

# TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF STRENGTHS

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## I. The Nature of Strengths

### A. What is a strength?

**A strength is a specific quality that enables a person to do certain things very well!**

### B. What Specific Qualities are Considered Strengths?

1. Behavior patterns that make you effective.
2. Thought patterns that make you efficient.
3. Beliefs that empower you to succeed.
4. Attitudes that sustain your efforts toward achievement and excellence.
5. Motivations that propel you to take action and maintain the energy needed to achieve.

### C. How Does the Concept of Strengths Differ From Other Concepts or Measures of Ability?

1. The concept of strengths is more specific in terms of the quality it describes and the things the strength enables a person to do very well. Traditional concepts and measures of ability (e.g., IQ and aptitude testing) are more global and are not designed to explain what a person can specifically do.
2. The concept of strengths goes far beyond traditional academic skills. ACT/SAT test scores, reading, math skills and composition skills because it identifies the qualities that enable a person to do many types of specific things very well. On the other hand, strengths are needed and can be applied to academic tasks.
3. The concept of strengths goes beyond musical, athletic and artistic talents, and yet strengths can be applied in each of these domains.
4. The concept of strengths begins with the realization that many specific strengths may be needed to do something very well. One strength does not produce excellence. Many strengths, highly developed, all working together and strategically applied are needed to produce excellence.

### D. The Strengths Concept

1. The concept of “strengths” begins with talents.
2. Each person has a group of talents.
3. Talents form the basis for strengths.

4. Talents are like “diamonds in the rough”, whereas strengths are like diamonds that show forth brilliance after they have been carefully cut and polished.
5. Each person has a unique set and combination of strengths and talents that are developed and used to different degrees. This combination of strengths and talents makes each person like no other.
6. Each person is uniquely and profoundly talented!
7. A talent is an innate capacity for excellence.
8. Talents and strengths are the gateways to performance at levels of excellence.
9. A person’s potential for success is based in his/her talents.
10. While each person defines success for him/herself, achievement results from fully developing and applying strengths and talents.
11. There are many talents and strengths (over 400 already identified). (Clifton and Anderson, 1999)
12. Some tasks require several strengths, all working together, to produce excellence.

#### E. Dynamics of Strengths and Talent Development

1. Most people are not aware of their strengths and talents because they are so “natural” to them.
2. Awareness of strengths and talents may be limited due to limited/distorted feedback and/or negative, critical and judgmental relationships.
3. A person’s culture, and society in general, forms, limits, or deforms a person’s view of his/her strengths and talents.
4. Strengths can be developed and made stronger.
5. So long as a person has a talent (a capacity) a strength can be developed to higher levels of effectiveness, efficiency and excellence.
6. Strengths may either be developed or ignored - - - strengths may be rendered relatively useless and may deteriorate if they are not developed, used and applied. Like a muscle, if used it becomes stronger; if not, it atrophies!
7. Strengths and talents represent the areas where a person has the greatest potential for growth.
8. When fully developed and used, strengths and talents not only produce a person’s greatest success but also produce a person’s greatest fulfillment.
9. Talents and strengths do not develop without proactive, rigorous practice until they become natural.
10. Strengths and talents take practice, instruction, and affirming feedback to become all they can be.
11. Strengths develop best within the context of healthy, loving relationships.
12. Most people enjoy the process of developing their strengths.
13. Developing strengths has a motivating effect on a person and seems to generate hope and optimism about the future.
14. Developing strengths takes time and involves several steps and stages.

## F. Steps to Developing Strengths and Talents

1. Identifying Your Talents and Strengths
2. Affirming Your Talents and Strengths – This isn't always easy because to us, our talents and strengths seem automatic or have been taken for granted.
3. Celebrating Your Talents and Strengths – really feeling good about the talents and strengths you have. Having a sense of gratitude for your talents and strengths as opposed to wishing you had others. One way to gain this perspective is to think back over your life and identify peaks and valleys. Now think about your two deepest valleys and your two highest mountaintop experiences. Finally, think about how you got through those deep valleys. Can you see how your strengths got you through? Do the same for the mountaintop experiences. Which of your talents and strengths helped produce the high points and which talents and strengths were revealed by the mountaintops?
4. Developing Your Talents and Strengths. – Training and instruction can help you develop your talents and strengths. But remember the following principles of strengths development:
  - a) Strengths develop best in the context of a trusted relationship where you express your intentions and progress in developing your strengths.
  - b) Strengths develop by being intentional. Decide which talent or strength you want to develop and focus on one at a time.
  - c) Talents and strengths develop best by practicing and frequently using them in as many settings as possible.
  - d) Reflecting on your experience always enhances development. Therefore spend focused time thinking about your experiences and the development of your talents and strengths.
5. Applying Your Strengths – This is the ultimate. You must actively apply and fully use your strengths in the area where you want to achieve and reach levels of excellence. This may take considerable thought and creativity. But this is exactly what the “best of the best do.” They invent ways of applying their Strengths in the areas where they want to achieve.
  - a) Be active, creative and inventive as you apply your talents and strengths.
  - b) Don't wait until your talents and strengths are fully developed to begin applying them - - - in reality, applying talents and strengths helps develop them.
  - c) Think about how you can combine two or three strengths to produce a powerful way to increase your effectiveness.

## II. A Theological Context for Strengths

### A. Towards a Theology of Strengths

Listed below are the propositions, assumptions, beliefs and reasoning that form a “theology of strengths”. These thoughts are undoubtedly incomplete. Thus, we titled this section “Towards a Theology of Strengths.”

1. There is a God.
2. He is a Creator God.
3. God creates with intentionality. He has a purpose, reason and plan for what He creates.
4. God intelligently and lovingly created people with various talents and abilities.
5. The talents and abilities God created in us are inextricably linked to God’s will, God’s purpose, God’s plan for our lives.
6. The talents and abilities God has given us are part of what will enable us to fulfill His plan of our lives: to fulfill His will for us.
7. Strengths develop from the talents and abilities God has given us. God-created and God-given talents and abilities come first. Strengths stem from the way God created and endowed us.
8. God is a Creator God who continuously works in our lives to form us into the persons He wants us to be.
9. Talents and abilities are developed into strengths through a combination of relationships, interactions, life experiences, opportunities to grow and through instruction which God sometimes orchestrates and which He can always use to fulfill His purposes in our lives.
10. As we actively work to develop the talents and abilities God has given us and as we actively seek to know and do His will on a daily basis, we are working with our Creator God to produce the strengths and to fulfill the plans, purposes and intentions God has for us.
11. The greatest joy, the greatest sense of aliveness, the abundant life, and the most meaningful life is experienced when we are doing what God wants us to do, becoming the persons He created us to be and fulfilling the purpose for which He created us. In essence, abundant living results from doing God’s will and is experienced when we are “Where we are supposed to be, doing what we are supposed to be doing”.

12. The process of coming to know and do God's will is not usually automatic, immediate, or easy. It requires surrendering our wills and our lives to Him. It requires learning to hear and sense His guidance. It requires considerable energy to learn and become obedient. And it definitely requires faith and courage when the future and the process are uncertain and not clear.
13. When we do not know what God's specific will or plan is, there is always something that we can do in accord with His plan and purpose for our lives: We can strive to discover, work to develop and choose to apply the talents, strengths and abilities He has given us.
14. In all that we do, there is one most important priority: to become and to be truly loving persons! This top priority begins with loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. The concept of strength here literally means our abilities - - - the very attributes that God created in us.
15. Besides the talents and abilities God created in us, Scripture is clear about certain gifts that God also births into certain individuals. These gifts of The Holy Spirit are given to be used to the Glory of God and in loving service to others.
16. The gifts that God gives us are related to the way He created us and the way He continues to create us through life experiences, His guidance and instruction.
17. God's Holy Spirit inspires and empowers the believer who is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and is being obedient to the guidance God has given him/her.
18. When we are doing what God created us to do – fully using the strengths, talents and abilities He has given us, and when we are operating on the basis of the power of the Holy Spirit – we are at our very best!
19. There are at least two types of spiritual warfare when it comes to discovering, developing and applying our strengths:
  - a) The first type of a spiritual warfare is within oneself - - - to use our strengths for our own self-centered pride and personal gain as opposed to using our strengths to do God's will
  - b) The second type of spiritual warfare is with the evil one, Satan, the devil. We need to be absolutely clear; the devil wants to destroy us. He wants to kill us. He wants to keep us from being what we could be. And the devil most certainly wants to prevent us from doing God's will. Most of all, the devil wants to prevent us from doing what God created us to do and from becoming the persons God wants us to be!

20. One of the devil's primary and most vicious tactics is fear. The devil wants us to be paralyzed by fear. The devil wants us to be completely driven by fear. The devil wants us to be overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy. The devil wants us to be perpetually preoccupied with feelings of inferiority.
21. The reason the devil wants to make us and to keep us forever afraid, distracted, overwhelmed, preoccupied by our inadequacies, depressed and feeling inferior is because when we are preoccupied by all these fears, we cannot hear God! And when we can't hear God's call on our lives, we cannot receive God's guidance – which means that we won't be able to hear what He wants us to do and become who God wants us to be.
22. In addition to the devil's tactic of keeping us preoccupied by fears so that we can't hear God, the devil wants us to be convinced that we are inadequate, insufficient, inferior, and one massive combination of defects and deficiencies. Why? **Because if the devil is successful in convincing us that we have no God-given talents, no strengths, no gifts and no abilities, we will run away and hide even if we hear God's call on our lives, in which case, the devil wins!**
- 23. If we accept the fact that God has created us with certain abilities, that He has created us to do certain things very well, that He loves us and has a plan for our lives, that He has been actively involved in a creative process of turning our talents and abilities into strengths, and that He will empower us as we surrender to the Lordship of Christ, then we will become the persons He created us to be and get to experience the glorious, abundant life of being alive in Christ.**

Summary:

The critical issue is what we believe about God. Is He the Creator? Did He create us? Did He create us with an intention, a purpose in mind? If so, He would most certainly have created us with the abilities and capabilities to do His will. The issue then becomes: Will we seek to discover and develop our God-given talents and abilities into powerful, effective strengths? And then will we bring our strengths and our will under the Lordship of Christ to be empowered by his Holy Spirit for worship to God and to live in accordance with the example of Jesus Christ so that we, in fact, accomplish the purpose for which he created us? And in the process, have the opportunity to experience the abundant life He promised and enjoy the fruits of His Spirit – plus receive everlasting life!

## B. Concerns by Some Christians Regarding an Emphasis on Strengths

Objections about a strengths-based approach typically fall into three categories: concerns about pride and arrogance, concerns about “spiritual independence” from God, and concerns about congruity with Jesus’ teaching.

### 1. Concerns about Pride and Arrogance

Clearly the Bible is filled with statements that oppose arrogance of any kind. Both James and Peter quote the proverb, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5 NIV) and Peter continues, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” (1 Peter 5:6 NIV). No one who is Biblically informed would argue against the need for humility and that is precisely why a strengths-based approach, properly understood, is so in line with Biblical teaching.

The essence of the strengths-based approach is an acknowledgement and development of the gifts and talents *that God has given* each of his children.

In that wonderful unity passage, Ephesians 4, just after challenging his readers to “live a life worthy of the calling they have received” and reminding them to “be completely humble and gentle” and after celebrating the seven “ones” that unify the Christian experience, Paul makes an observation about uniqueness. He states in verse 7, “to each one of us **grace** has been given as Christ apportioned it.” (Ephesians 4:7 NIV). In that one little statement Paul makes it clear that Christ intentionally gifted each of us according to His purpose. What is unmistakable in this text is that our giftedness is a matter of Divine initiative. Paul even uses the word “*charis*” (variously translated as “grace and “gift”) to accentuate the fact that we should not feel any arrogance about what God has done in our lives.

Since all of our strengths come from God and have been created by Him, there is certainly no reason for us to feel proud because of strengths we affirm. In fact, becoming aware of our God-given strengths should result in humble gratitude rather than pride . . . that is, if we are honest!

Psychologists know that persons who suffer from feelings of inferiority and inadequacy act proud and arrogant in direct proportion to their real feelings of inadequacy and inferiority. This kind of action is out of line with God’s intent and must be constantly guarded against. But it certainly is not the unique struggle of Christians learning to affirm their strengths.

### 2. Concerns About Spiritual Independence From God

Regarding the second concern, Biblical instruction is also clear about being “God-centered” and relying on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit rather

than being self-centered and relying on our abilities. The perspective on strengths as “God-given gifts” helps to allay the fear of abuse in this area as well.

Peter makes it clear that our strengths come with responsibility when he writes, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” (1 Peter 4:10 NIV). If one takes this approach as a faithful exercise of responsibility on behalf of others, it is hard to imagine self-reliance and self-centeredness creeping in.

One of the Scriptures that some Christians use to refute a strengths-affirming perspective is when Paul heard these words from The Lord: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. But let’s not forget the context, Paul heard this when he was pleading with The Lord to have his “thorn in the flesh” taken away. In response Paul declares: “Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses . . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (II Corinthians 12:8-10 NIV).

In fairness to the Scriptures and in fairness to the affirming strengths perspective, isolated scripture verses should not be pulled out to make a point. If anyone reads the complete chapter in which the above verses are found, they will find that Paul is very clear about his abilities (verse 6). Paul also states that he is “not in the least inferior” to other apostles (verse 11), and that what he does is to strengthen others (verse 19). It seems to us that there is something healthy about knowing that you do have strengths and talents given by God, but at all times to rely on the power of God to do what He wants you to do.

The truth is that we are nothing without Him - - - He gave us certain strengths, talents and gifts – and He empowers us! Take The Lord out of the formula and we truly are nothing - - - no strengths, no talents, no gifts, and no power! Just as it is clearly stated in John 15, apart from Him we can do nothing. He is the Vine; we are the branches. But we are dead, good for little or nothing when separated from The Vine!

One of the best perspectives on this Scripture came in a devotional talk delivered by Jon Shoulders at a seminar in Nashville, Tennessee. Jon focused his attention on Christ’s statement that “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” and observed, “we don’t have to worry about our weaknesses because God takes care of those and when He takes care of it, it is taken care of.” Shoulders concluded, “Because God takes care of our weaknesses, that frees us to focus on our strengths, and in surrender to Him, we rest assured that even our weaknesses are not really weaknesses under his watchful care.”

### 3. Concerns About Congruity With Jesus and His Teachings

The third objection of some Christians involves Jesus and how His teachings and example relate to affirming strengths. In answer to this objection, think about Jesus' teaching in the parable of the talents. The five talents, two talent, and one talent men have long stood as a call to accountability in the way one uses his gifts. It seems quite natural to apply this thinking to a strengths-based approach. When we view our strengths as a mark of God's creative design, we then "come under" the teaching of this passage to use our gifts for God's glory.

It is very sobering to really hear what Jesus said to the person who did nothing but bury the talent he was given. Jesus said: "You wicked, lazy servant! . . . Take the talent from him . . . and throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matthew 25:26, 28 & 30 NIV)

At the opposite end of the continuum, think about Jesus' response to the woman who came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, and poured the perfume on His head. Jesus' affirmation was: "She has done a beautiful thing to me . . . she did what she could." Mark 12:6-8 NIV)

The implications from these two Scriptures seem clear. It boils down to what we do with what we have and have been given. If we choose to bury the gifts we have been given, we can expect harsh judgment. But if we take what we have and make it a gift to give back to The Lord Jesus, we get to hear: You have done a beautiful thing to me . . . you did what you could!

Clearly, what we can do is a manifestation of the strengths, talents and abilities we have been given. Only two questions then remain: (a) What will we do with what we could do? And (b) for whom will we do what we could do?

Jesus does not ask us to do what we cannot do! Jesus affirms us when we do what we can. Our strengths and talents are what give us the ability to do what we can do!

Jesus called each of us to do something that directly pertains to strengths. Jesus was very clear about what He considered the top priority, and that is to be a loving person. There are no two ways about it; we are to Love God with everything that is in us including loving God with all of our strength (which literally means our abilities). Second, we are to love others as we love ourselves and live by the standard of doing "unto others as we would have them do unto us". Finally we are to love one another as Christ has loved us.

So then the first question is: How can we love God? The best thing we can do to love God is to be the person He created us to be and to fulfill His will and His plan for our life. This requires that we follow His guidance and complete

what He asks us to do. In so doing, it is essential to fully develop and fully use the strengths and talents He has given as an act of worship and obedience.

Similarly, the challenge by Jesus to love others makes us stop and ask: what is the most loving thing we can do for anyone? If we put forth the test of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” most would admit that we like to have people listen to us, try to understand us, and help us see and appreciate our strengths, talents and potential. So at least for us, this is one part of what we need to do to be the loving persons Christ calls us to be.

Regarding Jesus’ command to love as He has loved us (John 13 and 15), the way Jesus has profoundly loved us includes: (1) He came to us, (2) He let us know He cares about us, (3) He made us feel important and special to Him, and (4) He encouraged and inspired us. Tall orders. But as we try to affirm the strengths of people, we do need to go to them. We need to communicate that we really care about them as we affirm their strengths. Our desire is that they will feel important and special as they see how God has given them many special strengths and abilities. We hope that as we affirm them for their God-given strengths, they will be encouraged and inspired to form their own intimate love relationship with God.

Affirming people in terms of their God-given strengths and talents is one of the most loving things we can do for anyone.

### III. The Transformational Perspective: Seeing as God Sees!

#### A. What We Have Seen

We have seen transformational changes in the lives of our students as they have become aware of their strengths and talents. First comes the awareness and then begins a new way of living based on the awareness of their strengths and talents. But our students aren’t the only ones being transformed. We, too, have become personally transformed by the awareness of our own strengths and talents, and we too have found that first comes the awareness and then begins a new way of living based on the awareness of our strengths.

We must also report that our relationship with God has changed with this new awareness. The relationship with Him has become deeper, more filled with gratitude, teary-eyed-joy and trust. In a word, we have a more “intimate” relationship with our Creator as we have become more aware of our strengths and talents.

We are coming to fully accept and appreciate the ways in which God has made us. We are also coming to more fully accept and appreciate how He didn’t make us!

We no longer wish that we were different than we are. We trust God! We have come to believe that God knowingly and lovingly made us! To complain about how

God did or didn't make us is trying to take God's place, play god or conclude that He just wasn't too bright or didn't care enough to make us right. And we won't go there! Our conclusion is that the all-knowing, most intelligent, all-loving God was loving us personally and individually when He made us.

We affirm that the Scripture is true, personally applicable and accurate when it says “. . . we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

## B. Our Change of Perspective

We are experiencing a very different frame of mind, a very different perspective. From this new perspective, we have a new view of ourselves and others. We are beginning to see ourselves and others from God's perspective. We are beginning to look at ourselves and others from the Creator's perspective.

Viewing life from The Creator's perspective has been transformational.

This new perspective has begun to transform how we do our work. It is transforming how we see our children and spouses. And the new perspective is transforming how we see ourselves and how we see the students with whom we are working.

As we look at ourselves and others from Creator God's perspective, we find ourselves trying to see the way He created us, the specific strengths, talents, gifts and abilities He birthed into each of us.

As we look at ourselves and others from God, The Creator's perspective, we find ourselves imagining what might happen if we really took our strengths and talents seriously and began developing them to their fullest extent. Taking The Creator's perspective, we also find ourselves imagining what might happen if other people took their strengths and talents more seriously and began developing and applying their abilities to the fullest extent possible.

## C. The Transformation

From this God, The Creator's perspective, we are experiencing a personal transformation!

This transformation brings hope and optimism. We feel ourselves becoming more and more hopeful and optimistic about everything!

As we see our strengths, and talents from God, The Creator's perspective, we have renewed hope, confidence and optimism because we realize that the seeds of greatness are already within us!

The seeds of greatness are found in our strengths and talents!

These seeds of greatness are real and personal, and they were placed within us by our all-knowing, loving Creator.

The implications of this realization are absolutely profound! And we have experienced a transformation since gaining this new perspective of seeing ourselves from God The Creator's point of view!

The reason for the transformational effects of hope, confidence and optimism is found in one simple conclusion: We don't have to be or become someone we aren't.

For years many people have been trying to get us to be and to become someone else. But when we look at ourselves from Creator God's perspective, the last thing in the world that He would want us to be is someone else! He wants us to fully become and fully be the persons He created us to be! And that means that He wants us to bring forth the seeds for greatness that He has already placed within us! He wants us to be who we really are! He wants us to be fully and completely who He created us to be! And that means fully developing and applying the strengths and talents (those seeds of greatness) that He has placed within us.

Talk about "good news"! Talk about transformation!

Do you see the implications? We don't have to be or become someone we aren't because the potential for greatness was given to us and created into us by Creator God Himself! Let the words sink in: We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

Realizing that you already have within you what it takes to do something good is really transformational!

But it doesn't stop there! It doesn't stop with us and our perceptions of ourselves.

We are more optimistic, hopeful and confident than ever as we work with our students and people in general! Why? Because we realize that each of our students and every other person also has within him/her seeds of greatness! They already have all the strengths and talents they need to do something excellently!

Just like ourselves, students and other people do not need to try to become and be someone they aren't! Students and other people don't have to become somebody else in order to be great! God has placed within each person a group of strengths and talents that are their own seeds of greatness.

As people who work with students everyday trying to promote their achievement, this new perspective is monumental. It is transformational because it means that we do not have to try to change who people are to get them to be great! Greatness is already

in them because God has placed within them the seeds of greatness, the strengths and talents needed to be great!

As opposed to trying to control, manipulate, cajole and force people to become someone different, our job is to work with God rather than to try to be “god”.

Working with students from the perspective of Creator God, our job is to work with the way God created the students. Our job is to help students discover the way God created them. Our job is to help students realize that their God-given strength and talents are beautiful and worth investing in. Our job is to encourage, stimulate and reinforce a process of building, developing and applying the students’ God-given strengths under the Lordship of Christ and to become all that their God-given talents will enable them to be.

D. Transformation Comes from Renewing Your Mind - - - Which Means: Seeing Things from God’s Perspective.

The most well known Scripture about Transformation is:

**“Do not conform any longer to the patterns of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”**  
(Romans 12:2 NIV)

In Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, the term “renewing your mind” literally means: “The adjustment of the moral and spiritual vision and thinking to the mind of God.” (page 279)

The “renewing of your mind” that results in being transformed comes as a result of adjusting our vision and thinking to the mind of God.

Now let’s personalize this. When God looks at us, what does He see? When God looks at us, what is His vision? When God looks at us, what thinking is going through the mind of God?

We believe that when God our Creator looks at us, He sees the strengths and talents He put in us. When God our creator looks at us, His vision is about what we can do and what we can become with the strengths and talents He has given us. When God our Creator looks at us, He is lovingly thinking about what we can do right now to fully develop the seeds of greatness found in the talents He gave to us.

Now turn back to the Romans 12:2 Scripture. Note that it says “. . . be transformed by the renewing of your mind .”

Note the implications of this phrase. Transformation doesn’t just happen. We get to “be transformed” by actions that we take! And what is the action that must take? “. . . by the renewing of your mind.”

The responsibility for renewing our mind is on our shoulders. We have the responsibility of renewing our own minds to the point where we have adjusted our “moral and spiritual vision and thinking to the mind of God.”

This means that each of us has the responsibility for adjusting our vision and adjusting our thinking to the mind of God - - - The God who created us!

Take it from us, this adjustment of vision and thinking to the mind of God is transformational. Seeing and thinking about ourselves based on the mind of our loving, all knowing Creator is transformational. Seeing and thinking about students and others based on the mind of our loving, all knowing Creator is transformational!

Our work is transformed into being in step with Creator God when we begin to see ourselves and others in terms of the way He created us! Then we realize that we are His workmanship and we are getting to do something that God prepared for us to do. Talk about a destiny. Talk about a meaningful purpose . . . No wonder it’s transformational to see things from His perspective!

#### IV. God-Honoring Excellence

Jon Wallace, President of Azusa Pacific University, has challenged his students, faculty and staff with the motto “God-Honoring Excellence”.

But what does God-Honoring Excellence mean and how can you accomplish it?

##### A. What is God-Honoring Excellence?

Honoring involves recognition and praise. Honoring is an outcome and intent. When you strive to honor someone, your intention is to bring recognition and praise to that person. This speaks to issues of motivation. Therefore, in our efforts to pursue excellence, our motivation and goal is to bring recognition and praise to God!

Excellence represents the highest standard of achievement. Excellence means the same as optimal, the best, or the most superlative level of performance that is possible.

Excellence can be thought about in absolute terms or in personal terms. Absolute excellence is perfection. Personal excellence means becoming and being the best that a person can become.

The type of God-Honoring Excellence that we are advocating is personal.

A person of God-Honoring Excellence strives to become and to be the best that he/she can be in order to bring recognition and praise to God.

## B. What is Required for God-Honoring Excellence?

The first thing that God-Honoring Excellence requires is gratitude. Given our self-serving nature, making the move to being God-honoring requires setting aside our self-centeredness and intentionally working to bring recognition and praise to God rather than ourselves. The only people who will likely do so are those who are so grateful to God that they want to bring Him the praise and recognition. These are the people who know that they owe a debt of gratitude for their salvation. Knowing you have been loved to life by The Gift of God makes you a debtor of deep gratitude to God and to do anything less than bring honor to God is simply evil.

The second thing that God-honoring Excellence requires is surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ and assuming the appropriate role of disciple (which literally means “learner” and “follower”). We can’t be God-honoring or excellent until and unless we are disciples under the Lordship of Christ - - - and stay in that position. This means that we must be willing to listen, hear, learn and follow Him. He then leads us to where He wants us to be excellent, and He empowers us to be excellent. Moreover, it is He who gives us the gifts to be excellent in those areas where He wants us to be excellent.

The third thing that God-honoring Excellence requires is fully developing and applying our God-given strengths and talents. We will never be excellent where we have no talent. In order to become excellent, talents must be developed into strengths and then the strengths must be fully developed and fully applied.

For God-honoring Excellence to become a reality, people need to fully develop and apply their strengths and talents under The Lordship of Christ as an act of deepest gratitude for His mercy and loving kindness.

## C. Conceptualizing Giftedness and God-Honoring Excellence

On the attached sheet we present a conceptual diagram that pulls together our theology of strengths as it applies to vocation, roles and ministry.

It all begins with God who intelligently and lovingly created us with certain talents that represent our capabilities and potential strengths. From our God-given talents, there is a potential to develop strengths depending on training, experience and instruction.

Will strengths be fully developed, minimally developed or not developed at all? Thus the question marks (?). Will our God-given talents become strengths? To what extent will we develop the talents He has given us? Will our talents become fully developed, robust strengths? **THIS IS THE BEGINNING POINT, DETERMINING THE EXTENT TO WHICH WE EXEMPLIFY GOD-HONORING EXCELLENCE!**

Gifts are Divinely inspired and Divinely empowered abilities. This raises three issues: (1) Are we surrendered to the Lordship of Christ? (2) Are we open to the indwelling, empowering and inspiring presence of God? and (3) How well developed are the strengths and talents God has given us?

The quality of our giftedness and thus the level of our God-Honoring Excellence is a direct extension of the degree to which we are surrendered to the Lordship of Christ, open to His empowering and inspiring presence, and the degree to which they are well-developed strengths and talents for His Spirit to work through!

Vocation or “calling” is the same as God’s plan and will for your life. God “calls” us according with His plan and His will for our lives. Under the Lordship of Christ there is a direct progression from talents to strengths to gifts being lived out in a daily “vocation” of following His voice. The goal is “To be where He wants me to be, doing what He wants me to be doing.” As these things line up, God-Honoring Excellence is almost assured.

Finally, there are the roles and functions we perform on a daily basis. As “Precious Children of God” (PCGs) we operate out of gratitude. We know we are His workmanship created to do good works.

Strengths are not the ends; they are the means. The “ends” we use our giftedness to accomplish fall into four overlapping categories: (1) To build the Kingdom of God, (2) To build the church, (3) To spread the Good News and (4) To make disciples.

Now we come to the final point of accountability:

CAN WE AND WILL WE PERFORM OUR CALLING TO ROLES AND MINISTRY WITH GOD-HONORING EXCELLENCE?

The issue of “can we” minister with God-honoring excellence depends on what we have done with the strengths and talents He gave us. And to the issue of “will we” minister with God-honoring excellence depends on our openness to His Spirit, ability to hear His call, and our sense of personal responsibility and gratitude.

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