Biblical education is the Christian educator’s heart. In order to be Biblical, yet culturally relevant, education needs to challenge both students and educators alike to strive for excellence. The story of Caleb’s desire to have “his mountain” in the Old Testament book of Joshua contains interesting insights that challenge the educator to seek excellence. Caleb had been promised by Moses that he could possess Mount Horeb. When the Israelites finally arrived, Caleb reminded Joshua that his desire was to receive Mount Horeb. Joshua gladly gave it to him.

I am confident Caleb remembered the day when he and Joshua had entered the Promised Land. They had brought Moses the minority recommendation to enter into the land, whereas the majority of the spies opposed entering the land. Caleb wanted Mt. Horeb. This was the birth of Caleb’s dream. Unfortunately, because the people followed the majority report, Caleb’s desires were put on hold.

Years ago, Christian leaders conceived the movement of Christian education. Leaders like A. C. Janney, Verle Ackerman, Arlin Horton, and Jerry Williamson helped promote the movement. I remember when the desire came to me, and in 1974 I founded the Cumberland Valley Christian School in Southern Pennsylvania. Our school was like most of the schools in that day. Classes were held in stairwells, offices, and church auditoriums. Inadequate buses were barely able to make trips. Teachers took huge pay cuts to teach. Pastors preached hell, fire, and brimstone sermons weekly in chapels. Men and women volunteered to clean restrooms. Tuition was kept low to attract students. Basketball teams had scores like 21-7. In America, Christian schools opened on an average of one a day.

Christian education is different today. Pastors change churches. Many inherit schools they do not want. Some schools are considered necessary evils. The fact is, we need Christian schools today more than ever. This need demands that we grow up in our movement by providing excellence in Christian education.

The word excellence means “remarkably good, first rate.” The title “Excellency” is given to certain high officials. “To excel” is to be superior. The obvious question is this: “In what should we be excellent?”

If you and I visited a Jewish school, we would expect to see Jewish students with a deep understanding of Jewish law. If we saw a group of Muslims in an Islamic school, we would be assured that they had a thorough knowledge of Mohammed. When we see a Christian school, we need to understand that the students should sense that Christianity is Christ, and the students need to be filled with the knowledge of God (Philippians 3:10). Excellence, then, is that process that leads us to the knowledge of God.

The conquest of Mount Hebron by Caleb provides at least four insights into excellence. These can be applied to our Christian school movement. These insights can put schools on the road to excellence.

**A Godly Leader with a Vision**

Three times in Joshua 14 the Scripture stated that Caleb “wholly followed the Lord” (Joshua 14:8, 9, 14). Caleb was 40 years old when Moses made the promise to him. He was 85 years old when the promise came to fulfillment. There is something special about older men and women with godly character. We need to hear what they have to say. Their knowledge, experience, and even their humor are often invaluable. Listen to what they say.
Years ago, I heard an elderly man being interviewed. The interviewer asked him; “To what do you attribute your old age?” The elderly man responded with a twinkle in his eye, “Due to the fact I was born a long time ago!” Caleb was an older man who was endowed with a huge vision. To have excellence in the school movement, there needs to be one person in leadership, like Caleb, who proclaims a vision. I have in my personal files notes taken from either a conference I attended or a book I read in past years (source unknown) that, based on case studies and interviews, outlined four ingredients necessary to create a compelling vision:

1. Communication
A leader does not need to be an exceptional communicator, but there must be great communication, collectively driven, throughout the entire organization. There needs to be the ability to speak openly with team members.

2. Persistence
Once the vision is established, things will get tough. There needs to be persistence in the community. Excellence has a price tag. Christians are not second class citizens who dwell in the Dark Ages. There needs to be a persistence to the core vision of the school that will produce excellence.

3. Empowerment
There needs to be a social architecture for a designed result. Confidence needs to be placed in people. Worthy employees need to have a sense of authority with boundaries.

4. Organizational Learning
Regularly monitor the vision. These traits were found in the life of Caleb. He saw the mountain, held onto his vision, and waited for forty-five years. He wanted to communicate his vision to Joshua. He persistently went forth. He involved other people, and then shared the mountain with others.

Vision allows us to march around walled cities. Vision allows us to wonder at God’s greatness. Vision expands our minds.

The prerequisite to a new territory is sight. The question that leaders should regularly ask is “What rings my bell?” Perhaps it is a new computer lab, a new track, a better benefit program for faculty, or a second Christian school in the community.

This writer has observed, when visiting school properties, that if a school is clean, well kept, and a place of happiness, then there is probably a vision behind the ministry. The atmosphere is influenced by the driving vision.

A Group of the Right People
Caleb wanted an area of the mountain called Kirjath-sepher (Joshua 15:16). It still remained in enemy hands. Caleb offered marriage to his daughter Achsah as the victor’s reward. Othniel volunteered and won the victory. He was the right person to get the job done.

One of the important factors in excellence is that we are only as good as our people. Stop and think of the people in your ministry. Are they prepared to get the job done? A recent phenomenon in corporate America is the writing of Jim Collins, who discusses companies that are able to move from good to great. “In contrast to the very I-centric style of the comparison leaders, we were struck by how the good-to-great leaders did not talk about themselves. During interviews with the good-to-great leaders, they’d talk about the company and the contributions of other executives as long as we’d like but would deflect discussion about their own contribution” (Collins, 2001). Collins’ concept is what is called “a level-five leader.”

It is interesting to note that leaders who achieve are fanatic-ally driven. They are infested with an incurable need to produce sustained results. Collins further points out that they are more “plow horse than show horse.” They display a workman-like diligence. They look out the window to attribute success to factors other than themselves. When things go poorly, they look in the mirror and blame themselves.

As administrators, when we evaluate staff and faculty, we must focus on whether or not we have the right people. Al-
be with the right people. For a leader to think that he
can provide all the answers borders on ludicrous.

4. There is no substitute for having the right people in
the right places. If you are constantly putting out
fires, it will be a time-consuming and exhausting pro-
cess. If there are fires, there is usually a reason. Find
the match. The match needs to be extinguished.

Do One Thing Well

Caleb had one major goal in mind. His desire was to get
the mountain. So often our Christian ministries struggle. We
have inadequate resources and then add necessary and periph-
eral projects to people’s schedules. The following suggestions
are important to keep the right people.

1. Initially, people must serve in their gifted areas. De-
termine what your team members do best and have them focus on that one area. In the ministry that the
Lord has allowed me to oversee, I remind our people
that my three major responsibilities are to preach/ teach, to define the vision, and to oversee the lead-
ership staff in order to minister to our 250 employees.
First, leadership positions must be filled—then the
staff members need to be carefully placed in their ap-
propriate positions of service.

2. The key people need to be compensated. This in-
cludes more than salary. Helpful conferences and
books should be a part of their compensation package.
Thoughtful notes and words of affirmation are also
very helpful.

3. The staff needs to catch the vision and see how their ar-
eas of ministry fit into the whole picture. Regular staff
meetings should reaffirm the vision. When someone
hears the vision, it often will challenge him or her to
understand, remember, and decipher the vision.

4. When team members sense they are doing what they
were made to do, and as a bonus they are getting paid
for it, joy enters the ministry. They cannot wait to get
to work and get the job done.

An example is the criteria of The Deaver Foundation in
south Florida. This foundation gives a Teacher of the Year
Award. The foundation looks for teachers who encourage
students to acquire an interest in lifelong learning. Character,
participation in extracurricular activities, and creativity are all
teacher qualities exhibited to achieve this goal. It is only when
leadership recruits and retains the best possible faculty that this
is possible. The right faculty is the key to excellence.

Stick With It

“Now therefore give me this mountain,
whereof the LORD spake in that day: for thou
hearest in that day how the Anakims were there,
and that the cities were great and fenced: if so
be the LORD will be with me, then I shall be
able to drive them out, as the LORD said. And
Joshua blessed him, and gave unto Caleb the son
of Jephunneh Hebron for an inheritance. Hebron
therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son
of Jephunneh the Kenzite unto this day, because
that he wholly followed the LORD God of Israel.
And the name of Hebron before was Kirjath-arba;
which Arba was a great man among the Anakims.
And the land had rest from war”
(Joshua 14:12-15).

Life is a grindstone. Whether it grinds you down or pol-
ishes you up depends upon what you are made of. In order
to accomplish excellence in Biblical education, we need to
establish long-range goals and stick with them. Long-range
goals can keep someone delivered from the frustration of
short-term failure. Long-range goals should include financial
issues that involve sources of income outside of tuition and the
normal fund raisers. Christian schools can establish 501(c)(3)
organizations as foundations that can encourage contributions
for buildings and projects for the school only. Many of our
schools are under the authority of the local church. Prospective
donors may not desire to give to the church, but will give to
the school. A foundation will provide the possibility for a new
influx of funds.

Additionally, there needs to be a willingness to try new
things. The purpose of a ship is not to stay in the harbor. It
may be safe there, but ships should go to sea. Leadership
needs to venture out and learn what the cutting edge is
issues are in education. Therefore, The Florida Association of
Christian Colleges and Schools has recently begun a journal,
Life@School. The journal is a systematic and thematic maga-
zeine that deals with subjects that are practical and pertinent to
education. “Reaching the Heart of the Child,” “Nurturing the
Faculty,” and “Educating the Net Generation” are recent journal
issues. In addition, magazines and Internet articles often offer
the educator new ideas that foster teaching excellence.

Sticking with it involves a firm belief in your staff. When
people believe in the leader, it is admirable. When the leader
believes in the staff, it is deeply meaningful. Longfellow
wrote: “All your strength is in union—all your danger is in
discord.”

Conclusion

When we strive for and focus on excellence, we are often
unaware of the magnitude of the transformation. It simply hap-
pens. However, when it happens, you will know it. Little will
need to be done to motivate the people. The people simply
catch the vision and the spirit. Elon Trueblood once talked
of “the company of the committed.” Our schools need a com-
mmitment to excellence that will build character into the lives of
people. Achieving that excellence is a process that includes
godly leaders with a vision, a group of the right people, a com-
mmitment for the staff to excel in at least
one area, and a desire to stick with it.

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