

## Looking at Life Through Bifocals

*Thoughts of a Journalist*

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2000 Fellow

*Our employer is God,  
and everything we do must run through the  
filter of this question:  
How does God see my performance?*

It was back in the spring of 1977—long before I was a follower of Christ—that I learned a key insight into the Christian life.

I was a senior in high school and decided to join the orienteering club. Orienteering was, and is, a fairly obscure sport. It requires acres and acres of woodlands and more than a little concentration. Alone in the woods, armed with a topographical map, a compass, and directions for the course you are to traverse, you run from one marker to another until you complete a loop that is several miles long. This is much more difficult than it sounds: the markers (a milk bottle hung from a tree, for example) can be hundreds of yards apart and by no means visible. If you are off by even a degree on the compass—if you run a compass reading of 89 degrees instead of 90 degrees—you will miss your mark completely and become quite lost, with almost no way to recover except to find your way back to the starting point, and begin again.

So the trick to orienteering is this: look at the map, take a compass reading, and fix your eyes on an object (a tree, or a bush) and run toward that object, never taking your eyes off of it until you reach it. Then you take another compass reading, fix your eyes on another object, and run to that point, never averting your eyes from that target. In this way—by constantly checking with the map and compass, then focusing on the terrain—you eventually reach your first mark, and the next, and the next, until you return to home base.

Orienteering is about reconciling your physical position to something far less concrete: a map that someone else made, and which you must trust is accurate. It is about operating on two levels: the physical level of

the terrain, and the theoretical level of the directions you are following, hoping that the two will bring you to the goal, even though you cannot see much farther than that tree a few yards away.

Christians, too, live on two levels: the human and the spiritual. In front of our eyes, screaming for attention, is the rough and tumble of everyday life. But just as real—albeit not as intrusive—is the spiritual realm and the guiding hand of God. As Christians, we live ever conscious that everything we do and everything we experience occurs on two levels.

The best illustration of this bifurcated world, and our need to see things spiritually and humanly at the same time, occurs in 2 Kings. One morning, the prophet Elisha and his servant awakened and walked outside their house in Dothan to find thousands of enemy soldiers and chariots circling the city, with the intent of seizing Elisha. When Elisha's servant saw the army, he was terrified.

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (2 Kings 6:16-17).

This is spiritual perception. Elisha saw God's reign and His forces where the servant saw only the chaos of human circumstances.

Jesus referred to spiritual perception when He told His disciples, "Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matt. 13:16), implying that their spiritual senses had been awakened, while the rest of the world slumbered. And, one of the gifts that followers of Christ receive is spiritual discernment. It's the visual equivalent of faith—seeing what is not apparent to human eyes.

Spiritual perception—seeing human circumstances from God's point of view—helps a Christian cut through the confusion and fear one might feel when confronted by a bad set of circumstances. The reason is simple: If one sees the world spiritually, then one knows that God is sovereign; He always has a purpose; and He always prevails—in other words, there is al-

ways more than meets the human eye. Or, to change metaphors, this spiritual perception is like wearing bifocals, and it changes one's approach and one's reaction to circumstances.

It is that dual vision that has allowed me to survive at National Public Radio. I have no doubt that if I did not see — no, if I did not actively *look for* — God's hand in the chaos of daily deadlines, intense personalities, confusing stories and partial truth, I would feel just as overwhelmed as Elisha's servant.

This dual vision has helped me in many areas, but I'll mention just two: It has changed the way I look at my audience, and it has changed the way I report a story. "Whatever you do," Paul writes to the Colossians, "work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (3:23-24).

Here Paul tells us that when you or I, as Christ followers, go to work each day, we must perform our jobs in a fundamentally different way from others. Our employer is God, and everything we do must be run through the filter of this question: How does God see my performance?

That raises the bar higher than the most demanding editor or supervisor ever could. If in fact God is your employer, your Audience of One who is judging your performance for eternity, that means you have an obligation to exhibit more integrity, more earnestness, more kindness and selflessness than the co-worker in the next cubicle. It means that you are judged not just by your outward actions — did you do the job well, even if you stepped on someone to do it? — but also by internal standards. Your thoughts and motives come under the microscope as well, because Christ, who lives within you, hears every thought and understands every motive.

I recall grappling with this issue a few years back, when I was a contract reporter for National Public Radio. Being on a short-term contract — as opposed to being a staff employee — is an ulcer-inducing state of affairs. In essence, I was only as good as my last story, and once that contract is up, I could have been out on the street. So, from a human calculus, it was important to get on air as often as possible.

Several years ago, I was forced to wrestle with these two pulls — to glorify God for eternity, and to glorify self for job security. Several members of a cult called Heaven's Gate killed themselves, and I was assigned to help track down family members and conduct interviews for a staff reporter on the scene in San Diego. I managed to find several family members and persuade them to talk with me. I then transcribed the interviews, selected the best sound bites, and — when I

learned that the other reporter had been unable to find any interviews on his own — I proceeded to write the script for him. He then read my script on the air, and received euphoric kudos from the managing editor, the vice president for news and others — praising him for his quick work and sensitive handling of such a delicate story. Almost no one knew about my role.

I remember smiling as I heard the piece on *All Things Considered*. Since I was a contract reporter with my contract nearly up, I could have used those commendations for myself. But I believe we live in eternity, and our judge is not our boss or anyone else, but God. I also realized that God had given me a gift that day: He had allowed me to store up a little treasure in heaven. A friend of mine once said to me: An omelette made to the glory of God finds a place in heaven. An act that goes unnoticed by everyone but God still finds its place — creates treasure — in heaven, and that day, I had made a heavenly deposit.

I have found another benefit to serving the Lord in everything I do: It brings immeasurable peace. Why? Because God will never fire me. A child of God has complete job security. God did not die on a cross for me just so He could watch me waste my life in a dead-end job or no job at all — Jesus made that much clear in the parable of the talents. Having paid such a steep price, He fully intends to use the talents and passions and temperament He gave me — albeit for His purposes, not mine.

I remember the exact moment I fully understood that God was my employer. I had applied for a staff reporting position with NPR, the only staff reporting position that had come open in several years. I had really been doing that job for the past year anyway, and I thought I had a very good chance.

I was working in a dark little room called an edit booth, going through tape and writing a story. My editor came into the room, and, averting her eyes, told me that someone else was getting the staff reporting job. Apparently, she said, the managing editor preferred another contract reporter, and (she let slip), the managing editor didn't particularly like me. With that, she quietly left the room, and left me to my own dark thoughts.

My immediate response was despair. Reporting jobs at NPR open up once every few years. But after a couple of minutes of self-pity, I began to think in spiritual terms, not human. If Christ is my employer, I reasoned, then I am guaranteed fulfilling work, harvesting in His fields, regardless of who signs my paycheck. Okay, I thought, since Christ is my employer, what does He want me to do in this circumstance? Does He want me to become bitter, to slacken off in my work? Of course not: That would bring Him dishonor.

So I began to think through how Jesus Christ

would want me to behave. It occurred to me that I needed to welcome this new reporter, help him learn about the Washington beat, and share my sources with him. I decided in advance when people tried to commiserate with me about not getting the job, I would take the high road, not complaining but expressing gratitude for the privilege of working at NPR. As I rechanneled my thoughts—thinking on the true, noble, pure, lovely, praiseworthy, as Paul advises us—I found myself growing excited about what God had in store for me as His little worker bee. If NPR is not a good enough plan for my life, I thought, then I cannot wait to see what God had in mind.

Two weeks went by with no announcement about the job. One day, my editor called me into her office. “Well, Barb, if you didn’t believe in God before, you should now,” she said, knowing full well that I did in fact believe in God. “In my 15 years here, I have never heard of this—the reporter who was offered the job accepted it, and then changed his mind. The job is yours.”

In reflecting on this later, I wondered why God had dragged me through the emotional brambles—why hadn’t He just let me have the job? But it became clear that God had a lesson for me to learn: Namely, that He—and not a human employer—is in control of my destiny. If I am supposed to have a certain position, no one can keep me out of it, not even the managing editor. If I’m not supposed to be in a certain position, no amount of maneuvering on my part or anyone else’s will keep me there. This has given me not only peace, but also a sense of adventure about how God might choose to employ me in His grand plan.

Finally, this bifocal approach has changed the way I report my stories for NPR. Professionally, I am searching for truth—that is, accuracy, fairness, and insight into any particular story I am covering. Spiritually, I am searching for Truth—that is, seeing God’s hand in the story I am covering.

The most dramatic instance of that occurred in April 1999, when I was sent to cover the shooting in Littleton, Colorado. I arrived at Columbine High School the day after the shooting, and walked into a scene surreal with grief—literally hundreds of teenagers shivering under the cold, steely sky, not talking, just hugging each other as they cried.

As I stood there, loathe to approach anyone with a microphone, I saw five young men standing in a huddle. I drew closer, and heard they were singing praise songs to Christ (“Jesus, Lamb of God, worthy is Your name...”). Then they stopped singing and prayed, thanking Christ for His love, for sustaining them through this grief, for allowing them to be witnesses for Him during this time. As I watched, more and more teenagers joined the huddle. Within a few minutes, the

group had grown to 60 or 70, and the sound of their singing took my breath away. I remember thinking, “Oh my goodness, in the midst of this grief, here is God.” At that moment, I could sense the chariots of fire—God’s presence—even as an army of tragedy and sadness appeared to overwhelm.

As a journalist, I could and did report the tragedy and its aftermath as accurately as possible. But as a Christian, I had my antenna up for the spiritual story. Because I believe in a God who is both good and omnipotent, one who will not be defeated by evil. In other words, I expected another shoe to drop.

That shoe to drop was the story of Cassie Bernall. It took little time for her story to be circulating among the students of Columbine: the story of a girl who was in the library when the shooters spotted her and asked her if she believed in God. “Yes,” she said, and a second later, Cassie Bernall was shot and killed.

I was the first to report the story, and every other media organization followed. And it prompted a spiritual revival among teenagers. At Cassie’s funeral, more than 75 young men and women made a commitment to follow Christ. Later, there were revivals at high schools across the country. Indeed, God used that moment of faith to defeat evil and draw many young people to Himself.

In many ways Cassie Bernall became the story of Columbine—a story that might have been overlooked, had there not been a Christian there on the ground, trying to look at this human tragedy with spiritual eyes. I’m not taking credit—spiritual perception is a gift that God gives to all His children. I was merely privileged to be there at the right time.

And, that’s what it is all about: being God’s man or woman on the scene. Because as Christians, we know we are players in a larger drama that can only be perceived when our eyes are opened by God and to God. It’s a spiritual drama that is more lasting and more powerful than any drama earth has to offer; and ultimately, it is the spiritual that gives meaning to our daily lives.



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