

## Chapter 1

# Revisiting Christian Excellence

*"Nothing clears the mind, clarifies vision or resets values like an eternal perspective"*

 Like most books, this one has a history, but mine may be a little more tangled than most. This excellence motif has slowly evolved into the final shape it has taken in this volume. Some of us believers, I suppose, are just hardwired to aspire to transcend the average and to excel in what we do in the spirit of Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might." We don't necessarily need to be rich and famous . . . just to satisfy an inner imperative. "Small fry" though we may be in the larger scheme of things, we still yearn to rise above the surrounding mediocrity.

That is the target audience for this little book--- believers endowed with a spirit that requires more of them than just drifting through life, going through the motions, never making a difference or leaving a wake. If your spirit is infused with the noble notion of excelling for Christ's sake in all the things that really matter, then this short volume is for you and your kind.

My interest in and passion for this theme goes back to the days when I was teaching in Bible college. Initially what stoked my fire was, not just my own native programming, but seeing in our student body some truly bright and talented students who, had they any

ambition to excel, might have kicked a dent in something. Unfortunately, I soon discovered many (delightful as they otherwise may have been) lacked the drive for anything more than making the grade and moving on, to who knows where.

During that decade I had a number of students with the brains to perform at a high level at any university in the country. As the father of two girls, it especially grieved me to see some of these very smart and talented young women (who weren't preparing for vocational ministries) breezing their way through Bible college like academic catamarans in a favorable wind, and then, a whole ton of money later, graduating with a degree that qualified them to work at Denny's. Terrible waste! More than once, I told some of them that and urged them to bail, go get a marketable degree, and go out there in the world and show everybody what a savvy Christian woman could do. Sad to say, most of them were satisfied to hide out in the Bible-college cocoon, scout out a Christian mate and accomplish nothing worthy of their gifts.

Don't get me wrong here. This writer is the farthest thing from a feminist fellow traveler. I am *all for* Christian women devoting themselves to domestic life; I absolutely applaud it. What I am talking about are people with million-dollar minds bringing a 25-cent vision to the project of life. You see, some of these gals didn't opt for the domestic life out of vision; they settled for it for lack of one. *That* is what I personally deplore---no drive to transcend the ordinary. This directionless spirit of mediocrity is hardly in the mold of the noble housewife of Proverbs 31:10-31!

In response to my long-standing passion for this subject, I prepared for our students a couple of chapel

lectures on this topic. With many, those lectures struck a nerve. Over the years students and colleagues urged me to publish them. As I set out eventually to amplify my topic to book length, a funny thing happened en route. As it turned out, this matter of excellence was trickier from a Christian perspective than I first realized. The more I pondered my subject, the more my conception of what “excellence” really means *for a Christian* morphed. For example, as much as I personally admire excellence in the usual categories in which humans typically strive to distinguish *themselves* (note that phrasing), my thinking evolved. I started to see that for a believer in Christ, pursuing those traditional forms of excellence fell way short of the biblical excellence God calls us to. That was a big shift for me.

You see, I for one had always been scandalized by mediocrity and ineptitude in Christian endeavors. From a youth, I always felt that we Christians needed to polish up our act, lest by lack of competence and class in the way we do things, we embarrass the name of Christ. And on that score, my mind hasn’t changed a great deal. There indeed is something to be said for doing all things well.

Even so, I gradually came to realize that my original vision of excellence, as a Christian target, was too much in the mundane, temporal vein of pursuits that, in the final analysis, don’t really matter *if detached from our higher goals as people of God*. As my thinking matured, a new model evolved of the shape Christian excellence ought to take. The revised version, I think, does not exclude the traditional, but transcends it by far in terms of goal and motivation.

Certainly, it is more biblically rooted and distinctively Christian than my initial, more secular

conception of what the pursuit of excellence was all about. The more I reflected, I saw more clearly how misplaced my original emphasis was.

Not that my earlier standards and values were *all* wrong. Just that they were *too* wrong. Somewhere along the line, it began to dawn on me that when we talk about raising standards of excellence in the (institutional) church, what we typically have in view are not categories God would link with that attribute.

Gradually the light dawned. I began to see that the usual targets of our pursuits of excellence are not really *biblical* goals, but cultural brass rings that make no spiritual difference. In other words, my epiphany was this: Our Christian ideals don't always spring from *revelational imperatives*, but from merely *cultural benchmarks*. In the end, I realized that genuine *Christian* excellence is a *sui generis* (i.e., something in a class by itself). And the driver of the aspiration for pure Christian excellence is a biblical, not human, value system. Seeing that, well, the implications for the pursuit of excellence were sweeping.

So, a very long pause. I stopped to refine and overhaul my original thesis. This book is the fruit of that better vision. What I offer herein is, I believe, a distinctively Christian “philosophy” of excellence that better squares with our calling in Christ and directs our energies and abilities where they ought to be focused, rather than diverting them to the service of vain and unfruitful ends and endeavors.

And, the Christian vision, as I reframed it, is far superior to the traditional. Whereas the Scriptures call ordinary believers to true Christian excellence, the traditional approach invites exceptional persons to mere ordinary excellence. The Christian aspiration is cosmic in

its vision; the traditional pursuit is merely cosmetic. The latter, as mentioned, is not necessarily excluded from the former, but the former is not usually included in the pursuit of the latter. And here is another crucial discovery along the way: To excel in a Christian way, we must, first and foremost, excel at the point of our primary identity, not our secondary vocations. We must resist falling into the trap, as most do, of letting our chosen professions---engineers, brokers, accountants, attorneys, techies, doctors, musicians, artists, writers, athletes, etc.---define who we really are at our core. Should we lapse into that error, that blurring of our identity will divert our quest for excellence into some (biblically) irrelevant veins. Whatever else we may be, we must bear in mind that, first and foremost, we are *Christians*---followers of Christ, i.e., disciples or learners of Jesus.

That is our primary and proudest identity. Unless we excel at that high point, any other marks of excellence we may achieve, in the eyes of God, are not worth the powder it would take to blow them up with. That is no overstatement. For the believer, this yardstick (excelling at simply being Christian) has to be the ultimate benchmark of excellence. Hence, the pursuit of excellence for Christians has little to do with charging out there like Olympians into this competitive world, getting all sweaty, and proving that whatever they can do, we can do as well or better. Those temporal skills and achievements may win kudos for us, but do they really bring any glory to God? Recognizing this faulty mental state substantially changes the whole equation of true excellence. My position, therefore, is that all human achievements and the accolades that go with them are nothing to get all jazzed about, except as

those attainments truly *complement* our mission and *complete* our maturation in Christ.

In short, for believers to excel in tangential things but fall short in our spiritual calling---to be a disciple of Jesus Christ---is to miss the essential thing. And that, from a Christian perspective, would represent a gross surrender to the worst form of mediocrity, no matter how many ways we might excel in envied traditional categories.

And here, I think, is a most beautiful and compelling aspect of this more biblical vision of excellence---*the target lies totally within the reach of the earnest, but under-endowed believer. It is not elitist, but blessedly egalitarian. In the only way that really matters, the most ordinary Christian can be extraordinary. No one is excluded from the chase by the accidents of birth or circumstances, as is the case with most of the forms of excellence the world trumpets.*

There you have, in a nutshell, the perspective of this book. Bottom line, I insist that *the essence of excellence for believers is not being good at the things we do, but rather excelling at who we are in Christ.* There is a life worth dying for. Of course, these premises evoke some natural questions. These I have tried to anticipate and answer along the way.