Putting Beliefs Into Practice Revisited: Twenty-somethings and Faithful Living

Rick Wade updates his earlier discussion of 3 major ingredients necessary for Christians' faithful living: convictions, character, and community.

A Turning Point

In recent months Probe has focused more and more attention on the state of the younger generations in the evangelical church regarding their fidelity to basic Christian doctrines and Christian practices like prayer and church attendance. Our concern has deepened as we've become more aware of the fact that, not only is the grasp on Christian beliefs and practices loosening, but that some unbiblical beliefs and practices in our secular culture are seen as acceptable for Christians.



With this in mind it seems appropriate to revisit a program I wrote over ten years ago on the necessity of linking our beliefs with the way we live in order to practice a healthy Christian life. It was based on Steven Garber's book *The Fabric of Faithfulness.*{1} Garber's book was written with college students in mind. However, the principles are the same for people in other stages of life as well.

The Fabric of Faithfulness was written to help students in the critical task of establishing moral meaning in their lives. By "moral meaning" he is referring to the moral significance of the general direction of our lives and of the things we do with our days. "How is it," he asks, "that someone decides

which cares and commitments will give shape and substance to life, for life?”{2}

In this article I want to look at three significant factors which form the foundations for making our lives fit our beliefs: convictions, character, and community.{3}

For many young people, college provides the context for what the late Erik Erikson referred to as a *turning point*, “a crucial period in which a decisive turn *one way or another* is unavoidable.”{4} However, as sociologists Christian Smith and Patricia Snell report, graduation from college is no longer the marker for the transition of youth to adult.{5} Steve Cable notes that “most young adults assume that they will go through an extended period of transition, trying different life experiences, living arrangements, careers, relationships, and viewpoints until they finally are able to stand on their own and settle down. . . . Some researchers refer to this recently created life phase as ‘emerging adulthood,’ covering the period from 18 to 29.”{6}
<h3>*Telos* and *Praxis*

The young adult years are often taken as a time to sow one’s wild oats, to have lots of fun before the pressures (and dull routine!) of “real life” settle in. Too much playing, however, delays one’s preparation for those pressures. In addition, bad choices can be made during that time that will negatively affect the course of one’s life.

Theologian Jacques Ellul gives this charge to young people:

“Remember your Creator during your youth: when all possibilities lie open before you and you can offer all your strength intact for his service. The time to remember is not after you become senile and paralyzed! . . . You must take sides earlier—when you can actually make choices, when you have many paths opening at your feet, before the weight of necessity overwhelms you.”{7}

Living in a time when so many things seem so uncertain, how do we even *begin* to think about setting a course for the future? Steven Garber uses a couple of Greek words to identify two foundational aspects of life which determine its shape to a great extent: *telos* and *praxis*. *Telos* is the word for the end toward which something is moving or developing. It is the goal, the culmination, the final form which gives meaning to all that goes before it. The goal of Christians is to be made complete in Christ as Paul said in Colossians 1:28: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature [or complete or perfect] in Christ." This over-arching *telos* or goal should govern the entirety of our lives.

Garber's second word, *praxis,* means action or deed.{8} Jesus uses the word in Matthew 16:27 when he speaks of us being repaid according to our deeds or *praxis.*

While everyone engages in some kind of *praxis* or deeds, in the postmodern world there is little thought given to *telos* because many people believe no one can *know* what is ultimately real, what is eternal, and thus where we are going. We are told, on the one hand, that our lives are completely open and free and the outcome is totally up to us, but, on the other, that our lives are determined and it doesn't matter what we do. How are we to make sense of our lives if either of those is true?

Where we begin is the basic beliefs that comprise the *telos* of the Christian; i.e., our convictions.

Convictions: Where It Begins

When we think of our "end" in Christ we're thinking of something much bigger and more substantive than just where we will spend eternity. We're thinking of the goal toward which history is marching. In His eternal wisdom God chose to sum up

all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). New Testament scholar J. B. Lightfoot wrote that this refers to "the entire harmony of the universe, which shall no longer contain alien and discordant elements, but of which all the parts shall find their centre and bond of union in Christ."{9} It is the *telos* or "end" of Christians to be made perfect parts of the new creation.

Who is this Jesus and what did he teach? He said that He is the only way to God, and that our connection with Him is by faith, but a faith that results in godly living. He talked about sin and its destruction, and about true faith and obedience. What Jesus said and did provide the content and ground of our convictions, and these convictions provide the ground and direction for the way we live. These aren't just religious ideas we've chosen to adopt. They are true to the way things are.

Garber tells the story of Dan Heimbach who served on President George H. W. Bush's Domestic Policy Council. Heimbach sensed a need while in high school to be truly authentic with respect to his beliefs. He wanted to know if Christianity was really true. When serving in Vietnam he began asking himself whether he could really live with his convictions. He says,

"Everyone had overwhelmingly different value systems. While there I once asked myself why I had to be so different. With a sense of tremendous internal challenge I could say that the one thing keeping me from being like the others was that deep down I was convinced of the truth of my faith; this moment highlighted what truth meant to me, and I couldn't turn my back on what I knew to be true."{10}

Christian teachings that we believe give meaning to our existence; they provide an intellectual anchor in a world of multiple and conflicting beliefs, and give direction for our lives. For a person to live consistently as a Christian, he or she must know at least basic Christian doctrines, and be convinced that they are "true truth" as Francis Schaeffer put

it: what is really true.

Character: Living It Out

So our beliefs must be grounded in Christ. But we can't stop there. Not only do we need to receive as true what Jesus taught, we also need to live it out as He did. After telling the Corinthians to do all things to the glory of God, Paul added that they should "be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

Morality is inextricably wedded to the way the world is. A universe formed by matter and chance cannot provide moral meaning. The idea of a "cosmos without purpose," says Garber, "is at the heart of the challenge facing students in the modern world."{11}This is a challenge for all of us, student and non-student. Such a world provides no rules or structure for life. Christianity, on the other hand, provides a basis for responsible living for there is a God back of it all who is a moral being, who created the universe and the people in it to function certain ways. To not live in keeping with the way things are is to invite disaster.

If we accept that Christianity *does* provide for the proper development of character in the individual based on the truth of its teachings, we must then ask *how* that development comes about. Garber believes an important component in that process is a mentor or guide.

Grace Tazelaar graduated from Wheaton College, went into nursing, and later taught in the country of Uganda as it was being rebuilt following the reign of Idi Amin. At some point she asked a former teacher to be her spiritual mentor. Says Garber, "This woman, who had spent years in South Africa, gave herself to Grace as she was beginning to explore her own place of responsible service." Grace saw her mentor's beliefs worked out in real life.{12}

The White Rose was a group of students in Germany who opposed Nazism. Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were strongly influenced in their work by Carl Muth, a theologian and editor of an anti-Nazi periodical. One writer noted that "The Christian Gospel became the criterion of their thought and actions." Their convictions carried them to the point of literally losing their heads for their opposition.

Being a mentor involves more than teaching others how to have quiet times. They need to see how Christianity is fleshed out in real life, and they need encouragement to extend themselves to a world in need in Jesus' name, using their own gifts and personalities.

Community: A Place to Grow

Garber adds one more important element to the mix of elements important in being a Christian. We've looked at the matter of convictions, the beliefs we hold which give direction and shape to our lives. Then we talked about the development of character, the way those beliefs are worked out in our lives. Community is the third part of this project of "weaving together belief and behavior" (the sub-title of Garber's book), the place where we see that character worked out in practice.

Christian doctrines can seem so abstract and distant. How does one truly hold to them in a world which thinks so differently? Bob Kramer, who was involved in student protests at Harvard in the '60s, said he and his wife learned the importance of surrounding themselves with people who also wanted to connect *telos* with *praxis*. He said, "As I have gotten involved in politics and business, I am more and more convinced that the people you choose to have around you have more to do with how you act upon what you believe than what you read or the ideas that influence you. The influence of ideas has to be there, but the application is something it's very hard to work out by yourself."{13}

The Christian community (or the church), if it's functioning properly, can provide a solid plausibility structure for those who are finding their way. To read about love and forgiveness and kindness and self-sacrifice is one thing; to see it lived out within a body of people is quite another. It provides significant evidence that the convictions are valid. "We discover who we are," says Garber, "and who we are meant to be—face to face and side by side with others in work, love and learning."{14}

During their university years and early twenties, if they care about the course of their lives, young people will have to make major decisions about what they believe and what those beliefs mean. Garber writes, "Choices about meaning, reality and truth, about God, human nature and history are being made which, more often than not, last for the rest of life. Learning to make sense of life, for life, is what the years between adolescence and adulthood are all about."{15}

Convictions, character, and community are three major ingredients for producing a life of meaningful service in the kingdom of God, for putting together our *telos* and our *praxis*.

Notes

1. Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior During the University Years* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996). An expanded edition was published in 2007 under the shortened title *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*.

2.Ibid., 27.

3. Ibid., 37.

4. Erik Erikson, *Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic Insight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 138, quoted in Garber, 17.

5. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

6. Steve Cable, "Emerging Adults and the Future of Faith in America," Probe Ministries, 2010, www.probe.org/emerging-adults-and-the-future-of-faith-in-america/.

7. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 282-83, quoted in Garber, 39.

8. Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), s.v. "Work," by H.-C. Hahn (3:1157-58). [Note: The hyphen is there in the source text.]

9. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistle of St. Paul*, 322, quoted in Brown, NIDNTT, s.v. "Head," by C. Brown (2:163).

10. Garber, Fabric, 122.

11. Ibid., 59.

12. Ibid., 130.

13. Ibid., 149.

14. Ibid., 147.

15. Ibid., 175.

© 2011 Probe Ministries