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Perspective

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Perspective is a monthly journal with articles and book reviews. It is part of the "equipping" ministry of Mount Vernon Baptist Church, where we exist to KNOW, EQUIP, and SEND one another for the worship and glory of God.

SERMON SCHEDULE

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Lost Love

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Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor
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Be kind to one another, tenderhearted,
forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (ESV)

Parenting: The Church

Aaron Menikoff

What's the most important piece of furniture in your house? Is it the end table? Probably not, though it is a nice place to put a lamp. What about the loveseat? Again, this is a great piece of furniture, and a nice place to relax, but if you could keep just one piece of furniture, it wouldn't be this. In my home the dining room table gets center stage. This is where meals, Bible studies, and games take place. Our family probably spends the most time around that table. You might say my family life is organized around that particular piece of furniture.

If the church were a piece of furniture, how would it rank in your spiritual life? Is it more like an end table or the dining room table? Is the church merely helpful in your life, or do you actually seek to organize your life around the church? As we think about parenting, this is a vital question to consider. I'm convinced that the local church is central to my role as a husband and father. The local church is where I'm spiritually fed so that I can walk with the Lord. The local church is where I'm held accountable so that I won't fall away from the Lord. The local church is where I'm encouraged through times of trial and distress to persevere with the Lord. The fact of the matter is I can't think of parenting or anything else in my life without reference to the local church.

Sadly, many Christians do not think rightly about how the church relates to their parenting. Some parents outsource the evangelism and discipleship of their children to the church. They shirk their biblical responsibility to be the primary spiritual influence in the lives of their children. Still other parents make no real attempt to involve their children in the life of the church. They neglect the great gift a church body can be to their family.

Parenting is hard work, but God designed that labor to take place in the context of a gospel-centered congregation. One of the most important ways a church can be involved in parents' lives is by equipping parents to lead their children well. That's why at MVBC the past

few years we've moved away from "children's ministry" and adopted the term "family ministry" when thinking about how we can be part of the evangelism and discipleship of our kids. We still have age-appropriate Sunday School classes, fun activities, and spiritual retreats. But the most important thing we can do as the body of Christ is to help parents see the importance of taking the lead in providing spiritual formation for their kids.

Back to the furniture: If the church is just an end table in your life, what I'm about to say won't make much sense to you. But if the church is the center of your life you will be very interested in the question, "How can I parent in light of the church?" I want to draw your attention to that particular question.

First, parents should be the primary spiritual caregivers for their children.

I should probably say parents *are* the primary spiritual caregivers for their kids. After all, they'll spend maybe 2-3 hours at church each week but at least 50 hours at home—most of those hours with a parent. So whether a mom or dad gives good or bad spiritual guidance, they are the ones primarily guiding their children.

Parents should embrace this fact and make every effort to pour gospel truth into the heads and hearts of their kids. We should not leave it merely to the church to spiritually educate our children. Unfortunately, this idea is counterintuitive to modern minds. We live in a culture that outsources everything. Most all of us live in houses we didn't build, eat food we didn't grow, and wear clothes we didn't make. Thus it seems natural for many parents to outsource the evangelism and discipleship of our children. But that's not the way it's supposed to be.

The pattern we find in Scripture is one of parents caring for the souls of their children. Moses exhorted parents to teach their children the Word of God, "when you sit in

your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut 6:4). Clearly all of life was to be given over to helping children make much of the Lord. Paul singled out dads when he told them to bring up their children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Fathers have a special responsibility to be sure their families are growing in the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Parents clearly have a sobering, sacred responsibility to influence their children spiritually in the home. What role does the church play in this? We want to do everything we can as a church to recognize the responsibility of parents and we want to do all we can to equip parents to faithfully raise their children. This includes providing quality teaching from the pulpit, excellent resources in the bookstall, and even sending home study guides that parents and children can work through together.

I know that some kids don’t have parents who care about God or the church. I was like that. When I was in high school and started going to church, my parents weren’t interested. I caught a ride with friends. I couldn’t rely upon my parents to teach me about Jesus. Thankfully, God was at work in my life. As a church, we want to be sensitive to those children whose parents, for whatever reason, don’t want to be involved in their children’s spiritual lives.

But for those parents who do take an interest, they need to embrace their God-given responsibility to shepherd their children. What are some practical implications for those parents who see this already?

1. Pray for God’s help in this gargantuan task. If you are overwhelmed, that’s a good place to start. Be humble and dependent upon the Lord. God will give you the wisdom and strength you need to lead your child. Plead with him daily for help.

2. Take a spiritual inventory of your family’s spiritual health. Devote some time to working through the following questions: How is the Word central in the life of our family? How is the church central in the life of our family? How are our kids growing in their knowledge of the Lord? How can we do a better job of pointing our kids to the gospel every day?

3. Take advantage of the teaching of the church. Every Sunday and Wednesday there are opportunities to grow as a parent. Consider using your Sunday School handouts as a guide to lead your family through a book of the Bible. Use the application from a morning sermon to lead your family to think more about Scripture. Take advantage of special classes on parenting or evangelism or discipleship. Drop by the bookstall and see what books are on sale for parents. One of the best ways we serve kids is by encouraging parents to be godly adults.

4. Seek help from brothers and sisters further along the parenting path. Take advantage of the fact that you are surrounded by new parents and empty-nesters, grandparents and even great-grandparents. Find parents you respect and ask them questions. Talk to them about your struggles and pursue godly counsel.

Over the past two or three decades pastors have sought to make churches fun places for kids. They have invested hundreds of millions of dollars making their children’s halls resemble Disneyland. The motives are good: they want kids to want to be at church. This will work for a few years—what child doesn’t want to be in a place that looks like the Magic Kingdom? But as time goes on, kids will see through the glitter and look for the substance. If you want to make a life-long impact on your kids, take the time to walk them through the Bible at home. After all, you are your child’s primary spiritual caregiver.

Second, parents should place their children in the regular flow of a local church.

One of the most helpful things a parent can do to encourage spiritual growth in a child is to make sure that child is folded into the life of a church. This means time with kids and adults, time gathering with peers and time gathering with parents. God has designed the church to be multi-generational and that means the generations need to mix.

Many Christians today grew up in churches with a “segmented” ministry, where people were divided up by age and stage of life. This meant the children were in one room, youth in another, singles in one class, young marrieds next door, and so on. It’s easy to assume it’s always been this way.

But it hasn’t. This kind of segmented ministry is a relatively recent phenomenon. What we call ‘Sunday

School' began in the nineteenth century as a noble attempt to provide education to wayward youth. Faithful adults wanted to get kids from non-Christian families to church, and so they offered "school" on Sunday. That has morphed into the kids Sunday School classes we still have today.

But the rise of youth ministry goes back to the mid-twentieth century. Thomas Bergler, who wrote his dissertation at Notre Dame on the topic of youth and the church explains just how this happened. Between 1930 and 1950 parents grew increasingly afraid that the crises of the twentieth century would topple the faith of their kids. Where is God in the midst of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War? These thoughtful parents went on the offensive. They began to market the church to teenagers. The goal was to fill churches with young people. For the first time in human history, entertainment was seen as a legitimate way to draw youth to church. As a result, youth were taken out of the regular flow of the church's life and kept together for their own classes and services. Segmented ministry was born.

It's a ministry that persists today. Bergler argues that the cost of this shift was high. Instead of helping adolescents mature into spiritual adults, it ended up making adults who were spiritual adolescents.

We should not discard everything associated with segmented ministry. At MVBC we have Sunday School classes for kids and youth. As I type these words, we are making plans for the youth to go on an overnight retreat to think together about the attributes of God. Age-appropriate teaching can be a special part of the church's life. Moreover, we want to create an environment where, in such a fragmented society, children and youth can meet, talk about the gospel, and become friends.

However, the local church must be intergenerational. The lives of the old and the young should overlap. We should find ways to fold our children into the regular flow of church life. How does this desire affect our parenting at MVBC?

1. We want quality, gospel-centered, age-appropriate teaching for children and youth. We have Sunday School for kids and youth, and on Wednesdays we usually have special classes. It's wise to raise up godly teachers who can reinforce what mom and dad are teaching at home.

These classes are also good ways to welcome kids from non-Christian families.

2. We want parents to learn and worship and serve with their children. When your children are old enough, it is valuable to give them opportunities to see you engaged in Bible study and corporate worship. They can see you asking questions, singing hymns, and even praying on Sunday evening. And throughout the week, your kids have a front-row seat to your spiritual life. They get to see you being hospitable and evangelizing. No one has a greater influence on your child than you. Jesus said that a student, when fully trained, will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). How much more will a child, when fully grown, be like his parent?

3. We want children to see other godly adults. When kids are part of the regular flow of the church they get to see God at work in the lives of adults. David Kinnamen, in *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving the Church*, says one of the worst things we can do is relegate our youth to a large-group meeting. We should strategize to provide opportunities for them to spend time with godly adults. Kinnamen put it this way:

It is much easier to put on events for large groups of kids than it is to mentor each and every one of them into a mature and holistic walk with God. If our churches are too big to provide that level of life-on-life focus, can we grow the next generation of Jesus's disciples?

If our kids are part of the regular flow of the church's life, you'll see them. Please don't ignore the kids when they walk by. Ask them their names. Get to know them. Ask what they've been learning. Take an interest. They'll know you care, and that's important.

Third, parents and churches should exercise caution before encouraging children toward baptism and church membership.

A godly parent should long for the day his child is baptized into the membership of a local church. Baptism does not save, but it's a meaningful event. It's a church's public affirmation of an individual's profession of faith.

The Bible is clear that baptism is for believers. In Colossians 2:11-12, Paul links baptism and faith. In

Matthew 28:19, Jesus says *disciples* are to be baptized. A disciple is someone who has been saved by God. Therefore, being a disciple is a prerequisite for baptism.

But other than asserting that baptism is for believers, the Bible gives little guidance regarding the appropriate age for baptism. We need to give this careful thought and attention. A couple passages of Scripture are helpful, and on the basis of texts like these, parents and churches should exercise caution before encouraging children toward baptism and church membership.

Mark 4:1-20

In Mark 4 we find the Parable of the Sower. Whenever the gospel is shared, gospel seed is sown. Lots of people hear the Word, and many respond immediately. But as time goes on, the world, the flesh, and the devil attack. As a result, some people decide that following Jesus just isn't worth it; they fall away. As Jesus put it, "The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). Again, some people (even kids) respond immediately and positively when they hear the gospel, but they don't persevere because they didn't truly believe. They weren't genuinely saved.

So what's the point of this parable? Jesus is telling us to be cautious before affirming a new profession of faith. God alone knows who is truly a Christian, but before we baptize, we want to test the evidence. The evidence we should be looking for is fruit that lasts.

Mark 10:13-16

In this familiar passage the disciples rebuke parents for bringing their kids to be held by Jesus. But Jesus rebukes the disciples, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

Some use this passage to defend the baptism of babies or of very young children. But I think the opposite point is being made. Notice to whom Jesus is speaking. He is speaking to adults, to his disciples. And notice what he is commending. He is commending child-like faith. "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *like a child* shall not enter it." The point is not that children receive the kingdom of God, but that those who do receive the kingdom have faith "like a child." Jesus is talking to adults and telling them to be like children.

That begs the question, what are children like? They tend to believe their parents. Generally speaking, they trust mom and dad. If mom says Santa Claus is coming, they ask, "When?"

Jesus knows this, and he takes the presence of these children to be an opportunity to teach the disciples what their attitude toward the kingdom of God should be like. Their faith, their trust, should be child-like. Jesus is not telling us to check our brains at the door. He is saying, *Trust the King. Even when all your questions cannot be answered, trust the King.*

This passage isn't about baptism at all. However, it's teaching should caution us against baptizing our children too young. We should wait until our children are able to naturally think independently of their parents.

I remember reading a study done in the 1990s about baptisms performed in Southern Baptist churches. Nearly half of the baptisms in the time-period studied were so-called 'rebaptisms'—adults who had been baptized so young, they weren't sure if they really understood what they were doing, so they opted to be baptized again. These adults struggled through the simple reality that kids often have a hard time discerning between the faith of their parents and their own faith. In most cases, the older a child gets the easier it is for him or her to naturally perceive the difference.

But this raises a very practical question: When should we encourage our children who profess faith toward baptism, membership, and the Lord's Supper? On the basis of the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4, it would be wise to hold off until the child has a track record of resisting the world, the flesh, and the devil. And on the basis of Mark 10, when they have learned to think independently of mom and dad.

However, this still doesn't fully answer the question. How long does the track record need to be? When do kids think independently? In short, what age should our children be before we encourage baptism? Scripture is silent on the issue, so I can't give a fixed age. However, my encouragement to you is to hold off at least until your kids are in their teenage years and are turning into young adults. This allows the time for both testing and independent thought—two things we want to see in every disciple.

I've been talking to parents about this question for twenty years. They have a lot of questions about practically how to lead their children in discussions about salvation. So here is how I would encourage you to lead your children toward baptism:

1. Teach and model the gospel daily. Never take your influence for granted. Your model won't save your children. Only God saves. But what you say and how you live matters. The best Sunday School class, the most engaging summer camp is no substitute for the faithful words and witness of a Christian parent.

2. Tell your kids they need salvation. Jonathan Edwards records a conversation he had with one of his sons. Apparently a friend of his son had died recently, and Edwards took that death as an opportunity to point his son to Christ. The famous American pastor reminded his son that he, too, would one day die. Then Edwards exhorted him that he was old enough to put his faith in Christ. Putting off baptism does not mean putting off evangelism. Tell your kids they need Christ. Assure them that God saves sinners of every age.

3. Call your children to repentance and faith daily. I often hear of parents or teachers urging children to "make a decision" or "pray a prayer." Once their kids have done that, the adults often back off, resting in the fact that the child decided to follow Jesus, and assuming that this decision is a guarantee of that child's salvation. The kids have "closed the deal," so-to-speak. There is, however, a better way. Though it is fine to encourage children to make a decision to follow Jesus, beware of emphasizing the significance of a one-time decision. This tempts children to base the assurance of their salvation on that decision and not on the cross.

For this reason, I avoid the one-time, "sinners' prayer" with my kids and, instead, I call them to repentance and faith daily. As I pray with my kids, I'll almost always say something like, *Dear Lord, thank you for my daughter. Thank you for making her and putting her in a Christian home. Father, I pray that today she would repent and believe the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.* This is a daily prayer in my household, a prayer that they would turn from sin, turn to Christ, and trust in him continually for salvation. My wife and I discuss these ideas regularly with our kids to try to see what the Lord may be doing in their hearts.

My goal is to teach them not only that they must repent and believe to become a Christian, but that repentance and faith are a daily part of being a Christian.

4. Clarify the marks of a true believer. Make sure your kids know what a Christian looks like. A Christian is convicted of sin. A Christian believes Jesus is Savior and Lord. A Christian loves God and neighbor. A Christian pursues holiness. We want our kids growing up with the knowledge that though we are saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone; good works always accompany it. A careful reading of 1 John is very helpful here.

5. Lead them in the spiritual disciplines. Sometimes I'll hear parents wondering if they should lead their kids to pray and read the Bible if they aren't sure they're Christians. Absolutely! One of the privileges of growing up in a Christian home is having parents who can lead you to meet God through the Word and prayer. Yes, by all means, exhort your kids to pursue the Lord this way. These are the means God uses to save us.

6. Encourage them when you see what appear to be signs of spiritual fruit. You don't want to give your children the sense that you are constantly skeptical God is at work in them. It's one thing to be slow to pursue baptism. But it is another thing to discourage them when there are signs of the Spirit's work in their lives. Be careful not to assume they are a Christian, but don't assume they aren't.

7. Explain that baptism, membership, and the Lord's Supper are best reserved for those approaching adulthood. Kids understand that there are things they have to wait for: college, a driver's permit, the right to vote. Many parents aren't yet old enough to be President of the United States. It's normal in life to wait for things. It will not shock kids to be told they need to wait to be baptized.

I know that this is a very delicate issue for a lot of parents. We all want to see our children take steps that show they love the Lord and want to follow him for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, many parents are afraid that if their kids don't follow Jesus in baptism early on, they never will. But this, of course, is not true! Baptism does not save; it is simply a sign of God's saving work. So we should encourage our kids to repent and believe the moment they can understand those words, but we should hold off on baptism and church membership until they

are old enough to display a track-record of repentance and independent thought.

For all these reasons, we should be cautious about encouraging children toward baptism and membership.

Fourth, our failures as parents should point us to our heavenly Father.

The topic of parenting can be a hard one for many of us. Not only might we be sad because we weren't or aren't the parents we want to be, but many of us are wounded because we didn't come from homes filled with love and peace and the gospel.

I've been a foster parent for three years, and I've heard stories that would make you sick about parents who abused, neglected, and abandoned their children. We live in a world where parents fail. Even the best parents fail their kids.

One day, our foster daughter will be old enough to understand the struggles her parents faced. It's hard to say how she'll process all that—she's not even five years old right now. I'm her foster dad, and I love her. Lord willing, we will adopt her soon. But more than anything, I want her to understand that she doesn't finally need a human father, she doesn't finally need to be adopted into my family; she needs to be adopted into God's family. She needs a heavenly Father.

What's true for her is true for all of us. Maybe you need to remember this right now. You may be really upset at your parent for letting you down. It's important for you to understand that the most important family we can ever belong to is a spiritual family with God the Father seated at the head of the table. He is the giver of life, the sustainer of souls, the founder of joy. He turns our mourning into gladness; he lifts our sorrow. If you feel lost, or hurt, or abandoned, or neglected, or unloved, you can find a Father in him. All those who turn away from their sins and trust in Christ are given God as a Father, and he will never let you down.

If you are a parent now, the best thing you can do, is point your kids to a heavenly Father. Not long before Jonathan Edwards died, he wrote a letter to his daughter and pointed her away from him and to God:

Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God that I must shortly leave you; therefore, give my kindest love to my dear wife . . . and I hope she will be supported under so great a trial, and submit cheerfully to the will of God. And as to my children, you are now to be left fatherless, which I hope will be an inducement to you to seek a father who will never fail you.

That's the best parenting counsel I know to give. Jonathan Edwards failed his kids. We will all fail our kids. The best thing we can do as parents and as a church is point each other—kids included—to our heavenly Father.

If you are a mom or dad, God has given you a special gift in your children. Be grateful and do everything you can to point those kids to Christ. But even if you aren't a parent, you get to be part of the church of the living God. He has given you brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, and children to love and serve in this body. Don't take those relationships for granted. Mount Vernon is blessed to have a family ministry, and if you are part of this body, you are part of that ministry.

Join me in the great task of being a church that equips parents to raise their children well, and takes every opportunity to make the gospel known to young and old alike.

~Aaron Menikoff

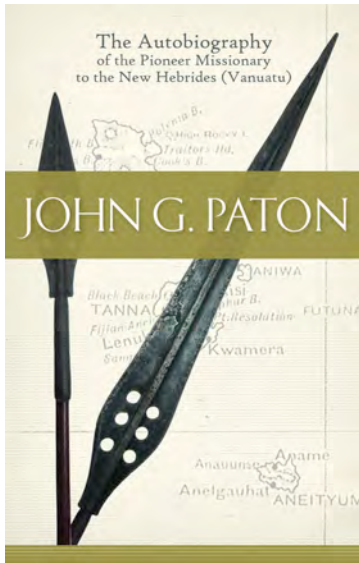
Book Review

John G. Patton:

The Autobiography of the Pioneer Missionary to the New Hebrides

By John G. Patton

Reviewed by Priscilla Barry



One year ago, I bought two copies of the book *John G. Patton, The Autobiography of the*

Pioneer Missionary to the New Hebrides – one for my sister-in-law, Marsha, and one for me. I gave Marsha a copy because I wanted to be able to discuss the book with someone; and I wanted them to keep me accountable to read the *entire* book. I knew that Marsha really would read the book and then ask me about it. This accountability between the two of us was a good idea because some sections of this book get a little tedious, and there is a temptation to put it down. But don't stop reading this beautiful, inspiring story. Even the seemingly pointless sections interweave with those that are gripping to reveal a God that loves a totally depraved, hate-filled group of cannibals and works in ways that are beyond human comprehension to bring them into a relationship with him.

Patton begins his story sounding like a grandfather reminiscing about the good old days. He tells of revisiting his childhood hometown in rural, northern Scotland and laments that the world of his youth no longer exists. This reminiscing and revisiting section is a little long but includes stories that should not be missed. Such as, the story of his parent's first meeting. As a young girl, his mother, out of curiosity, follows a young man and discovers that he is going into the woods to read a book entitled *Erskine's "Sonnets"* and pray. While he is in a trance of prayerful devotion and oblivious to the world around him, she hides his Scottish bonnet and then watches from her hiding place with great enjoyment as he, in his perplexity, seeks for the bonnet and then finds it. After two days of this same stunt, she leaves this

note, "She who stole away your bonnet is ashamed of what she did; she has a great respect for you and asks you to pray for her, that she may become as good a Christian as you." This is the beginning of the relationship between Patton's parents which produces a home for their eleven children that, though extremely poor in material goods, is full of love, good humor, and deep devotion to God. Patton describes his father's joyful love of God and declares that after family devotions, "I used to look at the light on my father's face, and wish I were like him in spirit,—hoping that, in answer to his prayer, I might be privileged and prepared to carry the blessed Gospel to some portion of the Heathen World."

Patton's poverty leaves him struggling to get a good education. Eventually, he begins work as an agent for the City Missionary in Glasgow and starts a mission church. Yet he continually hears "the wail of the perishing Heathen in the South Seas," and is aware that few people are going out to declare the gospel to them. In fact, many Christian people attempt to dissuade Patton from his plan to work among the cannibals of the New Hebrides. One of these, is an old Christian gentleman who warns Patton, "The Cannibals! You will be eaten by Cannibals!" Patton responds, "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."

On April 16, 1858, Patton and his wife, Mary Ann Robson, leave for the New Hebrides (modern day Vanuatu, in the South Pacific) under the auspices of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland. They begin

their ministry with no knowledge of the island languages and as the only English speakers on the island of Tanna. This results in the establishment of their home on a site which is a breeding ground of fever and ague. Mary Ann falls victim to the sickness a few days before giving birth to a son on February 12, 1859. She dies, and two weeks later, her infant son dies also. After losing his entire family, Patton says, "It was very difficult to be resigned, left alone, and in sorrowful circumstances; but feeling immovably assured that my God and Father was too wise and loving to err in anything that He does or permits, I looked up to the Lord for help, and struggled on in His work."

Patton loves the Tannese natives and makes every effort to teach them about Jesus, even though they return his every kind, unselfish gesture with threats of bodily harm and death. They lie without compunction, steal at every opportunity, and eat not only their enemies, but also their friends and even their own wives. After years of living under constant threat of violent molestations of all types, Patton says, "It is a sober truth, and it comes back to me sweetly after twenty years, that I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smile of my blessed Lord in those dread moments when musket, club, or spear was being leveled at my life. Oh the bliss of living and enduring, as seeing 'Him who is invisible!'"

Patton eventually leaves his beloved Tana and goes to Australia to acquire funds for all the missions in the New Hebrides. On his return, he is assigned to the island of Aniwa. After suffering much abuse from the natives, God orchestrates events which reveal His presence to the heart of one chief, who testifies to his people, "Something here in my heart tells me that the Jehovah God does exist, the Invisible One, whom we never heard of nor saw till the Missi (Patton) brought Him to our knowledge ... let us be taught by Missi how to serve the God who can hear ..."

Patton tells his readers, "God gave His best, His Son, to me; and I give back my best, my all, to Him." May each of us do the same.

