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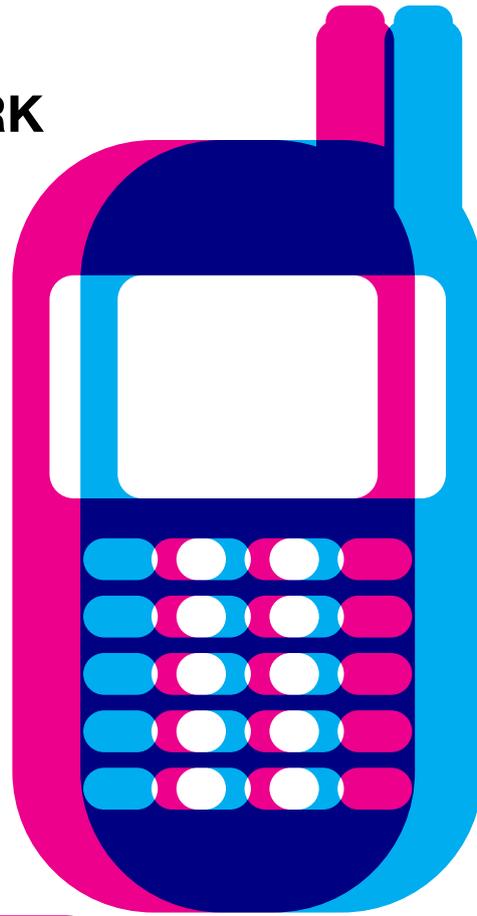
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THE POWER OF THE NETWORK

BY WILL WALKER



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POWER

If you haven't already had too many people ask you what you plan to do after you graduate, you will soon enough. I will spare you the question, not because I don't want to be one of those people, but because I know you probably don't have an answer. Plans are a difficult thing, because while you can make them, rarely are you in control of enough factors to make them happen. If everything does work out like you want it to, that is when you discover that you wanted the wrong things. I'm pretty sure you don't believe me about any of this, which is exactly why you must keep reading.

Three years ago I led a Bible study for fraternity guys at the University of Texas, including one named Mike. He was smart, good looking, fun to be with, president of his fraternity, and an excited new Christian. Besides coming to that study, Mike also helped me start a discussion group for non-Christians in his fraternity. Soon after all that, he graduated, got a job, and got married, and that was the last I knew of him.

Last week (just in time for this article) I received a letter from Mike. I was glad to hear how he was doing. He wrote, "Will, I am married to the woman of my dreams, I have a fantastic job, things could not be better." Mike is well on his way to the good life. The only problem is that the good life isn't very good. The next sentence in the letter reads, "Yet somehow I feel empty emotionally and spiritually. I am so motivated and seem to be firing on all cylinders in other aspects of my life, why can't I get it going spiritually?"

The good life, as it has been sold to us, is about comfort and ease. The problem, of course, is that no amount of status or wealth guarantees you either of these. The deeper problem is that comfort and ease do not necessarily make for a satisfying life, much less a life of significance.

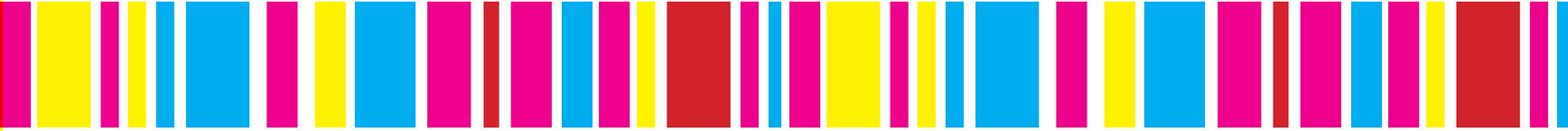
I know what you're thinking. You're not Mike. God is more of a priority to you. That's probably true. So let's just say Mike and his wife make a change and three years from now their life looks like this: they are going to a good church where they are learning and finding ways to serve; they are having regular quiet times; they are tithing; Mike is reading a book on biblical leadership; his wife is reading a book on contentment; and they have even talked to their neighbors about their faith in God. All that while Mike still has the dream job and they each still consider the other to be their dream spouse. Does that sound more like the life you are planning? If so, you may well be on your way to the Christian good life, which amounts to slapping a Christian label on the same old earth-life pursuits. You don't have to die to yourself; you just have to spiritualize your pursuit of things like importance and comfort and ease. The only problem is that the Christian good life is also not very good.

Jesus said that if we hold on to our idea of life—in this case, "the good life" or "the Christian good life"—we will lose it. I think He means that we will end up holding on to a mere idea while real life passes us by. In other words, we will have to pretend that normal life is really what we want in order to think we are doing okay. According to Jesus, the way to discover real life—a life interactive with God, alive to the reality of His kingdom—is to repent of our desires for a normal life. That is, we need to make better plans and want different things. In Jesus' words exactly: "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25, NIV).

I assume that this is what you really want when you think about it—a life given to Jesus. I think this is what a lot of people in your shoes want. So, how do authentic, energetic Christian students end up settling for a normal life, Christian or otherwise?



CRUISE CONTROL



In college, especially in the context of a ministry like Campus Crusade, the environment is passionate and idealistic. We talk about reaching the campus today to reach the world tomorrow. You go to several conferences a year and maybe even a summer or year-long mission trip. College students take part in things like all-night prayer meetings and campus-wide outreach events. They hold weekly meetings, form ministry teams and accountability groups, take training classes, complete discipleship appointments, and so on. It is a great environment for faith and spiritual growth, largely because there are so many people around who are setting the pace for such things. In other words, just to keep up with the flow of a strong movement on campus, one must walk at a faster pace than much of the Christian culture at large.

In regard to this concept of "pace," my observation is that people generally keep up with the people around them. If prayer is a high value in your movement, then you probably think prayer is a big deal. The same goes for knowledge, outreach, service, and whatever else you can think of. In most circles of life, Christian or otherwise, our tendency is to find

a comfortable pace in the midst of our peers and set the cruise control of our life at that speed. Not too fast, not too slow. The thing about spiritual life in college is that the pace is set fast in a lot of areas because you're around passionate and idealistic people. It really is great.

What happens in the "real world" is that everyone gets so busy and distracted that the pace of the Christian race slows down. Idealism gives way to survival. Dynamic relationships and passionate service are often replaced with being a nice person and pitching in somewhere at church. The people in the fast lane are those who manage to have quiet times and go to a small group; anything beyond that requires too much time and energy. This is how following Jesus becomes less about living for others and more about our faithfulness to certain activities. To be sure, these activities are not bad—they are, in fact, very good—but they are a means toward an end and not the end in themselves. So we do not throw out the activities; we simply put them in their proper place, which will enable us to redeem the activities of normal life for their purpose in kingdom life.

TIME CRUNCH

Just so you know I am not exaggerating about the spirit-quenching reality of the real world, let's do the math for a typical five-day work-week (120 hours) for a single person just out of college:

Work: 50 hours
Sleep: 35 hours
Eating: 5 hours (if you microwave everything and eat pretty fast)
TV watching: 6 hours (if you watch only one show a day)
Drive time: 5 hours (if you don't get out much)
General errands: 2 hours
Entertainment: 4 hours (that's one movie and two hours for all your other hobbies)
Margin: 5 hours (all the in-between time, stuff you didn't account for, and time it takes to finally get up and do what you need to do)

Okay, I'll stop there. I haven't mentioned things like Internet use, social life, leisure time, exercise, personal reflection and study, and more, but I'll stop there because you have only eight hours left. Granted, you may be able to do some of these things on the weekend if you are not worn out from the rest of the week. So let's say you will have eight hours plus scraps of your weekend available to foster the kind of relationships and spiritual growth to which you currently devote huge amounts of time and energy. And oh yeah, you're still single. Get married and have a baby and then let me know what you have left over.

My point, as bluntly as I know how to put it, is that spiritual growth and personal ministry will never be easier than it was in college. To make matters worse, time is just one reason that I believe this to be true. Here are some other things you had in college that you will not have after graduation:

Thousands of people your age with similar interests, all within walking distance
Lots of free time
An environment designed for social and spiritual experimentation
Older people whose job it is to invest in your personal growth and maturity
A relatively small amount of responsibility
Lots of ministry opportunities

In the same way that a fish doesn't know it's in water, you may be unaware of what you've had the last four to six years. I'm going to tell you what you've had: community. Of course, I don't know your story, but generally speaking, college has provided you with a community of people who care about your life, who challenge you toward maturity, who teach and mentor you, and so on. Not only that, but you also serve others in these ways. I believe strongly that your depth of spiritual maturity is directly related to the depth of community you have experienced. I say that because I don't think you can divorce spiritual life from community. There is simply no other context for our faith.

You may disagree or at least you might think I am putting too much emphasis on community. That's okay. You are entitled to such an opinion. I just think you're wrong.

Only through much arrogance and futility have I come to really believe that I need people and people need me, not because any of us are more important than the rest, but because personal faith must find

expression in a public arena. Community is not a part of spiritual life; it is the air from which spiritual life draws its breath. If you can grow on your own, even with God's help, then you have something to boast about before others. But if we need each other to grow, then our boasting is turned into humility. This is how community exposes our inadequacies and magnifies the power of the gospel as our only hope for personal and cultural transformation and our only hope for a truly good life.

I cannot forewarn you strongly enough that community will be the difference between a meaningful life and a wasted life. Given our inclination toward independence and the cultural values that support that tendency, now is the time to think differently about the role of community in your life and to think practically about your role in the life of community. Or at least it's time for me to tell you about it. Whether or not you think differently about these things will depend, I guess, on what happens when these ideas collide with your plans. Are you willing to lose your life for Christ in order to find it?

PLANNING PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE FUTURE

Whatever your experience of community has been in college, you need to make this a priority after you graduate. Nothing will matter more in your life than your relationships, so it only makes sense that you put some thought and energy into this. That you may only have a few months until graduation is not a hindrance. There is plenty you can start doing now to pursue kingdom life. Besides, if the stuff I am going to tell you to do causes people to think you are weird, who cares? You're outta here in a few months anyway. Better to have been weird in college than to be weird after college.

A few of my friends and I actually wrote a book about our community. In the book we tried to give some practical ideas about how one can go about cultivating this kind of life. I am going to share a few of those ideas in condensed form here, but if you want to pursue these further (and you should), by all means buy the book—*The Kingdom of Couches* (CruPress.com).

CHURCH CHURCH

In the book my friend Bob wrote a chapter about church. Instead of worrying about where to put the quotation marks, just know that what follows—concerning church—is more or less Bob's thoughts.

Somewhere along the line the church ceased being a missional community. We divorced spiritual life from actual life. Somehow we bought into the idea that church is the place where we do spiritual stuff and life is the place where we do everything else. To get back to the church as Jesus intended it, we're going to have to get back to the concept of the church as a missional community.

Here is a good place to start: instead of worrying about how *we do* church, let's start *being* the church. I'm convinced that if enough of us start giving ourselves to community and embracing the mission God gave us, our churches will begin to take notice. They will begin to get excited about what God is doing, and they'll want to get in on it. The church won't change simply because we attend regularly and tithe faithfully. It will change by us living in missional community.

You don't need to spend the first week in your new church sending e-mails to your pastor about missional community. The best contribution you can make is to start living missionally wherever you end up. In your church, find a way to serve that makes good use of your gifts. Get involved in a small group. Take part in all the typical activities. But as we do things in church, we need to be asking how we can be the church. Missional community gets us thinking less about "How can we get people to come to us?" and more about "How can we live out our faith and love for one another among people?" We become an outward-facing community, constantly thinking of natural ways to engage the culture around us together. At some point we even stop having to refer to "natural ways to engage the culture" because it actually becomes natural.

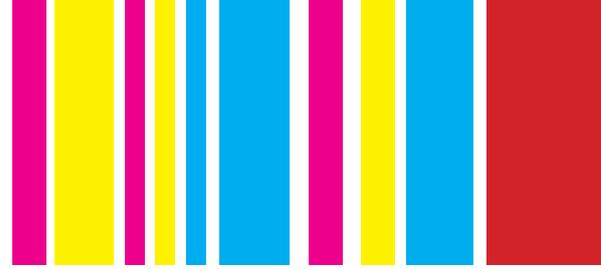
We will have to leave behind our safe Christian activities and step out into the real world, where people actually are. Instead of asking people to come to us, we live life among them. We throw off the shackles of the subculture and remind ourselves what it's like to be

human. Humans go to concerts, parks, coffee houses, neighborhood parties, and even (gasp!) bars. They spend time talking with friends. They live life. Christians, for the most part, have traded normal living for the subculture version: Christian concerts, Christian coffeehouses, neighborhood Bible studies, Christian chat rooms, and so on. It's time to reject this isolationism. We need to plug back into the reality of the human community around us, living in friendship with believers and nonbelievers and talking about Jesus as real people, not a marginalized subculture. In this way outreach becomes a natural function of relationship. You can't be friends with others and not tell them about the faith that defines you. This is what makes the kingdom of God a city shining on a hill as opposed to a really great fort hidden in the woods somewhere.

You're on board with all this, I know, but don't forget about the time crunch. This kind of commitment will mean loss of something else: money, energy, entertainment, and most of all, comfort. Mission is the first thing that will fade in the real world. You will settle for maintenance, perhaps even strive for community, but what the world needs is missional community—groups of people who will give themselves away for the cause of Christ. The church is desperate for young people who will humbly lead the next generation into this kind of reality. If you settle for merely going to church, you will discover firsthand what I said earlier: that a normal life is a wasted life.

"Church" is a broad concept. It's a good concept, but it is sometimes difficult to get your arms around. The nitty-gritty of missional community is your relationships with people. Relationships are like ligaments, and a healthy body is one in which all the ligaments are working in harmony with each other for the good of the body. I begin with church because your most likely community will be with people you meet there. The rest of this article deals with specific practices that will help you cultivate meaningful relationships with those people.

CONF- FESSION



Sin is a dominant topic of conversation in my communities. For starters, we have a lot to talk about in this area. Beyond that, we believe this is part of what it means to “walk in the light” (see 1 John 1:5-10). When we conceal or neglect sin, we learn and grow only in theory, not in our actual lives. That is, we may continue reading the Bible and having conversations, but all the while the real us is isolated from those activities. This is the nature of hypocrisy. An honest dialogue about sin in general, and yours specifically, enables a community to ground itself in reality.

Confession is like flossing. We know we should do it, but most of us don’t unless there is something glaring that other people can see. But confession is not a spiritual additive, something you can get by without. It is the kind of honesty and truth that makes relationship possible. Jesus is willing and able to cleanse us and restore our relationships if we will just get our sin—the real us—in the light. If we do not talk about our sin, then we are liars in our actual lives regardless of what we know or say.

Our sin is not simply between us and God. Most people think of it that way, but this is another area where we confuse personal and private.

CONVERSATION

My friend Brett talks about the lost art of conversation. He says a lot of people think we don’t know how to talk to other people because we watch television too much and our brains have atrophied. Brett’s theory, though, is that the real reason our conversations are often so draining and empty is that we’re afraid of each other. He elaborates on this idea in the book:

We are afraid of what people might think if they knew what we actually thought. We fear looking stupid. I’m fine if the conversation stays on impersonal topics like sports or the weather or how that guy’s outfit does little to compliment his body type. I tend to speak my mind about those kinds of things, because there’s not a whole lot hinging on my opinion. *Wait, you think it’s unseasonably warm this fall? That’s ridiculous. Our friendship is over.*

It’s when things get personal that I begin to keep my actual thoughts private. It’s not that I really want to be dishonest. The pretense is draining. It’s just that honesty is risky, and it’s rarely politically correct. It’s easier to lie or to just keep things impersonal.

What I sacrifice along the way is meaningful relationship. I could term all light-hearted conversation “shallow,” labeling small talk as the enemy here, but it’s not. “Small talk” is a lot of fun, and it’s the normal person’s way to transition into more serious matters. It’s my attempt at acceptance—to please or appease those around me—that sends my conversations awry.

We need people to both know us and love us, but the grace they will need to deal with our faults will also only come from God. They will be able to forgive, but only because in Christ God has forgiven them much. The Gospel provides a fertile ground for community and for the kinds of conversations that community tends to be grounded in. It’s tragic that this is often the opposite of our experience.

I’m not saying we need to tell the world about all our issues. To begin with, people are not really interested. They have issues of their own to keep up with. But in the context of community—the people you live life with—an open dialogue about struggle and desire and sin is imperative to growth and learning. This is the kind of authenticity that people are drawn to.

Honesty is a discipline. You must intend to tell people about the real you. If you don’t think you can do it, try writing some things down and letting a good friend read it. Start small, but whatever you do, you must start. It will never get easier than it is right now.

The aim of confession is not to allow others to punish us or even fix us, and vice versa. Rather, we listen, we talk about relevant passages of Scripture, we reason from our experience, and we pray. Jesus does the cleansing. We just need to get our real selves into the light. The cleansing process is mysterious to me, but so is the gospel. I believe in both.

As with confession, honest conversation is not simply voicing everything we think. Spewing our honest thoughts whenever we have them is selfishness to the highest degree. I find it helpful to distinguish between selfish honesty and selfless honesty. Is your honesty for the purpose of consuming or for the purpose of contributing? Selfish honesty is characterized by a sense of needing to say something so you can feel better about yourself, whether it’s gossip, insult, or boasting. Even confession can be selfish when it’s just about getting it off your chest. Selfless honesty, on the other hand, is characterized by a sense of wanting to say something that would benefit others—encouragement, admonishment, teaching, personal disclosure for the sake of intimacy, or confession for the sake of restoration.

In my estimation, the most important aspect of honest conversation is facing the truth about our own lives, inviting others into that process, and then humbly disclosing what we discover. We talk as a means of being known as we are, not being known as impressive as we want people to think we are. And as our words do turn to other people, we need to think more about honesty in terms of encouraging one another and telling people the truth about how we see God in them. This is woefully lacking in our communities. If we told people the truth in the positive sense, telling them the truth in the negative sense would not be as difficult.

Knowing what to say, how to say it, and when to say it requires discernment, and discernment is not a formula but a process of trial and error. Deciding to be honest is not a one-time purge but a way of life that is navigated through the waters of success and failure over time. Gospel-centered community is hard work. And perhaps the hardest work is that of transforming our conversations. They have become a stage for self-importance, and we have many habits from performing all these years. But we must start by telling people about the real us and taking interest in the real them as well.

PRAYER

Praying with people can be awkward. Imagine for a moment, though, what it would be like to pray regularly and casually with your friends in a way that makes nobody feel awkward. Would our lives be different if our inclination in relationships and circumstances was to step back and ask God to step in? I think our lives and communities would be dramatically better. Yet I am anything but quick to pray. I am quick to give advice, quick to talk about how my problems are worse, quick to get out of uncomfortable situations, but not quick to pray.

What if I made it a point to pray with everyone I spent time with throughout the course of my day, as a way of disciplining myself to pray with people? After all, the only way to get to a place where praying together is normal is to start doing it even when it's awkward. I know only a few people who do this, and I think they are weird. But thinking about how careless we are in our conversations, and how important they are in missional community, maybe our conversations could use some prayer. I had a friend in college who did this. Every time

we sat down to talk, even if it was pretty casual, he would say, "Can I pray for us?" I would say, "Sure," because what else was I going to say—"Um, I don't think so. We don't need to pray just to talk to each other"? So he would invite God into our conversation and ask Him to use us to encourage each other. I always found it much easier not to say stupid stuff around that guy.

So, what if we started there, just by inviting God into our conversations? That way the awkwardness of praying together is already on the table. Then when things come up in the conversation that we should and want to pray about, it will be easier to do. This is a simple thing to do but will be incredibly difficult to try because of our desire for independence that will surface in the process. But that is exactly why you should try it. This is how discipline leads us to heart issues. I will think you are weird if you try it with me, but prayer is just weird in general if you think about it.

SUPERNATURAL = ALIEN

Paul and Peter used the language of citizenship to help us understand the nature of following Jesus: "Our citizenship is in heaven"; "We are aliens and strangers in the world" (1 Peter 2:11). The idea is that if you are going to settle down as a citizen of this world it will demand all your energy and time and desire. You'll have to play by the rules of the earth-life in order to succeed. If, on the other hand, you want to take up citizenship in the kingdom of God, this too will demand all your time and energy and desire. The rules are different: "Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:44). This is why you can't apply for dual citizenship. You can't have your cake (normal life) and eat it too (kingdom life). Not a very creative analogy, but you understand.

To settle in to this world—to take up residence here—means that one has come to want basically the same things that everyone else wants: money, approval from peers, control, security, health, comfort and ease, physical pleasure, and so on. If kingdom life—the life that is

actually good—is what we want, we will have to decide that this world is not our home. We will have to repent of wanting our faith to be defined in terms of achievement and will have to embrace the truth of what Jesus said—that our faith would be defined by our love for one another.

This is where theory meets reality. Will we settle for a good life—enough money, good kids, involved church member, sports, hobbies, and so forth—or will we strive for something along the lines of dynamic relationships and passionate service? Such a pursuit does not exclude incidental success or pleasure or acclaim; it just doesn't aim for such things.

The "real world" wants to lure you into self-sufficiency so you will think that normal life is real life. I want you to see that you were made to live for something beyond yourself so you will think that normal life is a wasted life.

REFLECTION

1. In what way do you bring your sin into the light of community?
2. Who will be your community in the transition after graduation?
3. In what ways do your conversations disclose who you are? In what ways do they typically hide or disguise who you are?
4. Pursuing deeper community begins now, not 12 months from now. From thoughts expressed in this article, what can you pursue right now?
5. What area of your spiritual life (prayer, Bible study, confession) do you think would most benefit from the inclusion of others?

Will Walker has served on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ at the University of Texas for five years. He has written for Cru Press, Relevant Books, and Relevant magazine (online) and is the author of *The Kingdom of Couches*. Will and his wife, Debbie, live in Austin, Texas, with their skittish mutt, Abby, and two children: Ethan and Holden.