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Spiritual lessons from the Genesis account of the fall

by Steve Clark

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom



The Great Downfall - Part I

by Steve Clark

God created the human race with great care and established it in a way that gave high hopes for the future. Adam was like a young man of good family, a favored son who received the best education available, who was betrothed or married to a woman of equal background. The son of God should have had a good prospect for his life.

But as we know from experience, not all such young people do well. Adam did not. Along with Eve, he ended up driven out of paradise by God with no chance of return. Facing a life of poverty and hard work, Adam turned out something of a failure. Having undergone what Christians have called “the fall”, Adam and Eve were in a predicament of great magnitude.

[A race fallen and unable to help itself](#)

One time when I was hiking in the mountains, I turned the bend and saw a man sitting, half lying, by the side of the trail. At first I thought he was just resting. But when I reached him, I found that he could hardly move. This man had twisted his ankle and fallen. He was waiting for a friend to come back with help. Ironically, he was young and strong and an experienced hiker. It never should have happened, but there he was. It did not occur to me at the time, but he made a good image of the human race as we see it at the end of the third chapter of Genesis — fallen, unable to help itself.

Some image like that of the hiker at the side of the trail is behind the use of the word “fall”. The Scriptures use this word to speak about many human setbacks or disasters. When David heard of the defeat and death of King Saul and

his son Jonathan, the refrain of his lament was, “How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!” (2 Samuel 1:25). Here “fall” refers to defeat and destruction. In a similar way, in view of the siege of Babylon by the army of Medes and its sudden capitulation, a prophecy in Jeremiah proclaims: “Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken; wail for her!” (Jeremiah 51:8). Her domination, her future prospects of wealth and prosperity, are all gone.

The word “fall” is used more broadly than for defeats in war. A proverb says, “A righteous man falls seven times, and rises again...” (Proverbs 24:16). It is speaking about various failures a righteous man has to endure, and probably has moral failures in mind. Because they are a kind of defeat, moral failures can be described as “falls”. We are warned by the Apostle Paul, “Let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). In view of all the possible kinds of falls, we are instructed by Ecclesiastes, “Two are better than one, because...if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up” (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10).

We do not speak about the fall of a snake, and do not think much about the fall of a four-legged animal like a dog or a cow. But because normal human posture is erect, a fall is very important for human beings. If they fall and cannot rise, they become unable to walk or run. A fall is a kind of predicament, at least when it is not complete ruin.

The phrase “the fall of the human race” or “the downfall of the human race” as it might better be translated, sums up the great failure that produced the predicament we are now in. The human race had been created in the image and likeness of God, filled with glory, established as the ruler of material creation, with an even better future in store. Yet it ended up in exile, banished by God, having suffered a great loss. How had such a great defeat happened?

A downfall caused by sin

The downfall of the human race was not an accident. Nor did it happen because God changed his mind. It was not even the result of a great enemy overpowering Adam and Eve and destroying paradise. It happened because of something human beings did. “The man” had “put forth his hand” (Gen 3:22) to take the one thing his Father had commanded him not to take. He had, to use a familiar word, “sinned”.

“Sin” is one of many words used in the Bible to speak about moral failures or wrongdoing. Through a lengthy historical process, it became the main word used in Christian teaching to refer to the failures of people to live the way they should. “Sin” especially refers to those failures as offenses against God. When we say that someone has sinned, we usually mean that they have done something that God has forbidden.

We also use the word “sin” in other ways. When we speak about human beings who live in a way not pleasing to God, we say they are living in sin. “Sin” here refers to the state of sin, the state of someone who lacks a good relationship with God. In addition, when we speak about tendencies inside human beings that cause them to commit sins, we also use the word “sin.” We say their bad actions were caused by their sin or their “sinfulness”. As we go on, we will be more concerned with the state of sin and with sinfulness. At the outset, we have to look primarily at sinful actions.

The main cause of the human predicament

According to Christian teaching, sins are the main cause of the human predicament. They are the reason the human race cannot reach its intended purpose. That teaching stems from Genesis chapter 3, which describes the first sin and presents it as the one which caused the downfall of the human race. The first sin, however, was more than just the cause of the fallen state of the race. It was also the prototype or “model” of all subsequent sin. Genesis, in other words, describes the first sin in a way that allows us to understand the nature of all sin.

The “Model” Sin

The Test. Genesis 2 contains the only words that God said to unfallen human beings that are recorded in Scripture:

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying,
You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*

- Genesis 2:15–17

Here we come to a controversial point. Why did God command Adam (and Eve probably through him) to avoid the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? The view of the serpent as presented in Genesis 3:1–15 was that God wanted to keep the human race in a state of inferiority. This view has been expressed in other ways by modern people who claim that Christianity retards the advance of the human race or acts as the opiate of the people. The serpent's view is certainly plausible. After all, why should God forbid the first human beings to eat fruit that gave something as good as wisdom?

The fear of the Lord

One of the best answers given by Christian commentators is that the prohibition was intended to be only temporary. The knowledge of good and evil was something good that the tree conferred, something God wanted the human race to have, but something that should only come in a certain way. Adam first needed to acquire age and experience before he could eat of the tree safely. He needed to be taught the “fear of the Lord” (Psalm 34:11).

The “fear of the Lord” is the respect for God that leads to obedience to him. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). True wisdom comes through knowing that only what God holds to be good is truly good and that what God commands is good to follow — even when we do not understand why he commands it. It is based on a commitment to God's teaching over any rival forms of teaching, on a trust in its goodness, and on a willingness to accept the limits he imposes to protect us when our own wisdom is inadequate.

Without fear of the Lord and personal maturity, knowledge, especially when manifested in increasing power and mastery of the world, can lead to destruction. We have only to consider modern warfare. Here human beings have the knowledge that can cause tremendous destruction without the wisdom that ensures its use for good rather than evil purposes.

Seeking wisdom for self-glorification

Knowledge without fear of God can also lead to evil effects in a person. It can lead to pride, the belief that one can determine what is good and evil for oneself, or to seeking wisdom for self-glorification at the expense of greater goods (Ezekiel 28:1–10). To many can it be said, “You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor” (Ezekiel 28:17).

To protect his newly created son, God commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam first needed to learn obedience. Like a good father, God probably intended to lay the foundation of Adam's wisdom — to “teach him torah” — so that Adam might then eat of the tree and acquire more wisdom on his own. Such an understanding of the need to acquire knowledge of good and evil in the right way probably lies behind Paul's instruction in Romans 16:19. Alluding to the tree of knowledge, he exhorts Christians to be wise as to what is good and blameless [RSV: guileless] as to what is evil. They should not, in other words, acquire knowledge of good and evil by doing evil.

In such an understanding, eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would eventually have been part of the process by which God formed his son, and with him the human race, to govern his creation, making of it something good, completely free from evil. Adam would then have been able to act like his Father, the Lord God. He would have been in his Father's image and likeness not just because of his natural capability, but even more because of his formation and character.

The great test

The account in Genesis implies that Adam had received enough instruction to know how to conduct himself, at least how to conduct himself in regard to the tree of knowledge at that point in his development. If, however, Adam's instruction was to be complete, it had to involve undergoing a test. Genesis 3 is the account of the great test that came to the human race. In line with the interpretation of the Genesis narrative we have been following, that test is best understood as part of God's plan.

The Hebrew and Greek words that are normally translated "test" are sometimes also translated "temptation". The account in Genesis 3, in fact, is commonly described as the temptation of Adam and Eve. In English, we use the word "temptation" when a test involves an inducement to do wrong and when it is clear which choice we ought to make. The focus in the English word on the presence of possible wrongdoing, however, can obscure the fact that someone who has fallen to temptation is someone who has failed a test.

The word "test", however, can also be problematic. If we say that Adam had to pass a test in the course of being educated by his Father, what comes to mind most readily is a test in the modern school or university. Such a test provides a way for a teacher to find out whether the pupils have acquired the necessary information or not. They respond to questions or do exercises that show what is in their mind.

Such a view of a test is misleading as an understanding of the events in Genesis 3. It is misleading, first of all, because Genesis 3 describes a test of wisdom. Wisdom, in the most common scriptural sense, is not primarily theoretical information, knowledge that can be written on a piece of paper about what is right and wrong. Wisdom involves the ability to live and act well, to make choices that are good and just. Wisdom is not proved through the ability to answer questions, but through the ability to handle concrete situations in which there is an issue about good and evil. Moral maturity, according to Heb 5:14, is being "trained by practice to distinguish good from evil". Any test of Adam's wisdom and his fear of the Lord would have to involve a practical situation in which a choice was needed.

There is a further way in which the test Adam underwent was different from tests in modern schools. In the ancient world, tests were not used simply to determine whether pupils had completed the educational process adequately. Rather, they were seen as an actual part of the educational process, as a way to learn, because wisdom, or any practical knowledge, cannot be acquired apart from action.

Young people can go through instructions, but until they play real games, they have not learned a sport, and until they fight real battles they are not warriors. When James says, "when you meet various temptations [RSV: trials]... you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:2-3), he is reflecting the scriptural view that character, the ability to live a good life, is only produced by testing. When the discourse of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy tells us that God tested the children of Israel "to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not" (Deuteronomy 8:2), he probably was taking the view that only in choosing to obey, especially in situations of difficulty, was obedience actually established.

If we accept such a view of testing, we cannot be said to be fully moral or faithful until we have come successfully

through temptation. We could even say that it is not clear what is in our hearts until we make real life choices and adopt and hold to certain courses of action in the face of challenges or difficulties. If God wanted a son who could rule over creation, that son would have to undergo a real test. He would have to handle a situation on his own, but handle it rightfully, in the way his Father taught him. By choosing well and following God's commandments, Adam and Eve would become the people they were meant to be. But of course, a choice is no choice at all unless there is a real alternative, nor is a test a real test unless there is the possibility of failure. In other words, to be what God intended them to be, Adam and Eve had to decide not to sin.

The External Source. The account of the first sin is found in the third chapter of Genesis:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman,

Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden'?

And the woman said to the serpent,

We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'

But the serpent said to the woman,

You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." - Genesis 3:1-5

Here we see the dynamics of the first sin, the archetypal sin, portrayed in narrative form. At the outset of the chapter, we see the serpent, the one who originates the idea of sinning. The incitement to sin, in other words, came from outside Adam and Eve. It was a challenge they were presented with.

Satan's role in the downfall

The serpent is a strange figure, a talking reptile who convinces Eve to take a sinful course of action. In the Book of Revelation, we find the serpent identified as "Satan" (Rev 12:9). A being of angelic nature, Satan appears from time to time in the Old Testament as someone who seeks to bring harm to human beings because of their guilt or possible guilt. He is the "accuser", the attorney for the prosecution, the opponent of human beings in the great trial which is the earthly life. He seeks to get human beings condemned and so ruined. In identifying Satan with the serpent, Revelation is following a tradition probably also found in the Book of Wisdom, written in the first century B.C., where it says: "Through the devil's envy, death entered the world" (Wis 2:24).

Satan's role in the downfall of the human race raises many questions. How did he become the sort of being who would want to cause the downfall of the human race? How did he himself fall? Revelation 12 seems to tell us that the history behind Satan's appearance happened in heaven and not in this material creation. It also indicates that Satan was not alone, but the leader of angels who were in rebellion against God. Here we need to limit ourselves to a simple consideration of Genesis 2 and 3, but the fact that Satan was a rebel against God is important for the Christian understanding of what follows.

To rebel against his Creator and rightful Lord, a mighty angelic prince like Satan had to be filled with pride. In other words, he had to be filled with the desire to be God's equal and not subject to him. When manifested in rebellion, pride regularly expresses itself in hostility toward the target of rebellion. Throughout human history, then, Satan is a rebel and an enemy of God.

As an enemy of God, Satan is also an enemy of God's son, Adam, and of the human race. The Book of Wisdom says he acted in the temptation "out of envy". Perhaps his envy stemmed from resentment at seeing another being favored the way he himself had been. Satan may have expected Adam to take the place from which he himself had fallen.

Perhaps his envy was just the expression of hate for a rival or potential rival. Whatever his motivation, Satan wanted the human race to disobey God and so be subject to the stated punishment for disobeying the command of God — death. As Jesus put it, Satan’s actions were those of a murderer (John 8:44) because he sought to kill the as yet innocent human race.

The conversation between Satan and Eve reveals something further about Satan’s influence on the first sin. We discover that his words do not seem hostile to the human race. Satan presents himself as a friend, a knowledgeable friend, one who knows more about the human condition than Eve. Even more, he presents himself as someone who knows that God has spoken falsely to Adam and Eve.

Eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will not produce death, but just what the name of the tree seems to indicate: greater knowledge or wisdom, and hence equality with God. God does not hold his position by an intrinsic excellence no creature can attain, but by knowledge that can be had for the asking, or better, for the eating. Knowledge is power. Enough power is equality. Eve can have all that by reaching out and eating of the fruit.

Eve believed Satan, but later, confronted by God as the judge, she is quite clear that she has not become equal to the Lord of all. She then confesses, “The serpent beguiled me” (Gen 3:13). Her words are sometimes translated “he tricked me” or “he deceived me.” Eve had learned an important truth through the results of her conversation with Satan: sin is a result of deception that originates in the influence of Satan.

Few human beings have experienced Satan or any other demonic being appearing to them and trying to persuade them to sin. The New Testament, however, tells us that Satan is the ruler of “this world”, that is, of fallen human society that has not yet been redeemed. It also tells us that his “rule” is manifested in various doctrines, religions, and theories that lead human beings to sin. We will consider Satan himself more fully further on. At this point, we simply need to see that his influence comes to us from the various voices in society that lead human beings to sin.

Satan did not use force to overpower Adam and Eve, and he does not use force to overcome other human beings. He seeks a choice on the part of human beings — the choice of disobedience to God expressed in disobedience to his instructions. To attain his goal Satan makes false statements about God and the consequences of disobeying God. Sin, in other words, involves choosing falsehood rather than accepting what God has said. It is based, at least implicitly, on disbelief, rejection of God’s Word.

The Inner Source. The account in Genesis then turns to Eve’s response to the influence of the serpent.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. - Genesis 3:6

The way sin originated inside us

This passage portrays the way sin originates inside a human being. The external agent succeeded only because he was an effective motivator who knew how to arouse something inside Eve to get her to do what he wanted. When she heard the words of Satan, Eve looked up to the tree to see its fruit. She could tell it would be nourishing. She saw it was attractive, enticing to look at. And she now understood that it would produce a beneficial change in her, wisdom.

Something awoke inside of Eve. The first letter of John, probably referring to this passage, describes what was happening inside of Eve as “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). “Pride of life” seems to mean the desire to be something great or to live at a higher station.

The cause of sin inside of Eve, then, was desires of various sorts. But is desire bad? After all, the contents of paradise were all very good (Gen 1:31) and all the trees in it were “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Gen 2:9), probably including the tree of knowledge. The fruit of the tree that was now tempting Eve is purposely described in Genesis with many of the same words used to describe the original creation. The tempting fruit, in other words, had been made good and fulfilling by God.

Just as importantly, the desires Eve experienced were also created in her by God. The desire to eat what may have been the world’s most luscious and nourishing fruit was a good desire. Even the desire to be wise, to be as great and noble as possible, can be good. To push the point further, even the desire to be “like God” could be good, since God wants humans to imitate him (Eph 5:1) and be partners with him in ruling his creation (Gen 1:26).

Eve’s desires were starting to move her to a wrong choice, but they were not, in themselves, bad desires. She was not even experiencing her sinful human nature at work, because she did not have a sinful human nature. Eve had not yet fallen. She was a human being the way God created human beings to be, responding to something that God had made good and desirable. Yet in so doing, Eve sinned and Adam sinned with her.

Sometimes we hear about people who seem to take great pleasure in torturing and killing other human beings, often innocent children or animals, or who take pleasure in wanton destruction of nature. We might consider these actions the paradigm case of sin, sheer evil or desire for what is in no way good. But these are expressions of a nature far gone in the corrupting results of sin — either the sin of those who do such deeds, or the sin of their parents or others who have made them to be what they are, Satan not the least. Such actions are not the disease as first caught but the disease in its last stages, morally destroying the being in whom it lives. The paradigm case of sin is rather the first sin, the sin that caused the downfall of the human race.

Something good gone wrong

Here we have arrived at an important truth about the nature of sin. Sin is a parasite that grows on God’s good creation. It is something good gone wrong. In the first sin, a good person with healthy desires responded to something good created by God, but made the fatal mistake of approaching it in a way that violated the right kind of relationship with God.

Eve sought something God wanted for her — to be wise and to be more like him — but in a way that rebelled against the truth of her creaturehood. We cannot relate to God well except on the basis of the reality of who he is and who we are. We need to acknowledge that we are not the source of our own being or of the good things that come to us. We have to accept the limits involved in being a creature. We therefore need to respond in gratitude to the one who has created us out of his goodness and to live in a way that is pleasing to the one who is willing to keep us in existence. Wisdom requires the acceptance of reality as it is, especially the reality of who he is and who we are. Only on such a basis can human beings grow in wisdom and become like God.

Sinful actions, then, do not have to be evil through and through to be seriously sinful. They simply need to violate the relationship with God by doing something he has made clear he cannot accept. Consequently, of their very nature they break the relationship with him. Normally, a human action does need to be seriously evil in itself to break the relationship with God. It needs to be an action like murder, adultery, or idolatry. Such was not the case with the transgression of Adam and Eve. Eating the fruit of a tree is not intrinsically evil. Under other circumstances, such an action would have been good.

An action that was not intrinsically evil was probably chosen because of its fitness to represent the essence of all sin: disobedience, disordered choice, failure to live in unity with the one who created us and who made a certain kind of

life good for his human creatures to live. To choose to do something that could be good, but to do it when God has forbidden it, is to choose to do evil.

This leads us back once again to the central truth about sin. Sin comes from outside, external influences. Sin also comes from the inside, the internal desires of human nature that are capable of embracing good, and evil. But sin is ultimately the choice or decision of the sinner to act in a way that destructively damages the purpose for which every human being is created: the love of God. Sin is a failure of the sinner — and usually in the face of a test.

Part II to be continued in next month's issue.

[Steve Clark](#) is former president of the [Sword of the Spirit](#). This article is excerpted from the first chapter of Steve Clark's Book, *Redeemer: Understanding the Meaning of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, (c) 1992, 2009. Used with permission.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom

email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com



Surrender to God

Excerpt from a sermon
for the first Sunday in Lent

by John Henry Newman

I suppose it has struck many persons as very remarkable, that in the latter times the strictness and severity in religion of former ages has been so much relaxed. There has been a gradual abandonment of painful duties which were formerly enforced upon all. Time was when all persons, to speak generally, abstained from flesh through the whole of Lent. There have been dispensations on this point again and again, and this very year there is a fresh one. What is the meaning of this? What are we to gather from it? This is a question worth considering. Various answers may be given, but I shall confine myself to one of them.

We must subdue ourselves to Christ

I answer that fasting is only one branch of a large and momentous duty, the subdual of ourselves to Christ. We must surrender to him all we have, all we are. We must keep nothing back. We must present to him as captive prisoners with whom he may do what he will, our soul and body, our reason, our judgment, our affections, our imagination, our tastes, our appetite. The great thing is to *subdue* ourselves; but as to the particular form in which the great precept of self-conquest and self-surrender is to be expressed, that depends on the person himself, and on the time or place. What is good for one age or person, is not good for another.

There are other instances of the same variation. For example ...the present war with evil spirits would seem to be very different from what it was in former ages. They attack a civilized age in a more subtle way than they attack a rude age. We read in lives of saints and others of the evil spirit showing himself and fighting with them face to face, but now those subtle and experienced spirits find it is more to their purpose not to show themselves, or at least not so much. They find it in their interest to let the idea of them die away from the minds of men, that being unrecognized, they may do the more mischief. And they assault men in a more subtle way – not grossly, in some broad temptation, which everyone can understand, but in some refined way they address themselves to our pride or self-importance, or love of money, or love of ease, or love of show, or our depraved

reason, and thus have really the dominion over persons who seem at first sight to be quite superior to temptation.

Now apply these illustrations to the case in point. From what has been said it follows that you must not suppose that nothing is incumbent on us in the way of mortification, though you have not to fast so strictly as formerly. It is reasonable to think that some other duty, of the same general kind, may take its place; and therefore the permission granted us in eating may be a suggestion to us to be more severe with ourselves on the other hand in certain other respects.

And this anticipation is confirmed by the history of our Lord's temptation in the wilderness. It *began*, you will observe, with an attempt on the part of the evil one to make him break his fast improperly. It *began*, but it did not end there. It was but the first of three temptations, and the other two were more addressed to his mind, not his bodily wants. One was to throw himself down from the pinnacle, the other the offer of all the kingdoms of the world. They were more subtle temptations.

Subtle temptations and subtle sins

Now, I have used the word "subtle" already, and it needs some explanation. By a subtle temptation or a subtle sin, I mean one which it is very difficult to find out. Everyone knows what it is to break the ten commandments, the first, the second, the third, and so on. When a thing is directly commanded, and the devil tempts us directly to break it, this is not a subtle temptation, but a broad and gross temptation. But there are a great many things wrong which are not so obviously wrong. They are wrong as leading to what is wrong or the consequence of what is wrong, or they are wrong because they are the very same thing as what is forbidden, but dressed up and looking differently.

The human mind is very deceitful; when a thing is forbidden, a man does not like directly to do it, but he goes to work if he can to get at the forbidden end in some way. It is like a man who has to make for some place. First he attempts to go straight to it, but finds the way blocked up; then he goes round about it. At first you would not think he is going in the right direction; he sets off perhaps at a right angle, but he just makes one little bend, then another, till at length he gets to his point. Or still more it is like a sailing vessel at sea with the wind contrary, but tacking first this way, and then that, the mariners contrive at length to get to their destination. This then is a subtle sin, when it at first seems not to be a sin, but comes round to the same point as an open direct sin.

To take some examples. If the devil tempted one to go out into the highway and rob, this would be an open, bold temptation. But if he tempted one to do something unfair in the course of business, which was to one's neighbor's hurt and to one's own advantage, it would be a more subtle temptation. The man would still take what was his neighbor's, but his conscience would not be so much shocked. So equivocation is a more subtle sin than direct lying. In like manner a person who does not intoxicate himself, may eat too much. Gluttony is a more subtle sin than drunkenness, because it does not show so much. And again, sins of the soul are more subtle sins than sins of the body. Infidelity is a more subtle sin than licentiousness.

Even in our Blessed Lord's case the Tempter began by addressing himself to his bodily wants. He had fasted forty days, and afterwards was hungered. So the devil tempted him to eat. But when he did not consent, then he went on to more subtle temptations. He tempted him to spiritual pride, and he tempted him by ambition for power. Many a man would shrink from intemperance, of being proud of his spiritual attainments; that is, he would confess such things were wrong, but he would not see that he was guilty of them.

Fertile excuses and evasions

Next I observe that a civilized age is more exposed to subtle sins than a rude age. Why? For this simple reason, because it is more fertile in excuses and evasions. It can defend error, and hence can blind the eyes of those who have not very careful consciences. It can make error plausible, it can make vice look like virtue. It dignifies sin by fine names; it calls avarice proper care of one's family, or industry, it calls pride independence, it calls ambition greatness of mind; resentment it calls proper spirit and sense of honor, and so on.

...What all of us want more than anything else, what this age wants, is that its intellect and its will should be under a law. At present it is lawless, its will is its own law, its own reason is the standard of all truth. It does not bow to authority, it does not submit to the law of faith. It is wise in its own eyes and it relies on its own resources. And you, as living in the world, are in danger of being seduced by it, and being a partner in its sin, and so coming in at the end for its punishment. Now then let me in conclusion, suggest one or two points in which you may profitably subdue your minds, which require it even more than your bodies.

Let us mortify our curiosity

For example, in respect to curiosity. What a deal of time is lost, to say nothing else, in this day by curiosity, about things which in no ways concern us. I am not speaking against interest in the news of the day altogether, for the course of the world must ever be interesting to a Christian from its bearing upon the fortunes of the church, but I speak of vain curiosity, love of scandal, love of idle tales, curious prying into the private history of people, curiosity about trials and offences, and personal matters, nay often what is much worse than this, curiosity into sin. What strange diseased curiosity is sometimes felt about the history of murders, and of the malefactors themselves! Worse still, it is shocking to say, but there is so much evil curiosity to know about deeds of darkness, of which the Apostle [Paul] says that it is shameful to speak. Many a person, who has no intention of doing the like, from an evil curiosity reads what he ought not to read. This is in one shape or other very much the sin of boys, and they suffer for it. The knowledge of what is evil is the first step in their case to the commission of it. Hence this is the way in which we are called upon, with this Lent we now begin, to mortify ourselves. Let us mortify our curiosity.

Let us mortify our excessive desire for knowledge

Again, the desire of knowledge is in itself praiseworthy, but it may be excessive, it may take us from higher things, it may take up too much of our time – it is a vanity. The Preacher makes the distinction between profitable and unprofitable learning when he says, "The words of the wise are like goads and nails." They excite and stimulate us and are fixed in our memories. "But further than this, my son, inquire not. Of making many books there is no end, and much study" (that is, poring over secular subjects,) "is affliction of the flesh. Let us one and all have an end of the discourse: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man." Knowledge is very well in its place, but it is like flowers without fruit. We cannot feed on knowledge, we cannot thrive on knowledge. Just as the leaves of the grove are very beautiful but would make a bad meal, so we shall ever be hungry and never be satisfied if we think to take knowledge for our food. Knowledge is no food. Religion is our only food. Here then is another mortification. Mortify your desire of knowledge. Do not go into excess in seeking after truths which are not religious.

Let us mortify our reason

Again, mortify your reason. In order to try you, God puts before you things which are difficult to believe. St. Thomas's faith was tried; so is yours. He said "My Lord and my God." You say so too. Bring your proud intellect into subjection. Believe what you cannot see, what you cannot understand, what you cannot explain, what you cannot prove, when God says it.

Let us bring our will into subjection

Lastly, bring your will into subjection. We all like our own will – let us consult the will of others. Numbers of

persons are obliged to do this. Servants are obliged to do the will of their masters, workmen of their employers, children of their parents, husbands of their wives. Well, in these cases let your will go with that of those who have a right to command you. Don't rebel against it. Sanctify what is after all a necessary act. Make it in a certain sense your own, sanctify it, and get merit from it. And again when you are your own master, be on your guard against going too much by your own opinion. Take some wise counsellor or director, and obey him. There are persons who cry out against such obedience, and call it a number of bad names. They are the very persons who need it. It would do them much good. They say that men are made mere machines, and lose the dignity of human nature by going by the word of another. And I should like to know what they become by going by their own will. ...For one person who has been hurt by following the direction of another, a hundred persons have been ruined by going by their own will. This is another subject. But this is enough. May almighty God enable you.

Excerpt from a [Sermon for the first Sunday of Lent](#) given on March 12, 1848.

John Henry Newman, 1801-1890, was an influential writer and major figure from the Church of England in the Oxford Movement. In 1845 he became a Catholic priest and was made a Cardinal late in life in 1879.

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email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com



Salt and Light

Our Vocation to Holiness

by Donald Bloesch

A case can be made that the dominant affliction in the contemporary world is the anxiety of meaninglessness. This is indissolubly linked to a crisis in vocation, which affects even those in the ministry. A growing number of students coming to seminaries today are seeking for a vocation rather than claiming a vocation. Some are even in quest of a faith and are therefore abysmally unprepared to witness to a faith. Mirroring the wider culture, too many of us who call ourselves Christian are preoccupied with self-fulfillment rather than service, with emotional and social security rather than holiness.

What we do not adequately see is that people are put on this earth to glorify God by serving the kingdom of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. Until we discover our reason for being, we will never find ourselves and continue to grope aimlessly in the darkness. Until we realize that our vocation is the service of a holy God, and this means living in holiness in imitation of this God (Ephesians 5:1–2), we will remain disoriented, even as Christians.

Holiness as a life-goal is not fashionable in the modern church, including the conservative church, and there are understandable reasons for this. First, holiness has often been associated with an otherworldly mysticism that supposedly leads people away from the crying needs and concerns of daily life. The holy person then appears to be a dropout from society. Holiness has also been confused with perfectionism—the illusion that one can arrive at the point where it is no longer necessary to stand before God as a repentant sinner. Finally, holiness has been confounded with a legalistic mentality that insists on rigorous adherence to moral codes often stated in negations—

no drinking, no smoking, no drugs, no dancing, no card-playing, etc. Morality will necessarily entail discipline and prohibitions, but morality is not yet holiness—singleminded devotion to the God of majesty, power, and love.

The Meaning of Holiness

Rudolf Otto reminds us in his much acclaimed *The Idea of the Holy* that holiness is something deeper than morality. It assuredly contains a moral dimension, but in its essence it is closeness to the living God. It elicits not only admiration but also awe. A holy person is transparent to the God of purity and power as we know him in Jesus Christ. The mark of the holy life is not virtues that we can achieve either with or without the assistance of God but graces that are worked within us by the Spirit of God.

All people have a vocation to holiness. We are all created for the glory of God. All are called to fear God and keep his commandments (Ecc. 12:13). Our Lord declared, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” (Mat. 11:28–29, italics mine; cf. Isa. 45:22).

People of faith, however, are especially singled out for a vocation to holiness: “Aim at peace with everyone and a holy life, for without that no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14 REB); “As obedient children, be yourselves holy in all your activity, after the model of the Holy One who calls us” (1 Pet. 1:15 NJB); “He saved us and called us to a consecrated life, not for anything we had done, but of his own accord and out of the mercy which he bestowed upon us ages ago through Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 1:9 Goodspeed).

In the biblical perspective holiness means separated by God for the service of his glory in the world. Not only individuals but whole peoples can be set apart for this glorious task. The children of Israel are told: “You are a people holy to the Lord your God, and he has chosen you out of all peoples on earth to be his special possession” (Deut. 7:6 REB; cf. 1 Pet. 2:9).

Holiness is not wholeness as the world understands it but faithfulness, perseverance in obedience. It means wholehearted dedication to the living God through service in his name. To aspire to holiness is to aspire to something other than a virtuous life or even a complete life. What makes the holy person distinctive is not so much adherence to conventional moral standards as consecration to the Wholly Other, who stands in judgment over all human values and aspirations.

The great saints of the church have always been suspect in the eyes of defenders of conventional wisdom and virtue. Hosea was considered a fool because he forecast doom upon the nation of Israel where idolatry was rampant (Hos. 9:7). Jeremiah was ridiculed and vilified because the word he relayed from the Lord was not pleasing to people in high places. Jesus earned the enmity of the Pharisees because among other things he healed on the Sabbath. Francis of Assisi after his conversion embraced the lepers whom he had previously shunned and who were universally despised and feared, especially by the pillars of society. Luther was cast out of the religious establishment of his time because of his commitment to preach the gospel of God’s free, unmerited grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer abandoned “all outward and inward security” when he joined the conspiracy against Hitler and as his biographer Eberhard Bethge put it, “forsook command, applause, and commonly held opinions.”⁽¹⁾

True Spirituality

True spirituality is the way we live out our vocation to holiness. It is letting the light of the glory of God shine in every aspect of our existence so that the world might come to know Jesus Christ. It is living in the midst of the world’s afflictions for the greater glory of God.

True spirituality is both theocentric and Christocentric. Its focus is on the holy love of divinity, not the spiritual fulfillment of humanity. We are called not to realize ourselves but to be saved from ourselves. Our goal is not to become ourselves but to become someone other than ourselves.

In biblical, evangelical perspective spirituality means the lordship of Christ over the whole of life (Francis Schaeffer). The biblical prophets heralded the reign of the living God over the whole of creation. Biblical Christians also speak of the vision of God, but this is subordinated to his lordship. The vision of God, moreover, does not mean absorption into God but uninterrupted fellowship with God, unflinching service to God.

The focus of a gospel-centered spirituality is not the adornment of the human soul or the liberation of spirit from matter but the advance of the kingdom of God in the world. We do not climb a mystical ladder to heaven but descend into the depths of the world's afflictions with the message of reconciliation and redemption through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection from the grave. General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, gave this command to those in his charge: "Go for souls, and go for the worst!" The goal in evangelical faith is not to be lost in God but to be found in Christ.

Faith in Action

The Christian life is characterized by passive sanctity and active holiness. The Holy Spirit secretly works sanctity with us (Calvin); our task is to manifest this work of the Spirit in our everyday activities. We do not procure sanctity or holiness, but we can do works that reveal the holiness of Christ. We do not earn holiness, but we can demonstrate, celebrate, and proclaim his holiness. Christ has broken down the wall of hostility that divides peoples (Eph. 2:13–14), but we can give concrete witness to this fact by being peacemakers and catalysts of social change.

Faith involves both passive surrender and active obedience. We are justified by faith alone, but faith does not remain alone but issues forth in faith working through love (Gal. 5:6). In the act of faith we become dead to the world so that we may live in Christ. In the life of faith we die with Christ so that the world may live.

In Matthew 5:13–16 we are summoned to live out our vocation as salt and light. The metaphor of light in the New Testament can refer to Jesus Christ, the message of his saving work, and even to the disciples. Basically the significance of our vocation lies not in what we are but in what we bring. We are commissioned to carry the salt of the gospel to the world, to radiate the light that is in Christ.

Just as Jesus is the light (Mat. 4:16; Jn. 8:12), so must his disciples be as well. Yet our light is reflective. It is his light that must shine through us. Our task is to make visible not ourselves but the living God in Christ. We are not to advance ourselves but lose ourselves in service to God. Our Lord enjoins us: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mat. 5:16 NRSV).

In rabbinic tradition "salt" and "light" were associated respectively with the law and the covenant. The disciples were to proclaim their Master's reinterpretation of the law and then to live according to it themselves.

Salt and light must be useful. If we do not shine our light or sprinkle our salt, they are to no avail. We are to be salt for the earth, light for the world. We are to live no longer unto ourselves but unto Christ who lived and died so that we might live in Christian freedom.

Our mandate is to call people to Christ, not to ourselves, to uphold his great work, not our little works. Yet when we give ourselves to Christ in this way, our sanctity, our little light, will become visible. We shall be known by our fruits (Mat. 7:16 RSV). People will see in us the light that resides in Jesus Christ. This light will be hidden to us but manifest to others.

Works of Piety

We are commanded to let our light shine, to be rich in good works (1 Tim. 6:18). Our righteousness does not lie in our works: our works proceed from our righteousness, which is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). This

righteousness, which has its basis in Christ and is received by faith (Rom. 3:21–31; 9:30–32), will produce works that redound to the glory of God.

Among the duties that comprise the Christian life are deeds of piety. Calvin defined piety as the fear of God and zeal for the honor of God. Piety concerns obligations that we owe to God alone, and one of these is believing in the gospel. “This is the work that God requires,” said our Lord: “to believe in the one whom he has sent” (Jn. 6:29 REB). To believe in Jesus Christ and to uphold him as Lord and Savior of the world is the one crowning work of the Christian. Luther put it succinctly: “For in this work all good works exist, and from faith these works receive a borrowed goodness.”(2)

Prayer is certainly another indispensable work of piety. In biblical perspective prayer is not contemplating the essence of God or meditating on transcendental ideals: rather it is the pouring out of the soul to God, asking for his help and guidance, interceding for the world in its lostness and misery. Christians should not only pray but be warriors of prayer, praying both in the Spirit and with the understanding (1 Cor. 14:15). If we do not pray we will lose our saltiness, our light will grow dim.

Christian piety also involves public worship—hearing the Word of God, giving praise to God for his many blessings, confessing to God our sin. Worship that is done in spirit and in truth entails keeping in remembrance the death and resurrection of Christ by celebrating the sacraments—baptism and Holy Communion. The sacraments not only remind us of how much we owe to God, but they also strengthen our bond of communion with the living Christ, who encounters us in a special way in these rites as we believe and obey.

Finally, works of piety include exhorting and reproving our fellow believers in a spirit of love—and being willing to receive such reproof from others. We are to be gatekeepers as well as servants (Ezek. 3:17). We do our brothers and sisters no favor if we stand by passively while they openly flaunt God’s holy law and career down the slippery slope toward perdition.

Works of Evangelism

Surely works of evangelism will have a prominent role in our holy vocation. Worshiping God is integral to the Christian life, but so is bearing witness to what God has done for us in Christ. We have been chosen by God to “declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9 RSV).

It is the responsibility of all Christians to tell the story of salvation. This imperative is underlined in Fanny Crosby’s much loved hymn, “Tell Me the Story of Jesus.” This prolific hymn writer was herself a model of holiness. Although blind and in need of the comforts of life, she blithely gave away all of the royalties on her hymns to missions and charities.

Evangelism also consists in sharing our experience of Jesus Christ. The essential content of our proclamation is the gospel itself, but we need not keep secret the way the gospel comes alive for us personally. Paul spoke boldly of his Damascus road experience, although his aim was to elevate not himself but Jesus Christ alone (cf. 2 Cor. 4:5).

Part of the ministry of evangelism is interceding for the world, praying for the conversion of the lost. Unless our spoken witness is grounded in prayer, it will not avail for the salvation of others. On the other hand, unless our prayer is accompanied by an earnest effort to bring the knowledge of Christ’s atoning work to others, its value will certainly be diminished.

The great commission of our Lord to his disciples also involved baptism and teaching: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them

to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mat. 28:19,20 RSV). Baptism might well be regarded as the sacrament of Christian vocation, for it initiates us into a new way of life.

The ministry of teaching is of critical importance. While only some Christians by virtue of special spiritual gifts and innate talents can be public teachers, all Christians have a role in introducing others to the precepts and tenets of the faith. All believers share in the prophetic office of Christ, all are to witness and teach by words as well as deeds.

Works of Mercy

Being salt and light for the world certainly involves helping the poor and needy—providing hospitality, visiting the sick and people in prison, caring for the lonely and the abandoned, serving in the myriad ways presented by the challenges of daily living. By ministering to others in the name of Christ we give tangible reality to the royal priesthood of all believers.

Good Samaritan service must not be confused with humanitarianism. Christian service is done not in the spirit of paternalistic altruism but out of self-sacrificial love. We do not try to raise the unfortunates of society to our level but we descend to their level. We are motivated not simply out of a commitment to moral ideals but out of vicarious identification with those for whom Christ died.

Works of mercy serve the Christian mission of bringing people into a right relationship with Christ. Mother Teresa has declared that the greatest problem of the suffering and dying in Calcutta and other cities of India is spiritual destitution, and only faith working through love can meet this need. Teresa of Avila put her finger on what makes Christian service distinctive: “The soul of the care of the poor is the care of the poor soul.” General William Booth had as his motto “soup, soap, and salvation.” He wisely discerned that sometimes physical needs have to be met before there will be a positive response to our message. Our motivation is love, but our goal is evangelism: to confront people with the message of the gospel that alone can redeem and sanctify the human heart.

Works of Justice

In addition to the practice of piety, evangelism, and mercy, Christians should be involved in the task of correcting abuses in the social order. This too can be a holy work—a work that serves the glory of God. We are to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream” (Amos 5:24 RSV). In the mind of the Old Testament prophets, justice entails redressing social wrongs and bringing about an equitable distribution of the goods of society.

Salt when applied to an open wound will sting; light when it breaks into darkness will expose the darkness. This is why salt and light always will be resisted. Speaking out in defense of the poor and disinherited will engender hostility from those who have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. But we must speak out in the name of Christ and for the sake of his gospel, not out of a desire to build an earthly utopia. Any justice that is not informed by piety—the fear of the living God—is bound to lead to greater injustice in the long run.

The Church should preach against social sin and point the way to a solution. Its mission is to change the attitudes of people and thus provide an impetus to social reform. The church must seldom if ever be a political lobby, but the people of God are called to be agents in bringing about social holiness.

Works of justice are not simply exercises in politics but parabolic acts that point beyond themselves to God’s redeeming work in Christ. Our works are to be seen as a witness to the light of Christ, as sign and parable of the coming kingdom of God. Human justice must never be confounded with divine justice. It may, however, correspond to divine justice. When we defend the rights of the poor, the helpless, and the oppressed, we are calling attention to the spiritual liberation that Christ brings through the outpouring of his Holy Spirit.

Biblical piety has a theocratic dimension in its focus upon the coming of a new social order under the leadership of Jesus Christ. It includes the vision of a holy community, where church and state work together to bring a sense of moral cohesiveness to society, where righteousness and peace become visible and concrete (Ps. 85:10). Yet the holy community we can achieve is not the holy city that will come down from heaven (Rev. 21:10). We can prepare the way for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, but we cannot create it, we cannot build it. But we can serve it by telling others of the good news of Christ's work of redemption and by following Christ into the darkness of this world as disciples under the cross.

In Micah 6:8 works of justice, mercy, and piety are brought together in remarkable unity: "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (NIV).

The Fruit of Faith

Works that are pleasing to God spring from faith in his mercy and power as revealed in Jesus Christ. Christians are not only to speak of light and salt but to be light and salt.

Good fruit can only come from a good tree (Mat. 7:17). Being is prior to action. "Faith in the heart leads to righteousness, and confession on the lips leads to salvation" (Rom. 10:10 REB). The hope for a new social order rests on a new kind of person. Yet regeneration by the Spirit is only the beginning. We must be trained in righteousness so that we can apply the spiritual vision given us to the concrete needs and problems of society.

Being in Christ will invariably give rise to acting in the name of Christ. The one who "confesses and believes," says Karl Barth, "shall live by righteousness."⁽³⁾ If we truly accept Christ as Savior, we will be motivated to follow him as Lord wherever he takes us.

Just as faith produces obedience, so obedience gives rise to understanding. According to 1 John 2:3, "It is by keeping God's commands that we can be sure we know him" (REB). Faith brings assurance as it works through love.

We are driven to service of our neighbor through the paradoxical love of the cross, the love that is demanding, sacrificial, and also unconditional, going out to all people irrespective of their moral or social status. And if we truly love we will be passionately concerned that our hearers come into a right relationship with Jesus Christ. We should let our light shine so that people "may give praise" to the "Father in heaven" (Mat. 5:16 REB). To let our light shine does not mean to parade our virtues but to hold up Christ before others.

John the Baptist is often celebrated in church tradition as a model of holiness, as a "burning and shining lamp" (Jn. 5:35 RSV). He was not himself the light, but he came to bear witness to the light (Jn. 1:8). His testimony is inscribed in the memory of the church, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30 RSV).

This indeed is the salient mark of discipleship and holiness. Our mandate is not to make something of ourselves but to wear ourselves out for Jesus Christ. Mother Teresa has rightly observed that we are called not to success but to fidelity to the One who has redeemed us. Or as Barth put it: "The temporal holiness of the saints is the service that they render to the eternal holiness of God."⁽⁴⁾

We should strive to be rich in good works not to merit salvation, not to win the admiration of others, but to demonstrate our gratefulness for Christ's gift of salvation. The Heidelberg Catechism rightly declares that the motivation for good works is gratitude to God for what he has done for us in Christ (Question 86).

When Catherine of Sienna was asked by one of her nuns what she could do to show her appreciation for Christ, this great saint of the church replied that further penances were unnecessary. The one thing she could do was to find

someone unworthy of her love and then to love this person in gratitude for God's love to undeserving sinners.⁽⁵⁾ Gratitude is not the only motivation in Christian service, but it should always be a crowning element.

Our task as believers is take up the cross and follow Christ in order to make known to others the boundlessness of his love. We should endeavor to be salt and light so that people might come to know the love and mercy of God and give glory to the Father in heaven. By losing ourselves for the sake of the kingdom we will find ourselves, realizing our true destiny as sons and daughters of the living God. By placing the welfare of others above our own happiness, we will find true happiness in the end—the joy of salvation.

Notes:

1. Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Edwin Robertson; trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke and William Glen-Doepel (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 700.
2. Quoted in Walther von Loewenich, Martin Luther, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), p. 153.
3. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 382.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
5. See Morton Kelsey, *Reaching: The Journey to Fulfillment* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), p. 93. While Kelsey tries to make a place for both Agape (self-sacrificing love) and Eros (self-realizing love), the latter is dominant in his spirituality.

This article was originally published in [Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity](#), Fall, 1992. *Touchstone* is a monthly ecumenical journal which endeavors to promote doctrinal, moral, and devotional orthodoxy among Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox. Copyright © 1996 the Fellowship of St. James. Used with permission.

Donald Bloesch is a noted American evangelical theologian. He has written numerous books, including *Wellsprings of Renewal: Promise in Christian Communal Life*, *Crumbling Foundations: Death and Rebirth in an Age of Upheaval*, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate Over Inclusive God-language*, *A Theology Of Word & Spirit: Authority & Method In Theology*. He was raised in the Evangelical and Reformed Church, in which his father and both his grandfathers were also ordained ministers. From 1957 until his retirement in 1992, he was a professor of theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, USA, where he continues as a professor-emeritus.

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email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com



Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem, by Don Schwager

Prayer – The Spokesman of Hope

by Christoph Schonborn

Just before her conversion, Blessed Edith Stein went into the cathedral in Frankfurt and saw a simple woman come in from the market, kneel down, and pray. By Edith Stein's own testimony, the sight of this woman made a decisive impression upon her on her journey toward the faith: a simple woman, kneeling and praying in the cathedral. Something inexpressible, very simple, so ordinary, and yet so full of mystery: this intimate contact with the invisible God. Not a self-absorbed meditation, but quiet relaxation in the presence of a mysterious *Other*. What Edith Stein sensed in this humble praying woman would soon become a certainty for her: God exists, and in prayer we turn toward him.

Longing to pray

Think of the impression the silent prayer of Jesus made on his disciples, prayer that often went on for hours, all night long, in fact! What was it about this secret place, this long turning in silence to him whom our Lord calls "Abba"? "He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples'" (Luke 11: 1). *Teach us to pray*. The disciple yearns to enter this place of silent intimacy, this vigilant prostration before the presence of the Invisible One. He feels such a great reverence for the mystery of the prayer of Jesus that he does not dare to interrupt, to "burst in" on our Lord with his question. He waits till Jesus himself comes out of his prayer. Only then does the disciple make bold to ask, to implore: "Teach us to pray!"

Does it not move us when we come into church and find someone silently praying there? Does this sight awaken in us the longing to pray? Do we hear at this moment the murmuring of the spring that summons us to the living water? As the martyr Ignatius of Antioch writes: "Living water murmurs within me, saying inwardly: 'Come to the Father!'" (1) *The longing for prayer is the lure within us of the Holy Spirit, who draws us to the Father, Yes, this*

longing is already prayer, is already the prayer of the Spirit within us, "with sighs too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

Is the ground of prayer dried up today?

There is, of course, a question we have to consider carefully: Is the *ground* of prayer dried up today? Isn't the hidden "murmuring" of the wellspring of the Holy Spirit drowned out by the noise of our times? Can prayer prosper when, as Neil Postman writes in his disturbing book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the average American spends fifteen years of his life in front of the television? ... There is no doubt that there is much in today's society that is detrimental to prayer.

And yet we are permitted to *hope* that no secularization can entirely drown out the call of God in the hearts of men. ... For prayer is the expression of a longing, which has not been "produced" by *us* but has been placed in the hearts of men by God. It is an expression of the "fecisti nos *ad Te*" of Saint Augustine (Thou madest us *for thyself*). ... *He who prays hopes*. For someone who cannot hope to be heard cannot ask. After all we only ask other human beings for something when we have the hope that our petition has a chance of being granted. "Prayer," says Saint Thomas, "is the spokesman of hope"(2)

For what do we pray and hope?

By our prayer we can gauge the state of our prayer. For what do we pray? For what do we hope? The reason why prayer and hope are so closely related is that both realize that what we pray and hope for does not lie within our own powers but can only be *given* to us. But what are we permitted to hope for? And what should we pray for? In his long *quaestio* on prayer (the longest in the whole *Summa*), Saint Thomas says:

Since prayer is a kind of spokesman for our desires with God, we only ask for something in prayer rightly if we desire it rightly. In the Lord's Prayer not only do we ask for all that we may rightly desire, we also ask for them in the order in which we are supposed to desire them. This prayer, then, not only teaches us to ask, it also shapes all our affections (*sit informative totius nostri affectus*). (3)

A wonderful statement: The Our Father shapes our whole affective life into its right proportions; it places in us desires and yearnings and therefore the right priorities in our praying.

Is it really reasonable for our primary hope, and therefore our greatest longing, to be: "*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done*"? We have a concern for our "daily bread" (think how many of our people are worrying about their jobs or have already lost them!). We want to get on well with one another ("Forgive us our trespasses ..."). Above all, we beg for protection from evil and temptation, from anguish and despair ("Lead us not into temptation," "Deliver us from evil"). All of these petitions develop out of the problems of our life. They force their way to the front of our attention and harass our hearts. They are usually, therefore, our first and most pressing petitions.

Prayer is the language of hope

The fact that we turn to *God* with these petitions shows that we expect, that we hope for, help from him in all these needs. As Cardinal Ratzinger has said, prayer is "hope in action," for "prayer is the language of hope."⁽⁴⁾ "The despairing man no longer prays, because he no longer hopes. The man who is sure of himself and his own strength does not pray, because he relies only on himself. The man who prays hopes for a good and for a strength that go beyond his own powers."⁽⁵⁾ If we really pray for what we ask for in the four petitions of the second part of the Our Father, then we are already *hoping*, and that hope goes beyond the thing we ask for, it is directed toward the *Person* of whom we ask it: "Hallowed be *thy* name, *thy* Kingdom come, *thy* will be done...." These petitions become the articulation of an ever greater trust, which dares to call God "Our Father".

Saint Thomas [Aquinas] says that the Our Father is "informativa totius nostri affectus": it shapes all our desires and feelings. And indeed, time and again, we hear of people being healed in the very roots of their lives through the Our Father. I am thinking, for example, of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's friend Dimitri Panin,⁽⁶⁾ or of Tatiana Gorischeva, who received the grace of conversion through reciting the Our Father. When our *affectus* is shaped by the Our Father, our desires and yearnings are sound and in conformity to the action of God, and then our prayer will be more and more efficacious, because it really will be in harmony with God's plan, really will be cooperating with God's providence. Then our praying will be in harmony with the "sighs" of the Spirit, who "intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:27). In the *Compendium theologiae*, Saint Thomas says: "The Our Father is the prayer through which our hope in God is raised up to the highest degree."⁽⁷⁾

Just as faith is *certain*, because it believes *God*, so hope does not disappoint (cf. Romans 5:5), because, full of trust, it expects *from* God what he promises. It is from God *alone* that hope derives its triumphant certainty: "In *te*, Domine speravi, non confundar in aeternum" (In *thee*, O Lord, have I trusted, let me never be confounded).

[Excerpted from [Loving the Church](#), by Christoph Schonborn, Archbishop of Vienna, Austria; translated by John Seward, © 1998, [Ignatius Press](#), San Francisco. Used with permission.]

Notes:

(1) *Epistula ad Romanus* 7, 2.

(2) STh 2a2ae 17, 4, obj. 3.

(3) STh 2a2ae 83, 9. 3.

(4) *Auf Christus schauen: Einübung un Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 68f.

(5) *ibid.*, 69.

(6) See *The Notebooks of Sologdin* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

(7) *Compendium theologiae* 2, 3.

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Prayer Shaped by the Word of God

The Lord will prepare a banquet table for those who hunger for his Word

by Don Schwager

Words have power. They can build up and transform or they can tear down and destroy. Scripture tells us that God created the universe by his all-powerful word. That same word took flesh in Jesus Christ who was sent from the Father to redeem a fallen race: “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). His words are words of life because he speaks what the Father has given him (John 8:28). His words not only have power to instruct, but power to heal, restore, and remake us in the image of God.

Paul the Apostle said, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). What does it mean to have Christ’s word dwelling in us?

If you have a favorite author or two, you enjoy reading their literary works. Sometimes you can’t get enough, so you search for everything they wrote, even their letters and biography, because these can often reveal important things about the personal life and thoughts of the author. But the people we know the best are those we live with and share our lives with on a personal, intimate level.

God's word alive in us

God is the greatest of all authors and the author of life itself. He comes to dwell with us through his Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). If we accept his gracious invitation, God literally makes his home with us.

When we read the words of Scripture do we mainly seek wisdom and inspiration for living a better life? A good motive indeed. But God wants his word to not simply improve or reform us. He wants his word to transform our every thought and action.

Forty years ago the Lord taught me a vivid lesson in how I should approach his word. That lesson comes back to me time and time again as I seek the Lord in prayer and the study of his word.

At the end of my time at university I was 22 years old and at the crossroads of my life. As a student I had been actively involved in an evangelistic campus ministry and was serving in a local Christian community. As I approached graduation, I thought I had a pretty clear idea of how I could best serve God. I saw myself as a junior apostle – ready to go wherever the Lord wanted to send me on mission. My question was "Where do I start to launch out in mission? Perhaps I should move to another university campus where I could begin a new evangelistic outreach."

"My thoughts are not your thoughts"

The Lord, in his wise and gentle manner, prompted me to pray for guidance and direction. I wanted the Lord to confirm and bless my noble aspirations and plans. The Lord instead led me to his word in the Book of Isaiah, chapter 55:8-9:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

I prayed long and hard that summer. What was God saying to me and how did he want me to respond? I felt convicted every time I read the passage from Isaiah 55. Do my thoughts – what I think God wants of me, how he wants me to live and serve him – really conform to his thoughts – what he thinks is best for me, and what his plan is for my life? How can I best serve him and bring him glory?

Finally one day, in exasperation, I sank to my knees and prayed, "Lord, I surrender! I surrender my thoughts, my ways, my plans, my aspirations. I surrender everything, Lord, into your hands. Show me your ways and lead me on your path."

I felt broken, humbled, and spent of my own striving for success. I was like a young wild steed – charging ahead across every hill and valley I fancied to conquer. The Master had to stop me in my tracks in order to get my full attention. He wanted to take the reins and tame my racing spirit and mind, not so much to slow me down but to set me on the right course.

A full-time student in the school of life

I began to realize that I was only beginning to learn how to follow the Lord as a mature disciple. I had much to learn about how to conform my thought patterns and way of life to Christ's word. In fact, I had as much to *unlearn* – thought patterns and sinful behavior – as to learn. Paul the Apostle summarized it best:

“Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).

If we want to know God’s mind – his thoughts and intentions for our lives – then we must allow his word to not simply inform us but *transform* us as well.

Loving God through his Word

How can we conform our thoughts to Christ’s? A key step is learning how to listen to God as he speaks to us through the words of Scripture. We can approach Scripture in two very different ways – informational reading and formational reading. The following chart (1) compares the two approaches.

INFORMATIONAL READING	FORMATIONAL READING
Seeks to cover as much as possible	Focuses on small portions
A linear process	An in-depth process
Seeks to master the text	Allows the text to master us
The text as an object to use	The text as a subject that shapes us
Analytical, critical, and judgmental approach	Humble, detached, willing, loving approach
Problem-solving mentality	Openness to mystery

In our daily prayer and reflection, we should allow God’s word to form our minds and change the way we think and live as disciples of Christ. Expectant faith and docility open the mind and heart to hear Christ’s voice and to learn from him.

One of my favorite prayers from Psalm 119:97-104 expresses the joy of the humble man who receives wisdom and understanding from listening to God’s word and then putting it into practice:

Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.
Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.
I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.
I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.
I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.
I do not turn aside from your ordinances, for you have taught me.
How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

Wisdom from the early fathers

The early church fathers were steeped in the study of the Scriptures and they passed on the wisdom which was handed down from the apostles, who were themselves taught by the Lord Jesus.⁽³⁾ The fathers have much wisdom and experience to pass on to us as well. Here are a few quotes to illustrate how they approached the Word of God in Scripture:

You are reading [the Scriptures]? No. Your betrothed is talking to you. It is your betrothed, that is, Christ, who is united with you. He tears you away from the solitude of the desert and brings you into his home, saying to you, “Enter into the joy of your Master.”

– Jerome, 347-420 A.D.

Nourish your soul with Bible reading. It will prepare a spiritual feast for you. ... You recall that one and the same Word of God extends throughout Scripture, that it is one and the same Utterance that resounds in the mouths of all the sacred writers, since he who was in the beginning God with God has no need of separate syllables; for he is not subject to time. The Scriptures are in fact, in any passage you care to choose, singing of Christ, provided we have ears that are capable of picking out the tune. The Lord opened the minds of the Apostles so that they understood the Scriptures. That he will open our minds too is our prayer.

– Augustine of Hippo, 354-430 A.D.

“Like a tree planted by streams of water,” (Psalm 1:3) the soul is irrigated by the Bible and acquires vigor, produces tasty fruit, namely, true faith, and is beautified with a thousand green leaves, namely, actions that please God. The Bible, in fact, leads us towards pure holiness and holy actions. In it we find encouragement to all the virtues and the warning to flee from evil. The Bible is a scented garden, delightful, beautiful. It enchants our ears with birdsong in a sweet, divine and spiritual harmony, it touches our heart, comforts us in sorrow, soothes us in a moment of anger, and fills us with eternal joy. Let us knock at its gate with diligence and with perseverance. Let us not be discouraged from knocking. The latch will be opened. If we have read a page of the Bible two or three times and have not understood it, let us not be tired of re-reading it and meditating on it. Let us seek in the fountain of this garden “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (John 4:14). We shall taste a joy that will never dry up, because the grace of the Bible garden is inexhaustible.

– John Damascene, 676-749 A.D.

Hungry for God

God made us to know him and to be known by him as his beloved. He delights to be with those who hunger for him and who listen to his word. Let him draw you from the distractions of your cares and concerns so you can sit at his feet and listen to his voice. You will not be disappointed, even for a moment. He will refresh you and renew you and give you strength for your journey. Taste and see how good is the Lord (Psalm 34:8)! He will spread a banquet table for those who accept his invitation.

Notes:

(1) M. Robert Mulholland Jr., professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, expands on this understanding of formational reading in his book, [Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation](#), published in 2001 by Upper Room Books.

(2) For further reading, see essay [Shaped by the Word](#), written by Brian K. Rice, Reformed evangelical pastor, writer, and director for [Leadership ConneXtions International](#).

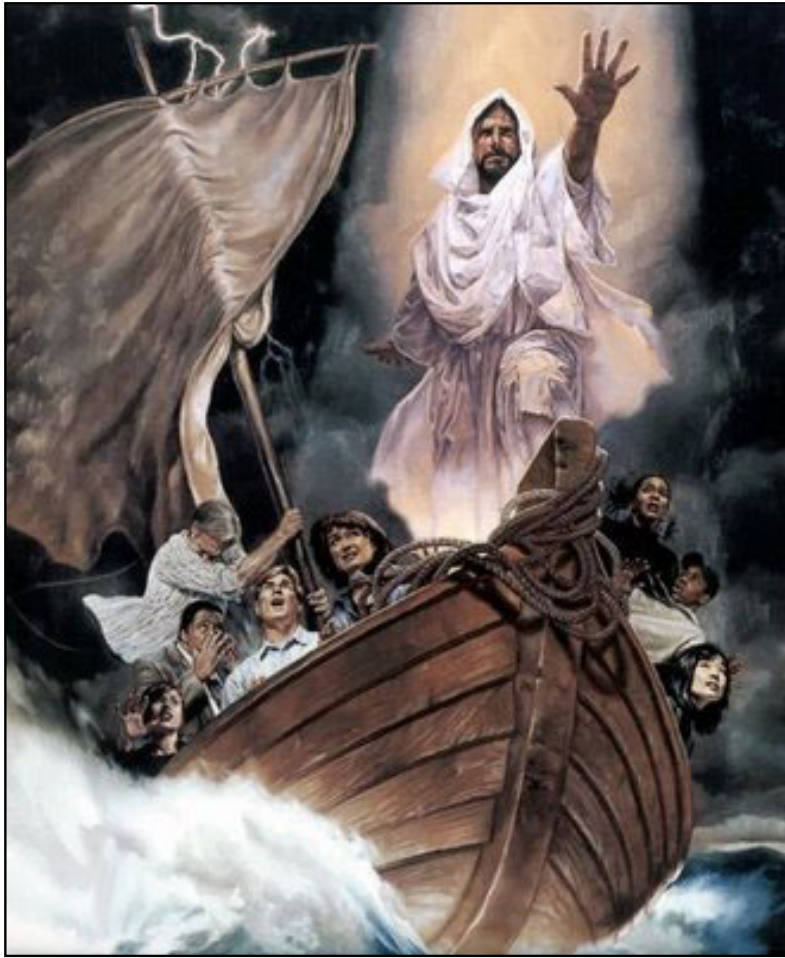
(3) For an excellent presentation on how the early church fathers approached the study of the Scriptures, see [The Nourishing Bread of Scripture](#) by Servais Pinckairs, a quote from his book, [The Sources of Christian Ethics](#), Chapter 8, © 1985, University Press Fribourg.

[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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Spiritual Risk Taking

What kinds of risks are worth taking for the sake of Christ and his kingdom?

by Jon Wilson

When I think of risk taking, my mind first goes to traditional kinds of “risky behaviors,” including bungee jumping, rock climbing, and sky diving. I was recently reminded just how risk-averse I can be when I watched the movie *The Guardian*, which portrayed the work of US Coast Guard rescue swimmers. These guys regularly jump out of helicopters into places like the Bering Sea to try to pull drowning people out of very high (and cold) seas. No thanks!

But this isn't the only kind of risk taking. Many people try to evaluate their “risk tolerance” in considering how to invest and save for their retirement. Small business owners tend to be risk takers. And, of course, the exploding “gaming industry” rakes in huge profits from people looking for the worst kind of risks, where you're pretty much guaranteed to lose. I am more naturally attracted to these kinds of risks, where there are no open helicopter doors involved.

Jesus' approach to risk taking

We don't often think about a very different kind of risk taking; maybe we can call it spiritual risk taking. It has a lot in common with these other kinds of risk: it can give some people butterflies in their stomachs, make others' mouths go dry, and cause still others to tuck their tails and run. But there are other ways in which it is very different from other kinds of risk taking.

Risk taking is an important topic for our communities in the Sword of the Spirit. There has been a growing sense among us that the Lord is moving us into a season of grace, fruitfulness, and growing pains. We have been given an image of an open door, with an invitation from the Lord to walk through. We have heard the Lord urge us to put aside our fishing poles, and to instead use nets for the great catch that he has in store for us. Words such as these can be exciting, but they can also leave us feeling overwhelmed, nervous, fearful, or inadequate. In light of this, it may be a good time to try to understand God's perspective.

The Parable of the Talents

Jesus told a parable about risk taking, often called the Parable of the Talents. Here it is, from Matthew 25. I think it has implications for us.

14"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. 15To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. 16The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. 17So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. 18But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. 20The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'

21"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

22"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.'

23"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

24"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

26"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? 27Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.'

28" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. 29For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 30And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

A few observations to start with. First, notice that the talents start out as, and remain, the property of the master. Second, the text tells us that the master used discernment in deciding who to give the talents to. Presumably, he wanted to maximize his returns by giving the most resources to the most capable servants.

Fear of failure, action, and risk

As we read on and see the failure of the one-talent guy, it's important to note that this servant didn't do anything

dishonest or unethical. He wasn't a bad person, as we might conventionally think about it. The problem was, he didn't do anything at all. And why didn't he do anything? He ascribes his inactivity to fear, presumably fear of his master, fear of failure, fear of action and risk. Finally, also notice that no one lost money in the story. The difference was between doubling your money or being left with what you started with.

So how might this parable apply to us as we consider taking spiritual risks? To begin, like the one talent guy, a primary obstacle for us is fear. When I read about the fear of the servant in the parable, I think of a squirrel in the middle of the road facing an oncoming car: fear causes paralysis, which only makes the situation worse. Squirrels are really fast, and if they would only act decisively, there would be a lot more squirrels alive today. So, too, we often act irrationally out of fear, which usually just makes our situation worse.

[In God's economy we can't help but succeed!](#)

Often we are afraid of failure. But look in the parable: no one who tried anything failed. I think it is the same way with spiritual risks. Things may not turn out as we had hoped or expected, but in God's economy, a faithful effort made in obedience to him will only bring good fruit. We can't help but succeed!

[Risk in making commitments](#)

Let me conclude by suggesting a few specific kinds of spiritual risks that we should be taking. The first would be the risk of commitment. Every time we make a commitment, we are giving up all the other things that this commitment precludes. This is a risk, and it is one reason why commitment is becoming increasingly rare in our culture.

[Risk in serving to others](#)

We also have opportunities to take relational risks, to go outside our comfort zone in order to love and serve others. This may include our family members, community brothers and sisters, or people who do not know the Lord. And related to this, the Lord may ask us to take identity risks, that is, to put our self-made identities on the shelf and to be willing to look different, even foolish, for the sake of God's purposes. Let's not be held back by what others may think of us.

[Risk in being generous](#)

Finally, we constantly have the opportunity to take the risk of being generous. There are many ways we can do this: with our money, our time, our attention, our resources, our skills and abilities. We need to keep in mind that, like the servants in the parable, all that we have is from our Master. We are stewards, and we do well to invest these resources in the work of the kingdom of God.

The master in the parable distributed the talents with discernment. We need to remember that God made each of us with great care; he gave us the gifts, abilities, and resources that he wanted us to have. He is calling us to risk all of these, to put them on the line, so that his kingdom may advance, and many others may come to know and serve him. Let us, who are always safe in our Master's hand, be spiritual risk takers.

[Jon Wilson is a coordinator of [Word of Life](#), a community of the Sword of the Spirit, and a member of Knox Presbyterian Church in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He and his wife, Melody and their five children live in Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA.]

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Double Vision

by W.E. Sangster

The real you is the self which Christ could make you. You were not made to grovel. You were not built to abide in sin. God made you for himself, and deep-set in your heart there are longings for holiness, and every now and then the Spirit inflames them and you long for the great spaces in which the saint moves.

I was in the Zoo some time ago and lingered by the cages of the eagles. Somehow or other the sight of them hurt me. I looked at the great wing-spread of the King of Birds, and felt sick at heart that they were caged.... Made for the skies ... and crammed in a cage.

So many of us are like that; made for the skies and imprisoned in sin. When Jesus looks at us, he sees us as we are, but, with his double vision, he sees us also as we might be.

He looked on Simon and saw Peter. He looked on Saul and saw Paul. He looked on Augustine the roué [debaucher] , and saw Augustine the saint.... If only we could see ourselves as Christ sees us! If we could stand at His elbow and get that double vision; the men and women we are; the men and women we might be! ... See yourself then "the man God meant." Hold the picture in the eye of relevant imagination whenever you pray. Dwell (on your knees) on the thought that God could make

you like that ... and, as you dwell on it daily and in prayer, God will use your sanctified imagination to pull you up. The actual will turn into the ideal. The difference may be so marked that you will need a new name. To you, as to one long ago, He may say "Thou art Simon ... Thou shalt be called 'Rock.'"

[excerpt from *Daily Readings from W.E. Sangster*, Frank Cumbers, editor, Revell, 1966, Old Tappan, New Jersey, USA]

William Edwin Sangster, a great Methodist preacher and writer, lived between 1900-1960. During World War II, he served as senior minister at Westminster Central Hall in London, the "cathedral" of Methodism. The basement became an air-raid shelter as soon as the German assault began. As space in the below-ground shelter was scarce, he and his family lived at great risk for five years on the hazardous ground floor. By war's end 450,000 people had found refuge in the church basement. In 1949 Sangster was elected president of the Methodist Conference of Great Britain.

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Spiritual Receptivity

by A.W. Tozer

What does the divine immanence mean in direct Christian experience? It means simply that God is here. Wherever we are, God is here. There is no place, there can be no place, where he is not. ...

If God is present at every point in space, if we cannot go where he is not, ... why then has not that Presence become the one universally celebrated fact of the world? The patriarch Jacob, "in the waste howling wilderness," gave the answer to that question. He saw a vision of God and cried out in wonder, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not."

The Presence and the manifestation of the Presence are not the same. There can be the one without the other. God is here when we are wholly unaware of it. He is manifest only when and as we are aware of His Presence....

Pick at random a score of great saints whose lives and testimonies are widely known. Let them be Bible characters or well known Christians of post-Biblical times. You will be struck instantly with the fact that the saints were not alike... The differences are as wide as human life itself. Yet they all walked, each in his day, upon a high road of spiritual living far above the common way. Their differences must have been incidental and in the eyes of God of no significance. In some vital quality they must have been alike. What was it?

I venture to suggest that the one vital quality which they had in common was spiritual receptivity.

Something in them was open to heaven, something urged them Godward....

Receptivity is not a single thing; it is a compound rather, a blending of several elements within the soul. It is an affinity for, a bent toward, a sympathetic response to, a desire to have.... It may be increased by exercise or destroyed by neglect. It is not a sovereign and irresistible force which comes upon us as a seizure from above. It is a gift of God, indeed, but one which must be recognized and cultivated as any other gift if it is to realize the purpose for which it was given....

The idea of cultivation and exercise, so dear to the saint of old, has now no place in our total religious picture. It is too slow, too common. We now demand glamour and fast flowing dramatic action.... To put it differently, we have accepted one another's notions, copied one another's lives and made one another's experiences the model of our own....

It will require a determined heart and more than a little courage to wrench ourselves loose from the grip of our times and return to Biblical ways. But it can be done....

Let any man turn to God in earnest, let him begin to exercise himself unto godliness, let him seek to develop his powers of spiritual receptivity by trust and obedience and humility, and the results will exceed anything he may have hoped in his leaner and weaker days.

[excerpt from [The Pursuit of God](#), by A.W. Tozer, 1948, public domain]

Aiden Wilson Tozer (April 21, 1897 - May 12, 1963) was an American Christian pastor, preacher, author, magazine editor, Bible conference speaker, and spiritual mentor. For his work, he received two honorary doctorate degrees.

Among the more than 40 books that he authored, at least two are regarded as Christian classics: *The Pursuit of God* and *The Knowledge of the Holy*. His books impress on the reader the possibility and necessity for a deeper relationship with God.

Living a simple and non-materialistic lifestyle, he and his wife, Ada Cecelia Pfautz, never owned a car, preferring bus and train travel. Even after becoming a well-known Christian author, Tozer signed away much of his royalties to those who were in need.

Tozer had seven children, six boys and one girl. He was buried in Ellet Cemetery, Akron, Ohio, with a simple epitaph marking his grave: "A. W. Tozer - A Man of God."

Prayer was of vital personal importance for Tozer. "His preaching as well as his writings were but extensions of his prayer life," comments his biographer, James L. Snyder, in the book, *In Pursuit of God: The Life Of A.W. Tozer*. "He had the ability to make his listeners face themselves in the light of what God was saying to them," writes Snyder.

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Fasting & Feasting: Short Readings for Lent from the Early Church Fathers



Hunger for Righteousness

by Gregory of Nyssa (330-394 AD)

Many say that righteousness consists in always giving to each what is right, what each deserves. I believe, however, taking account of the depth of the divine dispensation, that the word "righteousness" ought to include something more.

"Blessed are they that hunger...after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied". (Matt. 5:6).

When certain things are offered us as food, all of different sorts and very desirable, we need a great deal of patience to discover what is good nourishment and what is harmful. There is a danger that we will want to eat something that may lead to illness or death. Well then, only the person who is hungry for God's righteousness finds what everyone ought to be looking for.

In this passage, the Word says that righteousness is offered to all those who are hungry for it. It is clear that the word "righteousness" means the total sum of the virtues. It means that the person is blessed who possesses prudence, courage, moderation, temperance, self-control, who is hungry, in

short, for all included in the definition of virtue.

I insist on "all". It is not possible for one particular virtue to be isolated from the others and to remain a perfect virtue. For this reason, people in whom we do not find what we reckon as good, undoubtedly have in them the opposite of good. So it is absurd to speak of righteousness as applied to a person who is unwise, foolhardy, uncontrolled or dissolute in some way. Righteousness includes all the virtues and none is left out.

Let us be wholly absorbed by grace

by Pseudo-Marcarius (300-391 AD)

Inside us evil is at work suggesting unworthy inclinations. However, it is not in us in the same way as, to take an example, water mixes with wine. Evil is in us without being mixed with good.

We are a field in which wheat and weeds are growing separately. We are a house in which there is a thief, but also the owner. We are a spring which rises from the middle of the mud, but pours out pure water.

All the same, it is enough to stir up the mud and the spring is fouled. It is the same with the soul. If the evil is spread, it forms a unity with the soul and makes it dirty. With our consent, evil is united with the soul; they become accomplices.

Yet there comes a moment when the soul can free itself and remain separate again: in repentance, contrition, prayer, recourse to God. The soul could not benefit from these habits if it were always sunk in evil.

It is like marriage. A woman is united with a man and they become one flesh. But when one of them dies, the other is left alone.

But union with the Holy Spirit is complete. So let us become a single spirit with him. Let us be wholly absorbed by grace.

Let us glory in temptation

by Ambrose (339-397 AD)

The devil does not have only one weapon. He uses many different means to defeat human beings: now with bribery, now with boredom, now with greed he attacks, inflicting mental and physical wounds equally.

The kind of temptation varies with the different kinds of victim. Avarice is the test of the rich, loss of

children that of parents and everyone is exposed to pain of mind or body. What a wealth of weapons is at the devil's disposal!

It was for this reason that the Lord chose to have nothing to lose. He came to us in poverty so that the devil could find nothing to take away from him. You see the truth of this when you hear the Lord himself saying:

"The prince of this world is come and has found nothing in me" [John 14:30]. The devil could only test him with bodily pain, but this too was useless because Christ despised bodily suffering.

Job was tested by his own goods, whereas Christ was tempted, during the experience of the wilderness, by the goods of all. In fact, the devil robbed Job of his riches and offered Christ the kingdom of the whole world. Job was tested by vexations, Christ by prizes. Job the faithful servant replied: "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away" [Job 1:21] Christ, being conscious of his own divine nature, scorned the devil's offering of what already belonged to him.

So let us not be afraid of temptations. Rather, let us glory in them saying: "When I am weak, then am I strong." [2 Cor. 12:10].

Sin is in no way the fault of our nature

by John Chrysostom 354-407 AD)

"I am a victim of violence in my nature", you say. "I love Christ, yet my nature compels me to sin". If you were in fact compelled to sin, if you were the victim of violence, then you would be forgiven for it. On the other hand, if you sin through idleness, do not expect forgiveness.

But let us look at the question a moment to discover if we do commit sins by compulsion, under pressure of violence, rather than through idleness or serious negligence.

It is written: "Thou shalt not kill." But who compels you to kill? Who forces you to do it? On the contrary, you have to do violence to your own nature to kill someone. Which of us would lightly cut a neighbor's throat? Who would gladly stain his hands with blood? No one. So the facts are the exact opposite of your contention. To sin, you have to force yourself.

God has given our nature the gift of mutual love as a result of which every living creature loves its own kind, every human being loves his neighbor. Do you see? Our nature predisposes us to virtue. It is the vices that are contrary to nature. If they win a victory, it is the fault of serious negligence on our part.

And adultery, what shall we say about that? What sort of necessity drives you to that?

You answer: The tyranny of desire. Why, I ask you? Can you not have intercourse with your spouse and in this way defeat that tyranny? But I am in love with someone else's spouse. In this case there is no compulsion. Love cannot be compelled. You do not love because you are forced to love: you love

spontaneously, of your own free will. Sexual intercourse may be an irresistible need, but love is a free choice.

The conclusion is clearly apparent: virtue is consistent with our nature whereas vice is opposed to it.

Purification of Spirit through fasting and almsgiving

by Leo the Great (died 461 AD)

Dear friends, at every moment the earth is full of the mercy of God, and nature itself is a lesson for all the faithful in the worship of God. The heavens, the sea and all that is in them bear witness to the omnipotence of their Creator, and the marvelous beauty of the elements as they obey him demands from the intelligent creation a fitting expression of its gratitude.

But with the return of that season marked out in a special way by the mystery of our redemption, and of the days that lead up to the paschal feast, we are summoned more urgently to prepare ourselves by a purification of spirit.

The special note of the paschal feast is this: the whole Church rejoices in the forgiveness of sins. It rejoices in the forgiveness not only of those who are then reborn in holy baptism but also of those who are already numbered among God's adopted children.

Initially, men are made new by the rebirth of baptism. Yet there is still required a daily renewal to repair the shortcomings of our mortal nature, and whatever degree of progress has been made there is no one who should not be more advanced. All must therefore strive to ensure that on the day of redemption no one may be found in the sins of his former life.

Dear friends, what the Christian should be doing at all times should be done now with greater care and devotion, so that the Lenten fast enjoined by the apostles may be fulfilled, not simply by abstinence from food but above all by the renunciation of sin.

There is no more profitable practice as a companion to holy and spiritual fasting than that of almsgiving. This embraces under the single name of mercy many excellent works of devotion, so that the good intentions of the faithful may be of equal value, even where their means are not. The love that we owe both God and man is always free from any obstacle that would prevent us from having a good intention. The angels sang: *Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth*. The person who shows love and compassion to those in any kind of affliction is blessed, not only with the virtue of good will, but also with the gift of peace.

The works of mercy are innumerable. Their very variety brings this advantage to those who are true Christians, that in the matter of almsgiving not only the rich and affluent but also those of average means and the poor are able to play their part. Those who are unequal in their capacity to give can be equal in the love within their hearts.



Who Will Raise Tomorrow's Heroes?

by Michael Shaughnessy

Standard Dictionary Definitions

Hero: one regarded as a model; a person of outstanding moral character or one who has performed an act of great courage.

Courage: the mental or moral strength to face and withstand danger, fear or difficulty.

A Dallas Morning News article tells of teachers who no longer ask their students, “Who are your heroes?” since too many students can't come up with any. When they ask a boy who his heroes are, all he can think of is someone who has fame and money. Add good looks and you have the girl's list. Kids don't want to imitate them – they just want the fame, money and good looks. We live in an age with few great heroes for kids to imitate.

Fortunately, the world doesn't run on great heroes; it runs on little heroes: men and women who do what is noble, just, courageous and true – every day of their lives. It is today's parents, the little (family) heroes that will raise tomorrow's heroes, both small and great.

Raise a little hero. Some day he may be a big one. The world is going to need them.

[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.]

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Witnesses in the Jungle

Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, & Fellow Missionaries

by Jeanne Kun

In January 1956 the world was shocked to hear that a primitive tribe in the rain forest of Ecuador had killed five American missionaries. Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderian had been working at various jungle mission stations among the Quichua and Jivaro Indians for several years. The men, Protestant missionaries in their twenties and thirties, had been accompanied by their wives. Each couple was eager to share the message of the gospel with those who had never heard it. But, above all, they were dedicated to the Lord himself and sought to be obedient to him in all things.



Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Jim Elliot

Jim Elliot and his friends had hoped and prayed to be able to



team on the banks of the Curaray River

From Jim Elliot's journal:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. (1949)

God, I pray Thee, light these sticks of my life and may I burn for Thee. Consume my life, my God, for it is Thine. I seek not a long life, but a full one, like you, Lord Jesus. (1948)

Father, take my life, yea, my blood if Thou wilt, and consume it with Thine enveloping fire. I would not save it, for it is not mine to save. Have it Lord, have it all. Pour out my life as an oblation for the world. Blood is only of value as it flows before Thine altar. (1948)

Gave myself for Auca work more definitely than ever, asking for spiritual valor, plain and miraculous guidance. . . ." (May 1952)

make contact with an isolated and hostile people known by other tribes as the Aucas (“savages” in Quichua) because of their fierce infighting and hatred for outsiders. With his skill as a pilot for the Missionary Aviation Fellowship, Nate Saint had made it possible for the men to fly over the Auca settlements deep into the jungle and drop such gifts as cloth, axes, and cooking pots to assure them that their intentions were friendly and to win their trust. The Aucas reciprocated, tying native gifts – a parrot, a headband of woven feathers, manioc, and bananas – onto the plane’s drop-line.



Nate Saint next to his plane with camping gear

When the mission team landed on the banks of the Curaray River a few miles from the Auca village and set up camp, their hopes were rewarded: Three Aucas came out of the jungle and spent the day at the camp trying to communicate with the men, delightedly taking a ride in the plane, and curiously inspecting the missionaries’ equipment.

Two days later, on January 8, 1956, as Nate flew over the camp, he saw a group of Aucas headed toward it through the jungle. He landed near the campsite on the river bank, shouted the news “They’re on their way!” to Jim, Roger, Pete, and Ed, and by radio notified Marj Saint at the mission base of the hoped-for meeting. The next designated radio contact with their wives was never made.



Jim Elliot in the Curaray River surveys the jungle

A hymn written by Jim Elliot in Quichua, describing what happens when a man dies, using a simile from Ecclesiastes 11:3 which was simple and understandable to the Indians:

“If a man dies, he falls like a tree.
Wherever he falls, there he lies.
If he is not a believer, he goes to the fire-
lake.

“But on the other hand, a believer,
If death overtakes him,
Will not fall, rather will rise
That very moment, to God’s house.”

Nate Saint’s description of his work serving pioneering missionaries through aviation:

Their call of God is to the region beyond the ends of civilization’s roads—where there is no other form of transportation. They have probed the frontiers to the limit of physical capacity and prayed for a means of reaching regions beyond—a land of witch doctors and evil spirits—a land where the woman has no soul; she’s just a beast of burden—a land where there’s no word for



widows listen to the report of their husbands fate

The following morning, one of Nate's co-workers from the Missionary Aviation Fellowship flew over the site in search of the men and located the plane. All of its fabric had been stripped. Later a body was sighted, floating face down in the river, and then another. An armed expedition made up of the missionaries' colleagues, military personnel, and Quichuas set off on foot, hoping to find the other men still alive somewhere in the rain forest. A few days later, the other bodies, speared and sprawled in the sand and muddy river water, were discovered by helicopter. The ground party recovered four of the bodies and buried them on the banks of the Curaray. The body of the fifth missionary had been identified earlier by an advance party of Quichuas, but was washed away in a storm.

In the preface of *Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot*, first published in 1958, Elisabeth Elliot wrote:

“Jim’s aim was to know God. His course, obedience – the only course that could lead to the fulfillment of his aim. His end was what some would call an extraordinary death, although in facing death he had quietly pointed out that many have died because of obedience to God. He and the other men with whom he died were hailed as heroes, ‘martyrs.’ I do not approve. Nor would they have approved.

“Is the distinction between living for Christ and dying for him, after all, so great? Is not the second the logical conclusion of the first? Furthermore, to live for God is to die, ‘daily,’ as the apostle Paul put it. It is to lose everything that we may gain Christ. It is in thus laying down our lives that we find them.

“Those who want to know him [Christ] must walk the same path with him. These are the ‘martyrs’ in the scriptural

love in their vocabulary—no word to express the love of a father for his son. In order to reach these people for whom Christ died, pioneer missionaries slug it out on the jungle trails day after day, sometimes for weeks, often in mud up to their knees, while up above them the towering tropical trees push upward in a never-ending struggle for light.

It is our task to lift these missionaries up off those rigorous, life-consuming, and morale-breaking jungle trails—lift them up to where five minutes in a plane equals twenty-four hours on foot. The reason for all this is not a matter of bringing comfort to the missionaries. They don’t go to the steaming, tropical jungles looking for comfort in the first place. It’s a matter of gaining precious time, of redeeming days and weeks, months and even years that can be spent in giving the Word of Life to primitive people.

May the time never come when mankind no longer hears the soft footsteps of the herald angel, or his cheering words that penetrate the soul. Should such a time come all will be lost. Then indeed we shall be living in bankruptcy and hope will die in our hearts.

Nate Saint’s description of the first gift drop made to the Aucas:

We continued circling until the gift was drifting in a small lazy circle below us, ribbons fluttering nicely. Finally the gift appeared to be pretty close to the trees below. Once I believe the ribbons dragged across a tree and hung up momentarily. We held our breath while the kettle lowered toward the earth. It hit about two or three feet from the water directly in line with the path to the house. Finally the line was free and there was our messenger of good will, love and faith two thousand feet below on the sandbar. In a sense we had delivered the first gospel message by sign language to a people who are a quarter of a mile away vertically . . . fifty miles away horizontally . . . and continents and wide

sense of the word, which means simply ‘witnesses.’ In life, as well as in death, we are called to be ‘witnesses’ – to ‘bear the stamp of Christ.’

“I believe that Jim Elliot was one of these. His letters and journals are the tangible ground for my belief. They are not mine to withhold. They are a part of the human story, the story of a man in his relations to the Almighty. They are facts.”

Less than three years after the five men’s deaths, Elisabeth Elliot and Rachel Saint, Nate’s sister, made contact with the Aucas – who in their own language called themselves Huaorani or “the people” – through the help of an Huaorani woman who had earlier fled from her tribe. The Huaorani accepted the two women and Elisabeth’s daughter to live among them because they wondered why the missionaries had let themselves be killed rather than shoot any of their attackers. Then they heard the full story of how the men had come to tell them of Jesus, who “freely allowed his own death to benefit all people.



Steve Saint continues to visit the tribe regularly

Rachel spent more than thirty years working among the Huaorani. Steve, Nate Saint’s son, often visited his Aunt Rachel and grew up knowing the men who learned to “walk on God’s trail” after they had killed his father.

In an unbelievable expression of reconciliation, Steve Saint, Nate’s son, was baptized by two of the men who murdered his father, in the very river where his father died. Steve Saint has worked as a missionary in West Africa, Central America and South America.

At the request of the Waodani elders, he returned to the Amazon in 1995 along with his wife and children to live among the tribe for several months. While working with the Huaorani to build an airstrip in the jungle, Steve Saint spoke with Gikita, the leader of the attack. Then eighty years old, Gikita was eager to “go to heaven and live peacefully with the five men who came to tell him about Wangongi, creator God.”

seas away psychologically.

From Jim Elliot’s last letter to his parents, written on December 28, 1955:

By the time this reaches you, Ed [McCully] and Pete [Fleming] and I and another fellow [Roger Youderian] will have attempted with Nate a contact with the Aucas. We have prayed for this and prepared for several months, keeping the whole thing secret (not even our nearby missionary friends know of it yet). Some time ago on survey flights Nate located two groups of their houses, and ever since that time we have made weekly friendship flights, dropping gifts and shouting phrases from a loud speaker in their language, which we got from a woman in Ila. Nate has used his drop-cord system to land things right at their doorstep and we have received several gifts back from them, pets and food and things they make tied onto this cord. Our plan is to go downriver and land on a beach we have surveyed not far from their place, build a tree house which I have prefabricated with our power-saw here, then invite them over by calling to them from the plane. The contact is planned for Friday or Saturday, January 6 or 7. We may have to wait longer. I don’t have to remind you that these are completely naked savages (I saw the first sign of clothes last week—a G-string), who have never had any contact with white men other than killing. They do not have fire except what they make from rubbing sticks together on moss. They use bark cloth for carrying their babies, sleep in hammocks, steal machetes and axes when they kill our Indians. They have no word for God in their language, only for devils and spirits. I know you will pray. Our orders are “the gospel to every creature.”

—Your loving son and brother, Jim

From a letter written by Elisabeth

Jeanne Kun is a noted author and a senior womens' leader in the [Word of Life Community](#), Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA.

This article is excerpted from the book, [Even Unto Death: Wisdom from Modern Martyrs](#), edited by Jeanne Kun, The Word Among Us Press, © 2002. All rights reserved. Used with permission. The book can be ordered from [WAU Press](#).

Recommended reading:
[Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot](#),
by Elisabeth Elliot, 1958
[End of the Spear](#), by Steve Saint, Tyndale House Publishers
(15 May 2006)

Recommended viewing:
[Testimony by Steve Saint](#), *End of the Spear*, YouTube video
[Beyond the Gates of Splendor](#), story of Jim Elliot and
missionary companions, YouTube video

Elliot to her parents on January 11, 1956, while the five wives were waiting for news of the fate of their husbands:

I want you to know that your prayers are being answered moment by moment as regards me—I am ever so conscious of the everlasting arms. As yet we know only that two bodies have been sighted from the air but not identified.

Jim was confident, as was I, of God's leading. There are no regrets.

Nothing was more burning in his heart than that Christ should be named among the Aucas. By life or death, oh, may God get glory to himself.

Pray that whatever the outcome I may learn the lessons needful. I want to serve the Lord in the future, so pray for his continued grace and guidance. I have no idea what I will do if Jim is dead, but the Lord knows and I am at rest.

We hope for final word tomorrow and trust our loving Father who never wastes anything. All my love,

Betty

Selection of quotes from
Shadow of the Almighty: The Life and Testament of Jim Elliot, by Elizabeth Elliot. Copyright 1985 by Elizabeth Elliot (HarperCollins Publishers Inc.)

Jungle Pilot: The Life and Witness of Nate Saint, by Russel T. Hitt. Copyright 1959 by The Fields, Inc. (HarperCollins Publishers Inc)

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom
email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com



View a video introduction at Kairos-Media.org

Kairos Media – Launching a new web portal for Christians

an interview with Toufic Elramy, new director of Kairos Media

Kairos Youth Culture Newsletter Staff: Toufic, you were asked to spearhead the Kairos Media project. It's big! Where do you start?

Toufic: Modern culture rides on technology: film, television, radio, internet, mp3 players, video games. When youth aren't at school they are almost always interacting with technology of some sort. As most of us know, much of the web is not morally safe. You can go to Youtube or iTunes for all the right reasons and come away slimed. So, we are starting by providing an excellent and healthy media portal – a place where youth can go that is "cool," but also up-building.

KYCN: Excellence is a high standard!

Toufic: Yes. Cool may be more challenging though, but I think we have an answer for both. In the beginning we expect to get a fair amount of stuff that is somewhat short of excellent. That's ok. We primarily want to have a place where our youth can showcase their own work. They'll produce something, upload it and invite their friends to come and see. Some of it will be really popular – thus cool. The best songs and videos we will re?do in high quality and make them available for purchase. Over time, the site will grow in excellence.

KYCN: When will this media portal be ready?

Toufic: It's in development now. You can already upload videos and music to the site by going to www.kairos-media.org. We are planning an online "come and see party" starting February 26th.

KYCN: How will you ensure that Kairos media site will be safe?

Toufic: Each video and every song will be reviewed before it goes on line. Three criteria will have to be met. First, is it technically good enough? The sound quality must be adequate. The image must be in focus, etc. Second, does it uphold spiritual and moral excellence? If it falls into a gray area, it won't be posted. People will need to hit the bulls-eye, not just the target. Third, we won't post anything illegal or offensive: politically, culturally, ethnically, ecumenically, racially or otherwise.

KYCN: Are you worried about kids getting addicted to your site like they do to Facebook and YouTube?

Toufic: I wish! Well, not really. Our goal is not that. Like anything potentially addicting, people need to be wise. Alcohol, television, classical music, football – any of them can be addicting. If we see it is becoming a problem, we will provide a way to limit access.

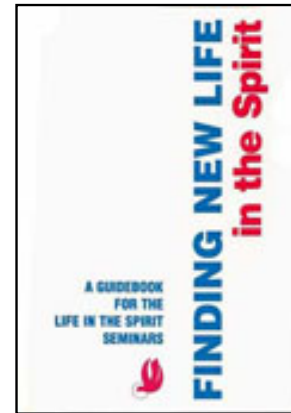
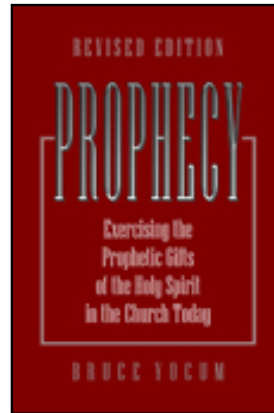
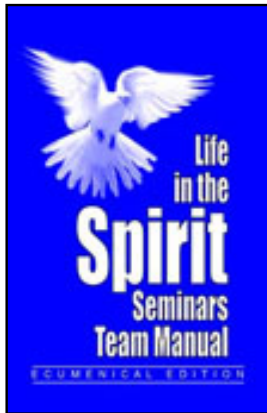
KYCN: How can people get involved?

Toufic: If they have already created a video or recorded a song, they can upload it now. More importantly, we need people to record songs or skits they do in the future. We also need team members who will review the material that is uploaded. We need financial support as well! My budget for this year is \$70,000. People can donate to this project at the kairos-media.org page. I also need people who will help me do fundraising. I already have some of my team in place here in Lebanon and in the U.S. but I will definitely need more people soon! Anyone who wants to help can email me directly via toufic.elramy@googlemail.com until I become really famous. Then I'll change my e-mail.

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publishing address: Park Royal Business Centre, 9-17 Park Royal Road, Suite 108, London NW10 7LQ, United Kingdom
email: living.bulwark@yahoo.com

Tabor House



a publishing resource for members of the Sword of the Spirit
by Jerry Munk

[Tabor House](http://www.taborpub.com) is a ministry of the North American Region of the Sword of the Spirit. It publishes resources for members of the Sword of the Spirit and makes those resources available through the Tabor House on-line book store: www.taborpub.com. In addition to this on-line book store, each of the member communities in the North American region has a local book table to make Tabor House books readily available to members and guests. Many of the books produced by Tabor House are "classic" books from the early days of the covenant-community movement. Slowly, however, new material is being developed and added to the Tabor House catalog, so check the website from time to time for new titles. [In the works: Bob Tedesco, former president of the North American Region, is putting the finishing touches on a powerful (but yet unnamed book) on the Sword of the Spirit. Don Schwager's book, *Servants of Jesus Christ*, is also nearing completion.]

Reading is a powerful means of Christian growth. Unfortunately, reading Christian books is not as popular as it used to be. Other media and the busyness of everyday life seem to have squeezed reading from the schedules of many. Some members of the Sword of the Spirit find it helpful to make a commitment to Christian reading – in addition to their reading the Bible. Including in your Christian reading books about the life and mission of the Sword of the Spirit helps to build a deeper understanding of God's work in and through Christian community.

In 2010, the Sword of the Spirit is celebrating the 40th anniversary of charismatic, covenant, Christian community. The book, *Building Christian Communities* by Steve Clark (Ave Maria Press, 1972) laid out a foundational concept upon which the Sword of the Spirit was eventually built. If you have never read this book (or if it has been decades since you last read it) consider reading it and growing in your understanding of the roots of the Sword of the Spirit. (Note: *Building Christian Communities* was last printed in 1992 and has not been available for many years. *Tabor House* received special permission from the original publisher to print 200 copies for the Sword of the Spirit. When those copies are gone, the book will again be out of print. If you want a copy, do not delay.)

[Jerry Munk is the publisher for Tabor House and a coordinator of [Work of Christ Community](http://www.workofchristcommunity.com) in Lansing, Michigan, USA. He is the author of *Life in the Spirit Seminar for Children*, available from Tabor House.]