

## A CALL TO EXCELLENCE

Excellence: 'the quality of being outstanding or extremely good' (Oxford Online Dictionary)

Society applauds excellence. Businesses present awards for excellence to encourage the pursuit of excellence amongst its employees. Universities proudly set up centres of excellence. Porsche markets its cards through its magazine, Excellence. Excellence is a quality to be admired and to be striven after.

In researching this article I came across a host of great excellence quotes:

According to the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC), "The will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential.... these are the keys that will unlock the door to personal excellence" (Confucius)

Aristotle, the great Greek philosopher (384-322 BC) wrote: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit". General Colin Powell (1937-), the first African-American to be appointed US Secretary State, said something similar: "If you are going to achieve excellence in big things, you develop the habit in little matters. Excellence is not an exception, it is a prevailing attitude"

Excellence is not the same as perfection. As Vince Lombardi (1913-1970), the American football player and coach, declared: "Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection we can catch excellence"

Nor is excellence necessarily about hitting the headlines. "If I cannot do great things", said Martin Luther King (1929-1968), "I can do small things in a great way"

According to 'The Professionalism Blog', "Excellence is ... the root of professionalism. It is about putting in maximum effort, not just to get something done but to achieve the best possible result and to do it with passion! An individual's choice not to accept second rate or second best for themselves or those around them means not just looking at the big ideas and issues but paying attention to the little things too. They all make a difference"

And yet for many ministers the pursuit of excellence is a non-starter. For instance, when in 1994 we launched the Richard Baxter Institute of Ministry (subsequently renamed Ministry Today UK), we stated that our aim was "to promote excellence in the practice of ministry enabling ministers and pastoral leaders to become increasingly effective in the mission to which Christ has called them". But then we discovered that survival rather than excellence was the key concern for many, with the result that we had to restate our aim in terms of 'surviving and thriving in ministry'. We now say that "The aim of Ministry Today UK is to be a supportive resource for all in pastoral leadership, so that they may not only survive, but also grow and develop, becoming more effective in the ministry to which Christ has called them".

In 1995 Hodder and Stoughton published my book, *A Call To Excellence: an essential guide to Christian leadership*. To my surprise it did not sell half as well as my earlier book *Dynamic Leadership*. Sadly I believe that the reason for one book selling so much better had a lot to do with the title. Ministers are not into excellence.

Yet however unpopular the notion of excellence may be in some quarters, I cannot escape the fact that as Christians we are called to excellence

Indeed, I came across an article on the web by Kelley Hartnett, an American church consultant, entitled *The Problem With Excellence*, in which excellence is primarily viewed in negative terms. In her experience excellence can be a euphemism for perfection. She asks such questions as:

- How is striving toward excellence paralyzing you?
- How is an expectation of excellence paralyzing the people around you?
- Is your church so polished that flawed people feel intimidated? Unacceptable?
- Which opportunities have you missed because what you had to offer wasn't good enough?
- By whose standards? Is striving toward excellence becoming an excuse for workaholism, procrastination, and missed deadlines?

My experience of church life is very different. Far too many churches are characterised by the acceptance of mediocrity rather than a passion for excellence. I identify with Lee Strobel, who was a teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois (1987-2000), who in his web-article, *Attractive Excellence for the Unchurched*, wrote: " 'Good enough' is not good enough -0 at least, not when you're opening your church's doors to the unchurched. All too often, churches are mired in mediocrity. Their facilities sorely need a new coat of paint, the piano is woefully out of tune, the sound system is tinny, and the lighting is poor. And the Christians usually don't mind very much because – well, we're family. But just like you clean your house when you invite company over, churches need to put emphasis on excellence when welcoming seekers from the community".

But important as it is to win people for Christ, the key motivation for excellence is surely to please God. Two words of the Apostle Paul immediately come to mind. Writing to the church in Corinth, Paul says: "Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God". Later when writing to the church in Colossae, he says: "Whatever you do,.... do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (or as Eugene Peterson renders this verse: "Let every detail in your lives... be done in the name of the Master, Jesus"). Excellence is never content with the second-best. A text I often quote in this respect is found in 2 Sam 21:24, where David says: "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing".

Many an old church building has on it the initials ADMG. Contrary to Google, this is not an acronym for the Association of Deer Management Groups nor for the Art and Design Management Group – rather it is a Latin Tag, *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam* – 'For the greater glory of God'. This surely is what excellence within a Christian context is all about. It is about giving our best for God; going the extra mile for God; always seeking to improve for God. ADMG – surely this should be the mark of every Christian's ministry. Not to pursue excellence is not to be passionate for God.