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*Will you seek to serve
the people with
energy, intelligence,
imagination, and
love?*

(G-14.0207h)

*See Study Guide,
page 68.*

Excellence

by Earl F. Palmer

How do you feel about this question and how would you answer it if someone asked you to make this as a promise: *Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?* That question is one of the nine questions asked of Presbyterian elders, deacons and pastors at the time of their ordination. It is a promise about excellence as a goal for ministry.

It is a vow not unlike the ancient Hippocratic oath that a physician makes “to do good and not to do harm” in the practice of medicine. An attorney admitted to the bar takes an oath to uphold the law as an officer of the court and to offer each client competent representation in a court of law. Both are promises to care about people and, within the mandate of a particular calling, to pursue excellence. The church is asking its servants to promise to work hard toward the goal of excellence in their unique ministries as a future elder, deacon or pastor and to love the people.

Should Christians make such vows, and is this one healthy in its wording and in its spirit? I believe that if we add the words “trusting in the grace of God” to the vow, then the answer to these questions is “yes,” but we need to think about what it is that such vows as these will mean if we take them seriously.

Vows themselves like all promises and commitment statements have a mixed track record; some are good and some are not. Religious and ideological dedication that causes men and women to make vows create many stories that are heartwarming and inspirational, but almost as many that are cruel and destructive. Vows of faithful love in relationship bring the joyous fulfillment of marriage, but there are vows that highly committed people make that are also the cause of harm. The book of Acts (23:12-25) tells of a vow made by 40 fierce men that they would neither eat nor drink until the Apostle Paul was murdered by them. They actually planned and scheduled the exact time for an ambush, but a Roman tribune spoiled their plans and by surprise the Roman official transported Paul under heavy military

guard from Jerusalem to Caesarea. The book of Acts does not tell if these conspirator vow-makers actually died of starvation because of their solemn vow, but we know that they did not succeed in murdering Paul.

The fact that people are highly committed to promises they make is not in itself, therefore, a useful test of the validity and rightness of their promise. Many commitments both secular and religious are not good for the maker of the vow or for those who suffer as a result of the vow. Excellence in and of itself is not a useful validating principle either, because excellence in the service of evil is still evil; it is just efficient evil and all the more frightening because of its skill.

For a Christian every vow must be tested just as every skill must be tested by the standard that is beyond myself and ourselves. We need a test that asks two fundamental questions: (1) What is the goal of my vow to excellence? Is my goal faithful to the will of God? Is the goal a Christian goal? (2) What are the ways in which I propose to reach my goal? Are the means that make the goal come into being faithful to the will of God? Do I pursue my goal "christianly"?

With those questions I must, as a believer in Jesus Christ, submit every discipleship vow and the journey that goes with the vow to the healthy discipline of the witness of the Bible: the Old Testament in anticipation and the New Testament in witness as they each point to the living center of biblical faith which is God speaking for himself in his son, Jesus Christ. Both the law and the gospel together become the check and balance as well as the hearty encouragement of Christian discipleship *goals* and the Christian discipleship *journey*.

Every grand vision and the collection of incremental, procedural small steps that become the means toward the grand vision need to be continually tested by the biblical witness and by the confessions of the church throughout the ages, as these historic confessions act as guide maps alongside of Scripture.

Each of us as individual Christians must in the end stand up and make our own decisions about the vows we make. Each of us is also responsible for the practical steps and means we take on to achieve those vows. No one can choose a life goal on behalf of my life, just as no one can live my daily life for me. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his friend E. Bethge that when he was a student at the University of Berlin he remembered a debate between two theologians about the question of "ends" and "means" and the importance of each. The question was whether in great historic movements the grand primary goals of a movement were the most important clue to a movement or was it the smaller secondary goals that were the most important. Bonhoeffer observed that when he was a student he was certain that it was the former but now as a somewhat older man writing from prison he knew that it was the latter. Secondary goals which are the means we use to achieve our larger goals outlast the primary goals, because they shape what we really are on a day-by-day basis. Grand visions

of justice may be easier to endorse than are the daily challenges that a man or woman must act upon at work or at home. It is easier to praise the Bible's authority than it is to follow the Bible's authority.

The New Testament calls believers to make promises that aim our discipleship toward excellence in both grand vision and daily walk. Because of the realism of the discipleship challenges to believers in the New Testament, the goals and the practical patterns of daily behavior are always united. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' ... but those who do the will of my Father." These are Jesus' discipleship words to us in the Sermon on the Mount, and they provide the context of discipleship teaching throughout the New Testament. Jesus has brought together the large vision and the particular separate steps.

Two case studies in the New Testament show us the call to excellence as a part of discipleship: the book of Hebrews (chapter 12) and the book of Philippians (chapter 1). Listen to Paul as he expresses his goals writ large and writ small:

"... as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel ..." (Philippians 1: 20-27).

Paul realizes that his own ministry is needed here and now and he aims for an openness ("full courage" is the RSV translation) as he lives out his discipleship. He has both his life and his death in his mind at the same moment and he leaves each to the shepherding care of his Lord. He seeks a discipleship journey in which the whole of his life is lived in congruence to the gospel.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews challenges believers to run the race that is our unique race. We will need to do the hard work of prioritizing what weights we need to let go of, and repent of the sins that oppressively close in on our lives. The challenge is thoroughgoing and calls us to learn how to face up to lameness and then to learn

how to walk on a straight path. But all of the challenges in this text (Hebrews 12:1-3) as in Paul's Philippians text are possible because of the redeeming and strengthening grace of Christ himself. He is the Redeemer, we are not, nor are we expected to be, and this good news makes the challenge an adventure that is realistic and possible.

I believe every Christian should aim for excellence in our unique and particular pathways of servanthood so that our servanthood may be lived to the glory of God. Excellence is a sound objective for our life work so that we feel good about our hands and our heads; every human being needs to know that he or she is good at something. What we do is not the source of our belovedness, because we are loved by God earlier than we can remember and before we have done anything, and we are loved after our doing is completed. We are even loved while we are asleep. But our belovedness has never been a Christian argument against excellence. Belovedness stirs up motivation by setting us free from the dreadful and suffocating fear of failure, as if my failure would cancel out God's love. Therefore, because of grace I take risks and without risks there is rarely excellence. I am willing to try a task when I feel the encouragement of the cloud of witnesses and when I can look to the Lord, who is the pioneer and fulfillment of the race.

I'm in favor of the question about excellence and I want to promise it, but I'll need God's grace to be the source and to be the purifier of my motivations. I'll need his grace to empower me each day on the journey, and that is why in my heart I'll add six more words, in no way to weaken the promise but to make it possible: "Trusting in the grace of God."