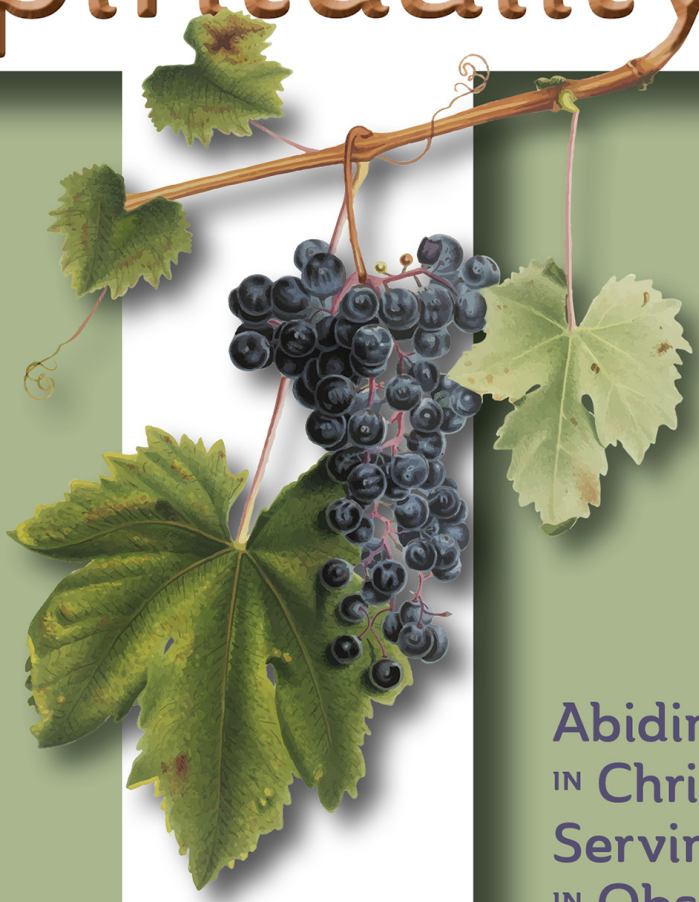
E. D. Burns

GREAT COMMISSION Spirituality



Abiding IN Christ, Serving IN Obscurity

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Great Commission Spirituality: Abiding in Christ, Serving in Obscurity

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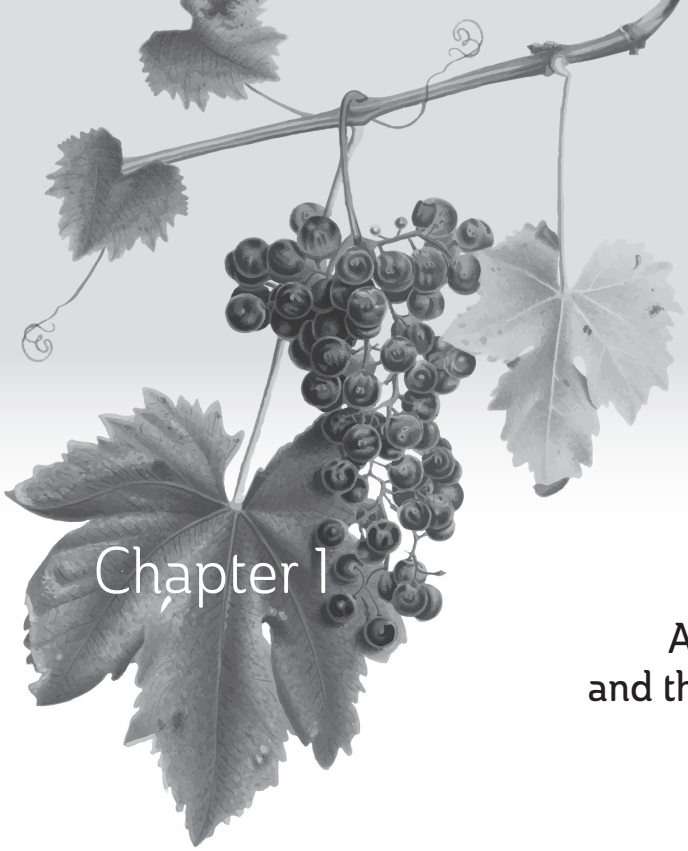
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Chapter 1

Rest

Abiding in Christ and the Peace of God

Scripture for Meditation:

> According to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.
>
> —Ephesians 3:16–19

Fifteen years after serving in missions, I could finally take a break. And no, I don't mean a vacation or holiday. True, I had just finished my PhD, and my wife was severely ill. But what I needed more than a break from the chaos of my external circumstances was a break from my own expectations and the expectations others had of me.

Some of my supervisors and leaders in the mission field exuded a victorious life. They recalled how things went spectacularly well for those who learned to listen to God's still voice and act upon it with unflinching obedience. The strong implication was that if we, also, listened to the

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Spirit's guidance and acted on it by faith, we too would have good success. We would live to tell tales of God's special anointing and blessing.

To be fair, they probably did not mean to communicate it all this way. They are works-in-progress just as I am. And while I probably misinterpreted their advice at times, sometimes, it was word-for-word, just as I relayed it above. These expectations led me to years of simmering anxiety and frustration with myself for not working hard enough, studying the language enough, practicing their disciple-making movement methods enough, or praying sincerely enough. Yet, God slowly began to open my eyes to see his work differently. Adoniram Judson, Andrew Fuller, Hudson Taylor, Martin Luther, Augustine, Thomas Boston, and others, were my teachers. They showed me how to work with all my might. But at the same time, they showed me how to rest in Christ. John G. Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides, described it this way:

> I pity from the depth of my heart every human being, who, from whatever cause, is a stranger to the most ennobling, uplifting, and consoling experience that can come to the soul of man—blessed communion with the Father of our Spirits, through gracious union with the Lord Jesus Christ. … "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."[1]

Whether I achieved much, little, or nothing, and even if I lost everything, Christ vowed to be with me for the honor of his name. He pledged to be my Friend through it all. But more than that, sweet as it is, Christ is my life. I am his. Our union is unbreakable. Nothing and no one can sever me from God's love in Christ. What God has joined together, let no man rend asunder. God hates divorce. That covenantal security in Christ gave me the courage to stay the course.

Hudson Taylor and Strength in Christ

As the end of each year approaches in December, I, like most Great Commission servants, hold deep regrets and disappointments. Before my mind are all my failures: the lack of fruitfulness in ministry, inadequacy as

1 Paton, *John G. Paton*, Kindle Edition, Location 6430.

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a godly father, insufficiency in language learning, and all the other spiritual and natural habits and goals that I fall short of keeping well enough. It's in this context that the joyful discovery of a justified life in Christ has given me (like so many others in church history) the courage to plod on.

The great missionary to the interior of China, Hudson Taylor, received a letter from a dear friend during a painfully dark season on the mission field. The letter commended the doctrine of union with Christ, which Taylor had heard before from Keswick influences in his earlier years.

This was not a new theological system for Taylor. But, as God is so kind to his servants, he opened Taylor's eyes to see into a fresh window of the heavenly reality of life in Christ. Joy in Christ was what turned a black and white vision of that doctrine into living color. And Taylor would heartily confirm, "oh, how joy flowed!"[2]

Taylor was not a naïve "let-go-and-let-God" Pietist. As a hard-working laborer in his Lord's vineyard, he believed in spending himself for evangelism and spiritual growth. He pioneered past the civilized and colonized coastlands of China. And he endeavored past the advice of his more realistic superiors. His sold-out venture into the vast, troubled interior demonstrates that he had no lazy, passive bone in his body. His spiritual nerve was steely, probably to a fault. He implied that his burned-out state as a Great Commission servant led him to the blessed truth of "the exchanged life."

It is a shame that so many Great Commission servants don't ever read Taylor and yet automatically lump him together with theologically unmoored Keswick mystics. I was one of those, until I read Taylor's spiritual autobiography for myself. I'm no Taylor scholar—I haven't read his life and works exhaustively like I have others. So there could be some pieces I might hesitate to recommend. But that's how we all are—none of us gets it all right, all the time, all our lives. Yet, what I have read in Taylor's spiritual autobiography has been truly refreshing.

Taylor displayed a stubborn devotion to God's uncommon assignments, while possessing an abiding assurance in his union with Christ. His Christ-centered restfulness galvanized his Great Commission resilience. In his foreword to Taylor's book, *Union and Communion*, J. Stuart Holden cautioned against the knee-jerk reaction to dismiss Taylor as an impractical mystic:

2 Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, 84.

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> It is inevitable that there are those who will read and reject as mystical and unpractical, that which is so directly concerned with the intimacies of fellowship with the unseen Lord. I would, however, venture to remind such that the writer of these pages founded the China Inland Mission! He translated his vision of the Beloved into life-long strenuous service.[3]

In other words, Taylor was not an idle quietist. He was no dogmatist of Keswick theology. Taylor's discovery of life in Christ differed from other Keswick contemporaries. This is a valuable lesson for how God can use bits of truth amidst the excesses of a theologically faulty movement to steer his servants to Christlikeness. He chewed the meat and spit out the bones, as it were. God used imperfectly worded Keswick sentiments to mercifully deliver Taylor from an exhausting, never-good-enough frenetic spirit.

Six months before Taylor discovered the "blessed reality [that] 'Christ liveth in me,'" he wrote this: "I have continually to mourn that I follow at such a distance and learn so slowly to imitate my precious Master."[4] But once the Lord opened Taylor's eyes to see into his union with Christ, his perspective of everything changed indelibly: "There was no thought of imitation now! … And how great the difference!—instead of bondage, liberty; instead of failure, quiet victories within; instead of fear and weakness, a restful sense of sufficiency in Another."[5]

He said, "I prayed, agonised, fasted, strove, made resolutions, read the Word more diligently, sought more time for meditation—but all without avail. … I knew that if only I could abide in Christ all would be well, but I could not. … To will was indeed 'present with me,' but how to perform I found not."[6] He would go on to admit that he intellectually knew that Christ was all he needed. He intellectually knew only abiding in him as a branch in the vine was necessary. But how was he to access that true life? He knew it was through faith: "I strove for faith, but it would not come; I tried to exercise it, but in vain. … I prayed for faith, but it came not. What was I to do?"[7] In other words, he was putting his faith in his perceived quality of faith, not in Christ.

3 Holden, "Foreword," Kindle Edition, Location 1973.

4 Taylor, *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, 86.

5 Taylor, 86.

6 Taylor, 86.

7 Taylor, 86.

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Taylor's discovery of this exchanged life—bondage for freedom, fear for peace—was found in a small word. That overlooked word distinguished the Protestant Reformation from the works-infused systems of Roman Catholicism and medieval mysticism. Both systems attempted to mix and conflate God's assisting grace with our efforts. What was the goal? To attain a justified life of union with Christ. Did they affirm grace? Yes. Did they promote faith? Yes. So, what was that small word that made all the difference between life within Christ and life without Christ? *Sola*. Alone. Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. Of those five *solas*, which is the instrument that receives Christ and all his benefits? *Sola fide*. Faith alone.

Taylor was already a devout Great Commission servant, pouring himself out for the good of China and the glory of God. Yet, for the first time, Taylor discovered the great exchange: Christ's righteous life imputed to sinners through faith alone and our sin's penalty imputed to him on the cross. Before understanding this foundational truth, Taylor sought assurance through a mixture of his faith in Christ with his Great Commission faithfulness and holy habits. Taylor recalled that glorious sentence from his friend's letter mentioned above. Here is how faith alone in Christ alone fortified his assurance and arrested his attention:

> "But how to get faith strengthened? Not by striving after faith, but by resting on the Faithful One." As I read, I saw it all! "If we believe not, he abideth faithful." I looked to Jesus and saw (and when I saw, oh, how joy flowed!) that He had said, "I will never leave thee." "Ah, *there* is rest!" I thought. "I have striven in vain to rest in Him. I'll strive no more. For has not *He* promised to abide with me—never to leave *me*, never to fail me?" And, dearie, *He never will*.[8]

Taylor's spiritual mentor in China, W. C. Burns, put it like this:

> The believer, who has begun to learn the value of Christ, does not find difficulty in determining whether to give up one thing, or two things, or many things for Christ, and whether he should still be repaid for so doing. He is not always hesitating and calculating whether Christ will make this or that loss to him. He has Christ, thrice blessed portion, and in Him, all. He would not seek earthly

8 Taylor, 87. Emphasis in the original.

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