

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Getting in shape to seek the Kingdom of God.

PART 2: FOUNDATIONS OF DISCIPLINE



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Foundations of Discipline

Foundations of Discipline
A *ReVision* Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe
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Waxed Tablet Publications

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Welcome to *Foundations of Discipline*

Welcome to *Foundations of Discipline*, part 2 of a 7-part series on the disciplined life. Seeking the Kingdom of God is full-time work, and we need to be in shape if we're going to make progress in this effort. Living a disciplined life is crucial to realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God

Foundations of Discipline provides an overview of those key elementary and foundational ideas and practices that must guide all our work at achieving a disciplined life.

These studies are designed for individual or group use. While you may derive much benefit from studying on your own, that benefit can be greatly enhanced by joining with a friend or a group to read, discuss, share, challenge, and pray for one another.

Take one lesson at a time, reading the Scriptures and narrative aloud, and pausing to reflect on and discuss the questions provided. Don't be in a hurry. Be willing to take more than one session on a lesson if it will allow you to delve more deeply into the subject matter.

If you're in a group, make sure you prepare for each study by reading through the lesson in advance and answering the questions in writing. Take turns leading your group. Let every member share in the privilege and responsibility of facilitating discussions. Group leaders should not feel like they have to "have all the answers." Their task is simply to lead the group through the readings and questions, and to help everyone participate.

These studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Discipline in the Scheme of Things

...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith... Hebrews 12.1, 2

Discipline and worldview

The disciplined life is simply the way we organize our time to carry out the demands and achieve the goals of our worldview.

Everyone has a worldview, a basic way of understanding the world and getting around in it. All worldviews take shape around three facets, which work together like the legs of a triangle to give dimension and stability to the worldview as a whole. By understanding our Christian worldview in this manner, we can see why it is especially important that we give ourselves to disciplining our bodies to follow Jesus.

Let's look briefly at the three facets of a worldview and the place of disciplines within that framework.

Vision

The first parameter of every worldview – the first leg of the triangle – is the *vision of the good life* to be attained. This constitutes a vast realm of *unseen things* – unseen because they always remain hoped-for and not yet realized.

Everyone embraces some commanding vision of life – what it should be, what they should aspire to, what will make them happy. This vision functions like the glow beyond the horizon to guide our steps day by day in the direction of what we believe to be the good life.

For most people this is a mixed vision and not at all clear. This includes most Christians. Disciple-making for worldview living requires that we train believers to see more clearly the beauty of the Christian life in all its promise and fullness. The Christian's vision of the good life is, in a word, Jesus – Jesus Christ: exalted in glory and filling all things, advancing His Kingdom, building His Church, dispensing and deepening His great salvation, and saving and sanctifying His people to follow Him as citizens and ambassadors of His Kingdom. This is the Christian vision of life at its best.

Disciplines

The second facet of a worldview – the second leg of the triangle – consists of *the disciplines by which we pursue our vision* of the good life. The clearer and more compelling our vision, the more consistent and diligent we will be in taking up the disciplines that will help us move in the direction of that vision.

Disciplines embrace every area of our lives and every moment of time. But that can be good or bad, depending on the nature and quality of our disciplines and the extent to which we are clear and conscientious in practicing them. The goal is to take up those disciplines – and *only* those disciplines – that will keep us moving toward our vision of life as it ought to be.

Here there is no shortage of voices and advisers counseling us one way or another – teachers, pundits, advertisers, politicians, investment advisers, etc., etc. One may lead a very disciplined life, active and always engaged in this, that, or the other. But this activity will not yield the good life unless it is the *kind* of activity specifically designed to achieve that end – unless there is a direct connection between the disciplines we embrace and the vision we seek.

And if we desire to attain to the *Christian* vision of life, then we must embrace distinctly Christian and Biblical

disciplines for every area of our lives.

The fruit of our seeking

The final leg of our worldview triangle is *the outcomes people realize*. The character of this facet will be determined by the interface of the first two. The *disciplined* pursuit of what people *envision* as the good life will always bear certain fruit in their lives. The outcomes we seek in the Christian life are those expressive of our vision, which is of Christ and His Kingdom. Love for God and neighbor are *the* defining outcomes of the Christian worldview.

Every worldview consists of a vision of things unseen, which is pursued through a raft of disciplines, and which results in certain outcomes or fruit in this life – the evidence of progress in our pursuit. In many ways, as Jesus noted, we may discern a person’s worldview by looking at the fruit of his life (Matt. 7.20). The Christian worldview, rightly envisioned and pursued, should yield the fruit of Kingdom living in those who embrace it. But this will only be so as believers are equipped with the vision and disciplines such fruit requires.

Vision fuels disciplines, and disciplines pursue vision. The clearer and more compelling our vision, the more careful, diligent, and consistent we will be in embracing only those disciplines that will move us toward that vision. And the harder we work at the disciplined life, in every aspect and moment of our lives, the more we can expect to see Kingdom outcomes consistent with our vision of Christ and Him exalted.

For reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by “worldview”? Do you agree that everyone has a worldview? Do you have a worldview? Is it important to know our worldview as fully as possible? Why or why not?
2. Summarize the *vision* of the Christian worldview, as you understand it:
3. What do you consider to be the most important *disciplines* a Christian should master in pursuit of the Christian vision of life? Why?
4. Briefly explain the relationship between vision, disciplines, and outcomes in the Christian worldview?
5. What are your goals for this study? What do you hope to learn?

Next steps: Meditate on Ephesians 5.15-17. Can you say that you are using all the time God gives you each day in a disciplined pursuit of Christ and His Kingdom? If not, what disciplines are taking up your time that need to be reviewed and perhaps replaced? Talk with a Christian leader or pastor about these questions.

Prayer:

2 The Aim of Disciplines

He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. Colossians 1.18

Christian vision

First place in everything: This is Jesus, what He intends to be in my life, in all of life, all things, at all times, forever.

What does this mean? Christ pre-eminent, Him filling all things with Himself (Eph. 1.15-23; 4.10), is the aim of the disciplined life, at least, for the Christian. The Christian worldview is Jesus, and us in hot pursuit of Him, bearing fruit in our daily lives of the evidence of His having risen from the dead. We long to know Jesus ruling our souls – heart, mind, and conscience. Increasingly, we seek the vision of Christ to command our thoughts, direct and focus our affections, establish our priorities, and empower our words and deeds – all our plans, hopes, aspirations, desires, efforts, and exertions.

For the Christian, Jesus is the benchmark for everything in life, so that everything in a Christian's life is disciplined to see, exalt, display, and serve Him. Jesus *is* the good life. He is everything that is good, and He defines and dispenses true and eternal life (Jn. 10.10; 14.6). See Jesus, see Him clearly and full of glory and majesty, filling all things in all things, and you will happily submit the whole of your life to know, enjoy, and serve Him in everything you do.

Where you look

For too many Christians, however, Jesus is not the aim of their lives, at least, not of their daily lives. Something else is. Maybe it's even some idea of "salvation" or the "good life", adjusted to fit our contemporary materialistic way of life. Many Christians believe they will "see" Jesus all right, but only after they have arrived in heaven. In the meantime, and for most Christians, whatever is really good and useful and desirable about life tends to be defined in terms dictated by our increasingly secular age.

Most Christians do not live the kind of disciplined life the Scriptures call for because the focus of their lives is not where it ought to be. For too many of us, the "good life" and the vision of all that matters and all that we hope to attain in life does not come down to Jesus Christ. Jesus is for *after* this life, and perhaps *through* this life. In reality, however, we want to make a good living, provide for our families, and enjoy the things, experiences, and conditions which most of our neighbors would agree constitute the good life.

And if our vision of the good life is primarily temporal and materialistic, this would explain why the way we use the time of our lives is devoted only partially to "seeing" Jesus – some prayer here, a little Bible reading there, some worship and small group over there, and maybe even a service project, if time permits. For most Christians, I suspect, Jesus gets maybe 8-10 hours of their week – and that's being generous. Why, we can't even devote one whole day to Him; only a portion of the Lord's Day is actually His. The rest is ours to do with as we please.

The world out of whack

The writer of Hebrews might just as well have been writing in our day when he said that, although God has redeemed His people so that we will put everything in life – all the time and work and activities of every moment of our lives – under our feet for the glory and honor of God the Father, we do "not yet" see this happening (Heb. 2.5-9).

If that was understatement in the first century AD, it's even more so today.

When the focus of our lives, the aim of our worldview, is the comfortable and secure life of peace and

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prosperity, this is what we will discipline our time to pursue. And once we've achieved as much of this as satisfies us at any given moment, then we'll simply settle down to indulge our hard-won gains.

But the "world to come" which God has entrusted to us His people (Heb. 2.5) is not the world of getting and spending and self-indulgence, the world of our secular and material counterparts. Rather, the world to come is that of the divine economy, the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, which Jesus is advancing even now from the Father's right hand by His Word and Spirit, in and through every true follower and disciple.

No, we do not yet see all things being put under our feet in ways that honor God and glorify Him. But, the writer of Hebrews reminds us, "we see Jesus." And *if* we see Jesus, if we see and desire Him as the aim and goal of every aspect of our lives, and if our vision of Jesus is growing and becoming clearer and more delightful and desirable every day of our lives, then we will take up those disciplines that can help us to capture *all* the time of our lives, and not just a few hours each week, for Christ and His Kingdom.

We need to keep the aim of the Christian worldview in site at all times. Everything under His rule, according to His good and perfect will and plan: This is when Christ will have the pre-eminence in your life and mine.

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you explain the aim of the Christian life to an unbelieving friend or co-worker?
2. Do you think most Christians are clear about the aim of the Christian life? Do you think their vision of the Christian life is as compelling as it should be? Why or why not?
3. How should a Christian nurture his or her vision of the Christian life? How does that vision translate into an aim for our everyday lives?
4. How can Christians protect themselves from being overwhelmed by the secular and materialistic vision of so many of our neighbors?
5. "And *if* we see Jesus, if we see and desire Him as the aim and goal of every aspect of our lives, and if our vision of Jesus is growing and becoming clearer and more delightful and desirable every day of our lives, then we will take up those disciplines that can help us to capture *all* the time of our lives, and not just a few hours each week, for Christ and His Kingdom." Do you agree? Why or why not?

Next steps: Suggest some ways a Christian might begin to take back more of the time of His life for seeking "the world to come." Are we likely to do this apart from a clear and compelling vision of Christ as the aim of our lives? Share your thoughts with a Christian friend.

Prayer:

3 Don't Use Your Head!

But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Matthew 16.23

Peter's problem...

We're looking at the foundations that must be in place for a properly disciplined life. The starting-point for a vibrant Christian life is Jesus Christ and the vision of Him exalted, ruling over His Kingdom, building His Church, dispensing His salvation, calling His servants into mission, and restoring all things to the Father. The clearer our focus on this, the harder we work to make this vision the commanding prospect of our lives, the more we will want to see the time of our lives devoted exclusively to the pursuit of Christ, His Kingdom, and His righteousness.

But as we improve the way we use our time in the pursuit of King Jesus, we must make sure that we are following Him according to His Word, and not merely doing whatever we think is best in seeking and serving the Lord. This was Peter's problem. He was all about Jesus being Messiah and King, and he eagerly anticipated the coming of the Lord's Kingdom and glory.

But Peter did not concur with Jesus' method. Jesus had just explained that He was going to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again on the third day. Peter considered that tactic unsavory and unwise, and he insisted, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!"

As if he had a better idea? His way of thinking about the coming of God's Kingdom was better than the King's?

...and ours

And what about when it comes to the detailed work that goes into God's Kingdom coming on earth as it is in heaven today? Are we following the plan and teaching of the Lord? Or are we depending on our own good ideas and clever schemes to carry out the Lord's agenda?

These days, I believe, we may be guilty of standing in Jesus' way rather than following behind Him. The Scriptures speak clearly and sufficiently about all the disciplines we must take up in seeking the Kingdom and righteousness of God. They guide us in understanding the *spiritual* disciplines essential for setting the saw of our soul to cut straight and true. They instruct us in the *relational* disciplines designed to promote justice and neighbor love. The Scriptures help us to discern, understand, and prosecute the *work* each of us has been given to do in seeking the Kingdom. They are sufficient to direct our *communal* disciplines – worship, fellowship, mission, and "one-anothering." And the Scriptures can equip us with those *provisional* disciplines necessary for dealing with the temptations, trials, and setbacks that come to us from time to time.

If we, like Peter, think we know better than King Jesus how any of these areas of life should be organized and conducted, then we are standing in Jesus' way rather than following in His tracks, and we can expect not to be blessed but rebuked, all our good intentions and best efforts notwithstanding.

Thinking with the mind of Christ

Peter's offense was to seek to do the work of God in a manner other than according to the Word of God. The Lord had just told Peter what was going to transpire, but that did not seem reasonable to Peter. Although clearly well-meaning in wishing to propose another course, Peter actually became an instrument of Satan by thinking a man's way rather than according to the Word of God. He needed to "get behind" Jesus and follow Him in faith, nothing doubting.

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In the same way, we must discipline our minds in all things to submit to the Word of God. We have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16), and we are commanded to let His mind hold sway in all our thinking (Phil. 2.5). What the Scripture teaches concerning the disciplined life may not always seem the reasonable thing to do – because we cannot square its teaching with our experience or logic – but it is always the Word of God. Our duty is to get behind it and order all our steps accordingly.

We must learn to think with the mind of Christ, and not our own best ideas. This is especially true with respect to the disciplines with which we fill the time of our lives and direct our bodies in seeking the Lord and His Kingdom. The Word of God speaks plainly and sufficiently about every area of life and all the disciplines necessary for following Jesus and growing in Him. We must be willing to shelter in the Scriptures and find all our protection, nurture, counsel, guidance, and power in the living Word of God in all things (Ps. 12; 2 Tim. 3.5-17).

For whenever we think we know better than the Lord how to do the work He's appointed to us, or to realize the full and abundant life He offers, then we'll find ourselves, like Peter, more agents of the enemies of Christ than followers in His way.

For reflection or discussion

1. Does T. M. mean that Christians shouldn't use their heads *at all*? What *does* he mean?
2. How might you be able to tell when you were beginning to get in Jesus' way rather than stand behind and follow Him?
3. Think of Jesus' confrontation with Peter. Do Christians have any responsibility like this toward one another? Explain.
4. T. M. mentions five different kinds of disciplines. How would you explain each of these to a new believer? Are you pursuing Christ's disciplines in each of these areas?
5. What would you suggest as some of the keys to thinking with the mind of Christ?

Next steps: What's involved in learning to think with the mind of Christ? Talk with some Christian friends about this question. How can you help and encourage one another to be followers of Christ rather than obstacles in His path?

Prayer:

4 Jesus' Agenda

"I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16.18

The centrality of the church

It's clear that, during His lifetime, Jesus was not going to accomplish the agenda He declared before His disciples outside of Caesarea-Philippi that day. In fact, He was on His way to Jerusalem, where His all-too-brief earthly sojourn would be cut short, He would rise from the dead, and, after forty days, He would return to heaven, to take His seat at the Father's right hand.

So just when was Jesus planning to "build My church", if not during the time of His incarnation? The answer is obvious: Throughout all the rest of time.

This is why Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples. Disciples make up the members of Christ's Body, the Church. This is why Jesus and the Father poured out the Spirit, so that He might cobble disciples together into a holy temple unto the Lord (Eph. 2.19-22). This is why the Lord gave His Word to His Apostles, so that we might know how to do the work of making disciples and building local churches (1 Tim. 3.15). And this is why churches have pastors and teachers – for the equipping of the saints for works of ministry, unto the building-up of the local church as the Body of Christ (Eph. 4.11-16).

Kingdom signs and outposts

Local churches are signs and outposts of the Kingdom of God, the reign of King Jesus in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (1 Pet. 2.9, 10; Rom. 14.17, 18). In local churches the disciples of Christ gather to worship, become equipped, and serve one another and the world with the Good News of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom comes to expression in local congregations, where believers, growing in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Lord, refract the reality of His resurrection life to a world of darkness and uncertainty. And *from* the church believers go into their personal arenas of influence and ministry to fill the world with Jesus through their words and deeds (2 Cor. 10.13-18; Eph. 4.8-10).

Thus Jesus intends the local church to *sign* the Kingdom to the world – like a billboard, to advertise its reality, like a road sign to point the way into the Kingdom, and like a translator of mysteries to the deaf, explaining and illustrating and reaching the imaginations of the lost with the promise of forgiveness, life, hope, purpose, and glory.

And the church is an *outpost* of the Kingdom because Kingdom citizens draw from their churches the resources and perspective they will need to fulfill their callings as ambassadors of the Kingdom to and in the lost world.

No wonder Jesus made building His Church the center-piece of His agenda! Enthroned at the Father's right hand, Jesus is building His Church like a great prism of hope. He shines the light of His truth in all its clarity and brilliance into the Church, there to be separated into polychromatic expressions as varied as the members of the Body and the spheres and niches in which they live, move, and have their being.

Jesus died for the Church; will we live for it?

These days we must seriously consider whether our view of the Church is the same as that of our King. Are we thinking with the mind of Christ about the Church – about *our* church – what it should be, how we should build it, and what its impact should be in our community? Or are we just perpetuating received models of "church" or imitating "successful" churches in the community and around the country? Are we building our churches the way Scripture teaches we should, or are we following our own schemes and great ideas about how to worship, make disciples, and pursue the mission appointed to us?

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The increasing fecklessness of contemporary churches in the face of surging secularism, mammoth materialism, and tsunamic sensuality should lead us to question whether we're following the Lord Jesus in pursuit of His agenda or standing in His way. How much longer will we continue to do the things which are steadily moving the Body of Christ to the margins of culture and society until we raise our heads, smell the malodorous air, and begin to ask what's wrong with this picture?

Jesus said the gates of Hades would not stand against His Church. The "gates" here represent the counsels, schemes, plans, and decisions of the courts of Hell. It's not too difficult to see that, rather than confronting, exposing, negating, and replacing such counsels, many churches have simply given into them, going with the flow of narcissism, materialism, entertainment, and individualism which is pushing our culture and society toward the abyss. As Columbanus observed of the churches in early 7th-century France, our churches today are taking on water, and we're being washed clean of everything distinctly Kingdom-like as the flotsam and jetsam of our age in flight from God settles into our pews, programs, and projects.

Jesus is building His Church. Are we? Have we devoted the time of our lives, and the disciplines that fill that time, to the Lord's agenda? Or are we content simply to pursue our own?

For reflection or discussion

1. What do we mean by saying that building the Church is Christ's agenda? How should His agenda influence or affect ours?
2. How is the local church a *sign* of the Kingdom? In what ways is your own local church a sign like this?
3. Why should we think of local churches as Kingdom "outposts"? What are some things that make them outposts?
4. Do you agree that the contemporary church is "feckless" in the face of advancing secularism? Why or why not?
5. Do you agree that the world has infiltrated churches so much that they're "taking on water? Can you give some examples?

Next steps: How confident are you that your church's leaders are building the Lord's church according to His agenda? Talk with some of them. Ask them to help you understand the Biblical basis for how they're working to build Christ's Church in your church.

Prayer:

5 All Things for Edification

Let all things be done for edification. 1 Corinthians 14.26

The problem in Corinth

The churches in Corinth were in a mess. They had settled into a kind of partisanship that saw groups of them touting the views of one teacher over another, taking their identities from admired leaders, piously scorning and looking down on others, and making a mockery of the oneness of the Body of Christ.

Moreover, they were taking their cues for life as much from the surrounding culture as from the plain teaching of God's Word, and they considered themselves to be really spiritual because they tolerated sinful practices, reveled in boisterous and free-wheeling worship, and practiced the most exotic gifts of the Spirit.

The problem in Corinth was that the churches there were filled with children – infants in Christ (1 Cor. 3.1-3). And one thing most infants have in common is that they tend to think only of their own interests and concerns. Churches organized around the interests, felt needs, and material concerns of their members are not schools for saints, but kindergartens for the coddled. The churches in Corinth had fractured the unity of the Body of Christ in their city, and they were in the process of starving the different congregations by catering to the whining of infants rather than following the agenda of Christ.

They were of little good to themselves and one another, and so had nothing to offer of Good News to the surrounding community.

Refocus

Paul determined to refocus the believers in Corinth by reminding them of the Gospel, directing their minds upward, to where Christ is ruling in glory, and advising them to prepare more carefully for His coming again.

Paul held out the vision of Christ exalted for the Corinthians so that they would begin to get back on *His* agenda and organize their lives accordingly. And he reminded them that they must think not in terms of themselves but of Christ and their fellow believers, and of their lost neighbors in the city of Corinth. They must get their lives in order. They must take up the disciplines that line up with the thinking of Christ and express the indwelling presence of His Word and Spirit (1 Cor. 2.12-16).

And as they do, they must turn their eyes away from themselves and their selfish concerns to think about whatever might conduce to building others up in the Lord. "Let all things be done for edification." Paul's exhortation concerning their worship applies to every area of life. As the Corinthians, duly chided, repentant, and reformed, began to get their lives in order, they would have to discipline themselves to seek the wellbeing of others, both in the churches and beyond.

They would have to make sure, in other words, that the disciplines that filled up the time of their lives were directed at the work of restoration.

Future-oriented

Discipline is not an end in itself. It is a future-oriented activity. Through discipline we bring our bodies into line with our vision of the future – of the good life, as we conceive it. We make our bodies obey what we hope to realize at some future point, and, for the Christian, that future can be summed up in the word "restoration" – the restoring of all things into the excellence and glory of Christ.

Christ has reconciled the world and everything in it to God through His life, death, and resurrection. Now,

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seated at the Father's right hand in glory, He is restoring the world to Him, setting the world right and upright, returning it to that "very good" condition in which it was originally made (Gen. 1.31). Christ is doing this work through His Church, which is both a sign and outpost of His Kingdom, His rule of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The watchwords by which Christians must live within the Body of Christ are words like "grow", "increase", "be transformed", "be renewed", and "restore." We must do all things in life, everything that takes up the time of our lives, for the purposes of Him Who is making all things new (Rev. 21.5).

Thus, as we shake off whatever remnants of infancy still beset us, and begin to press on to maturity in the Lord, we'll want to make certain that the focus of all our disciplines is toward restoration, the restoration of all things for the glory and honor of Jesus Christ. Whether in our own souls, our relationships with others, the work we do, our lives together in community and culture, or in dealing with our trials and struggles, we want to know the newness of Christ, we work for the manifestation of His pleasure and glory, and we will be content only when we and others – and our culture and societies – are being transformed to refract the resurrection life of Jesus more and more.

It is foundational to the work of disciplining our bodies that we want to see improvement, change, newness, and restoration in every activity of word or deed by which we make our way in the world.

For reflection or discussion

1. What are some ways you would expect to see more edification in your own walk with the Lord?
2. What are some ways you are hoping to achieve more edification in your work for the Lord?
3. What do we mean by saying that disciplines are future-oriented?
4. Review T. M.'s comments on the "watchwords by which Christians must live..." Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. In what specific ways is your local church working for restoration in your community?

Next steps: Where would you go in your church to be equipped for restoration such as is discussed in this article? Talk with a pastor or church leader about this question.

Prayer:

6 Excel Still More

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. Philippians 1.9-11

The bane of the status quo

It's fair to say that many church leaders, and probably many Christians, are resigned to a kind of *status quo* Christian faith. They like things the way they are. They don't aspire to much in their walk with the Lord, and they don't invest much effort working for the progress of His Kingdom. They're comfortable in their faith and don't see the need for change. For them, it's enough just to keep things going and be careful not to rock the boat.

Where do people get such stupid ideas?

As we've seen, this kind of thinking does not coincide with the mind of Him Who is making all things new, Who is putting all His enemies under His feet, advancing His Kingdom, building His Church, and bringing the knowledge of the glory of God to light over all the earth. We're thinking with the mind of men, not the mind of Christ, when we settle for the *status quo* as the standard for our walk with and work for the Lord.

Excel still more

The Apostle Paul commanded the believers in Thessalonica to "excel still more" (1 Thess. 4.10 NASB). Believers are called to lives of excellence. As Paul wrote to the Philippians, we must strive to "approve" only things that are *excellent*. Excellence is no friend to the *status quo*.

The sense of excellence is to go beyond, to surpass, or to stand out as superior by comparison. Think of the water Jesus turned to wine in John 2. It wasn't just any old cheap wine, it was the best. Excellence is a quality that applies to all of life. We must approve things that are excellent, and we must take up the disciplined life with a view to pursuing excellence in all things to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul directs our minds toward several expressions of excellence. It's clear from our text that excellence includes, first of all abounding love, that is, an overflow of the love of Christ, issuing like rivers of living water from the lives of those who know Him, at all times, in all situations (Jn. 7.37-39). Such love seeks always to edify others (1 Cor. 8.1), according to all the attributes of love outlined in such passages as 1 Corinthians 13.

Second, Paul indicates that excellence entails "all knowledge" as well, that is, the acquisition of whatever is appropriate or necessary for excellence in any situation. Such ability depends on possessing sufficient knowledge and understanding to be able to diagnose a situation and act in ways appropriate to excellence. Knowledge is gained by study, listening, and paying careful attention to our lives and times (Eph. 5.15-17; 1 Chron. 12.32). We are to seek excellence in all areas of knowledge necessary for serving Christ in our respective callings in life.

Next, Paul says "discernment" or "judgment" is also required for excellence. This may be related to skill in decision-making, making wise and loving choices, and following courses of action in every area of life that meet or exceed expectations. Such discernment comes through practice, based on increasing knowledge motivated by love.

Thus, excellence will also reflect the pure and blameless precepts of the Law of God, for these teach us how to excel in loving God and neighbors, and provide excellent counsel and guidelines for thinking about the

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requirements of love in any situation. The word, “sincere”, speaks to our motives in doing things, that they must not be self-centered but in line with a conscience which is clean and pure before God and men. The Law of God is an important resource for excellence when it comes to a good conscience (Rom. 2.14, 15).

Excellence, thus informed, active, and pure, comes to expression as righteousness reflecting the character, mission, and work of Christ. At some point, it seems, our excellent lives must point others to Jesus, so that they understand that what they are seeing in us is Christ, Who lives in us and through us by His Word and Spirit. All the disciplines we take up in pursuit of excellence must therefore maintain focus on Christ and His agenda, or we will not realize the righteousness excellence demands.

Finally, excellence glorifies God, making known His glory as it may be discovered in any situation or work (1 Cor. 10.31-11.1; Prov. 25.2; Hab. 2.14), and leading to the praise and worship of God. Whenever we act with excellence we bear witness to Him Who is above all things excellent in every way. So it is only right that whatever excellence we manage in life should redound to the excellence and glory of Him Who empowers us for excellence in all things.

The Christian who hopes to settle into a *status quo* relationship with Christ is standing in the Lord’s way and needs to get behind Him and His agenda. We are commanded to approve things that are excellent in every aspect of life, so that in all things we will stand out according to the criteria of excellence before the watching world. Let “excellence in all things” be another watchword and standard as we take up the disciplined life in following the Lord Jesus Christ.

For reflection or discussion

1. How would you define “excellence”? Relate this to areas of your daily walk with and work for the Lord.
2. Do you agree that many Christians are resigned to a kind of *status quo* faith? Why or why not?
3. What are some things that contribute to excellence? How are you pursuing these things in your own life?
4. What are the alternatives to pursuing excellence in life? Are these worthy of the price Jesus paid in saving us? Why or why not?
5. How might you be able to tell if you were beginning to settle into a *status quo* walk with the Lord? What should you do then?

Next steps: Imagine a spectrum with “status quo” at one end (point 1, let’s say) and “excellence” at the other end (point 10). Where would you place yourself on that spectrum in a general sense? In the various arenas of your life? Talk with a Christian friend about this exercise.

Prayer:

7 Ruled for Life

You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops. Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.

- 2 Timothy 2.3-7

Monastic life: ruled for revival

Christianity in Ireland during the 6th-9th centuries was organized primarily around a monastic model. Each monastery was like a small community, with the religious living within the compound and a community of lay people of various trades living in the outlying areas. Monasteries were referred to as “foundations” because, in many important ways, they provided the base on which revival, renewal, and awakening were brought to lost and straying people and their cultures.

Medieval monks served the people – teaching, shepherding, helping with a wide range of tasks – and the people helped with the support of the monks, just as Paul outlined in our text for today, as well as in 1 Corinthians 9 and Galatians 6. The monks embraced a raft of disciplines designed to serve the community at large, and the community took up disciplines that allowed the whole “foundation” to grow and to reach out to new places and peoples.

This symbiosis of monastic community life generated and sustained a movement of revival that lasted for nearly four centuries and brought renewal and awakening throughout Ireland, Scotland, and much of Europe.

Rules of discipline

Monasticism was a demanding way of life, particularly for the religious, who were often subject to persecution, deprivation, and intense spiritual warfare. Monks, pastors, missionaries, and other religious leaders found strength and consistency in living according to “rules” that outlined the life of faith they pursued.

A rule of disciplines was rather like a constitution or covenant that defined the terms whereby leaders would live and work together in a monastic community. The great benefit of having such a rule was that it ensured that all who chose to live under it – and lay people frequently took up modified versions of the rule of their community – would have a basis to encourage and assist one another in the work of the Kingdom.

These written monastic rules provided focus, consistency, and standards to guide the lives and work of all who accepted the challenge of living under them. They included disciplines to guide believers in their spiritual lives, relationships, and work. These rules helped monks organize their time, assess their daily lives, and encourage one another in their common mission.

I think it’s safe to say the Celtic Revival, that great movement of God’s Spirit that lasted for nearly four centuries between 430 and 800 AD, would not have had near the power and effects it did without those monastic rules.

A rule of disciplines?

A rule of disciplines can play an important role in promoting growth in the Lord and greater effectiveness in serving Him. Just as soldiers and athletes must abide by certain rules, and farmers must practice all the disciplines necessary for ensuring a good crop, so those who serve Christ can strengthen themselves in love

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for Him and for their neighbors by entering into a covenant with the Lord and a few soul friends to pursue a certain path of discipline.

We all live by rules anyway; each of us has his own disciplines, routines, and ways of doing things that define the way we use our time each day. Most of these “rules” are unwritten, and that means they may be neither as complete nor as helpful as we need. It can be difficult to make needed adjustments when we can’t identify the specific area or practice that needs adjusting.

The better we understand and practice the disciplines that help us to make the most of the time God gives us, the more we can expect to know full and abundant life in the Lord. This is what Paul means by instructing us to live by proper rules and make the most of the time (Eph. 5.15-17).

Is your life, disciplined as it is, disciplined as *properly* and as *beneficially* as it might be? Why not make some more specific commitments and take up a more clearly focused and carefully organized path for following the Lord and serving Him? Write out your personal rule of disciplines; then find a soul friend to help you stay the course in your rule, so that you can know more of the full and abundant life Christ has in store for you.

Solomon reminds us, “Whoever *has* no rule over his own spirit/*Is like* a city broken down, without walls” (Prov. 25.28). If we rule our souls well, our souls will rule our bodies and lives for the glory of Him Who rules all things.

For reflection or discussion

1. Do you agree that writing out a rule of disciplines might be a good idea? Why or why not?
2. How can we hope to focus, improve, and assess our practice of disciplines if we don’t have a written plan of disciplines, or if we don’t share that plan with a soul friend?
3. Where would you start to beginning writing up a personal rule of disciplines?
4. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study?
5. How are you planning to incorporate that lesson into your walk with and work for the Lord?

Next steps: If you were to write out a “rule of disciple” that described your disciplined life at this time, what would it include? Where might you make improvements? Share your thoughts about this with a Christian friend.

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at www.ailbe.org to learn more.

We hope you found this study helpful. If so, please consider making a gift to The Fellowship. You can contribute to our ministry by using the donate button at the website, or by sending your gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, 19 Tyler Dr., Essex Junction, VT 05452.

Thank you.