poisonous detractors. (Then we choose our healthiest personal and professional communities as centers for growth and depth.)
- We welcome God's love in our lives and risk being made new daily.

The good news is that faith and maturity tend to deepen as our lives unfold. Our hope is to grow up and down as we go along. We find faith and maturity, and, with God's help, they find us. Faith and maturity often deepen and

unfold layer by layer—first struggling toward self-discovery, next surviving and growing, then finding significant legacy, and finally sharing life’s gifts by paying and praying it forward.²

Life at the Loom

Life places a variety of “challenge threads” on faith-and-maturity’s loom. These hurdles etch lines in our faces, add gray to our hair, and leave stretch marks and scars on our bodies. But these challenges also help us grow up and down. Broken bones knit stronger at the fracture points than beforehand. Where souls and selves are on the line, pain brings gains.

The pilgrimage toward deeper faith and stronger maturity is well documented in Scripture. Profound pilgrimages leave marks, though. Jacob limped after his wrestling match with an angel (Gen. 32:31). Disbelief during the wilderness wandering cost the lives of an entire generation (Num. 14:23). Ruth’s care for her mourning mother-in-law created a redemptive lineage (Ruth 1:16-17, 4:13-17). The Damascus Road blinded Paul and sent him to Arabia to sort out his confusion (Gal. 1:15-17). In each case, faith and maturity grew as challenges were faced squarely.

With growing faith, these spiritual pacesetters discovered how to listen, when to slow down and discern, how to recover after being crushed, and how to find themselves after being lost. Hardship is often a pathway to peace and productivity.

Growing Down, Growing Up

Let’s chart our growth pilgrimage’s twists and turns. *As leaders we grow in faith and maturity when we weave our life stories into a larger faith story*, when we weave our life’s brokenness into healed places, and when we weave our life’s opposites into conversations with each other.

Leaders of faith and with maturity know who we are, understand where we begin and end, and sense when to say yes and no (Matt. 6:37). Our inner compass, our guidance system of faith and identity, orients and anchors us. We become clearly defined. That self-definition is the product of patiently weaving self and soul together, discovering the interplay of our unique stories with God’s big story.

You and I tell the stories of our lives. These stories are multilayered and can be tangled. We recall personal incidents. These little stories explain a bit about us, can entertain others, and create some connections to others.

We then begin to detect patterns in and between our stories. Now we see larger meanings and connections across our life's seemingly random events. Over time those bigger stories of family and faith merge and give meaning to our lives. They begin to "tell us." These stories tell who we are, what we're about, and where we're heading. Instead of a handful of random stories, we now have a thread that organizes life into a meaningful narrative.

We then realize there's an overarching story that really explains us. Faith expands and grounds our story. We see the Bible as the biggest story of all,³ the story of redemption. From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture tells us the big story of how God has acted mightily to draw us into relationship with him.

We finally move inside God's story. When we enter fully into the Christian life, this redemption story wraps around us and becomes our story. In fact, when we live inside the salvation narrative and claim it as ours, we can't imagine ourselves in any other story. It defines us, explaining us in profound ways. We've been found, called, and sent out to make a redemptive difference in the world.

Inside God's story we find surprises. Our "assumptive worlds"—those ideas we have always accepted as true and never examined—now float out of the mist and we recognize them. We Photoshop the old pictures in our heads—our assumptions about the world—so we can see new worlds in new ways. Our "truth" expands. Now we realize that becoming a disciple is a life-long process of discovery and risk-taking. We update our thinking and grow.

We've all been in the wrong place at the wrong time when life unfairly slapped our faces. Or, we've been in the right place at the right time when life gave us an undeserved pat on the back. In other words, we have realized that life's penalties and rewards are often out of our personal control. We've been there and done that, haven't we?

For good or ill, *we find ourselves caught up in life's surprises and breakage*. Resilience from our faith and maturity becomes the swing vote in these circumstances. Ultimately, it's not what happens to us that matters most. It's what we do with what happens to us that makes the crucial difference and measures our faith and maturity. Responding to events beyond our control gives us a chance to grow down and up. Leaders with faith and maturity are agile enough to deal with life's accidents and mistakes.

In the midst of unchosen turning points we make trade-offs and trade-ups. We try to exchange losses for gains, grudges for forgiveness, blind spots for insights, complexities for simple elegance, and hurts for healings. We discover new parts of our lives and determine that some are outmoded or

dysfunctional. In the face of those realities we can trade up to more mature choices for us at our current life stage.

How we deal with turning points and trade-ups is a basic clue to our faith and maturity levels. Picking up the loose, broken threads of life and weaving them back together helps us grow. They strengthen us for the future. Mature judgment often emerges from the debris of immature judgment.

Thinking and acting in both/and fashion is one mark of faith and maturity. Holding opposing alternatives is a basic part of moving successfully through cycles of stability and change.⁴ When we're overwhelmed by life, we freeze internally. To thaw our thinking and to move ahead, we try to see life as a whole, a process that's always in transition. We try to suspend our options and patiently sort out possibilities. We integrate and enrich our problem-solving approaches.

Some understandings of human development note that we focus on discovering our inner opposites during the first half of our lives. Then we grow toward the emotional middle between our opposites during our second half of life. That process of "moving to the middle" helps us balance our best selves and souls.

Once we've thawed the poles of our lives, we can then turn to our futures. Theologically, it's an act of faith to describe our futures in plurals. Redemption is always expansive. There's so much more to the world than we first see or suspect. God has doors—doors beyond our imagining—already open and waiting for us. Past is prelude, present is rehearsal, and our futures are waiting for us to see and seize them.

Now the leadership weaving adventure begins.

Mooring Firmly on Theological Beliefs

Christians are moored by theological beliefs, the lengthwise threads in leadership tapestries. In this book we affirm a Trinitarian approach to leaders' transformation—centering in the kingdom of God, modeling Jesus' ways of relating to others, and relying on the Holy Spirit's power.

God's kingdom serves as an anchor and a guide for faith leaders. Jesus' leader patterns show faith leaders how to relate and proceed. The Holy Spirit empowers faith leaders to move ahead creatively. How is our strength rooted in the redemptive work of the Trinity?

Maturing Ourselves Stage-by-Stage

Kierkegaard's classic observation is true: we live our lives forward and then understand them backwards. That's the intention for the maturity section of this book, the crosswise threads in this leadership tapestry. How do our adult lives unfold stage-by-stage? We examine several questions:

- How do we mature as people, persons of faith, and leaders?
- How do we let our flaws escape and then welcome depth and clarity in their place?

As life stages run their course, we can check to see what we've mastered and where gaps remain in our maturation processes. Each decade contains distinctive challenges and offers rich opportunities. In broad strokes we can chart the spiritual journey toward maturity and leadership as follows:

- Teen years and earlier—Dream and discover.
- 20s—Explore and expand.
- 30s—Climb and achieve.
- 40s—Bridge and redefine.
- 50s—Contribute and leave a legacy.
- 60s—Invest in others and in our own futures.
- 70s and beyond—"Sage" and pay it forward.

Each decade, then, becomes an occasion to learn, mature, believe, and move ahead with confidence. At each stage we can evaluate how our pilgrimage toward maturity is progressing and working for or against us.

Look to the past. We can look back upstream to what has gone before. We can cultivate what we've inherited from others and what we've experienced in life that's healthy and reliable. At the same time we can let go of histories and habits that no longer serve us well. We can ask ourselves:

- What life, faith, and leader stages have I mastered already?
- What's still left for me to learn as I mature more?

Look at the present. We can look into the mainstream and check where we are in the present moment. We can deepen and build on sturdy foundations. From that base we can use yesterday and today as a launch pad toward tomorrow. We can ask ourselves:

- Where am I grown up now?
- What life lessons must I learn now on the fly?
- What learning gaps must I let bridge my life, faith, and leadership?

Look to the future. We can look downstream toward the future and anticipate where our paths lead. As we mature more fully, we can risk our futures with confidence. We can ask ourselves:

- What's next for me in life, faith, and leadership?
- What resources am I stewarding?

Creating Leader Teams

We'll complete our leadership tapestry with a congregational application—by describing leaders in different roles, with varying experience levels, and with a variety of gifts. We'll talk about the mix and blend of four leadership roles—the NOW, NEW, NEXT, and NEAR leaders.

NOW leaders are in the midst of the fray. NEW leaders are just moving into the arena. NEXT leaders are poised on the sidelines and preparing for larger service. NEAR leaders have broad experience and walk alongside the NOW, NEW, and NEXT leaders as coaches and guides to provide perspective.

It takes creative blends of all four roles to lead congregations and faith organizations well. The African proverb says wisely: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

The Consultant's Loom

As we launch this grand adventure of learning about leadership, I remember an early lesson that continues to impact me as I navigate my season of investing in others and paying forward all the gifts I have been fortunate enough to receive.

Early in my ministry I was infatuated with and captured by methods. With a full and demanding personal and professional schedule, I found myself constantly under pressure to deliver programs and services to a demanding congregation. Taking the time to dig deep and think hard about ministry seemed like a luxury, and so I settled for adopting the work of others. It wasn't so much plagiarizing as it was abdicating the task of study and thoughtful reflection. I loved reading sermons and leadership books, and I often attended conferences to listen to profound and inspiring thought leaders.

Rather than develop my own philosophy or theology of ministry, I simply shopped around for good ideas, creative methodologies, and best practices. Bringing them home, I would import them into my ministry situation and assume that just bringing the words to a group or the ideas to a team meant I had done my job.

Quickly I learned how naïve I was. Ideas that worked elsewhere fizzled in my setting. Sermon ideas that came from others came off as inauthentic when I tried to preach them. My array of splendid methods offered without an underlying thoughtfulness produced little of significance. In the end I felt shallow and inauthentic. The public life of ministry became confusing and conflicted for me. Some of my favorite role models flamed out and proved unreliable. Exasperated, I turned away from what had worked for others and started the hard journey of self-discovery.

I found my inspiration in horticulture. Roots come first, before fruit. Writers such as Bob Dale, Stephen Covey, and Ed Friedman showed me how to go below the surface and do this arduous work of foundation-building before (and while) living the public side of leadership. If we can help you do the same, we will all be better for it. So, put aside what works for others and allow God to lead you on a path toward self-discovery. What you will find there will become your doorway to a life of meaning and significance.

The Art and Craft of Leader Weaving

This book explores leaders' theology and maturity, leaders' matches and mobilizing actions. These weavings open us to God's futures. They encourage us to cultivate self and soul, to share our gifts and pool our strengths with other leaders. Read on with some basic questions and one practical application in mind:

- How can we grow theologically grounded leaders?
- How can we map the growth process of stronger, more mature leaders?
- How can we understand leaders' roles?
- How can we create teams for the health and vitality of our congregations?

Are you ready to begin weaving your leader life and the leader potential of others?

Notes

¹ Frederic M. Hudson, *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991).

² Bob Buford, *Finishing Well: What People Who Really Live Do Differently!* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004), 13-14.

³ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

⁴ Roger Martin, *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).