

Lamb, Following Jesus in the
"Real World"

6

Strategies for Church Involvement

part
2.

The film *The Dream Team* is an imaginative if unlikely comedy about four patients in a mental hospital and the psychiatrist who leads their group-therapy sessions. The psychiatrist gets the daring idea to take these four guys to a Yankees baseball game to help them to loosen up and relax with him and one another. Through a freak coincidence, and unfortunately for his plan, the psychiatrist ends up witnessing a murder. Having been beaten up by the criminals, he is eventually discovered and taken away in an ambulance, while the four patients obediently stay in their car.

In the bizarre chain of events that follows, this group of semifunctioning, mutually hostile adults eventually come to realize that they must rely on one another and work together in order to find their doctor and, as it turns out, save his life. They face enormous obstacles (they are wanted by the police for their doctor's beating and for the murder he witnessed), but in the end—and to great comic effect—each of the members of the "dream team" uses his particular gifts and

quirks to find and save the doctor. The result is their best therapy ever, as each comes to understand his own gifts and also his need for the others. Through the ordeal they all make progress in their emotional growth and healing.

Though it is hardly flattering to say it, part of what I enjoy about that film is that it reminds me of the church. Not the Church Triumphant but the church at Fifth and Main. Not the Church Universal but the church particular. A group of people who without the Spirit of God in their midst might be at each other's throats. A group of people some of whom can barely function in society. A group of people with little quirks that make them very funny, if you could stand back and see them from the right angle. Yet somehow, through the grace and power of God, this odd collection of people, when they come together, are called to be the very incarnation of Jesus on the earth. And as they struggle to become what they are called to become, each grows and experiences much-needed healing.

Unfortunately, no one really wants to identify with such a weird assortment of people. In the movie each member of the group thought that he didn't belong there and it was the others who had problems. If you have recently graduated from college, you too may also be tempted to view the church (that is, the one you attended last Sunday) as a group of strange individuals very much different from yourself. And yet everything in Scripture tells us that if we are to follow Jesus we *will* participate in his body, the church. That church is not the church invisible but rather the church all-too-visible, the one down the block with all the sinners and hypocrites in it. And if we are honest with ourselves, we fit right in at such a church!

Models of the Church

Before we consider practical strategies for church involvement, we need to examine the nature of the church. What is it supposed to be? The answer to this will help us to know how to relate to the church. In a short book on the nature of the church, *The Outward Bound*, Vernard Eller uses two contrasting images to describe how the church sees itself.

A *commissary* is an institution which has been *commissioned* to *dispense* particular goods, services, or benefits to a select *constituency*. The commissary church, then, sees itself primarily as an institution, a *divine institution franchised by God*. God has stocked the institution with a supply of heavenly graces (Bible truths, correct theology, the sacraments, etc.) which the clerical proprietors, through proper transaction, can disburse to the customers. The measure of a commissary, it follows, lies in the legality of its franchise, the warranty of its goods, and the authorization of its personnel.

A *caravan*, on the other hand, is something entirely different. It is a group of people banded together to make *common cause* in seeking a *common destination*. . . . The being of a caravan lies not in any signed and sealed authorization but *in the way it functions*. Its validity lies not in its apparatus but in the performance of its caravaners—each and every one of them. A caravan is a caravan only as long as it is making progress—or at least striving to make progress. Once the caravaners stop, dig in, or count themselves as having arrived, they no longer constitute a caravan.¹

Eller says that the early church understood itself as a caravan; the people of God were banded together on a trip to the City of God. The book of Hebrews makes a clear statement of this. Emphasizing the continuity of faith in Jesus with authentic Judaism, the author reviews the lives of many Old Testament heroes and heroines of faith:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

We can also understand the tension between Eller's two models of the church through the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The religious establishment of Jesus' day had a "commissary" understand-

ing of Jewish religion, especially of the synagogues and the temple. According to them, Jesus was not an authorized purveyor of the spiritual goods available in their system; he seemed to set up a competitive shop where anyone, including *nonauthorized* customers, could receive forgiveness or healing—even on the sabbath day, when such things were not supposed to happen. Jesus called people to follow him and hence to join one another in doing so. His caravan took on a literal form as he walked ahead of the pack of fearful and amazed disciples on the way to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32). After Jesus' death and resurrection, he reiterates his initial call to his first disciple: "Follow me!" (John 21:19, 22). The caravan doesn't stop until we all arrive in the heavenly city.

In Ephesians 4 Paul describes a clear vision for the church involving both "common cause" and "common destination." Paul depicts a caravan of people who thrive and grow and progress together as each contributes. Paul expresses the common destination of the church in various ways:

- ☐ "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" (v. 13)
 - ☐ "we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (v. 15)
 - ☐ "promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (v. 16)
- He likewise expresses the "common cause" of the church:
- ☐ "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling" (v. 4)
 - ☐ "the gifts he gave . . . to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (vv. 11-12)
 - ☐ "the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament" (v. 16)
 - ☐ "as each part is working properly" (v. 16)

The church Paul describes sounds pretty exciting! The leaders are gifted in training the saints for ministry. That ministry grows and develops the entire body, both qualitatively and numerically. Growth, speaking the truth, love, each member working properly—wow! Paul

envision an attractive dynamic of change; this is what the church is supposed to look like.

The image of a caravan can be connected to the image of community developed in chapter five of this book. A caravan is a *community on the move*. Some communities may be tempted to settle down, becoming rooted, permanent and perhaps complacent. But the caravan community of disciples will continue to take risks to follow Jesus to the heavenly city. This perspective profoundly affects our lifestyle choices. (See chapter seven.)

We may be tempted to assume that certain denominations will show up at certain locations on the spectrum of commissary to caravan. Yet the reality is that God is at work in churches all over. The most historically institutional church in the West is the Roman Catholic Church, but even that is changing. Avery Dulles, a Jesuit theologian, reflects on this change:

Vatican Council II in its Constitution on the Church made ample use of the models of the body of Christ and the Sacrament, but its dominant model was rather that of the People of God. This paradigm focused attention on the Church as a network of interpersonal relationships, on the Church as community. This is still the dominant model for many Roman Catholics who consider themselves progressives and invoke the teaching of Vatican II as their authority.²

God is at work renewing his church, bringing new life into structures that have become institutionalized. God desires that his church be a "people of the Way," as the early church was called. And God sends his Spirit to urge the church forward.

If the caravan model more closely reflects God's desire for his church than the commissary model, that has implications for us as participants in it. We are not members of churches the way people are members of discount shopping clubs. Membership in the church looks more like membership on a football team. Our fortunes rise and fall as a team, and we all must work together to fulfill our purpose. The rest of this chapter focuses on the practical implications of this model.

Take Your Place in the Body

What are you doing when you join a church? Why should you join one? You may take the answers to these questions for granted, but if finding a church after college proves difficult, the questions become relevant. To find a clue to the answer, consider the pivotal event in the apostle Paul's life:

With [pursuit of the Christians] in mind, I was traveling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road . . . I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads." I asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The Lord answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26:12-18)

In this passage Paul recounts his conversion in his defense before King Agrippa. Prior to this he has told Agrippa that as the Pharisee Saul, he had been a furious persecutor of Christians, zealous to see them punished for their "blasphemy." But then something literally knocked him off his horse. He met Jesus.

The conversation Jesus and Saul have is an interesting one. Jesus asks him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Imagine what goes through Saul's mind at that point. He has been persecuting a lot of people. He watched as Stephen was stoned by the council. Yet the question is odd. How can Saul be expected to answer it? So he begs for more information: "Who are you, Lord?" Whoever the source of this voice is, he is no mere mortal. So Saul calls this cosmic stranger he has never met "Lord." It won't be the last time.

Finally Jesus introduces himself: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."

Of course Saul isn't too happy to hear this. He wasn't prepared for this answer. The last person he expected to have to address as "Lord" was Jesus. Furthermore, even with all the people he had been persecuting, Jesus was not one of them; Saul had never actually met Jesus.

So the conversation gets a bit one-sided at this point. Saul has nothing left to say; words and sensibility fail him. Jesus continues with some instructions for him, but I have a feeling they were repeated later, under conditions more conducive to comprehension. At this point Saul is taking in very little.

"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." I think Saul/Paul spent many of his next few days and weeks thinking about that one. As a result of his meditations Paul came to a deep understanding of the nature of the church. From this experience Paul got his favorite image for the church: the body of Christ.

Jesus doesn't say, "I am Jesus whose friends you are persecuting," or "I am Jesus whose disciples you are persecuting," or "I am Jesus whose church you are persecuting." Rather, Jesus identifies so closely with his people that he equates himself with his followers corporately. In other words, when the church is persecuted, Christ feels the pain. The "body of Christ" image is not simply metaphor; it is reality, at a fundamental level. To be a member of the church is to be joined to Jesus. And vice versa: to have anything to do with Jesus requires participation in his body.

Jesus tells Saul why he has appeared to him. He is going to send Saul to the Gentiles. Saul's appointed task is to open people's eyes and to turn them from Satan to God, so that they will receive forgiveness . . . That's it, right?

No, receiving forgiveness from sins is not the ultimate destiny of those who respond to Paul's preaching, as important as that is. Rather, Jesus goes to all the trouble to call Paul in this dramatic way in order to accomplish a further goal: "so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (v. 18).

For the Gentiles who will respond to Paul's preaching, and for us

today, the process is not complete until people *take their place* within the body. Taking a place means more than finding a church to attend on Sunday mornings when nothing else is going on. It means more than finding a pew to sit in. It means entering the community of the people of God and taking up your role in God's plan for his people. It means being a functioning member of the body of Christ.

Several attitudinal barriers can make it difficult to find our places within the local body of believers. Each of these can keep us from satisfying involvement in church. No one will find a perfect church. If we have eyes to see all the things wrong with a church, we quickly will. That reaction can prevent us from receiving what God wants us to receive.

1. *Consumer versus participant.* The *consumer* attends a church service and rates it the way a reviewer might blurb a movie: "Two thumbs up!" "Very moving!" "A total snooze." The consumer is there to purchase a product, whether the product is strong biblical teaching or rockin' worship. The consumer pays for this product by the time he spends, and perhaps by giving to the weekly offering—fair (if nominal) payment for services rendered. The consumer reads the church bulletin looking for goods and services that might be interesting: a Bible study this week, a singles night next week, a monthly men's prayer breakfast. The consumer feels free to come to the service (or any activity of the church) late and to leave early whenever a prior engagement or other work interferes.

The *participant* views the church service or activity as much more than something just to enjoy or evaluate. The participant expects to contribute (and hence enjoys the experience much more). She contributes to the worship by her own singing, contributes to the church budget by her tithing and contributes to the warmth and friendliness of the church by her greetings to visitors after the service. The participant comes early and stays late, as there are always little ways to help prepare for the activity or to clean up afterward.

2. *Attender versus member.* The *attender* makes numerous decisions every week regarding the church: "Will I go to the 8:30 service today, or the 11:00, or not at all?" "Do I have time to make it to the young

adults Bible study this evening?" "Do I really have time to stay for the monthly potluck? (If so I need to go buy some potato chips.)" All these decisions are evaluated against the list of other priorities the attender has. Most weeks she may well choose to go to church and go to Bible study—she may look to others like a very faithful member. But her mentality is one of an attender.

The *member* makes a commitment to join the life of the church in certain ways. This makes the member's life much simpler. Many fewer decisions need to be made every week. He will attend the same worship service, the same small group and the same activities every week, not because he has an uneventful or routine life but because membership in the community of the church is top priority for him. He organizes his work schedule around his church involvements, and other priorities fall in line after the commitments he has made to and with his church community.

The attender asks the question every week, every event: "Am I going?" The member asks different questions: "Whom can I bring with me? Whom can I invite to join me?" Since the member knows on Wednesday morning what he will be doing Thursday night, he can ask his friend at work, "Bill, would you be interested in joining me after work tomorrow for pizza and then a Bible study with some friends from my church?"

3. *Critic versus partner.* The *critic* keeps a mental scorecard of the church's strengths and weaknesses. He analyzes how people perform certain roles: how the worship was led, what songs were chosen, who prays and how well they did. He appreciates quality special music and is able to identify real talent when it is present *or absent*. The critic notices the friendliness of the greeters, the quality and abundance of the food offered during fellowship time and the confidence of the pianist. The critic discerns the wisdom, warmth and humor of the pastor. And certainly the critic evaluates the biblical depth and exegetical rigor of the sermon.

If you were to talk to the critic about his reflections, he would ask, "Why does *the church* do it this way?" "Why do *you guys* pray like this?" "Why do *they* sing these songs?" He may compare the church with his

former group: "Back home *we* do Communion this way . . ." In each statement the critic makes it clear that he is on the outside of the church looking in, making critical evaluations (positively and negatively). He keeps himself standing apart from the people of God.

The *partner* also has a critical, evaluative capacity but uses it very differently. The partner, as an insider, wants the worship service, the small group experience, the service activity, even the fellowship time after worship to be the best it can be. The partner may have heard a new song she wants to introduce in worship, so she speaks with one of the worship leaders. Or she may be concerned that new people are not being welcomed effectively, so she talks with her small group about making a conscious effort to do so. Or she knows that the pianist is new and a little uncomfortable, so she makes it a point to affirm and encourage him after worship every week. Or, noticing the church's lack of interest in missions, she brings a concrete proposal to the church leadership or congregational meeting for discussion. While the critic says, "Why do *you guys* do it this way?" the partner says, "Would it be possible for *us* to do it like this?"

Paul's ministry was to open people's eyes, to call them to turn from Satan to God so that they might receive forgiveness *and* to take their place among those being sanctified by faith in Jesus. *Consumer, attender, critic:* these attitudes prevent people from taking their place in the body. They are the attitudes of clients of an institution rather than of fellow travelers on a journey. People who adopt these attitudes do so to protect themselves, their schedules and their prior commitments. They may do so out of fear of losing control of their lives, yet they lose out.

Participant, member, partner: adopting these postures toward the church makes taking a place that is satisfying and rewarding. These attitudes make us into fellow caravaners, people who have joined others on a journey toward the heavenly city. This approach makes it possible to experience true community in a church setting. Deeper friendships, greater spiritual growth, more profound understanding of Scripture, daily reliance on God—the door to all of these is opened when you take your place among those who are being perfected by God.

Openness to Church Renewal

I said in the first section of this chapter that God is at work renewing his universal church and many of his local churches. It is impossible for any of us through sheer effort and planning to bring renewal to a church—God must bring it through a fresh outpouring of his Spirit. But we can participate in God's renewing work in a church, if we welcome it and can see it coming.

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins" (Mark 2:22). Jesus tells this short parable in response to a question about his religious practices. His disciples weren't fasting regularly according to the fashion of the day. Challenged to justify their behavior, Jesus says that it wouldn't be appropriate for his disciples to fast "as long as they have the bridegroom with them." Fasting is supposed to help you focus your heart on God, but while Jesus is around the disciples have God in their midst. Fasting is not necessary at this time.

But then Jesus tells the parable of the wineskins, a commentary on the whole of the tension between Jesus and the Pharisees. In this episode and in the next two in Mark, the central issue is the conflict between the old and the new. The old is the Pharisees, the way they fast and the way they observe the sabbath. The new is Jesus and his approach to these same things. In the words of the parable, the Pharisees were trying to put the new wine of Jesus' presence and message into their old wineskins, their familiar and revered religious structures. Jesus says that to do that will destroy both the old and the new. Nothing of value will remain.

The parable makes a distinction between the wine and the wineskins. The new thing God is doing, its essence, is the wine. The structure that holds the new thing, the vehicle that conveys it, is the wineskin. This distinction is something that the Pharisees failed to see.³

For those of us familiar with the Gospels it is easy to forget that the Pharisees weren't always the bad guys. A century or so previous to Jesus' appearance in Palestine, the Pharisees were a radical reform movement within Judaism. After the return from the exile, this group

wanted to keep Israel faithful to God so that God would once again look favorably on his chosen people. They expected the imminent return of the Messiah, who would restore Israel to its former glory. Their zeal for the sabbath, the law and religious observance was originally motivated by a desire to see God move with power among his people.

So at one point these structures (strict observance of the sabbath, rigid fasting practices) were themselves new wineskins into which God had poured his renewing Spirit. But by the time of Jesus' coming they were old and in need of replacement with fresh structures. Any attempt to force the new outpouring of God's Spirit into old structures was sure to result in destruction. In the death of Jesus we see the most graphic depiction of the destruction that results when the old and the new come into conflict.

This process has happened repeatedly throughout the history of the people of God and will continue to happen. The new structures into which God pours his Spirit become old as his people begin to trust in the structures rather than in him. The Pharisees took the Mosaic law, given by God to point his people to faith in him, and they began to trust in that law—its codification, objectification and proper execution—rather than in the God who gave it. They pursued the law, a law of faith, as if it were based on works (Romans 9:31-32).

This same process happens today when any church begins to rely on the structure rather than the Spirit who inhabits it. A few hundred years ago, singing English hymns rather than Latin chants was an innovation that brought greater fervor in worship. Yet those same hymns today, for many, can kill rather than release joy in worship. The monthly church potluck, while at one time a loving reenactment of the early church's fellowship meals, may in some churches have become a chore that only the most dutiful members are willing to endure. In each case meaningful worship and satisfying fellowship are God-inspired goals, but the particular structures used to achieve these goals will need to change over time. At any point a church may grow to trust in its structures of worship, fellowship, service, discipleship or leadership more than in the God who directs and shapes and

energizes those structures through his Spirit. If this happens, then the church has undergone potentially deadly institutionalization. The church has ceased to be a caravan. It needs to experience renewal.

A church is like its individual members: imperfect, with strengths as well as weaknesses. We want to be able to see the church in the light of growth and renewal, just as we want to experience growth and renewal in our own lives. If we have become participants, members and partners in the churches of which we are a part, we will be given opportunities to participate in the renewing work of God among his people. God may give us eyes to identify some of the old wineskins in the church. With the commitment of a member we will be able to perceive weakness and need for change without impatience or revulsion. More than simply identifying the problem, we will find ourselves called to be part of the solution.

Elusive Community and Everyday Churches

Many Christians active in college fellowships have a difficult time joining churches after college. This is not necessarily simply because of poor motivation on the part of recent graduates. Below I offer the recent stories of several highly motivated graduates who experienced a bumpy transition into a variety of churches. Each entered his or her church with a participant-member-partner posture, but all found their investment in church disappointing. See if you identify with any of them.

Maya: My church involvement since graduation has been one of extremes. When I first came into contact with my church, I felt like I had come home and became a member immediately. The style of worship was similar to that of the churches I grew up in. As I stayed, though, it became increasingly difficult to put forth the energy to meet people. For a while I considered changing churches, after deciding that many people were not very interested in relationships. I had expended a lot of energy in the beginning to meet people and got about 5 percent of that back—it was very discouraging. I prayed and decided that I was going to stop expecting people to return my phone calls and initiative.

Kendall: While I learned a lot through my involvement with my church and respect it in many ways, discipleship and community are noticeably lacking there. I saw an endless group of people coming in without the base of partnership with which to minister to them.

Leslie: I've done most of the things organized churches do—social groups, service groups, outreach groups, study groups and leadership groups. I spent almost three years on a parish vestry. Most of my work in the church didn't help me or strengthen me to be more of a Christian in daily life—not directly, anyway. And it all took up incredible amounts of energy, leaving other areas of my life neglected for far too long.

Jan: I was involved in a Korean church as the youth pastor, but I couldn't foresee the lack of care I would receive in this environment as opposed to my college days. The church had no conscious ministry of caring for its leaders. In my case, I was expected to perform and supply the kids with teaching each week. But I was totally alone. This was a difficult, lonely and spiritually dry year. Each of these people joined a church with the expectation of active participation, and they all jumped in. But each found church involvement disappointing (or worse) because of, in part, the failure of the church to offer satisfying community.

In many churches God is already bringing renewal in the experience of community. Yet many churches still have a long way to go. If you have enjoyed community in the college setting, you may eventually be able to participate with God in his renewing work in the church you join. But in the short term you must ask, "Where can I find the quality of community within the church context that I need to grow in my own faith?"

The previous chapter outlined a model for community with critical commonalities: common commitments, common vision and common life. These form the basis of any healthy community, Christian or otherwise. Ideally, your local church should offer community according to these principles. Yet as we have seen, the reality is often far different. Can you ensure an experience of community as you enter a church?

The most certain way of finding community in a new church is to

bring it with you. Then at least you know it is there. That is the best chance you will have of experiencing community. I say this not because of a pessimistic view of churches but because of a realistic understanding of community: it takes work and a long time to form. So if you have community available, bring it with you.

How do you bring community to a church? The concept is simple: you start with community and then, as a community, you join a church. It involves calling together a group of people who have decided to be the caravan-type community of God's people, who have made a decision to follow God together after college. Each member of the group may need to subordinate some of his or her own tastes and preferences in order to find a church where the community is able to worship God and grow in love for one another and for others.

This is a strategy for planting a *seedling community*. This small group is not meant to be full-grown, fully developed shady-oak-tree community, but simply a seedling, already sprouted and prepared for growth. Your hope would be to invite others into your group, so that the sense of community can grow numerically as well as in depth. Over time your seedling community may become the shady-oak-tree type, fully rooted in the soil of the church.

I know of Christian households of four graduates where the members attend three different churches. Any potential for bringing the Christian community they could enjoy into their church is lost because their church commitments do not overlap.

I want to emphasize at this point that this recommendation doesn't imply that deep community is not available in most churches. My suspicion is that satisfying community is possible in more churches than one might expect, but that it will take work to discover and develop. But even in the best church with the most satisfying community, the experience of joining the church and its community will be smoother and faster if done by a group who themselves are a growing community.

At the same time I realize that this isn't always possible. You may not have access any longer to the community and partnerships you enjoyed while in college. The rest of this chapter offers some help and hope for you as well. A case-study approach will allow us to explore

specific strategies for church involvement.

Church Involvement Case Study

What do you want in a church? What do you look for? On what criteria do you evaluate churches as good or bad, worth joining or not? These are fundamental questions for any Christian, but especially for people making the transition beyond college. Read the following descriptions of three churches, thinking as you read about what you might do to get involved in them.

University Baptist Church. UBC is a relatively young church, planted about ten years ago. Currently it has a regular attendance of about 125. Appropriately named, it is situated near a university, and about one-third of its attenders are undergraduates or graduate students. Many of the rest are young professionals and recent college grads. (It has few families with older children.) The worship style is contemporary, with some hymns. A variety of people are involved in the worship service, through leading worship, reading Scripture, sharing ministry highlights and making announcements. The sermons are Bible-based, relevant and challenging.

UBC is a church with vision to reach out in love and compassion to the poor in its neighborhood. It sponsors a clothes closet and food pantry, serving over 150 families per month. A few people have become Christians and have joined the church through this ministry. The closet/pantry also serves the church as a place to call new attenders to get more involved. Some of the closest relationships that have developed in the church have done so in the closet/pantry ministry. Many of the leaders of the church came into leadership through consistent involvement in this ministry.

UBC also places a priority on getting people into weekly small groups, and the pastors advertise them extensively during the fall of each year, when new groups are forming and old ones are changing membership or dividing. Perhaps 30 percent of the church body is in a church small group (many of the students are involved in on-campus Bible studies instead). The small groups vary in size, format and leadership; some of them foster deep relationships and a form of community while others

have fizzled. A couple of these groups have offered some accountability to their members, but in the other small groups that has not been a goal. There is no development strategy for new group leaders or ongoing training for those who are in leadership already.

Vineyard Christian Fellowship. VCF is a charismatic church that has grown to 650 in attendance in the last ten years, although its growth rate has slowed in the past year. The worship service features a contemporary worship band with electronically amplified and mixed sound. The casual style of dress and seeker-friendly format make the service and the church as a whole very accessible for unchurched people who are visiting for the first time. The church desires to demonstrate the power of God and give people an experience of his presence. In this way the church ministers both to non-Christians as they turn to God as well as to Christians as they need healing and growth in their relationships with him. The Sunday-morning teaching is varied in quality but is focused on Scripture.

The main discipleship and community structure of the church is the kinship group, in which eight to fifteen people gather weekly for worship, prayer, sharing and teaching in a mix varying from group to group and week to week. Just over half of all the attenders are in a kinship group or ministry group, though commitment levels in the kinship groups vary widely. Some of the kinships focus on specific needs or populations. One kinship, for singles, actually includes a leadership training component, a second meeting per week for those who want training to lead inductive Bible studies and care for people in a kinship setting. Other kinships deal with adult survivors of sexual abuse, those in recovery from divorce and those in recovery from a homosexual lifestyle.

Ministry teams, such as the worship team, the outreach team and prayer teams, meet and become centers of relationship for those involved. For many these commitments serve the function of the kinship group as well as providing an avenue for ministry. Leadership in the church is functional and fluid, not hierarchical or fixed. The pastoral staff is open to new ideas and is willing to help people with new ideas make them happen. Lay ministry is heavily emphasized.

Trinity Episcopal. Trinity Episcopal Church is an older church in transition, operating with its second interim rector in two years. The worship style is liturgical, with singing of psalms and prayers, and includes some contemporary music and choruses. The congregation participates actively in worship, with hearty singing and congregational open prayer. The teaching is always based in Scripture, and the sermons are expected to impact daily life. The church has about 150 in worship, of whom about sixty are in "sharing groups"; most of these sixty are young professionals, single or married with no kids.

The weekly sharing groups include some Bible study, and accountability of some kind is at least a goal for them. Fellowship is an articulated goal and definite strength of these groups. The church has maintained several service ministries to children and the homeless, but these programs are in flux until the new rector is chosen. Leadership for the ministry groups is self-selected, and little strategic direction or training is given to leaders. The other main relational group is the choir—about thirty are involved. The choir population is something of a cross-section of the church by age and socioeconomic background.

Study your own church. The next section will look back at the three example churches and offer strategies for church involvement. But before you go ahead, take some time to think about the church you are in (or any church with which you are fairly familiar). To receive the most benefit from this exercise, consider the following questions before you look at the next section.

1. Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the church in light of the basic elements of community—accountability, partnership and fellowship (see chapter five).
2. How do people enter relationships in the church? What types of relationships do they have? (Factors: size of church, type and frequency of small group gatherings, geographical tightness of community.)
3. Who are the leaders? What does the leadership structure of the church look like? How do people become leaders? What are the criteria for leadership?
4. What opportunities are there to find people open to or eager for community and able to be real partners?

- ☐ teaching Sunday school
- ☐ small groups
- ☐ involvement in an adult Sunday-school class
- ☐ membership on a committee
- ☐ local outreach

Where would you find people with whom you could build partnership? What do you do to enter into partnership and friendship with them?

5. Keeping in mind the priorities discussed in this and the previous chapter, what would you do if you were going to attend this church

- ☐ alone, without anyone else you know?
- ☐ in partnership with one or two others from your campus?

For group reflection. If you are in a small group, you may want to come up with and discuss your own case study of church involvement. Have one person in your group describe a real church (home church, current or former church) with real strengths and weaknesses. The church doesn't have to be either a paragon of perfection or the very essence of death, but probably is best somewhere in between. People will then ask questions of the person familiar with the church and try to answer the questions given above. Obviously this kind of exercise can be even more useful if the entire small group attends the same church. Make real plans and commitments as you study your own church.

Strategies for Involvement

My hope is that you have given some thought to the questions in the last section and that you have familiarized yourself with the case-study churches I've described. Now let's turn to specific strategies for involvement, using the case studies as illustrations.

Look for a small group. Each of the three churches mentioned above has a small group structure. Kinship group, home fellowship, singles Bible study, sharing group—whatever the name, find a small group and join. Small groups vary even within the same church according to leadership styles and personalities, so it would be best to meet the leader(s) or key members even before you visit. If you enter a church with a "seedling community" (a few friends who share your vision),

you all may want to join the same small group. If your "seedling" community has five or more people, plan to divide into a couple of small groups, rather than all joining a single group and inundating it. But at least try to join groups in pairs. In this way you can bring some of the relational strength you have with one another into the context of the small group, strengthening both your prior relationships and the quality of your new small group experience.

Get involved in relationship-building structures. If the church doesn't have a small group structure (though fewer and fewer churches don't), other structures may foster relationships in the church. Even if you are able to find a small group, participation in other activities as well may give you greater opportunity for relational breadth. For example, in the Episcopal church you could join the choir. In the Vineyard you might join one of the ministry teams. Some churches have new members classes or adult Sunday-school classes. These involvements may change over time, but investment early on will help you get to know more people and enter more quickly into the life of the community.

Take initiative in relationships. People may or may not take initiative with you—don't wait for them to make the first move, and don't judge the church by the standards of your student fellowship. Go ahead and invite people out for lunch after church. If you gear up for a period at the beginning during which you will take a great deal of initiative with people, you will find opportunities to develop growing friendships.

Join ministry that is already happening. Eventually you may have vision and ability to begin a new ministry within the church, but at the beginning it's more important to join what is already going on. This will help you understand the reasons behind the church's particular ministry emphasis; it will help you to be a better partner—not a critic—to the church. For example, UBC emphasizes involvement in the clothes closet and food pantry; get involved there. VCF uses ministry teams for worship, prayer and outreach; based on your gifts and interests, join one of these ministries. (Again, if you have friends entering the church with you, invite them to join you in one of these ministries.) The Episcopal church is undergoing transition—it may be that soon you will be able to contribute or implement your ideas as

the church struggles to move forward in ministry.

Enter as a servant. Look for small, simple ways to help, to chip in: setting up chairs or helping to clean up after a meeting or meal, collecting the bulletins left in the pews, volunteering for nursery duty, assisting certain elderly or needy members with simple tasks. The best thing you have to offer at first is simply your availability.

Consider ministry to the least of all. Often churches have a difficult time finding enough teachers and helpers for children's Sunday school. Consider becoming a helper among the children. I know of no greater way to enter a church with a humble servant attitude. Don't jump in as the teacher; be the helper, whose main job is helping the children glue the face on a paper plate. The adults who are already giving their lives to these children have learned something fundamental about the gospel. Don't shoot for the elder board; shoot for working alongside the people who love children. Learn from the teachers and the children in that setting. To such as these belongs the kingdom of God (Mark 10:14).

Don't enter leadership quickly. Any church in which leadership is an opportunity for healthy spiritual growth will not put people into leadership too quickly. If the church is desperate for leadership you must ask why—probably leaders are not being developed, trained or supported. Even if you have led small groups before, you will probably want to experience one in the church setting before you take on small group leadership. Your willingness to come in on the ground level will disarm those who might otherwise have resented you, and eventually you will gain greater freedom to lead and innovate.

Don't hop around. Stay in one small group and in one area of ministry for a while trying to develop partners. Jesus told his disciples, when they were visiting towns two by two, to stay in the first house that received them until they left the town (Mark 6:10). The priority is to build partners and deep relationships, the foundation of community. Your first friends and partners in ministry in a church may remain so even if your interests and ministry focus eventually change.

Pray for your church. As you pray, God will give you a soft heart toward the quirks and problems of your church. He will make you into

a participant-member-partner and will give you his eyes for the church. God may direct you to people who need encouragement. And he will show you how much you have to learn from the wisdom and maturity of the leaders.

Be patient and expect God to work. Be patient with yourself—you are building the foundation for a lifetime of church involvement. Be patient with other people—they may not share all of your convictions, yet God may be very much at work in them. You may have more to learn than you think. And be patient with the church. God is more committed to this church than you are. If God intends to renew the church, one good sign of that is that he is raising up people to pray for the church. If you aren't praying, then don't be judging.

Keep your youth in proper perspective. Expect to learn, and be open about your need for growth and development. Enter the church as a learner, not an expert. Ask yourself, "What are the things this church has that I need?" Acknowledge to yourself and others that you are new at postcollege life and that you are still in transition.

Look for people from whom you can learn. You may find an older man or woman in the church who exudes love for God. This person may be booked up with activities and involvements and initially may not have much time to meet personally with you. But perhaps you could join one of his or her ministry committees or small groups. This may give you opportunity to develop a relationship that could prove fruitful for your own discipleship over time. The same could be said for peer relationships and potential partnerships. When you identify people you think you could learn from and enjoy, take steps to build relationships with them. Expect that your church will have people you can learn from, and it probably will.

Be prepared to learn from many different people. In college we are exposed to a relatively narrow spectrum of people from whom we are expected to learn: professors and students (we *aren't* expected to learn from janitors and lunch-line servers). That's why we need to open our minds: many of the people we meet in church may possess less formal education than we do but much more wisdom. If we met these people on the campus we might be tempted to ignore them, but in the church

they are our brothers and sisters—our *older* brothers and sisters. If we carry any educational elitism into church, we are likely to resist or dismiss the leadership and insights of men and women who have been gifted by God.

Criteria for Evaluation

The fact that God is at work in a particular church doesn't necessarily imply that you should join it. Many factors contribute to preferences in church selection; debating preferential factors would be like saying, "You should eat only chocolate-chip ice cream."

But some aspects of a church are not like eating chocolate-chip ice cream—they are more like bread and butter or meat and potatoes (or for some people, sprouts and tofu). They are essential for a healthy diet, not simply dessert after the meal. If you are not certain about the church you plan to join, you may find it helpful to reflect on the following questions.

Where can I find community? Much of this chapter has focused on finding satisfying community in the context of the church. Yet in some churches this may not be possible. Do community-forming structures exist? Church small group structures vary, but most of them at least offer the hope (and desire) for community. Obviously small groups that meet only once per month or every other Sunday evening for one hour will not be conducive to the kind of community you are hoping to find in a church. This may be a good indicator that the church doesn't really value community.

Where is Scripture being studied? Some degree of happy fellowship may exist in a church without a true sense of common convictions and common commitments. Community itself is based on a corporate life with God, including both prayer and Scripture study. If there is no place in the church where Scripture is being studied in a way that can be transformative, then you will want either to start such a study (if you plan to commit yourself there) or else to move. Corporate Scripture study may look different from what it looked like in college. Sermons on Sunday morning may be a part of the corporate Scripture study of the church, but hopefully not the whole thing. Are people

willing to spend time to study the Bible? Is the Bible authoritative in people's lives?

Many churches would like to have Bible study in small groups, in Sunday-school classes or at other times. Church leaders are not usually resistant to the idea of Scripture study, but some have little idea about how to make it practical and accessible. Often the limiting factors are time and desire—people don't value Bible study enough to set aside the time. If you desire to introduce your church to transformative Scripture study, then start small and invite people who will be willing to give the time it takes to do it right. Over time this will win a hearing among others, as people share about the experience they have.

Ultimately, if there is no hope for common Scripture study in the church you are considering, then what shapes that church is simply the opinions of its members. If the church is not listening to God through his Word as a body, it would be better to keep looking for a church that is.

Can I invite my friends to worship here? It is critical to attend a church where you feel comfortable inviting other people, including non-Christian friends from work (or your chosen ministry arena, if it is not within the church). Different factors come into play. For example, you may be willing to drive forty minutes to attend a church with a happening worship service. But will it be possible for you to drag your work friends all that distance? Would a more geographically accessible church make a significant difference? Very probably.

Other factors include the style and length of the worship service and the ethnic composition of the church. If you are living in an urban neighborhood with the intention of doing ministry there, it's crucial to attend a church in which friends and people from the neighborhood would feel welcome and at home. That may mean choosing a bilingual church if your ministry is to nonnative English speakers. That may mean that the style of worship of the service doesn't quite match your preferred style—that you are less at home there so that your friends can be more at home. That may mean that you as a Korean-American choose not to join a Korean church if your friends at work are mostly Caucasian.

In other words, the vision of the church should roughly overlap or relate to your own vision for ministry. If your vision is for student ministry, your church should be attractive to students. If you minister to the homeless, the church should be a place you feel comfortable bringing them to. Ask yourself, "Is the church attractive and open to the people I would want to bring?"

Will this church help me grow as a Christian? The church should be challenging to your own spiritual growth. Many churches are better at getting people to do things than at helping them to grow spiritually. Many are better at using leaders than developing them. You may have learned how to lead a Bible study through the training program of your college fellowship. Many churches don't have such a training program; their trained leaders all come from other fellowships and churches.

Pray to see this church with God's eyes. Ask yourself, "What are the strengths and emphases of this church that I see lived out in the character and choices of its core members?" If your list is a short one, then perhaps you should look for another church.

What is this church's doctrinal statement? Are there any doctrinal peculiarities? It is beyond the scope of this book to describe or prescribe a certain set of doctrines to look for, beyond the basics of belief in Jesus Christ as God incarnate and a reliance on Scripture as the Word of God. Every church thinks that its doctrines are the best or truest summary of God's revelation to humankind. However, one warning sign is a church or group that essentially teaches that every other church is apostate and that to be saved people must be members of this particular church body or denomination. Often this will come out of a peculiar focus on an aspect of the Christian life or a weighted emphasis on obscure passages in Scripture. An emphasis on the right baptism or the right sacramental meal, an addition to the historical "salvation by faith alone" formula or a focus on the teaching of some recent "prophet" or additional "scriptures"—any of these things can take a church out of the mainstream of historical Christianity and into cult status.

If your previous growth as a Christian is not valued in the church you have begun attending, that is a good indication that this church sees

itself as the only true church. Look instead for a church that has a humble recognition that it isn't the only group of people trying to follow God faithfully, is open to new understanding as God pours out his Spirit in new ways, yet meanwhile is still committed to its doctrines and practices.

Is the church open to God's agenda for renewal? A church that is open to renewal sees the structures as servants of the people of God and not the other way around. Openness doesn't mean that people lack strong orthodox convictions—biblical renewal doesn't involve inventing new beliefs about God. Openness to renewal is openness to new structures, new ways of achieving time-honored goals.

As you see the need for renewal in your own life and the life of the church, ask yourself, "Do the leaders seem open to moving in new directions?" Even if these new structures, small groups or worship elements aren't the ones you might have chosen, if the church is open to change at this level that is a good sign. If the church hasn't changed its format or its ministry and care structures in twenty years, and no change is on the horizon, this is a sign of rigid institutionalization. Go to a church where the hand of God is more visible in shaping his people.

* * *

The problem in joining any church is a little bit like Groucho Marx's problem in joining a club. He once said, "I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me as a member." We all want to find the perfect church, yet the reality is that if we found it and joined it, we would ruin it.

Churches are often like the Dream Team, with each of us embarrassed by the actions of fellow team members. Perhaps with clearer vision we would see that our brothers and sisters in Christ are often embarrassed by us as well. So we must do the best we can—and we have no choice but to find a church where we can band together as we extend and receive God's grace through his people gathered in his name.

■ For Reflection

Models of the Church

- ☐ How have you viewed your church as a commissary, dispensing

goods and services as you have need of them?

☐ By what aspects of your church have you tended to evaluate it (its community life, its performance of certain functions, its ability to meet your needs)?

Take Your Place in the Body

Consider the three contrasts: consumer-participant, attender-member, critic-partner. Obviously these pairs form continuums. Most of us probably fall somewhere in the middle.

☐ Think about the church community of which you are a part. How would you rate yourself on each scale? Perhaps you could make a list of things you do or think that are characteristic of each of the attitudes contrasted.

☐ What would it mean for you to move more to the participant-member-partner side of the charts?

Openness to Church Renewal

☐ Have you grown to rely on some structures of God's grace instead of God in your college fellowship or in your current church?

☐ Is it possible to imagine God's grace administered to you through other structures?

☐ How can you be an agent of renewal in your current church or community?

For Further Reading

Eller, Vernard. *The Outward Bound*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980.

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7 A Mobilized Lifestyle for the Kingdom

Glenn and Matt live together in a studio apartment in the Tenderloin district, one of the most economically depressed areas of San Francisco. They live in a five-floor building that has seventy studio apartments, most housing families of five or more. The population of the building is predominantly recent immigrants from Southeast Asia.

Glenn and Matt had a vision to begin a tutoring program for the kids living there. When they moved into the building, they made a radical decision. Instead of each moving into a single studio, they both moved into one studio. They rented an adjoining studio apartment as a study center, opening it up as a drop-in library, lounge and hangout for the kids in the building and the neighborhood. Each of them staffs the study center one night a week, and others from their church join the rotation. Glenn and Matt are teachers at the local Galileo High School and see many of the kids from the neighborhood in class. At school they have become friends with a number of the teenage boys, and about a year ago they began a Bible study on Friday nights for these guys. Recently four of them became Christians, and

eight or ten others have joined the study.

Glenn and Matt are not alone in their vision to incarnate the love of God in this place. Paula and Sandy, also recent college graduates, live in another studio apartment in the same building. They attend the same church and are also involved in tutoring kids in the building at the study center. Paula recently left her former job to work for the local Family Literacy Program. She teaches English and helps immigrant families learn about the resources available to them. Paula herself is a Chinese immigrant via Vietnam; she speaks Cantonese and can empathize with the people with whom she works.

Glenn, Matt, Paula and Sandy have made choices about their lifestyles which are allowing them to have radical impact on people in need. Throughout this chapter we will examine how our lifestyles can be mobilized for the kingdom of God. We will look more closely at the choices and decisions these four people have made.

A Definition of Lifestyle

Lifestyle is an amorphous word, the heading for our lives' *miscellaneous* category. Questions of lifestyle include the following:

- ☐ What do you spend your money on?
- ☐ How do you spend your time?
- ☐ At what pace do you live?
- ☐ Where and how much do you eat?
- ☐ Where do you live?
- ☐ What spiritual disciplines do you practice?
- ☐ What do your vacations look like?
- ☐ What do you do with your leisure time?

Let me offer a simple definition of lifestyle that brings these diverse elements together:

Lifestyle:

the outworking of our values in our lives.

Do you agree? When confronted with this definition, I want to claim that my lifestyle may include things that don't really reflect my values.

But if I take a hard look at them, I would have to agree that they do reflect my values. For example, I used to eat fast food perhaps four times per week. That says something about the relative values I placed on nutrition, time and money. I may claim to value healthful living, but if I fail to eat healthfully or cannot ever seem to allocate time to fitness disciplines, then I must admit that I don't truly value what I claim to value.

Our lifestyles don't lie. They accurately reflect the value we give to competing interests and priorities. We cannot ignore people and claim to value them; we cannot disregard God and claim to honor him.

Jesus' Style

A young man walked up to Jesus one day as he was teaching in the temple. "Teacher," he said, "what is the greatest commandment?"

Jesus scanned the man's face. He listened intently to the man's tone. After a day of trick questions aimed at trapping him, it sounded as if this questioner was refreshingly sincere. Jesus was pleased to respond to a humble, uncontrived question. "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' " Then Jesus added, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:28-31).

All of Jesus' teaching can be summarized by these two commandments, reduced simply to "Love God and love your neighbor." All of Jesus' calls for obedience, all of his ethical teachings, all of his parables, imperatives, rhetorical questions—everything Jesus said can be summarized by these simple (though not easy) commandments.

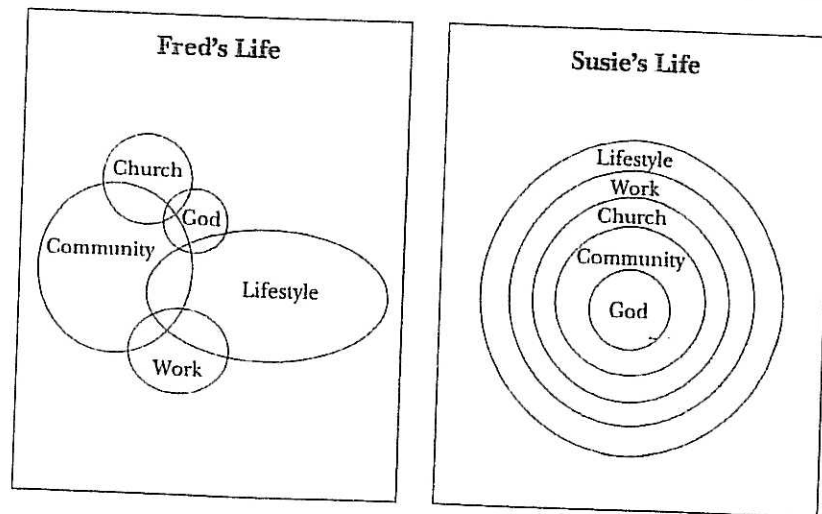
To Jesus, relationships were everything. Obviously simply knowing the commandments does not mean that obeying them is easy. So Jesus lived and taught, modeled and articulated what it means to love God and love people. Jesus' relationship with his Father displayed the nature of a true child's love relationship with the Father God. Jesus' servanthood to others illustrated what neighbor love is all about. Jesus' followers became disciples as they apprehended his model and teaching.

Jesus called his disciples to live by two priorities only: to love God and to love people. If we are to follow his teaching and example, these values should have *the shaping impact* on our lifestyles. Yet too often our lives reflect a multitude of other competing values at war within us; we make attempts to live consistently, but obstacles appear that undo our best efforts.

God, Work, Community, Church and Lifestyle

The diagram below illustrates how topics of the past four chapters and the topic of lifestyle fit together. The first set of circles graphically illustrate Fred's scattered life. Fred wants to have a place for God in his world, but God is not at the center of his life. God has a lot to do with church, has some overlap in his community and is factored into his lifestyle. But God is not at the center of any of these things. Fred's community includes some of his church world but also his work world, and these two worlds don't intersect at all. Fred's lifestyle is more influenced by his non-Christian friends and his work than by his Christian community or church. Fred's work has nothing to do with God. He certainly doesn't see himself as striving for the kingdom of God as he heads off to work each morning.

Compare this with the depiction of Susie's life. Susie has, at the



center and focus of her life, her relationship with God. She gives priority to her time in prayer and Scripture study, and it affects all she does. God is at the center of her closest friendships with other Christians. This deep community is found in her church and is central to her involvement there. Her "work"—that is, striving for the kingdom—includes her involvement in the church but goes beyond it to encompass her ministry and job outside the church. Finally, her lifestyle is centered on her active working for the kingdom, so that her time, money and value choices reflect her priorities of loving God and loving people.

The five circles can be understood as follows:

- ☐ The inner circle, relationship with God, is the heart of discipleship. If God is at the center, then we have rejected the world's lies regarding how life is to be lived and joy is to be found. The worship of God alone is the foundation of true joy and contentment.
- ☐ Community is our most vital human resource. It is the core of a satisfying experience in a church but also of a connected and satisfying life in the world.
- ☐ Church includes our core community as well as other relationships with and ministry to Christians in the local congregation.
- ☐ Work includes ministry in the church setting but also ministry in a secular environment and tentmaking. It involves all the ways we actively strive for God's kingdom.
- ☐ Lifestyle goes beyond active striving to the implicit choices we make and practical ways we mobilize our resources for our work, church, community and relationship with God.

Just a word about the diagrams. What is significant about the circles is what they include or exclude, not their size. The God circle in Susie's diagram is the smallest, but that doesn't mean it is least important. It is the center of each of the other circles, and hence it is the focus of her life as depicted here.

Susie is a fictitious character, but Glenn, introduced at the beginning of the chapter, is quite real. How does the set of circles work in his life? Having graduated from college with a degree in engineering, Glenn moved to San Francisco with some college friends. He became

involved in a church right away and began looking for an opportunity for ministry. Meanwhile he was commuting two to three hours every day by train to his work in Silicon Valley. As Glenn joined a local ministry, he began to see himself as a missionary to the city. But his multifocused life was becoming frustrating. So Glenn, with his friend Matt, made several key decisions:

- Glenn and Matt decided to move into the Tenderloin area, where they had already begun to get involved in ministry.
- They switched to a church that had ministry involvement in their neighborhood and was very supportive of their efforts. There they met Paula and Sandy, and the four of them became the core of a community of people praying for and ministering in the Tenderloin.
- Glenn decided to earn a teaching credential. Afterward he found a teaching job at the local high school, where Matt had been teaching for a couple of years. Though Glenn had enjoyed his work as an engineer, he found that his sense of purpose required more focus than the commute and the work would allow. Since he began teaching, Glenn has spent a summer back at his engineering firm as a consultant. He enjoyed the short-term assignment but was glad to return to teaching in the fall.

Glenn was unsatisfied with a life that looked something like Fred's, described above. So Glenn made conscious choices to bring his life into focus, centered on his relationship with God and his sense of God's call on his life. Now his lifestyle supports his work, which is centered in his church and the core community living in and involved with the Tenderloin.

It is possible to choose *not* to live a scattered, distracted, undirected life. Each of us can begin to make choices that bring our lives into focus around the things that matter most.

The Centered Life

Jesus speaks about the impossibility of living a consistent life that has more than one center. He uses three images to make the same point:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up

for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:19-24)

Jesus says that the things you most value will be at the center of your life. You cannot live in the light of God if your focus is on other things. You cannot serve God and any other master. Jesus says that the unfocused life is an impossible one—your focus will return, but usually on something other than God. Jesus calls us to live our lives focused on, devoted to, fixed on God. It is no surprise that at this point in his teaching Jesus continues with a call to strive for the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:25-34).

Paul speaks of his single-focused life with the metaphor of the runner who is running a race in order to win the prize:

I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:22-27)

But this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. (Philippians 3:13-15)

The athlete is an apt image of someone whose entire lifestyle reflects

his or her values and priorities. Serious athletes in training will spend most of their day mentally fixed on their goal. What they eat, when they sleep and how they spend their time—everything they do relates to and supports their overall objective. Paul is saying that he has this same kind of focus. He can say that he does *one thing*, that all his activity can be summarized as a pressing toward the finish line in his life and faith. And in both of these passages Paul calls his readers to think of life in the same way.

God's Economy and Our Resources

One day Jesus told a particularly shocking tale of graft and corruption in which the bad guy turns out to be a model for Christians!

There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, "What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer." Then the manager said to himself, "What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes." So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" He answered, "A hundred jugs of olive oil." He said to him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty." Then he asked another, "And how much do you owe?" He replied, "A hundred containers of wheat." He said to him, "Take your bill and make it eighty." And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes. (Luke 16:1-9)

How do we understand this parable? What was Jesus thinking?

The manager, or steward, in this parable could be compared to an accountant and investment manager combined. This steward was ac-

cused of wasting his master's goods, through either faulty accounting or poor decision-making. He was fired and told to turn over the accounts, the written records of business transactions. It is as if he were given two days' notice and told, "Have the records up to date and be ready to turn the books over to me at that time."

So he decided to fudge the books before turning them over to his master. He made friends essentially by giving away his master's money. By decreasing the amounts of debt people owed, he was making his master poorer and his master's clients wealthier. He hoped he could later turn these transactions into contacts and friendships he could "take to the bank." His plan was that these clients would be indebted to him and would welcome him into their homes when he was turned out.

The confusing part of this parable comes in verse 8, where the master discovered the dishonest steward's plan. Contrary to what we expect, the master commends the steward on his shrewdness. Why? Why wasn't the master angry with this steward who was giving away his goods?

Consider the personality of the master. This is a wealthy merchant, used to buying low and selling high, making money every time. The master is a shrewd businessman himself. He had fired the steward because the guy was wasting his money. Essentially he had fired the steward because he was *not* shrewd in his dealings. So in a moment of desperation, this inept steward has developed a plan that is *uncharacteristically shrewd*. When the master discovers the plan, he no doubt is not happy about it, but his own appreciation for shrewd thinking makes him commend his former steward for a sudden, unexpected display of shrewdness.

Here the parable ends and Jesus speaks to his listeners: "The children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." To retranslate, "Worldly businessmen know how to use money to make friends, but Christians don't." Then Jesus goes on to say perhaps the most confusing thing of all: "And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes."

First let's consider what Jesus means by a few of these phrases. "Dishonest wealth" could be translated simply as "worldly wealth." Jesus is not speaking about wealth gained illegally. A few verses later, in Luke 16:11, Jesus contrasts worldly wealth with true riches, treasure in heaven. Second, Jesus speaks of "when it [worldly wealth] fails." Worldly money fails when life itself is over, when only true riches or treasure in heaven matters. It is not a question of "if it fails," since for all people money fails at the point of death. Finally, Jesus speaks of "the eternal homes." Here he is referring to heaven, where his disciples will live eternally with him and with one another.

So what is Jesus trying to tell his disciples? Jesus urges them to use money to make friends who will welcome them into heaven. Is Jesus telling people to buy friends?

The steward understands something about the resources he has available to him. First of all, *he knows that his wealth isn't his*. He has access to large amounts of wealth that he can give away at no cost to himself because it isn't his to begin with. Second, *he understands that he will not have access to this wealth for very long*. He wants to invest these fleeting resources in something that will last far beyond his access to them. He invests in relationships, in friendship with his master's clients.

The situation of this steward is our situation as well. Since we are disciples of our Lord Jesus, and created beings owned by God, none of our money, wealth or possessions are really ours. Our possessions and "the cattle on a thousand hills" (Psalm 50:10) are all God's. We are simply stewards of God's resources. So we can give them away at no cost to ourselves—they weren't ours in the first place! And like the steward in the parable, we have access to these resources for only a little time. Money will fail; life itself will fail.

If we understood what the steward understood, we too would be investing God's resources, on short-term loan to us, in eternal enterprises, in projects that will develop eternal wealth, treasure in heaven. On this earth the only eternal things around us are people. Cars, houses, boats, even companies and governments—none are eternal. They will all one day come to an end. Jesus told his disciples to invest

their temporary, worldly wealth in other people who would become friends and welcome them into the dwelling places of heaven.

How does this happen? How do we make friends who will welcome us into heaven? By spending our resources so that people will come to know our generous and wealthy God. As we spend our money on people, we communicate that they are valuable. The gospel says that God so loved people that he spent his only begotten Son on the cross to save them. God used his resources to make friends who would celebrate with him in heaven. Jesus, in this parable, is telling us to do the same.

Jesus contrasts Christians ("children of light") to merchants like the master. Merchants of any era know all about making friends with money. Money is the way palms are greased, deals are made, government officials are satisfied. Money makes friends. But in the world, money is not simply a means, it is *the* end of all activity. In fact, people are too often simply a means to the end of making more money.

Jesus turns that relationship around. Money is not permanent; it is temporary and will fail. One way or the other, people are eternal beings; people are an end in themselves. Worldly merchants *use people to love money*. Money is their goal and their idol. Disciples of Jesus instead *use money to love people*. Serving people and bringing them into the kingdom is the goal. This is the greater joy by far: loving people into the kingdom, in part through the use of money. Disciples love what is worthy of love and use what is only meant to be used.

Albert Einstein made most of his discoveries through "thought experiments." A thought experiment is an experiment that is carried

	Worldly businessmen	Disciples of Jesus
Shrewdness:	Duplicity, cunning	Generosity
Goal:	Gain money	Love people
Tool:	People	Money
Motto:	"Use people to gain money"	"Use money to love people"

out only in the mind but that yields helpful insights. Consider this thought experiment: Suppose we were to pool all of our money in one bank account. Anyone who needed anything could have access to it at any time, and all income would be deposited jointly. And suppose we decided that this decision was irreversible. How would this change your own spending and saving patterns? What would be easy to spend money on? What purchases would be more difficult?

It would be much easier to spend money on one another, and it would be easier to be generous to those outside the community to whom we want to be a servant or a witness. Members of the group might move into shared housing, decreasing the monthly housing expense for the group. People would choose to share things, rather than each person having to own his or her own appliances, games, tools and luxuries. The most difficult purchases would involve personal spending on selfish wants beyond simple needs. Every dollar I spent on myself would mean a dollar less for the community and its ministry to others.

Now you might think this kind of community would become a grim place. Not so! Instead of sneaking off to buy myself some ice cream when I am down, I would have others who are looking to my interests and are aware of my discouragement. And since all of us would be eager to share the abundant resources of the community with those who are outside, "making friends for ourselves by means of worldly wealth," people on the fringes of our community would take great interest in what we are up to. The power of this approach to life would draw people in.

I began this discussion considering a simple thought experiment. Yet reflecting on Luke 16 helps us see that the hypothetical situation is, in important ways, reflective of reality. We are simply stewards of God's resources. As we begin to see our resources as God's, on loan for us to use *wisely* (though not *stingily*), it becomes easier to spend God's money on others. It becomes more difficult to spend money on myself, because God will hold me, his steward, accountable for the decision. It becomes a privilege and a joy to handle God's resources in this manner.

This mindset creates a new economy, God's economy. For example,

when I buy ice cream for myself, nothing very eternal happens—if you don't count weight gain. But when I share God's resources with others in God's name, they are served genuinely and in a way that brings glory to God, the true provider. I benefit as well, as I receive the joy Jesus wants for his disciples as I too become a lover of people, not money or things (or ice cream). This then is God's economy: as we serve people with our money, they are brought into relationship with God. God, the engine of this economy, is glorified. We receive joy as we experience community with God's people and deep dependence on God.

Generosity

Viewing our resources the way the steward did in Luke 16 will have a liberating effect on our lifestyle: it frees us to be as generous with others as God has been with us. Yet during the transition beyond college it can be very tempting to have a tight hold on our money. Most of us are making the transition from net spenders (college tuition, room and board) to net producers (wages or salary). We are tempted to think that it will just take a few years to get on our feet financially, and *then* we can become very generous—or at least begin tithing. Yet *now* is the time to allocate resources toward our stated values. Don't wait for the distant future to begin to set the pattern of using money to love people.

Consider setting aside money in your budget for generosity. You may want to set aside 10 percent (a tithe) for giving to your church and supported ministry and then a second 10 percent for special needs and spontaneous generosity. If you will be earning \$1,500 or more per month, it would be exciting to have \$150 every month just to spend on people! As you are in ministry you may meet people whose needs God is intending to meet through your faithful generosity. God may intend to use you to minister to them on multiple levels, both physically and relationally. If you set money aside as you earn it, before long you will find plenty of creative ways to give it away or spend it wisely on people.

Generosity in community is contagious. One year I lived virtually rent-free because of the generosity of a friend. I was able to set aside

what I would have paid in rent, about \$200 a month, to give away. Because I received the generosity of another, I was able to be generous in turn. And as I live this way, it makes it easier for others to do so as well.

One form of generosity I have both received and given is to share rent in a household according to income and ability rather than according to the size of the bedroom. While at one time I lived rent-free, at another time I paid nearly twice as much rent as another person in my household because of the difference in our incomes, though in fact we shared the same bedroom. My generosity enabled Brian to participate more fully in ministry. My resources were part of the way God was providing for my friend while he too sought first the kingdom of God.

Hospitality

The importance of a lifestyle of hospitality is obscured because of the domestic "Good Housekeeping" images the term *hospitality* conjures up: an aproned 1950s mom taking a steaming apple pie out of the oven, or a table set for a fancy tea complete with dainty napkins, scones and an assortment of jams and preserves. But this does not cover the scope of the biblical notion of hospitality. In 1 Timothy 3:2 Paul says that a bishop or overseer must be, among other things, hospitable. What is hospitality that it would rank as a qualification for holding the highest church position mentioned in Scripture?

Let me define hospitality in a way that will make sense of its importance:

Hospitality:

the ability to make a welcoming space for relationships to grow.

The gospel is a relational gospel; those who foster growing relationships provide a fundamental ministry. Though Jesus had no home, he was hospitable—he gathered people together and drew them not simply to himself but also into relationship with one another. Hospitality is the ability to *make space*. Relationships need different kinds of space to be able to flourish.

Hospitality may involve many things:

- *Physical space*—a clean, neat living room, dining room or kitchen; a guest room, game room, TV room. Even a small apartment can be a warm place for people to gather, or it can be a disaster area no one enters without a hard hat.
- *Time*—setting aside time to encourage relationships to form. Inviting people over, visiting people, planning trips around seeing people.
- *Social space*—thinking about what would help people be at ease as they are forming new relationships: snacks, games and the like.
- *Emotional space*—asking questions in group settings that open people up or take the discussion to a deeper level. This also includes knowing which questions are appropriate and which may feel forced.
- *Spiritual space*—spending time in prayer and reflection to discern deeper needs in people, helping them enter more fully into relationships with others.

If you seriously want to mobilize your resources for the kingdom, begin to see things you already have as tools for hospitality, rather than as possessions that own you. For example, a house or apartment may be a wonderful kingdom asset, but it all depends on the attitudes and priorities of those who live there.

Hospitality requires that resources be set aside for it. You may have the most hospitable house imaginable, but if you have no time to invest in relationships, nothing will happen. The next section will examine simplicity as a means to mobilizing our resources for the kingdom. Yet you may decide to buy some expensive things in order to strive for the kingdom through hospitality. A TV with a VCR seems like a necessity in the materialistic acquisition race of our culture. Purchasing one thoughtlessly or selfishly would involve participation in that form of idolatry. Still, your household may decide that you want to be able to entertain others and provide a gathering place where relationships can form. For groups, a video night is far less expensive than a theater movie. For this economy of hospitality, as a group you might decide to purchase a VCR.

Taking another look at Glenn and Matt, we see the high value they placed on hospitality. Each could have afforded to rent a studio apart-

ment for himself, and no one would have faulted them for extravagance. Or they could simply have chosen to share an apartment, and people would have marveled at their frugality. But instead they chose to double up in one apartment and rent a second so that they could have space for a study center and drop-in lounge. They set aside physical space so that relationships could grow. And they have seen much fruit. Kids, used to the cramped quarters of their family apartments, love to come by, whether for English tutoring or other academic help or simply to enjoy some attention and a safe place to relax. The extra rent Matt and Glenn pay each month is small compared to the study center's value to the kids. Glenn and Matt are using their worldly wealth to make friends for the kingdom of God.

Simplicity

The word *simplicity* summarizes the kind of lifestyle we are to be pursuing as disciples of Jesus Christ. If our lives are centered on God alone, we will live simply. If our sole pursuit is the kingdom of God, our priorities and values and the lifestyle choices that reflect them become simplified. In *Celebration of Discipline* Richard Foster says this is the foundation of simplicity: "Simplicity begins in inward focus and unity."¹ In the diagrams earlier in this chapter, simplicity is depicted in Susie's concentric circles. Each expanding circle of concern is centered on the inner and more fundamental circle, until our entire lifestyle is built around God and our desire to strive for his kingdom above all else.

On the other hand, if our lives have multiple centers, the resulting complexity will prevent us from experiencing the joy that Jesus promises his disciples if they live by his Word. We will find ourselves scattered and disjointed. It may very well be failure in this area above all else that robs postcollege Christians of joy and satisfaction with their lives.

Foster distinguishes between inner simplicity and outer simplicity. It does no good to pursue outer simplicity (living and eating without spending much money, avoiding extravagances and comfort-oriented gadgets, enjoying and preserving nature, and so on) without an inner

focus. All our efforts are asceticism without purpose. But if we are pursuing God's kingdom and his righteousness first, we may buy things or not buy them, based not on legalistic criteria of simplicity-holiness but on our goals and the proper means to achieve them. We will reject many purchases as unnecessary extravagances. We will purchase some things for their usefulness to the kingdom. Decisions regarding these things will not be fraught with guilt or lust or regret but with joy in the chance to love God and serve others better.

One year nine of us moved into a house with five bedrooms. We were all involved in ministry together, and we were working at developing community in our relationships with one another. Because of age and experience, I was the leader of this household (and the new owner of the house). Given the mathematics of the situation, I could have asked to have the single room as my own. Instead, as a household we decided to set aside one bedroom as a guest room. That meant one of the four remaining rooms had to hold three people. As it turned out, relationally it made sense for me to share the triple with two other guys. At age twenty-seven I was living in a room with two roommates, and I loved it! If this sounds odd, that's only because of our cultural assumptions regarding the need for privacy.

The choice of hospitality over privacy is an example of simplicity. Simplicity means preferring the purposes of the kingdom of God to personal comfort. Simplicity yields resources mobilized for the kingdom of God, and it also yields the experience of joy contradicting any sense of sacrifice.

Referring again to the example at the beginning of the chapter, the choices Glenn and Matt have made have left them embracing simplicity very easily. Because of the size of their apartment, they simply cannot accumulate a lot of stuff. And because of the potential of theft, they are discouraged from buying expensive things. On the other hand, Matt recently purchased a second car, an old van, from a friend at church. While a second car in a city is something of an extravagance, the van fits into Matt's *simple* (that is, single-focused) lifestyle. Matt bought the clunky but working van in order to be able to transport kids. On Bible study nights and at other times throughout the

week, the car is repeatedly filled with and emptied of kids as Matt or Glenn shuttles their young charges around the city. The single focus of these young men's lives guides their purchasing choices and their attitudes toward the things they do have.

Justice and Compassion

Examining Jesus' surprising story of using money to make friends for the kingdom in Luke 16, we discovered that disciples love people and use money. In fact, there is much danger in inverting this principle. A few verses after the parable of the shrewd steward, Jesus tells another story to warn against the love of money and the neglect of people:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises

from the dead." (Luke 16:19-31)

It is as if Jesus told this parable to illustrate the principle of his previous parable. Here is an example of someone who loved money rather than people and therefore had no one to welcome him into the eternal dwellings. The rich man had resources that he could have used to care for people around him. Specifically, Lazarus would gladly have eaten the scraps from his table. The rich man's wealth eventually failed when he died—all of his worldly wealth suddenly counted for nothing. He had failed to love God and love his neighbor. Being a child of Abraham (v. 25) and therefore expecting to enter heaven, he was tragically surprised to find himself in perpetual torment.

In his death the rich man discovered an eternal and uncrossable gulf. Yet this gulf was formed during his life. The gate and fence around the rich man's property were a physical picture of the yawning chasm. The rich man probably saw Lazarus at his gate every day, yet never did anything to help him. His complete lack of concern for Lazarus widened the gulf further. Perhaps if the rich man had made efforts to break down this economic and social barrier in his lifetime, he wouldn't have ended up on the wrong side of it in death.

As college graduates (or soon-to-be), we all have wealth and educational capital that places us in a position to identify with the rich man of this story. Jesus calls us, his disciples, to break down the gulf between rich and poor. As we make choices to direct our resources (time, money, professional training, spiritual gifts) toward the poor, we begin to break down the barriers. This is a part of striving for the kingdom of God:

- ☐ The kingdom of God is advanced in our own lives as we declare allegiance to God alone.
- ☐ The kingdom of God is advanced in the lives of the poor as they receive their material needs as coming from God's provision, not simply from the benevolence of nice people like us. What we ultimately want for the poor is not wealth or even justice but inclusion in the body of Christ and participation in the economy of God through the community of God's people.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is unsettling, because it suggests that the requirement for admittance into heaven is simply to have suffered poverty while on earth. But when we read the story in the context of the entire chapter, the requirement is simply faith in God rather than money. "You cannot serve God and wealth," Jesus said (v. 13). The rich man served money by allowing it to control him. He did not invest in eternal treasure. Though in this world he was wealthy, in heaven he was bankrupt.

We could imagine a different end for the rich man. Suppose he had invited Lazarus in for a meal. As they talked, he would have noticed Lazarus's sores. The rich man might have asked about medical care. Lazarus might have said, "The clinic won't treat me." The rich man at first might have offered to pay, but also might have asked *why* the clinic wouldn't help him. Out of his concern for Lazarus, the rich man might have begun to do what he could so that Lazarus could get the medical care he needed. As Lazarus began eating regularly and gained access to medical care, his health would have improved. The rich man would have begun to see his wealth in a different light—in the light of the purposes of God on earth. If he had begun to use his earthly wealth differently, he might not have died impoverished in the eyes of God.

We too cannot live a life of faith in God if we use wealth of any kind to shield ourselves from the poor. So how can we cross the barriers?

- ☐ If you pursue professional training (education, medicine, law), make choices to use that training for the kingdom of God. If God has given you a desire to pursue medicine, for example, consider taking your training and skill to the poor in an urban or rural underserved setting or even overseas. This will probably affect what medical school you attend, the specialty you choose and the residency program you seek. (If you are planning to work among the poor in the long term but that hasn't affected your choices in the short term, you are deceiving yourself.)
- ☐ If you don't *know* any poor people, begin to take steps to put yourself in a place where you can get to know them. Personal involve-

ment in the lives of others often begins to break down walls of isolation.

- ☐ It is beyond the scope of this book to talk at length about the process of racial reconciliation, but any effort to break down barriers of class will address issues of race as well. Regardless of your race or class background, pursue relationships that will help you face these issues personally. Also take time to read books that will help you understand the depth of the challenge and to find hope for your own process.²
- ☐ Don't enter into this alone but with a community of people who are called to break down walls of alienation between rich and poor. Glenn, Matt, Paula, Sandy and several others from their church have become a prayer and ministry team supporting one another as they cross language, racial and social barriers to communicate the gospel. For all of them, this partnership has been crucial to perseverance and joy in ministry.

Mobilizing Your Lifestyle

Now let's return to the list of questions at the beginning of the chapter. It would be possible to answer those questions and feel pretty good about how we are doing if we were aiming for 10 percent better than the average. We might take pride in being able to say,

- ☐ I spend less money on nice clothes and fancy restaurants than my non-Christian friends.
- ☐ I am only half as stressed out as my peers at work.
- ☐ I don't live in the most expensive part of town.
- ☐ I don't spend as much money on expensive vacations as my non-Christian friends do.
- ☐ I try to watch only the best programs on TV.

Yet what would our lives be like, and what would our satisfaction with life be like, if we could say, with Paul, "One thing I do"? "Forgetting what is in the past, every day I strive forward for God's kingdom for that day. All of my energy, time, money and thoughts are spent seeking God's kingdom in my own life and in the lives of people around me." What would that involve? What would be the result?

- ☐ Where I live, how I receive my income and the focus of my ministry

and relationships would overlap more. This probably would mean less time spent commuting and more time pursuing and enjoying relationships. I probably would live with other people and might not have as much privacy as I would prefer, but these choices would foster a deeper experience of community.

☐ I wouldn't have to ration TV watching, because I would be doing more purposeful things most of the time. Even rest and restoration might take a more meaningful form than couch potatodom. Glenn and Matt, Paula and Sandy don't even have TV sets, and they don't feel the lack. Their lives are full, loving and being loved by the people around them.

☐ I wouldn't take on stress at work, because I know that my work is to strive for the kingdom of God, letting God take care of the needs and worries of the day.

☐ The discipline of prayer would be focused and purposeful. For Glenn, Matt, Paula and Sandy, daily personal prayer and regular corporate prayer really matter—they are routinely aware of a depth of needs that most of us feel only rarely. So discipline in prayer comes out of their own need for God and not some tenuous sense of duty to God.

* * *

Our lifestyles reflect our values. If our lifestyles are going to reflect a wholehearted striving for God's kingdom, perhaps we need to reconsider the answers to these lifestyle questions in light of Jesus' values and God's call on our lives. As we do so, the circles of concern of our lives will come more into focus, our lives will be simplified, and our joy will be multiplied.

■ For Reflection

God, Work, Community, Church and Lifestyle

- ☐ Draw a diagram like the one on page 144 describing your life.
- ☐ How are the various circles related to one another? How would you like that to change?

The Centered Life

- ☐ Can you say, "This one thing I do . . ."? How could your life

(community, church, work and lifestyle) be more focused on God?

- ☐ What lifestyle decisions would you need to make?

God's Economy and Our Resources

- ☐ What would have to change for you to view yourself as a steward of God's resources?
- ☐ What steps could you take now to use worldly wealth to invest in eternal friendships?

Generosity

- ☐ Do you have a line in your budget for generosity? Are there ways that the resources God has entrusted to your stewardship could be more shrewdly mobilized for his kingdom?
- ☐ Think about your car—are you willing to loan it out, give rides to people and so on? Are you willing to be slightly inconvenienced in order to help someone who needs to borrow a car or who needs a ride?
- ☐ What about your books, records, tapes—are you willing to *give* them to people who borrow them, rather than expecting them back? What would this reflect about the relative value you place on things and on people?
- ☐ What about your computer, tools, stereo equipment—are you willing to let others use your stuff? Do you get anxious that someone might break it? How attached are you to your possessions?

Hospitality

Evaluate your current (or anticipated) living situation regarding its potential for hospitality.

- ☐ Are your living room, dining room and kitchen clean and usable for entertaining? Are there enough comfortable chairs and furniture? Are these areas typically free of miscellaneous piles, laundry and dirty dishes? Would people enjoy hanging out in these rooms?
- ☐ Does your meal policy include a provision for guests? Do you have regular meals together as a household? Could someone just drop in and be invited for dinner? Would someone feel free to do that?
- ☐ Is your place close to public transportation (if in an urban area)?

or easily accessible by car (if not)? How available is parking? Will your friends or the people you reach out to be likely to want to come to your place?

- ☐ Do you have space for overnight guests? How prepared are you to receive people without warning?
- ☐ Do you often have food available for snacks, spontaneous parties or casual gatherings?
- ☐ Do you have group games that are easy to learn and fun for a variety of people? How do you do at inventing or initiating participative activities that don't cost a lot of money?

Simplicity

- ☐ How would your life be improved if you lived more simply?
- ☐ What steps could you take to bring your life more in line with a single-minded pursuit of the kingdom of God?
- ☐ What are some outward expressions of simplicity your life can take on now? If you haven't graduated, how will that be more difficult when you do?

Justice and Compassion

- ☐ Jesus mentions two specific manifestations of the rich man's lifestyle of luxury: his beautiful apparel and his daily feasts. How have your spending patterns on food and clothing made it easier or more difficult for you to be generous with the poor?
- ☐ What opportunities exist for you to bridge the chasm separating rich and poor?

For Further Reading

Foster, Richard J. *Freedom of Simplicity*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981.

Peterson, Eugene H. *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1980.

8 Embracing a Lifestyle of Ministry

Consider the stories of three recent college graduates who have embraced a lifestyle of ministry.

David. God originally had very little to do with David's lifelong dream to become a doctor. But while David was in college, his involvement in a Christian fellowship renewed his faith and gave him a love for ministry. So after being admitted to medical school, he deferred his program for one year in order to continue in ministry with his college group. Now he is in medical school, leading a Bible study for med students. David seeks out one-on-one time with the members of this growing study, and he is helping several of them to become more serious disciples of Jesus even while they pursue a rigorous academic program.

While in college, David committed himself to regular involvement with a homeless shelter. He continues to have regular contact with the poor through a soup kitchen near his medical school, which is situated in an inner-city neighborhood. He hopes one day to become a

surgeon and to take his skills and training into an underserved area, in a city or perhaps overseas. But David has not postponed investing in other people until after he finishes medical school. He says, "Activities like these help me keep perspective on why God has called me to medical school."

Jennifer. Fulfilling a longtime desire to work with preadolescents, Jennifer became a sixth-grade earth science teacher. Her ministry to kids is reflected in comments their parents bring back to her. They are grateful for the personal attention and care she gives. She is open with kids and available to them; she has been a source of strength to several girls when they suspected they were pregnant. Jennifer herself is from a broken home; this has given her a special compassion for and interest in kids from a similar background. She is passionate about her subject and finds satisfaction in helping kids to discover science and to enjoy school.

Jennifer has also been a junior-high youth leader for several years at her church; a few of the kids she sees daily in class are also in the youth group. Watching kids make meaningful decisions to follow Jesus has been exciting for Jennifer, since she didn't grow up in a church. She is gaining a vision for how kids can become disciples in a church context. Besides leading the Sunday school, Jennifer and her husband, Randy, have begun a weekly discipleship group with six eighth-graders. They invest other time throughout the week with individual kids and attend many of their plays and performances. They have also come to know some of the kids' families, entering more fully into their lives.

Dan. Dan graduated from college in 1989 as a speech communications major, and then he moved to Oakland to volunteer with Harbor House, a ministry to recent immigrants and other poor people. Having put himself through college by running a housecleaning business, Dan took his skills, tools and contacts and expanded his business to employ other people. Over two years Dan hired several teams of workers, mostly Latinos, each team with its own manager and regular customers. His hopes were (1) to give people relatively new to the work force the skill and discipline to succeed and (2) to be an active

gospel witness to those he hired. Later he sold parts of the business to the team managers as each gained the skills necessary to run the operation. Two of these businesses continue to thrive, and Dan still supports his ministry through his own business.

Dan and several other volunteers with Harbor House have moved into an ethnically mixed apartment complex. After spending time getting to know some recent immigrant families, they began a discipleship group for Cambodian boys ages ten and eleven, trying to reach them before they made a choice to join a gang. The group involves seven kids and three leaders. Dan sees the kids quite often. He and his partners offer tutoring a couple of nights a week and have a Bible study on Friday night. The group attends church together and spends the whole day together on Sundays, with outings and activities after the service. Dan has specific goals for the kids: that they become Christians (a few have) and that they become productive members of their community. The group encourages hard work in school, obedience to parents and school authorities, and leadership development. Already Dan has seen the group make a real difference in the lives of the boys.

Definition of Ministry

The word *ministry* could be defined in many ways for many purposes, but for our purposes this definition will be most helpful:

Ministry:

spending our lives on others to direct them toward God.

The three people whose stories are told above are spending their lives on others to direct them toward God. None of them is in "professional" Christian ministry. But they all see their lives as vehicles for the advance of the kingdom of God, in themselves and in others.

This definition of ministry has several implications.

Ministry is God-directed, not self-directed. Our goal is not that people respond to us in awe of our self-sacrifice but that they respond in awe of the great God who provides for us. Our goal is not that people like

us because we are so kind and giving but that people love God and trust him because he is so praiseworthy and trustworthy.

Ministry is God-directed, not simply other-directed. Jesus says that to spend your life on any other cause than the advance of the gospel is a waste (Mark 8:34-35). Even spending your life in service of others with no thought for the kingdom is a waste according to Jesus. Many people do good deeds but ultimately lose their lives. Their good deeds testify to their own greatness, not God's. Only those who lose their lives for Christ's sake, relying on *his* strength and guidance, gain the promised eternal life.

Ministry can take a variety of forms. Evangelism, social justice, compassion, service, teaching and training, accountable relationships within Christian community—each has as a goal that the people we serve move closer to God, see Jesus more clearly, follow him more fully. Some ministry strategies may be more effective than others, measured on certain scales. But it is possible to spend your life helping others to grow toward God in a thousand different ways.

Specifically, ministry is not simply verbal communication. It certainly involves that, but getting people to "know" certain propositional statements is not our only goal. Simply speaking the truth apart from loving people enough to spend ourselves for them can be dangerous for us and for others. Unfortunately, much "ministry" is carried out without the love necessary to validate it, and the recipients of this "ministry" often feel angry and resentful.

Christian community is both a source and a destination of our ministry in the world. It is a *source* in that it fuels our ministry—gives us energy for it and gives it momentum and vitality. Community provides us with encouragement and partnership and clarity of vision. But this community is also a *destination* or goal of our ministry. Paul was told to convert Gentiles so they would receive forgiveness and a place among those sanctified by faith in Jesus (Acts 26:18). If people are properly directed toward God, they will be directed toward the body of Christ. No ministry is complete until people take their place in the body of Christ, which will help them continue to grow up into the full stature of a mature Christ-one.

Ministry is a total life involvement. We spend our *lives*, not simply a little bit of money, an hour or two of time, or one week per year. Ministry involves the full circle of our lives—our lifestyle choices, our work, our church and Christian community—all of our lives centered on God and the advance of his kingdom in us and in the lives of others around us.

The Blessings of Ministry

In the middle section of the Gospel of Mark Jesus teaches his disciples about the paradoxes of life in the kingdom of God. Jesus understands and sympathizes with his disciples' fundamental motives and drives. Peter at one point tells Jesus to save his life; Jesus responds with a paradox showing how life is really to be gained. Later Peter is feeling insecure because he has left everything to follow Jesus; Jesus responds with a paradox showing how we find true security. Later still the disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest; Jesus responds with a paradox showing how true greatness is achieved.

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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mark 8:34-37)

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Mark 10:29-31)

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must

be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:42-45)

Life. Security. Greatness. The astonishing thing in each case is that Jesus doesn't scold his disciples for wanting these things. He doesn't say, "You shouldn't care about saving your life!" "Christians don't need security!" "You shouldn't want to be great!" Rather, he actually appeals to their desire for these things but redirects their energies. "If you *really* want to save your life, lose it!" "If you want *true* security, leave everything that represents security¹ and follow me." "If you want *lasting* greatness, you must become a servant." These are fundamental motivations—we all desire these things. Jesus appeals to us, as he did to his disciples, to obey him and live the way he did in order to satisfy our deepest desires.

The path to life involves spending our lives on others for the sake of the gospel. The only lasting security is found as we throw our lot in with those who follow Jesus. We experience true greatness as we become servants of others in Jesus' name. Ministry is the paradoxical path to the satisfaction of our deepest longings. The apostle Paul understood this. He tells us why he lives the way he does, becoming a servant to any and all: "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:23).

Jesus' invitation to become a servant, a minister of the gospel, is conditional: only those who want to be great need bother to become a servant. We all want the things Jesus talks about. So why do we hesitate? What gets in our way? Let's consider some of the common obstacles to ministry and look at what Scripture has to say about them.

Obstacles to Ministry

Perhaps at one time or another you have heard, thought, or even said one of the following statements:

- ☐ "I don't have energy for ministry."
- ☐ "I'm in transition and can't give myself to new relationships."
- ☐ "I have to work on my own problems before I am ready for ministry."

- ☐ "I am afraid of becoming burned out."
- ☐ "I don't have time—my schedule is too booked as it is."
- ☐ "I don't know what my gifts are."

How does Jesus respond to these statements? Somehow, if the paradox promises are true, then choices to give priority to ministry should yield a return. Life, security, greatness, joy: we know Jesus promises these things. So let's briefly examine these obstacles and hear the words of Jesus in response.

Ministry is sustenance. On a hot, dusty desert day at noontime Jesus' disciples are concerned for his health and urge him to eat. But he tells his disciples that ministry itself sustains him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting." (John 4:31-35)

Jesus calls his disciples to see life the way he does. He says, "Look around you and see" all the people who are ready for the gospel. The disciples could literally turn and see; as Jesus spoke these words, a crowd from a nearby Samaritan town was being led to him by a woman with whom he had been speaking a few minutes before. Jesus himself is energized by the chance to see the dynamic spread of the kingdom of God. He gains energy as the gospel is proclaimed and people show interest. The disciples are concerned only about food for their journey; Jesus wants his disciples to be sustained the way he is, by doing God's will and completing his work. Jesus wants his disciples to live and thrive on striving for the kingdom of God.

It is indeed possible to live this way today. I expect that most reading this book have experienced the *food* of doing God's will. How many times have you heard someone report regarding a summer mission trip, "We went over there to serve in God's name, yet we received more from them than they did from us"? Repeatedly we are surprised that

we are served by God even as we serve others in his name. As we give of ourselves to others, God supplies us with his strength, peace and joy.

This then is the economy of God: as we serve others in Jesus' name and with his resources, (1) God is glorified, (2) others' needs are met and they are directed toward God, and (3) we receive joy, peace, strength and more resources with which to continue to serve. If we are not experiencing this economy, we probably are not drawing on the resources of God. At such times ministry becomes draining and exhausting, and we may very well not have enough energy to do it.

We should *expect* to receive from God as we enter into ministry. God doesn't call us into ministry at the expense of our spiritual life. We shouldn't enter into ministry situations where the conditions are likely to be costly to us in the longest run. If this seems likely, probably something is wrong—either our attitude toward the situation or the situation itself. Often a lack of partnership and accountability is especially dangerous, making pride or abuse of authority more likely. Jesus always delegated ministry responsibilities, even simple tasks, to pairs of disciples. Amazingly, the only time the Gospels record any of Jesus' disciples doing anything alone was when Judas betrayed Jesus. Be wary of entering into solitary ministry situations!

Ministry is mobile. During the years right after graduation from college it can seem that your life is in such transition that you need to delay involvement in ministry. Yet if we have responded to Jesus' call to be his disciples, we are called to a life of ministry in the midst of our transition.

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." (Mark 6:7-11)

Sending his disciples out to nearby villages, Jesus told them to travel

light and be prepared to move around, but when they arrived in a town that welcomed them, they were to stay in one place and develop relationships there. If Jesus were speaking to us today, he might say, "I know you will feel unsettled the next few years and may live in four different apartments in as many years, but wherever you are, *invest in relationships there*. Get involved in ministry there until I call you to move on."

If we wait for the transition to be over, we may never get involved in ministry. By the time the transition is over (if it ever is), our lives may have become so comfortable and settled that we won't want to orient them toward ministry. Don't wait until you get into that graduate-school program, or until you finish! Don't wait until you pay off your school loans. Don't wait until you get married. Invest in ministry relationships where you are. God will lead you when it is time to move on.

Ministry puts problems in perspective. Some people are tempted to think that their problems are so consuming and confusing that they have no energy or ability to enter into ministry relationships. They assume that problems, weaknesses and sinful patterns all have to be eradicated before they take on ministry. Yet that is not how people grow up as disciples of Jesus. Paul gives a different model in Ephesians 4:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators

of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:25—5:2)

In the larger context of these verses Paul is challenging the Ephesians to get beyond their moral and spiritual problems. Paul says that they were taught "to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds" (vv. 22-23). To show them how to do this, Paul gives these rules for a new life, mostly paired commands modeled after the "put off, put on" command. The negative command in each pair involves a character issue in the lives of the people, while each positive command involves a call to ministry:

- ☐ "let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors"
- ☐ "let [thieves] labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy"
- ☐ "[only speak] what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear"
- ☐ "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another"
- ☐ "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us"

The fact is that a call into ministry is often exactly what we need to get beyond our problems, addictions, temptations and fears. In a sense Jesus' words to the man at the pool in John 5 are his words to us. He asks the man, "Do you want to be healed?" The man gives his excuses regarding why he hasn't been healed for so long. But Jesus simply says to him, "Get up!"

Sometimes a focus on our problems can actually paralyze us. Jesus wants us to get beyond them by taking our focus off ourselves and calling us to see the needs of others. Each of us can find people who are worse off than we are and offer them something in God's name. Our own healing will come as we begin in humility to look not to our own interests but to the interests of others.

In fact, entering into ministry often shakes up our schedule and priorities enough that some problems or temptations simply get squeezed out of our lives. This happens in romantic relationships or friendships marred by exclusivity and idolatry. As the two people enter

into ministry, the best part of the relationship gets better, while the worst parts (exclusivity, sexual temptation and so on) they no longer have time for. While entering into ministry is not an easy solution to all problems, it is often a part of the process of moving toward a more spiritually healthy lifestyle.

Ministry with Jesus prevents burnout. We may be tempted to avoid ministry because we have had experiences of ministry that have led to burnout. Or we may have been in ministry and are "taking a break" in order to prevent burnout. But this attitude toward ministry is one of the surest ways to *produce* burnout.

The clearest example of burnout in the Gospels comes after the feeding of the five thousand, when the disciples row all night. When Jesus comes out to them walking on the water, their hearts are so hardened that they fail to recognize him: they think he is a ghost! The process leading to burnout began earlier that day, when Jesus promised his disciples rest after they had returned from their preaching tour of the cities of Galilee. Instead of finding a deserted retreat place, they found a crowd of people waiting for them. The disciples' hearts were hardened because of their sarcastic and resentful response to the ministry opportunity Jesus presented to them: "You give them something to eat." Jesus was trying to give the disciples the eyes of a shepherd, wanting them to see the crowds as he did: "They were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). But the disciples wanted Jesus to send them away; after all, they thought, he had promised them rest. Feeding five thousand people didn't sound like rest to them.

But I think that is exactly what Jesus had in mind. He wanted them to learn that rest and ministry aren't incompatible. If the disciples had had a different attitude, the whole experience could have been very exhilarating and rejuvenating. How exciting it could have been to listen to Jesus' teaching and then to see so many fed with so little and to participate gladly in the miracle. Instead their hearts were hardened. In their attempt to cling to Jesus' promise of rest, they failed to trust in Jesus. In their desire to be renewed after a time of intensive ministry, they missed the chance to be renewed through a rewarding experience of ministry.

Of course not all ministry opportunities are equally valid. Perceiving a need does not mean receiving a call. Some situations are more likely than others to result in burnout. But one certain way to burn out is to resist and resent Jesus' call into ministry out of fear of burnout.

Reexamining the stories that opened the chapter, we might worry that Jennifer could be prone to burnout: she has been in the same ministry (church youth leader) for five years, and she teaches the same age group in her work. Wouldn't she get tired of junior-highers? One day she may, but now she is experiencing partnership and satisfying ministry and is being renewed by God through the process. She hasn't decided to "take a break" out of fear of burnout; she presses ahead because she doesn't want to miss out on what God has for her.

A pruned life is a fruitful life. Jesus does not want us to be burned out in ministry. In fact, he calls us to live in a way that is deeply satisfying. He wants us to experience a meaningful and purposeful life.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. . . .

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. (John 15:1-5, 16)

A grapevine needs to be pruned so that the energy of the plant does not get consumed in producing a lot of branches and leaves. A plant can appear vigorous and vital because of its many leaves but be so dedicated to leaf growth that it produces a pitiful quantity of small, sour fruit. So the wise vinegrower will prune back the vine, allowing

the plant to focus its sap on the remaining branches and the developing fruit.

Surprisingly, the pruning process is somewhat arbitrary. Sometimes it is sick branches that are pruned away, but often the cutting back is simply random. The trimmed branches weren't harmful in themselves—they simply took away energy from the fruit-bearing activity of the plant.

Jesus says we are like branches of the vine. Our lives are meant to be fruitful, but that involves pruning—allowing God to channel our time and energy toward the commitments and activities that will be most fruitful. The logic of our culture is to fill the emptiness of fundamental purposelessness with an abundance of activity. Our days are filled with busyness that seems critical at the time but on an eternal scale withers away to insignificance. Our nights are filled with club meetings, hobbies, church events and TV shows. Our weekends are filled with a relentless pursuit of recreation and a drivenness to enjoy our leisure time. All of these things are like leaves on the vine. They fill our time with activity, and from a distance our lives look healthy and vital. Yet with all the energy going into sheer activity very little is directed toward developing fruit.

David, the medical student who is pursuing ministry (see the beginning of this chapter), is probably as busy as anyone. But he makes time in his schedule for the ministry involvements he has chosen, and he is not the loser for it. He has less time to study, but his ministry involvements put all of his time into perspective.

Jesus says he wants our lives to bear lasting fruit, eternal fruit. "Heaven and earth will pass away," he says, but human beings are eternal. The only activity with potential for eternal fruit is investment in the lives of people. Ministry—spending our lives on others to direct them toward God—is the fruitful activity that should fill our lives.

If you don't have time for ministry, your life is too full. Don't allow even good things to get in the way of spending your life to have eternal impact on other people.

Discovering gifts through ministry. Perhaps you feel ready to get involved in ministry but haven't really identified what your gifts are. It's

easy to think this way after leaving the convenient structures of campus ministry involvement while finding no obvious replacement.

Surprisingly, when Jesus called his band of disciples together, he seemed to disregard their specific gifts and personalities in favor of a one-experience-fits-all model. He told each of them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." He promised that they would become something they were not. When he sent them out two by two, he gave the Twelve only one set of instructions. Yet over time their personalities, gifts, sensitivities and talents emerged to give different shape to their ministries. Peter and John had almost the same amount of exposure to Jesus, but their different temperaments and gifts led them into ministry in different ways and to different groups of people.

Several years ago a half-dozen new college graduates moved into a house in an economically depressed and racially mixed neighborhood only a few miles from their college campus. They all found part-time work and spent the rest of their time building relationships with kids. They started three Bible clubs. Over time more graduates joined them. While the group began with a single leader, eventually other leadership roles were formed and a variety of ministries were begun, including after-school tutoring and a summer day camp. As the ministry grew and as those involved grew personally, their roles were further differentiated: some focused on older kids, others on children; some worked mostly in a predominantly Latino apartment building, others with African-American kids. Some worked part-time jobs, some worked full-time jobs. Some focused on group interaction, others gave priority to one-to-one friendships with children. Some were better teachers, others were better administrators. Some were motivated by the big vision, others were meticulous and faithful in the details. Several became full-time staff of this newly incorporated non-profit, and fundraising became an added responsibility for them.

The reality is that if each of these people had waited for the perfect ministry role to come along before jumping into ministry, they might still be waiting today. Instead they all joined a ministry that they knew was something of a risk, and over time it paid off. They all had a desire to work with kids, but certainly not all of them were naturally gifted

as youth workers. As time went on, each of them gained a greater confidence in their gifts and contribution to the team.

Jesus calls each of us to follow him and to fish for people. As we join him and enter into the work he is doing, we will grow in an understanding of our specific ministry gifts and interests. Then, as opportunities develop, our greater self-understanding will help us to discern God's leading.

Ministry, Evangelism and Community

In the first section of this chapter I said that small group Christian community is both a source and a destination of ministry. The challenge of ministry is to put our resources to work to give others greater confidence in God so that they draw near to him. An experience of satisfying Christian community gives us resources upon which to draw and gives us a tangible direction toward which to encourage those we minister to.

When this kind of ministry happens with people who are not yet Christians, we call it evangelism. When the process happens with Christians, we call it discipleship. Yet it is the same process. Our goal is the same: that people will draw near to God and find their greatest desires met in him, in part through the tangible expression of the body of Christ.

But I want to extend the relationship between community and ministry a little further. Community is not only the source and the destination of ministry but also the most effective ministry tool. The chapter opened with three personal stories. Not surprisingly, David, Jennifer and Dan (along with millions of other people involved in ministry) have focused their efforts on small groups of people, whether kids or medical students. A community of people gathered in Jesus' name is the most effective tool for shaping, developing, training and encouraging the spiritual growth of mature disciples, new believers or people who aren't yet Christians. It is the tool both Jesus and Paul used, to great effect. It is a tool we have available to us as well.

Imagine a small group of disciples who are trying to reach out to their non-Christian friends. Suppose each of them reaches out to two

friends in a one-to-one strategy. Each group member tries to invite these friends to the small group of Christians. When the non-Christian friends arrive, they look around the room and each knows only one person, the friend who invited him or her. This makes the group dynamic difficult, and unless relationships form quickly, the non-Christian may be too uncomfortable to come back.

Now imagine a different strategy in which the community is seen as a tool for evangelism, not simply the final destination after success has been achieved. The small group discusses and prays for a list of people who are all known by more than one group member. In subgroups of two or three, group members spend time with these friends, demonstrating the love of Jesus. When responsive people are invited to the small group, they show up and find that they already know several members. In a sense they have been invited into the community, and that itself is an attractive part of the evangelism process. As one former atheist said to a group doing this kind of evangelism, "Your love for one another is the strongest proof I've seen for the existence of God." Shortly thereafter he became a Christian.

A ministry that is only feeding people with no concern to give them the gospel is incomplete (and vice versa). Likewise, if a ministry is focusing on evangelism but not on bringing people into a community of believers, it is incomplete. Evangelism and discipleship have as their goal that people be brought into deeper relationship with God. And that happens, as we see repeatedly in Scripture, only as people are brought into meaningful relationship with the body of Christ, the community of faith that together is striving for the kingdom of God.

■ For Reflection

Definition of Ministry

- ☐ How does your life reflect the priority of ministry?
- ☐ Who are the people you are spending your life for in order to direct them toward God?

The Blessings of Ministry

- ☐ Have you seen the paradox promises hold true in your own life?

How have you found life, security and greatness by choosing to give them up?

- ☐ How do you struggle with that now?

Obstacles to Ministry

- ☐ Which of these obstacles to ministry are relevant to you?
 - lack of energy for ministry
 - transition and unavailability for new relationships
 - personal problems preventing ministry
 - fear of burnout
 - lack of time—an overbooked schedule
 - uncertainty regarding ministry gifts
- ☐ What changes in your life would be necessary to break through these obstacles?
- ☐ Where can you get the resources you will need?

Ministry, Evangelism and Community

- ☐ How have you seen community serve
 - as a *source* of evangelism? (as the encouragement and impetus for outreach)
 - as a *destination* of evangelism? (as the place to which you drew people)
 - as a *tool* for evangelism? (as the means by which people were attracted to the gospel)

For Further Reading

Stevens, R. Paul. *The Equipper's Guide to Every-Member Ministry*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

9 Finding God's Will for Your Life

The movie *The Blues Brothers* offers a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of divine guidance. Jake and Elwood Blues, played by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd, are two grown men who deeply disappointed the nun ("the Penguin") who raised them in a Chicago orphanage. These men turned out bad. After Jake is released from prison, he returns with Elwood to hear from "the Penguin" that the orphanage will be closed unless five thousand dollars is raised to pay the tax assessment on the building. Jake offers to steal the money, but "the Penguin" will not receive stolen funds, and she chases them out of her office, telling them not to return until they have "redeemed themselves."

Jake and Elwood feel a certain affection for "the Penguin" and the orphanage janitor, the only family they have. They want to help but don't know what to do. Then they receive their "call from God" while attending an African-American church service. During the particularly rousing preaching/singing/dancing, a directed beam shines in through a high window onto Jake, and he "sees the light": he and

Elwood are to revive their old blues band and put on a concert in order to raise honest money for the orphanage. This revelation is the unlikely but entertaining premise for the rest of the movie, which ends with the entire band in jail but with the tax assessment being paid minutes before it was due. Throughout the movie, as Jake and Elwood pursue their quest in the face of many obstacles, they confidently reiterate, "We're on a mission from God."

We all want to feel we are "on a mission from God." Who wouldn't want to have a sense that God had appeared to them and appointed them to do something purposeful and specific, something with his stamp of approval and his promise of success? Yet most of us must consider and make all of our decisions, from the trivial to the weighty, without receiving God's specific, personal, voice-in-the-clouds type of guidance. Nevertheless, given all that we have seen in Scripture regarding the big decisions of life, we can expect God's hand to be at work.

Just Do It!

One day a graduating senior, full of hope and possibilities, came to Jesus and asked him, "Jesus, what is God's will for my life? I just want to do whatever God wants me to do."

Jesus, characteristically responding to a question with a question, replied, "You've done Bible study; how do you read it?"

The woman, taken aback only momentarily, recovered and said, "You mean, 'love God' and 'love your neighbor'?"

Jesus replied, "Yeah, that's how I read it too. Just do it."

The woman saw through this simple, naive, almost trite response. She wasn't about to let Jesus off that easily. She didn't want to look like an imbecile in front of the other graduating seniors waiting in line to ask Jesus for advice. "Just do it? It's much more complicated than that! Jesus, you fail to grasp the intricacy of the question." Having regained her composure, she paused, then added slowly, emphasizing each word, "*Exactly who is my neighbor?*"

At this point, Jesus told the young woman a story of a man who was beaten, robbed and left for dead in a back alley, and of an illegal alien

who stopped to help him and nurse him back to health. It was a shocking story, a very modern story, complete with random violence, subtle racism, an unlikely hero, religious villains and extravagant love. Though the woman had heard this story in Sunday school a thousand times, somehow she heard it as she never had before. She was caught up in the powerful images that Jesus' stark words portrayed.

She stared at Jesus, taking nothing in for a moment, until she realized that he had asked her a question. She snapped out of it. "Uh, what was that? Could you repeat the question?"

Jesus restated his question: "Which of the characters in the story acted as a neighbor to the man who was beaten and robbed?"

The woman, beginning to feel ashamed, replied, "The one, I guess, who showed mercy."

Jesus' patient, loving, simple reply came to her: "Do this and you will live."

Of course this story, taken from Luke 10:25-37, originally involved a lawyer, not a graduating senior. But other than that the details are pretty much the same. Both the lawyer in Luke and the woman above were interested in knowing God's will for their lives. And both were somewhat insulted by Jesus' implication that the answer is rather straightforward.

We want to think that we would gladly do God's will, if we only knew what it was. Since we don't know, we stand still, paralyzed that we might do something that's not part of God's game plan. Or we proceed as if God's will and the prudent choice were one and the same, unless we hear something contradictory directly from God. One way or the other, we think, "The hard part is knowing God's will; if I only knew God's will, doing it would be easy."

We are just like the lawyer. The lawyer didn't want to waste his precious time and resources loving people who didn't count in the "neighbor" category. So he wanted Jesus to get more specific. "Love your neighbor" is too vague. "I want categories! I want limits! I want rules! Who's the neighbor? Is it all educated people? Is it all needy people in my city? Is it all the homeless? All the 'deserving poor'?"

We pray to God, "Let me know your will and I will follow you." Yet

we don't learn God's will and then examine it, weigh it, considering whether to follow it.

Suppose God appeared one morning at the foot of your bed as your alarm was about to go off and said, "I want you to prepare to become a missionary to Japan. I have great things planned for you there." This kind of experience would impress upon you the need to prepare to go as a missionary to Japan. Perhaps this is what we hope for when we pray these words: "Let me know your will, God." God doesn't work that way in our lives very often. But he *has* revealed much about his will.

Think about the difference between the lawyer's question and Jesus' question. The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asked, "Who was a neighbor to the man?" The lawyer's question focused on obligation, seeking a limitation to the onerous command to love one's neighbor. Jesus' question focused on opportunity: "There was an opportunity to love this man as a neighbor; who seized the opportunity?" The lawyer's focus was right knowledge; Jesus' focus was right action: "Do this, and you will live."

None of us need to ask God, "God, is it your will for me to love people today?" He has made his will plain. It is neither complex nor confusing. He has only two main priorities for us: to love him and to love other people. The only question is the details, how it will be lived out. Actually we have it backwards. The hard part is not *knowing* God's will. It is *doing* what we already know *is* God's will.

Jesus affirms here, as we have seen before, that his two priorities in life were simple ones: to love his Father God and to love his neighbor. He calls us to live by these as well. What does he mean? These commands can be restated simply:

Love God = Trust God

Love others = Serve others

We love God by placing the whole of our lives in his hands, by trusting him entirely for all that we need, have and hope for. We love others by serving them in God's name, by spending our lives on others to direct them toward God. This is the summary of God's will for our lives.

What should the lawyer or the graduating senior learn from the story Jesus told? In the original story, the Samaritan knew whom to love because of two things: (1) he perceived a need—a person in real need crossed his path, and (2) he recognized that he had resources to care for this person in need. So he responded in love for his neighbor in need. The kind of love he offered was costly. It cost his resources: money and oil for the wounds, and he even picked up the man's hotel bill. It cost his comfort: the wounded man rode on his donkey while he had to walk down the hot, dusty road to the inn. It cost him time: all of the care the Samaritan gave the man took time from his busy schedule. Caring for this man didn't help the Samaritan get where he wanted to go. It cost him his racial prejudice—he chose to help a man from a race that considered him a dirty half-breed, truly less than human.

When we face choices with no clear "God's-voice" guidance, we can begin to eliminate some options and focus on others based on the opportunities to live by the priorities Jesus has for his disciples.

But this does not mean that God's will for all of us is exactly the same. We also need to take into account the unique way God has created us.

When I Run I Feel His Pleasure

The movie *Chariots of Fire* won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1981. It is the story of the British running team in the 1924 Olympics, and particularly the story of two men, Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, both world-class runners but with very different motivations. Eric Liddell and his sister Jennie were Christian missionary kids who themselves were preparing for the mission field. At one point Jennie is worried because it seems that Eric has neglected his ministry and is spending all of his time preparing for the Olympics. One scene shows Jennie and Eric on a beautiful Scotland hill. Eric says, "Don't fret for me, Jennie."

She says, "I do fret for you, Eric."

Then Eric gives his memorable line: "Jennie, I know God has made me for a purpose, but he has also made me fast. And when I run, I

feel his pleasure."

"I know he has made me for a purpose"—and it is not to win the Olympic gold medal. That is the implication. Eric is saying to his beloved sister, "Jennie, I am with you. I know God has made me for a purpose, and my whole life is given to it. I want to love God and love people as well as I know how." Eric Liddell went on to become a missionary in China, spending his life and dying there for the advancement of the gospel.

"But he has also made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure." What a great sentiment! Liddell takes enormous delight in running very fast. What a contrast to the drivenness of his rival Abrahams, who knows no peace as he runs, and who competes in a never-ending quest to prove himself.

When I taught computer science at Stanford University, I felt God's pleasure. I loved to get up in front of students, most of whom were somewhat afraid of computers, and begin to light a fire of interest in the subject. This was in the early 1980s, before personal computers were commonplace. Most of my students had their first real experience of computers in my class. I loved to spend late nights in the computer center with students as they worked on programming assignments due the next day. Whether from the front of the lecture hall before a hundred or looking over the shoulder of an individual—when I saw the spark of understanding in the eyes of students, I felt the pleasure of God.

I taught computer programming for three years as a part-time "tent-making" job to support my full-time but volunteer ministry to college students. I knew God made me for a purpose, to strive to advance the gospel in the lives of students. But he also made me a teacher and gave me skills to enable me to do it well, and he allowed me to thrill in teaching as I was exercising my God-given gifts. I was good at it, I enjoyed it, and ministry happened through it.

Eventually I decided that, as much as I enjoyed teaching computer programming, I enjoyed student ministry more, and I moved into a full-time position with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. As I look back, it's clear that God used my experience of teaching programming

and all that came out of it to prepare me for my current life and ministry, in which teaching still plays a central role. I didn't leave behind teaching as I left Stanford's computer science department. When I teach, I still feel God's pleasure.

God wants us to be free to enjoy the work we do, when work is understood in the sense of striving for God's kingdom. When we remove "making a living" from our notion of work (see chapter four), we begin to experience freedom to pursue what we enjoy. We don't want to be satisfied just making a living when we can be using our gifts and talents to strive toward the kingdom. Once that is our focus and desire, we can discover the kinds of things in which we feel God's pleasure and can pursue those things and trust God to guide us the rest of the way.

Let me get specific for a moment. You may be pursuing, as I once was, a high-status, high-income (and high-stress) job because of the material compensations and rewards. You are unlikely ever to experience "God's pleasure" if this is your purpose and desire. You may as well be honest with yourself. For example, if you enter law school simply because after three years you can expect to command a high salary and a respectable status, you will be the biggest loser. Is it God or your own pride and idolatry that has called you to law school?

On the other hand, God may have given you a desire to seek justice and an ability to think clearly and logically. God may have fashioned you in such a way that you could really enjoy law school and the profession of law. But don't forget that God made you for a purpose: to love him and to love other people. Use your skills to love others. An attorney can serve people in many ways and love them through skills made available in servanthood. Honor God by being generous with your earnings as you trust him alone for your provision and sustenance.

If we let go of cultural assumptions about what is supposed to make us happy (such as a status career or a high-income job), we can make choices that will bring us happiness as we do what God created us to do. And we can fulfill God's purpose in creating us and calling us to himself as we love him by trusting him and love others by serving them.

Most likely you will not go into "professional Christian ministry." Perhaps some people who are planning on it really should decide not to. Full-time, paid Christian ministry is the exception, not the rule. Choosing that path is not more noble or honored than making any other faithful choice. Some people may be unfaithful by not choosing to direct their lives toward full-time ministry, but others may be unfaithful by not channeling their love for God and others through doing carpentry, teaching in elementary school, piloting planes or being an accountant. For many people, parenting is the most satisfying ministry, job or work situation they experience, even though the culture doesn't place as much value on parenthood as on a paying career.

I hope all of us will be able to enjoy what we do with our lives. Yet some of us may do tentmaking work that does not allow us to taste "the pleasure of God" while on the job; our deepest satisfaction will come, as it did for Paul, in being able to minister the gospel freely. Many of us will have full-time jobs, at least for part of our lives. But may we not be satisfied until we "feel God's pleasure."

Lives That Don't Make Sense

A couple of chapters back I invited you into a "thought experiment" regarding money. Now I would like you to try another experiment. Imagine that a video camera is fixed on your life, recording for posterity all the major choices and decisions, all the turning points, the forks in the road. For the sake of peace of mind, let's assume that your nastier private sins are omitted from this videotape. This is a tape of your *public* history. The videotape includes sound but not thoughts, so everything an eyewitness would experience is recorded.

Now assume that we turn this (very, very long) tape over to an expert video editor. Her job is to remove any audio and video references to God, Jesus, your spiritual life and the Bible. The editor then returns the tape and we replay it, watching with eager anticipation as the events of your life unfold before our eyes.

What kind of a story would we see? Would the story line make sense? Would the choices you made and the path you took make

sense? Would the viewer understand your choice of which college to attend? your choice of which job to take after college? your choice of where and with whom to live? the direction of your life? Consider your choices: are they completely predictable? You may think that they were motivated by God, but could someone looking at your life and choices on tape understand everything you've done on the world's terms alone?

This thought experiment reveals something of what a life of faith means. We should regularly be making choices that would be completely inscrutable apart from God. Like Abraham's choice to leave his homeland and go, not knowing where. Like Noah's choice to build a huge boat in the desert. Like Moses' choice to reject his adopted royal Egyptian heritage to identify with God's enslaved people. Like Peter's choice to leave behind the biggest catch of his life to follow Jesus. Like Eric Liddell's choice not to run in an Olympic heat on the sabbath, so that he was disqualified for the medal he prepared for two years to win.

We are meant to be confusing and confounding to those who don't acknowledge God's work in the world. If we can easily edit out fifteen minutes of prayer here and two hours of church or Bible study there and still make sense of our choices and motivations, then faith in God isn't much of a factor in our lives.

As followers of Jesus we are designed to live in such a way that if people filtered God out of our life's story, they would look at it and say, "This is crazy. This is senseless." Or to look at it in reverse, we are designed to live our lives so that people cannot reasonably filter God out of our story. We are meant to live in such a way that our lives provide undeniable testimony to the reality of a faithful God.

One way to make choices counting on God to work is to voluntarily limit your options. In the world this is always considered a foolish tactic. Russ, a Christian graduate, applied to several different programs at eight different graduate schools. On top of that he sent out résumés to twenty different firms in six cities across the United States. Russ was exploring future plans as if God were not in the picture at all. Sure, God could work by opening the right doors to get him into

the right program or job. But how would Russ be sure that it was God, and not just the law of averages, that opened up a particular job or study program in a particular city? Some people have an idolatrous inclination to pursue a multiplicity of options as if God couldn't guide them through a limited set of options. Most people in the world would be happy with two options for the future.

Take risks and expect God to come through; don't plan your career with all sorts of contingency plans. Plan as if God must be present in your life, and you will not be disappointed.

This is not to be presumptuous or to test God. Don't assume he will get you into your preferred graduate school because you think he wants you in a certain program. While limiting your options, be ready for God to work through disappointment, not simply success. You may need to look for work, any work, if you do not get into the grad school of your choice. It may even be that God didn't want you in grad school. In that case rejection could be a form of God's mercy.

A Lamp to My Feet

Going to college often begins a process of making long-term plans and encourages having long-term aspirations. As you have probably found out, this process is only exaggerated as you prepare to graduate. Emphasis is placed on getting on the right *career track*. You are told to get on the *fast track*. Once you have a job, you are encouraged to get on the *management track*. With more education you could even get on the *executive track*. Lawyers get on the *partner track*, physicians the *specialist track*, academics the *tenure track*. Each of these tracks lays out your required choices and scheduled achievements, as well as specifying obstacles in your path. If you work hard, the promised rewards of these tracks will be yours in just a few years.

But as followers of Jesus, we need to be on the *discipleship track*. Following Jesus is what it implies, following someone who is moving. We need to have the same attitude toward Jesus' words that the psalmist did toward the Scripture available to him: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). God's Word is not a spotlight down the whole multidecade freeway of our lives; it's more

like a hand-held flashlight illuminating the next few steps on a narrow path. When we are on the discipleship track, we have received promises about our ultimate destination but no assurances about the path (other than that the way will be hard and few make it). So we have to stay close to the path as it is illuminated for us a step at a time by God's Word.

Some people are nearsighted and some are farsighted regarding their lives. Some people can only focus on the events of today. Next week is far off—forget about ten years from now! Others have vision for where they want to be in ten years but may be a little fuzzy on what God may want for them today. Whatever our vision problem may be, we need the helpful corrective lens of God's Word to give clarity as we look at the world and our choices. God's Word should shape the values by which we live daily as well as the long-term direction our lives will take.

One way to gain some clarity about God's design for your future is to reflect on past experiences that have prepared you for a particular work/ministry direction. If God used a youth ministry worker to touch your life while you were in high school, perhaps God is preparing you to work with high-school kids, either in a career as a teacher or as a volunteer through a church or parachurch ministry. Paula, one of the four whose story opened chapter seven, is an ethnic Chinese immigrant from Vietnam. This background gave her compassion for and a desire to work with people in need from a similar background. Her volunteer ministry to this group of people led her to find full-time work in a public agency addressing their needs. Another recent graduate, Karen, began to gain vision for ministry to prison inmates when her own brother was imprisoned.

We may be tempted to get off the discipleship track by trying to pay for present-day faithlessness with a promise of future faithfulness. We say, "God wants me to be a missionary, but first I must find a wife." Such a goal may be quite legitimate, but putting our faithfulness to God on hold creates a very real danger. We may easily be tempted to justify our present inconsistencies with the rationalization that in the future our lives will be more faithful. So we allow stinginess with our

resources, an unavailability for ministry, sexual impurity or drivenness and anxiety at work to persist because we hope one day to make up for it with a heroic decision to yield our lives fully to God's will. Yet if we live this way today, we will be likely to end up nowhere near where he wants us later. Present faithlessness is no foundation for future faithfulness.

Paying off college loans. Alan graduated from college nearly twenty thousand dollars in debt. His loan payment was \$232 per month for ten years. Alan thought of using his engineering training to secure a position in the Middle East as a tentmaking missionary, but he didn't feel ready to go until he had eliminated his debt. So he secured a good job, earning over thirty thousand dollars a year before taxes. He hoped to make payments of nearly one thousand dollars per month to pay off the loan in less than two years.

Alan found it hard to make payments as he'd hoped. His work schedule was grueling, so he ate out fairly often. His professional friends lived more extravagantly than he did, but he noticed that his tastes in food, entertainment and clothing were beginning to become more expensive. As his tastes changed, his spending on these things grew.

Eventually Alan forgot why he'd even wanted to go to the Middle East. He took a vacation trip to Asia, an area that was much more fascinating to him, but he never thought of becoming a missionary there. Alan did pay off his college loans early, after only four years. To celebrate, he purchased a new car (like those of his friends), with monthly loan payments slightly higher than his college loan payments had been.

Where did Alan's plans go wrong? Among other things, he lacked partners to hold him accountable to stay on track.

If you are graduating with several hundred dollars per month in loan payments, it may be a helpful goal to try to pay off your debts quickly so that you will be more available for ministry, especially overseas missions. But you will need to find partnership and support during this process. It's very easy to become trapped by upscale lifestyle choices when your income stream starts high and grows fast.

Finding Partnership

"It is not good that [anyone] should be alone" (Genesis 2:18). What was true for Adam in the Garden of Eden is as true for college graduates trying to discern God's will for their lives, or at least for the next step or two. It is not good to be alone. In each of the last five chapters we have seen how partnership is an essential foundation for faithfulness to the gospel. Partnership in the work setting will facilitate ministry there. Partnership is a necessary component of community and of a satisfying church experience. Partnership in faithful lifestyle choices makes those choices possible and more rewarding. Partnership in ministry fuels and renews those who are doing it. Partnership provides accountability in all these things. If you want to follow Jesus in these areas of your life, you will need to look for partners.

We tend to take partnership for granted and expect that finding a job is the real challenge of graduating from college. Rather the reverse is more likely: most jobs could lend themselves to striving for the kingdom, but finding satisfying partnership is surprisingly difficult. So we should make decisions that reflect the importance and the relative scarcity of partnership. If the limiting factor is partnership rather than jobs, that may have implications for the decision-making process.

Finding any kind of partner is a little scary. People are always less attractive in particular than in general. It is a lot like joining a church: we all want to find a church to which we can contribute and from which we can learn, but when we are confronted with real churches (and not simply the ideals we uphold), commitment becomes scary. Likewise with marriage: probably most of us want to be married (in general), but as we get to know someone specific, commitment can become a scary thing.

Partnership is confining. It requires us to say, "I'm willing to decide that my life and future will be affected by your choices." Whether in ministry, housing, job or marriage, commitment to real, flawed, sinful humans is scary because as we get to know people we will not like everything we see.

Of course the reverse is also true. We make ourselves vulnerable

when we invite someone into our life enough to let them matter to us and to make plans around their choices. "Will you live with me?" is almost as vulnerable a question as "Will you marry me?" The fear of rejection can erode faith in God. We think, *What if mathematically it all works out for everyone else, but I am left out? What if God doesn't plan to give me the kind of partnership and experience of community that he generously gives to others?*

Above I suggested that to live as if God makes a difference might involve limiting our options rather than pursuing many different possibilities for life after college. One practical way to limit options is to decide to stay in or move to a certain location based on the church and meaningful partnership you would enjoy in that city. Consider deciding your location first, then look for a job (or apply to graduate school). It limits the options, but God's call on your life may be more to a group of partners than to a particular job or program in a far-off city.

I know two guys who decided to apply to the same graduate schools and made choices to attend the one that accepted them both. The world would understand this kind of self-imposed constraint in the case of a married or sexually involved couple. But for Christian friends who want to help each other be faithful after college, this kind of choice is a powerful testimony to the priority of God in their lives.

Probably the most difficult thing about finding partnership is making the transition from the possible to the definite. We look around at church or in a Christian group and think about people as potential partners. Having lots of possibilities is exciting. But our tendency is to postpone the point of commitment until all the pieces fall into place. It is as if everyone is waiting until everyone else is committed before they are willing to commit themselves. And no one is ready to be committed until all the pieces of his or her own life (job, housing, church, ministry) fall into place. So we all dance around each other, wanting to keep the others interested but preserving our own freedom from entanglement as long as possible.

This dance of ambivalence can derail God-inspired vision for partnership and community. I have seen this with groups interested in

moving forward in ministry together, groups considering overseas missions together and groups looking for housing together. The way out of the commitment dilemma is also the way of faith. The challenge is to make a faithful decision without all the pieces in place.

Tim, a graduate student living in a household of people in ministry to undergraduates, had the vision to begin a similar household of graduate students. It was difficult to imagine leaving his very satisfying experience of household community unless he knew that he would be able to experience it again. Yet it would never happen unless he took the risk and committed himself to try. So Tim found another graduate student, Ken, and the two of them said, "We're in." Tim now had a partner, and the two of them began to talk with others about the kind of household community they were looking for. Tim's willingness to leave behind what was comfortable made all the difference: the graduate-student household formed around Tim and Ken's commitment and vision.

What would be the effect on your friends and partners if you were to say, "I'm in; how about you?" As you make that statement you testify to God's power to make the possible real. Faith is exactly that, "the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). This kind of faith calls out of others a response of hope, and before long what was unseen becomes tangible reality through the grace of God.

Discernment and Community

Is discernment essentially an individual's task? Is it true that even deciding that God is calling you into community with other people is an individual process? In fact, in a sense this is true. All of us need to decide for ourselves that we intend to follow Jesus, and each of us needs to personally own the decisions involved in living that out.

But very often in Scripture we see people making decisions *as a group* for the group, without a specific sense that the individuals came to the decisions independently. Paul and Barnabas were sent out as missionaries by the Antioch church as a result of a prayer time among the leaders. No time was wasted helping Paul and Barnabas come to agreement with the decision God's Spirit had revealed to the leaders

in prayer (Acts 13:1-4). When Lydia was converted by Paul's persuasion, her whole household was baptized (Acts 16:15). Later the Philippian jailer was converted and his entire household was converted, all at once in the middle of the night (Acts 16:33). It is certainly not necessary to think that the other members of these households did not believe; rather, the decision was not at its core each individual's decision.

This kind of radical individual participation in the corporate means that the community will impinge on the plans and decisions of individual members. Certainly the community will make decisions regarding its corporate life, and these will impinge on individuals. But the community may also offer wisdom and counsel on upcoming decisions in the individual's life. It may even challenge and call into question decisions the individual has already made or is about to carry out. This is meaningful accountability and partnership in action.

A few years ago my wife and I were considering a cross-country move in response to a call to minister with InterVarsity at Harvard University. We were excited about the potential but aware of the cost of the move: the loss of community, the potential danger to our faith. We were a part of a team of IVCF staff who took their relationships with one another very seriously. As a team we spent two days praying about and talking through the option, one day in May and another in September.

In May our partners brought up a number of issues that we decided we needed to talk through with our prospective supervisor before we made the decision to move. In September, having heard the responses to these and other questions, the team became convinced that God was indeed calling us to go to Boston. This certainly confirmed our own sense of call to Boston and gave us the reassurance we needed, especially later, during a difficult first year of transition to the East Coast. Without the confirmation from our partners it would have been easy to doubt God's call when things became difficult.

My hope is that each graduating senior or recent graduate seeking God's will for his or her life will have and submit to the kind of community that can ask tough questions about plans, hopes, goals and

the motives behind them. This community serves not simply to police insincere motives but also as a confirmation, to affirm our own sense of calling and to identify spiritual gifts and encourage their use.

■ For Reflection

Just Do It!

- ☐ What would it look like to think through decisions about your future in the light of Jesus' story about the good neighbor?
- ☐ Take an inventory of your gifts, abilities, interests and resources. How can they be used to love people?
- ☐ These same gifts and abilities, given by God, can become a snare and inhibit trust in God. How are you tempted to rely on yourself and your abilities for the things God has promised to provide as you strive for his kingdom?
- ☐ What would it look like to take a bold risk, a step of faith?

Don't wait until you know God's will perfectly, but simply do what you know. As you begin to move, God will guide you further. Make an effort to leave God freedom to bless your gifts for his service or to remove them as stumbling blocks in your life.

When I Run I Feel His Pleasure

- ☐ How would you express what you know about yourself in Eric Liddell's words: "God has made me _____, and when I _____ I feel his pleasure"?
- ☐ How could this understanding of yourself guide you as you think about choices you have before you?

Lives That Don't Make Sense

- ☐ When was the last time you made a choice that, apart from God, made no sense at all? When was the last time you made a plan that, unless God were real and active, would surely fail?
- ☐ Have you ever experienced a closed option as mercy from God? How were you given perspective to see it in those terms? (Have you prayed in thanksgiving to God for his wisdom in closing a door you might otherwise have walked through?)

A Lamp to My Feet

- ☐ Is your own life vision nearsighted or farsighted?
- ☐ How could your vision be corrected?
- ☐ Do you have college loans to pay off? How quickly do you plan to pay them off? What help will you need to maintain your goals?

Finding Partnership

- ☐ Reflect on the nature of your current partnerships and your prospects for the future. Think about people who are currently meaningful partners to you:
 - in your job or academic setting
 - in your community or church
 - in your living situation
 - in ministry
- ☐ How could your effectiveness and satisfaction in these areas increase as your experience of meaningful partnership increases?
- ☐ If you lack partnership in one or more areas, whom could you approach to see if God could build partnership with them? What risks would it involve for you?
- ☐ What would it mean for you to say, "I'm in." How about you?"

Discernment and Community

- ☐ Identify decisions currently facing you in the following areas:
 - job, grad school, career
 - church and community
 - living situation and geographic location
 - lifestyle and the use of money
 - ministry
 - romance and friendship
- ☐ Which of these areas would be more or less difficult for you to allow your partners or community to be involved in?
- ☐ How have you submitted your decision-making process regarding any of these issues to the wisdom and accountability of your community?
- ☐ If you haven't already done so, what active steps could you take to seek out guidance and accountability?

For Further Reading

Smith, M. Blaine. *Knowing God's Will*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991.

10

The Joy of Obedience

Graduating from college is a little like competing in the Olympics. You train and prepare for years, with long days of practice and countless choices to postpone other gratifications in order to achieve your goal. You compete in and sometimes win smaller matches to qualify for ever more elite competition. Finally when your day arrives and you compete and win, you feel that release, that satisfaction, that . . .

Emptiness. The emptiness that comes when you realize that it was not the Olympics you were competing in but just the qualifying heats. The preliminaries. In fact, for you the Olympics aren't over, they have just begun and will take another forty or fifty years to complete. Sure, you've accomplished something, but the real test and validation of all your past effort is still in the future, the far-distant future.

It is almost impossible to sustain energy and movement toward lifelong goals. Only a few historical greats seem to have been able to do so. Certainly those of us who grew up on TV with its half-hour sitcoms have enough trouble mustering up an attention span for a six-

hour miniseries, let alone working toward goals that are a lifetime in the making.

So we set intermediate goals: graduation from college, a trip to Europe, that first promotion, getting married, home ownership and so on. But unless we occasionally lift our sights and consider the trajectory of our lives, we may find in the end that we have accomplished little of eternal value over the course of our lives even though we succeeded in achieving all of our short-term goals in the process.

Let's listen to the apostle Paul one final time as he helps us set our sights on the things that matter most.

Press On Toward the Goal

The themes of Paul's letter to the Philippians make it a great choice for study for graduating seniors or recent graduates. Paul's main concerns about servanthood, partnership, perseverance and joy are critical for the transition time after graduation. Look now at some of his closing words to his beloved community:

Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh! For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. (Philippians 3:1-7)

Paul calls the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord," in contrast to those who rejoice in the flesh—those who take confidence in the outward marks of faithfulness to God, like circumcision. Paul is vehement here

and elsewhere that there is nothing you can do that gives you favored standing with God. Those who took confidence in the works of the flesh thought that simple ritual observances earned points with God and obligated him to bless them. Paul gives the Philippians a stern warning against those who would foist this kind of legalistic religion on them.

Paul, a master debater, preempts one of his imagined opponents' responses. They might say, "Paul, you are just saying that you take no confidence in the flesh because you have no reason to take confidence in the flesh anyway." That would be like someone without a college degree saying college education is worthless. When an outsider to an elite system says the system is flawed, he or she cannot be taken seriously.

So Paul preempts their attack by claiming, "No, actually, if anyone is an insider to the 'confidence in the flesh' system, it is I." He goes on to list all his qualifications for critiquing the system. His ultimate qualification: "as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Rather than a critique of the system from one who couldn't make it, this critique comes from one who formerly excelled in the system. This stance gives Paul's warnings and evaluation added weight.

So Paul lists his credentials under the old system simply so he can junk the old system with authority. How does he feel now about his "flesh" résumé? He says he counts it all as loss. He speaks in accounting language. It as if he had been going over his books, feeling great about all of his accomplishments, summing their value: "\$500,000! Wow, I'm rich!" And then, as God revealed to him the true value of his actions, he realized that the gain he thought he had was really loss. He discovered that the amounts weren't positive sums, but negative. A half-million surplus became a half-million deficit! He came to regard it as loss.

But Paul doesn't stop there.

More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a

righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained. (Philippians 3:8-16)

Here Paul continues to use the accounting metaphor to talk about how he views his past and his future. He regards everything as loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. In other words, he is not trading away something of surpassing value in order to get something of mediocre value. Rather, he trades away things he considers "rubbish" in order to receive something of surpassing worth. Hardly a difficult trade, from Paul's enlightened perspective.

His summary of this process is found in verses 13 and 14: "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

In an Olympic race a runner runs toward the goal line in order to win the prize. The prize cannot be *taken* by the runner; it must be *given* to the runner after he or she has successfully completed the course. (In other words, the runner does not run toward *the prize*—that would result in disqualification.) In the race Paul has in mind, the prize is resurrection from the dead (v. 11). This is something he must be given; he cannot claim it.

In order to win the *prize* Paul runs toward the *goal* (vv. 12, 14). The goal is that Paul share in the sufferings of Christ and become like him in his death (v. 10). This is Paul's language for what Jesus refers to

as "losing your life for my sake and the gospel's." It involves faithful striving for the kingdom of God to the point of death. This is the goal toward which Paul presses, forgetting all that lies behind. Paul is clear that he has not yet finished the race; somehow it might be possible, if he did not press on, that he indeed would not finish.

Remember, Paul is writing to the Philippians. He is their founding apostle. They might be tempted to think, *If anyone has made it, Paul has; he should be able to retire.* But Paul isn't planning to retire: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own." Paul says that forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead are critical to his achieving his goal. We can understand this in the athlete analogy: a runner who stops running and turns around to gaze on the distance he has covered is likely to lose. But what does this image mean for Paul?

Paul says he has had to count all things as loss for the sake of Christ: his zealous persecution of the church, his "righteousness" under the law. We easily understand why Paul had to count those things as loss—they were pre-Christian and in fact were obstacles to faith in Christ. But then he says, "I *regard* everything as loss," using the present continuous tense. What is included in the "everything" that he continues to count as loss? Here Paul means all of his recent past (not just his Pharisee past): his church-planting efforts, his missionary work, all those conversions. Paul must count as loss not just his "righteousness" under the law but also his "righteousness" under the gospel. Not just his Pharisee résumé, but his Christian résumé as well.

Why would Paul have to count these good things as loss? I imagine it would be tempting for him, at this point in his life, to relax, to rest on his laurels. We get that image from the ancients, who placed laurel wreaths on the heads of victorious warriors or athletes. So the only way to rest on your laurels is to have completed your race, and Paul says that he hasn't completed his race yet. He has no laurels to rest on.

If anyone had had reason to stop pressing on, it would have been Paul. Yet Paul knows he can win the prize only if he finishes the race

by dying in obedience to Jesus. He must continue to strive for the kingdom of God, not stopping until he has literally lost his life for the sake of the gospel, so as to receive it back in the resurrection of the dead. He must count as loss even the good that he has done to advance the gospel, lest it become a snare for him, a point of pride, a subtle means to complacency, preventing him from completing his race.

As for Paul, so for us. As far as we have come in obedience to Jesus, as much as we have learned about discipleship, as long as we have been following Jesus—it will all be for nothing if we do not persevere to the end. Paul tells us to view life the way he does: "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained" (vv. 15-16).

Paul wants us to think about life as a race, and to press on, running toward the goal for the sake of the prize. But we need to understand how we may be tempted to stop running the race.

The Faces of Disobedience

Paul's urgency in Philippians is rooted in his awareness of the very real possibility that people who begin as disciples may turn away from the path of discipleship. A couple of verses after the end of the passage we've examined, he says, "For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears" (Philippians 3:18).

Paul isn't telling the Philippians that there are many non-Christians or anti-Christians out there—that's not news. He's telling the Philippians that some people who used to be partners and Christian friends *now* live as enemies—they have repudiated the faith. That is why Paul thinks of them *with tears*. These are people who meant a great deal to Paul and who now oppose him or the gospel message. (See also 2 Timothy 4:10, 14.)

Many friends have told me that the person who was instrumental in their conversion is no longer walking as a Christian. Sometimes it was a youth worker, sometimes a high-school friend or teacher, some-

times a college roommate. But in each case, those who were formerly so committed to their faith eventually found reasons to give it up.

I myself know a number of people who followed Jesus faithfully while in college but hit a snag somewhere afterward and today live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Probably you know people like this as well. We pray for these friends. I also know people who, like the prodigal son, left the care of their loving Father God but then came to their senses and have returned to God. We thank God for his taking hold of his own when they are ready to let go of him.

The reality is that we face many temptations not to press on in the life of faith. I want to identify four different ways we can miss out on the best God wants for each of us who have begun to follow him. I will discuss the four "faces of disobedience" in order of decreasing seriousness and increasing subtlety and likelihood. Jesus, Paul and other New Testament authors all warned their audiences that not all who begin the process of discipleship complete it. My hope is that by identifying faces of disobedience, we can better mark out the path of faithful obedience—that hard, narrow road that leads to life.

Repudiation. We may not think it likely that we will repudiate and outwardly reject the faith within five years,¹ but obviously it could happen. Much of the material in this book is designed to make that possibility less likely. Maintaining active involvement in a meaningful Christian community centered in a Bible-based church will likely give the accountability we need to keep on track. But if we think we are immune to the temptation to repudiation, we are actually more vulnerable to it.

Perhaps surprisingly, repudiation of the faith doesn't usually come about because the theological or philosophical foundations of the faith have been shattered through intellectual challenge. Rather, rejection of the faith often comes about when there is a clash of wills: mine and God's. People leave God when they want to sleep with their girlfriend or marry a non-Christian. They leave God out of a desire to fit in to a non-Christian peer group. Or people leave God because of some promise they think he made to them and then broke—like allowing a loved one to die or suffer tragedy.

Again, the point isn't to dwell on the dismal possibility that we might end our lives in rejection of God, but to acknowledge, as Paul did, that since it is a possibility, we want to run the race to the end. We want to put ourselves in the place where we have the best shot at perseverance. This involves all the faithful choices I have talked about since chapter one: rejecting the kingdom of the world and embracing the culture of the kingdom of God, participating in the body of Christ, losing our lives for Christ's sake and the gospel's.

Compromise. OK, so perhaps repudiation of the faith is not too likely, at least for you who are motivated enough to get all the way to the last chapter of a book on discipleship. But a more likely "face of disobedience" is compromise. Not outright repudiation. Not a rejection of the tenets of the faith. Not a denial of the deity of Jesus or of the authority of Scripture. Just a whittling away, an erosion over time of convictions gained about God and our practical obedience to him.

Jesus tells the familiar story of the sower and the soils in Mark 4. Perhaps you have heard this story before and sought to identify with the good soil, hearing and accepting Jesus' teachings and responding to them in the obedience of faith. But let's face it: it may be that you just haven't seriously tangled yet with "the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things" (Mark 4:19). (Sounds like graduation from college to me . . .) Perhaps these weeds have yet to come in and choke the Word. How would you know?

Paul warns the Philippians of those "whose minds are set on earthly things" in contrast to those of us whose "citizenship is in heaven." Jesus warns us of those who would try to please two masters. Where is your loyalty: in the world or in God's kingdom? If it is difficult to tell, look at your schedule, your money and your relationships. Are these directed toward the purposes of the kingdom or toward trying to fit in to the world? As you leave college, are you tempted to revise your own hopes for your relationship with God in view of the reality of the "real world"?

One area of potential compromise is in the business world. Paul warns, "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership

is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14). (This is often taken as a prohibition of Christians marrying non-Christians. While it certainly applies, that is probably not the intended application.) It is easy to become mismatched with nonbelievers, especially in business. While I don't think this means we should never work for non-Christians, it does present a warning. When we are hired by someone, we make ourselves tools toward the accomplishment of our employer's goals. (Rarely will people hire us in order to satisfy our goals and desires. That may be a byproduct, but it is not their purpose.) Sometimes their goals aren't antithetical to God's goals. But often the motivation and the ends pursued sound more like "the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things" than like striving for the kingdom. While it's possible to be faithful to the job we were hired to do without falling prey to these motivations, that may make us less than the best company worker. In order to succeed in such an environment, we are tempted to compromise.

In many areas of our lives we're tempted to compromise as we face the imagined cost of faithfulness in an unfaithful world. Of course, ultimately it is faithlessness that is costly, but in the short term things look different. Celibacy before marriage and faithfulness in marriage seem costly in a culture committed to immediate and total gratification of sexual desire. (AIDS, divorce, abortion and sexual violence are some of the long-term costs of our culture's practices.) Choices to serve others and spend your life directing them toward God mean taking on their pain and struggle as your own. When we focus on any of these short-term costs and forget the long-term rewards, we can be tempted to lose heart. Simply seeing the prosperity of those who don't acknowledge God can raise doubts that cause us to compromise.

Psalms 73 is the story of someone who "almost slipped" while seeing the success of pagans who don't acknowledge God. And we battle compromise the way the psalmist did: by regaining a true vision of reality. The psalmist writes:

But when I thought how to understand this [the success of the wicked],

it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end. (Psalm 73:16-17)

The psalmist's vision was restored as he moved from an envious, self-pitying reflection on his circumstances and those of others to a worshipful reflection on the character and work of the Lord God. Worship, Scripture study, and the help and accountability of partners all can help us see through the deception of the world and perceive reality clearly. An accurate vision of reality promotes motivated obedience.

The psalmist gets off track when he takes his eyes off God and begins to look around at others and their lack of faithfulness. And we can get into trouble by comparing our lives to the lives of other Christians. If they are not as far along in their discipleship, we can begin to feel proud of the choices we have made, or we may resent and envy the choices they have made. If we decide to settle for what other Christians are doing, the result may be compromise.

For some people a certain way of life may involve incredible faith in God, while for us the same lifestyle would be compromise. Different people will be called to live out the gospel differently, based on their experiences and gifts. We will meet people who have not been exposed to what we've received from Scripture but who are living faithfully to what they've received. They are taking steps of obedience, trusting God in their work and church commitment; they are involved in ministry.

Both of my parents, for example, became committed Christians after their college years. They are living faithful lives, and while I was growing up they gave me a great spiritual heritage, the foundation of my current discipleship. I love them. They are generous, hospitable people and inspiring Christians. But comfort, convenience and privacy are more important to them than they are to me. I have often suggested, only half in jest, that they sell their house, give the money to missions and move in with another couple in their church whose children are also all grown up. My parents appreciate my choice to live in community, but for them it would be unthinkable.

Much of the difference between us is a difference in our experience of Christian discipleship. We each have responded in faithful ways to God's call. Yet if I were to live like my parents, it would be spiritual compromise for me. And for me to judge them and say that they must follow Jesus the way I do would be wrong as well. They are running their race and are faithful in it. I am running my race, on a different track. I pray that I may be as faithful over the years as they have been.

This is not a Christian relativism ("what's right for me may not be what's right for you") but simply a recognition that we are not accepted by our actions but by our response in faith to the word we have received. The thief on the cross and Peter the apostle were saved in exactly the same way, according to the same standard: they both responded in faith to the word that they heard. This has several implications for us:

- ☐ We cannot judge people by the word that *we* have received.
- ☐ We cannot assume that the specific call God places on our lives is for everyone. Indeed, in Scripture we see a diversity of faithful ways to respond to God.
- ☐ We must not resent other Christians because they have things we don't. To the extent God has given those things as gifts, they should be grateful. We should be grateful for God's generosity to us, which a moment's reflection will reveal. (In Matthew 20:15 Jesus warns against resenting God because of his generosity to others.)
- ☐ We must not judge ourselves by the standards of others. In order to finish the race, we look toward the finish line, not toward those in the other lanes.

The race analogy falls short in one key respect. In the Olympics only one runner gets the gold medal. But in the race Paul speaks of, everyone who presses on to the end wins the prize. "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind. Only let us hold fast to what we have attained." No compromise.

Complacency. Complacency is perhaps the most dangerous face of disobedience, because it is the most subtle. In five years a small percentage of your college Christian friends may have repudiated the faith. Perhaps a slightly higher percentage may have compromised in

key decisions. But we can easily imagine that in five years half of your friends from your Christian fellowship or church group will be living complacent lives, satisfied with the level of "radicalness" or commitment they have achieved, and not moving on. Not necessarily sliding back, just holding steady. They don't start running backwards; they just stop, take a look back and relax. Take a stretch in the infield. Watch the rest of the race.

This is the heart of what Paul is warning about. Think of it, this is Paul the apostle. In any five years of his Christian life he accomplished more than any of us do in a lifetime. So what if the last ten years of his life he spent watching TV and doing crossword puzzles? We want to say, "Paul, chill out, man, you've made it." We'd give him a gold watch and let him relax and enjoy life.

But it's important to forget what lies behind and continue to venture into new areas of trust and dependence on God. It doesn't matter if we are giving 25 percent of our income, living in economic community and heavily involved in our church. We must forget what lies behind, not thinking about how great or how radical we are, and continue to press on to what lies ahead.

Just a word about forgetting. Paul says he forgets what lies behind, but in the Old Testament God's people are told to remember.¹ What's the difference?

When the people of Israel are told to remember, what they are to remember is the faithfulness of God, not their own noble or righteous acts. So when we look back on our lives, we are not meant to see the list of wonderful choices we have made for God, but the markers and remembrances of God's faithful presence in our lives. We look back and remember, not to firm up our fragile egos but to enlarge our recognition of God's glory, faithfulness and grace. As we remember, our attitude should be gratitude, not pride.

So Paul's command to us to join him in forgetting what lies behind and God's command to the people of Israel to remember are two sides of the same coin—we forget what we have done, we remember what God has done, and both spur us on to continue in the race and press on, without compromise, without complacency, eager to reach the

goal for the sake of the prize.

Joylessness. Prolonged joylessness is the fourth face of disobedience—

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that even though we don't repudiate the faith, compromise our values, or remain complacent, we can still be living disobediently simply by being joyless? Is joylessness really a face of disobedience?"

Paul begins Philippians 3 with the words "Rejoice in the Lord." Let's examine both parts of that.

□ "Rejoice": Paul challenges his readers: don't be bitter, don't resent the choices you've made. Others will look as if they are doing better, but think about the long run. Rejoice!

□ "In the Lord": of all the things in Paul's life, only one thing he counted as gain: Christ and becoming like him. We could choose to rejoice in many different parts of our lives, but we are to rejoice in the Lord. Not in our achievements, not in our college degree, not even in our Christian accomplishments. "Rejoice in the Lord."

Paul challenges the Philippians toward joy.

The fact is that prolonged joylessness is a sign of disobedience.² It is evidence of a lack of faith in God to provide and guide, to care for us as his Word promises. If we don't experience God's love for us, then how can we be gladly growing toward him? How can we minister effectively to others in his name and with his resources? Instead we will grow to resent God throughout the process. Or simply be satisfied with less than joy.

Have you ever thought of joylessness as sin? By *joy* I don't mean a light, fluffy happiness. If we experience joylessness, there is usually something we need to repent of. We may need to repent of the idolatry of the thing we don't have. We may need to repent of our insecurity regarding the thing we do have. We may need to repent of our attitudes toward God, who hasn't produced answers to our prayers in the way we thought he should.

When our hope is not in God, our hope will often disappoint and leave us joyless. The solution is not to find a different temporal object of hope (a new, better job or a more sympathetic boyfriend, for ex-

ample) but to repent of placing our hope anywhere but in God. Many misplaced affections can rob us of joy. But we can experience a consistent contentment, a deep, abiding joy. We want to be people who are not satisfied with less than joy.

Dissatisfied Contentment

How do we do this? Paul discovered a secret:

Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

Consider these contrasting images:

- ☐ a runner, fixed on the goal, driven to complete the race, completely single-minded in pursuit of his stated objective
- ☐ a man at peace, content with his life and anything that comes his way, able to rejoice in abundance but content in the face of privation and suffering

In the last half of Paul's letter to the Philippians, he uses both of these images to describe himself.

This is Paul's ethic of "dissatisfied contentment." Paul is dissatisfied, not complacent, always moving forward, yet he experiences deep contentment. This dissatisfaction is not a restlessness of spirit, of a person moping about wondering what his life is for. This dissatisfaction is one of motion: he moves forward out of deep inner motivation to draw ever nearer to his Lord Jesus, but the abiding emotion is joy. "Rejoice in the Lord always!" (Philippians 4:4).

Paul is content, but never satisfied; always pressing on, but always rejoicing.

We are too often the exact opposite of Paul. We experience a "satisfied discontent," a complacency of spirit that leads to inertia and stagnation, coupled with an inability to experience joy or deep contentment. We are not dissatisfied enough to press on toward the goal, but we are not content with our lot either. The world says, "If I only

had _____, then I'd be happy." Fill in the blank however you want: more money, a boyfriend, better sex, more recognition at work, more free time, an opportunity to travel. The world says, "The right mixture of circumstances and material comforts is the key to contentment." Paul says that the secret of contentment and joy has nothing to do with things and circumstances ("I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty"). In fact this must be true, because circumstances change like the weather, but contentment implies an abiding joy, a fundamental condition not subject to hourly updates. Paul's secret lies in valuing the things that God values, striving for his kingdom, living in his will. He can indeed do all things God has called him to do through the empowerment of God's Spirit.

We want to live like Paul did and to learn, over time, his precious secret. We want to press on toward the goal but to experience peace and contentment in the process.

Go for it!

Jesus tells two stories of people who took the plunge and went for it:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-46)

Jesus communicates deep truth with an economy of words in these short but powerful parables. The first man, probably a day laborer working in a field, is not particularly looking for anything when he comes across the treasure. In order to own the treasure (rather than simply steal it), he scrapes together his life savings, liquidates all assets and purchases the land in which the treasure is hidden (unbeknownst to the seller). The second man is not a casual laborer but a middle-class merchant, an expert in pearls. He has been looking for fine pearls, but he never expected to find anything quite like *the* pearl, the end of his search. He liquidates his entire collection in order to purchase this single pearl.

In these two simple stories Jesus summarizes the experience of all people who have encountered God. Some spend years looking for him; others bump into him with no prior awareness of their need for him. But both kinds of people respond in the same way: they go and sell all they have in order to acquire the supremely valuable.

This story is compelling because of the ultimate worth of what is obtained in the bargain. Yes, both men must go and sell all they own. In order to acquire the treasure they must part with everything. They can hold nothing back. But this seems to them merely a minor detail—what is crucial is that what is purchased is worth far more than its cost. Clearly it's not an even trade. This explains their attitude in the process: joy.

When we bring our lives to God, we too can hold nothing back. We embark on a lifelong process of selling all, of losing our lives for Christ's sake and the gospel's. The "obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5) involves sacrifices like those the laborer made to purchase the field and the merchant made to acquire the pearl. But in a real sense, no sacrifices are ever made. It is no "sacrifice" to trade away decaying things of temporary value to obtain the thing that never loses its supreme value. When we see the transaction with the eyes of faith, the only possible response is joy. Deep, abiding joy. The kind of joy Jesus had. The joy he wants for us.

When Jesus came onto the scene in Galilee, he preached, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). This is the summary of the good news: God's King is finally on center stage, intervening in this world. He comes with all the authority, wisdom and power of God, yet he comes as a servant to call people to join the kingdom and swear allegiance to himself, the Servant-King.

Striving for the kingdom of God is a sure thing—because the outcome is assured: God's kingdom is indeed coming! We are not betting on a long shot. We are not joining the side likely to lose. This is not some obscure, utopian solve-the-world's-problems campaign. The kingdom of God is a sure thing. Jesus' resurrection proved that.

What's more, *striving for the kingdom of God is a good thing*. Not only

is the outcome assured, but the process yields satisfaction of the deepest desires of our hearts: life, security, greatness, purpose, joy. The King of the kingdom is God's King, God's good, righteous, loving Servant-King, who knows us like a shepherd knows his sheep, and who will lead us and guide us to green pastures and cool, clear water.

So go for it! Press on toward the goal, counting as loss all that lies behind. Want even more than you have yet experienced in your relationship with God and in your experience of the body of Christ. Strain forward, press on, finish the race. And in the process lay aside all attachments that would keep you from knowing the joy Jesus desires for you. Experience the abiding joy, peace and contentment of being in the care of God.

■ For Reflection

The Faces of Disobedience

- ☐ We battle complacency by continually taking steps forward in our discipleship. What steps have you taken recently?
- ☐ Security breeds complacency. Is your security in God and his people? Does that security inspire you to take faithful risks or keep you from rocking the boat?
- ☐ What faith-inspired risks have you taken recently?

Dissatisfied Contentment

- ☐ Joy is not a minute-by-minute monitor of our spiritual progress. Day to day it isn't necessarily to be our focus. But reflecting back over time, ask yourself: Do I experience a fundamental contentment?
- ☐ What (in me, not in my circumstances) needs to change so that I can experience joy?
- ☐ What does repentance mean for me at this point?

For Further Reading

Clinton, J. Robert. *The Making of a Leader*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988. This book addresses the process God uses to make leaders over a lifetime. It is helpful to give a long-term perspective on God's work in a person's life.

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Chapter 1: What Do You Expect?

I am indebted for much of this material to Greg Read, IVCF staff at Stanford

during my undergraduate days there and now an associate pastor of Vineyard Christian Fellowship, San Francisco. His emphasis on repentance and his gift of analysis of the culture laid the foundation for the specific challenges I present here.

¹Real median income of U.S. families, from 1973 to 1990, showed growing disparity between those under age thirty and those over sixty-five. Average income for families headed by someone over sixty-five increased nearly 40 percent in real terms, while average income for families headed by someone under age thirty decreased by 16 percent during those same years. In previous decades the increases in income had been spread fairly equally across age brackets. Also, in this same time span the poverty rate for families with children where the family head was under thirty years old doubled, from 16 percent to 33 percent, while poverty rates for families whose head was over thirty grew only a few percentage points, from 9 percent to 12 percent. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, cited in Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp. 94-95.

²Acts 4:19-20; 5:19-29. While we are always supposed to *honor* authorities, we are not necessarily supposed to *obey* them, if God's call comes first. This is true of parents and governing authorities. Jesus' remarks in Mark 3:33-35; 10:29-30; and Luke 9:59-60; 14:26 make it clear that his authority and claim on the lives of his disciples is higher than that of parents.

Chapter 2: The King and the Kingdom

I am indebted to the strong tradition of emphasizing the lordship of Christ throughout IVCF. The structure of this book in general, and the first two chapters specifically, reflects the structure of one of IVCF's foundational training programs, Bible & Life.

Chapter 3: Productivity and Prayer

This chapter reflects the emphasis and wisdom of Doug Gregg, IVCF staff and Presbyterian pastor in Los Angeles. His teaching has spurred my own prayer life forward.

¹S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer* (New York: Revell, 1941), p. 18.

²Charles Hummel, *Tyranny of the Urgent* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1967). A revised edition of this booklet was issued by IVP in 1994.

Chapter 4: Meaningless Work and Fruitful Labor

I am grateful for Tom Sine's challenging book *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1981) for helping to orient me to a dynamic view of vocation in the kingdom of God. I am also grateful for several excellent

insights from Kevin Rhodes, a teaching elder in a church in Boulder, Colorado.

¹"From 1975 to 1988, the proportion of high school seniors who believed that 'to me, work is nothing more than making a living' rose from 19 to 25 percent." From "Monitoring the Future: Questionnaire Responses from the Nation's High School Seniors" (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1975-1988), cited in Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 107.

²John A. Bernbaum and Simon M. Steer, *Why Work? Careers and Employment in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1986); see the discussion on pp. 34-42.

³John Perkins, *A Quiet Revolution* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1976), pp. 33-34, cited in Sine, *Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, pp. 140-41.

⁴I am indebted to Sine, *Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, especially the discussion on page 140, for turning the common question around.

Chapter 5: Community After College

My understanding of community has grown over many years and comes from many sources. I would like to acknowledge Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco for the clarity of its call to community and its challenge to me.

¹For example, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and the Upper Room discourse (John 13-17). Furthermore, most of the parables of the kingdom invite individual participation in what is fundamentally a communal experience: a party, a banquet, a wedding feast. Individuals must leave behind family, but only to enter into a much larger family.

²Jesus' promises of answered prayer (Matthew 7:7-11; Mark 11:22-24; Luke 11:5-13; John 15:7) are given most fundamentally to the gathered community of believers. These are not "health and wealth" promises, but rather promises that the community of God has access to the resources of God to meet legitimate needs of the people and to pursue the purposes of the kingdom.

³Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 157-63.

⁴Home ownership by those under twenty-five years of age decreased by over 30 percent between 1973 and 1990, according to the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. This study was cited by Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 95.

⁵Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 115.

⁶Here Paul is speaking about the body of Christ, understood as the church. I have been speaking of a *community*, a word that I am using to refer to what

might be a church or merely a subset of a church. My understanding is that Paul's hope for the functioning church applies to any functioning community within a church. The next chapter will examine Paul's vision of the church and our participation in it more fully.

⁷Obviously many communities change over time because people move away. There can be good ways for this to happen and bad or destructive ways. Our aim is community life that can endure through changes as people come and go, and that people who leave have good reasons to leave, not simply that they are giving up on community.

⁸Twelve-step programs offer the meaningful accountability needed to help people take these steps. Christian community should do so as well.

⁹For example, a high-school sports team could be viewed as a clique with a purpose or vision. It is much less likely to fall apart.

Chapter 6: Strategies for Church Involvement

I am grateful to have been involved in a couple of healthy and growing churches since college, most recently a Conservative Baptist church in Cambridge. I was challenged early on in my thinking on the church by several of Howard Snyder's books (*The Problem of Wineskins* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1975], *The Community of the King* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1977], *Liberating the Church* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1983]). For the original exegesis of Acts 26 I am indebted again to Greg Read.

¹Vernard Eller, *The Outward Bound* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 12-13.

²Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 27, cited in Snyder, *Community of the King*, p. 38.

³See, for example, Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins*.

Chapter 7: A Mobilized Lifestyle for the Kingdom

¹Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 70.

²A great place to begin to read about racial reconciliation is Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice, *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Chapter 8: Embracing a Lifestyle of Ministry

¹For the disciples and the people of Jesus' day, relatives, including parents, siblings and kids, formed the social security system, the safety net that protected individuals from starvation and poverty. The larger this net was, the

more security one felt. Jesus says to his disciples, "I know you have left behind your social security net. Don't worry, because the network of relationships you have entered into will be a hundred times larger. You will have family, fields and houses far beyond your needs."

Chapter 10: The Joy of Obedience

I am indebted to Daniel Fuller and John Piper for my understanding of the proper connection between joy and obedience. Piper's *Desiring God* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah Press, 1986) and Fuller's *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992) provide a wealth of insight into this connection and its application in the life of a Christian. The title of the chapter and some of the foundational insights again derive from Greg Read.

¹See Exodus 13:3: "Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because the LORD brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten.' " The command to remember is also found in Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:18; 8:18; 16:3, among other places.

²Both Jesus and Paul command us to rejoice. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, calls us to "rejoice and be glad" even in the face of persecution (Matthew 5:12).

³This phrase was coined by John Piper; see "Holy Hedonism," *His*, November 1981.