

C-Minus Christians in an A-Plus World

What are my elective courses?

by Rev. Tim Nelson

We live in an A-plus-driven world where C-minus outcomes just don't cut it. To *do our best* is the standard, to *be the best* is the goal, and anything less is to simply not make the grade. Just how driven is our world for superior performance? Consider this:

An Australian professional football player said Tuesday he plans to have one of his fingers amputated in an attempt to improve his game. Brett Backwell . . . has suffered from pain and restricted movement since he broke his left ring finger three years ago. . . . “To chop a finger off, that’s a bit drastic,” Backwell told the Australian Broadcasting Commission. “But I love my footy, and love playing sport, and if that’s going to help me to succeed *at this level* [emphasis added], then it’s something you’ve just got to do.”(footnote 1)

Backwell is the first athlete known to have amputated an appendage simply to enhance his performance—to raise his grade in one area of his life. At first glance, he seems a bit eccentric. But upon closer examination, Backwell is a poster boy for our culture. He may well be a poster boy for your family and your church because, like most American evangelical Christians, you are probably driven to excel. If so, you might—like Brett Backwell—be systematically amputating some of your most important appendages in your quest.

The truth is, we are finite. Our you-can-do-it-all, extreme-everything world balks at that thought, as do many of our churches. Inevitably, however, our finiteness seeps in through the cracks of our lives, or suddenly cascades over inadequately constructed character levies. Sooner or later, we wake up to the reality that we must live with limitations, and living with limitations means a life of difficult choices. With limited time and energy, we cannot *do our best* in every pursuit. Almost certainly, we cannot *be the best* in any pursuit (the current odds against it are 6 billion to one). We cannot get an A-plus on every subject we take. Can we be content with any C-minuses?

Most sincere believers I have known do not embrace their limitations and make difficult choices very well. In fact, the lives of many devoted followers of Jesus could best be described as “neurotic”—we are stressed out and confused, imbalanced in emotion and mind, and often behave oddly as individuals and as churches. As Dr. Richard Swenson aptly writes in *Margin*, “You can’t follow Jesus at a sprint.”

Part of the reason is *velocity*—the cockpit of our lives has been stormed by the proliferation of options, the manic pace and the high expectations of our excellence-driven culture. For me, there has also been an accomplice lurking for decades in the cabin of my soul. It is a twisted theology of excellence, which I would like to unpack in the form of a syllogism—a deductive argument made up of a major premise, a minor premise and a conclusion, as follows:

Major Premise: *Jesus is the pattern for His followers in all things.*

Minor Premise: *Jesus did all things well.*

Conclusion: *Therefore, followers of Jesus do all things well.*

Major premise

Is Jesus the pattern for His followers in all things? As a wee boy, I watched my mother sew. After unfolding the pattern, she’d pin the crinkly paper tightly to the flattened cloth. Working her scissors down the lines of the pattern (40 years later, I can still hear the “*snip, snip*”), she’d cut both the pattern and the cloth. Can a believer unfold the character of Christ from Scripture, pin the actions and attitudes of Jesus over his or her life, and cut precisely along the lines?

As a young believer, I answered that question with a passionate, “Yes!” I’d read *In His Steps* and its theme modernized in the “What Would Jesus Do?” slogan, both of which seemed to capture in a phrase the heart of 1 Peter 2:21. *Snip, snip.*

I’d pondered the words of Jesus, who told me that an apprentice, “when fully taught, is just like his teacher.” *Snip, snip.*

Even the term “Christian” (*christianos*), used three times in the New Testament to label followers of Jesus, means “little anointed ones”—“little-Christ”—spitting images of Jesus in word and attitude. *Snip, snip.*

For me the major premise was clearly demonstrated: Jesus is the *pattern* for His followers in all things, and I must cut along those same lines as His devoted follower.

But every student has report-card time, and as I neared my 30th anniversary following Jesus, it was evident that my little spiritual home-ec project wasn’t turning out so great. I had cut nowhere near the lines of my pattern. Turning back to the Scriptures, I kept tripping over passages suggesting that Jesus was a pattern I could not duplicate at a number of critical points:

Jesus had neither a sin nature nor sin (2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 1:19).

Except for one agonizing moment at the cross when the sin of the world was laid on Him, Jesus had intimate, unbroken fellowship with Abba.

Jesus was continually being filled with the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the lavish and permeating fruit of the Spirit in His life.

Jesus evidenced all the spiritual gifts and possessed them inherently as God’s Son and the perfect man.

Perhaps the most profound difference for me was: 5) Jesus had a crystal-clear mission for His life (Mark 10:45). Honestly, navigating *my* calling resembles trying to find and follow the white line while driving at night through a thick fog.

Though highly committed, I knew I couldn’t cut along those lines. Forget it. But then, neither could I turn in my spiritual scissors and walk away from the table just because of consistently lousy outcomes. With nearly each turn of the page, Scripture makes it clear that though I will never cut along the lines of the pattern of Jesus perfectly, I can learn, and I am expected to learn to cut along those same holy lines with ever-increasing precision.

Scripture reverberates with clarion teaching that as a follower of Jesus, I have a new nature and can walk in it. It tells me I can have restored “Abba! Father!” fellowship with God (Romans 8:15). It tells me that while I don’t have all the spiritual gifts, God has placed me into a local body of believers who *do* have all the gifts, and together as a functioning community, we can become “the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 4:13-16). And it tells me I can have a fullness of the Spirit by being continually filled with the Spirit of God, as I yield my heart moment-by-moment to His gracious control (Ephesians 5:18).

“I must . . . but I can’t . . . but I can. . . .” Is it any wonder that sincere followers of Jesus are ripe for neurosis? So what are believers to do? Examining the minor premise will shed some light on the solution.

Minor premise

Does Jesus do all things well? The apostle Mark reports this reaction from those who followed Jesus: “They were utterly astonished, saying, ‘He has done all things well’” (Mark 7:37). What Jesus did, He did A-plus *well*. But did Jesus do *all* things? All *your* things?

But Jesus didn’t have a home or a high-mileage donkey to maintain (Matthew 8:20). Jesus didn’t have a wife to care for, and any married believer will agree that Paul knew what he was talking about when he said being married meant dividing one’s devotions (1 Corinthians 7:32-34). Jesus didn’t have kids. Those who say living with the disciples was like having kids, obviously never had kids. Jesus didn’t get up at 3 a.m. to help Peter throw up and change his sheets, or haul 12 disciples to 12 different soccer fields for twice-a-day practices.

Reality is that Jesus excelled because He knew the difference between core courses—those that God had assigned to Him—and electives. With the list of electives growing almost daily in our world, it is essential we learn to do the same. Electives differ from one person to the next, but if we give to thought to what are, without doubt, our own personal core courses, then our other commitments/activities gradually show themselves to be electives. Maybe *good* electives, but still electives.

Linger with me for a moment and ponder this thought: Jesus, the perfect student, intimate with the Father, filled with the Spirit and utterly focused on His clarion mission, chose to drop the elective courses that occupy growing portions of our available time. Jesus did not do all *our* things. How can you and I believe we can get an A-plus on the courses that God has assigned to us, and get A-pluses in our many electives, to boot?

Conclusion

No, followers of Jesus do not do all things well. Finite people must live with limitations, and limitations means life is full of difficult choices. Let me ask you a penetrating question: “Whose report card really matters? Is it acceptable to be a C-minus Christian on any courses in our A-plus world?”

Depends on which report card matters. If our priority is the world’s report card, then C-minuses or Fs or dropped courses are simply unacceptable. If our priority is God’s report card, C-minuses or Fs or dropped courses on some subjects are very acceptable. In fact, they are *essential*. When Abba reads our report cards, He is looking for A-plus excellence—that we are doing our human best, undergirded by His Holy Spirit—in all His things He has assigned to us, as individuals and as communities of believers in local *churches*.

May I propose a better syllogism to manage your life in this high-velocity, excellence-driven culture?

Major Premise: Jesus can teach you to do all *His things*.

Minor Premise: Jesus teaches all *His things* well.

Conclusion: Therefore, Jesus can teach you to do all *His things* well.

I refer you to a prayerful, intensive study of Matthew 11:28-30. Here, Jesus addresses the Judaism of His day, to a people pursuing righteousness under its system of suffocating legalism. His solution: “Come to Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden [that would describe you and me, wouldn’t it?] . . . take My yoke upon you and learn from Me.”

I suspect this same invitation is also the key to addressing the drivenness of our day, for sincere Christians pursuing respect here and reward hereafter under our system of suffocating busy-ism. In the yoke of intimate apprenticeship beside Jesus, He will teach us what things He has for each of us to do and how to do these things well, for He does all things well.

I know what you want to ask: “What are His things for my life? What specific courses should I take?” Ask Jesus. However, Scripture gets you started. For years, I have used my hand as a visual aid to help me daily remember five courses that Scripture appears to make part of our core curriculum. These come through the principles the Scriptures teach, the priorities Jesus modeled and the primary threads that the Spirit of God has woven into the fabric of the hearts of those who follow hard after God. Parting company with Brett Backwell, I urge you not to allow any of these five crucial appendages to be lopped off your soul:

The pinky. This represents little people—the less, the least, the lost—people who need to be introduced to Jesus and challenged to follow Him and who need their basic needs of life met. Though the less, the least and the lost may not be the consuming mission of your life, you cannot be like Jesus without laboring for an A-plus here, even if it means a C-minus on subjects esteemed by the world.

The ring finger. This represents loving relationships with those God has wrapped around you in covenant community—your spouse, your children, your family and other believers close to you in spiritual community. Jesus said that low grades here are as great a concern as lack of love for the Father, Himself.

The middle finger. This represents the significant contribution God has assigned you to make on this earth. I’m not talking about your vocation, although your significant contribution may intersect with your vocation. I’m talking about essential purpose. For Jesus, it was “to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” What’s your significant contribution? You want to get an A-plus on that one.

The index finger. This represents discipleship as we guide fellow believers to become wholly devoted followers of Jesus. This is taking the principles the Scriptures teach, the priorities Jesus modeled and the primary threads that the Spirit of God has woven into the fabric of our hearts, and passing them on faithfully to others (2 Timothy 2:2).

The thumb. This is the largest of all, gives strength to all others and separates us from all beasts. This represents spiritual intimacy with the Father. A man came to Jesus one day and asked, in essence, “In what subject of life, above all others, must I raise my grade?” Jesus answered without hesitation: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength” (Mark 12:30). We are to daily, passionately, pour ourselves into Him and He into us.

Worn down, but longing one day for a “well done”? Don’t lop off one of your soul’s appendages in the pursuit of an A-plus on the world’s report card. Instead, begin to methodically eject the driven, margin-less pace of our culture from your cockpit. Then pitch the theology of excellence out the emergency door. Strap yourself into the seat next to Jesus as His beloved apprentice and enjoy the journey of learning to do all His things well over the long haul.

1 Associated Press, September 13, 2005.

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Less Is More Leadership: 8 secrets on how to lead and still have a life, by Dale Burke (\$15.19). For many leaders, successful careers or ministries are easily attained, but the accomplishment is shadowed by doubts of sacrificing family and personal life. For others, choosing to pursue fulfillment in their personal life brings the fear of lost career opportunities. Dale Burke offers secrets to cutting through the pile and getting to the “main stuff” God made you to do.

Spiritual Gift inventory (Network, by Willow Creek). (\$8.79). Help church members discover their spiritual gifts, personal style and God-given passion for serving in the body of Christ. With this six-session course, newly revised, churches will see increased participation, greater effectiveness and less burn-out in their congregation. (Included: leader’s guide; a participant’s guide; a DVD with drama vignettes; CD-ROM with coach’s guide, user’s guide and PowerPoint®.)

Simplify Your Spiritual Life, by Donald Whitney (\$9.59). We live in a complex world. Technology improves daily, and with it, the pace increases. No wonder our spiritual lives take a hit. But if the weight of the world is hindering your walk with the Lord, step back and evaluate. Jesus faced incredible challenges and suffered agonizing trials, but there was simplicity in His relationship with His Father that we can emulate.

First Things First, by Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill (\$11.20). Far from the traditional “be-more-efficient” time-management book with shortcut techniques, *First Things First* helps you create balance between your personal and professional responsibilities by focusing on what is important, not merely what is urgent.

Two Days Longer: Discovering more of God as you wait for Him, by Beth Lueders (\$11.99). The dilemma of the ages is man asking God to speed up and God asking man to slow down. Waiting feels contrary to our nature, yet waiting is essential to our faith. In *Two Days Longer*, you will discover that the Jesus who waited “two days longer” to travel to the bedside of his dying friend is the same God who orchestrates delays in your own life today.

Hearing God: Developing a conversational relationship with God, by Dallas Willard (\$12.00). Being close to God means communicating with Him. But how do we hear his voice? How can we be sure that what we think we hear is not our own subconscious? What role does the Bible play? What if what God says to us is not clear? In this updated classic, originally published as *In Search of Guidance*, the author provides insight into how we can hear God’s voice clearly and develop an intimate partnership with Him.

Hearing God’s Voice, by Henry and Richard Blackaby (\$14.39). Learn to discern the voice of God, identify ways He speaks and respond to revelations of His will.

How to Listen to God, by Charles Stanley (\$10.39). In the daily routine of life, the clamor of voices can obscure your spiritual hearing. Learn to distinguish God's voice from all the voices around you, and how to joyfully and obediently respond.

Making Room for God: A guide to contemplative prayer, by Melvyn Matthews (\$5.59). Increase your awareness of God by becoming more conscious of the value of your inner life. In doing so, you will become more sensitive to the needs of neighbors and the world. By deepening your prayer life, you can become closer to God and more spiritually connected.

Making Room for Life, by Randy Frazee (\$14.39). You can make room for satisfying relationships, for hobbies and for significant ministry—not by working faster or having more gadgets, but by simply choosing a lifestyle of conversation and community over a lifestyle of accumulation. The author's insights call you back to the kind of relationships and life rhythms you were created to enjoy.

First, Break All the Rules, by Marcus Buckingham, Curt Coffman (\$24.00). The authors, consultants for the Gallup Organization, reveal keys to becoming an excellent manager, based on more than 80,000 interviews conducted by Gallup during the past 25 years. Their keys include finding the right fit for employees, focusing on strengths of employees, defining the right results and selecting staff for talent—not just knowledge and skills.

Now Discover Your Strengths, by Marcus Buckingham, Donald O. Clifton (\$24.00). The authors advise a unique approach to effectively managing personnel: focus on enhancing people's strengths rather than eliminating their weaknesses. Included is a Web-based interactive component that allows readers to complete a questionnaire developed by the Gallup Organization and discover their own top-five inborn talents.

Follow This Path, by Curt Coffman, Gabriel Gonzalez-Molina (\$21.56). This volume of management theory argues that emotions have a strong impact on economics. Customer loyalty comes from a nonrational attachment to a company's employees and its brand. Workers, in turn, must feel emotionally connected to managers who value their contributions and give talent its head. The authors are management consultants for the Gallup Organization.

Margin, by Richard Swenson, M.D. (\$11.99). "Margin" is the space that once existed between ourselves and our limits. It's something held in reserve for contingencies or unanticipated situations. Dr. Richard Swenson provides a prescription against the danger of overloaded lives in four key areas: emotional energy, physical energy, time and finances.

The Overload Syndrome, Richard Swenson, M.D. (\$10.40). Do you dread getting up and going to work? Are your relationships strained because of stress? Do you sometimes wish you could check into the hospital just to get some sleep? Anyone living in today's society knows the struggle of trying to handle the load of life. *The Overload Syndrome* offers prescriptions to counteract the symptoms and restore time to rest and space to heal.

Boundaries, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend (\$11.99). A boundary is a personal property line that marks those things for which we are responsible—defining who we are and

who we are not. Often, Christians focus so much on being loving and unselfish that they forget their own limits and limitations. The authors offer biblically based ways to set healthy boundaries with our parents, spouses, children, friends, co-workers and even ourselves.

What Is the Father Like? By Philip Keller (\$12.00). This well-known devotional writer Keller explores the character of God by reflecting on selected attributes. The God who emerges is a gracious and loving Father who exercises infinite justice and mercy in taking care of his children.