Passing the Baton of Leadership
by Paul and Nate Bramsen (originally given at EBC’s 2011 Iron Sharpens Iron Conference).

Part 1

Paul: In a relay race, the incoming runner has the eyes. The outgoing runner provides the target. The incoming runner’s job is to place the baton in the left hand of the outgoing runner. Immediately after receiving the baton, the outgoing runner switches it to his right hand so he can pass it to the next runner.

The Word of God instructs us to pass another kind of baton.

“I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. … You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 1:5; 2:1-2)

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” (Deut. 6:4-7)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting. And from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service and serve no more. They minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service.” (Numbers 8:23-26)

God wants us to pass the baton of servant leadership to the next generation.

1) Why must we pass the baton?

In the race of life, the stakes are great. If we are to live out the theme of this conference: “God so loved the world. Do we?” and fulfill our role in making disciples of all nations, we must pass the baton of godly, visionary leadership.

Nate: If we are to pass the baton of leadership, we must overcome certain fears. Where do we sometimes fail to pass the baton? We fail to pass it in our homes, local assemblies, and ministries. Those who cling to the baton – drop it at death, having failed to pass it. Why such failure? Let’s look at a few fears.

The first fear as to why we don’t pass the baton is the fear of irrelevancy.

In Joshua 5 we find Joshua outside Jericho where he encounters the commander of the Lord. He asks him, “Are you for us or are you for our adversaries?” The commander answers, “No, but as commander of the army of the Lord I have come.” Sometimes we want to know if God is with us in what we are doing, when what we need to know is whether or not we are with Him in His plan. If you’re living an existence that will end when you breathe your last, then you’re not plugged into His plan. His plan is the baton-passing plan, a plan for His glory, a plan for people from every nation to be one day united around His throne.
Consider Barnabas and Saul in the book of Acts. In chapter 11, the church in Antioch is flourishing. So what does Barnabas do? Sit back and enjoy the success? No, “Barnabas went to Tarsus (a wearying, 330-mile journey) to look for Paul.” He then brings him to Antioch and gets him involved. In chapters 11, 12, and 13, it’s “Barnabas and Paul (Saul)”, “Barnabas and Paul.” But in chapter 13, something changes. Paul comes to the forefront. And from there on, for the most part, it’s “Paul and Barnabas”, “Paul and Barnabas.” What happened? The baton was passed. Barnabas was not afraid to release control. He was not afraid that passing the baton might make him irrelevant. If you fear becoming irrelevant, you probably already are.

If you belong to Jesus Christ, you have a baton to pass. I don’t care if you are 10 years old, or 90 – you have a baton to pass. One baton we’ve been focusing on here is reaching the world with God’s grace and truth.

Sometimes we view the church as a holy huddle—a place where we come to get encouragement and that’s it. But the church is far more than that. The church of Jesus Christ is God’s plan for blessing the world. We must not look to the United Nations, or governments, or worldly organizations for solutions. When we see suffering around the world, the chaos in the Middle East, conflicts in our own country and homes, the solution is in our midst. In the feeding of the 5000, Jesus’ disciples came to him and said, “Send the multitudes away so they can go and find food.” Jesus told them, “The multitudes don’t need to go away. You give them something to eat” (Matthew 14). Steve Camp said, “Don’t tell them Jesus loves them until you’re ready to love them too. Until your heart breaks from the sorrow and the pain they’re going through.”

My question is: Are you relevant? Are you relevant in your local church? Are you passing that baton? Are you relevant in your home? Are you passing the baton? Are you relevant in your ministry? If we’re not in the constant phase of preparing others to receive the baton of leadership, we’re stagnant and on the verge of extinction.

**Paul: 2) What is the baton?**

In a relay race it’s the round cylinder you pass to the next runner. In the race of life it’s making disciples, who will be able to disciple others also. It’s the gospel; it’s passing on God’s truth and the life that goes with it to the next generation. The Great Commission is about making disciples, marking them in baptism, and molding them to observe all that the Lord has commanded.

In 2 Timothy 2 we read of Paul passing the baton to Timothy. He says, “My son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus,” that is, be empowered by walking with God. Be strong in your relationship with God. You can’t pass to others what you don’t possess yourself. Paul also told Timothy, “The farmer that labours must be first partaker of the fruit.” You must feed yourself. At age 20, my Christian employer passed me a baton, by asking me to teach the book of Romans at morning coffee break to any of his employees who cared to attend. In the final chapter, among the many salutations, Paul sends his greetings to Philologus, a name meaning, “Lover of the Word.” I told the men, “That is what I want to be: a lover of God’s Word.” That’s the baton too isn’t it? To help others love the Word; to help others fall in love with the Word Himself—Jesus.

In 2 Corinthians 11:3 Paul speaks of the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. That too is the baton. So is having a vision for the Lord and the lost world around us. In short, Paul told Timothy: You must invest in people. “The things that you’ve heard from me, among many witnesses, entrust to faithful men so that they might be able to teach others also.”
Living in Senegal, West Africa, we’ve learned a lot from the Senegalese people. While Americans tend to be time-oriented, Senegalese are relationship-oriented. For example, when you see a dollar bill, what do you think of? Perhaps, “I could buy a hamburger with it, or put a few drops of gas in my car.” But a Senegalese may reason, “I could strengthen relationships with that dollar.” Most Senegalese are poor. So a young man might think, “If I give this money to my dad it will help with the daily needs and it will strengthen our relationship. It will make me relevant and more important in the family because I’ve helped out.”

Passing the baton requires building relationships with people. The Lord Jesus chose 12 disciples to be with him for three years. In the context of a relationship, He molded them into godly, servant leaders who would turn the world “upside down” for God.

Let me say one thing that the baton is not. It is not our traditions. The rabbis of old had a saying: “Build a fence around the law.” The Pharisees did that. They came up with their own laws and traditions, supposedly to protect God’s Laws. If we’re not careful, we can fall into the same rut—making our traditions as sacred as the Word of God. I heard Jabe Nicholson put it like this, “I see a generation of people who are trying to keep going the vision of dead men.” That is not the baton we want to pass.