

*By Don M. Snider, Ph.D., Colonel, U.S. Army, Retired*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

It has been long understood that for American military leaders there exists, indeed every day, the central challenge to integrate rightly their faith and their professional duties. This challenge arises from the dual callings accepted by Soldier Christians and by the duties that flow from each of them. The calls are to serve Country and to serve God, each a calling with its own set of duties and ethics by which to live and to lead. Conflicts of loyalty, though infrequent, are inevitable in the course of a military career. And how leaders resolve such conflicts in the public awareness of seniors, peers, and followers can, on occasion, invalidate their ability to continue to serve the calling of Country. There are no formulas, Christ only said: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's."

In our time that challenge is being exacerbated by the intensifying cultural wars in America, particularly the watch-dog groups that are focused on religious expression within the military.<sup>2</sup> So it is not now the case that every well-intentioned attempt by a Soldier Christian to witness to his or her faith will be successful or even well received. There are real, substantive challenges to be overcome if one's witness to the Kingdom is to be advanced while professional standing is undiminished.

Putting this in terms of your own development, I would say the challenge is to create an *understanding* and *practice* by which, as a Soldier Christian, you can meet this challenge—to integrate authentically your witness as a Christian with your responsibilities under Oath as a leader within one of America's military professions.

## Mastering the Context

As Max Bennis has so well laid out in his book, *On Becoming a Leader*, leaders can never

surrender to the context in which we find ourselves. Successful leaders, he demonstrates, become so because they master the context within which they lead, overcoming the habits, practices, and rules that so often lead to ineffectual leadership.

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So, in what context will you next lead?

Two items have already been mentioned, dual callings to God and to Country, each with duties and ethics that you have fully accepted. Second, it is the case that you are not to compartment your life and its varied roles (supposing that you actually could do so psychologically which is, of course, quite debatable). You may not choose to be a Soldier leader in some settings and a Christian in others. Little is more lacking in integrity! Your faith is to be, and will be, known by all in whatever context you are leading.

You are, in addition, free to witness appropriately to your faith, even as you fulfill your military responsibilities. The great freedom to religious expression is, after all, one of the reasons most of us have accepted an oath to serve and defend the Republic and its way of life. The Constitution and, subsequently, Congresses, Executives, and Courts have consistently provided for such expression. It is one of your tasks to be well informed as to what “appropriate” means in the context I just used it.<sup>4</sup>

Lastly, we must note a steady secularization within the society you defend. As documented by the most recent American Religious Identification Survey, 86 percent of American adults self identified as Christians in 1990; but only 76 percent did so in 2008; those with “no stated religion, atheist, or agnostic” rose in the same period from 8.2 percent to 14.1 percent; etc.<sup>5</sup> While media discussions of a currently post-Christian America are fanciful, a slow trend is unmistakable and doubtless underlies some of the overt hostility demonstrated toward Soldier Christians from secularist, legalist, and atheist watch-dog groups.

### **Under Your Military Calling: Leadership and Witness within the Military Professions**

What, specifically, is the understanding of witness that I am suggesting for your consideration? Let’s start from the perspective of your call to Country and your role as military leader. The leadership imperatives have not changed: military competence and moral character manifested in presence, decisions, and actions. This has, in yet another war, been confirmed in research in Iraq. The strength of the leader’s character, the extent of his or her competence, and the establishment through leader behaviors of cooperative and interdependent relationships with followers combine to develop trust. And that earned trust on the part of the follower is what enables leaders to lead with a higher impact.<sup>6</sup> We are not surprised; the quintessentially human nature of combat has not changed through the ages.

Second, within the leadership relationships we must recall that the practice of the military professional has been clearly defined. It is the “repetitive exercise of discretionary judgments” amid a complex and uncertain operating environment.<sup>7</sup> Think of a leader on patrol in Iraq or Afghanistan, or a senior leader in the Pentagon. How many times in the course of a day will they make a highly discretionary judgment, one not prescribed by a formula or computer but rather drawn primarily from their years of accumulated knowledge and experience? That is the practice of the military professional’s art, many times a day, followed up by actions to implement their decisions. For the senior leader, most such judgments are highly visible and of high moral content (i.e., they influence directly the lives of many other humans—subordinates, families, allies and enemies). And most such judgments will, of necessity, be communicated publicly and thus placed under broad scrutiny, since leadership by presence becomes more limited the higher up the chain of command one rises.

Thus, the leader’s daily practice must consistently be one of “professional excellence,” clearly reflecting the leadership imperatives of military competence and moral character. A good way to think of this challenge, and to apply it personally, is with two questions. First, with respect to competence: Do the discretionary judgments you make move the organization’s culture (how we do things around here<sup>8</sup>) to match its ethic, both in what is done (effectiveness) and in how it is done (rightly, with moral excellence as the American people expect)? Remember that the purpose of a profession’s ethic, which is embodied in its leaders (yes, embodied!), is to ensure that individual professionals are effective in what they do, whether they are doctors in an examining room, a lawyer writing a brief, or a commander overseeing a region of Afghanistan.

There is no other purpose to professional ethics than fostering the life-blood of the profession—the vital trust relationship with clients based on the effectiveness of the practice delivered. Yes, competence is a moral imperative for the professional!

Second, with respect to character, do your actions as a leader, verbal and non-verbal, consistently reflect integrity with the profession’s ethic; in Soldier language, are you “walking the talk 24/7/365”? Or, in more developmental language, have you assumed and announced the role of moral exemplar as part of your leadership within the profession and unit you serve?

### **Under Your Christian Calling: The Imperative to Be a Witness**

Having presented the leadership imperatives and your professional practice from your call to

serve your Country, let's turn now to the imperatives flowing from your Christian calling. Two Scriptures come to mind:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.  
(Matthew 28:18-20, English Standard Version—ESV)

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22-25, ESV)

Thus we are called to both "hear and do," and the doing requires an ongoing witness to Jesus Christ and his Gospel. As mentioned earlier, these passages do not allow closet Christians, those who hide their faith. But, beyond that imperative, is any specific form of witness mandated above another? Let's look further into Scripture:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:13-16, ESV)

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16, ESV)

Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. (Colossians 3:17, ESV)

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what

is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. (2 Corinthians 5:10-11, ESV)

From these passages we can draw several insights: for the Soldier Christian witness is required; multiple forms are encouraged, including both verbal and non-verbal; but no one form is specifically mandated over the others. Further, as Paul so clearly states to the Church in Corinth, the purpose of the exercise is to “persuade.”

### **Synthesis: An Authentic Witness under Your Dual Callings**

Given the evolving military culture within which you live and serve, of the forms of Christian witness encouraged in these scriptures *I recommend that you choose to be a positive witness first and foremost by your professional excellence, by demonstrating both your military competence and your moral character.*

Remember what Paul taught the Corinthians – witness is about “persuasion.” I believe a military leader who is most “persuasive” in this Biblical sense will be one who “speaks” in the cultural language that the military most expects and best understands. We all know that in military society, subordinates are watching military leaders carefully to see what they will do, how they will decide and act, even more than they are listening to them to hear what they say. The military is not immune to our larger society’s problem of incessant and mind-numbing communications, music, and chatter. Thus the best way to consistently penetrate that “noise” is by your daily professional practice—by exhibiting professional excellence in and through the military competence and moral character manifested in your leadership judgments and actions.

Note also that such forms of persuasion are completely compatible, indeed they are expected, within the ethics of the military professions. Each of their ethics is essentially that of a self-policing meritocracy, and your merits as a professional--of both competence and character, --need to be constantly and humbly on display to serve as your military and Christian witness.

Some will object that such a choice slights the importance for other forms of witness, particularly verbal expression. I disagree, and suggest that your consistent professional excellence will multiply personal relationships and other such opportunities for a more personal witness as those around you seek to know the source of your, and your family’s, faith-based approach to

life and work. Your responsibility of “always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” remains, and such opportunities will be enhanced as others observe your successful integration of faith and profession.

### **The Individual Practices of the Soldier Christian that Produce an Authentic Witness**

Given this *understanding* of the primary form your witness should take, what individual *practices* best enable you to do that?

I will not discuss here your military competence as it contributes to your witness of professional excellence. It is expected that, as a dedicated military professional, you are and will remain militarily excellent by pursuit of life-long learning coupled with the episodic schooling your service offers. Rather, I will focus here on the other component of your professional excellence, your moral character and its manifestations in your leadership decisions and actions. Sadly, your service most likely will scarcely mention this aspect except in platitudes, and certainly they will not be much involved in its development. That is your task.

I suggest that for the Soldier Christian there are at least four *practices* that facilitate the moral development of Christian leaders: 1) Die daily to self; 2) Be steeped in God’s Truth; 3) Remain empowered by the Holy Spirit; and, 4) Be content with, indeed seek, a life of simplicity. In my own experience and that of my peers, *these practices are best understood as disciplines of the mind and the body which we are intentionally and almost ruthlessly to habituate as leaders within the military professions.*

A bit of explanation of each of these is warranted, which I shall do for purposes of brevity without references or proof texting.

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***Die daily to self:*** Once reunited with God through faith in Christ, the essence of living in the Kingdom is to live as Jesus himself would live if he were in your assignment. The heart of your character should be the same *agape* love and boundless humility that enabled Jesus to live within God’s effective will, even to his death. But our human hearts are proud and deceitful, perhaps the more so in the warrior; therefore, you will have to abnegate self every single day, sometimes many times a day. Selflessness must be habituated. Without this practice, the others will simply not be effective.

A good way to think of this practice is to check every decision you make, every discretionary judgment that is your professional practice, to see what personal equities you have in the decision. Are you intentionally benefiting in any way? Simply stated, that should not be the case at all, ever! Only the crass careerist could contemplate such an action. You, instead, serve for the Audience of One, and He is able. You are the servant of all others, even those who might oppose you. And, given the loneliness of command and the difficulty of such an introspective daily practice, I suggest you do this as often as possible in an accountable fellowship with other Soldier Christians.

***Be Steeped in God's Truth:*** For the Christian, the perfect will of God is to be found in His revelations, both created and written. In them He informs us of the content and way of moral excellence and hence the settings we are to adopt for our own moral compass. You will face many temptations to calibrate your compass with all manner of good advice and insights, both from your profession and from the society you serve. But your sole criterion in every instance must be its compatibility with God's revelation. For the follower of Christ, there can be no other standard by which to develop moral excellence.

I suggest you not attempt to be the moral exemplar within your leadership role unless your own character is constantly calibrated by deep study of His revelations and your life is lived within the auspices and support of His moral community, His church. Only then will your personal character, manifested daily in your decisions and actions, be authentic to both of your callings.

***Remain empowered by the Holy Spirit:*** The process of sanctification, the growing of spiritual maturity into Christ-likeness, continues from the moment we are reunited with God until we die... *but only if we remain empowered by the Spirit* that Christ gave us as He departed this earth. Without His power we may have our compass pointed on moral north, but we will surely be lacking in moral agency, the courage to act on what we know to be right.

The military professions have no shortage of leaders who can reason to right moral decisions and have the best of intentions with that knowledge. But you and I have seen far too many cases where it all stopped there. Our experiences clearly tell us that in the ordered hierarchy that is the military, the power to persuade, to persevere, and to speak truth to power does not often enough come from the human chest. For the Soldier Christian true strength of will to act, and then willingly to be accountable for such acts, comes from the indwelling Spirit via the disciplines that foster His activity in our daily lives (prayer, study, fasting, listening, tithing,

worship, the sacraments, service). For this to happen, by intentional practice you must live the habits of mind and body that allow the Spirit, unimpeded, to do His will in and through you. God does not impose Himself on you!

***Live a life of simplicity:*** “Keeping up with the Jones” within America’s hyper materialism should not be the motivation or the witness of the Soldier Christian. It simply does not fit the role of the servant that is mandated within the ethic of each of your callings. Rather than extrinsic displays, the motivation of the military professional is intrinsic to the calling — the honor and nobility of service to fellow citizens and to the Republic; the satisfaction of missions rightly accomplished and of soldiers well led.

Now, with transferrable college benefits, lifetime health care, and a reasonable retirement, you and your family can experience a comfortable life. Anything more will appear unbecoming of your servant callings. Given that, I suggest your family’s lifestyle of contented simplicity will all the more lend a persuasive megaphone to your witness as a Soldier Christian, since it will cause many to wonder why you are so set apart!

### Conclusion

The witness of the Soldier Christian is an imperative, but to be effective it must be done in a manner that is persuasive. And now this is to be done in an environment of increasing hostility to religious expression. Thus I am suggesting that the best way to *understand* your witness is to see it primarily as your daily professional practice wherein your professional excellence “speaks” of your Christian faith. Soldier Christians who are seen and known to be professionally excellent as manifested in their military competence and moral character are witnesses to their faith in the language that is most expected, common, and understandable within the military professions.

Further, I am confident the developmental *practices* that I suggest you habituate to mature your Christian character undergirding professional excellence will, in fact, be equally useful in other leadership roles, such as within the family...and His church...but those are topics for other essays.

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His continuing research examines American civil-military relations, the identities and development of the American Army officer, military professions, and professional military ethics. He was research director and co-editor of *The Future of the Army Profession*, (2d Edition, McGraw-Hill, 2005), and *Forging the Warrior's Character* (2d Edition, McGraw-Hill, 2008). More recent publications include, "Dissent and Strategic Leadership of Military Professions" (Orbis, 2008), *The Army's Professional Military Ethic in an Era of Persistent Conflict* (co-author, Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2009) and, co-edited with Suzanne Nielsen, *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in the New Era*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

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## Notes:

1. Some definitions are in order: **Soldier** is used generically to describe any Christian serving in the military regardless of service or rank; **Witness** (n.), Greek, *Martus*, denotes one who can aver [to declare in a positive or dogmatic manner; to affirm] what he has seen or heard or knows ( *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, Revell, 1981).

2. Jimmy M. Browning, "Religious Expression or Religious Coercion: Commanders Caught in the Cross-Fire," Student Research Report, Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, February 2010.

3. Max Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Basic Books, 2003), see particularly chapter 1.

4. See, *Religious Freedom for Soldiers and Military Chaplains* (National Association of Evangelicals Declaration, February 2006), available at:

[http://www.nae.net/images/content/NAE\\_Statement\\_on\\_Military\\_Religious\\_Freedom.pdf](http://www.nae.net/images/content/NAE_Statement_on_Military_Religious_Freedom.pdf)

5. ARIS Survey available at [www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org](http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org)

6. See, Patrick J. Sweeney and Sean T. Hannah, "High-Impact Military Leadership: The Positive Effects of Authentic Moral Leadership on Followers," chapter 5 in Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews (eds.), *Forging the Warrior's Character* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 2008): 91-116.

7. See Don M. Snider, *et.al*, "The Multiple Identities of the Professional Army Officer," chapter 6 in Don M. Snider and Lloyd J. Matthews (eds.), *The Future of the Army Profession*, 2d Edition (NY: McGraw-Hill, 2005): 143.

8. See, *Military Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 2000.

9. In addition to the Scriptures, there are dozens of texts from which over the years these ideas have been gleaned and lived, and some not all that well! Nonetheless I believe several are so insightful and helpful that they should be in the library of every lay Soldier Christian. The half dozen or so most prominent of these texts are: John R.W. Stott, *Life in Christ*, *The Cross of Christ*, *The*

*Contemporary Christian*

; J.I. Packer,

*Knowing God*

; A.J. Tozer,

*The Knowledge of the Holy*

; Dallas Willard,

*The Divine Conspiracy*

; Richard Foster,  
*The Celebration of Discipline*  
; and, James Montgomery Boice,  
*Foundations of the Christian Faith.*