Chapter 14

Worship and the Risk of Faith

Risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success,
but in terms of the value of goal.
—Ralph Winter, founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission

The safest place for ships is in the harbor
but that's not why ships were built.
—Anonymous

There's a popular term in Christian circles these days. We use it to describe wise decision-making and priority setting. The term is "balance." To have the right proportion of work, play, worship and ministry is to have balance. In our church services, if we are doing too much singing and not enough Bible study, we might be out of balance. If I am working too much and not taking time to rest or to gather with Christians for worship, I would be off balance. These are sensible ideas, and necessary for spiritual, physical and emotional health. It keeps us from being too extreme in any one segment of life.

But the idea of balance can be misunderstood and misapplied. In pursuit of balance we can end up diluting our loyalty to God. We can give in to self-protection and self-preservation, our zeal for God can be easily compromised and our faith become sadly lukewarm.

What sort of scales should we use to check our balance? How can we avoid becoming so well adjusted that we look no different at all from the rest of secular society? What is God's idea of balance?

Worshipers are risk-takers

When the white-hot revelation of the glory of God bursts in, worshipers do things that aren't normal. They march to the beat of a different drum. The Bible is full of people that were captured by a revelation from God and who became insanely devoted to God. By human standards, they would be considered crazy and imbalanced.

When the Lord said to Abram " … leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you," (Gen 12:1). "Abram left, as the Lord had told him … " (Gen 12:4). Hearing God's voice emboldened him to take a risk of faith. The author of Hebrews tells us "By faith Abraham … obeyed and went, *even though he did not know where he was going*" (Heb 11:8, emphasis added). Without any guarantees, no medical provision or police protection, he left behind all the security of his family and country of origin. How "balanced" was that?

As a worshipping teenager, David's zeal for the Lord energized him to risk his life to defend the Lord's honor. His heart of worship drove him to attempt the impossible, to reject the armor of Saul and plunge into battle, trusting in God's authority rather than the inventions of men, like "spear or sword or javelin." He challenges and slays the giant so that " … the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (1 Sam 17:46). How balanced was that? This was a zealous worshipper whose actions perfectly expressed the zeal of his songs to Yahweh.

The apostle Paul is a shining example of a worshiper whose life is full of risk. It all begins with a light from heaven flashing around Paul as Jesus reveals himself. From this time on, for Paul, " … to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Once he got his marching orders from Jesus, Paul began to preach. As he quickly became a powerful preacher, the Jews conspired to kill him, keeping a close watch on the walls of Jerusalem for a chance to ambush him.

How balanced was Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, when he continued his ministry even though he was " … hard pressed on every side … perplexed ... persecuted … struck down ... suffering beating, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights and hunger?" (2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5). There was no question for Paul whether he should live a risk-filled life to be a light to the Gentiles. He was compelled by the pursuit of God's glory. His love for God made him other-centered. He didn't mind whether he lived or died, as long as he could help people and finish his race of faith. Balance as a form of tame safety was never on the agenda.

Are we too civilized?

Erwin McManus has written a book called "The Barbarian Way" in which he calls the church to the raw, primal faith of the early Christians. McManus contrasts the radical lifestyle of the early followers of Jesus to the watered down version of modern Christianity. When Christianity becomes too civilized, there isn't much talk of sacrifice and risk. Everyone is promised comfort, security, safety and prosperity. If safety and security are our main goal, then *losing* that worldly security can become a fear that defines our life. Max Lucado says it well:

> When fear shapes our lives, safety becomes our god. When safety becomes our god, we worship the risk-free life. Can the safety lover do anything great? Can the risk-averse accomplish noble deeds? For God? For others? No. The fear-filled cannot love deeply. Love is risky. They cannot give to the poor. Benevolence has no guarantee of return … The worship of safety emasculates greatness.[1]

The positive version of Lucado's statement, "The worship of safety emasculates greatness" is "the worship of God leads to greatness." When faith shapes our lives, we

become people who worship and do the bidding of a great God. Worshipers of God are free to take risks because they are safe in God's care.

Here are some of McManus' observations on faith and risk:

> We have lost the simplicity of that raw, untamed, and primal faith …Jesus is being lost in a religion bearing His name. People are being lost because they cannot reconcile Jesus' association with Christianity. Christianity has become docile, domesticated, civilized.
>
> The result and proof of faith are that you get to live a life without risk, which is ironic when you realize that for the early church, faith was a risky business.
>
> The more you trust Him, the more you risk on His behalf. The more you love him, the more you will love others. If you genuinely embrace his sacrifice, you will joyfully embrace a sacrificial life.[2]

The "barbarian call" McManus describes isn't about a faddish trend among young people, it's about the ancient call to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves. As Erwin says, "A world without God cannot wait for us to choose the safe path."

What do I risk?

While I find the stories of Bible heroes inspiring, my lifestyle looks very different. I'm not fighting nine-foot tall giants or traversing across a dangerous military zone. I'm not a prophet in the wilderness eating locusts and wearing animal skins nor am I in danger of being thrown to the lions. What does a radical life of faith look like for the middle class North American?

The root issues of living a life on the edge of faith are the same, regardless of our station in life or the age we live in. We are called to listen to God and obey Him. We are to follow the unique path that God has for each of us, even if it's radically different from what our culture, or our family of origin would have us do. We are impassioned by the pursuit of God's glory. We do what Jesus asks us, even when we feel weak and overwhelmed by the task ahead.

While I was still a teenager, God took me by surprise. For the first time in my life, I really got a glimpse of him and worshipped him. Soon after, he began showing me powerful but vague glimpses of a calling to ministry. I graduated from university, eager to move forward. For the next few years I found myself in humble jobs that gave me just enough money to survive while I was doing in-service training in my church. I had seen enough of God to be launched into a faith journey. I didn't know where I was going, so I was forced to depend on God for guidance.

The sensible or "balanced" thing to do would be to pursue a normal career, or perhaps get a graduate degree to equip me for a profession. In fact, I was accepted to the Masters Degree program at UCLA for hospital administration, a field I found interesting. But somehow I knew deep inside that I wasn't meant to pursue a standard kind of job in the marketplace. I had to wait until God opened the right door of opportunity.

A few years after getting married to Linda, our first big leap was to relocate to Santa Barbara in 1983 to help out with a new church plant. This move was in response to a word from God I received while driving down the freeway one day—"move to Santa Barbara to help with the new church." We found jobs to meet our expenses while serving as intern pastors. We learned new ministry skills and traveled abroad to serve on a prayer ministry team. We were forging ahead into unknown territory, simply responding to the open doors before us.

In these early years I made lots of mistakes in church leadership. I once heard someone say that church leaders learn and make mistakes just like everyone else, except they do it *in front of other people*. We learn to teach only by teaching; at first we may sound silly. My first attempts at leading worship were nerve-wracking experiences that left me drained. We learn to lead only by making lots of wrong decisions along the way. Then we have to admit that we were wrong. If embarrassment is one of the main costs of the faith journey, it's no big deal compared to the price paid by Christian martyrs.

After a year and a half of volunteer work in that church, we were invited to move to Canada, to help with another church plant. We left behind the familiarity and comfort of Southern California to go to a new country. As we prayed and waited on God, it seemed like the right thing to do. We launched out, sometimes wondering if we had made the right move. The cost of moving to beautiful British Columbia hasn't been great, except for the pain of leaving behind many friends and family members and a culture that was comfortable. Because we've helped plant several churches, we've left behind lots of dear friends along the way.

Go Everywhere

My personal path has involved lots of short-term travel to lead worship and teach on worship. In the last twenty-five years I've visited twenty-nine countries on ministry trips of various kinds. One key moment for me in hearing God's call to the nations came when I was waiting for a dentist appointment. Next to the dentist's office was a travel agency. While waiting for my dentist appointment I wandered over to this shop and stopped in front of a large rack of travel brochures. The brochures advertised destinations all over the world. God said to me "*that* is where I've called you to go." I realized he meant "everywhere." It made me weep.

On another occasion God told me "you are like seed in my hand; as a farmer scatters seed on his land I'm going to throw you out to the nations." I don't believe you get extra points with God by going overseas. There's plenty of need in our own backyard to keep us busy for a lifetime. International travel just happens to be part of my journey.

In 2002, our entire family of ten took a three-month trip to Hong Kong to share life with a community of full time Christian workers and new converts. We lived on a campus in the hills of Sha Tin that housed many new Christians, most of whom came out of drug addiction and other abusive situations.

In this brief mission experiment, our family shared meals, worship and community with lots of men who had never experienced a healthy family or a safe home. We were somewhat uncomfortable because of the hot climate, the language barrier and the unfamiliar routine, but it was nothing compared to the hardships a full time missionary faces. It was another great learning experience that was possible only because we took a big chunk of time, energy and money to do something out of the ordinary.

Raising and teaching our children

Another dimension of our lives is having a large family. Telling the long version of that story would require an entire book, but the relevant point for this chapter is that parenting is itself a risk of faith. When we dedicate ourselves to God, it means raising our children to follow him. It means teaching them everything we can, and including them in a lifestyle of serving others. It means praying that they will have a genuine life-changing faith. But ultimately, we depend on God to reveal himself to our children and to instill in them a vibrant knowledge of Himself that guides them for their whole lives. Linda specifically felt called by God to raise our kids to be worshipers.

My wife, Linda, has been a mother for twenty-four years and home-schooling our kids for the last twelve years. She feels specifically called to the ministry of discipling our children in the context of home schooling. While we can see good results on every level: spiritual, relational and academic, sometimes she wonders if her efforts will really pay off. When one of the kids is resisting her leadership or when there's a personality clash, she struggles but perseveres.

In my travels, I often mention to my hosts and audiences that my wife has taught our eight kids at home. I get all kinds of stares of unbelief and oohs and aahs. "How can she possibly manage all of that work?!" they ask. The way she manages it is that her life isn't about her own comfort. She doesn't require much time to herself. Her life is other-centered. Her love for God overflows into a passion to serve and train her kids to follow Jesus. For her it's a privilege; it's simply the right thing to do. The cost to her in time and energy is huge, but she has no regrets.

Amidst the strain of mothering and teaching many children, she hangs onto God, remembering his clear instructions to her to teach her children. She says, "I take risks because I know I'm loved and I can trust the one who loves me. In the role of a discipler, what you're asking for can *only* be done by the Holy Spirit." Worshipers who've caught the heart of God attempt the impossible. Ongoing intimacy with God fuels her to lavish love on our kids and trust him for the results.

On the hard days, she used to wonder what it would have been like to be a career woman. She comes from a highly educated family who placed a supreme value on professional achievement. She graduated at the top of her class in a very high-ranking university and could have easily moved up the ladder of professional success. As she journeyed with Jesus, that wasn't the path that opened up before her. She was content in being "change in the pocket of God," willing to be spent however God might choose.

But she is about to begin a new adventure. Linda is training to embark on a new career as a midwife. This will be the fulfillment of a vision she has had for many years. It took a lot of perseverance and patience even to get started on this path. For many years she has been mentoring young mothers, teaching on childbirth and assisting at births.

When I first met Linda, her plan was to go to India as a single missionary. Marriage was the farthest thing from her mind. She's a very missions-minded person and so for the past twenty-four years, her primary mission has been to raise our kids, and to lead them to the Lord. While her parenting role will continue, the demands are decreasing because the kids are growing up. Four of our kids are attending universities and one has already graduated. Linda's new mission will be to serve families in our community as a midwife. And perhaps her original vision of serving in a third world country will also be realized in the coming years.

At the age of forty-nine, Linda will begin a three-year university program that will qualify her to be a midwife. For the past three years, while applying to midwifery schools, she has shared with me her doubts about undertaking a new career at this stage of life. When I remind her that she graduated from UCLA with honors in the nursing program, she says, "That was a long time ago."

But I've encouraged her to go for it again. We both know this is a risk. It will require a huge output of time, energy and money even to complete her degree. But this is who God has *made her to be*, so it's a risk worth taking. Her passion is to make a difference in people's lives, to somehow pass on a blessing from God. Serving through midwifery is the most strategic use of her gifts to demonstrate Jesus' compassion.

Staying on the Edge

Whether it is stories from church history or the Bible, one thing is clear: worshipers are risk-takers. When you see Jesus, and I mean *really* see him, it prepares you to take

leaps of faith. But more than that, seeing Jesus prepares you to live a life of faith. You find yourself doing things that may not always be sensible from a worldly point of view.

Faith and worship are interdependent. The worshiping heart is a believing heart; by faith, we see God, which leads us to worship him. In worship, we see more of God's grandeur and love. Beholding God's glory builds our faith and compels us to do acts of faith. In doing acts of faith we are acutely aware of our dependence on God, which in turn compels us to pray. So, faith and worship go hand in hand.

Simon Guillebaud, a missionary to Burundi who has had many close calls with death while living in a country racked by violence, explains how "common sense" can displace the adventure of faith:

"Common sense will so often rationalize averageness and lukewarmness—I shouldn't think there was ever a man or woman of God who followed the path of common sense at key decision-making times." Simon further explains that common sense is indeed a gift, but can be overruled by God's ways:

> I'm not advocating an abandoning of our critical faculties, a spontaneous embarking on ill-conceived adventures, or a jeopardizing of the safety and well-being of others. Neither am I saying that common sense is wrong, or is to be jettisoned as conflicting at all times with the life of faith. Common sense is a God-given faculty, an endowment without which we couldn't survive. However, common sense wouldn't advocate sending Jesus to the cross … Common sense rationalizes away most of the dynamics of faith, because it operates on a different plane.[3]

Oswald Chambers speaks of a "glorious uncertainty" we have in walking by faith:

> The nature of the spiritual life is that we are certain in our uncertainties … Certainty is the mark of the common-sense life; gracious uncertainty is the mark of the spiritual life … Leave the whole thing to him, it is gloriously uncertain how he'll come in, but he will come.[4]

Hudson Taylor, the great 19th century missionary to China, said: "Unless there's an element of risk in our exploits for God, there's no need for faith."

Through every chapter of my life I've been in challenging situations that require me to do things I've never done before. Not always a comfortable and predictable life, but it forces me to stay dependent on God, asking for help everyday. Linda and I haven't stagnated in growing as disciples of Jesus. We have to keep learning from him because we can't do life without him.

Applying the faith-risk lifestyle of our worshiping heroes to our own daily lives can be done without crossing oceans, leaving behind family and friends. One big key in knowing how to live out your worship is what you're good at doing and what you're trained to do. If he made you to be an accountant or a school-teacher or a truck driver then a worship-faith-risk life will look unique for you in your occupation.

Worship music ministry was a no-brainer for me. I started writing worship songs as a seventeen-year old baby Christian and haven't stopped writing since. When someone asked Brian McLaren why he writes so many books, he said, "I can't stop writing." I can relate. I had to do what was "in me." That meant pouring my life and resources into music ministry, regardless of how I benefited from it.

I won't elaborate on the other steps we should all take in figuring out God's will for our lives—things like evaluating our gifts and abilities and asking for input from others who have seen our strengths and weaknesses. But I will say that another key in being true to the revelation you've received is continuing to ask God "what do you want me to do today?" Aside from the obvious tasks of life, how does he want you to invest your time? You can only take one faith step at a time. Most of those steps are small, simple choices.

If you keep asking God what he wants you to do each day maybe he'll give you an idea that takes you way out of your comfort zone—something completely out-of-the-box—something that your friends might think is "way out of balance." Showing kindness to a stranger, or engaging a co-worker in a conversation that's more than superficial, may be the kind of uncomfortable adventures of faith God is inviting you into. You don't have to cross an ocean; maybe you need to just cross the street.

I'm learning to take the risk of caring for people who can't return the favor. I'm learning that " … caring for orphans and widows … " (Jas 1:27 NLT) doesn't necessarily mean they'll be converted. True religion is to give despite what you get back. It's a risk to pour out your love to severely broken people. Sometimes you feel like you're pouring your life into a black hole. But the risk of faith means giving to "the least of our brothers" as if we were giving to Jesus himself.

Ralph Winter, founder of the U.S. Center for World Mission, said that "risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success, but in terms of the value of the goal." What are the chances that your family member will receive Christ after twenty years of your prayers and discussions? What are the chances that your children will really own their faith and get God's vision for their lives? I don't know what the chances are, but the *value of the goal* is matchless. It's without rival. What else is worth our devotion and time and tears except the things that will last forever?

We join the heroes of faith listed in Hebrews 11 as we adventure into spiritual tasks that can only bear fruit by God's miraculous intervention. While some of the heroes of

faith did mighty exploits and saw their dreams come true, others died before God's promises were fulfilled. While many of them are celebrated heroes, some were tortured, some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison, and some were put to death by stoning and by the sword. The writer of Hebrews says "the world was not worthy of them …" (Heb 11:38). Rather than taking the safe way out, and living a long life on earth, they chose lives that were really worth living.

The risk of faith means we might not see the fulfillment of all of God's promises. We might care for a young Christian who never overcomes his addictions. We might serve a non-Christian spouse who never believes in Jesus. We might pray for and befriend a non-Christian neighbor who never seems to change. Sometimes things don't work out the way we hope.

Todd Hunter tells the story of seeing the baseball star Mickey Mantle strike out during an All Star game at Anaheim Stadium. As he walked back to the dugout, 46,000 people rose and gave Mickey a resounding ovation. That made no sense to Todd. Later he realized that they were applauding Mantle for his amazing career.[5] He hit over five hundred home runs and led his team to seven World Series championships. But he also struck out hundreds of times. Only five players have struck out more times than Mantle.

This is a picture of going for it in the kingdom. Sometimes we strike out. It takes courage and tenacity to keep stepping up to the plate to "hit the ball" and you risk getting hit by a pitch as well as striking out. But the only way you'll get a hit is to step up to the plate.

In a recent message to Vineyard leaders in Canada, Gary Best shared this quote from an anonymous source: "The safest place for ships is in the harbor but that's not why ships were built." Gary hasn't lived a risk free life of "staying in the harbor." He loves to see God's kingdom come to people and he has paid a huge cost as a pastor and national director of the Canadian Vineyard churches. He is still "yearning for the open sea." He has seen a vision on the horizon that has defined his life and he's determined to press on into more adventures of faith.

I hope I never stop pushing the envelope. I hope that I never settle for a life that is dominated by TV and self-indulgence. It sounds pretty boring compared to the joy and fulfillment of seeing God reach out his hand as I follow his lead, always trying to do things that are beyond me.

I encourage you to not stay within the confines of your own strength. If you do, how will God have the chance to demonstrate that he is God in you and through you?

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1. Max Lucado, *Fearless* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2009), 10.

2. Erwin McManus, *The Barbarian Way, Unleash the Untamed Faith Within* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2005),12, 30, 37, 53.
3. Guillebaud, *For What It's Worth*, 33-34.
4. Oswald Chambers, *So Send I You/Workmen of God: Recognizing and Answering God's Call to Service,* (Uhrichsville, OH: Discovery House, 1987).
5. Todd Hunter, "Risk Taking" *Vineyard Newsletter* 1987.