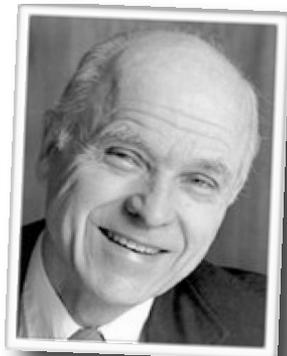


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# Loving God through Heart Obedience in Seeking First His Kingdom

By ROBBY BUTLER



Life Principles of  
Dr. Ralph D. Winter

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**God used Winter to extend the “gospel of the Kingdom” to a sixth of the world’s people groups (roughly a billion individuals). Yet the greater impact of his life will be in and through others who learn to follow Winter’s example of heart obedience in seeking God’s Kingdom.**

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Dr. Ralph Winter was a humble man who deeply and profoundly loved God, His Word, His Glory, and His Kingdom. From his life we can learn many valuable principles for seeing God fully obeyed—within Christ’s body and throughout the world.

## **Heart Obedience is the True Measure of Love for The King**

*If you love me, you will obey what I command. — Jn 14:15*

Like his generation, Winter focused more on demonstrating love than on expressing it verbally. The centrality of worship in his life lay in seeing every act of obedience as an expression of loving worship.

Prayer, congregational and private singing, Bible study and witnessing were all important elements of such obedience at times, but none of them became a substitute for simple obedience to God as the Holy Spirit spoke to Winter through His Word.

## **Heart Obedience Feeds on God’s Word**

*To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” — Jn 8:31*

Early friendship with Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigator ministry, contributed to Winter’s life-long passion for obedience as the main point of Bible reading. The first and most important part of his day was thus meeting with God in His word to find something fresh to obey.

## **Heart Obedience Rightly Handles God’s Word**

*Do your best to [be one] who correctly handles the word of truth. — 2 Ti 2:15*

Winter was concerned about popular misuse of Bible verses that masked their intended meaning. He applied his linguistics training to reveal the intent of the original texts, and developed and published tools to make it easier for others without a knowledge of Greek and Hebrew to do the same.

## **Heart Obedience Seeks Guidance in Community**

*Encourage one another daily, ...  
so that none of you may be hardened  
by sin's deceitfulness. — He 3:13*

In contrast with the individualism of North American culture, Winter understood that much of God's guidance comes in community.

Having mined God's word for himself, he was then eager to compare notes with others who were learning from God through His word. He thus led his team in seeking daily to discover how God was leading them to obey Him more effectively.

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be understood properly  
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from every nation**

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## **Heart Obedience is Often a Group Activity**

*... show hospitality ... so that we may  
work together for the truth. — 3 Jn 1:8*

Winter observed that some of the most critical decisions a person makes are what teams they will join in serving God's Kingdom, as God's guidance often comes to and through team leaders. He thus urged leaders to recognize that they have a special responsibility to listen for God to speak to them through their followers as well as His word.

## **Heart Obedience Records and Meditates on God's Word**

*Blessed is the man who...  
[delights] in the law of the Lord, and ...  
meditates [on it] day and night. ...  
Whatever he does prospers. — Ps 1:1,3*

Conscious of the human tendency to forget what God reveals from His word each day, Winter observed how many of history's great leaders kept a journal. He himself faithfully recorded and reviewed daily God's Word and works in his own journals, and encouraged others to do so as well.

## **Heart Obedience is to the God of the Bible**

*You diligently study the Scriptures ....  
These ... testify about me, yet you  
refuse to come to me .... — Jn 5:39-40*

Winter demonstrated that guidance comes not from a wooden reading of the Bible, but from the Holy Spirit as Christ's body pursues God's word in community.

For example in the early days of reclaiming from a cult the present campus of the U.S. Center for World Mission (USCWM), God used the story of Jericho to lead the team in physical marches around the property.

## **Heart Obedience Embraces God's Plan for All Nations**

*"[Teach all nations] to obey everything I  
have commanded you. ... — Mt 28:20*

Winter shared Dr. Hesselgrave's observation that the Bible can only be understood properly in light of the Author's revealed intent to redeem a people for Himself from every nation.

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# The world has yet to see what God can do through a man who is fully consecrated to Him.

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This quote, made famous by 19th-century evangelist D.L. Moody, became one of Winter's favorite sayings. Through Winter's life, the world now has a good measure of just what God can and will do through a man fully consecrated to Him.

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## Heart Obedience Learns from History

*... To this day they do not drink wine,  
because they obey their  
forefather's command. — Je 35:14*

Finding that in the 1800s revivals God led His people to stop using tobacco, alcohol and even caffeine, only for later immigrants to reintroduce them, Winter fought tobacco and alcohol addiction and discouraged caffeine addiction. He noted that 1 in 10 social drinkers end up alcoholics, and that no one would keep a dog that bit 1 in 10 guests. To challenge caffeine addiction, he often quipped when offered coffee, "No thanks, I don't do drugs."

## Heart Obedience Shows Diligence and Humility in Pursuit of Understanding

*It is the glory of God to conceal a  
matter; to search out a matter  
is the glory of kings. — Pr 25:2*

Winter understood that the human authors of Scripture themselves saw only as in a reflection (1 Co 13:12), and came to see the Bible as the inspired and inerrant record of the growing insight of God's people into His character and purpose. From this foundation he sought diligently to better understand God and His Word.

## Heart Obedience Means Seeking God's Kingdom

*For whoever wants to save his life will  
lose it, but whoever loses his life for me  
and for the gospel will save it. — Mk 8:35*

Winter saw global problems, not as unrelated issues, but as multiple fronts in a single battle for God's Kingdom and His glory.

He urged the global body of Christ to glorify God and strengthen its witness by demonstrating God's character through collaborative efforts to eradicate problems by dealing with them at their roots.

For example he advocated addressing poverty at its roots by tackling corruption, unemployment and disease, rather than simply bandaging the plight of the poor with charity.

## Heart Obedience Risks for God's Kingdom

*Be strong and courageous. Do not be  
afraid or terrified because of them, for  
the Lord your God goes with you; he will  
never leave you nor forsake you.  
— De 31:6*

Winter noted that "Risks are not to be evaluated in terms of the probability of success but in terms of the value of the goal."

## **Heart Obedience Studies the Battle for God's Kingdom**

*... you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. — Ep 2:2*

Winter diligently studied the unfolding conflict between the Kingdom of God and the prince of this world, throughout history and into the present. He skimmed ravenously, compared notes with others, and sought eagerly to inform the understanding of Christ's body.

Toward this end, Winter developed several courses: *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, its on-line sequel *Foundations of the World Christian Movement*, the one year *INSIGHT* undergraduate program, and the M.A *Foundations on the World Christian Movement*. (To learn more, visit <[uscwm.org/index.php/courses](http://uscwm.org/index.php/courses)>.)

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## **Stay home and live on a missionary budget.**

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### **Heart Obedience Lives a Wartime Lifestyle**

*Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. — 1 Co 4:2*

Winter lived as a steward of war supplies, urging in *Commitment to a Wartime Lifestyle* that those “awakened from the groggy stupor of our times ... can also stay home and deliberately and decisively adopt a missionary support level as their standard of living and their basis of lifestyle regardless of income.”

## **Heart Obedience Rejects Excuses for Passivity**

*We demolish arguments and every pretension ..., and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.  
— 2 Co 10:5*

Winter was deeply concerned with the popular misconception of God's sovereignty that suggests that “everything works out the way God intends it to.”

He pressed for broader awareness that God has temporarily granted a portion of His sovereignty to both angels and humans so that they may choose whether to follow Him or not, that until Christ returns we live with the consequences of both our own free will and the free will of other beings, both human and angelic, and that our representation of God's Kingdom authority over evil empowers our witness.

### **Heart Obedience Inspires Creativity**

*Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you. — 1 Sam 10:7*

Winter was widely heralded for his creativity, which was driven by his passion to advance God's Kingdom more effectively, to see what others might have overlooked, and to help others discover what he saw.

When invited to speak, Winter would avoid reinforcing what people already knew, seeking instead to provoke in God's people a clearer vision of their role in God's purpose.

With individuals as well, his prayer was “Lord, what does this person need to hear?”

## Heart Obedience Applies Itself Fully

*The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.*

— Pr 21:5

Winter embraced Oswald Chambers' popular title, "My Utmost for His Highest." He denounced the temptation to confuse faith with passivity, noting that God doesn't answer prayer for Him to "paint the back fence."

That is, God expects His people to do what He has equipped them to do. Winter thus perceived Biblical faith as an antidote to laziness, both in personal development and in the application of God-given resources.

## Heart Obedience Challenges Convention

*Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. — Php 2:4*

In his passion for more effective obedience to Christ, Winter urged those who worked with him to ask *why* we do *what*. We do the *way* we do it, and to make sure they weren't putting their own interests first.

When the USCWM began repaying loans, for example, Winter resisted "conventional wisdom" by repaying a large no-interest loan ahead of other, interest-bearing loans, on the grounds that the interest-bearing loans were at least getting some compensation for the USCWM's use of their money.

Similarly, when a young man asked him whether a particular girl seemed "right" for him, Winter proposed asking instead, "If this girl were my sister, am I the kind of person I would want for her?"

## Heart Obedience Starts in Prayer

*He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.'" — Lk 11:2*

Winter noted that listening is more important in prayer than talking, and that Jesus taught His followers to pray for the advance of God's Kingdom ahead of their own needs.

Beyond daily private and corporate prayer times, Winter instituted for many years a 24-hour prayer "watch" where each member of the USCWM had a recurring four-hour opportunity to listen and record what they felt God was saying. Winter also published a daily prayer guide, now called the *Global Prayer Digest*, to fuel daily prayer for unreached peoples.

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When good men differ it is often because they are looking at different facts.

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## Heart Obedience Learns from Opposition but Doesn't Yield to it

*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. .... — 1 Co 15:58*

Winter often sought review and refinement of his thinking, especially from those likely to challenge him. He enjoyed gracious disagreement as an opportunity to learn together, noting that "when good men differ it is often because they are looking at different facts." Yet as he followed Christ, Winter held firmly to his convictions despite the resistance his unconventional ideas sometimes provoked.

## **Heart Obedience Leads to Maturity**

*But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. — He 5:14*

Winter observed that responsibility leads to maturity, not the other way around. He was quick to entrust major responsibilities to people who had relatively little experience. As he noted in regard to raising his own children: the challenge is providing responsibilities suited to each one's constantly developing abilities.

## **Heart Obedience Brings Further Guidance**

*If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor ....  
— Jn 14:15–16*

Winter saw that obedience leads to guidance, quoting Dawson Trotman: "If you can't see very far ahead, go as far as you can see," and then noting that a ten foot flashlight beam was enough for a journey of several miles.

He also noted that, "It is easier to obey your way into believing than to believe your way into obeying."

## **Heart Obedience is Charitable**

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.  
— Ja 3:17*

Winter knew that each heart has mixed motives, allowed for the limitations of each member of his team, and sought to be realistic and charitable, without judgment or condemnation.

## **Heart Obedience Aims at Multiplication**

*And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others. — 2 Tim 2:2*

Winter recognized that, personal obedience must multiply in the obedience of others.

Asked where he would send 2,000 new missionaries, he replied that he would tell the first thousand to stay home and stir others to go.

Winter also modeled and urged others to solve their own problems in ways that maximize the benefit for others. He urged leaders to do everything in ways others can follow, to share in humble tasks, and to avoid all forms of special treatment.

When bumped to first class, for example, Winter would ask to trade with someone in coach, sometimes meeting other mission leaders there who had done the same.

## **Heart Obedience Multiplies Resources**

*Then the Lord replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.  
— Ha 2:2*

Winter's passion to increase effective heart obedience in others led him to promote strategic mission thinking. Winter founded William Carey Library to publish the insightful dissertations being developed at Fuller Theological Seminary's new School of World Mission. He then minimized the profit margin in order to maximize the circulation of these strategic materials.

## **Heart Obedience is Willing to Start Small**

*Who despises the day of small things?  
... — Ze 4:10*

Winter noted that a working model is more influential than a great idea, and advocated that “anything worth doing is worth doing poorly” (rather than not at all, as others can improve it).

## **Heart Obedience Aims at Perfection**

*Whatever you do, work at it with all your  
heart, as working for the Lord,  
not for men, ... — Col 3:23*

While Winter was willing to start things poorly, he also sought quality for God’s glory. When an article overran a deadline, he observed that, “people will not remember how long it took, only how well it was written.”

## **Heart Obedience Leads to Greater Things**

*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith  
in me will do what I have been doing. He  
will do even greater things than these,  
because I am going to the Father.  
— Jn 14:12*

Winter urged investing one’s life in Kingdom goals too big to be achieved alone, or even in one lifetime. He often quoted the statement he attributed to D.L. Moody: “There is no limit to what you can accomplish if you don’t care who gets the credit.”

Instead of guidance by circumstance (what’s convenient), by training (what I prepared for), or by inclination (what I’d like), Winter urged guidance by cause: investing all that we are and can influence in the most strategic Kingdom problems we can discern.

## **Heart Obedience is for All Disciples, not just Ministers and Missionaries**

*For we are God’s workmanship, created  
in Christ Jesus to do good works, which  
God prepared in advance for us to do.  
— Ep 2:10*

Winter recognized the tremendous Kingdom value of “secular” employment. Borrowing from John Cotton’s great 17th century sermon, he urged that all believers give themselves without regard for compensation to a work which employs their strengths, in which they sense God’s leading, and which benefits others.

He also echoed Dawson Trotman, “Don’t do what others can or will do when more important things need to be done that others can’t or won’t do.”

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## **Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly.**

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## **Heart Obedience is Reflected in Humility**

*How can you believe if you accept  
praise from one another, yet make no  
effort to obtain the praise that comes  
from the only God? — Jn 5:44*

While Winter pursued credentials to make himself more useful to the Kingdom, he had no interest in the praise that comes only from men. When public attempts were made to honor Winter as “special” or “unique,” he resisted such acclamation by pointing out that he had accomplished nothing without the help of others, and that God desires each of His children to walk in obedience to Jesus, in the light of his Word.

## **Heart Obedience Resists Evil**

*... I will build my church, and the gates  
of Hades will not prove stronger than it.  
— Mt 16:18*

In his final decades, Winter's grasp of history prepared him to embrace Dr. Boyd's analysis, that St. Augustine's flawed theology had led large portions of Christ's body to accept evil rather than resist it as Jesus taught and empowered His disciples to do.

He thus sought to identify and oppose the "diabolical delusions" by which Satan leads whole societies into self-destructive behaviors.

## **Heart Obedience Joins Christ in Destroying the Devil's Works**

*... The reason the Son of God appeared  
was to destroy the devil's work.  
— 1 Jn 3:8*

As Christ's body on earth, Winter came to believe that we are to follow Jesus' example in representing God's character and Kingdom by identifying disease as Satan's handiwork, and by fighting it (along with all other works of the devil) with all of the resources God has made available to us.

## **Heart Obedience is Discerning**

*A discerning man keeps wisdom in view,  
but a fool's eyes wander  
to the ends of the earth. — Pr 17:24*

As his Kingdom influence grew, Winter was increasingly pressed and pulled to agree with popular opinion in matters on which his increasing years gave him additional, and often contrary perspective. With great patience he both listened and offered his perspective, preferring to delay important decisions so as to gather as much wisdom and achieve as much agreement as possible.

## **Heart Obedience Leads to Intimacy and Honor**

*I no longer call you servants, ....  
Instead, I have called you friends, for  
everything that I learned from my Father  
I have made known to you. — Jn 15:15*

Throughout his life, Winter revealed that God's delights to bless and honor simple obedience to Himself, and that understanding of the Father's heart and intimacy with Christ are not just a goal to be sought, but the rich fruit of heart obedience in seeking first His Kingdom.

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**May God lead and empower you  
to apply these principles to your own life,  
to maximize your own effectiveness  
in serving and glorifying our King  
in the advance of His Kingdom.**

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*For more on Ralph Winter, visit [MissionFrontiers.org/pdf/2009/03/summary.html](http://MissionFrontiers.org/pdf/2009/03/summary.html)  
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