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**A Bulwark of Living Stones**

*Like living stones be built into a spiritual house through Jesus Christ* *(1 Peter 2:5)*

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Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.

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Building a Bulwark

Vision for community and mission in the Sword of the Spirit

by Carlos Mantica

Our community in Managua, the City of God, finds its meaning in the mission the Lord has entrusted to it – to be part of a bulwark. We believe the Lord raised up the community to move that mission forward. That is its reason for existence.

The word “bulwark” is uncommon for most of us, but in various ways the Lord has made clear that this concept of being a “bulwark” is part of his call to the whole Sword of the Spirit. The idea of the medieval castle or the fort in the early European settlement of North America might help us better understand what a bulwark is. We tend to consider castles and forts as defensive, and they do have to be solid and unassailable to protect their inhabitants and the many others who rely on them. But they were often advanced positions to help establish a new culture in the territory they were placed in. In order to better understand and fulfill our own mission as communities, let’s look at four characteristics of a fort.
First, those who lived in the forts were members of the same nation. They were relatively few in number and were distinct from the surrounding tribes. They had a distinct culture, expressed in a common way of life, values, and attitudes different from the nations around them. They thought, talked, dressed – even danced – differently than those outside. They were ruled according to the laws of the government that had sent them, with their own leaders and court system. Their loyalty was to their own nation and companions. It was, in a way, a nation planted in the midst of other nations.

Second, people in the forts were more strongly influenced by their own culture than by the culture of the surrounding peoples. For that reason they were able to extend their own culture instead of being absorbed by the surrounding culture. And in fact, they succeeded in bringing European culture to huge tracts of territory in North America – sometimes through military campaigns, but much more often through influence. People went out from the fort every day to hunt and to tend the fields, and in time the tribes around them learned from them the new methods of farming, technology, and warfare, and from time to time even received asylum within the fort.

Third, the forts did not function as isolated units. Isolation would have led to annihilation in a very short time. Instead, each was part of a chain of forts which would help and protect one another. Only solidarity and coordination would make possible their eventual conquest of such a large and hostile territory.

Fourth, life within the fort required the hard work of a variety of professions. Military commanders and soldiers would be stationed at the fort, but its survival, strengthening, and development depended also on the services of hunters, butchers, bakers, doctors, and teachers. If one of the services was neglected, the whole life within the fort was affected. The ultimate mission of the fort was not accomplished by one person or even a few, but by everyone working together – united, equipped, and faithful to its government.

In the same way, the mission of our community, the City of God, is not accomplished by any one person but by everyone’s participation. Within the mission, some people and structures are oriented towards our internal life – pastoral leaders, administrators, and coordinators – and other people and structures are oriented toward defense and outreach – evangelists, teachers, and other community representatives – to restrain the enemy and to establish and consolidate new communities, to take new ground. The two functions are equally important – the one oriented within and the other one outward.

We as a community consider ourselves to be something like a fort, planted in a territory that is not yet the Lord’s,
and we have discovered that the mission in foreign territory requires that we live a radical life in Christ. As Jesus pointed out in the Gospels, to be a disciple, to be effective in the mission he calls us to, we need to give our whole life – even to death – to accomplish it. The Lord hasn’t invited us to a quiet stroll in the countryside. Rather, he has asked us to build and maintain a “fort” for him, influencing the people around us on the Lord’s behalf, sometimes providing help in their need, winning some to the Lord by our words and actions and by our very presence. To build a Christian community as part of the bulwark which he is establishing is a work of great magnitude and – according to what he has shown us – one that has eternal consequences for thousands upon thousands if it is not ready on time. Therefore we need to be serious disciples of the Lord to carry it out.

**Communities, evangelism, and life in Christ**

I was deeply encouraged in reading the documents of the 1979 Latin American Catholic bishops, when they gathered with Pope John Paul II in Puebla, Mexico, to discuss evangelism in our region. “Puebla,” as the conference has come to be called, speaks eloquently of the challenge facing us to build and maintain a new, godly society in the world today. The bishops saw the building of Christian communities as essential in Latin America and in the whole church, given the situation it finds itself in today. The bishops acknowledged the strategic significance of communities throughout the history of the church for bringing the gospel to others and providing Christian influence in society.

I want to quote two short sections from the document: “The Church evangelizes in the first place through the global testimony of its life. (By its manner, and not only by what it does). Thus in its faithfulness as sacrament, it tries to become a sign or living model of the communion of love in Christ which it announces and tries to bring about.

“The pedagogy of the Incarnation teaches us that people need clear models to guide them. It was said that the greatest political relevance in the Middle Ages was the foundations of Benedictine monks, because their form of community life became the great model for the social organization of fledgling Europe; Latin America also needs such models” (Puebla, ch. 171).

“Each community in the church of Latin America should make the effort to constitute for the continent an example of coexistence where it succeeds in bringing together both freedom and solidarity, where the authority is exercised in the Spirit of the Good Shepherd, where a different attitude toward riches is lived out, where teachings on new formulas of organization and on new structures of participation create openings and paths toward a more human society.

“And above all, where it is unequivocally manifested that without a radical communion with God in Jesus Christ, all other forms of communion are purely human and turn out to be incapable of sustaining themselves and fatally end in turning against man himself” (Puebla, ch. 172).

Puebla describes a model of social, political, and economic structures more radical than what has been brought about by human effort alone, either in modern times or during the whole history of revolutionary movements. Puebla calls for structures built on gospel principles by men and women empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In the same way, our community is not trying simply to build a new society with human strength. The attempt to build with merely human strength has been made by people in various ages, including all of history’s revolutions. Puebla’s goal and ours in the City of God is to build the kind of new society that can only be accomplished because it is founded on a radical communion with God in Jesus Christ. In the areas of freedom, justice, authority, and wealth, it begins where all the others leave off, going far beyond merely human vision and ability.

**A society with Gospel values**

This is not an easy way to live, and in our community we are far from perfect at it, but we can already see signs of
God’s kingdom breaking forth in it. For example, we aim to exercise authority as a service, not as an excuse to lord it over others. In the area of possessions, the level of sharing in the community is much more ambitious than in any communist society. We don’t do this by negating the right to private property, nor by imposing some law, but simply through the generous sharing of goods and resources, inspired by the Holy Spirit working within each of our members. Our community life is founded on the ideal of genuine love, to be expressed in a total commitment involving every area of our lives and possessions.

Learning to live as members of this new society is not an easy business. It is a high calling and entails a very deep level of commitment, both to God and to our brothers and sisters. It entails a death to self and a renunciation of the values of our current secular society.

- In a secular society which values absolute personal freedom as an inalienable right, our way of life calls us to move from independence to interdependence and on to brotherhood and sisterhood.
- In a secular society centered on competition as the key to personal success, our way of life proclaims collaboration, mutual help, and service for the growth and well being of all.
- In a society that applauds rebels, whatever their cause, our way of life insists on relationships of authority and subordination that do not diminish the dignity of the person.
- In a society that has stopped believing in the sanctity and importance of marriage, our way of life fosters an ever-increasing affection, kindness, and commitment between husband and wife.
- In a society in which emotions are the absolute criterion for action, our way of life builds its relationships on people’s given word and solemn commitment.
- In a secular society that no longer proclaims freedom of worship or religion but freedom from any religion or worship, our community way of life presents a people who value their relationship with God above all other values.
- In a society that disregards all morality or introduces a supposedly human morality, we insist on obeying the law of God with all its implications.
- In a society in which people pride themselves on doing whatever they want, our way of life proclaims that doing the will of God is the absolute criterion for action.
- In a society that demands justice, we proclaim mercy.
- In a society full of violence, our life upholds the wisdom of self-sacrificing love.
- In a society full of anxiety, where mental disorders and depression are quite common, the new society in Christ testifies that people can live today in harmony, joy, and peace.

Our community, a small “fort,” is distinct from the society in which we live – distinct in its economics, law, and manner of governing, in its lifestyle and values. Despite the barrage from the media offering an often twisted and superficial philosophy about how to live, we are doing what we can as a people to establish the Lord’s kingdom on earth.

A distinctive people

The strategy of being a distinct people who influence the people around them is really God’s own strategy. In the New Testament the Apostle Peter in his first letter gives one of the earliest definitions of the church, and in so doing echoes the Lord’s call to the people of Israel in Old Testament times. To the Christians, Peter writes, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God” (1 Peter 2:9). God’s plan was and still is to establish his church, this people set apart for him, as a city on a mountain top, a sign planted in the midst of the nations, light and salt of the earth, leaven in the dough – an instrument for the extension of the kingdom of God. But disgracefully, many Christians today have lost their sense of being a nation.
The example of Israel helps explain our call to community, our call to become a holy people. Speaking through Moses, God told his people Israel that they should have nothing whatever to do with the wicked ways of the nations around them, for, he said, “You are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession” (Deuteronomy 7:6).

His people were supposed to be different from the other nations. In addition to the Ten Commandments, the Lord gave the Jewish people many other regulations for their daily life, as detailed in the book of Leviticus and elsewhere. For example, they were to consecrate their first-born sons to God and circumcise all their sons. They were to avoid eating the meat of certain animals and were to offer to him the first fruits of their crops, the first-born of their animals, and a tithe of their earnings. These concrete norms constituted a way of living, a distinct culture. The importance of these for the survival of a people was made particularly clear when the people of Israel were exiled from their land, sometimes for long periods of time and in various countries. By virtue of their common and distinctive way of life, they have continued even to this day to be one people, one nation, set apart by their culture.

I believe the Lord has also called us as the Sword of the Spirit, this community of communities, to be his people, a distinctive grouping within the whole Christian people – not better, but distinctive – to whom he has given a particular mission. From the very beginning he has addressed the City of God and many other communities as “my people” and continues to speak to the whole Sword of the Spirit in this way. Like the People of Israel, we find ourselves dispersed all over the world, made up of people of different races and languages. What gives us an identity in such a diversity is our culture. We are supposed to be a distinct environment, a distinct people with its own culture, even though formed from people of diverse races, languages, and cultures around the world.

We express in a profound way that we are brothers and sisters as we more and more share a common way of life. Our unity, although still imperfect, is already a reality, a kind of utopia before our eyes. The Lord has chosen us and is in the process of forming us into one people in our local community and in the network of communities like ours – the Sword of the Spirit. We have the same God, have all been called to follow the Lord, and have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior. He has made a covenant with us and joined us all into one people, and we in turn have made a covenant with one another, even with those we might never see. He chose us and gave us a new name and a new identity. And among us there is a real confidence that what we are involved in is something that was his initiative and not merely human.

**A distinctive way of life**

As a community of communities we have our own way of praising and worshipping the Lord. Our music – strong and at times martial – is fitting for a people who are in a spiritual battle, a people at war. It differs noticeably from the sweet, almost lyrical music of other groups. Our common form of praying reflects the vision we have of the Lord – the Lord of heaven and earth – and focuses on giving him the glory and praise that is his due, rather than primarily on asking for his help, although we do depend on him for even the smallest things and are open to seeing him work wonders, large and small, on our behalf. We have our distinctive way of honoring him by celebrating the Lord’s Day and relaxing together.

We have a distinctive way of exercising authority, with subordinates being encouraged to take initiative and bear responsibility. We have a distinctive way of relating to secular authority. A way to share our material goods and money. A distinct way of relating as husband and wife, with the husband serving as the head of his wife, and she the suitable helper and necessary complement for him. We have a distinct way of speaking, in which the words “brother” or “sister” flow naturally and in which we work to eradicate from our speech all negative humor, name-calling, sarcasm, slander, vulgarity, and rudeness. And we try to live our lives in the light, not in secretiveness or darkness. Brotherly correction is given and received in humility; exhortation and counsel are received gracefully. If
there is an argument or a difficulty in a relationship, we know how to heal it, asking and giving forgiveness and owning up to our faults. And we don’t harbor anger or bitterness in our hearts.

We have an approach to sexuality that is different from the world’s but at the same time joyful and full of thanksgiving. There is a clarity about our identity – the men dressing and acting as men, and the women dressing and acting as women. We have a distinct process of dating and courtship among young people, with the young men showing signs of respect to young women.

We have forms of giving and receiving respect between children and adults, men and women, and between members of the community and their leaders. When we have guests, the children give their seats to the older brothers and sisters, whom they treat with respect, calling them “uncle” or “aunt.” But the children are also taken into account and treated with respect: they are not only our children or our nieces and nephews, they are also our young brothers and sisters in the Lord. Among themselves the children treat one another with affection, as brothers and sisters or cousins. We also have a distinct way to form our children so they will grow up as confident people, loving God and loving those around them.

We have a distinct way of viewing the world around us and what is happening in it: a distinct attitude toward life and death, toward sickness and suffering and trial, toward success, riches, friendship, and happiness. In our homes we live a life that is quite similar from one family to the next, and distinct from the world’s way. Each of us takes time for personal prayer and we all read the Scriptures. We offer prayers of thanksgiving before meals and have times of family prayer. We have family nights and celebrate the Lord’s Day. We pray over one another very naturally for various needs. The use of TV is limited. Hospitality is very much a part of our daily lives, and in many cases, single brothers and sisters make their home with families, sharing a common life. We know how to value and administer our time, and we try to schedule it wisely so that we can be faithful to commitments and punctual at meetings.

These are all elements of a culture that we consciously try to live out. We feel proud to be part of this people and proud of our way of life.

We feel that the Lord has called us to live a way of life that is radically distinct from the world around us and opposed to many of its ideals, values, and customs, and this is not an easy task. The world may not applaud us for it. In fact, the Lord warns us in Scripture that if people persecuted him, they would also persecute us, his disciples.
When a great earthquake and tidal wave was spotted off the northeast coast of Japan on the afternoon of March 11 2011, a warning went out across the land. A few heard and fled to high ground. But within minutes after the tsunami hit the coast, more than 15,000 people perished. The destructive tsunami waves of up to 38.9 metres (128 ft) swept houses, bridges, roads, trees, and everything else into a massive rubble of destruction. One coastal community survived intact from the full onslaught of the destructive tsunami waves. This city had decided many years previously to build an enormously high bulwark as a protective wall, after they had suffered the destructive force of a tidal wave which caused great damage and loss of life. Their wise mayor had convinced the residents that it was worth the enormous financial cost and sacrifice of great human effort to build a high protective wall for future generations as well.

An urgency from the Lord

I believe that what we are doing is very important for the Lord’s overall plan for the world. I would like to quote and comment upon one of the many prophecies we have heard over the years that speak of the seriousness with which the Lord sees the mission he’s called us to in the Sword of the Spirit.

A word about charismatic prophecy is probably in order as I do so. The New Testament instructs that we should not disdain prophecy but test it (1 Thessalonians 5:20). Throughout the history of the church, the Lord has raised up charismatic preachers, teachers, and prophets to speak a word to a region or to all his people. From those prophetic words, huge renewal movements have begun and waves of repentance have swept across the lands. I believe that we are in the midst of one of those waves and that we should not take lightly the word the Lord speaks to us. One prophecy in particular, given in the mid-1970s, has set a tone of urgency for the Sword of the Spirit’s response to the Lord’s call.

“Sorrow upon sorrow, agony, terror, and sickness of heart will be your companions in the days ahead. The storm is rising, the clouds gather, lightening, wind, and storm great enough to carry off even the strong, ready to break upon the slumbering, the unprepared, the confused. Where now is the shelter? Where the bulwark, the refuge? Where is the strength of my church when the storm is upon it? Unprepared, divided, and confused, weak when strength is most needed, it will crumble. The earth will be littered with the debris, the testimony that it was ready.

“Weep for those who rush to find shelter within her when the day comes. Pray for those who trust in her defenses in that day when she is found unable to defend herself. Unless you take pains now to hear my word, to follow my leading, to carry out my will, there will be no defense. If you heed me, if you believe my word and trust in it to the limit of your strength and the end of your faith, and carry it out
Living Bulwark

with the help of my grace, a bulwark will be ready. And when the collapse comes, and the walls long crumbling are washed away, yet there will be an army, a wall of defense to preserve my church.

“I have said to you before and I say to you again, that I alone have wisdom, insight, knowledge, and vision sufficient for the combat that lies ahead – the combat which should have begun generations ago and did not. If you seek to plan your own plans, you will be crushed in defeat, and find no consolation in me. If you trust to my plans, and carry them out though they seem foolish, you will find your right hand strong, invincible, trained to the task and upheld by the power of heaven?

“Do you understand? The day is close upon you. I do not speak always in riddles; and when I speak to you in plain speech, receive it as plain speech.”

Now is the time

I don’t believe that this prophecy is describing a future time when all the difficulties will happen simultaneously and universally. I think that in many places they have already begun to happen and will continue to do so. Some of you know about the partial fulfillment of the prophecy in 1998 here in Central America during Hurricane Mitch, in which we as a community we were able on a small scale to serve as a bulwark and protection for the church and for many outside it.

An awe-inspiring part of the prophecy I have quoted is God’s desire to involve men and women like you and me in his work and to make the outcome dependent on our cooperation, obedience, and dedication. This is the way he has arranged the whole plan of salvation – to be accomplished in partnership with human beings. In the prophecy, he doesn’t say that everything will turn out all right even if we refuse to listen to his call. The welfare of many is dependent on our faithfulness and radical dedication. We are only a part of his plan, of course, not the whole. But he also clearly says to us, “If you heed me, if you believe my word and trust in it to the limit of your strength and the end of your faith, and carry it out with the help of my grace, a bulwark will be ready.”

In the prophecy, the Lord says that this battle should have begun earlier. We lag behind. The day he is talking about is not years into the future, but imminent. For those who believe they will be protected simply by closing their eyes or running away, the Lord says the following, one of many words he has spoken to us over the years about our call: “What use is there in building an island of peaceful ease while all around you war rages? Either I will take your ease from you, and give you in exchange for it a place in the battle, and with it my everlasting favor, or the enemy will take you from your ease, and give you in return for it punishment and terror. There is no other alternative. You are a nation at war, and the war will grow and draw you in, whether you wish to join or not.”

Hearing prophecies like these, obviously international in scope, our community in Nicaragua tried to take them seriously and live them out at the local level. In doing so we have experienced tremendous blessing. Because we took them to heart, we were ready and our perspective clear when, in 1979, the Sandinista Revolution brought real tribulation to our country that lasted 11 years – the persecution of the church, the collapse of our economy, and the flight of thousands of people to foreign countries where they thought they would find peace, but did not. We had been warned through the prophecy and had been able to build our lives on the solid foundations that the Lord had given. During those difficult years, the Lord allowed our community to play an important role as a bulwark for our church on the local and national level against communist indoctrination.

The Lord has always asked his disciples to love one another as he loved them. Today he is raising up disciples in communities, called in a special way to radically live out that love as brothers and sisters in Christ, committed to one another in a way that touches every area of life, and every moment of every day. Christians have always been called to be in the world without being of it, to be salt and light. In this particular moment in history, in which the values of
the world threaten large segments of the church, the Lord is calling some Christians to form communities, “forts,” that are joined together as a bulwark to strengthen and protect his church and foster the spread of his good news – to be a people set apart for him, living according to his ways.

[1. Lest it be taken wrongly, note that this word does not predict the disappearance of the church. The people of Israel also survived, but 10 of its 12 tribes disappeared forever.]

Carlos Mantica is a founder of The City of God community (La Cuidad de Dios) in Managua, Nicaragua, and a founding leader of the Sword of the Spirit. He served for a term as president of the Sword of the Spirit between 1991 and 1995. He is author of the book, From Egghead to Birdhood (hatch or rot as a Christian). See excerpt from one of the chapters in the book: Good Teacher.
All of us who believe in Christ Jesus are said to be living stones, according to the words of Scripture: “But you are living stones, built as a spiritual house in a holy priesthood, that you may offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-6).

When we look at an earthly building, we can see that the larger and stronger stones are the first to be set in place as the foundation, so that the weight of the whole structure may rest on them securely. In the same way understand that some of the living stones become the foundation of the spiritual building. What are these living stones placed in the foundation? They are the apostles and prophets. That is what Paul says when he teaches: “We have been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with our Lord Jesus Christ himself as the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20).
You, my hearers, must learn that Christ himself is also the foundation of the building we are now describing, so that you may prepare yourselves more eagerly for the construction of this building and become stones that lie closer to the foundation. As the apostle Paul says: “No foundation can be laid other than the one that has been laid already: I mean Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 3:11). Blessed are those, therefore, who build a religious and holy structure upon such a noble foundation.

In this building of the church, there must also be an altar. I think that if those of you, disposed and eager for prayer, offer petitions and prayers of supplication to God day and night, you will become the living stones for the altar which Jesus is building.

Consider what praise is ascribed to these stones which make up the altar. “The lawgiver Moses said that the altar was to be made of stones, uncovered by iron” (Deuteronomy 27:5). What are those stones? Perhaps those uncut and undefiled stones are the holy apostles, all making a single altar, because of their unity of mind and heart. For it was known that with one accord they all opened their lips to pray: “You, Lord, know the hearts of all” (Acts 1:24).

Therefore, these who were able to pray with one mind, one voice and one spirit, are perhaps worthy to form together one altar, where Jesus may offer his sacrifice to the Father.

Let us strive to agree among ourselves and to have one mind and voice. May we never quarrel or act from vainglory. But may we remain united in belief and purpose. Then even we may hope to become stones fit for the altar.

[Homilia 9, 1-2: SC 71, 244-246]

Origin (185-254 AD) was a Bible scholar and philosopher based in Alexandria, Egypt and later in Caesarea in Palestine.
He lived during a turbulent time of barbarian invasions, periodic persecutions, and rampant Gnostic heresy. The death of his father as a Christian martyr deeply affected him. The Christian historian Eusebius tells us that Origen was only seventeen when he took over as headmaster of the Christian Catechetical School at Alexandria. He was a prolific writer of homilies, scripture commentaries, and treatises.

Under the persecution of Decius in 250, Origen was imprisoned and underwent appalling torture. After his release he died at the age of 69 in 254.
Living stones fashioned by faith, made firm
by hope, cemented by love

by Augustine of Hippo (185-254 AD)

So the Lord will repay his faithful followers who are so lovingly, so cheerfully, so devotedly carrying out these works, to the effect that he includes them in the construction of his own building, into which they hasten to fit as living stones (1 Peter 2:5), fashioned by faith, made solidly firm by hope, cemented together by charity. This is the building in which that wise architect the apostle placed Christ Jesus as the foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10-11), also as the supreme cornerstone (Isaiah 28:16); one which, as Peter also reminds us from the prophetic scripture, was rejected indeed by men, but chosen and honored by God (1 Peter 2:4; Psalm 118:22).

By adhering to this stone we are joined peaceably together; by resting on it we are fixed firmly in place. You see, he is at one and the same time the foundation stone, because he is the one who regulates us, and the cornerstone, because it is he that joins us together. He is the rock on which the wise man builds his house, and thus continues in utter security against all the trials and temptations of this world, neither collapsing when the rain pours down, nor being swept away when the river floods, nor overthrown when the winds blow.

[Sermons 337]

Aurelius Augustine was born in 345 in the town of Tagaste, in Roman North Africa, in what is today Algeria. His mother was Monica, a very devout Christian who had a significant influence on her son's life. His father, named Patricius, was a pagan of significant status in society. Patricius became a Christian shortly before his death.
Augustine was educated at Carthage where he enjoyed academic success. He also enjoyed the party life, and at the age of 17 fell in love with a woman whom he never named. They lived together unmarried for 13 years and had a son whom Augustine named Adeodatus, meaning “gift from God.” His son died in his youth.

At the age of 19, after reading Cicero’s *Hortensius*, Augustine fell in love with philosophy. He later wrote, “It gave me different values and priorities. Suddenly every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart.” While he pursued Platonic philosophy and the theology of the Manichaens, a Christian heretical sect, he became restless for truth and virtue. Shortly before his 30th birthday, Augustine encountered Ambrose, the saintly bishop of Milan. Augustine was moved by Ambrose’s example and his inspired teaching and preaching of the gospel. At the age of 32 Augustine found peace with God and was baptized by Ambrose during the Easter liturgy in 387. Augustine returned to North Africa and formed a monastic community with a group of friends. He was ordained a priest in 391 and became a noted preacher. In 396 he reluctantly became a bishop and remained the bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. He left his monastic community, but continued to lead a monastic life with the parish priests of Hippo in his episcopal residence. Augustine died on August 28, 430, during the siege of Hippo by the Vandals.

Augustine was a prolific writer and original thinker. His numerous writings, including theological treatises, sermons, scripture commentaries, and philosophical dialogues, number into the hundreds. His autobiography, the *Confessions*, was considered the first Western autobiography. It was highly read among his contemporaries and has continued as a classic throughout the ages.

Augustine is one of the most important figures in the development of Western Christianity. He is esteemed as a great Latin church father and a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Protestants consider him to be one of the theological fathers of Reformation teaching. Among Orthodox he is called St. Augustine the Blessed.
A Mighty Fortress is Our God

hymn by Martin Luther (1483-1556)

A mighty fortress is our God,
A bulwark never failing.
Our helper he amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe.
His craft and power are great,
And, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing,
Were not the right man on our side,
The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he.
Lord Sabaoth, his name,
From age to age the same,
And he must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,
Living Bulwark

Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The Prince of Darkness grim,
We tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure,
For lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers
Not thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours
Through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also.
The body they may kill,
God's truth abideth still.
His kingdom is forever.

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A Holy Nation:

Raising our children for the Lord

by Bob Tedesco

The Lord’s Prayer is one of the most important points of unity in Christianity. Virtually every Christian has it memorized and can recite it from a very young age. Aside from a few exceptions there is nearly universal agreement on the wording.

Across the spectrum of Christianity and over hundreds of years, there have been some teachers who have taught that the Lord’s Prayer is a collection of topics or areas to address in prayer, and not just a rote prayer to be quickly or mindlessly recited. One argument for their approach is to ask, “When the disciples asked the Lord to teach them to pray, do we really think that his response was to direct them to recite a twenty second prayer?”

Hallowed be thy name
One free-church model addresses the “Hallowed be thy name” topic as a time to recite and consider some of the names and roles of the Lord, as given in scripture. The group listed eight of them. The Lord is righteous, holy, present, our peace, our healing, our provision, a banner in our midst, and our shepherd.

Righteous and holy
Recently, while praying this model, I was struck by the distinction between righteous and holy. To be righteous, among other things, is to do the right things. We think of righteous individuals as people of character: honest, trustworthy, truthful, reliable, upright, loyal.

To be holy, on the other hand, is to be set apart for God. “Things” can be holy as well as individuals. Roles can be holy, as in the cases of a priest or a minister. A nation can be holy. There are many righteous people in various cultures and religious expressions. Not all righteous people are holy. Not all holy people are righteous (at least not all the time).

We are called to be righteous and holy. We are called as a people to: 1) do the right things, and 2) be set apart for God: for his purposes, his plans, his actions, his kingdom. The apostle Peter describes Christians as, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy” (1Peter 2:9-10 RSV).

A holy nation
So, we are “God’s own people.” We are not just God’s own singles, God’s own marriages, and not just only God’s own family. This has significant meaning for how we raise children within a family and how we relate to other people’s children. Whether single or married, we are called to help other people raise their children, and that will be somewhat difficult since, at least in Western culture, we are no longer “wired” to be very concerned beyond family borders. But because we are called as a holy nation, a holy people, we should really foster that concern beyond family borders. We serve, participate in, and support events, groups, and outreaches that benefit the children of others.

Raising our own
Because we are called as a holy nation, a holy people, we are called to raise our children to be set apart for God. “From now on you must live the rest of your earthly lives controlled by God’s will and not by human desires” (1Peter 4:2 TEV). It is not a sufficient response to the Lord to raise our children to be righteous, to get a good education, have a good career, and live happily ever after. It is not even spiritually safe (for them)! Such things may have seemed safe in the 1950s, but the environment that we now live in is such a mine field that few are surviving it.

In the early part of the charismatic renewal, there was a fair amount of discussion in various church circles of what it meant to be saved, how to get saved, etc. Today it is a real concern to address the question, “How do the saved survive?” Our younger Christians are having great difficulty traversing the gauntlet that is young adult life, especially if there is a significant disconnect: a non-local college, or being in a romantic relationship with a non-Christian, or in a strong relationship with a group of non-Christian friends (real or virtual).

If our children are not set apart for God and trained to view their lives that way (that is, view them as holy), the righteousness that seemed so ingrained is unlikely to carry the day over the long haul.

Jesus’ pattern: “Thy will be done”
“Lord, teach us to pray,” was a request that sprang from the disciples observing Jesus’ pattern, admiring it, and wanting to embrace it. What was that pattern? In simplest terms, Jesus sought out the Father, praised him, listened to his instructions, and then did them. It was a daily pattern. It was a good pattern for Jesus.
What the world needs today are disciples who seek the Lord, hear and discern his direction, and then follow it.

That’s what Jesus did.
That’s how we hope to live.
And that’s the vision of life that we should be passing on to our children!

Bob Tedesco is past President of the North American Region of the Sword of the Spirit, a founder of the People of God community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA, and has been one of its key leaders for the past 38 years.
The Battle is the Lord's

Are you ready to fight for him?

by Paul Jordan

Who does God choose to send into battle for his name and for his people? The bravest, the strongest, the best trained, and the first in the bunch?

One of my favorite stories in the Bible – and the Bible is full of stories – is about how God chose to use someone whom no one else would have thought qualified. That person wasn’t even a grown-up, just a teenager from a big family of the tribe of Judah in Israel. He was the youngest of a bunch of brothers and a couple of sisters. His name was David, and he knew God.

David appears in the Bible for the first time when the prophet Samuel is led by the Lord to anoint him as the future king (1 Samuel 16). He was probably only thirteen or so on the day when he was summoned home from the sheep fields to be anointed by this stranger, his bemused brothers looking on. But something happened to David on that day.

“Samuel anointed him and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.”

The spirit of the Lord came upon him? – God himself came to live in David in a powerful way.
A nation at war

The narrative then quickly moves to a battle scene (1 Samuel 17). Israel’s King Saul is fighting – again. “King Saul and the men of Israel were gathered in line of battle against the Philistines.”

Israel? Battle? Philistines? Israel was God’s chosen people. God chose Israel. To be chosen is to be loved. God loved Israel, his people. He wouldn’t give up on them. His love is all about faithfulness.

Battle? Many of the stories of the Bible are about God’s people fighting. Sometimes they fought for survival, but they also fought in order to take land and be established. They fought because God was commanding them and they fought to bring glory to his name.

People only fight for things if they’re worth something. In fact, to fight for something is to declare its worth. It is to say, this king or this cause, this child or this friend, is worth fighting for. Or in other words, I am willing to suffer for this. Ask any winning athlete and they’ll tell you. Great cost, but it was worth it.

Still today, we can see such battles all around us. Everything that costs us in building God’s kingdom is part of the fight. Striving after holiness. Defending God’s ways. Winning souls for God. It’s a fight. These days it’s “not against flesh and blood” but in those days the Philistines were the worst enemies of God’s people and this battle would go down in the history books.

Goliath – a giant of a killer

Picture the drama. “The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side.”
Enter Goliath. “There came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits…”

Six cubits?! Well, these days that’s about 8 feet, 10 inches (2.7 metres). A giant just walked on stage.

The narrator says, “He had a helmet of bronze …and was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze.”

He was armed to the hilt. Just his coat weighed about 100 pounds (45 kg)! Talk about Heavy Metal. So he’s big and he’s strong.

And then the giant begins his taunt: “He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, ‘Why have you come out to draw up for battle?’”

In other words “You really shouldn’t have bothered getting out of bed. I’m going to kill you.”

“Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I kill him, then you shall be our servants.”

Goliath lays down the challenge. In short: let’s save time, if one of your men can kill me, game over, you win. Of course, the odds are not worth betting on. Goliath has never lost.

**Knees buckle**

Now imagine the effect on God’s army. We’re looking for a volunteer. Everyone takes one step back. Not me – I just need 2 more months to finish my dissertation. Not me, I just got married! Not me, I need to build my career! Not me, I’m too young. Not me, I’m not good enough…

When I was younger we used to play soccer in the park. No one ever wanted to go in goals. “I have a bad back. It’s not my position. I went in goals last year.” It’s remarkable how quickly young men develop excuses. You can bet there were a few on that day.

But then Goliath raises the stakes further, his outspoken pride unwittingly sealing his fate. “…I defy the ranks of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together.”

I defy! Another translation of the word is “blaspheme.” Yes he is taunting Israel. To defy Israel, however, is to defy Israel’s God. But make no mistake, it is no small thing to defy the living God.
So what happens as these words fall on the ears of the King? What happens as Israel hears these words? “When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.”

Guess what. They start to be afraid. Really afraid. Earlier in the same book it talks about the men of Israel fearfully hiding in caves. You can imagine them having a hard look at the map to the caves again. “For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening.”

Day after day, no one even tried to fight. Deeply Afraid. Shrinking soldiers. Impotent Israel. No one will fight. Nothing can be done. There is no hope… Or is there?

And David heard him
Scene change. We’re back in the sheep fields with the teenage shepherd, young David. David’s three eldest brothers were at the battle. His father asks David to take the boys some food. “Take these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers.”

David sets off and comes “to the encampment, as the army was going forth to the battle line, shouting the war cry.” David went and “greeted his brothers. As he talked with them, behold, the champion…Goliath… came up out of the ranks of the Philistines, and spoke the same words as before.” Once again the giant begins his provoking, defying taunt.

Then four simple words: “And David heard him.”
David didn’t just hear him like you hear background music in a store. He heard him. He understood. He perceived that there was something significant going on here. It’s the kind of hearing that normally happens in slow motion in movies. Young David’s head slowly turning. His eyes meeting the giant’s.

**Who does he think he is?**

“And David said to the men who stood by him, What shall be done? …Who is this Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

You can hear the indignation rightly rising in David. What are we going to do about this? Who does he think he is? He is defying our God! We have to act, brothers. Why is nobody doing anything about this?!

“Eli’ab's anger was kindled against David, and he said, ‘Why have you come down?’” Eliab was David’s oldest brother. No.1 meets No. 8.

I actually grew up with six younger brothers so I’m no stranger to the clashes. But older brothers, like Eliab and I, can too easily douse the youthful fire. David’s response to his ‘big brother’ is so human it’s almost comical.

“‘What have I done now?’ …And he turned away from him toward another, and spoke in the same way.” David won’t stop. Eventually even King Saul hears about David…. “and he sent for him.”

**Give me a place in the battle**

After a heated discussion in the royal war room, David says: “Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” In other words: “with all respect King Saul, send me to fight Goliath!”

Saul retorts, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.” You can’t do it David. Why? Well Saul gives a couple of reasons. Firstly, you’re too young. And secondly, he’s a pro. This guy Goliath has made a career from killing people and you don’t even know what a Gillette Mach III is!

Now Saul’s reasoning isn’t all that bad but he’s missing two crucial truths. Firstly, David has experience that Saul doesn’t know about – Saul underestimates David. But more significantly Saul misses the spiritual truth.

David answers, “Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.”

David believes that because Goliath has defied God, Goliath simply has no chance. The battle is the Lord’s. It’s not blind faith or youthful rashness, it’s truth-based courage.
Your clothes don’t fit

“And Saul said to David, ‘Go, and the Lord be with you!’” So Saul agrees. Exasperated or exhorting? Hard to tell.

“Then Saul clothed David with his armor.” Maybe a sign of official commission? Maybe it made him look more impressive? Maybe Saul just wants to protect him? Maybe the boy is so hidden in the armour as to reduce the embarrassment factor for Saul? All we know is that it doesn’t fit.

“David then said to Saul, ‘I cannot go with these; for I am not used to them.’” Perhaps Saul expects David to do things the way he would. But David is young and he’s going to take an innovative approach. The goals remain, but the method looks different.

Instead “he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the brook.”
Showtime

Imagine the scene. The young boy appears on the battle field, the underdog gladiator on whom rests Israel’s future. “He drew near to the Philistine.”

Much at stake. Hollywood can’t match this moment.

Who knows if his brothers were aware of what was going on. Gasps. It’s David. What’s he doing? I can’t believe you let him out of your sight. Dad’s going to kill us… But this is David’s day. He is on stage. And no one else can take his turn.

Approaching, Goliath sees him. “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air …” You are not serious? Sending a little boy? A babe cannot win a war!

David boldly proclaims: “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down, and cut off your head.”

Quite a speech. And then, the motor of his zeal, “…that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.”

So that all the earth may know that God is alive! David declares his love. The fuel in David’s heart is the Spirit of God. And his seemingly risky, selfless action is so that God can be known. And so it begins.
The battle is the Lord’s
He runs at him. He doesn’t even tentatively pick his steps like a predator about to pounce. He runs. “The battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand. …David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine.”

Interestingly, David doesn’t say he will give you into my hand this time but our hand. Not only is he doing this so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, he is also doing this on behalf of his people. “David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone, and slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground.” A thud echoes in a stunned valley as six cubits of warrior hit the dust. Disbelief gives way to glory. What a day! What a victory!

David has taken his turn!

The Spirit spreads
The giant is down and David quickly finishes the job. But now look what happens to the spectator peoples: “When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. And the men of Israel and Judah rose with a shout …” A few verses ago Israel was dismayed. Deeply afraid. But now Israel lets out a great shout. You can bet there was some dancing that night.

Since God lives, David lives and as David lives out his call, the people around him come to life.

Happy day
What a story. You would tell your children about it. And your children’s children. And your children’s children would tell their friends. “My Grandfather was there when David took out Goliath. The Philistines ran away that day!”

On that day David remembered the truth that God is alive. And it fired his hope. Whilst the people hid in their mental caves David rose to be fully alive.

On that day young David stepped out – even against popular opinion. Whilst many preferred to wallow in selfish
fear, David carried the flag, confident in God.

On that day David took his place in the battle, he put himself on the line to bring glory to the name of the Lord.

**Fast forward**

The simple truth is that the Kingdom of God is built on the backs of men and women like David. With a hope that fires courage in the face of fear. Who take steps confident in the promises of the Lord. And who are, above all, ready to sacrifice for the sake of the glory of the Lord. For that is what it means to love him.

The story of David and Goliath ends with a brief interchange between David and the King: “And King Saul said to him, ‘Whose son are you, young man?’ And David answered, ‘I am the son of your servant Jesse from Bethlehem.’”

Israel had more battles to fight, but years later a baby would be born in Bethlehem who would win once and for all. An anointed shepherd king, a descendant of David, would be born. One who would battle “Goliath” with a cross and usher in a new age for the whole human race.

The battle is, and always was, the Lord’s.
I suppose I live in one of the more radical expressions of community. I sometimes introduce myself as an “urban monk.” Recently in a business context the person laughed, incredulous, and asked if that was simply a marketing gimmick, or the real thing. I smiled. “You’ll have to answer that yourself.”

I am a member of the Servants of the Word, a Christian missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord. We live together a common life with shared finances and a daily pattern of life inspired by a Benedictine rhythm of prayer and work. I live in one of our households in west London, UK. We currently have 10 men living here, representing an age range from 23 to 64. We hold positions of service and leadership in mission projects here and around the world, yet after every meal together we all pitch in and do the dishes. I’ve been doing this for about 30 years. His response, “Wow, that’s the real thing.”

**What is real community all about?** It’s the place where Christ-love is expressed day in and day out. It’s counter-cultural and life transforming. It requires us to die to self so that we can discover new life in Christ. It’s all about looking not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others. It’s joy-filled and sometimes painful, intentional, and naturally relational. It takes time. The foundations are servant-heartedness, mutual respect, and...
Living Bulwark

submission to one another. Commitment enables it to happen. Inter-generational expression gives vision for the long haul. How to do all this must be modeled and taught. It’s one of the great needs of our time and one of the challenges the church most struggles with. When it happens, a youth group is totally alive, a neighborhood celebrates together, and the love of God is known.

Commitment enables real community to take root and grow

Another example. Members of the Antioch Community, also in London, made a radical decision almost 20 years ago. Many members moved to Acton in west London in order to be close enough together to express day-to-day support and mission in the local area. It’s an ecumenical community, and its members are active in numerous local churches, including Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, and free church members. There are now about 90 adults and 70 children in the community. Multi-national and with all ages represented, from grandparents in their 80s to lively children and full-on teenagers, the community provides a place for integrating singles and families.

Antioch aspires to be “a community of disciples on mission.” This phrase expresses that active mission grows out of the foundation of real community. Last autumn the community hosted a healing event with the involvement of local churches that attracted over 400 hundred local residents, and made a lasting impression of the power of God released in the healing service. From the community life itself springs a regular pattern of open dinner parties, neighborhood BBQs, men’s and women’s events, Alpha courses and practical service projects. Every Tuesday evening our household cooks dinner for a family who lives down the street from us. In many ways, the Antioch Community is joining with others to rediscover what it means to be neighbors.
Andy Pettman, senior leader of the Antioch Community, highlights that community requires commitment, the willingness to stick at it when the going gets tough. And it will get tough. Commitment requires that we work through disagreements. The Antioch Community follows a biblical process for handling conflict based on respect of one another, attentiveness to how the disagreement is talked about, and agreeing to submit to outside help. This sort of process needs to be taught, and agreed to.

Knowing how to manage conflicts and reconcile broken relationships is a key skill for young people. When you lay foundations for working through disagreements, you’re training a generation of peacemakers in a world of conflict.

**Lessons from the Book of Acts: Real community is counter-cultural. It’s not going to happen without serious effort.**
Christian community was born through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. We read about these heady days in the opening chapters of Acts. Peter preached, people responded, and then this radical community of prayer, sharing, dinner parties, and outreach mission appeared overnight. It all looks so easy.

Let’s look a bit deeper though. There are important lessons tucked in here, and in what follows as, Paul picks up the community building work outside of Jerusalem.

Acts describes how the church was born out of the fabric of God-fearing Jews. Peter’s preaching in Chapter 2 focused on a clear message: “This Jesus whom you crucified is risen from the dead, and this is proof that he is the promised Messiah.” All those listening knew what Peter was talking about. They needed to respond, they just needed to know how. Three thousand did respond, and joined the way of life modeled by the disciples. The church was born.

These pioneers of the church were able to adapt quickly to a new way of life because they had a common starting point – as God-fearing Jews they shared a common set of values and cultural norms. For example, they knew what it meant to have fellowship over meals and to pray together. Most importantly, they had a context to understand what it meant to be a dwelling place of God through the Spirit. There was also a practical reference point: the disciples themselves were already modeling a common life shaped by their experience as disciples of Jesus. The early church was an extension of this community, it was all about how the believers lived their life together.

Notice how the community building work changed as the faith spread to the Gentiles in Corinth and Ephesus. These cities were not God-fearing places. Corinth was infamous for its shameless and immoral lifestyle. Ephesus was a center of economic power and wealth as well as the worship of idols. Paul’s pastoral letters to the Christians in these cities reflect this difference. The converts in these places had a much more difficult transition to make. A whole new way of life had to be taught, and it was hard work.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul begins with the encouragement that indeed Jesus has provided all that they need to become God’s people. But notice what he writes about next – he gets straight to the business of addressing key issues in their inner life. Most of the letter deals with concerns over how they handle disagreements, morality, and relationships. Paul encourages them to get these inner dynamics working well so that the life of Christ is known among them. Paul’s interest is in building a way of life that is sustained over time. God gives grace for this new life to grow, but we need to cooperate with this grace through our practical day-to-day decisions.

The church (then, as it is now) was made up of real people, people who struggle with sin, disagreements, selfishness, and simply the difficulty of learning how to live with others. Yet these were the people called together to express a Christ-centered love day in and day out. Paul recognized that the people needed to be taught how to do this, both through his word as well as through the witness of his own way of life. Jesus’ profound act of service to his disciples in the washing of the feet at the Last Supper was meant to be a foundational lesson for us. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” (John 13:13,14)

The challenge for youth workers is how to cooperate with grace to work “on the inside” to build community. We need to be taught. Christ-centered community won’t happen naturally, even though we are born of the Spirit and are a worshipping community. Indeed, the three qualities at the heart of community – servant-heartedness, respect of others, and submission – are counter-cultural concepts (as in, practically unknown) in most young people’s experience.
Community in our Youth Groups: It’s easy to love neighbors who live far away, but not the ones I live with.

Internet can’t create the type of community we’re considering here. It can get people connected with shared interests, but this is not real community in flesh and blood. I recently talked to a young man experiencing a painful loneliness, despite living in a shared housing situation with other Christians. At first impression, nobody in the flat had time in their busy schedules to hang out together. They had become like ships passing in the night. We looked again, and noticed that each of the guys spent several hours each week (sometimes each day) on Facebook and Skype with friends in other places. Interesting.

We need a re-wiring out of the Western mindset of individualism. The internet provides opportunities for connection with others, but can also reinforce the default position of looking out for number one, with no real commitment to others. We need to step back, re-envision what community could mean in our context, and then commit to action to make it happen one small step at a time.

Cultivate real community in the young people we serve

Andy Hewitt is the executive manager of Youth Initiatives, working in several locations of social need in Northern Ireland. He notes that young people have a sense of disconnection, sometimes expressed in their family situation, society around them, and the anti-social behavior of their immediate peer environment. Youth Initiatives expresses community by providing a place to experience a strong sense of belonging. Ideally, young people connect when they are 11 or 12 years old, and then stay connected through to their adult years.

A key concept for Youth Initiatives is creating a shared agenda.

We begin by reaching out to them where they are at, in school or on the streets. When they come along to something we’re doing they experience it as a safe place, a place where they can feel vulnerable as well as challenged. We have to get below the surface and be real. But when the young people come to us they also notice something different. They’ve come into a new way of doing things. The older members are involved in service as well as leadership. They are the ones setting up and cleaning up afterwards. They are the ones welcoming in new members and setting the inclusive tone. There’s an attitude of respect that’s noticeable, even amidst all the fun and banter.

Community is first experienced. It’s perhaps intangible, but the young people know if it’s there, and if it’s genuine.

We work on simple skills that make a big difference. We remember names, and what they’re about outside the youth group. We encourage our team to write these details down if they need to. We pay a lot of attention to how young people relate to each other. We work on things like respect, the way guys and girls interact, the language they use. We don’t do gossip. We recognize contribution and hold service as a high ideal. We offer small groups where they can get below the surface in real conversations. For many young people, this is one of the rare experiences of positive, formative contact with an adult.

So let’s be ready to be counter-cultural and transform the way we do life together. Pay attention to the inner life of our youth groups in order to cultivate our ability to see, to act, and to listen as individuals and as a group. Model real community as leaders, and create opportunities to train young people in how to live this out themselves. Real community requires commitment in order to take root and grow. Through the grace of God it releases life into our youth groups and celebrations in our neighborhoods.

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**Five ways to cultivate community in your youth ministry**

1) **Capture vision**
   Do a vision exercise with a core group including young people and leaders. Imagine what the youth group would look like, feel like, sound like from every angle of 'how we do life in context of youth group' that you can think of. How would people know that they are cared for? What would new people experience as they walked in? What would a silent listener hear if they heard all the private conversations?

2) **Leaders as role models**
   In light of the vision, consider how the leaders can actively model key elements of the group 'culture' themselves. Pay attention to how the leaders relate to each other, how they support one another and speak of each other. This is all about what is obviously demonstrated by actions (not just intentions). Also consider how you bring along members in a mentoring role, not just a leadership role.

3) **Older youth as role models**
   Work with the older youth as a distinct group. How can they pass on the vision to the younger members through their own example? Help them see themselves as 'shapers' of the group culture. Recognise their responsibility and actively train them in doing it well.

4) **Train key elements of vision**
   Plan effective ways to train the group in key elements of their 'inner life'. This includes topics such as speech, honour and respect in relationships, servant-heartedness, serving in teams, taking on responsibility. Make the training very practical so that you can track progress towards your vision.

5) **Recognise and honor what you want to see grow**
   This approach is based on the concept of a shared agenda. Everybody knows what the group vision is and what it's all about in real life. Pay attention to examples of it happening well. Reinforce this by recognising individual contributions both privately and publicly. Create a context where the young people articulate how key elements of the vision get expressed.

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Training in Excellence

How godly character strengthens individuals, families, and communities

by Don Schwager

The true measure of a man

If you walk the halls of Parliament in London you will see rows of marble statues depicting leading statesmen. The walls are filled with murals depicting larger than life figures who dominated the political stage. One figure is hard to miss. In the main entrance there is a mural of Sir Thomas More in his role as Speaker of the House, confronting Cardinal Wolsey, who is King Henry VIII’s Chancellor. In spite of Cardinal Wolsey’s imperious demand, More refuses to grant the king a subsidy without due debate by the House. In Westminster Hall, the most historic part of the Parliament building, there is a plaque in the middle of the floor commemorating More’s trial for treason for refusing to take the oath of supremacy to Henry VIII. When More ascended the scaffold before his execution, he exclaimed, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s servant first.”

More was regarded by his own peers as an exemplary judge beyond reproach. It was common for people with civil complaints to wait many years before their case would be heard in court. More was noted for his impartiality and speed in seeing that cases were heard in a timely fashion. He earned the singular achievement of finishing all of the
Living Bulwark

backlog of court cases during his tenure as judge. More’s reputation as a man of moral integrity and his defence of conscience, have inspired succeeding generations to the present. Samuel Johnson, one of the most famous English literary figures of the 18th century, wrote of More, “He was the person of the greatest virtue these islands ever produced.”

More’s zeal for justice was fuelled by his moral vision and courage to live according to the convictions of his faith and in obedience to God’s law. He strove to put the love of God first and to allow nothing to keep him from that love. He wrote,

“Let every man in time learn, as we should, to love God above all other things, and to love all other things for his sake. And whatever love is not based on that purpose – namely, the pleasure of God – it is a very vain and an unfruitful love. And whatever love we bear to any creature in such a way that we love God the less, that love is loathsome love and hinders us from heaven. Love no child of your own so tenderly that you could not be content to sacrifice him to God as Abraham was ready to do with Isaac, if God were to command you to do so. And since we know that God would never do that, offer your child otherwise to God’s service.”

One day, while travelling on business, he received news from his distraught wife that his barns had burned to the ground. He wrote back,

“Be of good cheer, and take all the household with you to church, where you should thank God – both for what he has given us and with what he has left us…I pray you, with the children and with all the household, be merry in God.”

The true measure of a man or woman is proved in the crucible of trial and suffering. Who do we love most, and what are we willing to sacrifice and die for?

There are many notable examples of godly men and women, married and single, young and old, who chose the higher way of excellence rather than mediocrity, chose integrity rather than compromise, sacrifice rather than
personal gain, and forgiveness rather than retribution. May we follow their example and strive to model for others – especially our children and the generations to come – the way of true greatness.

**Training by example**

How can we train others to give their best and to strive for moral excellence? Training in character involves more than simply giving instruction and correction. It first and foremost involves leading by giving good example – being role models that inspire and show how a life of character is practiced in daily living. When Jesus explained to his fellow Jews the parable of the good Samaritan, he showed that mercy is always a sacred duty – both to one’s friends and foes alike. Jesus ended his example with a simple command, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). At his last supper with his disciples, Jesus pointedly gave an example of how they should always treat one another with selfless love and humble service. When he had finished washing their dirty feet, he said, “I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15).

Jesus warned that teachers must set a good example and do what they tell others to do. “The scribes and the Pharisees speak with the authority of Moses…But you must not imitate their lives! For they preach but do not practice” (Matthew 23:3).

Palladius (365-425 AD), a monk of Egypt and later a bishop of Helenopolis, explained how Jesus taught by example to form his disciples in godly character.

> Words and syllables do not constitute teaching – sometimes those who speak are disreputable in the extreme. Teaching consists of virtuous acts of conduct, and not being bad tempered or causing harm…This is how Jesus taught….He did not use fine language when teaching others – he required the formation of their character [quote from the *Lausiac History*].

**Role models**

Paul the Apostle knew the importance of good Christian role models in promoting Christian virtue and living a holy life. He taught by example and showed others the way to live as disciples of Christ. “Imitate me as I imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

People learn more about a life of character from what they see than from what they hear. Children instinctively imitate grown-ups – for better or for worse. Growth in good character requires the right kinds of models as well as the right kind of intellectual formation.

But the upholding of godly models of virtue and the training of young people in Christian character are rarely promoted today. The moral virtues are often ridiculed, ignored, or rendered meaningless in modern culture. Platiitudes, such as “be true to yourself,” replace virtues of loyalty, respect, and commitment in relationships, and the integrity of keeping one’s word.

We live in a character deficient society because its moral bearings have been lost or ridiculed as outdated and unnecessary. The most prominent role models held up by the media are the celebrities from the film, music, and sports industries. Unfortunately, nearly all of them fail as good role models. We need to fill the vacuum and show young people how to find and imitate the right role models who will teach and inspire them to choose not only what is good and healthy – but what is excellent.

Parents, teachers, and leaders are role models – whether they recognize it or not. People instinctively observe how leaders act and behave. Good leaders can counteract the example of bad role models in society by engaging
personally with the people they are serving. They can help others learn how to grow in wisdom and other good character traits. The Lord also works to instruct us through the godly examples of men and women in the Bible and in Christian history – as well as living examples in our own communities and churches.

**Biblical role models**

Two particular examples from Scripture were singled out as role models. (Scripture portrays many other examples as well.) The first example of the ideal godly woman is portrayed in the Book of Proverbs, chapter 31. This example was read each week by the Jewish father in the presence of his wife and children during the family Sabbath ceremony. The second example of the ideal godly man is portrayed in the Book of Job, chapter 29. Both examples portray men and women who serve their households and the wider community with godly virtues. Examples of particular virtues, such as wisdom, diligence, and discipline, are emphasized in bold.

![The Virtuous Woman from the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 31:10-31](image)

A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. **The heart of her husband trusts in her**, and he will have no lack of gain. **She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.**

She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her food from afar. **She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and tasks for her maidens.** She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard. **She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong.** She perceives that her merchandise is profitable. Her lamp does not go out at night. She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. **She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.**

She is not afraid of snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet. She makes herself coverings; her clothing is fine linen and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them; she delivers girdles to the merchant. **Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come.** She looks well to the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. **Her children rise up and call her blessed; her**
husband also, and he praises her: "Many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

The Virtuous Man from the Book of Job, Chapter 29:1-15

And Job again took up his discourse, and said: "Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me; when his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness; as I was in my autumn days, when the friendship of God was upon my tent; when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were about me; when my steps were washed with milk, and the rock poured out for me streams of oil! When I went out to the gate of the city, when I prepared my seat in the square, the young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose and stood; the princes refrained from talking, and laid their hand on their mouth; the voice of the nobles was hushed, and their tongue cleaved to the roof of their mouth. When the ear heard, it called me blessed, and when the eye saw, it approved; because I delivered the poor who cried, and the fatherless who had none to help him. The blessing of him who was about to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the poor, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made him drop his prey from his teeth. Then I thought, 'I shall die in my nest, and I shall multiply my days as the sand, my roots spread out to the waters, with the dew all night on my branches, my glory fresh with me, and my bow ever new in my hand.' "Men listened to me, and waited, and kept silence for my counsel. After I spoke they did not speak again, and my word dropped upon them. They waited for me as for the rain; and they opened their mouths as for the spring rain. I smiled on them when they had no confidence; and the light of my countenance they did not cast down. I chose their way, and sat as chief, and I dwelt like a king among his troops, like one who comforts mourners.

Bad character corrupts families and society

God not only calls Christian parents, teachers, and leaders to be good role models for their families and communities. They must also do everything they can to root out evil and harmful influences that weaken a holy way of living. Scripture warns that if bad behavior and vice are left unchecked, these evil influences will not only affect those who are young and vulnerable, but they will also have a corrupting affect on family life and society as a whole.

God holds teachers and leaders doubly responsible because of their influence on others. That is why Jesus had very strong words of warning for the religious and secular authorities in Palestine – “beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod” (Mark 8:15). Left over leaven (old leaven no longer useful or good for new dough) was often used as a symbol in the Scriptures for evil behavior that had a corrupting affect on others. Paul the Apostle used the image of old leaven when speaking to the Christians of Corinth about their tolerance of sinful behavior in their own community.

Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven...the leaven of malice and evil, with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

The Lord rebuked the prophet Eli because he did not discipline his own sons when they openly broke God's commandments and flouted his commands in the holy place that was set apart for the worship of God (1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25, 27-36).

The challenge for Christian parents, teachers, and leaders today is daunting. Bad examples, lax moral standards, and the growing influence of immoral media channels have leavened not only many secular societies, but many Christian homes and communities as well. We are fortunately not left alone in our struggle to build a Christian society that upholds God's law and way of life. The Lord himself is actively at work to bring moral and spiritual renewal to every family, nation, and community that acknowledges his rule and saving power. God is raising up Christian communities today as bulwarks to stem the tide of evil and to strengthen individuals and families in their call to be saints, and martyrs, and to be missionaries of the good news of his kingdom.

[Don Schwager is a member of The Servants of the Word and the author of the Daily Scripture Reading and Meditation website.]

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To: Members of the Sword of the Spirit  
From: The President  
Beirut 28 March 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The third International Coordinators Meeting (ICM) of the Sword of the Spirit will take place in one month in New Jersey, USA May 25-28. In looking back, many of us would testify that the first two meetings (2004 and 2008) have had more impact on our life together than originally anticipated – a clear sign of the Lord’s will to have our main leaders regularly assemble every four years to hear him speak to us, and to invite him to act powerfully in our midst. He has already spoken to us of these times we are in being a season of growth in our mission with a promise of his providence, and this requires all of his people – and in particular the coordinators – to be both equipped and united in their generous and obedient response to the call.

This upcoming ICM will be first an invitation for each one of participants to reflect personally on the call to be a saint, a missionary, and a martyr in the midst of the challenges we all face to advance our common mission. At the same time, workshops are aimed at equipping coordinators to serve more effectively in some important aspects of our life together – whether in the areas of raising boys, discerning vocations, being better equipped to understand our common mission, or using spiritual gifts for its advancement. Finally, considerable time will be devoted to personal sharing in small groups and to prayer and worship meetings.

Given the urgency of the times we are in, I ask all members of the Sword of the Spirit to continue to pray and intercede for the event. The next issue of Living Bulwark will feature some of the highlights from the ICM and include some sharings from participants.
Your brother in Christ,

Jean Barbara
President of the Sword of the Spirit
Is Christianity a Culture?

Christians are called to be a new people, God's people, with a new way of life

by Steve Clark

A distinctly Christian way of life

Anthropologists view culture as being a people's whole way of life. Although this modern anthropological notion of culture is not, strictly speaking, a biblical or traditional Christian concept, it can be valuable because it highlights a central thrust of New Testament teaching. Christians ought to have, as the natural consequence of their Christian beliefs and values, a distinctively Christian way of life that reflects and supports those beliefs and values. In scriptural terms, Christians, because of their new birth in Christ, are to be a new people, God's people, with a new way of life which is in harmony with God's nature and purposes. The Apostle Paul puts it simply: "He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13).

Paul also describes the concrete change in behavior involved in the transfer of kingdoms: "You must no longer live as the gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness" (Ephesians 4:17-19).

Spiritual ignorance, stemming from a rejection of the truth, alienates people from the life of God and issues in a corrupted way of life (see also Romans 1:8-32). This is not, of course, to say that non-Christians or non-Christian cultures lack all goodness or that Christians cannot learn from them. But there is an important spiritual principle here: the form a human culture takes depends on its spiritual relationship with God. If a culture does not explicitly acknowledge and obey the one true God, it will contain distortions of true righteousness and sometimes immoral practices.
The Apostle Peter emphasizes the new identity of Christians in these words: "You are a chose race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people....I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:9-11). God's people are to live in the midst of other peoples, and hence are "aliens and exiles" whose way of life is different from that of the peoples around them. As followers of the one who said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58), the early Christians understood that "our commonwealth is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20), that "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). Their new identity was a matter of practical, everyday life in that they had their own laws (the scriptural laws), courts (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 6:1-6), and governors, and cohesive communities which had distinctive social customs and expressions.

Beliefs and values

All cultures are built on beliefs and values. Beliefs include, for example, the assertions that Jesus is Lord and that there is life after death. Values are principles or qualities which a person, group, or society considers desirable and around which life is oriented: for example, loyalty, beauty, or comfort.

Based on beliefs and values the two primary elements of culture are: social structures and patterns of life. Social structures include institutions and principles; for example, the institutions of family and government, and the principles by which conflicts ought to be resolved. Patterns of life are the particular forms in which beliefs, values, and social structures are realized in action. Patterns of life include customs and expressions; for example, courtship customs and artistic impressions.

In order to have a Christian culture or way of life, all that we do must proceed from Christian beliefs and values. But what of the relation between Christian culture and the natural human culture with which we identify ourselves? For example, we see ourselves as Americans or Mexicans or Indians. If we find that our actual way of life does not, in fact, differ much from that of non-Christians in our particular cultural group, then we may conclude that our Christian beliefs and values are not as important in shaping our lives as they ought to be, and that we run the risk of being assimilated into a non-Christian American or Mexican or Indian culture.

But the fact that Christianity forms its own culture does not mean we have to cease being Americans or Mexicans or Indians. It does not mean that Christianity must look exactly the same everywhere in the world. That part of American culture which is incompatible with Christianity should drop out of American Christians' lives, but that part of it which is compatible can be retained and transformed. Although the core beliefs and values, many elements of social structure and some patterns of life have to be the same for an American Christian and an Indian Christian, still some of the elements of their social structures and many of their patterns of life will differ a great deal.

Another way of putting all this is to say, on the one hand, that the Christian culture of an American will be distinctively American, and the Christian culture of an Indian will be distinctively Indian; at the same time, both the American's and the Indian's natural heritages will be transformed in order to be distinctively Christian.

Cultural relativism

In the attempt to allow for the diversity of human cultures, however, it is easy to lose perspective on the core parts of Christianity which should not be adapted or changed. The failure to distinguish essential beliefs such as sexual morality, and important social structural elements such as parental roles is called "cultural relativism." Cultural relativism sees such Christian beliefs, values, and elements of social structure as being "culturally conditioned" — stemming from a particular culture rather than belonging inherently to Christianity. These beliefs, values, and many elements are seen as merely part of one or several possible incarnations of Christianity into different human cultures.
and hence not integral to every Christian culture.

Cultural relativism is thus unable to distinguish between those things which are fundamental to God's purposes from those things which are simply expressions that vary from culture to culture. Cultural relativism also misses the actual significance of the various expressions. Far from being unimportant because they are "just cultural," that is, because they vary from culture to culture and hence are not normative, customs and expressions can be significant for Christians because of what those customs and expressions represent. For example, taking one's hat off or putting it on when worshiping God are obviously different expressions. But they both can represent the same value of reverence, honor, and respect. To give another example, although American Christians might not bow before their elders as Ethiopian Christians might do, American Christians might be reminded by the custom of bowing that respect is an important Christian value, for which a suitable, culturally American expression should be found.

As Christianity is translated into a variety of human cultures, its essential beliefs, social structures, and patterns of life must remain intact. Otherwise the result is not a translation but a new message. Human cultures can be christianized, but to do so requires a transformation. They must become cultures that are founded on God's revealed truth and that support those who desire to live it out.

[Steve Clark is president emeritus of the Sword of the Spirit.]
Journey of Self-discovery in Christ

by Glenna Schleusner

Before coming to Detroit to do a Kairos Gap year of service, I don’t think I was aware of just how little I trusted my own instincts and abilities. I knew I was afraid of failure, because I was afraid of making mistakes and making people angry with me, but I hadn’t realized how that had led me to assume that everyone else knows better than me.

Since my arrival in Detroit and the beginning of my service here, God has been teaching me that he didn’t make a mistake with me. He’s equipped me with gifts and abilities, and when I’m asked to step out of my comfort zone, he’s right beside me taking that step with me.

It’s been a journey of small steps: planning Bezalel Project lessons, first with a friend and now more by myself; teaching at Bezalel; giving a talk at a retreat for the Cornerstone School kids; and writing and giving a four to five minute speech in Kairos Gap training (okay, maybe that one wasn’t a small step). Even things like cooking a meal once a week and learning to drive a stick-shift car have been used by God to teach me confidence.

It sounds horribly cheesy to say that so far my Kairos Gap year has been a journey of self-discovery, but in some ways that’s the truth. Only it’s not so much a journey of self-discovery as it is a journey of discovering myself in Christ.

Every time I’ve reached out to God, afraid of whatever task I’ve been given, He’s been there to give me
strength and courage. And that’s where my new confidence really comes from; not just a realization that I have more gifts and better instincts than I thought, but that the God who gave me those gifts and instincts is there to help me use them.

I know there’s still a lot of spiritual growth ahead for me. One of the other things God’s done this year is show me more of my rough, unpolished edges. Instead of being afraid of the challenges ahead, though, I can welcome them with confidence, knowing that I’m not alone, that Jesus is with me every step of the way.

[Glenna Schleusner is from Lansing, Michigan, USA and a member of the Work of Christ Community in Lansing.]

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Emerging Adults

by Michael Shaughnessy

Relationships and emerging adults
Relationships rank high in the minds of emerging adults (22 to 30 year-olds) but maybe not in the way you think. The terminology in use reveals something. “Hanging out” is one term. It reflects that modern relationships have the feel of fluidity, not loyalty, casualness, not commitment.

Emerging adults express a desire for secure, lasting relationships but few have much experience of it. Parents divorce. Roommates change. Lovers leave. Siblings move away. It's a mobile world.

Emerging adults often have many Facebook friends who know the kinds of things normally reserved for one's closest friends. Few have many reliable, face to face friends. It may be “all about relationships” but do they work?
Emerging adult relationship with parents

Emerging adults almost all say their relationship with their parents is one of the most important things to them. That is helpful for parents to know, especially for parents who are tempted to compromise their standards for fear of losing their relationship with their children. Some parents feel they are in a bind they aren't actually in. They see signs that their children are challenging the boundaries. However, the signs being given off aren't necessarily accurate.

“Very few emerging adults want to drastically break their ties with their parents. If anything, they actually want to improve their relationship with their parents...but they want that on a renegotiated ground.” (p.78) If it is negotiable, they will very likely negotiate! However, “when parents are seriously religious, want their children to be seriously religious, and have raised them to be so, the emerging adults' desire to have a good connection with their parents tends to encourage them to continue to affirm and practice their religious faith, even if perhaps in a less intense way. In such cases, to reject the religious faith of one's seriously religious parents... would be symbolically and substantively to damage that relationship.” (p. 85-86)

In other words, if parents make their children's moral and religious practice something that clearly defines whether their children are in a good relationship with them, their children are much more likely to uphold the same values. Violating what has been defined as important threatens the relationship.

This isn't the whole of what is necessary to raise children who are radical disciples, but it is part.
The four “R’s”

“Religion is not made for young people. Look at the entertainment aspect – even education, the average elementary school all the way through college, it's so oriented around movies, video games, entertainment, fun books – why on earth would young people go to church if it doesn't offer anything personal as a reward, especially when church just tells them what they're doing wrong? Why would we go? To youth, it's boring.” (p.31)

Many youth workers will read such a statement and come to the wrong conclusion: the church needs to increase the entertainment value of its programs to reach youth.

The analysis of what actually gets young people involved, and keeps them involved, does not show entertainment to be a very significant factor. The most significant factor is having parents who are serious about their faith and pass that seriousness on to their children.

A second significant factor is “having more adults in a religious congregation to whom they can turn for support, advice and help.” (p.233) Youth workers are often the adults youth will turn to, but there is also great value in transgenerational relationships. “Real adults” can do things youth workers cannot.

So, the first factor is relationship. The second factor is relationship. The third factor (you can see it coming) is relationship. Youth who have a living relationship with the Lord, manifested in devotional practices, especially personal prayer and reading of scripture (p.234) become faithful adults. Although most youth workers would find conversion experiences critical as well, such experiences make little long-term difference if youth have no daily-manifested relationship with the Lord.

There is a fourth relationship factor: the peer relationship. The right peers encourage the right behavior. Those who believe, support those who believe. Those who don't, don't. Good youth work puts its main emphasis on the four R’s, not entertainment.

All quotes are from the book, *Souls in Transition*, by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, (c) 2009, published by Oxford University Press.
Mike Shaughnessy is an elder in The Servants of the Word and the Director of Kairos in North America. Kairos is an international federation of outreaches to high school, university and post university aged people. This article was first published in the February 2011 Issue of the Kairos North American Youth Culture Newsletter.
Reflections on Belief

by Sam Williamson

A few years ago, a client of mine visited my company for a series of meetings. He asked for a restaurant recommendation, and I suggested The Gandy Dancer, my favorite restaurant. The very next day he came to my office and raved about the restaurant. He was going to recommend it to every one of his colleagues.

Smiling, I asked what he’d ordered. “Nothing,” he said, because he’d been too busy. But he had “stopped by and studied the menu, and everything looked incredible.”

That is how many of us believers live our lives. We read the menu and miss the meal. It’s as though we’ve come to believe that Christianity — boiled down to its core essence — is an abstract impersonal menu of truths.
But it isn’t; and that mistake leads to a bland, malnourished, and starving life.

**An example**

As an example, let’s examine the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Most Christians believe that we are justified by faith and not by works. I do too. Unfortunately, most teaching focuses on the theological concept of Justification by Faith. It doesn’t teach us how to *live a life* of Justification by Faith.

We are reading the menu and missing the meal.

**The Test**

It’s as though we think that entry into heaven is a one-question multiple-choice exam. We arrive at the pearly gates, and Jesus hands us the Entry-Into-Heaven-Exam sheet,

The Incarnation of the Son of God, the earthly ministry and teaching of Jesus, the suffering and death of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the Son of Man; they all boil down to this moment. Which box will we check?

The hosts of heaven wait in anticipation. All the disciples are there; the martyrs watch; the angels, the seraphim and cherubim all wait with hushed eagerness. Will we check the right box, or will we be chopped?

Is this the essence of Christianity? Does it all boil down to an impersonal, abstract, dry, lifeless question on a test?

**It’s more than that**

Justification by Faith is an invitation to a feast. When Christ promises abundant life, he offers more than an extension of our life into the hereafter; he offers a richness of life of living in a reality that is deep, fulfilling, and abundant. Now. That is Justification by Faith.

Do you see where I’m going? Are we content with the correct cerebral concept? Or are we operating in the personal, lived-in reality of the truth. Are we chewing on the menu or feasting on the meal?

The movie *Chariots of Fire* examines the lives of two Olympic runners. Someone asks Harold Abrams why he runs so hard, and he says, “When that gun goes off, I have ten seconds to justify my existence.” When someone asks Eric Liddle, he says, “When I run I feel God’s pleasure.” Eric Liddle feasts on the satisfying reality of experiencing Christ’s love; Harold Abrams hungrily grasps for his life’s justification.
It is possible to hold the correct abstract concept—Justification by Faith—and *not actually be* Justified by Faith. We can claim Justification by Faith, and yet:

- Get our personal satisfaction from raising good children
- Receive our self-esteem from success, promotions, or money
- Only feel fulfilled when in a romantic relationship
- Feel especially good about ourselves because we believe all the correct doctrines
- Get our personal applause from our preaching or ministry

Like Harold Abrams, we are justifying ourselves. In fact, when we justify ourselves by our checking Justification by “Faith,” it is a type of justification by works; the “work” is our theological correctness.

Acknowledging the correct answer — Justification by Faith — is not the same thing as the *state of being* justified by Faith. I suspect even Satan could check the right box.

**What to do?**

Remember when our mothers wouldn’t let us eat cookies before dinner because it spoiled our appetite? It’s because the cookies give a sugar high which temporarily masks our hunger, so we miss the good nutrition from the meal. Likewise, our self-justifying actions temporarily satisfy us, but they nourish no long-term satisfaction for our soul.

We need to starve our self-justifying habits.

Ultimately, though, we need to ask God for a deep heart-sense of his reality in our lives. When we sense his greatness in our hearts, and when we come to accept his deep love for us, then we begin to live a life that is Justified by Faith.

Hudson Taylor was a missionary to China in the late 1800s. He prayed a daily prayer which began:

> Lord Jesus make yourself to me  
> A living, bright reality;

That is what we need, his living, bright reality. A meal that finally satisfies.
Sam Williamson grew up in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He is the son of a Presbyterian pastor and grandson of missionaries to China. He moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1975. He worked in London England from 1979 to 1982, helping to establish Antioch, a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. After about twenty-five years as an executive at a software company in Ann Arbor he sensed God call him to something new. He left the software company in 2008 and now speaks at men’s retreats, churches, and campus outreaches. His is married to Carla Williamson and they have four grown children and a grandson. He has a blog site, www.beliefsoftheheart.com, and can be reached at Sam@BeliefsoftheHeart.com.
The Outrageous Generosity of God

Parable of the laborers in the vineyard

By Jeanne Kun

The parable challenges the attitude and behavior of the listeners. The question is addressed to them: are you jealous because I am good for your neighbors? This question challenges them to allow such a God into their life.

– Jan Lambrecht, SJ, Out of the Treasure: The Parables in the Gospel of Matthew

“I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you” (Matthew 20:14). How we react to the way the landholder paid the men he hired to work in his vineyard depends on the state of our own hearts. We could respond, “Oh, what a generous employer!” or we could say, “Isn’t that terribly unfair?”

In giving so liberally to those who had worked only a short time, the landowner was taking nothing away from the laborers who had worked all day. “I am doing you no wrong,” he reminded those who felt cheated. “Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?” (Matthew 20:13). Then he got at the heart of the problem by asking the grumblers, “Are you envious because I am

Matthew 20:1-16

[Jesus said to his disciples:] “For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage [a denarius], he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the market place; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage [a denarius]. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ So the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

In the Spotlight

Contemporary Voices

What galls those who were hired first (and us) is that there is not equal pay for equal work. It is within the frustration over this imbalance that the parable makes its point. If we insist that justice be followed to the letter, then God is not free to be merciful. If mercy, however, were taken off the table, we would all be lost. For the most essential aspects of our lives go beyond what we deserve. Are we owed life or health or love? It is only

As he so often did during his public ministry, Jesus once again turned customary rules and expectations upside down. He was not concerned here with labor relations or market-based economics. Rather, with this story and its surprising twist, Jesus exposed the canker of envy in the human heart and vividly illustrated the mercy and generosity of God—generosity so unstinting that it confounds not only our logic but also our sense of justice.

As long as we insist on equating “fairness” with “equality,” God’s generosity will never make sense to us. We need to get past our human tendency to interpret another’s gain as our loss before we can truly appreciate the magnificence of God’s gift to each of us. The fact is, no matter how long we work or how hard we try, we can never earn God’s love or his salvation through our own efforts. God freely loves us. He is eager to welcome all of us into his kingdom—sinners and latecomers as well as the upstanding and hardworking. Unreasonable? Outrageous? That’s the extravagant nature of divine mercy.

In its setting in Matthew’s gospel, the parable is addressed to Jesus’ disciples who had left everything behind to follow him (Matthew 19:27-30). Perhaps Jesus wanted his closest companions to know that despite their sacrifice, they were not to think they merited a greater reward than others who would later follow him. If Jesus also told this parable to the crowds that flocked to listen to him, he may have been warning self-righteous scribes and Pharisees not to resent the favor he shows to sinners—a warning that we, too, should take to heart.

Since Matthew addressed his gospel most particularly to the Jewish Christians of the early church, we might further because God gives us more than what we deserve that we have happiness, salvation, and eternal life.

God is not limited by our desire to measure everything out according to our merits. God will be generous to whomever God chooses. Even though we may at times be peeved that others are recipients of God’s mercy, such gifts to them are good news for us. Their God is our God. Mercy to them is an assurance that mercy will be available to us.

— George Smiga, God’s Word Today

Pondering the Word

1. The landowner merely told those hired later in the day that he would pay them “whatever is right” (Matthew 20:3). What does this seem to imply? How does this add to the suspense of the parable and increase the shock value of its ending?

2. How did the landowner respond to the grumblers’ complaints? Do you think he adequately addressed their issues? Why or why not?

3. Explain how you think Verse 16—“So the last will be first, and the first will be last”—relates to the rest of the parable. Note that a similar verse (Matthew 19:30) provides a link between Jesus’ previous conversation with his disciples and this parable. What does Matthew’s framing of the parable in this way suggest to you?

4. How does the parable of the laborers in the vineyard act as a metaphor for the final judgment?

5. What have you learned about human efforts and God’s grace from this parable? In what ways does this parable summarize the whole message of the gospels?

Grow!
recognize in this parable an admonition to them, “God’s chosen people.” The gentiles, who had not labored under the strict Mosaic code for centuries, were the latecomers, yet they were receiving the same blessing of salvation as the Jewish Christians. The Jewish Christians were not to begrudge the grace freely given to the gentiles, nor were they justified in looking down on them.

Since Jesus first told this disquieting parable two thousand years ago, it has continued to speak to diverse audiences and probe the hearts of countless men and women. Today the parable of the laborers in the vineyard – perhaps better named the parable of the good employer – still challenges us with its timeless message that God freely offers to everyone who would receive it the same mercy and reward: eternal life with him. And there is no room for envy in his heavenly kingdom!

In the Spotlight

A Denarius a Day

In the early days of human history, trade was conducted by bartering, and payment for services was made in goods. Later, precious metals such as gold and silver were used, with value measured by weight. Coinage was introduced around the seventh century B.C. The earliest coins were simply pieces of metal of a standard weight impressed with a seal. Consequently, coins were often named after the weight they represented – a shekel equaled 11.4 grams; a talent, 30 kilograms.

During the first century A.D., three different currencies were used in Palestine: the official imperial money (Roman standard); provincial money minted in Antioch and Tyre (Greek standard); and local Jewish money, most likely minted in Caesarea.

The denarius was a Roman coin made of silver. During Jesus’ ministry, the denarius showed the head of Tiberius, the emperor of the Roman Empire from A.D. 17 to 37. Soldiers and farm workers were paid a denarius a day for their services or labor, which was considered the standard wage, enough to cover life’s basic necessities.

In the Spotlight

Eye of Evil, Eye of Envy

“Are you envious because I am generous?” the landowner asked the grumblers. The literal translation of the original Greek of Matthew’s
gospel would be, “Is your eye evil because I am good?”

This “evil eye” is the eye of envy. The Book of Sirach, which includes maxims and sayings written in Hebrew by the Jewish sage Ben Sira around 200 B.C., was later translated into Greek by the author’s grandson. A passage from this Greek translation reads, “The eye of the greedy person is not satisfied with his share. . . . An evil eye is envious over bread, and it is lacking on his table” (Sirach 14:9-10). A similar expression equating the eye with greed, avarice, and envy was used again by Ben Sira in Sirach 31:13. Jesus refers to the state of the “eye” as healthy or unhealthy, calling it the lamp that brings light or darkness to the rest of the body (Matthew 6:22-23).

In the Spotlight

Celebrating Our Oneness

Suppose the all-day workers in the parable had walked home with the one-hour workers, rejoicing all the way over the generosity of the employer. Wouldn’t that have been a beautiful time of sharing for all? If we are able to rejoice in God’s grace for all, without comparisons and without envy, we live in shared joy and tender appreciation for everyone. We learn then what it means to love both neighbor and enemy. . . .

It is a rare person who loves enough to rejoice in all goodness, whether he or she benefits directly or not. Yet we can all practice this happy attitude. When we hear of something wonderful falling into another’s life, we can set aside that nagging “But what about me?” and simply enjoy the beauty with that person. We may even celebrate it. It is recommended that we do this, even though in the beginning it may feel unreal, if we have habitually envied every good thing that happened to others. Our emotions carry on in their habits, but do our emotions tell us the truth? Rarely! . . .

Let’s not count the hours we work, nor the hours another works. Let us press on, our eyes on the goal and our hands joined for the going. God awaits his full entry into our hearts.

— Marilyn Gustin, How to Read and Pray the Parables

Excerpted from Treasures Uncovered: The Parables of Jesus, by Jeanne Kun (The Word Among Us Press, © 2005). Used with permission. This book can be ordered online.

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2. Reflect on the following passages to deepen your appreciation of the parable you have just studied:

The greedy person stirs up strife, but whoever trusts in the LORD will be enriched. (Proverbs 28:25)

The eye of the greedy person is not satisfied with his share; greedy injustice withers the soul. (Sirach 14:9)

What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.... So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses.... (Romans 9:14-16, 18)

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

[When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4-7)]

Act!

Make a list of the ways you have experienced God’s generosity to you. Then turn your list into
your own “litany of thanksgiving,” praising God and thanking him for his mercy and loving kindness.
The man opened the door of the car. He felt dead. He looked across the intersection and saw the woman lying upon the road. Her legs were in the car, but her head was on the road. A crowd of people were beginning to gather. The man was afraid. He walked across the intersection and looked at the woman. She had silver brown hair and a small face. Her eyes were closed. The man was afraid. He began to walk away. The people murmured as he passed. He began to walk faster. The murmur became a buzz. And the people closed about him in a ring, forcing him back towards the car. The man began to cry. Cold, salty tears began to fall from his eyes, and he turned back to the woman fallen out of her car. A pool of blood was spreading around her head. The blood was dark brown. The man had always thought that blood was red. A large, strong man had approached the car and was looking at it. There was blood on the door jamb, and on the floor of the car where the woman had fallen out. The man was afraid. He looked at the green car, and the road, and the woman’s car, and the woman. He had done this.

The strong man turned to him and was about to speak. The man did not want to hear what he was going to say. He knelt down and picked up the woman. The strong man started to shout, but the man did not care. He picked up the woman and walked towards the crowd. They stiffened for a second. The man pressed the woman towards his chest and ran into the center of the people. They parted easily as he ran, but they started to shout, and run after him. The man was afraid. The man began to run with the woman in his arms. Blood from the woman’s head was on his shirt. He tried to straighten her in his arms as he ran, but the blood fell down her hair and dripped onto his jeans. He tried to keep her forehead level with the ground, facing up to the sky, but it kept slipping as he ran from the crowd down the street, across the estate towards the beach. The
woman was difficult to carry. The man could not run as fast as he was able because he was carrying her. But the man knew what to do. He had to get to the beach, and talk to God. God would understand. God would heal the woman. God would make the blood go away again. The people shouted and began to give chase. The man was afraid and ran faster. He flexed the muscles in his legs, and pushed off on the balls of his feet, and breathed with his nose. One, two, three and four he counted in his head as he ran. The man could hear the crowd running behind him, but they were not catching up. He turned his shoulder as he ran, steadying the woman against his elbow. Some of the crowd had stopped and turned back to the cars. Only some people continued to run after the man. The man could see the strong man in the midst of them. He turned his head and ran for the beach.

God was not on the beach. The man ran across the sand calling to God. He could not find him. God was not in the running. The man was afraid. He clutched the woman tighter to him to make her easier to carry, and made to continue running across the sand. She stirred and made a small sound of pain. She was not dead. The man laughed aloud with relief and turned to thank God. He could not find him. God was not in the turning. The man looked back along the beach and saw that the crowd had stopped following him, except for one man. It was the strong man. The man was afraid. The strong man would take the woman away. He would bring her to the hospital where she would die. The strong man would bind the man with chains and throw him into a house forever. The strong man would walk around the house all day shouting murderer, murderer, murderer. The woman was not dead. God could heal the woman. The man knew he had to keep running. He turned and cried to God one more time before he started to run. God was not in the cry. The man was afraid. He began to run. He ran across the sand. The strong man ran across the sand after the man. The man sobbed and continued to run along the sand. The strong man followed the man. He did not get closer, and he did not get further away. The strong man followed the man.

The man ran. He ran across the beach and up the road. He ran along the road and across the river. He ran up the side of the hill and across the plateau, trying to keep the woman’s head level with the sky. He cried out to God, but God was not on the road, across the river, or on the plateau. The strong man ran after him, and the blood dripped down on his jeans. The man ran across the plateau. He ran down the mountainside into the valley. He ran along the dry river bed and scraped his hand on the furze bushes. The woman’s head slipped from the crook of his arm now and again, and blood splashed on the ground. He could not support her head all the time. The man cried out to God, but God was not in the valley, along the dry river bed or in the woman’s head. The strong man ran after him, and the woman’s head lay over the crook of his arm, and blood splashed on the ground. The man ran along the dry river bed to the head of the small stream. The man ran by the small stream as it flowed into a watercourse coming from the east. The man ran along by the watercourse as its height rose, and its banks widened, until it was a great river that could not be crossed. And the water flowed out into a lake. Beside the lake there grew a tree. And the man thought it was the tree that grew at the center of the earth. The tree grew great and strong, and its top reached to heaven. And it was visible to the ends of the whole earth, and its foliage was beautiful. Its fruit was low and sleek and green, and it provided food to all. And the man called to God, but God was not in the tree. And the man was tired, and he laid the woman down by the foot of the tree. And he thought - Here I will wait for the strong man to come, and here I will be safe if God will not protect me.

The man turned to where the strong man had been following him, but he could not see the strong man any more. He looked as hard as he could, but he could see nothing. And a mist rose out from the ground and came towards the man and the woman by the man’s tree. And in the mist the man could hear a voice, and suddenly the man was afraid. And the voice said, cut down the tree, and chop off its branches, and strip off its foliage, and scatter its fruit. And the man clung to the tree, for it would protect him from the strong man. But he could not save it, and the top of the tree was cut off, and the branches began to fall down. And the woman began to
cough, and blood came from her mouth, and she was dying. And the man could not see through the mist, and he cried out to God. And he could hear him, but God was terrible now. And the limbs of the tree were falling off behind him, and the trunk was razed to the ground with a band of iron and bronze, with only a stump and roots left. And the man was weeping aloud to God, and the woman was coughing, and blood came from her mouth, and her life was ending. And there was a terrible crack behind him as the earth opened up across the roots of the tree. And the man fell to the ground in agony, for his heart was torn in two. And he wanted to die, yet he wanted to live, and his life was ending, and he could not save her. And as the man lay dying on the ground, by the roots and stump of the great tree, a shoot rose up from the crack in the ground in the old tree. Faster than the man could see, a shoot grew into a branch, which grew into a trunk, which split in three. And one branch grew to the North, and one to the south, and one straight up. And the woman rose, and lay by the foot of the new tree in the old tree, and died. And the man wanted to die too, but he couldn’t because his heart was still tearing. And he could see the new tree forcing apart the stump of the old, as it grew north and south, and straight up. And the man wanted to run to the new tree, but he couldn’t. And he wanted to walk to it, but he couldn’t. And he dragged his arm and knee towards it, and crawled along the ground to the new tree straight and tall, and north and south, and fell down on the land in front of the tree.

The man could hear the horn. It sounded loud and continuous. He heard a voice talking to him. It was not the woman or the strong man. It was not God. He opened his eyes. He could see a policeman. The policeman was talking. The man looked past him. He could see an airbag and a tree that had many branches, but one thick branch from the trunk grew straight up, and one grew north, and one grew south. And the front right nose of the low sleek green car was in the tree that grew straight up, and north and south. And the car was wrapped around it, and the tree was holding up the car, and stopping it from smashing into the house behind. The man looked behind him. There was the intersection, and a patch of oil, and the open road. He lifted his right hand from the wheel and the horn stopped. It was quiet, there was no one else talking. The policeman was saying patch of oil, incredible escape, and the tree saved you, and you should thank your lucky stars no one else was hurt. The man said, I think I died. The policeman said, you didn’t, but you might have. And you should be careful, and where do you live. The man said, “I think I live in that tree”. The policeman looked at him strangely, and took out his phone to make a call.

> See Parts 1 and 2

[Prose poem by an Irish dreamer who majored in English literature. Art work by an American business major who paints Irish landscapes when he is not dreaming.]
Spreading the Joy

A collaboration between writer Amin Kurani
and artist Jamie Treadwell

There is something inspiring about the way in which nature abandons herself to joy. In spring, delight spills from the tiniest leaf, rivers swell with song, and flowers burst on the bramble in piercing color. Things are more reserved in the city, but the tell-tale signs are there. The insects get chattier. The cherry trees release showers of floating blossoms on unsuspecting joggers.

It’s hard to imagine that only a short while ago winter was here and the land was hushed. How muted the colors were! How dark and skeletal the trees looked back then. The more one considers it, the more miraculous seems the change.

In the Middle East, it is traditional for women to let out a high-pitched trill, or ululation, on joyous occasions. Even when the celebration isn’t about them, the women will sing as a way of expressing that your happiness is also mine. How much more powerful our own joy can be when, like nature in spring, it is shared with those around us. As someone once put it: “Every time I smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing.”

*Colorado Triptych* by Jamie Treadwell is available as a limited-edition print. Visit www.jamietreadwell.com

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