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VOCATIONAL CERTAINTY: A MEASURE OF OUR FAITHFULNESS TO GOD'S AGENDA

My childhood was peppered with unpleasant memories of the Cold War, so when I was invited to visit the Soviet Union I felt like I was going to visit the bully who had tormented me at school. To say the least, I had no vision for Russia. I had flatly turned down the first invitation, trying to stay focused on writing a book that was nearing deadline. I did not want to be disturbed by a long trip without a clear objective, but several of God's helpers kept insisting, and I finally relented. I had no idea that the Lord would use a two-week stint as a "citizen diplomat" evaluating opportunities for humanitarian initiatives to entangle my heart in His plan for my life.

So there I was seven years later at the Healthy World Festival, standing next to the Health Minister of St. Petersburg, as we jointly announced the winners of Russia's first awards for Quality and Professionalism in Health Care. By that time, I had been blessed to participate in several "firsts" and had linked up with reformers and visionaries on many important projects. I had served on international forums, lectured at City Hall and other historic venues, consulted with governors and diplomats, and distributed dozens of tons of humanitarian medicines and supplies. All of these activities were providing access to men so that I could fulfill God's purposes. I knew

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His plan was working because I had also been privileged to perform the famous Russian “cut through.” Very few westerners had ever attempted it, and I had done it twice and lived to tell about it.

The cut through begins in a steamy Russian sauna, where you remain until your body screams for cold. Then you dash out of the sauna onto the frozen lake and into the hole *cut through* the ice. You remain in the frigid water until your body screams for warmth, and then return to the sauna. This was not an exercise for the novice or the reckless. Done without the proper strategy and coaching, it could easily kill you. But it was a marvelous Siberian health regimen.

Being invited to participate in the cut through was the most telling evidence of the success of my mission. It required trust between the coach and participant that came only after a relationship was proven. I had to trust the judgment of my coach and he had to trust me to follow his direction, because he was taking on a great responsibility. My coach had been the man who was now the Minister of Health. As we handed out plaques and cash awards to the appreciative physicians and scientists, I was savoring the real fruit of my work—the relationships that God had allowed me to establish.

When I first visited Russia, the Lord drew my attention to the health care sector. It was sadly lacking and at least forty years behind western standards. The deteriorating conditions and shortage of medicines created many opportunities for demonstrating God’s mercy and building relationships at a very personal level. My goal was to help men fulfill God’s agenda for their lives at home and at work. As I worked with them on projects and gained their trust, they often asked me to explain the foundational values of my methods. It was then that I got to fulfill the heart of my calling.

Vocational certainty is a measure of our faithfulness to God’s agenda. It begins when we realize the Lord has a purpose for our labor, and that our pursuit of a particular occupation, business, profession, or project has significance that extends beyond our career. Proverbs 29:18 (NAS) says, “Where there is no vision (revelation) the people are unrestrained (neglected or out of control), but happy is he who keeps the law.” The implication is that vision or “revelation” is needed

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for knowing and obeying the will of God. Men who know the will of God and pursue it are happy. Those who do not are left to pursue their own will, wasting time and resources in activities that may be destructive to themselves as well as those who follow them.

When we are seriously trying to follow Christ, we can depend upon Him to provide the direction we need on His schedule. Our self-imposed deadline may be extended by days, weeks, months, or even years, while He is accomplishing other purposes in our lives. I have learned through my mistakes not to press forward in my own agenda, but to wait for God's plan to become clearer. The surest path to success is to wait for the Lord to give us wisdom about what might be wrong with our ideas or perceptions. Then, He can accomplish whatever He desires both *in* and *through* us.

Wisdom from God "is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy" (James 3:17). To be sure that we are pursuing the right agenda, we should judge the validity of our vision by answering each of the following questions:

Do I have a sense of intellectual integrity about this idea? Are the thoughts and motives that are energizing me pure before God? Are my plans really clear? Do my gifts and talents naturally support what I am considering?

Do I have a clear moral conscience about this plan? Am I at peace, and are the steps I have taken producing peace in me? Or, do I really feel uneasy, but have pushed on because I want or need something more than I should?

Am I being faithful to the task? Are my actions reasonable when I take steps to fulfill my objective, or do I find myself becoming unreasonably aggressive? Am I forcing things to happen as opposed to gently and carefully stewarding my responsibilities?

Am I making a reasonable judgment? Is my plan reasonable? Does it pass the test of common sense, or am I rationalizing facts and events. When I consider giving up, do I feel peaceful and free, and exhibit the "fruit" of God's Spirit, or do I feel angry and desperate? Is there any wavering within me, or hypocrisy in what I am considering? Am I really speaking truth to myself, or is there conflict in my heart?

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These are difficult questions, but they must be answered or a man could find himself making a very bad decision. And, he may discover too late that the vision he has is wrong for him.

This almost happened to me when I was invited to Venezuela by one of the leading management institutes to teach a seminar for a small group of industrial leaders. A mutual friend had recommended me, and the president of the institute called personally to make the arrangements. He had provided management seminars to government and industry for over 20 years and was well respected. To be honest, it turned my head a little bit to be pursued by them. It would be a high-level, sophisticated audience with lots of perks and a nice fee. So I accepted their invitation and made the trip. My seminar was very well received and they invited me back, this time to speak to the top 25 executives of one of the world's largest oil companies. I was really excited because I considered this to be the blessing of the Lord. I had been doing consulting work and training as a "tent making" activity, using my business and management skills to support my work in ministry. I enjoyed working with ministries and nonprofit groups, and I usually had a special grace upon me when I met with them. But this was an opportunity to work in a serious business environment, so I accepted the invitation and joyfully began to prepare.

When I arrived, I received royal treatment. The client had spared no expense on the amenities. We met at a luxurious seaside resort and the training room was extraordinary. There was simultaneous translation and the participants included all of the top level vice-presidents. They were eager to hear what I had to say because of some very specific management failures they had experienced. We were using real case studies from their business and were clearly tracking with one another. By the second day, we had discovered crucial errors in the way they made some product development decisions that had cost them tens of millions of dollars. I was happy to be doing so well, and they were obviously satisfied with what I was teaching them. During one of the breaks, the president of the institute took me aside and said with a big smile, "I have very good news. They want to sign you to a major consulting agreement. You will be able to name your price."

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After the break, I had trouble keeping my mind on the topic for the hour. I knew that this giant oil company routinely signed seven figure deals with consultants. I was imagining having the resources to provide them with the very best service. I could also imagine making enough money on this deal to support my ministry for years to come. The situation looked like a winner and my head was spinning with excitement at the vision that was unfolding. Suddenly, I became aware of being cold, really cold, like an iceberg. I asked someone to check the setting of the air conditioner and continued teaching. I managed to get through the end of the day and retreated to my room to rest and think about the great possibilities that were before me.

When I got to my room, I felt cold, confused, and weak. I began to wonder if something might be wrong with me physically. I began to pray. "Lord, what's wrong with me?" Then, to my surprise I said, "Have I done something wrong?" I was immediately convicted in my heart that I had made a serious mistake. I asked again. "What is it Lord? What have I done?" Then, in a still and quiet voice, He said this to me. "I did not call you to save the oil industry in Venezuela." I was shocked and stunned, but I knew instantly what He meant. Teaching my seminar and doing an honest day's work was tent making. The kind of vision I had for a consulting contract would be more like building a tent factory. It was a major mission that would require a comprehensive relationship with the client, and a significant change in the way I spent my time and energy. There was really nothing wrong with the plan I had in mind; it was just wrong for me.

It was an important lesson for me to see how much my soul wanted that contract and how effortlessly I had envisioned an agenda. I spent considerable time that evening honestly reviewing my circumstances and repenting. As soon as I began repenting, the warmth returned to my body and I felt normal again. As I continued praying, God assured me that He had a better plan for my life. I didn't know how to stop what I had started, so I asked the Lord to help me disentangle myself without causing my host (and agent) any embarrassment. He did. The oil company suddenly discontinued the discussions. They never gave a reason and my host was stupefied.

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Make Sure of Your Calling and Vision

A calling is the confirming voice of the Lord when He speaks to our heart about how He wants us to occupy ourselves. Vision is the unfolding revelation He gives us so that we can find and fulfill the agenda that supports the calling. While some people have a sense of the Lord's calling early in life, others are into or beyond mid-life before it becomes clear to them. Often it is necessary to complete a maturing process so that we can believe and obey Him. But whether it comes early or late in life, it is always a great challenge to our faith to accurately respond to a holy mandate.

Proverbs 20:25 (NAS) provides some very important advice. It says, "It is a snare for a man to say rashly 'It is holy!' and after the vows to make inquiry." When a man prematurely declares that he is sure of his calling or vision, he loses his objectivity. From that point forward, he will tend to have a biased viewpoint on every piece of information he considers. If his vision is inaccurate or wrong for him, he will become less able to fully comprehend God's purposes. A lot of thinking, praying, research, and evaluating should take place before a calling or vision is declared "holy," so that we are not deceived by our own enthusiasm or desires.

People who experience failed visions are often motivated by "misplaced zeal." When sincere zeal for God connects with idealism or false doctrine and is channeled into the wrong idea, it can produce heartbreaking results. It happens to young and old alike, and is usually the result of replacing a relationship *with* God by activities *for* God. Romans 10:2-3 (NAS) warns us about the danger of having "a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge" and that "not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish [our] own, [we do] not subject [ourselves] to the righteousness of God." A simple lack of knowledge about God and His ways can lead a person into error in his faith, his vision, or both. It is easier than you might think for a man to misplace his zeal for God in a self-constructed idea.

In the same way that the secular world questions a man's "vision" if he does not press early and often for the fulfillment of his ideas, the institutional church often questions a man's faith, if he has no "vision" for his life or is hesitant to pursue it. In effect, we are

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sometimes taunted to take presumptive action by people who do not respect prudence. Personally, I would much rather have someone question my lack of vision or faith before I succeed, than to have them question my wisdom after I have failed.

The most difficult discipline in analyzing our ideas is a simple one. When research or counsel shows us that an idea lacks reliability, we must be willing to humble ourselves and discard it. Proverbs 14:16 (NAS) says, "A wise man is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is arrogant and careless." I learned a very important lesson about this when I narrowly avoided what could have been an organizational disaster. I had organized a project and found the funding to underwrite its completion, only to discover that parts of it were very vulnerable to failure. In fact, the things I had discovered brought the entire vision into question. I was very troubled that I had allowed myself to get so far into its development without being more certain of the facts.

As I evaluated the individual processes of our project, I found no way around the problems. Although I had not spent very much money, I had risked an enormous amount of credibility. I had no choice but to call together the board of directors I was serving and explain the whole situation to them. I knew I had done the right thing in coming to them, but I felt terribly stupid and embarrassed. After some agonizing analysis, they agreed with me that our plans were not viable and should be scrapped. I apologized to them over and over again for not having discovered the problem sooner. I also explained how the Lord had shown me that I had been so zealous for the outcome that I had overlooked or rationalized some very subtle, yet significant factors in the project.

One of the older and more experienced men on the board put it all into perspective for me. "I want to thank you for having the courage to come to us," he said. "I know this has been difficult for you. What you have shown us are facts that only surfaced because you were faithful and kept testing what you were doing. I know you feel embarrassed and that you're worried we won't trust you as we did before. As for me, I will trust you even more. You could have used our approval as your defense, kept pushing forward on this project, and created a real mess, but you didn't. In my opinion, you

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have been found faithful and your stewardship is not in question. Thank God you stopped us when you did.” Instead of shame, I received praise. Proverbs 12:8 (NAS) tells us, “A man will be praised according to his insight, but one of perverse mind will be despised.” Had I pressed foolishly ahead, I am certain these men would have eventually said some very different things about me.

The calling of a reliable man is a calling to faithfulness, so he must be prepared to face crisis and bring correction to his plans. Habakkuk 2:1 (NAS) says, “I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved.” As an idea develops, it is quite natural for enthusiasm and energy to be born. In fact, without the energy that real vision brings, not much would ever get accomplished. At the same time, a man must exhibit a sense of patience and self-restraint because there are commonly restarts, corrections, modifications, obstacles, and shortfalls. It is during these challenging moments that he must have a strong enough grip on the facts and his own emotions to remain stable, and a loose enough hold on the circumstances to receive guidance or correction.

Patience is not only a virtue; it is a fruit of God’s Spirit working within us (Galatians 5:22). Patience is also the way we demonstrate our faith in God as we wait hopefully for troubles to work themselves out. When things are slow in coming, we can take comfort in the words of Habakkuk 2:3-4 (NAS), which remind us that even if “the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay. Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith.”

I have been blessed to have God as my majority partner in many projects. I have also experienced what it’s like when His approval was wrongly presumed. The anguish of laboring without the Lord’s full approval and support has benefited me greatly. Among other things, it has made me much less vulnerable to the mystique of a vision and more concerned about proving its reliability. That requires prayerful research into whether or not our vision is right for us and the people it is intended to serve, what resources will be required, and how it will be accomplished. In chapter two, we will explore

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how to thoroughly test an idea, using “work-process analysis” (WPA) before we declare it holy.

Commit to Personal Excellence

Success at work greatly depends upon a man’s ability to perform with excellence and fulfill his promises to a customer or employer. It is also people’s perception of our skill that facilitates God’s strategic purposes. As Proverbs 22:29 says, “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.” But, too often, a man’s inspiration lacks the planning and self discipline required to be successful. Proverbs 24:3 (TLB) tells us that “any enterprise is built by wise planning, becomes strong through common sense, and profits wonderfully by keeping abreast of the facts.” Nowhere is this more important than in our personal development. Our calling to any occupation or vision includes the responsibility to prepare ourselves spiritually, mentally, and physically so that we can faithfully complete the agenda God has for us. This is a commitment that will invoke the power and favor of God when we most need it.

A good example of this is found in the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel 3). Because God saved them from death in a fiery furnace and allowed them to walk around in it unharmed, they are easy to remember. The furnace was so hot that the people who threw them in were killed just by getting close to it, yet not a hair on their heads was singed. It is a great story of God’s intervention and grace. But just as astounding is the part you rarely hear referenced. Their response to Nebuchadnezzar’s challenge is riveting. The king said to them,

“Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready, at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery and bagpipe and all kinds of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, very well. But if you will not worship, you will immediately be cast into the midst of a

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furnace of blazing fire; and what god is there who can deliver you out of my hands?” Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. *But even if He does not*, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.” (Daniel 3:14-18 NAS)

With these powerful words, “But even if He does not,” these three young men had made an unconditional commitment to the Lord even to the point of accepting what would clearly have been an unfair death. I often hear people lamenting what they see as inequities between themselves and a prosperous sinner. I don’t believe there is any demonic strategy more effectively used against men than this one. When we have been deceived into questioning the Lord’s fairness or faithfulness, our commitment to obey Him becomes conditional, and our faith can then be systematically undermined. What we do for the Lord should be done because of His love for us, our faith in His character, and the respect He deserves as our Creator. This is a motivation that will sustain us through the disciplines of the Lord and the temptations of the devil. As Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 8:12 (NAS), “Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.”

In 3 John 1:2 (NAS) the Apostle John said: “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.” The Greek word translated ‘prosper’ means to grant a prosperous and expeditious journey; to grant success in reaching your goal; to cause to prosper; or figuratively, to succeed in business affairs. But this was a prayer of conditional blessing. John knew that prosperity without discipline and self-restraint is bad for both the body and the soul, so he linked his prayer of blessing to the condition of each man’s soul. An expanded and more literal

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translation might be: Beloved, I pray that in all respects God would grant to you a prosperous journey through life and bless you with success at home and at work, along with good health, in proportion to and in the same measure that your soul prospers in learning and obeying His ways. The man who prospers in the business world without the discipline of the Lord prospers as a spiritual orphan and puts his soul at risk. In Matthew 16:24-26 (NAS) Jesus said to His disciples,

If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

So a person who is under the blessing of God's favor should be willing to link and limit his progress at work to his fulfillment of God's agenda. That Greek word for prosper is "euodoo" (#2137). If you incorrectly pronounce it *yoo-doo*, it will help you remember an important lesson. When *you do* something to fulfill God's calling or agenda, He blesses it and grants you a successful and prosperous journey.

Early in my ministry, I was invited to the Central American hideaway of a man who I had helped get started in his walk with Christ. Bill had been a powerful government official who had retired and turned his attention to business. Twice each year he invited a group of colleagues to his ranch to party, and of course, do some business. They were tough, experienced businessmen who came from around the world to enjoy the privilege of being his guest and making deals. They were building airports and skyscrapers, and buying and selling resources like a monopoly game.

To my surprise, they were not only willing to listen to me and participate in discussions about faith, they were eager to share some of their questions and concerns with someone that Bill trusted. Our discussions went on well into the night and the next morning. I did

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not expect to be received so openly and was joyfully exhausted when I finally dropped into my bed. The previous day's travel, the long hours of discussion, and the steamy jungle heat were taking their toll. It seemed like I had slept only a few minutes when I was jolted awake by Bill's not-so-gentle knock on my door, rousing me out for a private morning hike through the jungle.

As he pressed ahead of me, hacking his way through the deep undergrowth, I struggled to keep up. I was panting for breath, soaked in sweat, and falling badly behind in only a few minutes. I didn't want to lose any opportunity to minister to Bill, so I muttered a prayer of desperation, asking the Lord to help me keep up and not embarrass myself. With a burst of strength, I sprinted to catch up and was able to spend some quality time that might otherwise have been lost. On the way back to the ranch house the Lord spoke to my heart about my inadequacy. "If you are going to do the things I want, you are going to have to get in shape and take better care of yourself." I was nearly too weak to perform under the stress of this simple mission, and the truth of it scared me. As Solomon said in Proverbs 24:10, "If you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength!" I decided right then and there to do whatever it took to faithfully serve the Lord. I didn't know it at the time, but this was an important milestone on my journey toward becoming a reliable man. It was one of many layers of self-denial and discipline that the Lord would extract from my soul.

When I got home, I worked out a schedule of exercise which I began, improved, and have ultimately stuck with. Since then I have had the Lord challenge me spiritually, mentally and physically on too many subjects to list here. Each time it was a matter of what I had to give up or do better to be able to fulfill His calling and agenda. As the Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:12, "Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything." I had to give up a lot of things that other people were doing, not because they were evil or wasteful, but because I learned that to be successful at home and at work, I could not give myself to just any activity.

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One night when I was out jogging the Lord spoke to me and said, “I am going to help you get credentials.” I wasn’t sure at the time what that meant, but it sounded really good. I had no idea what credentials I would need or how much work it would take to get them, although I had long desired to complete my education. The more I prayed about it, the more I felt like God was making a way for me to return to college. I began to research and pray about what courses I might take and how they would benefit me in pursuing God’s agenda for my life. It was only a few months before I had a plan and re-entered college to complete my formal education. All along the way, the Lord kept adding things to my “to-do” list until I had a variety of well-coordinated credentials and experiences that perfectly complemented my talents and the agenda God had for me.

Keeping all of that going while I worked full-time, took care of my family, and became more heavily involved in ministry, would have been physically impossible if I had not made a commitment to get in shape way back in that Central American jungle. It was one of many decisions to improve that have invoked God’s blessing on my journey. All of our work is a stewardship in Christ and it is our responsibility, and a great joy, to discover God’s plan and pursue it with excellence. As Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 9:10 (NLT), “Whatever you do, do well. For when you go to the grave, there will be no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom.”

Develop the Skills to Manage Processes

Almost all occupations can be reduced to a simple business transaction. One person has knowledge, skill, time, a product, service, or some other valuable asset that he wants to sell or otherwise employ. Through personal contact, advertising, or other communications, he seeks those who want what he has. When they find each other they agree to exchange something of value, usually money, for what is needed. This basic transaction has been the same for thousands of years. The only things that change are the technologies that enhance how well we do it. One example is “Quality Management,” (QM) which was pioneered by W. Edwards Deming and taken to the masses by Philip Crosby. It is an

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educational technology that teaches us how to manage processes no matter what products or services they produce.

I was fortunate to have grown up in the middle of the “space race.” My dad, relatives, neighbors, and most of my friends worked at the Kennedy Space Center. We were a community of technicians, engineers, computer programmers, and scientists who understood the benefits of process management and were trained to respond to its demands. I worked in the Apollo program as a research engineer on the spacecraft launch team, and later as a simulation engineer in flight-crew training. Everything we did was evaluated against the requirements for flying the spacecraft safely and preparing every astronaut to perform his part of the mission successfully. Those were the golden years of aerospace and I could not have had better opportunities to learn and apply the principles of process management.

I participated in many great moments, like the Apollo 11 moon landing and the Apollo 13 recovery. But, like many, my engineering career came to an abrupt end with program cuts that sent thousands of us scurrying for jobs in the private sector. This was an enlightening experience for most of us because in the Apollo program we enjoyed nearly unlimited budgets with which to pursue QM. But in the private sector, we had to produce quality products and services while keeping a constant eye on profitability. I practiced QM as an entrepreneur in the telecommunications and insurance businesses, and in the ministry. I was also fortunate to meet Philip Crosby, who became a mentor to me and sent me as a QM missionary to the nonprofit world. I mention these things because I have had the rare advantage of applying QM from the mystique of space exploration to the mundane work of completing insurance applications, and know how practical it can be.

Although most of us have heard the language of QM at one time or another, I have found there is a lot of confusion about what it really means. Because of competition within the field of QM, terms like quality improvement, continuous quality, or total quality are often emphasized to distinguish one practitioner from another. But these are routine terms which describe its various attributes. For example, the purpose of QM is to improve the quality of our

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products and services. It must be done continuously every day we open the doors for business, and must totally encompass every person and process.

QM begins with the definition of quality, which is “conformance to requirements.” Requirements are what a customer, client, or boss wants, needs, or expects from us. These are their stated values. To be successful, we must be able to make our customer’s stated values our practiced values. By learning to do this effectively, we can provide them with quality products and services and fulfill the most basic transaction of commerce—exchanging something of value for what we need ourselves.

The concept of Quality Control, one of the most common terms in process management, was born in the manufacturing industry and was intended to keep products with defects from reaching a customer. It is often misused as a synonym for Quality Assurance or QM, but like the others, it has a very specific meaning. It consists of methods for “inspecting products in their various stages of production to find and correct errors.” Quality Control is what the “inspected by” slip represents in that new package of underwear you just bought. Someone checked that particular package of shorts or shirts to make sure they conformed with the manufacturing requirements before they were shipped. When I reviewed the data of how a spacecraft system performed during a test, I was looking for indicators of a malfunction or failure. Any system or component that did not function properly was repaired or replaced.

The objective of Quality Control is taking bad things out of a process. When we audit, inspect, or check for errors, we are controlling the quality of our products or services by searching for things that do not conform to our requirements. They can then be repaired, converted to some other use, or disposed of as waste. These methods translate easily into all work venues. Service or software processes can benefit greatly from Quality Control, whether it is checking the freshness of food at a restaurant, editing a book for errors in grammar, or inspecting a hospital room for cleanliness.

Solomon is clear about the importance of inspection when he says, “know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds; for riches are not forever, nor does a crown endure to all

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generations” (Proverbs 27:23-24 NAS). As any shepherd or cattleman can tell you, this is a directive to get up close and personal and not to casually observe at a distance. There are many diseases that can go undetected without the regular and close physical inspection of livestock. Even the most common ailments can cause livestock to lose weight or drop their calves prematurely. Before you know it, generations of hard work can be lost. We should be faithful to inspect the processes we manage and the work of the people who operate or manage those processes for us. We must know them well enough and audit them often enough to be sure that things are attended to properly. A person who is faithful to do these things is very unlikely to be caught off guard by a problem and lose his “crown.” Instead, he will be able to find errors when they are small enough to be corrected.

You may have already realized that Quality Control has its limitations. It is too expensive to inspect every single pair of shorts, every single brake job, or every sheep and cow everyday. And, even when inspectors and auditors are carefully trained, there can be inconsistency in their judgments and thoroughness. Because of the human factors involved, no matter how many inspectors are placed in a process, we are going to miss some of the errors and defects. It helps to train people to inspect their own work, but ultimately some amount of Quality Control is needed in nearly all processes. The real issue is deciding how much checking we can afford, what method is appropriate, and where to place it in our processes. It was just this dilemma that brought us to the next concept in the discipline of QM.

Quality Assurance is a term used to describe the methods for “putting good things into a process, so that we can be assured of its reliability and prevent errors.” This concept came from the aerospace industry and reliability engineering. It was the job of reliability engineers to determine the statistical probability of failure in various components, units, and systems. The study of this problem led to some very simple conclusions. Reliability works backwards from the system, to the unit, to the component, and then to the materials of the components. An air conditioning system is reliable if the individual units within the system, such as compressors, are reliable.

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The individual units are reliable if the components in them, such as switches and bearings, are reliable. The components are reliable if the materials used to produce them are reliable, etc.

From this basic concept, statistical methods were developed which allowed inspectors to certify the reliability of everything from materials to systems by thoroughly testing a random sample of items from each batch, without having to inspect every single material, component, unit, or system. For instance, from a batch of switches, a random sample would be taken and connected to a machine that would turn them on and off until each one failed, carefully counting each flip of the switch. It could be hundreds, thousands, or even millions of repetitions. The reliability rate was determined by calculating the percentage of failures per repetitions.

In the case of aerospace components, the minimum required reliability rate could easily be 999,999 correct functions out of 1,000,000 or even higher, depending on the possible consequences of failure. Using this method, a whole batch would either be certified as reliable for its intended purpose, routed to another use like toaster ovens, or destroyed. Putting good things into a system, such as components certified as reliable, was intended to prevent failures that could have otherwise occurred and “ASSURE” us of our objectives; thus the term Quality Assurance.

It was further discovered that by putting good things into human systems and organizations such as well researched design requirements, carefully written policies and procedures, the appropriate equipment and supplies, and thorough training, we could increase their reliability. When people know precisely what is expected of them, have what is needed to accomplish the job, and know how to do it, the processes become more reliable and quality is assured. Again, these same principles apply equally in both service and software processes. If we want to be assured of the quality of our counseling services, sales presentations, or hotel operations, we must spend the time and money to put good things into our processes.

QM is the deliberate management of processes, using Quality Control and Quality Assurance methods. Its objective is to take bad things out and put good things into our processes, in order to

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prevent errors and conform to our customer's requirements. The man who is diligent to do so "will have plenty of bread, but he who pursues vain things lacks sense" (Proverbs 12:11 NAS).

Press Toward Continuous Improvement

Our success in managing processes has more to do with people than things. So when we set standards, they should be tempered with some understanding of the people who are to perform duties and services on our behalf. I once read an article that criticized what the writer called the "motivational" aspect of QM. He thought that many of the meetings and discussions he had observed in QM work places were unnecessary. He believed that people were motivated by work itself, along with their need for money. It was his opinion that we should allow people's fear of competition and losing their jobs to cause them to perform to higher standards.

This man's work philosophy reduced the motivation of the average employee to a rat in one of B.F. Skinner's experiments (1953), feverishly pulling a lever to receive a food pellet, or in this case, the money needed to survive. Of course, the writer was correct in that most people's motivation for working is to support themselves and their families. But people are also motivated by more idealistic values. Very few people can work effectively for extended periods of time without knowing the strategic purpose of their labor, and what difference, if any, it will make in the world. People want to know that the things they are attempting are doable. If there is a risk, they want to know what it is and how it might affect them. They also want to know the potential rewards.

The writer of the article did not understand how QM created the enthusiasm to improve products and services in the companies he observed. The desire to improve was not caused by pep talks and motivational techniques, but by the hard work of answering people's questions and taking an interest in them. This kind of leadership is considered boring and a waste of time by those who do not understand its importance; but a direct line can be drawn between helping people see the values that are being fulfilled in their work, and their motivation. When people are motivated, they naturally reach for higher levels of effectiveness or productivity and will embrace new and higher standards.

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Proverbs 12:10 (NAS) says, “A righteous man has regard for the life of his beast, but the compassion of the wicked is cruel.” Solomon was speaking about the productivity of the beast of burden and how a righteous man should be concerned about its well-being. This proverb implies that some people cruelly push the beast of burden to work without properly caring for it. It is not my intention to lower the value of people by making an unfair comparison of them to beasts, but it is certainly correct to say that a righteous man should have regard for and show compassion to his employees. Besides being a good path for human relations, this attitude also provides some benefits for the fulfillment of our objectives. Knowing what to do and how to treat people is a powerful combination. One of the best examples of how these principles positively affect people is found in a classic of management literature, the Hawthorne Studies.

Western Electric, the research and manufacturing arm of the Bell companies before their breakup and now a part of Lucent Technologies, has a reputation for the highest standards in telecommunications research and manufacturing. The employees of its Hawthorne plant have been the subjects of studies in human behavior and industrial psychology since the 1920's (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1943). In one study the experimenters wanted to measure the effect of environmental factors on the productivity of assembly line workers. The scenario went something like this: They decided to improve the lighting in a particular assembly room to determine its effect on productivity. They installed extra lighting and then over a given period of time they measured the productivity of this particular unit. The result was a specific percentage of increase.

Then they decided to change the chairs used by the assemblers and install a more comfortable model. As before, they obtained a measurable increase in productivity. Then they decided to increase the distance between each assembler, giving them a more comfortable work space. Again, they measured a specific increase in productivity. In order to validate the cause and effect of the improvements, they decided to reduce the lighting back to its original intensity and measure the decrease in productivity. To their surprise, they measured another increase in productivity, not a decrease as they expected. The same thing happened with the chairs and the work space when they reversed them.

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Puzzled by the outcomes, each of the assemblers was asked to participate in extensive interviews and evaluations. They discovered that the increases in production *were* related to the motivation of the employees. However, their motivation was not related to the improvements, which they then knew statistically from the results of removing them. The interviews proved that the employee's increased motivation and productivity were related to personal factors such as their perception that they were getting personal attention, their feelings of importance as the objects of the study, and having their comfort considered by their superiors. This has become known as the "Hawthorne Effect." When we include people in design and decision processes, provide them with training, equipment, and supplies, or respond to their personal or professional needs, good things happen.

The system that drives QM is prevention. In other words, we use methods for Quality Control (taking bad things out) and Quality Assurance (putting good things in), to *prevent* errors from occurring and to *prevent* defects in our products or services from reaching our clients. This important concept is directly related to establishing standards for quality because it challenges us to answer the questions: How many errors and defects are too many? How many bad notes should the choir or orchestra hit in a concert? How many stale pieces of bread should be served in a restaurant? How many printing jobs should have errors in them? How many patients in a hospital should be given the wrong medicine? If you are the person receiving the product or service, your answer is probably zero. But what if you are the provider?

The only reasonable standard for prevention is expressed by a term known as "Zero Defects." When our standard for prevention is Zero Defects, it means that we are never satisfied with any process which allows errors to reach a client, even though we know that some will. The standard of Zero Defects is not a demand to achieve perfection, but, both personally and professionally, it is the only standard that achieves continuous improvement. Zero Defects is actually a very scriptural concept. In Philippians 3:14-15 (NAS) the Apostle Paul says, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are

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perfect [or mature] have this attitude.” Then, in 1 Corinthians 11:1 (NAS) he says, “Be imitators of me just as I also am of Christ,” Christ being the perfect example of a sinless life with no errors or defects. Then, again in 2 Corinthians 13:11, he exhorts us to “aim for perfection.”

These exhortations cause us to establish personal standards for righteousness because they cause us to answer the question: “How much sin in my life is too much?” Of course, we cannot be perfect, but we must press toward the goal of being without sin, by taking bad things out of our lives through prayers of repentance and forgiveness, and putting good things into our lives by reading the Scriptures and yielding to the Holy Spirit. When we do these things, we can expect to be “transformed into the same image [as the Lord] from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18 NAS). The Greek word for transformed has the same root as the word “metamorphosis.” It means that we can experience discrete and incremental improvement throughout our walk with Christ as we are transformed and changed into His image. What a wonderfully simple, yet strategically vital message. When a man is complacent about defects in his personal life, family, or business, he is not able to reach his potential for improvement; when he presses toward the mark of perfection, he will be transformed step by step through God’s grace.

Both industry and organized religion have tried to rationalize away the demands of a Zero Defects standard. In industry it is called “Acceptable Quality Levels (AQL). In the Church it is called “denominational doctrine.” In both cases, the standards are softened to conform to a more humane viewpoint. The primary motivation is to lessen the perceived threat of a standard of perfection which is terrifying to most of us. Thus, our leaders develop new theories to help us avoid such unlivable concepts.

I was taking questions following a lecture about process management when one of the participants asked the ultimate Zero Defects question. It was posed by the administrator of a nonprofit medical institution which treated newborn babies in physical crisis. She described the incredible commitment of her co-workers and the heart-rending decisions they made day after day and literally minute by minute, trying to save the lives of the little children in

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their care. She tearfully expressed that it was already their desire to fulfill the medical requirements of every baby, every time; yet there was nothing they could do to prevent the death of some of those babies. She wanted to know how a commitment to Zero Defects would help their situation.

First, I reminded her that we all understood she and her co-workers could not be perfect and save every baby. However, it was possible for them to manage their resources and processes so carefully that no known method or procedure was left untried, and that nothing they did contributed to the loss of a baby. In fact, by her description, it sounded as though they had a Zero Defects attitude already, if not a Zero Defects process. She expressed relief and hope because of my response, but her reaction would have been very different if I had encouraged her to establish Acceptable Quality Levels (AQL).

Setting an AQL is intended to take the pressure off people, so they can improve incrementally. You set a performance standard you can live with such as 80 correct actions out of 100, reach it, raise it again to maybe 85, reach it, raise it, etc. Since most improvement comes incrementally, this sounds reasonable. Unfortunately, continuous and incremental improvement will not occur without a commitment to Zero Defects, which is 100 correct actions per 100 attempts. Here is why. It is impossible for anyone to preset a specific number of mistakes they will make per one hundred repetitions of any action. The more we try to count mistakes as we work and adjust our performance, the more mistakes we make. The only way to constantly improve is to attempt to prevent all errors. Afterwards, we can check for errors and count them. Our progress will then be incremental and continuous: 80, 85, 90, etc.

As an example, suppose we pick an AQL of 90%. This means that we want to do things right the first time 90 times out of 100 or the converse is to make 10 mistakes out of 100 attempts. A simple four step process with a 90% AQL will result in an average rate of effectiveness of 58%, or 42 errors in every 100 attempts at the process. This is calculated by multiplying each step by the factor of .90. Step 1: $100 \times .90 = 90\%$. Step 2: $90 \times .90 = 81\%$. Step 3: $81 \times .90 = 73\%$. Step 4: $73 \times .90 = 58\%$. These are the results that will occur *if* you are successful in achieving an AQL of *only* 10 mistakes

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out of each 100 attempts at each step of the process. In other words, 42 out of each 100 customers will receive some defect because of a preset defect rate of 10 per 100. Whether you count those defects in medical services, books, or sandwiches, the results are not very appealing. The people who came up with AQLs could take a lesson from Proverbs 16:21 which says, “The wise man is known by his common sense, and a pleasant teacher is the best” (TLB).

The religious equivalent of an AQL is a new doctrine to relieve the burden of sin guilt. This is usually accomplished by new denominations and special conferences within denominations, but it can also be done on an individual basis. I will never forget a young couple who came to me for counseling about some of their relational problems. They spoke about their prayer times together, reading and studying the Scriptures and church activities they enjoyed. They were completely sincere, but very deceived. Why? Because they were unmarried but living together. I pointed out several Scriptures to them about God’s standards for sexual morality and asked them how they resolved their personal practices with these Scriptures. With stunning honesty they said, “We have no peace at all when we read those Scriptures, so we make a special mark in the margins of our Bibles and skip over them.”

People can construct a rationalization or method to support virtually any standard. However, a man’s “work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work” (1 Corinthians 3:13).

Measure Your Performance Accurately

The quality of the products or services produced by a process is measured by the price of non-conformance—what it costs in dollars and human values when we do things wrong. The price of non-conformance is determined by calculating how much money we spend in rework or repair, problem-solving, client loss, and a myriad of other factors which cost us money and credibility when we make mistakes. Recovering lost profits and improving customer satisfaction should be sufficient motivation for most people to seek improvements in their work. But because of the discipline required to implement

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the fundamentals of process management, we can easily become sidetracked into inaction. Usually, something has to happen to emphasize the risks and rewards, and help us move from theory to practice.

I began working on the Apollo program only a few months after the tragedy of Apollo 1, when astronauts Gus Grissom, Ed White, and Roger Chaffee lost their lives in a fiery inferno during a launch countdown rehearsal. In a full launch rehearsal, virtually everything is prepared the same as it will be on launch day. All the systems are fueled and “powered up” into full operation. It is a very serious exercise that challenges every aspect of the launch team, crew, equipment, and support personnel around the world just days prior to the actual launch. The Apollo 1 crew and team could not have anticipated that on this particular day, two apparently unrelated design changes would present the opportunity for two simple mistakes to result in tragedy.

First, a design change had been made to use a single gas atmosphere of oxygen within the spacecraft itself, instead of the normal two gas mix of oxygen and nitrogen. This would lower the complexity of various valves and pipes, and reduce the weight and space required to store the gases in the service module of the spacecraft. Although it simplified the process, it also slightly increased the risks. Pure oxygen, while not flammable by itself, enhances the burn rate of other materials.

Second, a new outward-hinged hatch design had been approved, but had not yet been installed. The hatch on the spacecraft hinged inward instead of outward to take advantage of natural pressures within the spacecraft. This helped keep the “front door” tightly sealed. But this arrangement also made escape much more difficult, and under the high pressures of an oxygen-aided fire, made escape impossible.

At some time during the preparation of the spacecraft, two critical mistakes were made. As a flight control panel was installed, the insulation was accidentally peeled back from a wire, leaving it vulnerable to an electrical short and arc. Additionally, a technician inadvertently left a tool behind that same panel which lodged against the exposed wire and created the potential for an inferno. During the

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launch rehearsal, one of the astronauts routinely changed a switch position on the fully powered panel, creating a spark between the exposed wire and the tool. The spark ignited the peeled-back insulation and then engulfed the inside of the spacecraft.

Each factor raised the risk of a disaster, but no one could have guessed they would all come together to create one. The price of non-conformance included the loss of three astronauts' lives and devastation to their families, injuries to several technicians on the launch tower, psychological trauma to hundreds of support personnel, the destruction of a spacecraft, damage to the launch tower and support systems, and congressional investigations that threatened the future of the space program. The jobs of literally tens of thousands of people were in jeopardy. And the financial losses were tens of millions of dollars, all because of an installation error and the misplacement of a two dollar tool.

When I became a member of the launch team, I was lectured extensively on safety procedures and the consequences of mistakes by people only remotely related to the actual spacecraft. My orientation included a tour of some of the more sensitive areas and I was taken into one of the "clean" rooms where a spacecraft was being prepared prior to being placed upon the launch vehicle. I was escorted up a short flight of stairs onto a platform which held the beautiful little capsule snugly and safely away from danger. On the floor of the platform, a two-inch red line was painted in a three-foot circle around the spacecraft. I was told that crossing that red line without the proper authorization and an approved list of every tool or object you took inside, so it could be checked when you came out, would result in immediate dismissal. I would never have the need to cross that line, but they meant business, and a visit to this room sent a clear message to everyone to do things right the first time, wherever they worked in the program.

Experienced process managers know that little mistakes can cause big losses. Over the years, I have seen this truth repeatedly confirmed in business, nonprofit work, and the ministry as people failed to take seriously the responsibilities of their work and the effect it could have on others. I was speaking to a church leader once about a project which had gone off on a tangent and ended up hurting a lot of people.

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He looked at me sincerely and said, “I still don’t know how we ever got from what we started out to do, to where we ended up.” Looking back, he was amazed how an entire congregation could miss the purposes of God so badly. The cause was a simple failure to apply honest measurements in determining the reliability of their path. Leviticus 19:35 says, “Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight, or quantity.” I think we can reasonably add to that the use of spiritual measures and judgments.

This church had been seduced by the success of their ministry. They had grown to the point that thousands attended their services and they operated on a multi-million dollar budget. But they had begun to take themselves so seriously that they were no longer holding themselves reasonably accountable. When things go well for us, it is easy to become complacent and rest on our laurels. As do many businesses, they were counting the number of people they were able to draw through their front doors and how much money they contributed, not how many errors were being made in serving them. Eventually the costly effects of their mishandling of people and money became too great for their constituents to ignore. Even then, as attendance and offerings declined, they were so deceived by their past success that they continued on until they ran out of money and lost their momentum, only then to confess the foolishness of their actions.

Being seduced by success can cause men to excuse errors instead of correcting them. It can create a smug bureaucratic attitude which resists listening to reason or honestly measuring performance. Even worse, it can lead to the deliberate manipulation of facts and figures. When a man’s pride causes him to begin to take God’s favor for granted, he can even be drawn away from his calling and vision, but eventually the price of non-conformance will prevail.

The most accurate measurement of our performance is found in a calculation known as “the cost of quality”—what it costs to do things right. It is assessed by comparing the “price of non-conformance”—the losses that are caused by errors, to the “price of conformance”—what it will cost to prevent the errors and do things right. The price of conformance includes the cost of taking bad things out of a process through inspections, audits, etc., and the cost of

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putting good things into a process, like human resources, benefits, written procedures, equipment, training, etc. When we deduct the one-time and continuing expenses for preventing errors from our potential losses, it usually results in financial gains. This is why Philip Crosby said, “Quality is Free” (1979).

From the steps taken in defining our calling and vision, to the actions that bring them to fulfillment, there are simple values and strategies that determine the outcomes of our work. Each time we establish a reliable value or implement a proven strategy, the certainty of our success is increased. But, for a follower of Christ, these disciplines do not take place in a vacuum of spiritual accountability. Each of us knows that ultimately, “your kingdom will be assured to you after you recognize that it is Heaven that rules” (Daniel 4:26 NAS).

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