

Boldly humble: And humbly bold

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [October 20, 2009](#) issue

"What causes you to become discouraged?" I asked a visitor from eastern Congo who started a university in that country a few years ago. He told me that the school had grown from 200 to 500 to 800 students, and that it was adding new areas of study. I was impressed as he described the intersections of pastoral training, agriculture and health. He painted a portrait of a school that is exciting, imaginative and hopeful.

I knew that his university is close to the intense violence of war in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and I was sure there must be enormous obstacles and frustrations associated not only with a lack of material resources but also with threats of violence.

But the visitor responded to my expression of concern with "Oh, I never get discouraged," then added: "Yes, there was one time—when I was confronted by a 12-year-old with an AK-47. I don't get too worried if I encounter an armed adult, because I can usually talk him out of whatever he's planning to do. But with 12-year-olds it's different. They will almost always kill you, because they think they have to obey orders. So I was discouraged.

"But once I talked the boy out of killing me, I realized that there wasn't any reason to be scared or discouraged. I just need to keep myself and my work focused on God. As long as I do that, I don't get discouraged."

Earlier that day I had been in budget meetings where I'd become discouraged. I had new data on the severity of our endowment's decline, and I was wrestling with challenging budget projections for the next five years. I felt the burdens acutely and was feeling rather low. Yet here was a Christian friend telling me I need not, indeed should not, become discouraged.

Miriam and Aaron complain about Moses' leadership in Numbers 12. They want to know what makes him so special. The narrator responds that "the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." This description is

puzzling. Anyone who's read the book of Exodus would not think of Moses and humility in the same sentence, especially if humility is associated with meekness. What does it mean to identify Moses as "very humble," indeed more humble than anyone else in the world?

Richard S. Briggs sheds light on the question in his forthcoming book *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Baker). He argues that what identifies Moses' humility is not meekness but rather his dependence on God. Moses' intimate relationship with God is the source of both his humility and his authority as a leader.

When God punishes Miriam for her lack of faith, Moses' response indicates that his intimate relationship with God leads to boldness. He pleads with God to heal her. Everett Fox's translation heightens the character of the plea: "O God, pray, heal her, pray." Briggs concludes that "humility . . . replaces meekness not so much with stubbornness as with an appropriate, vigorous, yet still respectful engagement with God."

Why doesn't my Congolese colleague get discouraged? Because he has the kind of humility we see in Moses. He has an intimacy with God born of his dependence on God. It's not a passive dependence; he does not sit back and wait for God to act so he doesn't have to. Rather, he discovers reasons for acting boldly precisely through his dependence on God.

My own discouragement says much about my lack of dependence on God. I become so mired in the weeds of economic realities that I fail to focus on prayer and discernment about what God might be calling me to be and do in response to the challenges that face me and the institution I represent.

I do not mean to contrast careful economic planning with dependence on God, either in Congo or in the United States. Our long-term commitments are crucial elements of what it means to identify ourselves as a traditioned people across generations. We would not be able to sustain Christian institutions on a significant scale or scope without attention to endowments and long-term planning.

Yet it is easy to substitute such planning for dependence on God. We need to join careful planning with ongoing prayer and attentiveness to God. An overreliance on prayer often leads people either to passivity or to recklessness (if they think they have gotten a clear word when they haven't). An overreliance on planning fails to

acknowledge our dependence on God and the need for ongoing discernment.

It's true that 12-year-olds sometimes kill, and that financial issues sometimes become so challenging that we must make tragic choices for people and institutions. The point is that we are to trust in the providence of God as we plan and act. If we cultivate a bold humility, acknowledging that an intimate relationship with God is linked to planning and action, we'll find that there isn't any reason to be discouraged.