

## Alvin York An Example of Ministry in the Market Place

By Michelle Atchley, *Providence Foundation Executive Assistant*

**W**hat is ministry in the market place? Market place ministry is simply Christians using their faith based in and built upon the principles of God's word and applying it to everything in which they are involved in life — work, studies, family life, devotions. Christians apply their faith, through use of their gifts/talents, to the culture surrounding them and, as a result, bring glory to God while making life better for future generations. This is a picture of faith that is living and active; faith that produces good fruit for generations to come.

During the 1960s-70s, there was evident fruit that much of the Church in America had disconnected from the surrounding culture. It was beaten, bruised, and disillusioned, as were many American citizens at that time. A variety of events (war, national economic problems, dishonest political and cultural leaders, rebellion and disinterest among the youth) resulted in an ensuing disillusionment, or 'malaise' as Ronald Reagan called it. The Church was no longer actively dealing with cultural issues or exerting the influence seen in previous eras. The Church's disconnection from the surrounding culture left government institutions and the overall culture ripe for take-over by those with little or no fear of God and with no respect for the faith of those who founded this country upon His principles. As Edmund Burke once said "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

In the 1970s, though, God started awakening the Church again

and gradual restoration has been occurring as Christians have looked to where the leading of the secular culture has taken us. Christians who have gained vision for the Church to lead and exert influence once again in the culture have been committed to be the salt and light that Jesus calls us to be.



Alvin Cullum York,  
Dec. 13, 1887- Sept. 2, 1964

"When I die, I had rather it be said about me that I gave my life toward aiding my fellow man than for it to be said that I became a millionaire through capitalizing on my fame as a fighter. I do not care to be remembered as a warrior but as one who helped others to Christ."

How does market place ministry apply to the commission to "make disciples of all nations"? Presently, God is using Christians in a way that is new to many. We are not called to militantly overthrow the current culture and start from scratch, but we are to invade the

land and permeate the culture as did Joshua and the spies sent into the promised land. Subtly and stealthily God places His people — wise as serpents and yet innocent as doves — until the very atmosphere of our nation and our culture changes. There will be times when we will have to rise up and step forward for battle, the Bible assures us of this. We have seen times when we have had to come together in unity to speak out and take a stand on major issues. Truly this type of battle will never end if we are being vigilant while living in this fallen, sin-filled world.

As individual Christians, however, we are at a place in time in which God is preparing and inserting His people into strategic places and positions within the culture — business, education, government, law, entertainment, and more. In these places and positions, He will use us to influence others even as He inserted Joseph into his position of influence within Pharaoh's kingdom. God has caused many tools and outlets to be created in our modern culture to be used in advancing the gospel to all the earth, but His people need to be in strategic positions to use or influence usage of these tools and outlets to their fullest potential for His kingdom purposes. God's heart is to have Christians interacting with the culture around them, to be as salt and light, flavoring the culture through lives offered up to Christ and providing light for others to follow as we follow Jesus. Through fulfilling our call to be as salt and light, we will see the steady reformation of our culture. An ordered, life-filled, Kingdom-

reformed culture will flourish and that prosperity will spread around the globe — to a world that is hungry for order and life.

The Founding Era of our nation was a period of time when the culture was flavored and heavily influenced by Christians. Does that mean every person in our nation at that time was a Christian? No. What it does mean, though, is that Christians were the ones exerting influence, giving direction, and being pillars, helping to give structure to a nation built on principles from the Word of God. One example of the influence of Christianity during the Founding Era was observed by Benjamin Franklin. As recounted by Bill Federer: “Jonathan Edwards’ preaching helped begin the Great Awakening, a revival of such proportions that history credits it with uniting the colonies prior to the Revolution. Of this awakening, Benjamin Franklin wrote:

It was wonderful to see...From being thoughtless or indifferent...it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro’ the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in...every street.<sup>1</sup>

Though never known to be a professed believer, Franklin noticed that through the Great Awakening, Christians were not following the culture, they were affecting the culture of the day — changing the very atmosphere of the towns in which they lived. As people were awakened to the realities of Christ, whole communities were feeling the effect of their awakening. Throughout the Founding Era (and beyond), America was a model of liberty, freedom, and prosperity to the world. This was

due to the blessing of God pouring on this nation as Christians applied God’s word to whatever area of service He had called them in life.

Today we can see Christians who are stepping into places of influence in secular culture — modern day Josephs. They are not the first, however. There have been many men and women who have gone before them. These men and women were



“I am a witness to the fact that God did help me out of that hard battle; for the bushes were shot up all around me and I never got a scratch.”

people of destiny who had a passion for God and His will to be done in and through their lives — heroes of the faith who served God for more than earthly rewards, but had hearts eager to receive the approval of heaven. One such individual was a simple, yet amazing, man of God named Alvin York.

After his conversion to Christianity, York’s life was fueled by his heart’s desire to do the will of God and see Jesus glorified regardless of his surroundings. He was already a war hero in the eyes of this nation and the world, but York’s humility and heart to be used by God secured him as a hero in heaven. He was truly a twentieth century ‘Joseph.’

### The Early Years

Alvin York was born December 13, 1887, in the community of Pall Mall located in the Wolf River Valley of Tennessee. Third oldest of eleven children, his older brothers had already left home by the time their father died in 1911. This left the responsibility of providing for his eight younger siblings and his mother on 24 year-old Alvin’s shoulders. He was a big, strong man and he worked hard farming, blacksmithing and occasionally working for other farmers. As hard as he worked, though, he would drink and fight even harder. Over the next three years, he earned a reputation for being “a real hellraiser”<sup>2</sup> and his mother feared that his temper would end up getting him killed.

His mother prayed for him constantly, to no avail, until New Year’s Day, 1915. Early that morning, York staggered home after a night of drinking and fighting. As author John Perry recounts the story, York’s mother waited until he arrived home; she then asked him:

“Alvin, when are you going to be a man like your father and grandfather?” ... His father’s honesty had been almost legendary in Pall Mall [and while he] had never known his grandfather, [Alvin] had heard the



*York used his first royalty check from the Hollywood movie about his life starring Gary Cooper (seen here with York) to begin construction of the York Bible Institute.*

story of his final expressions of love to his wife and children as he faced certain death at the hands of Confederate vigilantes. In the instant after his mother spoke, Alvin's mind raced...replaying the years of drinking and fighting, revealing to him clearly for the first time the hollowness and hopelessness of such a life.....[he] saw himself as a selfish, reckless, irresponsible man deserving of his mother's rebuke and his Creator's wrath. His wanton, careless life was shattered on the spot and left behind forever.

"Mother, [he said,] I promise you tonight that I will never drink again as long as I live. I will never smoke or chew again. I will never gamble again. I will never cuss or fight again. I will live the life God wants me to live." ...[His mother] smiled [and said] "I know you will, son."<sup>3</sup>

York kept to his word and did all that he promised the night of his conversion. He began to pursue the Lord with all his heart. He studied his Bible and took to heart the Words of life he read within, particularly the Ten Commandments. Not long after, he became a founding member of a new church established in the community. At this new church, he was named as second elder, he taught Sunday school, and was also the song leader.

### The Great War Begins

World War I began in 1914 with Germany's invasion of France. The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. One month later, the Selective Service Act was passed which required all men from the ages of 18-45 to reg-

ister for the military draft. One of the thousands of men who received a draft registration card was Alvin York.

York's registration with the draft board and subsequent drafting into military service started in his life a period of intense spiritual searching. He knew that the Sixth Commandment in the Bible said 'do not kill' and he believed, using his own past as an example, that fighting was wrong. He registered as a conscientious objector in his efforts to be disqualified from military service, but was denied. He spent many months in turmoil, praying and seeking the Lord to determine what to do. His conviction was to follow the Bible, but his nation was requiring him to fight and possibly kill.

An amazing breakthrough came when his commanding officers, knowing that York was a conscientious objector yet also recognizing his amazing leadership, met with him to discuss, scripture by scripture, if a time of war made it right to fight and potentially even kill. After this night of discussion, York was allowed a short break to go back home where he spent time in seclusion and prayer. York's time seeking the Lord brought him breakthrough. When he returned to camp, it was with the new revelation that "If a man can make peace by fighting, he is a peacemaker." When asked by his commanding officer if he had any objections to fighting he replied "No, sir, I do not."<sup>4</sup>

The events of October 8, 1917, reveal another moment of God working His plan in York's life. The battle of the Argonne Forest, France, put York and his company of soldiers slightly off-course and

behind enemy lines. After one particularly grisly encounter with the enemy, York, a corporal at the time, was left the highest ranking soldier with only seven others remaining alive from his company. In subsequent encounters with the enemy, while trying to lead the men safely out from behind enemy lines, he was providentially spared from being shot at close range and from being bayoneted by a large group of charging enemy soldiers. Then, he was able to use his sharp shooting skills to clear out a machine gunner's nest that threatened his life and those of the seven men following him.

Through his leadership, York's band of eight American soldiers captured 128 German soldiers and four German officers, while York himself killed 25 and put 35 machine guns out of commission.<sup>5</sup> They then marched their captives out from behind enemy lines to not just one, but **three** different American encampments before being able to turn their prisoners over for imprisonment. All of this occurred without the prisoners ever realizing how greatly they outnumbered the Americans who had captured them! Of that day York wrote in his diary,

"So you can see here in this case of mine where God helped me out. I had bin living for God and working in the church some time before I come to the army. So I am a witness to the fact that God did help me out of that hard battle; for the bushes were shot up all around me and I never got a scratch."<sup>6</sup>*{sic}*

On November 11, 1917, the Armistice was signed and the Great War ended. York was headed for



home — the events in the Argonne Forest battle were furthest from his mind. As he saw it, he had done God's will when he fulfilled, without hesitancy, his duties for the army. His humility of heart left him completely shocked by and unprepared for the hero's welcome he would receive when he got off the ship in New York.

### Coming Home

The ship carrying York home reached the docks in New York; it was greeted by crowds of people who had come to see the famous hero of the Argonne Forest. York, incredibly shy at first, actually hid below deck for a while after the ship docked. Eventually his shyness faded and, after much prayer and consultation with his pastor, he began to accept requests for speaking engagements and appearances. He traveled and spoke all over the nation. Though his actions in the battle of the Argonne were what opened doors for him into people's hearts and lives, he did not speak about his actions there. As he stepped through the doors of opportunity God presented for him, he spoke of God's goodness, of how Jesus had changed his life, and he began to speak of the new passion that started to burn in his heart — education.

Children of the Wolf River Valley, including York, had very few opportunities to attend school because the community was so poor. School was only in session for a few months in the summer and children only attended when not needed on the family farm. During the winter, because of the bad weather, the schools were not open at all. York himself only had the equivalent of a third grade education.

Before the war, York had never traveled far from home, but through his service in the military, he traveled to many places in the U.S. and Europe. He saw many amazing sights throughout his travels and he had time to read where farming never allowed time. He realized that while his home in the Wolf River Valley kept the people safe from a certain amount of corrup-



"If a man can make peace by fighting, he is a peacemaker."

tion, he also saw that their isolation prevented the people from enjoying many marvelous things that education could afford them. His life's mission became to improve the lives of the children in his area — children who were stuck in cycles of poverty through lack of education and lack of options. He gave much — his physical energy, his health, and even his own personal finances — to realize his dream.

The York Institute was the first school he started for the mountain

children of the Wolf River Valley. York said of his mission: "educating the boys and girls of the mountain districts and telling the gospel of Jesus Christ are far more important to me than reciting my experiences in France. When I die, I had rather it be said about me that I gave my life toward aiding my fellow man than for it to be said that I became a millionaire through capitalizing on my fame as a fighter. I do not care to be remembered as a warrior but as one who helped others to Christ."<sup>7</sup>

He had many struggles, trials, and persecutors throughout his lifetime as he spoke on his vision for educating the school children in his rural area and raised money to build his schools. The money to build the schools he established came primarily from his speaking venues and his travels, also from his business ventures, and the loans he took out using his farm as collateral. In fact, York died in debt, but even to the end of his life, he held onto the dream God stirred in his heart, throughout all the trials, until his dream was fulfilled. In 1939, York had also started the Alvin C. York Bible School, "in order to 'give instruction in the Holy Bible and to teach the fundamental Christian religion as contained therein' along with literature, the arts, music, and other subjects that would 'prepare its pupils and students to live and practice a full Christian life'."<sup>8</sup>

Another school York started, the Alvin C. York Agricultural Institute, has received numerous awards and accolades as fruit of York's dream realized. "In 1986, the [York Agricultural Institute] was selected as Tennessee's Center for Rural Education. In 1989, it was one of 218 schools in the nation selected to receive the National

School of Excellence Award. York's Community Education Program was selected by the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium to receive the 1989 Exemplary Program Award in the Adult Education and Community Action Division of NRSSC. In 1989, the school was designated as the Wildlife Management Education Center for Tennessee. In 1992, York Institute was again recognized nationally. The school was among 140 public secondary schools selected as being one of 'America's Best Schools' by *Redbook Magazine*.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, his schools have served as an example and model for other states designing rural education programs.

### York's Legacy

Alvin York's amazing character and his desire to serve God opened doors for him to step into the culture to minister and bring Christ there. He used the reality of his Christian walk to meet the practical needs of the culture in which he lived and, in the process, not only touched the lives of thousands of individuals in his community but his legacy has transformed other rural communities all over this nation. God can use our very real Christian walk to meet the practical needs of the surround-

ing culture and, through meeting these needs, transform the culture for His glory.

Author John Perry writes:

Real heroes are not now and were never defined by degrees of success; or by doing something they should do anyway even if most people don't; or, except in rare cases, by a single awe-inspiring moment of courage. Rather they are those people blessed and burdened with a God-given vision for improving their world that requires them to make a conscious, voluntary, life-changing sacrifice, which they make unhesitatingly and without complaint.<sup>10</sup>



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### Just War Criteria

Sergeant York was confronted with a military conflict and had to grapple with the idea of whether a Christian should use force or not. His dilemma was not new, as Christians have considered this question from the first century onward. The conclusion York reached concerning war is generally the view the church has held throughout the centuries; that is, a defensive war in a just cause is sinless. At the time of the American Revolution many ministers addressed this topic (see for example David Jones, "Defensive War in a Just Cause Sinless," in *America's Providential History, A Documentary Sourcebook*, edited by Stephen McDowell, Charlottesville: Providence Foundation, 2004, p.46 ff.).

The Protestant Reformation produced many books that articulated sound Biblical reasoning on the use of force. Some of these include: *A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants* by Junius Brutus (1579); *Lex Rex* by Samuel Rutherford (1644); *The Rights of War and Peace* by Hugo Grotius (1625); and *The Law of Nature and Nations* by Samuel Puffendorf

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> *American Minute* with Bill Federer, March 22, 2006, [www.AmericanMinute.com](http://www.AmericanMinute.com).

<sup>2</sup> John Perry. *Sgt. York: His Life, Legend & Legacy*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Conscience Plus Red Hair Are Bad For Germans (from *The Literary Digest*, June 14, 1919). See: <http://history.sandiego.edu/gen/text/ww1/sgtyork.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Perry, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>9</sup> York Institute Student Handbook, 2005-2006. See: <http://www2.york.k12.tn.us/handbook.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Perry, 331.

(1683). A brief synopsis of ideas presented in these writings on criteria of a just war follows:

**1. Just Cause** - force may be used in self-defense, or to preempt an anticipated attack, with the view of stopping an evil that threatens the basic rights of men (right to life, liberty, and property).

**2. Legitimate Authority** - only legitimate governments may wage war or use deadly force, not individuals or groups of rebels.

**3. Right Intention** - the goal in

war should be to establish Godly peace, a peace that is better than what would result if no force were used.

**4. Probability of Success** - arms should not be used in a futile cause (where many die with no hope of success).

**5. Proportionality of Violence** - the overall destruction that will occur must be weighed with the benefits of the outcome of the war. All collateral damage should be considered and a minimum amount of force should be

used to bring victory.

**6. The Principle of Last Resort** - all peaceful alternatives to war should first be tried before using force.

[Source: Ergun Mehmet Caner and Emir Fethi Caner, *Christian Jihad*, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 2004, p. 68-69.]

For more on Biblical principles of war see *Liberating the Nations* by Stephen McDowell and Mark Beliles, Chapter 13, as well as the books mentioned above.<sup>PP</sup>



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