

# Following Jesus in the "Real World": Discipleship for the Post-College Years

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## **A Turning Point**

Graduation. The "real world." Finding a job. Applications, résumés, interviews. School loans. Rent, first and last. Graduate school or work? Options and decisions, hopes and reality.

If you respond to these words with a gut reaction of anxiety, concern or confusion, then you are probably about to graduate from college, or you have recently graduated. There's reason for your feelings. If it was ever easy to graduate from college, choose a direction and move on in life, it is not easy today. The terrain is unmapped, the destination uncertain, the stakes ultimate. Life beyond college is a maze in a haze—multiple decisions, none clear-cut, each potentially a detour. If you desire to follow Jesus Christ, then in addition to the common concerns regarding graduation, you know that life involves temptation and trials. "The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:14).

How am I to pursue faith in God after college? How will my relationship with Jesus look different? Has anything I learned during my

college years prepared me for the choices and decisions I face as I leave? These are fundamental questions you have probably begun to ask yourself, whether you have two months until graduation or graduated a few years ago. What does it mean to follow Jesus in the "real world"?

It helps to remember that many people have already experienced the transition to life beyond college. You face fears and concerns that are fairly common to people in this stage of life. Listen to the statements of a few Christians who recently moved beyond the college setting:

*Dana:* As graduation got nearer, people constantly asked me, "So, what are you doing after graduation?" This bothered me, although I expected it. At first I even thought it was cool that I had no answer or that each time someone asked I had a different answer.

*Bill:* My feelings as I neared graduation were mainly fears. I was afraid of looking for work, of leaving my friends and of not knowing what God wanted me to do.

*Randy:* I was concerned about my future when I graduated. I had no idea where I was going to live, or what kind of work would feel right, or who would even hire me.

*Elisa and Dave:* Our biggest concerns were probably about money. When we left on our honeymoon (immediately following graduation), we knew that when we got back we had no place to live, no jobs and no savings to speak of.

### The Critical Time

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:14-15)

Jesus began his ministry at a critical time in the life of the Jewish people. The people of Jesus' day were desperate for divine intervention in their world. They were looking for God's Messiah to come and to save them from an oppressive political reality, the Roman occupation. Jesus' very first proclamation both warns and invites his hearers

to act on his timely message. The Greek word for "time" here is *kairos*, meaning "the critical time" or "the decisive point." The kingdom of God has come near, and those who hear the proclamation face a choice. The point of decision comes—and then goes. Jesus invites his hearers to respond: repent and believe the good news while there is still time.

Today there is perhaps no "critical time" or "decisive point" like that of the transition between college and postcollege. Until this point most of us were carefully prepared for almost every major educational transition. Nursery school prepared us for the fast-paced life of kindergarten; sixth grade prepared us for the increased pressure of junior high; even high school offered college prep courses and other extracurricular activities to prepare us well for college. Each had a growing variety of options. But even the wide variety of college courses, majors and activities seems pretty narrow when compared with the tremendous diversity of options for life after college: jobs, professions, graduate schools, internships, marriage and family, overseas missions, church and parachurch ministries, and the host of critical life decisions that accompany each of these choices.

Colleges do attempt to provide some aid as we make this transition—but not in ways that are especially helpful for Christians. "Faithfulness to God" is not a relevant category for most career-planning and job-placement centers at secular schools. Any help offered usually neglects considerations of faith and spiritual growth. This makes the decisive point of the transition between college and postcollege all the more critical for Christians, for we are swimming upstream as we try to make faithful choices in a faithless world.

With this appreciation of the "kairos" of the transition from college to life beyond, let's return to the initial proclamation of Jesus: the kingdom of God has come near!

Jesus invited his first hearers to join the kingdom of God. Now a kingdom requires a king. Jesus' declaration means that the King of the kingdom of God is also near. That king, as Mark spells it out, is Jesus himself. And that is the good news! If we want to respond to the kingship of Jesus, we will need to become subjects of the King by

doing what he says to do: "Repent, and believe in the good news."

If you are facing graduation from college or have recently gone through this transition, you are in a "kairos" moment, a critical time, a decision point. If you understand yourself as a disciple of Jesus Christ, one who is following Jesus the King, this is a critical time to return to the basic gospel message and see how to apply it to your current experience and your choices.

This book will work toward that fundamental goal through a sequence of four steps:

- ☐ *examine assumptions* regarding life in the "real world"
- ☐ *affirm convictions* and values by which to make key decisions
- ☐ *identify directions* for future faithfulness based on wise discernment of God's will for your life
- ☐ *rekindle hope* that life beyond college can be even better than life in college and that discipleship beyond college can produce more spiritual growth, more effectiveness in ministry and a greater sense of participation in the advance of the kingdom of God.

### Something That Will Last Forever

The advance of the kingdom of God—that's really what it's all about, isn't it? If you're like many people I've known, you saw dramatic evidence of the advance of the kingdom of God while you were in college. Relationships were plentiful and easily formed, so the avenues for kingdom impact were numerous. You may have seen friends become Christians. You may have helped a young Christian grow in his or her faith—or had someone help you mature in Christ. You may have taken leadership in a group—small or large—and seen God work through your willingness to take risks. My experience is that participation in the advance of the kingdom of God is addictive: once you have tasted it you want more. Perhaps the most dramatic advance of the kingdom of God you saw was in your own life, as your values and priorities changed based on a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. If you want more, great!

The worship song "I Want to Serve the Purpose of God in My Generation" powerfully expresses this desire to participate in the ad-

vance of the kingdom: "I want to give my life for something that will last forever!" What an inspiring declaration! The song became popular partly because it verbalizes deeply rooted desires. Who doesn't want to give her life for eternally valuable goals? Who wants to give his life for trivial, mundane and temporary things?

Yet the reality is that some of the people who sang that line while in college now find themselves squandering their lives for things that can't possibly last forever. The "real world" economy just isn't hospitable to the idealistic phrasings of our worship songs. Hectic workdays yield no peace; time-squeezed relationships yield no love; materialistic acquisitiveness yields no joy. Where is the kingdom of God in all that?

I hope that you too have sung the line (at least in your heart): "I want to give my life for something that will last forever!" My hope for this book is that you may find help to get on track, get *back* on track or *stay* on track, to make choices toward that end. Jesus made a remarkable promise to his disciples in John 15:16: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last." Jesus promised that his intention in calling us to be disciples is that our lives will be fruitful. Meaningful. Effective. That our lives will make an impact. This is an amazing promise, but he said more than that. He described the fruit as "fruit that will last." Eternal fruit. Today Jesus says to us, "I chose you and appointed you to give your life for something that will last forever." There is no cause, no corporation, no movement that can promise its adherents that what they accomplish with their lives will last forever. None, that is, except the movement that Jesus proclaimed, the kingdom of God.

The desire to make an eternal impact is not a vain wish, an unrealizable, idealistic dream. Rather, it is at the very center of God's purpose for our lives. Let's settle for nothing less than Jesus' purpose for us: lasting fruit.

### The Value of the Process

So let's think together about what it might look like to give our lives for something that will last forever. If Jesus appointed us to bear



lasting fruit, he must have some sort of plan. That simple realization is at the heart of the critical question "What is God's will for my life?" I hope that at least a part of you is impatient and eager to know the answer to this question. (I also hope that you haven't stopped asking it and never will.) The four-step process outlined above will help to identify God's will for your life, but be patient. The *process* of receiving guidance from God is usually as important as the specific guidance received.

If you have recently graduated and find yourself still unsure of God's will for your life, then know this: you are not alone. Furthermore, God is already at work maturing you and preparing you to trust him more and more as he leads you into the future.

When I entered college I thought I had things well planned out—major, advanced study, career, the works. "What is God's will for my life?"—I thought it was clear. Now, sixteen years later, I realize that my vision for the future really had little to do with God's vision. I still don't know what I'll be doing five years from now, but at least I know that I don't know. That's fine, because I look at my life differently now. I have come to understand my life as one of "following Jesus." I appreciate the biblical phrase "following Jesus" because it expresses movement. It is a dynamic image. Since I am following Jesus and he is on the move, I am moving with him. While I am less sure about where I'll be in five years than I once was, I know that Jesus will be there. I have joined with the first disciples in responding to the invitation of Jesus to come follow him.

If you don't already see your life in this dynamic, change-welcoming way, I invite you to join with me and all those who follow Jesus. We will need to be comfortable with the process, not simply impatient to arrive. In fact, we won't arrive until we see him face to face.

# 1 What Do You Expect?

**W**hen recent college graduates talk about the way life has changed since they left college, several emotion-packed words come up repeatedly: *fear, frustration, loneliness, confusion*. It's true: the transition out of college can be one of the most uncertain times in a person's life. But for disciples of Jesus, this time of transition can also open up tremendous potential for growth.

Think back to what you thought college would be like. As a high schooler, I was pretty sure that growing as a Christian would be extremely difficult in college. In fact, Christian growth wasn't necessarily even a concern for me—mere survival was all I was hoping for. But soon after I arrived at college, I joined a Christian fellowship that helped me grow more in a few years than I had in my whole prior life as a believer. Going to a secular university proved to be not the end of my Christian walk, nor a detour for it, but the critical path along which much of my growth occurred.

Maybe your experience was different. Perhaps you didn't expect to

find God in college, but he found you. Perhaps you even intended to leave your faith behind, but God chased after you! Or perhaps you went to a Christian college, and there God allowed you to learn of him in and out of class.

Whatever your expectations, God probably surprised you, giving you a deeper knowledge of himself than you had anticipated. Yet now, as you leave or look back on college, it can be tempting to think that this time of rapid growth in your faith is coming or has come to an abrupt end. Back to survival mode.

All of us can expect to do more than survive as Christians after college. We can expect to thrive as growing disciples of Jesus Christ. The challenges we face can be the very things that help us learn new trust in God.

The difference between seeing life in the "real world" as a *threat* and looking at it as an *opportunity* largely reflects the assumptions we carry around about what adult life is supposed to look like. College and the "American dream" are so integrally linked in our cultural heritage that huge, fairy-tale, dreamlike expectations are placed on our life beyond college: we hope to find financial security, emotional health, romantic bliss, personal freedom, self-actualization—in short, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These are high stakes! The possibility of making mistakes takes on intimidating proportions. Who will save us from the paralysis that comes over us when we face life-and-death decisions with little to go on? Let's return to the beginning of the gospel.

### Prepare the Way of the Lord

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' " (Luke 3:2-6)

Because this story is familiar, it may be difficult to grasp how radical John the Baptist's preaching was. When the word of God came to him, he appeared in the wilderness, on the outskirts of a tiny outpost of the Roman Empire. He preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Jews of the day would understand all the terms in this phrase, but certainly not the way John was using them. At that time baptism was a ceremony for ritual cleansing of Gentiles who were converting to Judaism, those called "proselytes." John's Jewish hearers would have had a category for baptism, but they must have balked at its application to themselves. Why would native-born Jews need to be baptized?

Imagine someone today preaching to the citizens of my city, Boston, "None of you are real Americans! You all need to be naturalized!" Citizens of Boston wouldn't stand for that kind of talk. "What do you mean, naturalized? My family has been here for three generations [or three hundred years]!" If you were born in the United States, you don't need to be naturalized. You already have citizenship.

As with us, so with the Jews in John's time. Baptism meant more than simply taking a bath. It designated entrance into a whole new culture. God designed the Jewish culture to be different from the other nearby cultures. Baptism was a sign of the unique covenantal relationship between God and his people, the people of Israel. Through the symbolic cleansing, "unclean" Gentiles were purified and allowed to enter into this covenant relationship. But it required a total cultural change, affecting all of life: religious rituals, food, work, rest, family, morality, social patterns and allegiances.

But John took the familiar ritual of baptism and gave it new meaning. John proclaimed the coming of a new kingdom and a new citizenship. His preaching is parallel to that of Jesus in Mark 1: a kingdom is coming, and people need to be prepared to declare their allegiance to the new King. The image John uses in Luke 3:4-6 makes this clear: the King is coming, so prepare the road to welcome him.

Fill in the potholes; take out the speed bumps; smooth out the road. John's message is "Prepare for the coming King!" The question we must ask is, How? John's first hearers asked the same question . . .

### **Bear Fruits Worthy of Repentance**

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (Luke 3:7-14)

John must have been a fascinating man. The Gospel of Mark tells us that he dressed in the style of Elijah, the great prophet of former times. He spoke with power and conviction, drawing thousands out to the inhospitable wilderness to hear him. And what gentle words of encouragement does he have for those who have honored his preaching by their coming? "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" John had a way with people, didn't he?

What is the answer to John's rhetorical question? "Who warned us to flee the wrath to come? You did, John!" So why isn't John the Baptist satisfied?

John knows his audience too well to be satisfied with record turnouts. He knows that these people have a tendency to want to justify their own lives before God because of their standing as Jews. John says to his audience, "Don't even *try* to say, 'We are children of Abra-

ham'! Don't give me any of that!"

In the Jewish culture, being a child of Abraham would usually do it. The ability to claim the proper pedigree would have been considered enough to ensure salvation from impending judgment. Yet John changes the definition of citizenship. To be included in God's people, one must "bear fruits worthy of repentance." John wants to see people whose lives have demonstrated that they really have repented, not just people who are willing to participate in one more ritual in a religion filled with rituals.

To understand what John wants, we need to understand the difference between being a "child of Abraham" and bearing good fruit. Being a "child of Abraham" is passive and static; it is simply a state of being. And John makes it clear that bearing fruit worthy of repentance requires action, involving choices and direction.

The Jews of John's day said, "We are children of Abraham." We evangelicals are prone to make the same sorts of pronouncements: "I'm a born-again Christian." "I believe the Bible." "I *teach* the Bible!"

The Jews thought their standing before God was determined by their ethnic heritage. We can tend to think our standing before God has to do with our Christian heritage, our résumé and credentials. Not that we'd actually claim to be justified by our deeds—we can spot works theology a mile away. But deep down, we all have a tendency to think that what makes us acceptable to God is the things we have done for him that differentiate us from others who haven't been as faithful.

In response to this attitude John calls for only one thing: repentance. We must turn away, make a 180-degree turn. To prepare for the coming of the King, we must leave behind what we formerly embraced. John is talking about true, not cosmetic, change. The issue is both timely and decisive: "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

The crowd responds to John's preaching by asking, "What then shall we do?" It's a good question. John then very plainly tells them how to practice repentance. Interestingly, he focuses on relationships,



daily activities and practical situations. He doesn't say, "You guys aren't religious enough! Pray more, fast, tithe and do more rituals." Instead he says, "Be just in your relationships. Care for someone in need." For John's hearers, taking up his challenge will mean severe cuts in income, privilege and power. Acting on any of John's challenges will affect people's standard of living.

We often think of repentance as what happens in prayer between us and God. It doesn't tend to cost much; it is personal and chiefly attitudinal. Here John expects an attitude change, but the actions must illustrate repentance. John challenges his hearers to respond to the coming King with costly actions at the relationship level. John addresses the issues that affect us most deeply: money, power, food, clothing—the basics.

John's role, as spelled out in the Isaiah prophecy, is to prepare the way of the Lord. John paved roads in the hearts of the people, calling them to repentance. Yet Luke tells us that John was preaching *good* news to the people (3:18). The good news is that the King of the kingdom of God is coming! We must be prepared to welcome him; we must hold this purpose in mind as we turn from the things that keep us from him. The picture in Scripture is that repentance always accompanies belief: "repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). We must turn from the things we have trusted in so that we can embrace the coming King.

So what does repentance look like for those who are about to launch into life beyond college?

### Let Go of Your Branches

Imagine that you've fallen off a cliff.

I didn't choose this image because of its similarity to the experience that is the subject of this book, but it is perhaps a fitting image. Perhaps you have had recent dreams of falling off a cliff, getting in touch with your psyche's deep fear of the unknown. Or you may have recently graduated and feel as if you already did fall off a cliff.

Imagine that you have fallen off a cliff—and are hanging on a branch. You are not going anywhere—but you can't get up. The image

I am thinking of comes from the cartoon story of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. The coyote has fallen off the cliff, you think he's dropped to his death, but he proves to be holding on to the branch of a tree, which just happens to be growing out from the cliff wall. At least he's not falling—he's safe for the time being, though he's not yet on solid ground.

So here you are, hanging from a branch on the side of a treacherous cliff. A man stands at the top of the cliff. "Do you need some help?" he asks.

All you can manage to say is "Yes, please."

The man offers you his hand, but though he is quite strong he cannot rescue you until you let go of the branch. So he says, "Please, let go of the branch."

What do you do? "No, pull me up first," you plead. But you realize that he's right: you can't be saved while holding on to the branch. The man at the top begs you to let go.

Why would you refuse? You might think, *If I let go, this guy might (1) be unable to save me and let me slip out of his grasp, (2) let go of me intentionally or (3) plummet over the cliff with me.* Ultimately it is a question of trust.

This scenario illustrates the nature of repentance. All of us tend to trust certain "branches" to keep us from falling or failing in life. We may recognize that these branches aren't ideal. We know they can't save us, but they do keep us from falling.

I define a branch in this sense as anything that promises security: the approval of others, athletic success, romantic relationships, career goals and achievements, money, status, self-sufficiency, political ideology, friendships. Because these things promise security, as we trust in them we are tempted not to trust in God, or we simply don't think we have to. I am not saying that all these things are bad or wrong or sinful, but like many good things, any of them can be turned into an idol. We are tempted to trust these things for security and safety rather than putting ourselves in the sure hand of Jesus.

The cliff-hanging scenario illustrates two fundamental and simple truths: we all desperately need to be saved, and Jesus is the only

means of real salvation. The only life the world has to offer us is like hanging on the edge of a cliff. No amount of financial security can save us—the branch could break at any time, we could lose our grip. No branch the world offers can help us get to the top of the cliff; only the strong and faithful grip of Jesus can do that. If Jesus is going to save us, really save us, from the only life the world has to offer, then we must let go of these branches.

In college I found a peer group, one that valued the things of the kingdom. With the help of older Christians and fellow students, I began to let go of many of the branches that I'd been clutching tenaciously. One critical branch for me was achieving success on the world's terms. Being successful itself isn't wrong, but an idolatrous pursuit of success certainly is. For me it was a branch that offered security but was ultimately unable to save me. Until I let go, this branch kept me from making certain choices to be faithful to Jesus. Later, when my girlfriend broke up with me, I was forced to let go of the romantic-relationship branch I had held on to. As painful as the breakup was, the following six months was a rich time of growth in my faith as I found myself with only Jesus as my security. Perhaps this has been your experience as well.

In one way or another we all have lost a branch, yet probably none of us have released all of our branches. And the question now is, What then shall we do as we leave college?

### Entering the "Real World"

You are about to enter the *real world*. You've used and heard the phrase many times. Of course it presents a bias, as if the college culture and environment were unreal and inferior. It subtly implies that what you have learned about discipleship in college won't work after college. Others may advise you, "It's fine to be idealistic when you're in college, but when you get out in the *real world*, life isn't like that."

When some parents look at the lifestyles of collegiate Christians, they aren't especially excited. Perhaps Christian growth has involved learning to value people more than grades and material belongings.

So with your time, possessions and even money you are generous and hospitable to the people around you. Yet your parents may think, *I didn't send you to college to learn how to be kind to street people and help other people with their relationship problems.*

Your parents may well have tolerated your Christian activity and growth in college because they could comfort themselves with the thought, *At least Karl [or Kari] will still end up with a degree. Surely he/she will have enough sense to settle down and get a job, go into the real world and live a normal life.* Added to such spoken or unspoken expectations is the "wisdom" of professors and peers who remind you, "Things will all change in the *real world*."

The fact is that many things *do* change upon graduation from college. Certain routine situations, like eating at a dining hall with a dozen friends, are no longer routine at all. Sleep patterns, work deadlines, free-time availability—all these do change, sometimes drastically.

But some more fundamental things don't change. What doesn't change is the reality of the world as described by Jesus and his call to his disciples to follow him. Jesus' authority in your life will not suddenly be invalid when you graduate.

As we Christians leave college, we face a real challenge as we reject the set of values and principles preferred by the non-Christian world. We must learn how to apply biblical convictions and values to a new set of circumstances and a different context. As we continue to grow in understanding of God's Word and in our experience of God, we expect that our convictions will mature and change. Yet the new context itself doesn't and shouldn't invalidate all we have already learned about what it means to follow Jesus.

### Repenting of Assumptions

Our lives are filled with expectation and hope as we graduate from college. We send out announcements and receive cards and gifts from well-wishers who have high hopes because of the promise we have shown. In the process we tend to take in many assumptions and hopes of others that may have nothing to do with God's design for our lives.



These assumptions are not forced on us by malevolent influences but rather are ironically imposed by those who have our "best interests" in mind.

We need to repent of holding many of these assumptions and placing our security and hope for a happy future in them. This is different from saying that none of our friends' and family's assumptions are true or will come true. For example, a good many people assume that they will get married, and most of them do marry. Yet the hope of marriage can be a branch, promising a measure of relational security and happiness. Holding on to this branch may make us less available to respond to God's leading in our lives. Letting go of the branch may in fact put us in the place where we can really experience God's guidance and provision, including his provision for us in marriage. We need to repent of clutching this branch so that we can see that God is the source even of relational security.

The following three stories illustrate several of the most common assumptions regarding life in the "real world." As you read, consider the following list of topics and identify the assumptions of each:

- ☐ job
- ☐ money
- ☐ education
- ☐ housing
- ☐ church
- ☐ lifestyle
- ☐ friendships and marriage

**Brad.** Brad was a political science major in college. He wound up in a business consulting job because the company conducted its interviews on campus with a relatively well-structured job-search process. Brad had been told he would be working fifty to fifty-five hours a week, but he found he really needed to put in sixty-five to seventy-five hours in order to stay up with the other first-year interns.

He had always liked the idea of living in Chicago, where the job was located, but he didn't know anyone there. He posted an ad at a big church for a Christian rooming situation, but nothing developed soon enough, so he rented a small one-bedroom apartment for \$550

a month. This seemed high to him, but so did his pretax monthly salary of \$2,400.

Having been a Bible study leader in his college fellowship, Brad had expected to get involved in a church, eventually in a teaching capacity somehow. But with the work schedule he kept, he was lucky just to have the energy and time to attend church regularly. One of Brad's best friends went to China to teach English for two years, and Brad had hoped to support this ministry financially and in prayer. But seeing his first after-tax paycheck brought him up short, especially when he totaled up rent, the costs of furnishing an apartment, and school loans. Brad never made a conscious decision about tithing, but two years later he had never given regularly, either to church or to missions. Then his intern position ended, and he went on to business school.

**Janet.** A literature major while in college, Janet had hoped to go into publishing. But because the job market was tight, she applied to graduate school as a backup. When no job offers came, she entered a Ph.D. program in American literature at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Janet had never considered living in the Midwest, but this was the best option available. Though the area had many strong churches, she found it more difficult to get to know people than it had been in her college fellowship. As far as she could tell, she was the only Christian graduate student in her department. Most of her fellow students seemed extremely hostile to Christianity.

**Steve and Amy.** Having dated all through college, Steve and Amy were married the weekend after graduation. She found the job she had prepared for during college, teaching junior-high school; he began work with an accounting firm. Their first year out of college was extremely difficult. Struggling to adjust to the demands of teaching, Amy gave her job a good deal of emotional energy, while Steve was working forty-five to fifty hours a week in addition to studying for the CPA licensing board examinations. They felt lucky to find an apartment halfway between their two jobs, so that each had to drive only twenty-five to forty minutes each way.

The demands of their schedule and their desire to build their

young marriage left them without time for regular fellowship, apart from going to dinner occasionally with old friends from college. They were quick to tell their friends of their dissatisfaction with the church they had begun to attend, but their motivation to do anything about it faded over time.

What unstated assumptions did Brad, Janet, Steve and Amy share as they made the transition out of college?

*Assumptions about jobs.* Perhaps the most dangerous assumption in decisions about life after college is the unquestioned priority of finding a job over every other decision. Each of the people in the examples above made major decisions based on finding a job in a certain location. The job brought Brad to Chicago, while the lack of one sent Janet to Ann Arbor. Steve's and Amy's jobs are an hour apart by car, so that geographical fact determined the location of the suburb into which they moved.

This assumption is dangerous because it implies a relative priority of job, profession or career over church, ministry, community, friendship, spiritual growth or any other related intangibles that should be factors in our decision-making. Of course job opportunities should play a role. But in the harsh "real world" of postcollege, finding a job can too easily become the first goal. For example, the decision process used by the graduates described above followed this general pattern:

- ☐ Find a job, which determines a general location in which to live.
- ☐ Find an apartment near enough to the job.
- ☐ Find a solid church near to where you live.
- ☐ Get involved in one aspect of the church you begin to attend.
- ☐ Make new friends, *if possible*, in your new small group or ministry team.

But this isn't the only way to make these big decisions about life after college. Consider a group of friends and partners from a college fellowship who decided to live together after graduation and pursue ministry in an urban context together. These four friends, Laura, Suzie, Debbie and Cheryl, moved to San Francisco to pursue ministry in the Mission District, a neighborhood with a predominantly Central American population. They spent much time in prayer asking for

God's guidance. Their process was almost the reverse of the one considered above:

- ☐ They chose ministry partners, with whom they shared kingdom values and a common vision for life.
- ☐ They chose a ministry field and a church that supported and helped them to advance ministry in their field.
- ☐ They found an apartment in a convenient location that facilitated their ministry and relationships in their church.
- ☐ They found jobs that supported them while involved in ministry and in the life of their church.

Another friend made different decisions to pursue God's call on his life. Rik is a Dutch citizen who graduated from college in Boston. He hopes one day to be a self-supporting missionary in Europe. Rik speaks Dutch, German and French as well as English. In order to follow his sense of God's leading, he sought a sales job with a company that has large operations in Europe. Rik hoped for a job in Boston, where his other ministry partners and good friends were living, but he was offered a job in Hartford, Connecticut, nearly two hours away. Rik decided to take the job, and his supervisor promised that he would be transferred to Boston as soon as possible. Rik hopes to return to Europe with some of his college partners, so he has invested time to maintain his friendship and partnership with people in Boston. Recently he received the job transfer to Boston, and partnerships continue to grow.

The point is not that there is only one right decision to make or even only one right way to make these kinds of decisions. The point is that unquestioned assumptions about how these important decisions get made will be likely to dilute discipleship after college.

A second major assumption we make regarding jobs is that our identity is wrapped up in what we do for a living. After finding out a person's name, usually the next question we ask is, "What do you do?" And we don't mean "what do you do in your free time?" When we ask this question, and when we answer it, we are usually placing others (or ourselves) in value-laden boxes based on the status of our jobs. Obviously Jesus (a carpenter by trade) or the many fishermen-

disciples were not hindered by working-class labels. The assumption that identity equals job has several implications:

☐ *Only certain types of employment are acceptable beyond college: full-time, professional positions with open-ended advancement potential.* In the example above, because Janet did not find such a job, she began an expensive five-year graduate program to enable her to find the kind of position she wanted. Janet's decision-making process reflected her narrow assumptions regarding acceptable employment more than it reflected hearing from God.

☐ *Your salary accurately reflects your worth to society.* This cynical attitude seeps into our thinking about ourselves and our peers. This is obviously a false economic equivalence, but the assumption is spiritually dangerous as well. How much corporate America values a certain job and how much God does are often very different.

If leaving college feels a little like jumping off a cliff, often the first branch we grab on the way down is a "secure" job. We must be willing to reconsider the decision-making process, allowing God's priorities to be reflected in our choices.

*Assumptions about money.* Now you have your *own* money! But it's amazing how quickly you can spend \$1,500-2,000 per month even though you lived on much less while you were in school. Brad found this out the hard way after he saw his first few paychecks evaporate. He was making more than he'd expected to make, but he also wrote big checks every month and found he had to spend money on things he used to take for granted, like chairs and dishes. The sticker shock of life after college is one of the painful realities of the "real world."

My first college job involved grading problem sets for introductory calculus courses. The hourly pay was pretty good, but I only worked a few hours a week. Still, that bit of income independent from my parents gave me the opportunity to learn about generosity and tithing. I grew to enjoy spending money on other people and giving to support ministry. After graduation my monthly paycheck multiplied by a factor of ten, but at that point I was responsible for food, housing, car and living expenses. I was challenged to be generous on a larger scale, but my greater expenses tempted me to justify selfishness.

Think about your assumptions regarding your money.

- ☐ Do you have a budget? Do you live by it? If not, take some time now to draft a budget based on current or expected income.
- ☐ How much do you plan to tithe?
- ☐ How much do you plan to save? Remember, saving money may be a cultural value, even a wise thing to do, but it is not a right. Many families throughout the world live with no chance to save money.
- ☐ How is your money related to your family? Will your parents be generous with you? expect you to be financially independent? expect you to help to support them at some time in the near future?
- ☐ What is your strategy for paying off student loans? How do your loan payments affect how you think about the future?

One thing most of us assume regarding money is that *we will have it*, in greater quantities than we've ever seen before. Furthermore, we assume—perhaps in the face of the current economic climate—that we will have more and more money every year of our lives. Again, my point is not that we shouldn't want or have money but that it can clearly become a branch we hold on to for survival. Repentance involves honestly facing up to our assumptions and turning them over to God to open us up to his desire for our future, even and especially in the area of money.

*Assumptions about education.* Janet's two options were full-time work in publishing and graduate school in literature. Perhaps without any strong sense of call to academic life, she embarked on an arduous five-year (or more) journey toward the completion of a Ph.D. in American literature. Janet has bought into the common assumption that more education is better than less.

What was once enough education in many fields no longer seems enough today. Thirty years ago a B.A. degree promised success in many fields and in business. Today the emphasis has shifted to attaining master's degrees, professional degrees and doctorates.

Some Christians entering graduate studies have a keen sense of God's call and see their academic work in the context of pursuit of the kingdom of God. But it is easy to uncritically assume the necessity of graduate studies. Unless we know with confidence that God has



appointed us to it, we risk wasted years pursuing something that does not yield lasting fruit (see John 15:16).

Another subtle assumption we can develop as we prepare to enter the "real world" is that it's possible to set aside some part of your life that is preparation only, *training* but not *doing*. If disciples of Jesus accept this assumption, it can lead them to relax in their pursuit of discipleship.

I know many graduates who have sensed a long-term call into medicine and have entered medical school. They are all motivated by a desire to use medical skills as a means of ministry. But medical school is an intense environment, not well suited for maintaining kingdom values. The assumption that medical school is simply a time of *preparing* for ministry and not a time to be *doing* it can slowly erode desire to serve in the name of Christ.

In contrast, Jesus prepared his disciples for a ministry of healing as he called them into it, to join him and to minister with him. Training was necessary for the first disciples, and for any disciple. But the best ministry training is always on-the-job training. Training apart from doing often leads to the trainee's undoing. (See the beginning of chapter eight, David's story, for a description of a medical student who didn't allow his rigorous medical training to keep him from participating in fruitful ministry.)

*Assumptions about housing.* If you haven't yet graduated from college, imagine yourself in your ideal postcollege housing. If you have graduated, try to think back to what conditions were like while you were in college. Now compare the two living situations, before and after graduation. How much space do you need? Do you have roommates? housemates? How is your space decorated? What is on the walls, floors, windows? What does the kitchen look like?

Many people would answer these questions quite differently before and after commencement. During college most of us expected to live in large dorms in cramped quarters. We expected to have roommates. But once we are out, we hope finally to live like civilized human beings! Posters and furniture that were fine for us in college are no longer adequate. We replace paper prints with framed ones, vintage

Goodwill furniture with new futons and a couch from home that still looks fine (our parents decided to pass it on and replace it with an even finer new couch).

Perhaps the most stubborn assumption regarding our housing regards roommates. Sharing a bedroom in college is OK, but after college it is almost unthinkable. Privacy is a constitutional right, isn't it? We graduate and declare, "The days of roommates are over." Over, that is, until we get married, and then we expect we won't mind so much.

I'm making a distinction here between *roommates* and *housemates*. Recent graduates looking for housing are often quite glad to share rent costs with others. Brad, in the example above, looked for a Christian rooming situation before he found his own place. He would certainly have saved rent money, perhaps paying 20 percent less to share a two-bedroom place with a housemate. But this is a far step from being willing to consider having four people live in three bedrooms, or even two people per room. The rent savings in *roommate* living situations would be substantial.

There is nothing especially holy about paying low rent, nor is there anything wrong or immoral with having your own bedroom. But "one person, one bedroom" is not the only way to live. Many people all over the world live happily without their own room. Some of us, as we set our sights on God's purposes in the world, may leave behind the assumption of a private bedroom. For, as a later chapter of this book will show, our housing choices affect our ability to seek God's kingdom and grow in our faith.

*Assumptions about church.* Church life can be one of the most difficult aspects of the transition out of a college-oriented fellowship group. Janet was relatively lucky as graduates go, because she found an abundance of strong churches near her in Ann Arbor. But she also found it difficult to get to know people there, and the few minutes after worship chatting with people left her feeling like a newcomer each week. She would rarely meet the same people twice. With the other three graduates whose stories I've told, she considered it important to be committed to a small group for prayer, study and mission, but neither she nor any of the others took the time to invest in such a group.

I certainly hope that active church involvement is an assumption, or a commitment, for you. But what have you envisioned as active involvement in a church? Assumptions regarding how a church operates can keep you from finding long-term satisfaction and even effectiveness in it. When you came to college, probably you didn't expect your college fellowship to be what it turned out to be. What assumptions do you have about postcollege church participation?

☐ *It will be easy to find a church where I can get to know people.* Even in a church that has a strong community life, it may be difficult to get to know people. During your time in college you may have found that other students took a lot of initiative with you. The people in your church may not expect to initiate friendship with people your age.

☐ *I have a lot of ideas that I want to introduce to my church.* While you have learned a lot as a Christian in college, you have a lot to learn about the church. You will need true humility to learn from those who have been committed to your church longer than you have been alive. Otherwise prepare to be shocked and humbled when you discover that people aren't necessarily immediately ready to listen to your wonderful ideas.

☐ *I will find an older Christian man [or woman or couple] who will help me and disciple me.* The number of mature men and women who aren't already overbooked with church and ministry commitments is small. There are many people to learn from, but the way you will learn may be very different from what you have experienced in the past.

These assumptions can all lead to discouragement if the conditions they assume aren't readily found. I'm not saying that you might as well settle for a minimal existence in a mediocre church. Rather, you will have a positive church experience if you recognize the realities of church life. It makes sense to strategize for satisfying church involvement under less than ideal circumstances. If things are better than you expected, you can only be grateful. Better that than to end up like Steve and Amy in the story above, who grew dissatisfied with their own church but were too unmotivated and cynical to do anything about it.

*Assumptions about lifestyle.* Since the 1960s the rate of income growth

in the United States has slowed dramatically. Previous generations of Americans could reasonably expect that the incomes and lifestyles of children would be half again as comfortable as those of their parents. Now economic realities are changing faster than expectations, so today's recent graduates are dealing with the shock of diminished potential while carrying unrealistic expectations.<sup>1</sup> For a young family of the 1990s to have what their parents had, two or three incomes are now needed where one would have sufficed in the fifties and sixties.

The current economic challenges present remarkable opportunities to people who want to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ after college. But for this to be the case, our assumptions about postcollege lifestyle must fall under scrutiny. Culturally determined spending patterns don't take into account the priorities of the kingdom. We must ask ourselves a host of commonly unasked questions:

☐ What kind of car should I own? Should I even own a car?

☐ How will the TV and VCR be used? Should I even own a TV or VCR?

☐ What will my food budget be? Can I live without nightly Coke and pizza?

As we examine our assumptions about lifestyle, the point is not simply to choose a life as spartan and as devoid of amenity as possible. But our freedom is to make real choices regarding the luxuries of life without allowing comfort and convenience to be the overriding concerns. As disciples of Jesus we have been given a greater goal than our own immediate gratification: to seek the kingdom of God. Later in the book the topic of lifestyle will be addressed in more depth, with a discussion of kingdom motives for choosing to buy a car or a VCR as well as kingdom motives for choosing not to.

When our lifestyle is linked to seeking the kingdom of God, even choices to spend money become much more satisfying than Madison Avenue can promise.

*Assumptions about friendships and marriage.* College is a time for building what we hope will be lifelong friendships. The intensity of community and common experience, like a well-tilled and fertilized field, is rich soil in which friendships can flourish and grow. A Chris-



tian collegiate fellowship or a Christian college has all of this, plus the gentle rain of the Holy Spirit to nourish and deepen friendships beyond what any secular environment offers. These friends have much influence on us while in college; we often make choices about how to spend our free time, our summers and vacations, even our classes and majors, based on the influence of our friends.

But the level of relationship familiar in college is not expected beyond it: in the "real world" we are expected to make decisions on our own, without respect to the decisions, plans and influences of others. For some the operative assumption goes something like this: *Now I'm on my own. I can't let friendships get in the way of my career.*

Most of us have a deep inner sense that that is not a satisfying way to live—but we find few alternatives. We are expected to be independent of others. We are expected to let go of the past—that is part of growing up. Yet as we let go of our assumptions about our relational life after college, we may be freed to include our Christian friends and ministry partners in our plans and priorities for our future.

Of course marriage is another matter. Family members and others may actually encourage you to make decisions about finding and securing a mate. Having a bunch of unattached friends while in college is OK (although our parents are always a little worried), but once we graduate the parental and societal pressure to be linked to one partner grows strong.

God said (Genesis 2:18) that it is not good for man to be alone. This observation deeply resonates with most of us. And we may tend to assume that our need for companionship is meant to be satisfied through marriage. Yet marriage doesn't automatically happen according to the assumed timetable! In fact, for some it doesn't automatically happen at all. The divergence between our assumptions about marriage and our experience can produce resentment, anxiety and fear and can keep us from pursuing the partnership and friendship God intends for us.

### **Honoring Parents While Making Faithful Choices**

As we tangle with the assumptions we make regarding life after col-

lege, we may recognize the great potential to disappoint our parents. Of course not everyone who takes discipleship seriously after college will face discouragement from parents. I know many students who have been empowered to make faithful choices by the support of their believing parents, and this has been true for me as well. But many people who try to go against the flow of the culture will experience tension with their parents. That is hard, because as Christians we are called to honor our parents.

Scripture gives us room to distinguish between honoring authorities and obeying them in the face of God's call.<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this work to address all the arguments. But one thing I know we can do to honor our parents is to communicate with them—not just our final decisions, but throughout the process.

A man once went away on a long trip, leaving his aged mother and pet cat in the care of a trusted friend. The man called his friend every night for updates to set his mind at ease regarding his loved ones. One night his friend reported that his cat had died. The man was grief-stricken, and his churning emotions led him to blame his friend: "You shouldn't have just announced that my cat died! You should have told me, 'Your cat is on the roof. I cannot get him down. I am worried about him.' Then the next night you could have said the same thing. This would have given me time to prepare for the possibility that my cat might die. Then it would have been far easier for me eventually to hear that my cat had died."

A few days later the man again called his friend, who compassionately informed him: "Your mother is on the roof. I cannot get her down."

Often, when dealing with our parents, it really does help to let them know that "the cat is on the roof." Rather than waiting until a decision is made, we can communicate our concerns, questions and leanings early in the process. If we are afraid of their objections or stipulations, their expression of disappointment or fear, the best way we can love and honor them is to communicate with them our own hopes and fears. They may or may not be able to understand, at least initially, and we may not receive their support. But over time, as we show them

that it's important to us that they hear and understand the choices we make, they may grow in respect for our choices, even when they would choose differently. I have seen this process work well for many graduates, who now enjoy the full backing of parents who were once unsupportive.

\* \* \*

Already the call to discipleship has involved letting go of the various branches to which we cling for security and safety. We have heard and responded to Jesus' challenge to let go of the things we know cannot save us. But we face many of these same choices again in the new context of life beyond college. Unfortunately, we are, at least in part, products of our Godless culture. If we don't have assumptions about life beyond college, others already have assumptions for us. Unless we stop and think hard about the choices we are making or will soon make, we will make Godless choices: not by actively rejecting Jesus, but simply by living as though God were not very relevant.

So far this book has dealt with what we are turning from. But the best part is still ahead of us: a discussion of what we are to embrace as we follow Jesus in *his real world*.

### ■ For Reflection

#### Entering the "Real World"

Take some time to consider how your life will change upon graduation, or reflect on the changes you have experienced since graduation.

- ☐ What do you expect your life to look like?
- ☐ What changes will (did) take place in setting and time use?
- ☐ What changes will (did) you experience in relationships and social patterns?
- ☐ What changes will (did) you experience in your lifestyle?

#### Repenting of Assumptions

Reflect on your own prevailing assumptions about your life when you arrive in the "real world." Also identify assumptions of people around

you, people who love you and whose opinions you value—these assumptions are likely to affect you as much as your own.

- ☐ Which one or two have the greatest hold on your life?
- ☐ What would it take to set aside these assumptions?
- ☐ How would you be blessed and helped to grow as a disciple of Jesus if you were to let go of these "branches" in order to cling to him alone?

#### Honoring Parents While Making Faithful Choices

- ☐ Are you making plans or weighing decisions that you have not discussed with your parents?
- ☐ What fears or concerns do you have regarding your parents' role in your decision-making process?

Spend some time in prayer, giving over to God your concerns and your relationship with your parents. Also spend some time thanking God for your parents, for their love and concern over many years. How could you demonstrate your gratitude and love in ways that would be meaningful to them?

## 2

# The King and the Kingdom

**A**t age nine, Bich (pronounced "bick") arrived in California from Vietnam with her family. Each day in her new home, Bich was painfully reminded that she was a foreigner and didn't easily fit in. Everything was new, including the language. So she applied her keen mind to learning the rules of the culture, watching those of her peers who clearly did fit in. During her early teen years she learned how to speak Californian, how to dress cool and how to act in any social situation. She made friends and began to thrive socially.

By the time Bich finished high school, she no longer had to think about how to act in each situation; she didn't need to remember the rules of her adopted culture. Bich had internalized the values of California teen society to such an extent that "native" behavior was second nature to her; her tastes, preferences and behavior were significantly aligned with those of her peers.

Bich's story illustrates something of the process of entering the kingdom of God. When we bring our lives to Jesus, he welcomes us

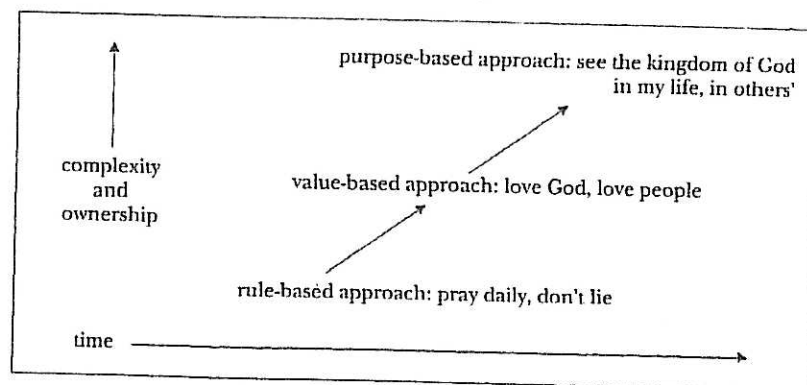
into his kingdom. We renounce our former citizenship and become subjects of the King of the kingdom of God. But the citizenship we receive when we become Christians doesn't mean we feel at home right away in this new society and culture. As we are aware that we don't know how things operate, we respond the way Bich did, by looking around and trying to embrace the lifestyles of those who fit in.

Through study of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit, we first learn the *rules* of the kingdom. For some the first challenges involve not lying, not using words harshly, not fighting back and not letting one's anger flare. At the beginning we focus on rules because everything is new and we want to fit in.

But eventually the rules don't hold our attention. We no longer have to think about not lying or swearing or stealing or having premarital sex. It's not that we aren't tempted by those things, but we have internalized the rules. Increasingly the cutting edge of growth for us becomes the *values* of the kingdom—loving God and loving other people. We make positive choices to be generous, to be a servant, to honor our parents. We struggle less and less with whether to lie to someone; our struggle increasingly focuses on how best to love that person.

Finally, as citizens of the kingdom of God and as subjects of the King, we begin to embrace not only the values of the kingdom but also the *purposes* of the King. We begin to desire to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). We begin to consider the implications for our own lives of the Great Commission's call to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-19). We struggle with discerning the best ways to seek and advance God's kingdom. More than simply fitting into the culture of the kingdom of God, we desire to advance God's purposes in our own lives and the lives of other people. Obviously this can take many forms, so we seek wisdom and guidance from God and others who know us.

Welcoming Christ's kingship is a process of increasingly allowing his authority and his kingdom to be the defining reality of our lives. This process takes a lifetime, and often it feels like "two steps forward,



one and a half back." It isn't always an upward progression.

My expectation is that you desire to have Christ be Lord of your life and that you have experienced substantial growth in this while in college. Now the question remains, How can Christ be more fully Lord of my life as I leave college?

### Leave Your Nets

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:14-20)

Jesus began his ministry by preaching that people should repent and believe in order to enter the coming kingdom of God. Like John before him, Jesus preached that participation in the kingdom of God meant switching allegiances, repenting of the old loyalties and accepting the true sovereign, the King of the kingdom.

The Gospel writer Mark shows us what the desired response to Jesus' preaching looked like. One day Jesus walked by a small fishing concern on the shores of Lake Galilee. To the fishermen who worked there he said, "Follow me and I will enlarge your vision for your life. Follow me and I will redefine your purpose!" Their response was immediate and total: they left what they were doing and followed Jesus.

The Evangelist is very particular about what details he includes in this brief account. Mark fails to mention many specifics of this interaction or its prior history. This leaves the reader with a dozen questions. But he does mention a few key facts: Simon and Andrew, the fishermen, left their nets; James and John, sons of Zebedee, left their father. In each case what defined them was left behind as they became disciples of Jesus. Here we see a tangible picture of the nature of repentance and belief.

This story is familiar to us—perhaps too familiar. Think about what it would mean for a fisherman to leave behind his nets, his working capital in the only trade he had ever known. Or consider the cost to a son of a wealthy businessman to leave his father behind to work the family business alone. To Simon and Andrew, nets meant a job; a job meant security. To James and John, the family ties and family business meant relational security. Jesus' call to follow him meant to leave behind what they valued most.

Jesus' initial invitation is the same for anyone today: "Repent and believe; leave your nets and follow me." Few of us are defined by nets; few fish for a living. But all of us have netlike accoutrements defining our identity: the books of a student, the expectations of our family, dreams of success and fame. When Jesus calls us into his kingdom, he calls us to leave behind the things that had previously defined and given purpose to our lives, so that he can give us a new purpose: "I will make you fish for people." He says to us, "Follow me and I will make you into a lover of God and of people. Follow me and I will give you a role in the advancement of the kingdom of God."

This is not to say that we all must literally leave behind whatever we are doing. Yet we must not let our current activity define our



identity. Some people say, "Since I am in college, I am called to be a student. That must be my top priority." This logic is persuasive for those who are not disciples of Jesus. But for us a different logic is at work: we are called first to be his disciples. So during college we may have experienced conflict between our roles as students and Jesus' call on our lives. As we leave the college setting we should expect to experience similar conflict and tension.

Of course not all Christian students struggle with overidentification with (and idolatry of) their studies. For some the "nets" are the literal nets of the basketball court, or the soccer field or the lacrosse stick. For others drama or computer games define identity. A call to follow Jesus will mean setting aside these things in some meaningful way in order to pursue a greater identification with Jesus. For a few it may even mean taking up a new, disciplined approach to academic work or graduate school, once they have set aside idolatries to respond to Jesus' call.

### **Lose Your Life to Gain It**

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" (Mark 8:34-36)

These final verses of Mark 8 contain the "altar call" of the Gospel, an echo of Jesus' call to his first disciples in chapter 1. In the first half of the Gospel Jesus' name becomes well known, but his identity remains a mystery; the question repeated throughout is "Who is this man?"

Mark answers this burning question when Peter blurts out, "You are the Christ!" (see Mark 8:29). At that point Jesus begins to teach his disciples what it *means* that he is the Christ. His ministry changes gears; he focuses on the disciples, spends much less time with the crowds, heals only a couple of people and teaches repeatedly about his upcoming death and resurrection. If the question of the first half

of Mark is "Who is Jesus?" the question in the second half is "What does it mean that he is the Christ?"

This then is the turning point in the ministry of Jesus. And this is when Jesus gives his altar call, his inclusive invitation for all who would follow him: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." If we really thought about it, we would probably wonder about Jesus' evangelistic strategy—clearly this kind of negative talk and depressing emphasis on pain and sacrifice are not the way to win friends and influence people!

Actually Jesus didn't leave his hearers with a one-sided emphasis on the cost of discipleship. He went on to give a cost-benefit analysis of the options: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Here Jesus presents his logic of discipleship: The world is divided into two camps, those who lose their lives for Christ's sake and those who don't. Both groups eventually lose their lives; death is the common end. The chief difference is that one group will gain life while the other will simply forfeit it. Those in one group try to save their lives but lose them in the end; members of the other group willingly lay down their lives for the sake of the gospel, and they gain life—real life, the eternal life that begins now—in the process.

Why does Jesus say all this? Because Jesus knows that we all desire "to gain the whole world." Or perhaps not the whole world, just a parcel of prime real estate. Not worldwide fame, just the admiration of our colleagues. Not the wealth of nations, just a comfortable home with a swimming pool.

A poignant illustration of this challenge is found in the 1966 Academy Award-winning film *A Man for All Seasons*. At the end of the film, Sir Thomas More is on trial for his life. Richard, a young man Sir Thomas has known, appears as a witness and commits perjury in order to give false but deadly testimony against him. For his willingness to do this act, he has apparently been awarded the position of attorney general for Wales. As this fact becomes clear, and after all



the damage has been done, Sir Thomas is saddened, not angered: "Richard, it profits not a man to gain *the whole world* and forfeit his soul . . . but for Wales?"

None of us will be given the chance to trade away our soul for the whole world, though Jesus says that it would be a bad trade anyway. Yet many willingly or unknowingly trade their souls for far less substantial recompense. Some live to regret the trade; all will die to regret it. Jesus' offer, to his first disciples and to us who would be his disciples today, is life, real life, life that does not end. In martyr Jim Elliot's paraphrase of these verses: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

### Transition Brings Temptation

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." (Mark 8:31-33)

Jesus' response to Peter in this section of Mark 8 seems a little strong, doesn't it? As Jesus speaks about his suffering and death, Peter becomes uncomfortable. He doesn't like to hear his Lord, the Christ, speaking in such negative terms. He has a different plan for Jesus, and it doesn't involve dying. What might generously be interpreted as a forgivable excess of enthusiasm or loyalty Jesus interprets as the words of Satan! A little strong, no?

But consider what Peter is doing when he takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Jesus has been giving crucial teaching regarding his upcoming death and resurrection, which will be central to his entire purpose in coming to earth. "No! You can't do that!" Peter interjects. "You don't have to die. Become king! Conquer the Romans! Save your life, Jesus!"

Jesus' response to Peter's temptation emphasizes that we all must lose our lives for the gospel if we want to save them. It's as if Jesus

were quoting from the rule book of the universe. He's describing something that works like gravity: If you jump out of a window, you will fall. If you save your life, you will lose it. This is true for everyone. For the crowds. For the disciples. Even for Peter, who isn't excited about following Jesus to his death. And it is true even for Jesus.

Imagine what would have happened if Jesus had listened to Peter's words "You don't have to die." This temptation from Satan would have cost him his life. And Jesus, seeing his disciples with the clarity of the only Son of God, knows that it would cost the eternal lives of all of those who would have come to believe in him.

It is no coincidence that Satan shows up at this point in Jesus' life. Jesus deals with demonic spirits a lot, but at only two other times in his earthly life does he encounter Satan and his temptation directly: in the wilderness and in the garden (Luke 4:1-13; 22:3, 40; John 13:2).

Satan shows up at key transitions in Jesus' life: the beginning of his public ministry, the point where he begins to define for his disciples the purpose of his coming, the point where he must make the final decision that seals his fate on the cross. As Jesus begins his ministry, Satan tempts him to define himself as a popular, powerful messiah and to use his power to advance his own purposes. After Jesus is revealed as the Christ, Satan tempts him again to define his Christhood in worldly, military terms, rejecting suffering and death. In the garden Satan's temptation is to resist death, so Jesus repeatedly prays to his Father to sustain him through it.

Satan knows that his targets are the most vulnerable to temptation at transition times. This is one of Satan's vital strategies. When we have set patterns of faithfulness and growth, it is easier to resist temptation. When we are in new situations or experiencing dramatic change in our lives, we are most susceptible to Satan's ploys.

Satan can neutralize all the progress Christians make in their spiritual growth in college if he can derail them during the transition after college. Their progress is slowed if he can persuade them that the "idealistic" convictions and choices they made in college somehow don't apply to the harsh realities of the "real world."

Satan may attack us by tempting us toward the sin of regret. We may

find ourselves disappointed at the faithful choices we made in college that left us with a less-than-impressive résumé. Perhaps we gave up a prestigious summer internship to participate in a crosscultural mission; perhaps we decided not to do a senior project in order to give priority to ministry. The regret becomes a sin as we doubt God's faithfulness.

Or we may be tempted toward envy. We watch as our non-Christian roommates sail into a good job or get letters accepting them into graduate school. Our temptation may be to think that we've been left behind our peers by not getting to know all the right professors, gaining the right summer employment experience and earning the knock-'em-dead grades that would have put us into the graduate school, government post or high-tech firm of our choice. As disciples of Jesus who have internalized the values of the kingdom, maybe we only know how to love God and love other people (and when we're honest we admit we aren't always great at that either). We've been spoiled for the world, useless to a Godless and loveless society, useful only to the kingdom.

Transition into the real world is the time when Satan will be tempting us to save our lives, to change back to the rules we played by before we encountered the kingdom of God. Satan will raise doubts and questions, perhaps through the voices of others. People will belittle our experience of God's trustworthiness, and those with more worldly experience will advise us, "Now is the time to get serious—save your life while you still can."

The irony is that the strength of this temptation during the time of transition will be proportional to the degree to which we have given our lives away during college. The more we have lived by Jesus' call to lose our lives for his sake, the more we will experience a temptation to save our lives and gain our piece of the world.

We need to know that the rules we have been playing by *are* the big-league rules—this is what it really is all about. We *have* been living in the "real world," the truly real world Jesus describes. What was true for Jesus and for Peter is still true for us: we must lose our lives for Christ's sake if we want to find life. Not that it's all downhill from here:

the life Jesus promises, real life, keeps getting better and better as our discipleship deepens.

So is it really possible to continue to follow Jesus in the "real world"? Can there be continuity between discipleship during college and discipleship after college? Yes, yes, *yes!* The context for our discipleship changes, sometimes dramatically, but *the principles governing it remain the same.*

### "Use the Force, Luke"

A useful and entertaining cinematic depiction of the life of discipleship is given in the character of Luke Skywalker from the Star Wars trilogy. Luke desires to become a Jedi master (a magician-warrior) like his father. Obi Wan Kenobi, "Ben," an old man who himself was once a Jedi master, encourages Luke in his quest. Luke begins training with Ben, who teaches him how to fight using "the good side of the force." (For our purposes here, let's set aside the films' pantheistic religious assumptions.)

At the climax of the first movie Luke is piloting a small spacecraft, trying to destroy the evil empire's Death Star before it is able to destroy the good guys' home base. Though an experienced pilot, Luke must struggle to use the unfamiliar targeting instruments of his craft. Just before the critical moment in his targeting run, Ben's voice comes to Luke's mind and says, "Use the force, Luke."

Luke's temptation in this new and unfamiliar situation is to abandon all that he has learned in his recent training as a Jedi warrior. Ben encourages Luke to live consistently with his training, to put away the targeting instruments used by "unbelievers" and instead rely on the guidance of "the force." And in this new context Luke does manage to resist the temptation to doubt all he has learned of "the force." The guidance of that force saves Luke's life and the lives of many others.

Luke's situation is like that of the recent college graduate who is a disciple of Jesus Christ. The newness of the experience of life in the "real world" can be disorienting; the context of life has changed, but the principles haven't. The temptation will come to question the

means by which God has worked in our lives while in college and to turn elsewhere for guidance—to the technology and wisdom of society. And in these moments of temptation Jesus comes to us and says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31). We can always rely on his words. His words are true, and to live our lives by them is the way we find life. Jesus tells us, "Use what you know. The rules haven't changed."

### **Context Changes, Convictions Remain**

During college Anne made it a priority to spend time in prayer and personal Scripture study each day. Each semester she set up her schedule with an hour between two classes so that she could count on taking that time to pray. Anne prayed regularly in a back pew of the campus chapel; on sunny days she stationed herself on the wide chapel steps. She kept this discipline fairly faithfully for most of her junior and senior years.

After graduation Anne found a job as a paralegal in a law firm. Her job began at 8:00 a.m., and she had to leave home by 7:15 a.m. to catch a bus early enough to be on time. Anne tried to have morning prayer times, but she was a late-night person by nature. It was difficult enough to get ready for work, let alone have an hour-long quiet time, before 7:15 a.m. Anne began to try to have her "quiet times" in the not-so-peace-and-quiet of the number 70 bus route. On a good day she could read her Bible or write in her journal for an uninterrupted twenty minutes. Once a week Anne skipped lunch, walked across the street to an Episcopal church and prayed in the back pew for an hour as she had done back on campus. She often thought about the luxury of uninterrupted time she had enjoyed as an undergraduate; now her rare truly *quiet* times were deeply precious to her.

Anne's story illustrates the need for creativity to bring the convictions and priorities of discipleship into the postcollege context, to think through old lessons with new applications. This contextualization process requires perseverance as we learn to distinguish between culturally preferred values and those of the kingdom of God.

This is not to say that our convictions do not grow, deepen, develop

and even change over time. What we believe about God may change as we grow to know him better. What we value and what we pursue in life may change as our wills are increasingly conformed to his will. What *shouldn't* change is our commitment to live faithfully to what we understand about God and his will for us, no matter what else changes around us.

What follows is a list of areas in which you may have developed some sense of conviction. The topics are arranged in a logical order. The first category, our relationship with God, is fundamental—it is the basis for character growth and love for others. Each successive category is built on the previous one.

Many of these categories will be discussed in depth in later chapters. Here I will simply illustrate a few of these concepts to stimulate your thinking and challenge you to take specific steps of discipleship even now.

*Priority on relationship with God.* Anne's story is a first example of this. But besides a personal quiet time or devotional time, a bedrock to developing a deeper relationship with God is spending time in his Word together with other Christians. During college a weekly Bible study fits easily into the pace of life. Perhaps you even led a Bible study for others or participated in a couple of small group Scripture study times each week. But after college, finding quality time for Scripture study becomes more difficult.

David, a recent graduate and relatively young Christian, told me about his upcoming financial consulting job, which would demand sixty to seventy hours a week, at least initially. David was worried that he would not have time for a weekly Bible study and feared that Sunday worship would not be enough to sustain his growth. I asked him to consider asking his manager, before he began the job, to allow him one evening each week that he could set aside consistently to attend a Bible study for twenties-age people in his church.

David was skeptical that his boss would go for it but came to believe that God wanted him to set his priorities in this way from the beginning. He spoke with his boss, explaining what his priorities were and why he needed the weekly evening off. His boss was very understand-



Relationship with God	Christian Character	Relationships with People
trust	integrity, sincerity	generosity, hospitality
seeking God in prayer	teachability, servanthood	servanthood, availability
obedience to God's will	commitment, faithfulness	forgiveness, reconciliation
listening to God through Scripture	compassion, kindness	accountability, partnership
	peace, joy	intentionality, risk-taking
		crosscultural outreach, racial reconciliation

ing and agreed to his request. So from the beginning, David's boss understood that his Christian faith was a priority in his life.

*Priority on character.* In college, *integrity* means not cheating. It also means not saying things you don't mean, not making promises you don't intend to keep (like "I'll call you later" or "I'll be finished with this tomorrow"). After college you have even more opportunities to cheat, whether on tax forms, expense reports or time sheets. Integrity means working diligently even when unsupervised. It may also mean quitting a job when you cannot in good conscience carry out your assigned tasks.

In college, *humility* allows us to come before Scripture ready to apply it to our lives. It produces a nondefensive appraisal of our faults and sinfulness. It also helps us forgive those who sin against us. After college we may be called upon to be a humble learner from people whom we find it hard to respect, who are quite different from ourselves. This challenge often comes in the context of a new church experience. In the context of a job, when supervisors and managers treat us unfairly (either positively or negatively), a response of humility may be difficult.

Deep personal *peace* may have been elusive in college—no contex-

tual change will make that easier to achieve. Yet as disciples of Jesus we are to be people who experience peace. Some people may simply have to reject certain jobs because they cannot perform them and live in peace. Long-term anxiety and faithful seeking of the kingdom of God are incompatible (Matthew 6:25-33).

*Priority on people.* Unfortunately, in our society jobs that place a priority on people are not as valued as those that deal with technology. So teachers, social workers, pastors and counselors are not as well paid as engineers and doctors. Even in medicine, specialties that are high-tech (low people-intensive) are more highly paid than specialties that are highly relational. Because of the divergence between our society's values and the values of Jesus, followers of his may be on a lower-income track.

The ministry of *hospitality* is perhaps undervalued today. It was a required character trait of those would be chosen as bishops or overseers in the early church (1 Timothy 3:2). In college hospitality involved such simple things as keeping food in your room, baking cookies for people and providing snacks at a Bible study. After college the potential for hospitality (and its cost) rises. You may choose to have a guest room in your house or apartment or an open guest policy for meals in your household.

Mere *availability* puts feet on the desire to be a good friend or servant to someone. Availability makes it happen; good intentions don't. In college you can minister God's grace to someone simply by being available to listen when he or she is going through a difficult time with family, academics or a romantic relationship. This can be costly, because such conversations often begin late at night and can hinder sleep or study. After college a willingness to listen and an ability to listen well are among the rarest of graces in the working world. Again, willingness to listen will be costly, both in time and in emotional energy. But it is part of making people a priority in our lives.

Genuine *forgiveness* is hard to come by in the "real world." The world has no category for asking forgiveness; rather, people tend to excuse themselves or blame others. (Ultimately, the world cannot acknowledge sin because it has no antidote for it.) The fact is that we

will sin against non-Christians. And asking them for forgiveness will be even harder: humbling, risky, yet potentially very fruitful, both for our relationships with them and for their understanding of the gospel.

### The Lord Is My Shepherd

Our determination to live out the gospel will put us at odds with the world. We will be swimming against the current of society, and this will be exhausting and potentially confusing. Fortunately, Jesus' kingship doesn't simply (or essentially) mean a list of things we need to *do*. Fundamentally it involves entering into a care relationship with the One who really knows our needs and is able to meet them. It means admitting that we cannot take care of ourselves on our own. It means embracing the following picture of the relationship between ourselves and Jesus:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff—

they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD

my whole life long. (Psalm 23)

The image of God as a shepherd may be lost on those of us who have no everyday knowledge of sheepherding in the ancient Near East.

The shepherd was responsible for seeing that all the needs of the sheep were met. "He makes me lie down" sounds coercive, but in fact sheep won't lie down if they are hungry, thirsty or fearful. Sheep tend to be easily frightened, and even a little movement in the water can be threatening. So the image of a sheep lying down in a green pasture beside still waters is a picture of total contentment.

The psalm is filled with extravagant images of care and protection. The shepherd works hard to guide his sheep; his efforts include effective use of the rod and staff to protect them from predatory animals, to discipline them when they endanger themselves and to pull them out of tight spots they fall into.

Then the psalmist leaves the sheepherding imagery to describe a lush banquet given by the Lord to demonstrate the Lord's favor on him in the presence of his enemies. Needless to say, sitting down at a banqueting table while enemies threaten imminent attack indicates total trust in the Lord's protection. The psalmist's final image is of personified "goodness and mercy," which literally "chase me down" or "pursue me" "all the days of my life." When God is our Lord, goodness and mercy will pursue us. So we see how the thought of the first verse sums up the entire psalm: "The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing."

It is not stretching this psalm too much to see it as prophetic of Jesus' leadership. In Ezekiel 34 God promises that he himself will become the shepherd of his people, and in John 10 Jesus claims that he is that "good shepherd" who lays down his life for his sheep so that they may experience abundant life. Having Jesus as our King means that we embrace the care, guidance, discipline and provision of Jesus as our Shepherd.

This image is important for us as we leave college and enter the "real world." Often the phrase "the real world" is used as shorthand for "It's a cold, cruel world out there." Much of our college experience has involved preparing us to be on our own, to stand on our own two feet, alone against the world. Without a Shepherd-King it is a "cold, cruel world out there."

In regard to life after college, perhaps the most significant image of the psalm is in the last verse: "Surely goodness and mercy shall



follow me all the days of my life." Explicitly or implicitly, we tend to think of our life goals in terms of a pursuit of happiness. In the psalmist's experience, though, the pursuit has been turned around: happiness (goodness and mercy) has pursued *him*, chasing him down even when he, in his blind pursuit of other things, tried to run away.

This has often been my experience of God: he will pursue me for my own good far more readily than I will pursue the things he wants for me. So I receive goodness and mercy at the hand of the Lord, but it is not usually a result of my relentless search; rather, it is a result of the Lord's relentless determination to bless and care for me in spite of my sinful tendency to wander from him.

As you take time to reflect on Psalm 23, you too can identify with the psalmist. Even as our peers are getting ahead of us and everyone seems to be on a faster track than we are, we can rejoice with the psalmist in our relationship with a God who pursues us *for our good*. With that confidence we can continue to make choices to place the control and direction of our lives in his sure and steady hands.

### ■ For Reflection

#### Leave Your Nets

- ☐ What is your defining characteristic? If the evangelist were to narrate your encounter with Jesus Christ, what would he mention to describe you?
- ☐ What "nets" hold you back from following Jesus more fully?
- ☐ As you continue to respond to Jesus' invitation, what do repentance and belief look like?

#### "Use the Force, Luke"

- ☐ How are you tempted to use the instruments of the unbelieving world to give you guidance?
- ☐ Which of your discipleship convictions do you sense are susceptible to erosion over time?
- ☐ How can you continue to rely on the power and guidance of Jesus in your life at this time?

### Context Changes, Convictions Remain

Spend some time thinking about convictions you have embraced as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Identify which convictions are most central to your life and growth as a Christian. Think first about the application of those convictions in the college setting; then consider how those same convictions could be applied in the new setting you are in or will be in after graduation from college.

#### The Lord Is My Shepherd

- ☐ Do you experience God as your Shepherd-King? Can you affirm, with the psalmist, "I lack nothing"?
- ☐ Do you tend to see yourself pursuing goodness and mercy? How might you need to stop to let God's goodness catch up to you?
- ☐ How does your life need to change to allow God to be your Shepherd-King?

#### For Further Reading

Both of the following books help readers examine their assumptions about life and discipleship and offer challenging cultural critiques.

Alexander, John. *The Secular Squeeze*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Bascom, Tim. *The Comfort Trap*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

# 3

## Productivity and Prayer

**A** young teenager and an elderly Japanese gardener become friends in the movie *Karate Kid*. Danny has just moved to Los Angeles and is being harassed at his new school. Having learned that Mr. Miyage knows karate, the boy asks to become his pupil. Mr. Miyage agrees and immediately puts Danny to work waxing his many cars and painting his wood fence. Miyage gives him specific instructions regarding his household tasks. "Wax on," he says, moving his right hand in a circle; "wax off," he says, moving his left hand in the opposite circle. Miyage's instructions regarding the manner of waxing and painting are to be obeyed exactly. Danny waxes all the cars and paints the fence but eventually gets impatient. Finally he explodes: "You promised you'd teach me karate. But you just made me your slave!"

At this point Mr. Miyage shows him the relevance of his tasks to his training. "Wax on" and "wax off" were not really techniques to satisfy an uptight slave-driver but exercises designed to build the strength and reflexes necessary for effective karate defense. While the boy was waxing cars and painting fences, he was developing muscles and important foundations for his karate training.

Even after this revelation, Danny is eager to learn how to hit and kick. The master tells him that he must wait, that his fundamental training is defensive and everything else will be built on it.

We are often like the Karate Kid. While God works to train into us fundamental skills for the defense of our discipleship, we want to get on to advanced material, more "productive" things. In our case the "defense" is prayer—taking time to develop our relationship with God. God says to us, "Give yourself to this discipline. It may seem like nonactivity, but it is the foundation of everything of value." Or, as S. D. Gordon once said, "You can do more than pray after you pray, but you cannot do more than pray until you pray." At the beginning of a day, or in the planning of our lives, too often we want to advance quickly without spending quality time with God in prayer.

### "You Lack One Thing"

One man who seemed to do well at the advanced material but failed at the basics was the man who approached Jesus in Mark 10.

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' " He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. (vv. 17-22)

On first reading, this incident seems to represent a failure of Jesus' evangelistic strategy. Why did Jesus become picky about the man's choice of words? Why did Jesus answer the man's query about salvation with a works-oriented approach, pointing him to the Ten Commandments instead of faith? Didn't Jesus realize that this guy wasn't ready to give away all his possessions? Almost every sentence Jesus utters in

this ninety-second evangelistic encounter seems to be contrary to conventional wisdom regarding how to interest someone in the gospel.

Of course another way to read the story is to conclude that Jesus showed extraordinary insight into this man—and that perhaps the encounter wasn't a failure after all. Jesus knew that the man's trouble began with his concept of himself. He called Jesus "Good Teacher" because of his belief that humans can be good. Jesus responds with a challenge, not to make a claim for his own divinity but to address the issue of the man's sinful humanity. "No one is good but God alone—no human teacher, not even you."

Then Jesus points him to the second table of the law, the last six commandments. The man claims to have obeyed these commandments. Here we might have expected Jesus to denounce the man's pride and call him a liar, but his response is love for the man. Perhaps another way to read this might be, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him [by] saying, 'You lack one thing . . .'" It is out of his love for the young man that Jesus points out his lack.

When Jesus lists some of the Ten Commandments for the man, he leaves out the first four, but not because he has forgotten them. It may seem as if Jesus is listing commandments haphazardly, as if he has a hard time remembering them all, and stopping when he thinks he has mentioned enough to make his point. But Jesus is very intentional here. He leaves out the first four "love God" commands (worship God only, no graven images or idols, don't take God's name in vain, honor the sabbath) because he knows that's where the man's problem lies. The man does fine at loving his neighbor and perhaps is exceptional in this category. His problem is even more fundamental. He does not worship God only; he has another god—his possessions. So when Jesus says, "You lack one thing," the thing the man lacks is love for God. He has never experienced a trust relationship with God.

So why does Jesus tell the man to go, sell, give, come, follow? Why does he tell the man to sell everything? The man's money stands in the way of his ability to see God provide for him. In the imagery from chapter one of this book, the man must let go of his "wealth branch" in order to need and rely on the saving power of Jesus. Or in the

closing imagery from chapter two, the man needs to put himself in a position where Jesus can become his Shepherd. In fact, that is exactly what Jesus recommends: "You lack one thing, but if you allow me to be your Shepherd, then you will lack nothing" (see Psalm 23:1).

I think of this man, whom we know from all the Gospels as "the rich young ruler," as a prototype of college graduates today. The man had everything going for him—he was young but accomplished, he had wealth and standing, he had motivation enough to come to Jesus to ask what he should do. I am sure the man half expected Jesus to be impressed enough with his record to tell him he was already doing just fine. To this wealthy young man, and to today's bright young recent graduate, full of potential and educational capital, Jesus says surprising words: "You lack one thing." Other people say, "You have everything going for you," but Jesus disagrees. "No, in fact you lack one thing." One crucial thing.

### How to "Serve God" Without Loving God

Often it is easy to discern what other people have as gods and idols in their lives without being able to see our own. Part of what obscures our own idolatry is that we dress it up in spiritual language with well-intentioned goals. For the sake of "serving God" we can forget to honor him or seek him in prayer.

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." (Luke 10:38-42)

Jesus has been on the road to Jerusalem since Luke 9:51. That means this is not a private dinner for three, the two sisters and Jesus. Jesus' disciples are with him, at least twelve and possibly more. We can only



imagine what kind of stress a crowd of that size would put on Martha and her modest suburban home (located in Bethany, about two miles outside Jerusalem). Martha shoulders the challenge of hospitality for such an honored guest as Jesus but chafes under the strain of it all.

Consider how Martha treats her honored guest. Her question to Jesus stings with sarcasm: "Lord, do you not care?" She knows that Jesus does care, but her question is framed to shame him into action. Then she commands her "Lord" to tell her sister to help her in the kitchen. If Jesus really were her Lord, she should certainly know not to try to issue commands to him. What drives her to this kind of disrespect and harshness?

As I imagine the scene, I suppose Martha's request of Jesus was her last and most desperate attempt to get Mary's attention and convince her to join in the dinner preparation. Consider how the story might have been very different if Mary had been standing outside the circle of the disciples, perhaps at the door of the room. Martha would simply have had to come behind her, gently tap on her shoulder and ask for help. No doubt Mary would have been saddened to leave but would have understood her duty. But in fact Mary was not standing; she was not at the edge of the circle; she was not easily distracted by Martha. Her gaze was fixed on Jesus as she sat as near to him as she could. Martha no doubt motioned to Mary, perhaps whispered to Mary, perhaps moved around the periphery of the room trying to attract Mary's attention, but all to no avail. So she was left with only one very desperate choice, to interrupt the Master in order to seek his help.

But her exasperation at Mary left her with little grace with which to entreat Jesus. She was sarcastic and demanding with the very One whom all of her activity was meant to honor. She was "serving Jesus" without loving him.

As we might expect, however, Jesus is loving and patient with Martha. "Martha, Martha": Jesus utters her name with compassion, not impatience. He *does* care about her; he *has* noticed; he *does* understand her situation. He has seen her efforts on his behalf, but he is aware that they have kept her from listening to him. He doesn't chastise Martha, but he helps her to see that a better option

is available to her, the one Mary has chosen.

I am a vision-driven person. I wake up early each morning with my goals for the day clearly in mind. But being involved in student ministry, I often confuse my goals with those of the kingdom of God, and doing my work with seeking the kingdom. Fortunately, there *is* some overlap. But often I am tempted to leave Jesus behind in order to do what I think he wants me to do. Like Martha, I often intend to "serve Jesus" yet fail to love him.

These are issues of productivity *and* prayer. In eternal terms these two are inseparable, but often to us they seem to be contrary. Martha was being so productive there in the kitchen. Should she have just sat down and listened to Jesus too? What would have happened to the dinner? Mary, on the other hand, was focused on Jesus, listening to him. Surely nothing would get done if all we did was imitate her.

The problem is that in our culture, productivity and prayer are not valued equally. They are not simply two equal priorities. Productivity is highly regarded and well remunerated while prayer is neither. So without discipline we will tend to give priority to activities that are highly valued and will barely eke out time to pray.

Years ago Charles Hummel wrote a little book whose title captures the essence of this problem: *Tyranny of the Urgent*.<sup>2</sup> Drawing a distinction between urgent things and important things, Hummel observed that too often our lives are ruled by the apparent need to get urgent things done, while the important things, because they are not urgent, remain undone. This is true about many activities, but especially prayer. Though we all know prayer is extremely important, something is always ready to crowd our time or to capture our attention so that we cannot pray.

### Choose the Better Part

We have looked at the story in Luke 10 from Martha's perspective, understanding both her drive to serve Jesus and the frustration with Mary's apparent lack of concern. Consider the same story from Mary's perspective.

Mary too was excited about the chance to have Jesus honor her family's house by sharing a meal with them. When Jesus came and

sat down to teach, Mary watched as the disciples filled out the circle in the gathering room. Spying a spot right next to Jesus' feet, she eventually took it as hers for the afternoon. So intent on hearing from Jesus, so grateful for his every word was Mary that she didn't even see or hear her sister's repeated attempts to get her attention. From where she sat, she simply couldn't be distracted by Martha's antics. She remained focused on what was really important that afternoon in Bethany. Therefore Jesus says in her defense, "Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

Mary is an excellent model for the recent or soon-to-be graduate. During this time of transition many distractions fill our minds, our appointment books, our "to do" lists. Applications, résumés, interviews, financial aid forms, the impending repayment of student loans, the search for housing and housemates, the uncertainty of changing relationships—all these things can provide fodder for a Martha-like expostulation: "Jesus, don't you care that I am about to graduate?"

Yet Mary's desire was to be next to Jesus, close to him, listening intently to him. Proximity to Jesus actually kept Mary safe from the tyranny of the urgent, from the intrusion of the demands of the day on her sense of priorities.

I say that Mary's proximity kept her *safe* because, in fact, she was endangered by Martha. Mary had made a choice to listen to Jesus, but we know that such a choice is always open to renegotiation. When we choose to follow Jesus, to be directed by him, that is not a once-for-all-time decision. So the closer we place ourselves to Jesus, the more fully he has our attention, the safer we are. When we allow ourselves to take a comfortable seat in the back row, listening to Jesus but allowing our eyes and minds to wander, we open ourselves up to the danger of the distractions of the day. Even a misplaced desire to be productive for the kingdom of God can keep us from submission to the good and perfect will of the King.

What Jesus says to Martha he could easily say to any of us: "Student, student [or Graduate, graduate], you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing." While our non-Christian peers are all too eager to enter the rat race, we can be safe-

guarded from its exacting demands by listening to Jesus. If we take time to sit at his feet, listening to him rather than simply listing our requests, we may find that Jesus doesn't want us to race like rats. We may come to hear his higher call on our lives.

### ■ For Reflection

#### "You Lack One Thing"

- ☐ If Jesus were to say to you in love, "You lack one thing," what lack would he point to in your life?
- ☐ What keeps you from experiencing the Shepherd-King love of Jesus? From placing your trust fully in him?

#### How to "Serve God" Without Loving God

- ☐ As you think about all the choices you face, are your prayer times eroded by distraction? How do you experience the "tyranny of the urgent"?

#### Choose the Better Part

In the morning I am often distracted by the upcoming events or concerns of the day. Instead of bringing these to Jesus for his care, I usually stop praying and start focusing on my concerns. Sometimes this catapults me out of prayer and into my day's activity without so much as a second thought. Sometimes, however, I am able to refocus, turn the distractions over to Jesus and allow him to protect me from the claims of my would-be tyrants.

- ☐ What are you distracted by in the morning when your desire is to turn your thoughts to the Lord?
- ☐ What does it mean for you to sit near Jesus, at his feet, rather than to stand at a distance?

Please, before you read on or turn to do other things, take some time now to pray.

#### For Further Reading

Hybels, Bill. *Too Busy Not to Pray*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

## 4 Meaningless Work and Fruitful Labor

**M**elinda graduated and went to work in a consulting firm in Boston. She had been a leader in her college Christian fellowship and was eager to continue to grow in her discipleship after college. But she soon found that the work demanded of her took most of her waking hours each week. She had taken the job partly because she was told that she would be working fifty-five hours a week, on average. Though this was high, she thought she could handle it and still pursue her faith through church involvement, a young-adults Bible study and relationships with Christian friends in the Boston area.

After six months of work averaging over sixty-five hours a week, Melinda decided that she needed to do more than make subtle suggestions to her supervisor, a senior partner in her firm, that she was being overworked. Her job involved making presentations to clients with proposals for new or revised business strategies and management plans. She decided to make a similar presentation to her boss, discussing her own priorities and the conflict between work demands

and her desire to pursue other goals. She was very clear with her supervisor that making money or succeeding in her career was not her goal in working for the firm. Her goals included learning business, organization and presentation skills but also developing spiritually and maintaining deep friendships. She documented how it was impossible to satisfy her goals on a sixty-five-hours-a-week schedule. Making it clear that the current situation was not tenable long-term, she suggested various ways that her work schedule could be reduced. She said she was even prepared to accept a lower salary in return for a lighter workload. Though she was a valued worker, she knew that this presentation could result in her being fired. As with Nehemiah making his petition before King Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1), Melinda's fate lay in the hands of the authority figure she challenged.

She was not fired. Melinda's supervisor was impressed with the work she had done to communicate her dissatisfaction in terms he could readily understand. Her workload *was* reduced—not without cost to Melinda, for her year-end bonus was substantially reduced from the previous year and her performance reviews were more critical. Within a few months, however, her supervisor asked if she would join the nonprofit health-care firm he had started. Though this new job paid less, it was more satisfying and less stressful. The benefits Melinda received far outweighed the costs: she had found a way to pursue committed discipleship after college.

### Working for a Living?

Of all the variables in our lives, one virtual certainty is that we will all have a job, at least for some time. But let me ask, Why get a job? If you are working now, why? If you are looking for a job, why? This is not a trick question.

The most common reason to work is to make money, to provide for necessities. Even the familiar question implies this: "What do you do for a living?" The question assumes that the activity you do that pays a salary or wage is the activity you do in order to live.

Of course we can recognize many other good reasons to work: to pay back student loans, to help out one's family, for enjoyment, for



a challenge, to make a meaningful contribution to society, for fulfillment, to be able to give to others in need. But these all seem secondary in some way. If you found a job that provided all of these but left you with no money for food or clothing or rent, you probably would be forced to look for a new job. On the other hand, many people find almost none of these other satisfactions in their jobs. They have settled for simply working for a living.<sup>1</sup>

When work becomes simply a means for survival, we have traded away much of the value and purposefulness that God intended for work. We begin to think that we are working only so that one day—the weekend, a vacation or retirement—we won't have to! When we think of work, the only thing we thank God for is the fact that it is Friday—TGIF!

Let's not settle for simply working for a living. We need to reject our culture's attitudes toward work and embrace a biblical view.

Facing the prospect of leaving the security of the college environment, you may be tempted to take the first job that offers a decent wage. Yet Jesus calls those who want to be his disciples not to settle for this petty vision.

### Striving for the Kingdom

A complete biblical picture of work is beyond the scope of this book. Entire books have been written to address the topic. So let me just summarize some fundamental biblical truths regarding work.

- God *created, formed, shaped, fixed, handled* creation; that is, God was the first worker (Genesis 1). Jesus, as God incarnate, spent most of his adult life working as a carpenter. The dignity of human work is revealed in this: God came to earth and made furniture.
- Humanity is created in the image of God the Worker and was given work to do *before* the Fall (Genesis 1:28; 2:15). Human work reflects the image of God. While still in the Garden of Eden, Adam had work to do.
- As a result of Adam and Eve's sin, God cursed the ground and work became *toil* (Genesis 3:17-19). Since the Fall all work is fundamentally thwarted—it doesn't go as planned, involves sweat and effort, and

ultimately humans and their labors return to dust. Yet work itself is not a result of the curse.

These observations from Genesis provide a foundation from which to examine the relationship of work and the kingdom of God.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today. (Matthew 6:25-34)

The Sermon on the Mount is the most impractical practical teaching Jesus ever delivered. Here Jesus describes the culture of the kingdom of God. He challenges his disciples to embrace a countercultural reality, identity and loyalty. In this section Jesus addresses a very natural tendency to worry about the essentials of life—food, drink, clothing—but he tells his disciples, "Don't worry; instead strive for the kingdom."

Note that Jesus doesn't say, "Don't worry, don't strive." Something is worth striving for. Scripture repeatedly warns against laziness and idleness (for example, Proverbs 6:6-11), and Paul warns believers to stay away from able-bodied people who have made a conscious choice not to work; these people, he says, should not be supported (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10). They, along with many in our society, should be called

to repent of their attitude, for they have lost sight of God's good purpose in work and have idolized leisure.

Notice also that Jesus doesn't say, "Strive first for the kingdom; then you'll have plenty of time to strive for food, clothes and other things." He is not suggesting that having a "quiet time" at the beginning of the day frees us to spend the rest of the day striving for our necessities. In fact, he specifically warns *against* striving for these things.

The question then, of course, is, How will we eat? Jesus has that most impractical practical answer: God will provide for us.

Jesus divides our pursuits into two categories, those that are our responsibility and those that are God's. *Our* responsibility is to strive for the kingdom of God. Our energy, time and attention are to be focused there. This will include working a job, but as an act of faithfulness to God, not as an anxiety-producing economic pursuit. *God's* work is to provide for us: food, clothing, shelter, all the worrisome needs we have. And he promises to do so, if we are striving first for his kingdom.

The economy of our culture is a closed system. It assumes a one-to-one relationship between the financial rewards of work and physical needs: you work to live, to support yourself. (This is not to fail to recognize the other rewards of work.) According to Jesus, however, the system is not closed: God makes all of his resources available to us as we strive for the kingdom. We don't have to look out for our own needs, because the God of the universe is responsible for that task and he is more than able to handle it.

Here Jesus is not making a promise that hasn't ever been made before in salvation history. From Eden to the Sinai desert to the land of Canaan to the exile, God's promise to his people has always been, "If you let me guide you, you will not be in need." The sheep's responsibility is simply to follow the Shepherd. The Shepherd-Lord's responsibility is to provide food, comfort, rest, cool water and protection (Psalm 23).

This means we don't have to fear the consequences of pursuing discipleship. This can be tremendously freeing. Losing one's job in order to remain faithful to Jesus need not be threatening. If by striv-

ing for the kingdom we cannot carry out our jobs, either because of a conflict of conscience or because of a conflict of purpose, we can be assured that God will provide for us in another way. It may mean a severe cut in income, and that might be a shock to our system. We may even experience suffering and privation, but we have the assurance of God's presence and mercy in the midst of it. My own experience of this, and that of many I know who have made choices to live this way, is that God *does* provide as he has promised.

Of course, throughout Scripture the promises of provision are always made in the context of the people of God, the community of the kingdom, the corporate body of followers who band together to rely on God and the resources he has put in their midst. If we are going to take Jesus seriously here (and I hope we do!), we will need to join with others who are doing that as well. (This I will take up in more detail in the next two chapters.)

God is the one who takes responsibility for providing for us, *not our employer*. God may be currently using the company we work for to provide us with salary enough to satisfy our daily needs, but that could change at any time without any lessening of God's faithfulness or his ability to provide.

So when Melinda faced her supervisor with her request for a decreased workload, she could do so without paralyzing fear that she would be fired. Certainly Melinda *hoped* she wouldn't be fired. But she could trust that God was leading her and would provide for her, whether through her current job or through another. Her responsibility was to strive for the kingdom. And God proved faithful to her as she placed her trust in him.

### Fruitful Labor

Paul's letter to the Philippians is a ministry report to his supporters. Things look dim: Paul is in prison, aware that he may be put to death. Yet he writes because he wants the Philippians to know that his imprisonment hasn't been such a terrible thing. In fact, the gospel has been advanced because of it.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the

flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. (Philippians 1:21-24)

Paul speaks of his two choices: life or death, Christ or gain. He is attracted to dying, because that means he would go and be with Christ. But he determines that he will remain alive in order to help people like the Philippians continue to grow as disciples of Jesus.

There is a strange logic at work in this passage. Paul decides that he will "choose" to stay alive—as any of us might do—but for very different reasons from those that would motivate most of us. Paul's perspective is so clear that he not only doesn't fear death but would gladly welcome release from this life into the bliss to come. So it is not survival instinct that keeps Paul alive. What then? The chance to pursue fruitful labor.

Paul has reversed the normal relationship between working and living. The common conception is that we work "for a living"—we work to live. Instead Paul lives to work, to pursue "fruitful labor," which in this context can only mean fruitful in the spiritual sense. Paul lives in order to be in ministry to the people of God, to help them grow in their faith. Not only is Paul not striving for food and clothing in order to live, but he remains alive simply to strive for the kingdom. Paul stays alive in order to advance the kingdom, to lose his life for Jesus' sake and to find real life.

I suppose we could say, "That was Paul. I am not called to live like Paul did." Yet Jesus told us to have the same attitude Paul did toward fruitful labor: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal" (John 6:27).

Jesus doesn't want any of his followers to waste their time laboring for food that rots tomorrow or is eaten and then no longer satisfies. Jesus wants all of us to labor for that which produces eternal fruit, eternal life for ourselves and for others. And the night before he was crucified he gave his disciples a vision of their life after his ascension: "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go

and bear fruit, *fruit that will last*" (John 15:16).

Each of us has a deep need to know that what we do with our labor will mean something, will be significant, will have lasting consequences. Jesus knows our need. He promises us that he has the same intention. Jesus says to each of us, "I have chosen you to live a life that has lasting, eternal consequences. Don't spend your life for things that do not last; do not labor for that which does not satisfy" (see Isaiah 55:2).

This is not to say that non-Christians cannot work jobs that give some measure of fulfillment, or that the only fulfilling jobs involve "full-time Christian ministry." Remember, work was given to humans before the Fall (Genesis 2:15), and all legitimate work is valuable and able to bring some fulfillment. But with the Fall, work became difficult and the results of our labor temporary (Genesis 3:17-19). Hence no work is ever totally fulfilling. And apart from the advance of the kingdom of God, none of our efforts are guaranteed to have lasting effect.

So Jesus redeems us from the effects of the Fall and its curse. He does this not by redeeming us from striving but by making our striving purposeful, yielding lasting fruit.

### The Relationship Between Work and Needs

We are to strive for the kingdom of God rather than for our daily necessities. Is there then any correlation between work and daily needs? Look at Ephesians 4:28: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands . . ."

This is Paul's advice to thieves who up to this point have not worked with their hands, except dishonestly. He tells them to give up stealing and begin working. But what is the reason he gives? How would you expect Paul to finish his sentence?

"Let them work honestly with their own hands so that they won't have to steal anymore."

"Let them do honest work to feed themselves."

"Let them do honest work so that they are not leeches on society."

Paul doesn't say any of these things. Instead Paul calls the former thieves into ministry: "[Let them do honest work] so as to have some-



thing to share with the needy." The purpose of the honest work of the former thieves is to transform it into *fruitful labor*. They aren't just working to support themselves. No one in the economy of God works merely to support himself or herself. Paul is saying, "Part of the reason God has you in that job is to take care of the needs of others." God may be taking care of the needs of others, as he has promised them, through the resources he has entrusted to you through your job.

What then is the relationship between our work and needs? We work to be able to provide for the needs of others; we are all called into ministry in this way. All of us are supposed to strive first for the kingdom of God, trusting God to provide for us, using the resources entrusted to us to provide for others.

### Vocation and Tents

When Christians talk about work, jobs and careers they often use the word *vocation*. This is an ancient word, coming from the Latin *vocare*, "to call." Literally vocation is a calling, and for Christians it is understood as a "calling from God." Yet the reality is that Jesus' clearest call on our lives is the call he issued to his first and all subsequent disciples: "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people," and "Strive first for the kingdom of God." In all of Scripture the term *calling* is never directly associated with a job or profession.<sup>2</sup>

Of course this definition does not solve the problem of what to do with our time, but it at least clarifies the priority. Jesus' call is to make our first priority striving for the kingdom, losing our life for his sake and the gospel's, working for food that endures to eternal life, bearing lasting fruit. So if our vocation (striving for the kingdom) isn't up in the air, what remains is a question not of *vocation* but of *location*.

How often have you prayed, "God, please show me your will for my life"? Really we should ask a different question: What does God value? John Perkins claims, "God's will is plain. We are to love him and to love people."<sup>3</sup> God's will for my life has much more to do with my embracing his plan and desire for the world than with my finding God's particular plan for my success and comfort. We are to use the work we do to love God and to love others.

Scripture speaks with great clarity. We don't need to pray, "Let me know your will so I can follow you." He has already revealed his will. The remaining question is, How can I find my life in God's will?<sup>4</sup> We must turn the common, secular or even Christian misconception of vocation upside down: God has a will, and he has made it very plain. He calls us to join what he is doing and to value what he values. In this we find life.

This is not to say that there is only one way to strive for the kingdom or live in the will of God. There are many legitimate ways to allocate one's time so as to reflect the priorities of God and of God's kingdom.

In Scripture we find many models of work and ministry. For example, we learn in Acts 18:3 that Paul was by trade a tentmaker. He worked at his trade in order to provide for himself and his traveling companions as he preached the gospel from town to town (Acts 20:34; 1 Thessalonians 2:9). In 1 Corinthians 9 Paul gives us insight into why he lived this way. Though as an apostle he could be entitled to live on support, he says, "We have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:12). In other words, Paul is a tentmaker for the sake of the kingdom. His "fruitful labor" is not making tents but seeking and advancing the kingdom; he makes tents in order to advance his overall (and single) goal.

Paul's life was not dichotomized into his ministry life and his work life. Paul understood his whole life as striving for the kingdom, whether through making tents or through preaching. But it also meant that when he was thrown into prison he didn't view that as a blow to his tentmaking business, but actually as a boon to his evangelistic ministry. In jail Paul could witness to guards and write letters to his partner churches.

Though Paul understood his tentmaking as a support to his ministry (and not *as* his ministry), there is a sense that his tentmaking also provided a useful product. Unlike most tents sold in Western nations today, Paul's tents provided fundamental, not simply recreational, housing for his customers. Shelter is a fundamental need, and addressing that need is a valuable enterprise. While Paul didn't glorify

his tentmaking activity as his ministry, we can assume that he worked with diligence and honesty to make quality tents that would last.

Like Paul, we want to be people who can say at the end of a week, "I have been fully involved in striving for the kingdom. All of my resources, my time and energy, have been mobilized toward the kingdom." Not just two hours on Thursday nights or three hours on Sunday mornings—we want to live our whole lives in a way that will make a difference eternally, so we bear fruit that will last. Jesus has called us to this.

### **Models of Work and Ministry**

Most jobs could lend themselves to striving for the kingdom, but not every job automatically does. Often our assumptions and attitudes will determine whether we are striving for the kingdom or simply making a living, finding life or ultimately losing our lives.

There are many legitimate models for the allocation of one's time. Some people work as "tentmakers" while their focus of ministry is in another area. Some work as ministers of the gospel and are supported fully by that ministry. Some work part time to free much time for ministry outside of work. Others work full time in jobs that are a key part of their ministry. Let's consider a few specific examples as models of work and ministry. (I will discuss more about ministry and give a definition of it in chapter eight.)

#### **1. Full-time secular employment: Accountant**

*Ministry opportunities.* It is possible to invest your time and energy in kingdom-directed activity in a number of ways on the job:

- ☐ Listening to and caring for coworkers. As discussed in chapter two, listening to people can be a powerful ministry, rare but vitally needed in the workplace. You can offer friendship and counsel with gospel content.
- ☐ Displaying personal integrity and moral character through honesty in expense accounts, being above reproach in relationships with people of the opposite sex, accepting blame and sharing credit rather than vice versa. A life of integrity—a consistency between beliefs and

actions—can be a powerful witness to others.

☐ Speaking up. Silent witness is not the only witness. Be ready to speak up regarding the truth you know and the hope that you have (1 Peter 3:15), though often people may subtly dismiss you when you do this. Your integrity will make all the difference in how people receive your words.

☐ Conducting your work ethically: pursuing integrity in accounting standards, giving an honest statement of the value of your services.

☐ Earning sufficient funds to provide for others. (See below.)

Other opportunities to find kingdom value and satisfaction in your work:

☐ Provide a product that has socially redeeming value. Does your company's product fill a real need, not simply a need concocted by Madison Avenue advertising executives? This can be a key criterion in choosing work and an employer.

☐ You may be able to shape certain practices of the company by the values of the kingdom of God. Obvious first steps would involve refusing to use your accounting skill to evade taxes or to overstate (or understate) the financial strength of the company, division or department for which you work. More significant might be to encourage and help the company to use a part of its profits or depreciating assets to benefit needy people.

☐ Ministry opportunities beyond the work setting include any number of volunteer activities, whether through church or in other contexts. If you work in accounting or a related field, you would do well to look for a ministry setting where you can get to know a few people well, since the job setting itself doesn't foster deep relationships. Also, if you have a job like this you really should hope to be providing for more than your own needs. Generosity and hospitality are critical as you strive for the kingdom. Look for ways to be diverting the financial resources God has entrusted to you (that is, your salary) to substantially provide for the needs of others. (For more discussion of generosity and hospitality, see chapter seven.)

*Dangers.* This kind of work probably involves the closest engagement with the world and therefore the greatest temptation to swallow

the values of the world. All work settings are risky without partnership, but perhaps this is the riskiest. You will need others who can hold you accountable to your goals and who can sense danger if you are beginning to capitulate to the work culture. Danger signals would include increased work hours, inability to focus on anything but work, inability to make and keep nonwork commitments like church ministry, community service, small group meetings or meals with friends. It is the clear sense of striving for the kingdom that lets you manage work rather than letting it manage you. Expect some conflict at work, and be nervous if you don't sense it. Because so many employees are willing to order their lives around the company, those who refuse will experience tension.

Every company and government agency has its own "corporate culture," a set of values that guide a variety of nonformalized operations from simple social interactions to complex decision-making processes. It is crucial to evaluate the corporate culture of a firm, company or agency against the values of the kingdom. No corporate enterprise will fully affirm God's values, but some companies will do better than others. As you consider where to work, reject a company whose corporate culture is inhospitable to the values of the kingdom. And once you settle on a job, don't confuse your firm's corporate culture with that of the kingdom.

These kinds of jobs are often compensated very well, and one obvious danger is the tendency of one's lifestyle to float up to match one's income. This is a danger because it could erode the very tent-making purpose that should motivate a Christian's choice of a job like this. Chapter five addresses the critical topic of community, essential to battling this universal tendency.

*Other examples:* manufacturing business (sales, marketing, product engineering, finance), law, banking, administration, journalism, management, engineering, real estate, medical specialties, academic research.

## **2. Full-time secular employment: Schoolteacher**

*Ministry opportunities.* Though explicit in-class witness is forbidden for

public school teachers, teaching can still provide excellent opportunities for ministry. With the breakdown of the family and the resulting loss of discipline, the ministry of teaching has become much more difficult. As teachers have to fear more for their safety, simply treating students as valuable human beings and not as dangerous threats can be tremendously healing for kids. More than ever before, this ministry is a ministry of fundamentals: bringing love into loveless lives, bringing hope into seemingly hopeless contexts.

A teacher has many avenues into the hearts of children for kingdom influence. Teachers can promote character development through value codes, emphasizing respect for others, cooperation (not simply competition), a sense of belonging to a community and service to others. Through classroom rules, group activities and focusing on role models, even public school teachers can teach gospel values without teaching Christianity. Furthermore, beyond the classroom teachers can give explicit witness to their faith through extracurricular involvement in the lives of kids. (See the story of Jennifer at the beginning of chapter eight for a good example of this.)

Teaching can be a very strategic ministry, whether over the course of a single year or over the course of a career. In most kids' lives you will make a little difference, in a few kids' lives a big difference; over time even small changes can have enormous impact. Because these changes are difficult to measure, you must have a confidence that God is at work and a deep sense of purpose to sustain you when you have little evidence of immediate success.

*Dangers.* For teachers, the potential for burnout is high. Teaching is not simply a job but an investment of energy and care in a group of relatively needy people. As in many such jobs, maintaining a sense of priority and balance can be difficult. We can forget that ultimately people need God, not us. Jesus alone can save. Specific challenges include the following:

- ☐ Teaching can swallow your whole life, taking away from your time for church or ministry involvement and other relationships.
- ☐ Teachers can easily lose sight of what is *important* in the face of all that is *urgent*: preparing and grading tests, assignments and papers.



(See chapter three's discussion of the "tyranny of the urgent.")

□ It is easy to overlook the needs of the entire class because of the seemingly infinite demands of the neediest of the kids.

□ It may be difficult to feel partnership in or support for your efforts to minister while teaching. Teaching often consumes many hours beyond forty per week. When you have a kingdom purpose in mind, this can be satisfying, but if your purpose is lost or difficult to sustain, the energy required can be draining. Look for a partner at school or another teacher in your church with whom you can pray for your crucial ministry.

*Other examples:* social work, primary-care medicine and nursing, public service law, counseling, job placement, child care, teaching English as a second language.

### **3. Part-time tentmaker: Print Shop Worker**

*Ministry opportunities.* On the job you have many of the same ministry opportunities as Christians in the business world do: listening, consideration, willing servanthood to both customers and coworkers. Occasionally you may be able to share explicitly about your faith, but that will probably be rare.

The real strength of this kind of work situation is the potential for ministry outside the work setting. Because the job is only part-time, large blocks of time and energy are available for intentional ministry, perhaps as a volunteer with a church or parachurch ministry. Because of the nature of the work you do, your mental and creative energy are more fully available for your unpaid ministry involvement. Also, unlike teachers, social workers and counselors, you can leave work for your ministry setting without feeling that your relational energy has been spent. You are able to engage with people in a fresh way.

A part-time tentmaker is doing well if he or she is able simply to provide for living expenses while working part-time. But no matter how little you make, plan to honor God with at least a tithe—10 percent.

I consider this work situation one of the best for recent college graduates. (I myself worked part time for two years after I graduated.)

While there are dangers, mainly I think of this option as a powerful way to avoid many of the dangers of long-term jobs while you are clarifying a sense of call.

*Dangers.* One of the dangers, surprisingly enough, is the likelihood of experiencing some success in both your work and your unpaid ministry settings. You may experience success and find meaningful ministry in your work setting. Your employer may respond by asking you to work even more hours or simply giving you more work than you can do in your original part-time work schedule. At the same time you may experience real enjoyment and satisfaction in your nonwork ministry setting. You may be asked to give more time to this involvement as well.

While success in both areas seems like a happy problem to have to deal with, success is a difficult thing to turn away from. Sometimes in order to continue striving for the kingdom you may need to make a difficult choice. You may need to quit a job you enjoyed, excelled at and were affirmed for in order to be more available for the fruitful labor God has called you to. On the other hand, if the fruitful labor you are experiencing is primarily in your workplace, you may need to consider refocusing your ministry and allocating more time to your job.

A second danger in part-time work is the potential for laziness. Working part time is not to be an excuse for a lazy, undisciplined life. Many volunteer ministry settings are relatively unstructured. If you do not have self-discipline and self-motivation, this option is not for you.

*Other examples:* retail sales, office/clerical work, waiting tables, making deliveries, substitute teaching.

### **4. Full-time Christian ministry: Youth Ministry Worker**

*Ministry opportunities.* The best thing about this option is that you have your full time available for ministry. The breadth of ministry options is so wide I won't even try to do it justice. For persons in this setting, the way God provides the daily necessities that he has promised to cover is through the gifts of people who are involved in the previous three work contexts.

*Dangers.* Despite the advantages, there are many dangers to this kind of work situation. One is falling into spiritual complacency because you receive a paycheck from a Christian organization or church. Any of us can think of far too many recent examples of ministry leaders who have fallen into sin—illicit sex, deception, pride, greed. Being in professional ministry doesn't make you holy or immune to temptation. On the contrary, it makes you more of a target for Satan's ploys, because the stakes are higher; a fall can affect many people.

As with option 3, this type of work is completely inappropriate for people who are not self-disciplined. The potential fluidity of lifestyle and lack of structure in a ministry environment make this job more difficult than you might imagine.

On the other hand, for highly motivated and disciplined people a more likely danger is experiencing burnout without deep and meaningful partnerships. The nature of most paid Christian ministry is that the work is never done. At the end of a day or week you could always have done more. For people who are moved by the needs of others, this can produce stress and anxiety. Without partners and people to whom you can be accountable for choices about how to spend time, you can easily burn out.

One final danger is the potential to teach irresponsibly. James 3:1 warns that teachers must be careful what they teach and how they live because they will be judged more strictly. Consider carefully whether it is God's call for you to enter into a ministry position where you will have spiritual authority in the lives of others.

*Other examples:* missionary, pastor.

### **5. Full-time ministry: Non-Wage-Earning Parent**

*Ministry opportunities.* Clearly, raising children is a ministry and can be a part of striving for the kingdom. Parenthood demands servanthood, the ability to look to the needs of others before your own. Full-time parenthood can be a ministry with great potential for kingdom impact—immediately in the life of your children and indirectly in the lives of all those affected in years to come through growing and grown

children who themselves pursue the kingdom of God.

Also, full-time parenthood offers many opportunities for ministry to others beyond the family. Parents can participate in their community through school involvement, including addressing issues of school curriculum, artistic or recreational opportunities (coaching a team sport, for example) or social service.

*Dangers.* It is possible to equate an almost idolatrous devotion to kids and family with pursuit of the kingdom. Parents can confuse ministry to kids with merely buying things for them, or a focus on the kingdom with a "focus on the family." What begins as a desire to receive children and welcome them in Jesus' name can replace Jesus as the focus of our lives.

It is also possible for the non-wage-earning parent to experience a form of ministry burnout, especially without much partnership or recognition of the value of the choice not to earn a wage. Sometimes because of traditional expectations about gender roles or modern assumptions regarding fulfillment in careers, the choice of full-time motherhood is especially undervalued.

### **Praying for and Finding a Job**

You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. . . . Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? (James 4:2-4)

Scripture gives us many promises that God hears and answers prayer. But here we have a warning: motives are critical. *Why we pray* matters. Probably most of us have prayed for a job. But what motivates us to pray for that job is critical.

Why do you pray for a job? Since the above discussion has decoupled work and providing for daily needs, let's identify faithful motives for desiring a job and asking God to lead us to the right one.

☐ *Work as a means of loving and trusting God.* When we are doing what God created us to do, we receive God's blessing in joy and contentment. When we give of our "first fruits"—that is, a tithe off the top—we remind ourselves that all we have comes from him.

□ *Work as a means of character development.* Many aspects of discipleship are best addressed in the work setting: integrity, submission to authority, discipline. We are created to become workers.

□ *Work as a means of loving others.* Work offers a setting in which to encounter people in need of the gospel. It also supplies us with resources to provide for people in need and to support others in ministry.

When we pray for a job, we also often pray for God's guidance. Perhaps he will bless us with a choice between jobs, or an unexpected opportunity. How do we discern God's leading?

A more specific sense of God's guidance may occur through seemingly unconnected events that weave together to form a pattern in the tapestry of our lives. After graduation Amy eventually found a job as an administrative assistant for a nonprofit medical-research foundation. She viewed her job mainly as a support to her ministry in and through her church; her job was second priority in her life. Yet Amy was a good listener and made friends quickly with others in the office. She was soon recognized for her competence and asked to apply for a job as development coordinator.

When Amy was offered the position, it became clear that her time would be somewhat less available for her ministry commitments. She would have occasional travel and social responsibilities if she were to take this new position. What should Amy do? How was God leading?

Amy took the job, but she did not do so because it offered her substantially more money and more status (which it did). God had already provided for her physical needs. Rather, she took the job because of the potential for training and growth. The development skills she would acquire in her new role would be usable in the future. As she grew in self-understanding, she could see that this was an area of interest and God-giftedness for her.

Furthermore, she used her larger paycheck to generously support her church and worked hard to maintain partnerships there. She was able to hire another member of her church to take her former position, giving her partnership on the job. Her relationships with the office staff continued to grow, reflecting her value of people and

disregarding the accepted barriers between hourly and salaried workers in that office. God used this sequence of events in Amy's life to direct her into an area of giftedness and kingdom usefulness. God was preparing Amy for a life of fruitful labor.

Finally, when we find a job we are to be grateful to God for his gift to us. We could easily forget this and slide into one of two sinful attitudes toward our work: resentment and jealousy, or pride.

Jesus tells a story (Matthew 20:1-15) about a landowner who hired laborers for his field. Some workers worked only one hour while some worked twelve, but he paid them all the same. The all-day workers resented the fact that some worked only one hour but received equal pay. To their complaints the landowner replied, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (vv. 13-15).

Jesus' story challenges us not to resent God's generosity to others. One way we might be tempted is to compare wages and jobs. We could easily come to resent even God's good gift of a job and to be jealous of his gifts to others. We are called to be content with what we have, honoring God as a generous God.

On the other hand, if God does give us a job with great material rewards, it is easy to forget that these are God's resources, meant to be used to honor him and to serve the needs of others. We can take a false pride in our wealth, thinking of it the way the rich fool did: "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19). Jesus warns us of the foolishness of this attitude as well.

### God's Values and the World's Values

As subjects of the King of the kingdom of God, we will often work at cross-purposes to the values of the world's culture. We will challenge the world's assumptions. In one sense, work in the world is valuable to the extent that we, through the way we live and work, undermine



Godless culture and positively live out the values of the kingdom.

Whether you work for a high-tech firm or teach kindergarten, you will experience conflicts in work settings, because the kingdom of God is radically different from the culture we live and work in. When these conflicts come, it is crucial to remember that it is God, not your employ-

	The values of the world	The values of the kingdom
View of the pursuit of work	"The rat race"	Pursuing a sense of <i>calling</i>
Who is honored	Those who have escaped "the rat race"; those who live in leisure	We worship a worker God and a worker Savior, Jesus
Purpose of work	People work for a living	We strive for the kingdom; God provides for our necessities
Vision of paradise	The end of "the rat race": paradise involves only play and leisure	The biblical vision of Eden includes purposeful work
View of greatness	Climbing the ladder, entering the professions, being well paid	"Downward mobility," servanthood, becoming last of all
View of redemption	Winning the lottery or making it big eliminates the need to work	Jesus' redemption transforms "toil" into fruitful and lasting labor
View of security	Financial security: we always need a little more money	We bank our hope for a happy future on the promises of God
Source of satisfaction	Achievement and self-reliance	Fulfilling our calling and reliance on God
View of resources and earnings	Ownership: the purpose of money is to satisfy our own needs and desires, and those of our immediate families	Stewardship: resources are entrusted to us, in part, to satisfy the needs of others, especially those in greatest need

er, who provides for you in daily ways. You can face the possibility that the job may end yet find yourself free of anxiety regarding God's ability to provide for you. Melinda faced this prospect and remained faithful. It was her willingness even to lose her job that ultimately led to God's provision of a better work situation.

Yet the divergence between the values of the world and the values of the kingdom presents real danger to disciples of Jesus. The danger is not that we might lose our jobs but that we might lose our faith. Or at least the sharp edge of it. At least the desire to pursue the kingdom regardless of the cost. This is the real danger. Probably you can think of people who once were committed Christians and have been drawn over to the other side by the anxiety, or the allure, of the rat race. You may not feel susceptible to it now. But at age twenty-eight or thirty-three, with marriage or the birth of your first child, comes an incredible temptation to settle down, to allow the current of the culture to sweep you downstream and over the waterfall into the pool of self-absorption and petty pursuits.

### ■ For Reflection Fruitful Labor

Think about your time in college.

- ☐ What kinds of academic work produced lasting fruit?
- ☐ What kinds of ministry effort produced lasting fruit?
- ☐ What other labor was deeply satisfying?

Think about your life in labor, forty to fifty hours a week, forty-eight to fifty weeks a year, for thirty-five to forty years. (That's 70,000-100,000 hours!)

- ☐ What kind of work can you do that you know will produce lasting fruit?

### The Relationship Between Work and Needs

- ☐ How is your work related to the needs of others around you? For whom is God providing through you?
- ☐ How could your resources be freed up in order to better provide for the needs of others?

### Vocation and Tents

- ☐ What do you know about yourself that would help you identify how you might best love God and love others through your work?
- ☐ It is difficult to know what personal factors led to Paul's choice of tentmaking as a job. What personal or preferential factors might influence your decision regarding work?

### Models of Work and Ministry

There are many different ways to allocate your time and still be faithful disciples of Jesus, as the five examples in this chapter illustrate. Later I will give more attention to ministry and how to have your whole life mobilized to strive for God's kingdom. But as you consider the work that God has for you to do in his kingdom, consider now the spectrum of work-ministry options in light of your own gifts and interests.

- ☐ If you could allocate your time without regard to finances, where would you like to spend it?
- ☐ What extraneous pressures do you feel that impinge on your desires?
- ☐ Just as it is wrong to avoid giving your life to ministry because you don't think you would be provided for financially, it is also wrong to go into full-time ministry because you think that is the noble or mature Christian thing to do. Do these or other pressures make this a more difficult decision process?
- ☐ Do you feel vulnerable to any of the dangers mentioned above?

### God's Values and the World's Values

The table on page 84 summarizes the contrasting set of values discussed in this chapter. This isn't meant to be taken as a simple contrast between all Christians and all non-Christians. As it is a summary, it is a form of stereotype. All of us, Christians as well as non-Christians, are at best a mixture of these values.

- ☐ How do your attitudes and values regarding work compare with those around you?
- ☐ What culturally significant values are you confronted with in your work setting?
- ☐ How might you interact in the work setting in ways that challenge

values contrary to the gospel?

- ☐ In your life's intersection with the non-Christian culture, where is the danger to you personally? What values or assumptions of the culture are most alluring to you right now?

### For Further Reading

Bernbaum, John A., and Simon M. Steer. *Why Work? Careers and Employment in Biblical Perspective*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1986.

Harris, Janis Long. *Secrets of People Who Love Their Work*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

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# 5

## Community After College

**T**he movie *The Big Chill* tells the story of a group of college friends who meet one weekend a decade after graduation. In the late sixties they had been campus radicals, but the film shows them in the early eighties. Most of the group members have bought into the system that they'd previously rejected and resisted. One of the two who never did accommodate to the system has killed himself; his funeral is the occasion for the group's gathering. The suicide of this man, who had been their friend and leader, has taken these folks by surprise and makes them review the direction their lives have taken the last several years. In each case they realize that they have made choices to live more comfortable, less radical lives. Yet they speak wistfully of the days when their lives had a greater urgency, a deeper sense of purpose, and their friendships had more substance. The warmth of their visionary days has been replaced by the chill of complacency.

One way to think about the social phenomenon depicted in *The Big Chill* is that it is the normal process of socialization in our society.

Idealistic, radical college students enter the "real world" and become upstanding citizens, defenders of the status quo, unwilling to rock the boat they now are sitting in comfortably.

Too often people speak about their time in a Christian college fellowship as the time when their faith was strongest and when ministry was most exciting. Even while still in college, many students wonder whether they'll be able to experience satisfying community and deep relationships with Christian brothers and sisters ever again. We come to doubt that what God has in store for us in the future is better than what we have already experienced.

A "big chill" is not inevitable for Christians graduating from college. We don't have to settle for the status quo. History is filled with the lives of people who went the other direction, for whom the flighty idealism of youth matured into a passionate drive to seek God's kingdom and minister in God's name. And for almost all of these people, one critical element sustained the commitment and passion needed to persevere. That element was Christian community.

This chapter and the next form a logical unit. First we'll consider the quality of relationships within a small fellowship group and look at key components of biblical community. Most people will find their fellowship group in a church context. A home fellowship group, a young adults Sunday-school class, a ministry team, a set of unstructured peer friendships—any of these could form the core of a functioning community within the context of a church. The next chapter, "Strategies for Church Involvement," focuses more on joining and contributing to the local church. Satisfaction in a church setting includes and is built on finding or developing a healthy small group, a community of growing disciples.

### The Community of the King

The bulk of Jesus' teaching to his disciples cannot be understood outside the context of Christian community.<sup>1</sup> Jesus assumes that his disciples will follow him in groups. There is no provision for a one-on-one relationship with Jesus apart from other believers. The standard of quality of this life together is nothing less than the depth of



Jesus' love for his disciples:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John 15:12)

This type of love simply cannot be lived out within modern, convenient, culturally appropriate patterns of relationship. Jesus is not describing the "relationship chic" of our day, for which the primary tools are the appointment book and the telephone answering machine. Jesus calls for such a high quality of relationship in the community of believers that all those around will stand up and take notice. This will be a confirmation of Jesus' effective work in the world and a signpost to the kingdom of God.

Even Jesus' teaching on salvation does not give us the simple picture of an individual on his or her own being reconciled to God in a private prayer. Chapter three examined the story of the rich young man who approached Jesus with a sincere question, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (see Mark 10:17-22). The man's question is a fundamental one: what is necessary for salvation?

Jesus' answer reveals his deep concern for this man. The man claimed to have obeyed the second tablet of the law (the commandments dealing with love for people), and Jesus did not contradict him. Yet the man lacked one thing. He had idolized money. In words that Jesus used elsewhere, he was not rich toward God (Luke 12:21). So Jesus told him to sell all his wealth, give the money to the poor and then come and join the band of followers who had already done essentially that. The man's relationship to God, according to Jesus' insight, could not be made right unless he gave up his wealth. But practically, the man could not have done this unless a community of God's people was ready to embrace him when he too became penniless and resourceless. Then he would learn along with the others the joy and freedom of dependence on God in the concrete form of the community.

Salvation and community for this man are integrally related. The man's problem, his wealth, kept him from experiencing a deep, loving trust relationship with God. But the solution to the man's problem would have drawn him into deep, loving trust relationships with his brothers and sisters, those who had also responded to Jesus' words. Jesus didn't intend for this wealthy young man to remain alone, isolated and alienated, hungry and destitute in a dreary life of asceticism. Jesus wanted him to come into the company of disciples, leaving behind anything that could get in the way. Jesus longed for him to discover the wealth and abundance available to all who cast their fortunes on the One from whom all blessings flow.

As the man left, Peter said to Jesus, "We've left everything to follow you," implying, "And what's in it for us?" Catching the implied question, Jesus reassured his concerned disciple. He stressed that whoever leaves behind family or property to follow him will receive a hundredfold in return, both family and property, in this life, though with persecutions (Mark 10:29-31). Now either this statement is indictable under truth-in-advertising laws or Jesus meant something other than blood relatives and title to real property held in our name. The only way to make sense of his statement is that Jesus' promises are fulfilled through the community of God's people. As people leave behind families to join the community of the King, they enter into a new family, with a hundredfold brothers and sisters and mothers. As people leave behind their own meager possessions, they enter into a wealth of community property, enjoying a hundred new places of hospitality and mutual generosity.

### **Community: God's Economy of Abundance**

Jesus' economics are at variance with the economics of the "real world." The world's economic systems, whether capitalism or communism or any other "ism," operate on a fundamental principle of scarcity. In fact almost all current economic realities—greed, corruption, selfishness, bribes, cutthroat competition, international tariffs and trade barriers, mortgage interest rates, inflation, unemployment, real estate speculation, taxes, health insurance, and currency-exchange

rate mechanisms—exist because of the notion of scarcity. Without scarcity of goods or capital to produce goods, none of these things would exist. Without scarcity there would be no motive for greed or corruption. Without scarcity competition would not be necessary. Of course scarcity entered the world when, as a result of the Fall, human work became toil. Jesus' ministry of redemption involves, in part, the redemption of the way we look at economic realities.

Consider again Jesus' words in Mark 10. He promises a hundred-fold return on our investment if we leave behind family and lands for his sake in order to strive for the kingdom of God. How can he be so bold?

As the history of the church demonstrates, these words weren't mere empty promises. When Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mark 13:31), the immortal words he is referring to include his promise to Peter in Mark 10. Jesus spoke of and practiced an *economy of abundance*, not controlled by the laws of supply and demand but fueled by the unlimited resources of God, accessed through faith in him.<sup>2</sup>

We know that the early church experienced this same economy of abundance, practiced in Jerusalem shortly after Pentecost:

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

We also know that this economy of abundance was common practice throughout the early centuries of the church. The early apologists often pointed to Christians' extreme generosity and economic sharing as evidence of the work of God. Even the church's opponents observed that the church cared not only for its own poor but also for the pagan poor, and they credited this for the rapid spread of Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

What would it look like to live with the awareness of an economy of abundance today? It seems that one prerequisite is a light grip on our own possessions. In Acts no one claimed that anything was his or her own—they all shared in common. The result of this is that everyone felt wealthy, in that they all had access to anything they needed (Acts 4:34). We too can experience this same sort of wealth if we are willing to let go of *ownership* and replace it with a more biblical understanding of *stewardship*.

*Sharing household resources.* The household I used to live in owned a vacuum cleaner and a microwave oven. We were glad to allow members of the household next door to use these things, and that meant they didn't need to buy them. They received free use of our appliances. This left their household with more resources to use creatively. One of these creative enterprises was holding a weekly dinner to which any number of people could be invited. Drop-ins were always welcome. Soon a number of non-Christians as well as Christians became regular dinner guests. Their open-door policy was infectious: soon other Christian households of recent graduates began to have similar dinners, and the vision of the economy of abundance spread.

*Buying a home.* Two decades ago only a single average income allowed an individual or a couple to qualify for a loan to buy a modest house almost anywhere in the United States. Now in the most populated areas it takes at least two incomes (or one very substantial one) to qualify for a home loan. With the added hurdle of a down payment, home ownership has simply been priced out of reach for most recent graduates.<sup>4</sup> However, several sets of Christian friends of mine have been able to join together to make a down payment, qualify for a loan and afford a home. They are all living in more hospitable homes in more convenient neighborhoods than they would have been able to afford on their own. I know of couples with children buying property with singles or with childless couples. Even singles have purchased property together.

Of course one of the advantages of home ownership is the accumulation of equity in real property. It certainly beats sinking money into rent every month. But for many young couples or recent graduates

from college, ownership would be impossible without a severe disruption of lifestyle. Purchasing property in community can make it possible and in fact can allow the participants to experience the economy of abundance, as they now have more room for hospitality, more resources for generosity and a relational abundance they would not experience living on their own. This is a case where current economic realities and the value of Christian community align to further the kingdom of God. Houses purchased in this way are more likely to be a witness to the world of the abundance of God's riches and his faithfulness to his promises. They are also more likely to produce the kind of experience we read about in Acts.

We can often observe a certain economy of abundance when people are in crisis. After a local disaster the entire community (and nation) responds to give aid to those in greatest need. If the disciples of Jesus all began to live out of the economy of abundance, what we now experience only in extreme times might become commonplace, and we would begin to see the world as Jesus did.

### Components of Biblical Community

So far I have been using the word *community* in two senses. I want to give more specific shape to the definition of community, but let me begin here:

*Community (concrete noun):*

*a group of people with certain things in common.*

*Community (abstract noun):*

*the quality of sharing enjoyed by a group of people with certain things in common.*

Community can be built around any set of common circumstances, beliefs, values and preferences. This is the sense in which community is often used: a rural community is built around sharing a geographical location and quality-of-life preferences; a music community is built around a preference for a kind of music.

Consider your answer to the question, What things are so essential

that if they are missing you don't have biblical community? I will look at three critical components: accountability, partnership and fellowship. Then we'll consider what a small group would be like if any one were missing. These elements are fundamental, yet not exhaustive, for an experience of true community.

Any Christian community exhibits these three aspects of commonality.

*Christian community:*

*common commitment—accountability*

*common vision—partnership*

*common life—fellowship*

These principles of Christian community are also fundamental for a healthy marriage or friendship. Aristotle's definition of friendship used the same three components, stated slightly differently. He said that friends must enjoy each other, be useful to one another and share a commitment to "the good."<sup>5</sup>

*Accountability.* Skim over Hebrews 3:12—4:1. Here the writer of this letter expresses concern for his readers because they are suffering from complacency. People are assuming that once they have begun to follow Christ, God's blessings are assured and they can coast. So the writer says, in effect, "Take care; we must hold fast until the end." Perseverance is critical.

The message of Hebrews is a message for us as well. We are told to exhort each other "as long as it is called 'today' " (3:13). In other words, we are never to stop exhorting each other. When tomorrow comes, it will still be called "today," so continue to exhort each other. This is a daily discipline, not one to be practiced only in very rare and severe circumstances. The author is aware of the danger and the possibility of falling away from the living God, and mutual exhortation is one way to keep people on track. It is an exercise of love to exhort someone rather than watch them fall into sin.

The "deceitfulness of sin" (3:13) is dangerous. It isn't that we are all trying to get away with as little as possible. We may want to follow



God, but sin is often hard to recognize. Since sin doesn't advertise itself as sin, we slide into it before we realize it.

Furthermore, we are warned of a hardened heart, an "evil, unbelieving heart" (3:12). Now, if we faced a choice between an evil, unbelieving heart and a soft heart toward God, it would be easy. The problem is that the hardened heart doesn't just show up one day. Our once-soft hearts are calcified slowly, as a result of a long series of daily choices. It comes on little by little through small disappointments, petty frustrations and "harmless" but faithless decisions.

The passage stresses the necessity of thinking about our discipleship in terms of "today." We all have a tendency to live our lives with God either in the past (focusing on the status we have achieved as disciples and what we've accomplished) or in the future ("Next year I will take these steps of faithfulness," or "I will go to the mission field in five years"). Our discipleship must be rooted in *today*. And we need brothers and sisters who are willing to challenge us when our "today" actions don't align with our convictions, our faithful choices from the past or our God-directed vision for the future.

Notice as well that little credit is given to any individual for being able to remain undeceived by sin. Even Israelites who saw miracles in Egypt and in the desert fell away. The biblical picture of human nature is that we tend to fall away and to be deceived by sin. While a few may be able to remain faithful while all around them have fallen away, isolation is not the likely context of faithful discipleship.

Finally, the author speaks with urgency. Imagine that a parent of a young child notices the child sitting in the middle of the street. How would the parent respond? In even tones—"Uh, Timmy, I just think it'd be safer if you got out of the road"? Quietly and patiently—"Timmy, you might want to play in the grass and not on the street"? No, the parent would snap into action, yelling, "Timmy, get out of the street!" and rushing to snatch the child up. The urgency and the shout are signs of love, not anger. The parent simply wants to see young Timmy survive and grow up.

Some Christians might argue, "That kind of discipline is necessary for children, and parents have a responsibility to administer it, but I

am not responsible in the same way for the decisions of other adult Christians." Unfortunately, because of the intense individualism of Western culture, that kind of thinking is rampant and unquestioned in the church. But it is not the thinking of Jesus or of his disciples. While we cannot force people to make faithful choices, we *can* exhort and encourage them and warn them of the consequences of sin (see 2 Timothy 4:2). We are also commanded to forgive them and receive them when they acknowledge their sin. And when the tables are turned, we are to receive exhortation with an understanding of the intention of love and concern behind it.

*Partnership.* Romans 16 is an interesting chapter. You probably haven't heard many sermons preached on it. It is the concluding section of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Paul wrote his letter as a means of introduction to the church there, probably before he had ever been to Rome. Chapter 16 reveals a web of close relationships that is remarkable, given that he had never been in Rome. He had met people in Ephesus and they ended up in Rome; he had met people in Corinth and they ended up in Rome. It is clear that these people were important to Paul and he wanted them to know it.

In this chapter Paul mentions many fellow workers, former partners who had worked with him in ministry. These partners are like family to him. Among them Paul lists both men and women: Phoebe, Prisca, Aquila, Andronicas, Junia, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa. Also he mentions the partners who are with him when he writes the letter: Timothy, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater. Tertius is writing the letter for Paul, who has bad eyesight. Paul is living with Gaius.

Paul is not teaching on partnership; he is just demonstrating that he has lots of partners. Obviously this passage isn't high in theological content. And yet we definitely get a clear message: Paul is grateful for all of his partnerships, and he is very aware of his need for others. (Prisca and Aquila even risked their lives for him.) He values his fellow workers and has many of them, both men and women. This famed (and probably misunderstood) "chauvinist" consistently puts women in a place of being coapostles and coworkers with himself.

Given my discussion of accountability, we might infer that the main

reason we need other people in our lives is that we are sinful and in need of correction. But even from the beginning God designed humans to be in community: "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner' " (Genesis 2:18).

It is not good for us to be alone, and God gives us partners in one another. The human need for partnership isn't merely a concession to the fact that we are sinful people and can't follow God faithfully on our own. Even before the Fall God recognized that it is not good for humans to be alone, so he created an ecology that requires partnership for survival. In Eve, God gives Adam most fundamentally not a romantic interest, not a sexual mate, but a *partner*.

In our society marriage seems like the only real model of partnership (and often not a good one), but certainly Scripture presents many other kinds of partnership. In most of Paul's letters, he greets people by name and writes with a group. He sends people to take letters to churches. Often we skip over these portions of his letters, yet they illustrate how important partnership was to Paul. He could not even write a letter without a partner, let alone plant a church.

*Fellowship.* Finally, look at Acts 2:42-47. Here Luke, the author of Acts, describes the life of the young Jerusalem church in the first weeks after its explosive beginning at Pentecost. Miracles were commonplace; miraculous healings and miraculous generosity characterized the church. People cared for the needy, ate in homes together and gathered in the temple to worship God. They had everything in common: possessions, homes, meals, life. They saw the mighty power of God and experienced his presence.

Furthermore, you get the sense that it was through the appeal and integrity of their life together that people were added to the church day by day. What the apostles taught about Jesus the church lived out. The preaching called people to a lifestyle, and their fellowship was the daily experience of it. The harmony between Jesus' teaching and the lives of his disciples had a tremendous impact. Their corporate life attracted attention; outsiders were first impressed and curious, then interested, then involved, finally committed. God's power was

released as people lived in this way. Daily they saw evidence of God in their midst.

Apart from the gospel it is impossible for people to live in close community and experience deep fellowship. In *The Great Divorce* C. S. Lewis gives an insightful if fanciful picture of hell—a place, he says, where people cannot tolerate one another. He pictures a great, flat plain extending to infinity in all directions. Here people are constantly moving away from one another in order to escape the demands of relationship. Precisely because in this hell there is no room for forgiveness and reconciliation, there is no possibility of society or community. The "not good" of solitary human life of Genesis 2:18 becomes Lewis's vision of hell. His description is quite close to the scene the apostle Paul depicts of those without Christ in Ephesians 2:11-14: alienated, separated, without hope or God, far off.

But with the good news of Jesus Christ, this cosmic alienation has been reversed. The key ingredient is forgiveness. We who have been forgiven huge debts by God can easily forgive the trivial impositions of others (Matthew 18:21-35). The dividing walls of hostility that separate us have been torn down through Christ's death (Ephesians 2:14-19). This makes it possible for Christians to live in committed relationships over many years. Forgiveness is the key to longevity and happiness in marriage, in ministry partnerships, in household living situations, in friendships of all kinds. It is what makes it possible to say that life in God's kingdom, with his people, is actually "sweeter as the days go by."

Having considered a few of the many biblical arguments for these fundamental components of community, now let's think about what each of these might look like in the practice of a functioning church fellowship, small group or household community.

### **Common Commitment: Accountability**

A small group desiring to enjoy Christian community will be built on a set of common convictions about how to relate to God and to one another. Various small groups will interpret what it means to love God and love one another differently. Some (monastic orders) may call

their members to poverty, chastity and obedience, while others may simply expect that their members will pray regularly and get along well. The shape of the commitments will be likely to reflect the role of Scripture in the small group. The common commitments may be in written form, like a covenant. Or perhaps they are simply the body of convictions the group holds.

Accountability, then, implies a recognition of and commitment to the truth. We must acknowledge that the truth about God can be known (although never perfectly), and we must acknowledge the truth about ourselves. If we are unable to affirm anything as true, or if we deny the truth about ourselves, accountability is meaningless.

This means we are going to share with our small group the struggles and temptations we face, asking for help and prayer. We will also confess our sins and failings, hearing in response Nathan's words to David: "The LORD has put away your sin" (2 Samuel 12:13). Accountability introduces a higher authority for the group. A critic might say, "You are judging people." But a group member can respond, "We are all under authority. It is not that you are under *my* authority, but that we are all under the authority of Scripture as we understand it."

Therefore a requisite for accountability in community is submission—to one another (Ephesians 5:21), to leadership (Romans 13:1; Hebrews 13:17) and to clear teachings of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Unwillingness to submit to the accountability of the community is the most certain way of effectively eliminating yourself from community. If unwillingness to submit is a characteristic of the entire community, it will neither offer nor receive effective accountability.

This is not to set the accountability structure of such a group in opposition to the leadership structure of a church. Most often the leadership of a community will be recognized lay church leadership. Small groups and other forms of community will need to ensure that their leaders themselves are accountable to others in the church, church board, eldership or pastoral staff. For successful community, healthy accountability structures must be combined with each person's humble submission to authority. This is difficult for many of us.

*Economic sharing.* The members of one community household de-

cided to pool their incomes and pay expenses from a common bank account. (Owners of assets acquired before the community formed kept that ownership.) This level of community is called "economic *koinonia*." (The Greek word *koinōnia* is the New Testament word for "partnership" or "sharing.") One commitment the members of this household made to one another was that none of them would spend more than ten dollars of discretionary money without consulting the others, if possible the entire household, beforehand. Their goal was a form of simplicity, calling the household members to be conscientious and disciplined in their spending.

The group embraced the challenge and welcomed the mutual accountability that would make this kind of arrangement work. Yet the requirement was not legalistically conceived: to spend more than ten dollars was not considered sin, and each household member enjoyed the generosity of the others by being allowed to spend money for nonnecessities, such as going out to eat with friends, taking someone to a movie, buying a CD. But the household was able to help each member become more accountable for the way each spent money. This was no small thing in a highly materialistic culture. Members of the community said that just knowing they would need to justify their desire to spend money prevented most frivolous expenditures.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of *common* in this section's title, "Common Commitments." Accountability means nothing if you ask someone to hold you to some value that you do not share. And we will hardly welcome accountability if people try to exhort us to live as we have no intention of living. This is why any thriving community must examine Scripture regularly together. Common Scripture study allows us to call people to commitment to the authoritative Word of God.

### **Common Vision: Partnership in Ministry**

It is critical for vital Christian community that the members be involved in ministry together. Ministry gives purpose to the common commitments and paces the development of the community as a whole. Here is how Paul speaks of the importance of ministry to the



overall goal of the Christian community, the body of Christ:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ, . . . from whom the whole body, . . . as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-13, 16)

Paul affirms that the purpose of a body of believers is to bring every member into full maturity in the faith. His vision is that we all grow together to measure up to nothing less than the stature of Christ.<sup>6</sup> The church's goal is to complete the discipleship process for each member and to mature as a body. Accomplishing this involves equipping every member for the work of ministry. If the members are working properly and working together, then the healthy body will grow up into the fullness of Christ.

*Ministry*, as Paul uses the word here, means both ministry *to* the saints and ministry *of* the saints to those who do not yet believe. The building up of the body of Christ involves both qualitative development and numerical growth as new members are added to the faith. A functioning community of Christians yields both the pastoral development of the believers and evangelistic fruit. In fact, these aspects of ministry are complementary. As younger Christians are called to care for and witness to others, they grow in their faith as well.

In college you may have experienced a community that called its members into ministry. Your college fellowship geared up for ministry, especially at certain times of the year: outreach to new students during the fall, perhaps a campuswide evangelistic event, weekend retreats. At each of these times the mission of your college group was well defined and each member of the community joined in working toward the overall goal. As each part was working properly, the entire community grew, in joy and love for one another as well as numerically.

*Common vision* is critical. As you consider small group involvement

in a postcollege setting, perhaps you feel little hope for a common vision for ministry. If each member of the community has a particular vision with little coordination or partnership throughout the whole, over time the pull of those different visions may sap and undermine the community as a whole. This does not mean that everyone will do the same thing, play the same role or contribute the same gifts. But even with a diversity of gifts, they all contribute toward the same goal.

*Household community.* A group of college graduates are interested in living together in a form of household community. Early in the discussions the group should consider the vision of their community. What is the area of need to which the community is called to minister? Perhaps it is the young-adult age group of a local church or the youth of a nearby inner-city neighborhood. Perhaps the group senses a call to go overseas, to become a team involved in crosscultural ministry.

Many common visions are worth pursuing. Different communities will pursue different visions. Yet it is critical that a community household have a common vision. This vision will determine subsequent decisions:

- ☐ Where should we look for housing?
- ☐ Who will be the main recipients of the household's hospitality?
- ☐ What other resources and partners will we need to seek out to pursue our vision?

### **Common Life: Fellowship**

The common life of a small group is perhaps its most visible feature. This is often what makes a community either attractive or oppressive, depending on how it functions.

It takes time to build community. There is no shortcut; there is no bureaucratic or institutional replacement for simply spending time together. A household of people must decide to share meals and set aside regular time for one another if their living arrangement is to be Christian community. Otherwise it can feel like a hotel, with corresponding low relational expectations. One indication of the "hotelization" of a household is that people treat common areas as if they expect a maid to do all the cleaning!

Of course any group will need to allow community to develop—it won't exist fully formed immediately. In a healthy and growing small group, people are increasingly willing to alter their priorities so that they can spend quality time together. Some may decide that the value of a weekly meal together is worth the extra effort of cooking and hosting. Or someone may decide to buy a car in order to be able to spend more time with other members in their homes.

*Small group community.* A group of recent graduates attending the same church grow dissatisfied with the level of sharing they experience in their small group. Living together is not an option, though two pairs of roommates are in the group. What can they do to build a greater sense of fellowship and deeper community in their group?

It is certainly possible to experience deep community between people not living under the same roof. Because of their common desire to grow, small group members will probably want to spend time together in a variety of contexts:

□ *Scripture study.* This can be a fundamental element of all three commonalities: common commitments, common vision and common life. Giving priority to Scripture study will add depth to the group's fellowship life.

□ *Worship.* Corporate worship as a small group lifts our sights from our own "to do" lists to set them on God, who calls us into relationship with himself as well as with one another. Worship is especially meaningful in a group that is able to confess sins to one another, receive forgiveness and be reconciled. Worship reminds us that we all stand in need of the same grace and forgiveness from God through Jesus Christ.

□ *Meals.* The early church in Acts was characterized by "breaking bread together" in each other's homes. Much of Jesus' teaching happened in the context of meals in people's homes. With a little intentionality, meals can be fruitful times. Shared meals give room for relationships to form and deepen, and in that setting group members can welcome guests into their fellowship.

□ *Celebrations.* God commanded the people of Israel to celebrate and commemorate certain events in their past, reminding themselves of

God's faithfulness to them throughout their history. A small group will gain much by fostering this same spirit of celebration and remembrance. Traditional holidays, birthdays and anniversaries of community milestones are all worth celebrating. Celebrations also offer avenues for a variety of gifts to be used for the benefit of the whole.

□ *Movies.* If thoughtfully planned, a night at a theater or at home with a video can foster community. While most videos are pointless, dozens of movies do raise important issues and are worth watching in community. Movies, for better or for worse, are chief carriers of the values of our culture. Better to watch them in community with a critical eye than to absorb their messages unchallenged.

□ *Road trips.* Jesus often took his disciples on the road or across the lake in extended trips away from his home base. When we are out of our home environment, relational patterns change and friendships can grow more quickly. So weekend retreats are effective for giving a church or fellowship group a greater sense of community. But beyond the familiar retreat, consider other forms of road trips: week-long vacations together, camping trips, short-term crosscultural missions trips, or tours to visit ministries, churches, communities or missionaries.

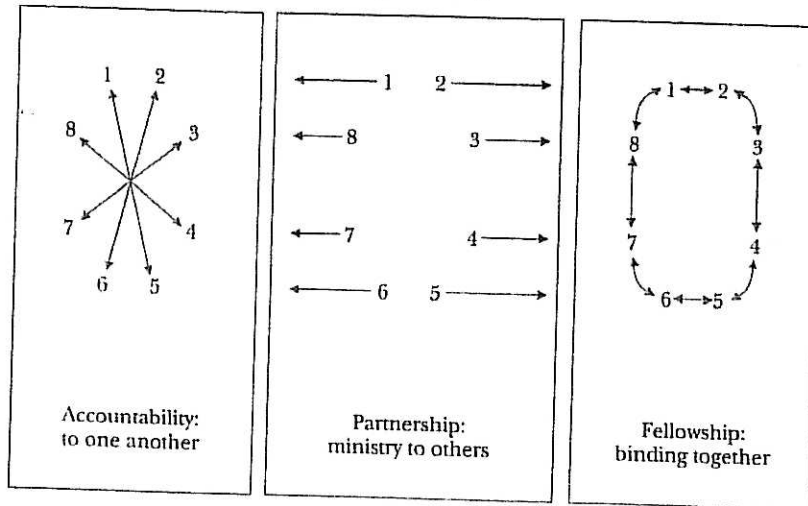
One year I led a small group with three graduating students, Steve, Brian and Seth. We all learned much that year as we met weekly to pray and share about our lives. After their graduation we decided to take a three-week trip across the United States, from California to New York City, then visiting Washington, D.C., Jackson, Mississippi, and other cities. We wanted an adventure, but we also were interested in visiting thriving inner-city ministries.

Daily God stunned us by showing us his vision and hope for the city. We spent much of our travel time debriefing on what we had seen. Each day our relationships with one another deepened, and we were excited to consider our future partnership. The four of us chose to live together the following year, continuing in ministry together and growing in our understanding and experience of Christian community.

### Community in Equilibrium

Now that we've examined three components of Christian community, let's consider how these components fit together, using the diagram below.

I call this a force diagram because the three commonalities discussed above can be understood as forces producing a dynamic equilibrium in a healthy community. Accountability is the inward force, partnership in ministry is the outward force, and fellowship is the binding force, like glue holding it all together.



What happens when one or more of these forces is underdeveloped or not present? Without all three forces in balance, the community falls out of equilibrium; it is unstable and will not long endure. Depending on which force is missing, the community may fly apart, splinter off or cave in on itself. In fact, all communities have weaknesses that if unaddressed may make them unstable. This is why so many marriages, friendships, households and churches split apart after a time. We want to aim for community with vibrant health and longevity.<sup>7</sup>

The point is not to limit our definition of biblical community to a particular incarnation or even a particular mix of these three ingredients. Some successful communities are stronger in some of the ele-

ments than others, and that's fine. And hopefully any community you are a part of will grow and develop over time. The examples discussed below are the extreme cases: if you recognize a lack of some element in your small group or church, you may be able to work toward change and a more healthy balance of the components of community.

What would "community" be like without each of these three commonalities?

*Without accountability.* Consider first a small group that has a strong common life and an outward focus in ministry yet offers its members no accountability. Members may enjoy being together and are involved in ministry together, but they aren't deeply involved in each other's lives. Because accountability is the most inward of the commonalities, a group without it can still look like a great community on the outside. At least for a while.

But none of the members get the help they need. Caught up in the desires of the world, some people fall into temptation and sin, especially sexual immorality and materialism. Others are broken people whose brokenness is not apparent in ten-minute chats after the Sunday-school class or the small group meeting. They remain in patterns of pain and discouragement because they are not given the accountability they need to take steps out of an unhealthy way of life.<sup>8</sup>

God provides for a small group in part through the spiritual and physical resources of its members. If ministry and fellowship continue without accountability, these resources will be depleted over time, just as a car eventually breaks down if no one ever bothers to put oil in it. A healthy group must have accountability in some form, or it will be impoverished over time and will hollow out and fly apart.

*Without partnership in ministry.* Now consider a small group with great fellowship and mutual accountability but no partnership in ministry. The small group is ingrown. In a high school we would call it a clique; in a church we might call it a social club. All of its energy is focused into the group; none is focused outward. Members lack vision for evangelism or service.

A small group without ministry is also unstable. There is no ultimate purpose in being together. Think about what happens to cliques in



high school. Without an outward focus they collapse or splinter apart.<sup>9</sup> All the energy that people have for relationships is turned inward and becomes judgmental, producing gossip, backbiting and factions. Eventually such groups either divide over trivial issues or disintegrate as members drift apart.

*Without fellowship.* Here we consider the rare example of a community with accountability and partnership in ministry but no fellowship. This is the least attractive form of pseudocommunity, resembling the stereotype of a marines boot camp. Such an outward-focused, mission-driven group is often fairly hierarchically organized. Involvement in this "community" might center on high-intensity relationships with a "discipler" and eventually with one's disciples.

Here people are "tough loved" but they aren't soft loved. Group members may begin to feel that their lives are being inordinately monitored and arbitrarily judged. Accountability can produce tension; without the warm love of fellowship the tension can break up the group. Members are supposed to be in ministry to outsiders, but this kind of community is not very attractive to invite people to. It becomes exclusively task-oriented, a situation that is self-defeating. Since the "task" is advancing the kingdom, and the kingdom is principally relational, we cannot advance the kingdom without loving people, especially those in our own small group.

Finally, we can summarize the three commonalities as follows:

Community involves . . .	Common . . .	Fundamental quality	Without it a group is characterized by . . .
Accountability	Commitments	Truth	Sin and hypocrisy
Partnership	Vision	Mission	Lack of cohesion
Fellowship	Life	Love	Lack of joy

### Implications

Let me emphasize several specific implications of the understanding

of community I have been building in this chapter.

*Community households.* A decision to live together as Christians doesn't make community. Moving into a house together or renting an apartment with a couple of Christians doesn't even ensure common life, let alone common vision and common commitments. A group of people who decide to live together may not be ready for the commonalities of community, but then it is probably best not to call the situation Christian community. Set realistic expectations.

But if you want to experience deeper community, mobilize your resources to make it happen. It will mean making your time available for common life. It will mean making your relationships open to common commitments and accountability. It will mean talking through what you want to pursue so as to make common vision and partnership a reality. If these things are all present, you should have a lot of hope that your housing situation will yield Christian community.

*Nonhousehold community.* Just as a decision to live together doesn't ensure community, neither does a separate living situation preclude it. In both situations you will need to make intentional choices in order to deepen relationships and pursue the components of community discussed in this chapter.

Several people not living in the same household or apartment desire to develop community. If they are willing to make priority decisions to achieve their goal, they have many creative options. For example, they could arrange a rotation of meals so that they eat together two or three nights a week, with their small group meeting for Bible study, prayer and accountability on one of these nights. The economy of scale involved in cooking less frequently for more people could actually counter the added transportation time involved, making this option *more* time-efficient. Another of the joint-meal nights could be an open time to invite other friends, hang out, go out to movies or enjoy a video.

The only thing getting in the way of the development of community is time, and since everyone has the same amount of time in absolute terms, the only thing preventing people from making the choice to spend time together is a difference of priorities. As people begin to experience and increasingly to value community, they will be willing

to make choices to pursue it more.

*First steps.* Perhaps you are tempted to think, "The boat has left the dock; I wish I had been ready." No timetable governs progress toward postcollege Christian community. The point is to get moving. If you are attracted to the kind of community described in this chapter, take steps to move toward it. Be the person to make this happen. You cannot create community alone, but you certainly can thwart or reject it when it comes along.

Consider asking your small group to take a weekend away together, perhaps at a retreat center or Christian conference. Try to include both meaningful content and fun time. Plan as a community to interact with Scripture in a significant way, to begin to develop common commitments to which you can be held accountable. Look at the book of Ephesians to see what Paul says about the nature of the church. That will challenge your understanding of what it means to be in relationships with other Christians.

"I'm in! How about you?" Chances are you know some people who would also be attracted to a deeper experience of community. Perhaps you already have a small group that meets weekly, but you know it could be much more. Perhaps you can say to the others, "I'm in! How about you?" By "in" I don't mean physically in—that is, moving into a house somewhere. Even more important is the emotional "in": "I'm willing to make priority decisions around you guys." You can say "I'm in" and invite others to join you, to make risky choices to be faithful to what God wants for you as individuals and as a community.

*Leadership and community.* Broad ownership is key to a functioning community. Yet leadership is also crucial; leadership gifts must somehow be recognized, and group members must work to submit to leaders. Different leadership roles will emerge: some people may be gifted for teaching, others for pastoral care, others for visionary leadership, others for administrative decision-making. Different forms of community will work out the leadership structure differently, but the ability of a community to recognize *and submit to* leadership will, to a great extent, determine its viability. The inability to submit to leadership is often what kills churches, households and ministry teams.

Think about how your community recognizes and empowers leadership. How easily do people take on leadership, authority and decision-making roles within your community? How valued and appreciated are those roles?

Is there someone to whom the leaders of your community are also accountable—your pastor or church leaders, for example? This kind of relationship can give community members greater confidence in the wisdom and direction of those in leadership.

*The evolution of community.* It is critical to enter into a small group expecting that community will take time to grow. Yet we also must expect that community will take different forms at different times in our lives. Marriage and children will change the nature of our experience of community with others. When such changes occur, we may be tempted to one of two responses. We may be frustrated when these life-stage changes affect our small group experience of community. Or anticipating the inevitable changes, we may reserve ourselves and not pursue depth with others.

Yet if we have entered into deep and satisfying community before these changes occur, we are more likely to continue to value community, to make choices to pursue it and thus to experience new rewards. For example, my wife and I recently became parents. Our experience of community has changed, but we are enjoying new benefits: our community has given us tremendous help in the care of our infant son.

\* \* \*

This chapter began with a look at a secular film's depiction of a warm college-based community that experienced a chill after many years. Another secular film depicts a very different kind of community. *Brother Son, Sister Moon* is Franco Zeffirelli's beautiful recounting of the story of Saint Francis. Francis's story is the reverse of those in *The Big Chill*. He was reckless and wild in his youth, but not one to resist the status quo at all: he went off to the war of his day, unlike the radicals of the 1960s who protested the Vietnam War. Yet illness and a subsequent conversion brought about a total repentance, and he became idealistic and radical—as radical as any radicals today. Other young people, also disenchanted with their society and the hypocrisy

in the church, joined Francis in his efforts to live by Jesus' model and to take Jesus' teachings seriously. It was the community of those who chose to live together that made it possible and attractive to pursue a radical lifestyle. The Franciscan orders grew to have a dramatic impact on the life and health of the church of the late Middle Ages.

This is the kind of experience we hope to have, binding our lives together with others in Jesus' name. We will grow as disciples of Jesus as his first disciples did, listening to his teaching and submitting to it in a group. We will learn to love God and one another in a community ignited by God's Spirit, stoked by God's Word and guided by the vision of the advance of God's kingdom.

### ■ For Reflection

#### The Community of the King

- ☐ As you anticipate making difficult choices to follow Jesus after college, do you have a community of disciples that will help you remain faithful to Jesus?
- ☐ If yes, how can they tangibly be of help? In what areas of discipleship do your brothers and sisters provide encouragement?
- ☐ If no, how can you discover, join or develop such a community?

#### Community: God's Economy of Abundance

- ☐ How much are you aware of God's "economy of abundance"?
- ☐ Do you live as though you believe God is generous and his resources are abundant and available to you through God's people? Or do you live with a scarcity mentality, acquiring and protecting possessions as a priority? Or somewhere in between?
- ☐ How could you take steps to move toward a greater reliance on God's economy? What form of Christian community could help you do this?

#### Common Commitment: Accountability

- ☐ Do you have friends with whom you already share struggles and confess sin? Thank God for these relationships.
- ☐ If not, do you have friends with whom you could begin to do this?

- ☐ What would it cost you? What would be the potential benefits?

#### Common Vision: Partnership in Ministry

- ☐ Reflect on potential partners with whom you share vision for ministry.
- ☐ What are your strengths as a partner? What gets in the way?

#### Common Life: Fellowship

- ☐ Do you find that recent changes to your life and schedule have made it easier to spend time in fellowship with your community or potential community, or more difficult?
- ☐ How can you make priority decisions that will help you and others make fellowship more satisfying?

#### For Further Reading

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