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THE SPIRIT OF EXCELLENCE

by Gary North

And the Lord spake unto Moses saying, See, I have called by name Bazaleel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship (Ex. 31:1-3).

There is a scene in the movie, "Chariots of Fire," in which one of the protagonists, Harold Abrahams, England's champion sprinter, confronts two senior administrators at Cambridge University. The incident supposedly took place in the early 1920's. The two officials have called him in to explain to him that university policy frowns "professionalism" in sports activities. Abrahams had hired a professional trainer to coach him. The two officials laud his performances, which have brought the University considerable prestige. But the senior administrator tells him that the use of a trainer is not quite within the tradition of amateur sports so cherished by the school.

Abrahams is outraged. He tells them that their much-cherished amateur standing is nothing but a facade, that they only want performances to look as though they were performed by amateurs. But they want victories. Then he challenges them: "**I pursue excellence, and I shall carry the future with me.**" He leaves the room, and the Master says to his associate, "His God is the God of a different mountain."

The movie is a dramatized (and historically lax) account of a famous rivalry of the early 1920's, between Abrahams and a Scottish runner, Eric Liddell [LIDdull]. Both ran in the Olympic games in 1924, Abrahams winning the 100 meter dash, and Liddell winning the 400 meters. (The movie failed to mention that Liddell had held the British 100 yards record of 9.7 seconds, and that he set a world record of 47.6 that day in the 400 meter race. The movie also did not mention that both Liddell and Abrahams ran in the 200 meter dash. Liddell came in third, and Abrahams finished last.)

Abrahams was obsessed with winning every race. Liddell, who was to become a Congregationalist missionary to China, ran for the glory of God. He loved to run. Liddell decided to forego the 100 meter dash because the trials were held on Sunday. In the movie version, he came under severe pressure from the British Olympic Committee and the Prince of Wales to run on the sabbath. Another runner — a rich British lord, who ran simply for enjoyment — gave

his spot in the 400 meter race to Liddell, since he was content with the silver medal he had already won in the hurdles.

All of this makes a powerful emotional impression, but it never happened. The true story is even more amazing. You do not switch races at the Olympics; you must qualify first, before the Games. Liddell had known for months before the Games that he could not run the 100 because of the sabbath. The British sports world did want him to run it, but he refused. What he did was to select the 400, a distance which he had never really concentrated on before. He trained for a little over ten months, in the winter of 1923-24. Then he went out and set the world record. "The secret of my success over the 400 meters," he told a reporter 20 years later, "is that I run the first 200 meters as hard as I can. Then, for the second 200 meters, with God's help, I run harder." (D.P. Thompson. *Eric H. Liddell: Athlete and Missionary* [Barnock, Crieff, Perthshire, Scotland: The Research Unit, 1971], p. 55.)

Driven or Called?

The impression the movie presents of Abrahams is that the man was driven by a desire to excel. He wanted to win every race, to "show" those who had snubbed him because he was Jewish. He was overly sensitive to any slight or perceived slight from others. He could not live with defeat. But as the final scenes of the movie indicate, he was discontented with his success. He could not live with either failure or success. The movie presents a scene in which he is getting a rubdown while he is talking to the narrator of the film, one of the less distinguished members of the Olympic team who had been his friend in college. (Actually, the two did not meet until both had graduated; the narrator attended Oxford, not Cambridge.) He bemoans his fate. He comments on the serenity of the other man — a serenity he has always found elusive. He cannot explain why he feels compelled to run, but only that he must. Nothing satisfies him.

Liddell, on the other hand, is pressured by his sister to give up running because he seems to love it too much. She wants him to go on the mission field, where their father had served. He has to explain to her that God gave him his speed, and that he runs for God, and because he enjoys it. "Jennie, God made me fast!" He sees his ability as God-given, something which opens doors for his lectures all over Scotland. Running, in short, is his **calling**. He is called by God to run.

Liddell refuses to run on the sabbath. Instead, the movie shows us, he preaches in a large church in Paris. It is the most powerful scene in the movie; unfortunately, his biography indicates that it never took place. He actually preached in a small Scots Kirk the following Sunday at a religious service held for members of the Games. But the screenwriter understood the implication of his refusal to run on Sunday, and this is conveyed in the movie version. As he reads from Isaiah 40, "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing" (v.15), the camera switches to the Games: men falling, losing their races, lying alongside the track, alone in their agony and defeat. He continues to read. We hear his voice as we see the races: "All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity" (v. 17). Steeplechase runners fall into the mud. The film editor makes it clear: Liddell's sermon has stood the test of time, and all those faceless athletes who ran on that Sunday in 1924 are long forgotten. Like the nations that rise and fall, and are subsequently forgotten, so were the representatives of nations at the Olympic Games. But Liddell's stand still moves the hearts of men, even those who do not share his view of the sabbath. He stood for God; they ran for personal and national pride. His story is worth telling; the others are forgotten — except Abrahams, of course, who as a Jew did not violate **his** sabbath, and who won the 100 on Monday.

The movie is not very accurate historically, but it is quite accurate theologically. Abrahams had no sabbath, externally and especially internally. He was driven, running for dear life, running for he knew not what. In contrast, Liddell had a sabbath, externally and internally. He knew why he running, for Whom he was running, and why on Sunday he would not be running.

Abrahams pursued excellence, the movie has him say. Liddell also pursued excellence. The movie shows that they both trained extensively, as any Olympic-grade athlete must. They were both self-disciplined. Yet Liddell comes out as the man who knew how to rest, for he knew why he was running. Abrahams lived a long life, dying a respected statesman in Britain in 1978. Liddell died at age 43 in 1945, in a Japanese concentration camp for foreigners who had been caught in China. He died a few hours after he had requested that a friend sing his favorite hymn: "Be still, my soul." He knew how to rest.

Liddell excelled with rest. Abrahams excelled without rest. One man was called by God; the other was driven by self. Each was victorious. Each received honor. Each is in the record books. But the movie makes it clear which man had peace: the man who pursued a personal God, not personal excellence.

Confrontation

The movie is clearly hostile to the British tradition of rule by aristocrat-amateurs. The movie begins in a railway station, with scarred war veterans loading the bags of the young men who missed the war and who were off to Cambridge. The class conflict is evident in the rude comments of one of the baggage handlers about fighting for the likes of them. The eating hall at Cambridge has a huge plaque which bears the names of those from Cambridge who died in the war. In the confrontation between Liddell and the Olympic Committee members, the gruff old chairman rejects Liddell's explanation about not running on the sabbath. "In my day, it was country first, God second."

Another Committee member remarks, "Yes, and the war was the result."

The impact of this film was unpredicted. It won four Academy Awards, including best picture, yet a few weeks earlier, the United States distributor, Warner Brothers, had signed a contract with a Christian distribution organization which allowed the firm to sell tickets in bulk at steep discounts to churches and other religious groups. They frantically cancelled the deal within a few weeks after the Award. The distributors had been worried about too few ticket sales; soon, they worried about too many ticket sales — at a discount. They had excellence in their hands, and they did not recognize it. They did not expect the Academy to recognize it, either. It was a classic case of poor economic forecasting. It cost them plenty.

I attended a special screening of the film. A representative of the discount ticket program introduced it at a morning showing. He was a youth pastor of some sort. He was wildly enthusiastic. He said he had seen it 15 times, and learned something new each time. After the movie, he was asked by one man if it wouldn't be a good idea to show the movie to the Dallas Cowboys, to try to convince the team not to play football on the sabbath. The man was shocked. "Well, if you want to try to pursue that sort of sectarian position, go right ahead. But we want to show the film because it teaches young people about morality and patriotism." It was incredible; what the movie explicitly was **not** about was patriotism. It was about precisely the "sectarian" position the man mentioned: sabbath rest. Then he added, "You must have a lot more faith than I do. I don't ever expect to see Sundays in America without professional football." The man had seen the film 16 times at that point, and he still didn't understand it.

Why was he still confused? He had not yet recognized an important message of the film: Christians are supposed to take seriously the words of Isaiah 40: "It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity" (vv. 22-23). This was what Liddell preached in the movie; this is what he told those who wanted to get him to run on Sunday. When patriotism conflicts with a fundamental biblical principle, we reject patriotism.

The pragmatism of today's Christian leadership runs so deeply that they no longer recognize a confrontation when it is in front of them. Could men of Liddell's persuasion play football with the Dallas Cowboys? Could they recommend that others patronize the games? What was this movie about, if not about restructuring lives, and then society, in terms of biblical principle? But our ticket salesman was interested only in giving young people a bit of entertainment that would teach them "morality and patriotism." As long as the kids come out to see the film, all is well.

But what if some of the kids see what the movie is all about? What if they see that the movie is telling them of a higher calling than simply running a race excellently? What if running the race of life excellently forces them to challenge the state, or totally compromised churches that sell discount tickets to big-time Hollywood movies? If men like Eric Liddell were to begin to fill the pews of the evangelical churches of America, or any nation, what would be the effect? **Today's church leaders would find themselves facing an army — an army which they are not prepared to lead.**

Today's churches are pathologically afraid of any confrontation with the powers that be. They may cheer on Eric Liddell, they may applaud Francis Schaeffer's *The Christian Manifesto*, but the reality is this: cheering isn't resistance, and applause isn't a confrontation. Entertainment isn't risk-taking. Discount tickets aren't expensive.

Excellence and Mission

Liddell and Abrahams pursued excellence. The representatives of the British establishment could not deal with either man. The establishment no longer journeyed to the mountain of the God of the Bible. They were gentlemen, not pilgrims; they were leaders, not prophets. They pursued their goals elegantly, as the hurdler did, practicing his craft by having his valet place glasses of champagne on each hurdle, and then having him watch for the slightest jiggle. Liddell's God was the God that Cambridge's Master believed was dwelling on Abrahams' mountain. Abrahams no longer took that God seriously, but his cultural inheritance still showed traces of that God's covenant. He would pursue excellence, and carry the future with him.

The decline of the British Empire after 1918 was rapid. The pale shadow of greatness has become a farce. The British conquered the Falkland's Argentine invaders by using a leased flagship (the *Invincible*, the aircraft carrier, had been sold to Australia). It took weeks, and the economic costs were horrendous. The outcome was in doubt for weeks. The geography of the situation points to an ultimate Argentine victory a few years from now. But the British defended their sovereignty one last time. The "stiff upper lip" is a bloody lip now. Watching the British fight a war is like watching Muhammed Ali fight his latest challenger. Even when he wins, it is pathetic, an embarrassment to watch.

What happened? Britain ruled the waves for centuries. How did the glory that was Britain fade? Simple: **Britain refused to listen to the God of Mt. Sinai.** Built in terms of future-orientation, the dominion covenant, and a will to bring Western civilization to backward nations, the Empire subdued whole chunks of the world. A few thousand young men governed India for two centuries. What they accomplished, no previous Indian in modern times could have contemplated, and no subsequent Indian has achieved. India exported not only cheap textiles, but grain. Peter Drucker describes this achievement of the Indian Civil Service:

"In its greatest period, the second half of the nineteenth century, it never numbered more than a thousand men. Most were very young, mere lads in their early twenties, for life expectancy was brutally short for the white man in India's hostile climate, in which malaria and dysentery were endemic and cholera an annual visitor.

"Most of these young men of the alien race who administered the huge subcontinent were stationed in total isolation in small villages or on dusty crossroads in which they did not see for months on end anyone who spoke their language or shared their concerns. Only a few survived long enough to retire, with modest pensions, to England from whence they had come and of which they always dreamed.

"These young men who administered British India were rather dull and uninteresting. After a short apprenticeship, they were put into an assignment of their own to sink or swim. These men were younger sons of poor country parsons, with no prospects at home and little standing in English society. Their pay was low; their

opportunities for loot or gain as their predecessors had enjoyed in the swashbuckling days of the East India Company a hundred years earlier had, by 1860, been completely eliminated.

"These untrained, not very bright, and totally inexperienced youngsters ran districts comparable in size and population to small European countries. And they ran them all by themselves with a minimum of direction and supervision from the top . . . They gave India, for the first time in its long and tragic history, peace, a measure of freedom from famine, and a little security of life, worship, and property. They administered justice impartially and, at least as far as they themselves were concerned, honestly and without corruption."

How did they do it? There was no top management. For two centuries they ruled without making fundamental policy — which was the cause of their demise, Drucker says. "The jobs the young men were assigned were big and challenging. There was enough scope in each of them to keep even a good man interested and occupied for many years. The job was the young man's job, and not a job as an 'assistant to' anybody. He was accountable. He was responsible. And it was up to him to organize the job as he saw fit. Performance standards were high and uncompromising. A young, basically untrained and unprepared amateur was expected to give perfect justice; to be totally impartial; to maintain public order, safety on the roads and in the villages, and religious and civil peace. And he had to do this by persuasion, by the authority of his own person and by his mere presence; to have to invoke force, for instance to call in the military, was considered failure. And while the individual job was anonymous, the Service had high pride in itself and a deep commitment to standards and mission. It was imbued with the highest spirit." (Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* [New York: Harper & Row, 1974], pp. 403-5.)

In this century, the Western sense of mission has died. The bureaucrats are acting like bureaucrats. All of them expect to retire on a pension, and an early retirement at that. They shuffle papers, place responsibility elsewhere, avoid making decisions, and avoid conflict whenever possible. The system substitutes impersonal responsibility to a rule book written by other bureaucrats for personal responsibility to a holy God who has delivered a rule book for all of life. The sense of mission is gone, and with it went the British Empire.

Rule by amateurs failed when the amateurs lost their willingness to pursue excellence. Those who pursued excellence have carried the future. The Marxists have pursued excellence; they have a sense of mission. (See the fine book by the former British Communist organizer, Douglas Hyde: *Dedication and Leadership* [Notre Dame University Press, 1956.] **Step by step, those with a vision of the future have captured the present.** They have invested spiritual capital first, and then economic capital. **They have invested the whole of their lives**, just as those young men did in India a century ago. And as we have seen, a minority rules a vast majority, when that majority has no vision, no sense of mission, no spirit of excellence to draw upon. They are ruled by those who possess these inner qualities.

The Collapse of Bureaucracy

What hope do Christians have of capturing the seats of power? How can they escape the bondage of Egypt? First, they must trust the God of history to deliver them as He

delivered His people in Moses' day. Second, they should expect to hear the law of God, as the Hebrews heard at Sinai, and to obey it. This was Israel's tool of conquest. Third, they must be of good courage, as God commanded (Joshua 1:6-7). Fourth, they must find those men in whom the spirit of excellence dwells, in every field of human endeavor. Once found, they must be guided by them, as the Hebrews were guided in the building of the tabernacle, until such time as their spirit of excellence fails or they become misusers of the gift.

Bureaucracies do not survive the loss of vision and sense of mission by their members. The Soviet Union has few Marxists left, men who believe that the state will wither away, or that the kingdom of necessity will bring in the kingdom of freedom, as Marx and Engels promised. They are being ground down by a bureaucratic machine that they cannot admit even exists, for such things as bureaucracies are not Marxist, officially. Bureaucracies can persevere long after the light has gone out of them, but they cannot survive forever. They need capital, yet they squander it. They require vision, but they snuff it out. They must be small, lean, and flexible in order to perform efficiently, yet the imperative of bureaucracy is to grow, to lock in its position, and to become overstaffed. Advancement is by the number of subordinates you control. It multiplies its appendages. It centralizes. It seals its doom. As the mid-nineteenth French social philosopher, Lamennais, once remarked: "Centralization induces apoplexy at the center and anemia at the extremities."

The goal is decentralization. We need a multiplication of profit-seeking companies that offer opportunities for gain to innovators and risk-takers. We need less civil government, less bureaucracy, and more Bible-governed law codes. We need a sense of mission to permeate the whole society, in every nation. We need men and women who are committed to the hope that in time and on earth, their efforts will count for something. We need people who are more afraid of boredom than they are of responsibility.

In short, we need men who will say to aging bureaucrats, "We pursue excellence, and we will carry the future with us." But they need the God-given spirit of excellence — a personal spirit who links men's hearts with God's will, through their conformity to God's law. We need a nation of Aholiabs and Bazaleels, in every field. We should expect to find them, in God's good time. The fact that we have so few of them today, and that they are unrecognized, need

not concern us too greatly. Their time will come. Their training for the great race will not be in vain.

Conclusion

One of the problems that plagues the Christian reconstruction movement today is the lack of qualified, dedicated workers who approach their callings in the way that those young British bureaucrats approached theirs. When we attempt to begin some project, we find it difficult to recruit competent workers. Furthermore, most Christian leaders today are amateurs. We have not been trained to lead. This lack of managerial experience, coupled with a lack of dedication on the part of subordinates, creates a major inhibiting factor in our efforts.

One of the best ways to become a good manager is to have worked under a good manager. Unfortunately, for over a century, Christians have not sought positions of major responsibility in every area of life. They have not become managers in the past, so those of us who are attempting to build up Christian institutional alternatives are not well trained. We are working on a "hit and miss" basis. Our institutions are generally underfunded, understaffed, and not highly efficient. Until we have mastered the art of management, not to mention policy-making, we will continue to struggle. The funding will come only when we perform better in our callings.

The Christian school movement offers us hope. We will be providing the secular world a growing number of educated, literate graduates who are more willing to work and less willing to steal than their public school counterparts. If this future generation is motivated to view life as Eric Liddell did — as a race to be trained for and won with humility and grace — then the Christian reconstruction movement will see progress within two generations. But if a vision of excellence does not become integral to at least a sizable minority of the graduates, then hope will be deferred again. As Proverbs says, "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick; but he that gathereth by labour shall increase" (Pr. 13:12).

We are under the terms of the dominion covenant (Gen. 1:28). We must perform to the highest standards. We must be governed by God's spirit of excellence. Not excellence as such, or excellence for the sake of race, country, or fame, but excellence for the glory of God. When Christians once again accept this view of life, we can expect to see the world turned upside down.

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