

# Building With Integrity

by Mike Ford

*Forerunner, "Ready Answer," May 2007*

*"The righteous man walks in his integrity; His children are blessed after him." —  
Proverbs 20:7*

As a young boy, my first love was baseball. I played the game every chance I got. I followed the sport via newspaper and radio. My brother and I devoured the box scores in the paper each morning, replaying the games in our minds and memorizing statistics. I fell asleep at night listening to the Minnesota Twins on WHO in Des Moines, Iowa. Though it was a bit strange for a boy from Tennessee, I was a fan of Harmon Killebrew, who played for the Twins.

While my brother felt that Hank Aaron was probably the best hitter the game had seen, I went with Ted Williams. By the time I became interested in the game, he was managing the old Washington Senators. Despite never having had the chance to see him play, I learned a great deal about his career. During his time on the field, he won six batting titles—and that includes losing four and a half years serving in World War II and the Korean War as a fighter pilot. If he had not lost those years during his prime, he would doubtless have surpassed Babe Ruth's home run record.

In 1941, he ended the season with a batting average of .406, a feat never duplicated since, and he retired with a lifetime batting average of .344 (most major leaguers average less than three hits in every ten at bats). In 1959, when he was 40 years old and closing out his career with the Boston Red Sox, he batted under .300 for the first time in his life. He had suffered from a pinched nerve all year, but did not use it as an excuse. Still, even with the sub-par year, he was the highest paid player in the game, making \$125,000 a year.

For the next season, the Boston front office sent him a contract for the same amount. Years later, Williams reminisced about this situation:

When I got it [the contract], I sent it back with a note. I told them I wouldn't sign it until they gave me the full pay cut allowed. I think it was 25 percent [it was actually closer to 30 percent]. My feeling was that I was always treated fairly by the Red Sox when it came to contracts. I never had any problem with them about money. Now they were offering me a contract I didn't deserve. And I only wanted what I deserved.

He cut his own contract by almost 30 percent, \$35,000! Are there any professional athletes today with that kind of integrity?

## Standing in Integrity

*Roget's Thesaurus* defines *integrity* as "honesty, uprightness, moral soundness, principle, character, decency, and righteousness." Certainly, what Ted Williams did was honest and upright, principled and decent. Another definition for *integrity* is "a refusal to engage in lying, blaming, or other behavior to evade accountability."

Based on these definitions, integrity is in short supply, not only in the sports world, but also in all walks of life. How often do we hear of or encounter someone who is dishonest, immoral, unprincipled, and unrighteous? Such contacts occur far too often these days.

In the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, an epistle that was also circulated to other Gentile congregations, he exhorts them to be the unified, spiritual body of Christ. Wherever they might be, they were all members of His Body. In Ephesians 6:10-14, Paul speaks of standing firm against the scheming of Satan:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness. . . .

He continues, listing the various pieces of our spiritual armor. However, notice the number of times in these few verses that we are exhorted to stand. We must hold our ground as we fight against the pressures of Satan and this world. In verse 11, Paul tells us to "stand against" the Devil's tricks. In verse 13, he encourages us to prepare "to withstand in the evil day" and "having done all, to stand." In the next verse, he concludes, "Stand therefore" and put on the armor that God can supply.

There are two things to notice here. First, we are to stand firm. Paul does not instruct us to be agile or swift of foot. To the contrary, he advises us not to move; we are to stand on a firm foundation, as it were. We are to be securely grounded, rooted and unmoving. A person living a life of integrity is not shifty, but has solid convictions rather than preferences that vary with circumstances.

Second, Paul details the armor we need to "take up." He lists several pieces of "the whole armor of God," but "the breastplate of righteousness" deals mostly closely with integrity.

Most soldiers in Paul's day wore a breastplate, and even today, the most basic protection offered to police and soldiers is the armored or bulletproof vest! The Roman breastplate, primarily made of bronze and backed with leather, was worn around the chest, protecting the heart and other vital organs. In Paul's spiritual analogy, the breastplate guards the heart, the seat of our attitudes and emotions. In other words, if we are to stand firm in the truth, our heart must be protected!

Interestingly, the translation of the New Testament by J.B. Phillips renders "the breastplate of righteousness" as "integrity your breastplate." Paul instructs us to protect our heart, our love, and our emotions with a breastplate of integrity! As part of the equipment each Christian needs to stand firm in the spiritual war we have been recruited to fight, we must fasten integrity right across our chests to provide protection. What happens when a soldier takes off his breastplate? He opens his soft abdomen to attack; he is unprotected! Spiritually, the heart becomes vulnerable, apt to be turned away.

## **Whole and Sound**

As mentioned earlier, the basic synonyms of integrity are "honesty," "uprightness," "moral soundness," "principle," "character," "decency," and "righteousness." It is a given that all Christians must possess these attributes, and we have all heard or read many sermons and articles on them. Since we all need to add them to our characters, we can consider integrity, not only as a trait that individual Christians need, but also one we need to bind us together as a unit.

*Integrity* has a second meaning, relating to the wholeness and soundness of a structure. Buildings are often described as having integrity, meaning that it has structural soundness, that it is strong and dependable, as well as complete, whole, and undivided. In Ephesians 2:19-22, in the Phillips translation, the apostle Paul writes:

So you are no longer outsiders or aliens, but fellow-citizens with every other Christian [*the saints*, NKJV]—you belong now to the household of God. Firmly beneath you is the foundation, God's messengers and prophets, the corner-stone being Christ Jesus himself. In him each separate piece of building, properly fitting into its neighbor, grows together into a temple consecrated to the Lord. You are all part of this building in which God himself lives by his Spirit.

We stand on the Christian lives of those who have gone before us. Those who have died in the faith, the saints who await their resurrection from the dead, form the foundation on which we stand, along with Christ, the Cornerstone. If we live our lives with integrity, then we too become an integral piece of the Temple.

Paul's main intention in Ephesians 2 is to let Gentile converts know that they have equal privileges with Israelite converts. Whatever his origins, each individual forms a separate piece of the "building," and all fitted together provide a habitation for God. The building metaphor is equally appropriate for us. Each of us comes from a different social and ethnic background, education, life experience, and so on. In order for us to become part of the Temple, a place where God dwells, integrity must reside in our characters.

Continuing the metaphor, each of us is fitted into the proper place. If a building is constructed of solid pieces—no rotted or bowed wood, no rusted metal, no inferior materials of any type—and if it is erected on a solid foundation, the result is a structure with integrity. The apostle Peter also uses the building metaphor in I Peter 2:1-5:

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

A building block or stone, used to construct a spiritual house or a temple, must be sound. It must itself have integrity. If the stone is weak, it will crumble or crack easily, endangering the whole building.

In Ephesians 3:17-19, we break into the middle of Paul's thought:

... that Christ may dwell in your hearts [protected by the breastplate of integrity] through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Notice that he mentions being "rooted and grounded," which is again the idea of standing firm on a solid foundation. What happens if some portion of a structure is constructed from inferior material? What if a support beam fails? Not only could the roof fall in, destroying the building itself, many lives could be lost as well.

## **A Fit Habitation**

Believe it or not, Ted Williams has a remote connection with such a situation. In Boston, Massachusetts, a tunnel runs under Boston Harbor to Logan International Airport, and it has been named the Ted Williams Tunnel. It is part of a gigantic, \$15 billion construction project called "The Big Dig." On July 11, 2006, twelve tons of concrete ceiling panels collapsed onto the roadway underneath.

It seems that a steel tieback, holding a 40-foot section of ceiling, gave way, letting the concrete slabs loose. A woman, just married, on her way with her new husband to pick up relatives at the airport, was crushed in an instant. She had probably never given a thought to traveling the tunnel and the surrounding roads, built with governmental oversight and loaded with problems.

Reports about the tragedy and the subsequent investigation show that deception and fraud were—and continue to be—common problems on this project. The state of Massachusetts, having filed over 200 complaints against the project's design and construction contractors for leaks, cost overruns, quality concerns, and safety violations, is planning to sue them for \$108 million. How ironic that there was such a horrible lack of integrity in the construction of the Ted Williams Tunnel!

The tunnel lacked structural soundness, strength, and unity; it was not reliable, complete, or whole. The lack of integrity originated in those responsible for the shoddy materials and workmanship. While one contractor may have had the integrity to do the job right, using sound materials and proven construction methods, another may not have. Without each piece being solid, complete, and fitting in with the other parts to form a unified whole, a structure with integrity cannot be built.

The same applies to Christians. Solomon writes, "The righteous man walks in his integrity" (Proverbs 20:7). Each of us is responsible for developing the skills God has blessed us with into the character or the integrity we need as His children. If we each operate with honesty, uprightness, moral soundness, principle, character, decency, and righteousness, then we will fit together as a Temple with integrity, a suitable habitation for God.

Knowing these things about integrity, we may better comprehend Paul's meaning in Ephesians 2:19-22, quoted earlier, but this time from James Moffatt's translation:

Thus you are strangers and foreigners no longer, you share the membership of the saints, you belong to God's own household, you are a building that rests on the apostles and prophets as its foundation, with Christ Jesus as the corner-stone; in him the whole structure is welded together and rises into a sacred temple in the Lord, and in him you are yourselves built into this to form a habitation for God in the Spirit.

