

# Benediction

*Neal C. Chandler*

**A**rdmoore told Carmen Stavely, who'd been away in Idaho visiting family, that what happened that Sunday morning was absolutely confidential. The bishop had instructed all who'd been present to keep the matter strictly to themselves; and he, Ardmoore, did not think (though as usual his optimism was naive) that more than a very few people outside the ward were acquainted with the details. As for himself, he had not been present, had not, therefore, been warned or instructed by the bishop, and was reporting only what he could not help learning from the entirely unsolicited accounts of others.

If what he told her was not in all respects consistent, Ardmoore would have been the first to confess confusion both at the contradictions and at the ardor with which each teller insisted upon the complete accuracy of his or her own version. Fortunately, there was general agreement on the basic sequence of events. The incident had occurred on the fourth of five Sundays in May and thus marked the fourth appearance of Brother Kevin Houston as the new Gospel Doctrine teacher.

The partitions in the multi-purpose room had been pushed back all the way and propped with metal folding chairs because, unfortunately (or providentially — here the opinions were as sharply as they were unevenly divided), Sister Reeva June Parish who teaches Gospel Principles had been home again with mono, and all her neophyte faithful and her missionary-surrounded investigators had come on over to hear Kevin.

The truth, as Ardmoore well knew, is that most of those people would have been there even if Reeva June, bursting with good health and sound principles, had put in her scheduled appearance. Reeva was sweet, but Kevin Houston

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*NEAL C. CHANDLER, who presently serves as statistical clerk in his ward in Cleveland, Ohio, teaches German and English at local colleges. He is the father of six children and his wife, Rebecca Worthen Chandler, is former managing editor of the Mormon Mendicant.*

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put on a truly spectacular show; and in four weeks, word-of-mouth had already made Gospel Doctrine a standing room sellout. With the exception of Ardmoore, who tended the flame in the clerk's office, and of the other bishopric members, whose reliable absence was a matter of form and tradition, almost everyone thinkable had been in that class, including, as is now well known, Damon Boulder himself who had not set foot in the class — nor in the church, for that matter — the entire four weeks since his own formal and unbidden release as Gospel Doctrine instructor.

Now Damon must have come early because he'd sat in the next to last row near the door. For the most part, people said, he was quiet and uncharacteristically reticent to speak or to take part unless called upon. But perhaps, as some now insist, he was only playing possum, biding his time, waiting. On this hotly contested question of premeditation, however, Ardmoore was, himself, unwilling to express an opinion, and it is perhaps important before we go any further, to point out that Ardmoore had always really rather liked Damon Boulder; that he had, in fact, defended Damon at the very ward council meeting in which Bennett Sarvus, practically as his first official act as newly installed Sunday School president, had recommended Damon's release.

Leaning back and pulling lint from the cuff of his blazer, Bennett had mentioned almost offhandedly that Boulder had now been teaching the adult class for over a year. Surely it was time to release him with many thanks and to offer him some new challenge in the ward. There followed several nodding, lip pushing, "well, why not" seconds from among those present, but practically no one was taken in by this careful show of nonchalance. Bennett and his seconds had just declared war.

Utterly predictable pockets of guerilla resistance quickly formed up and returned fire. In particular, the militant and military looking Marvin Chisolm led the counterattack. Marvin was the ward liberal, an unabashed Democrat rendered respectable by his brahman Utah roots and successful consulting business. He wore his expensive, Ivy League education openly with his mustache, his penny loafers, and his herringbone jackets. In church, his schooled reverence for the rigors of academe took the general form of irreverence for the popular accommodations of faith. In a tone of purest acid he declared himself: 1) entirely satisfied with the present teacher, and 2) categorically opposed to any change that might, in Marvin's own term, "further abet the already rampant and reprehensible 'Koolaidization' of Mormon theology." Even Ardmoore said, in a conciliatory tone, that it seemed to him a shame in a New Testament year to let go the only teacher in the stake who read Greek and who had some formal training in ancient scripture.

By this time, however, Bennett Sarvus had come to full attention atop the powder blue sofa on which he was sitting, and he began to speak with a hushed gravity quite beyond his twenty-five and a half years. Precisely this, he explained, was the problem. Brother Boulder had, it was true, a great deal of worldly learning — which was, no doubt, commendable in its place — but at the same time he openly spurned the authorized lesson plan; and, in fact, when President Sarvus had gone personally to inquire after the manual, Damon,

who couldn't even remember its title, had had no idea at all of its whereabouts, except to say that perhaps it might be "somewhere in the car." As everyone well knew, that meant somewhere awash in the ragged sea of books and papers spilling around the back of Damon's wheezing, barnacled, 1963 Plymouth stationwagon, a brontosaurial conveyance bizarrely adorned with seraph's wings that Carmen Stavely's own husband Walter and the boys in his Scout troop gleefully referred to as "The Fourth Nephite." It was also common knowledge that Damon's lessons were, in fact, taken largely from whatever obscure, uncorrelated, probably even foreign and idolatrous book he happened to be poring over at the time. More than a few people, especially established, full-blood Saints who were not afraid to speak out behind his back, complained that he talked over the heads of new members. He loved Latin words and questionable or extreme ideas; and though, yes, Damon Boulder had a great deal of worldly knowledge, Bennett whose own field was information management felt compelled to point out that raw, unmanaged, uncorrelated knowledge was not unlike raw weather, or raw language, or, for that matter, raw sewage. It posed a serious environmental hazard, in this case to the fragile spiritual ecology of the ward. Hadn't the scholars and intellectuals among the Jews managed with all their learning to befog the very light of Christ? Bennett, for his part, was not anxious to follow their example in the Sunday School for which he was now personally responsible.

He finished on a note of such sincere and impassioned concern that the room fell into a kind of rhetorical arrest. Even Boulder's angry supporters sat as if molded in aspic; and Ardmooore, embarrassed at his earlier comment and obvious shallowness, stared through the carpet at his feet. The bishop, however, shuffled restlessly and then coughed for attention.

"Look Bennett," he said, "I've been through all this before." And indeed, over the years and at the behest of many, he had tried to shift the reluctant Damon Boulder from teaching into nearly every other thinkable kind of position. As a temporary Scout leader Damon had, with the saturnalian hubris of innocence, taken the entire troop skinnydipping in the pond at the stake farm. In the clerk's office he had actually, knowingly subverted certain statistical reports with figures taken, as he later freely admitted, from a table of random numbers. When questioned, he explained guilelessly, but without repentance, that though doubtless inaccurate, his impossible numbers were certainly as useful and as significant as those called for in the reports. As ward In-Service leader he'd cancelled four consecutive monthly meetings, only to occupy the entire hour and a half of the fifth reading long exhortatory passages from the *Journal of Discourses* with a bright, theatrical enthusiasm comprehensible solely to himself. He refused categorically to deal with ward finances, insisting loudly that God and common sense forbade him to do so; and when called once, long ago, in a moment of sublimely naive inspiration to serve on the ward building committee, he had, while toiling faithfully and knowledgeably for a better than standard-plan building, also written a light-hearted, fun-poking letter of complaint and suggestion to the Church Building Committee in Salt Lake City. Unfortunately, in that higher, thinner, "intermoun-

tain" air, every vestige of fun and good nature must have evaporated utterly from the document, for, on its account, Damon's then brand-new bishop suddenly found himself skewered and roasting painfully over the fire-red carpet in the office of a very angry stake president. It was a lesson he hadn't forgotten.

"I could call Damon to the bishopric." He paused, absently fishing broken animal crackers from the watch pocket in his vest while looks of horror blossomed around him like crabgrass in time-lapse. "But if I did, he'd accept reluctantly and then celebrate by growing a full beard and what hair he has left to his shoulders." He looked up with a gesture of conclusion. "If the stake would let me do it, I'd retire and ordain him to teach mysteries to the high priests' quorum; but since they seem determined he's going to be the oldest active elder in the Church, I'm going to keep him right where he is. He likes it; and as long as he's not teaching some open heresy or other, I like it too. A little, hard-core education isn't going to hurt anyone. We're just not used to it, that's all. If you think someone is seriously troubled," he added as an afterthought, "well, we have other classes, don't we?"

But the trouble was that there were, in fact, no other classes. Reeva June Parish was, for reasons beyond her control, becoming seriously unreliable; and Family Relations was once again without a teacher, the last one having disappeared quite suddenly and, in fact, mercifully after the revelation of her imminent divorce. No one new had been called, and the bishopric's own wait-and-see footdragging was to blame. So it was not surprising or even unwarranted when, not many days later, a delegation of appropriately credentialed Saints went privately to the bishop's home.

In an old bathrobe, he led them to the cluttered family room where he sat, almost primly for a man of his comfortable dimensions, staring resignedly at the crackled leather of his slippers while Sunday School President Sarvus, after apologizing for the hour, polled his militant companions and then closed with another, even more impassioned appeal for retrenchment in Gospel Doctrine. When Bennett had finished, the bishop without raising his eyes from his slippers, took a deep breath and let it go. Then, placing his hands on his knees, he thanked all present for their concern, stood, and left the room.

According to Ardmoore, he must have gone straight off to bed without so much as nodding farewell to his guests. The house beyond the family room remained dark and eerily silent; and when, after much too long a time, the bishop had not returned, the abandoned and incredulous party of kingdom patriots found its own groping way out of doors, there to caucus one more time in troubled whispers on the moonlit drive before disbanding stealthily into the night.

The partisans were puzzled and pessimistically insecure about what their night ride had accomplished. Yet, the very next Sunday the bishop himself — ignoring channels — called Damon Boulder in and told him he would soon be released from his teaching job in prospect of a weightier assignment. Ardmoore who was in the outer office, swears that Damon Boulder laughed out loud. And this is not improbable, for Damon too had heard it all before. It may have seemed to him at first like a private joke between old friends until,

of course, the handwriting would not fade from the wall. Then he just sat in glum silence while the bishop performed his rehearsed enthusiasms across the desk.

There is no doubt Damon took it badly. He stayed away four full weeks, reappearing, as everyone now knows, on "that" fateful Sunday. The news of his return could not have spread any more quickly if it had been posted on a billboard in the parking lot; and round Rachel Holbein, one of the midnight riders, made a point of stopping Kevin Houston in the hallway, taking his sleeve, and whispering with all the theatrical subtlety of a silent movie conspirator that Boulder was back. And indeed, since Boulder was not known as a particularly forgiving or deferential man, Kevin might well have been apprehensive, except, of course, that he wasn't.

Kevin Houston had that particular kind of self-assurance which in a secular and sophisticated world is taken as evidence of old money. In Kevin, however, whose prosperity was, in fact, nearly as green as the bank notes in his wallet, it signalled instead a kind of foreordination to the high, blood bureaucracy of Zion. He spoke in the accumulated ecclesiastical jargon of four generations; and his voice, as the cynical Marvin Chisolm delighted in saying, had the "perfect grain and color of simulated walnut formica." Moreover, when he took the stage in Sunday School, he left no doubt at all in any mind, not even Marvin Chisolm's, as to who among those players present commanded top billing.

"So you gotta follow the Brethren?" The sentence sliced through the room at a whining pitch and decible level that stunned the still-conversing class members into silence. Having thus seized attention, Houston, who had not even reached the front of the class, whirled on his heel and backed the rest of the way up the center aisle. "Is that right, Brother Zimmer?" A young man in a short-sleeved white shirt and blue tie came to attention. "Ya gotta follow the Brethren?" Again Kevin whined the sentence out in a minor third so nasal and obnoxious that a newborn infant would have recognized it as a taunt.

"Well, I suppose." Zimmer, though reliable, was startled and embarrassed at an answer which, while clearly correct, somehow sounded ludicrous in the face of his interrogator's tone. Once having spoken, however, he immediately regretted his vacillation and, as quickly, repented. "I mean, yes! Of course!"

Kevin kept silent for a moment surveying the expectant class, then looked back to Elder Zimmer, now with a sardonic cast to his familiar smile. "Why?" he demanded. "You're an educated man, David." Zimmer shrugged. "Now don't be modest, a well-educated man, and you regularly study the scriptures? Does he read the scriptures, Ariel?"

David Zimmer's wife nodded vigorous confirmation. "He certainly does," she said.

"Well, I thought so. Now tell me this, Ariel. Is he a responsible man? Does he exercise good judgment in his work, for his family, in his Church assignments?" Again Ariel's affirmation was aggressive. "Then why on earth should David Zimmer, a man of education, preparation, and sound judgment feel compelled to follow anybody's 'Brethren?' Why don't those Church

leaders out there," he made a dismissive gesture in a vaguely westerly direction, "just leave him alone to follow his own gospel inspired, commonsense course to salvation?"

As Houston turned from Ariel to the rest of his audience, the predictable hands already fluttered aloft. There was round Rachel Holbein; there were the Cutters, Sylvia Potter, Arlon Crisp, who was elders' quorum president, and, finally, there were two of the six missionaries, all telegraphing urgent signals at the ceiling. But Kevin had something else in mind.

"Brother Chisolm, what do you think?" Marvin Chisolm had sat in class for four weeks now nursing a loud silence and an expression of weak nausea. It was time to call his bluff.

"I don't know, Kevin." Chisolm raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice so that the people behind him strained forward to hear. "I'm not even sure I know what 'following the Brethren' means. Perhaps you could explain."

"It's obedience!" Rachel Holbein had read the lesson and could no longer wait to be recognized. She dashed in headlong. "It means obeying the commandments and always doing whatever you're asked." She sat back resolutely and folded her hands on the manual in her lap.

"When I do what I am asked," Marvin looked at Kevin and not at Rachel as he spoke, "I am being polite or considerate or accommodating. I am obedient, on the other hand, when I do what I am told. Perhaps that is what is meant. Perhaps urging us to follow the Brethren is simply a euphemistic way of warning us to do what we are . . ."

"Now Marvin," Houston cut him off decisively at the offending verb, yet his tone remained as smooth and sweet as whipped topping, "do you suppose it is a simple thing to direct the affairs of a world-wide church of several million Saints?"

"Of course not." Marvin didn't see the point.

"We all know, Brother Chisolm, that you have had a good deal of administrative experience yourself. So let me ask you what sort of a system, what method you personally would suggest to the Brethren for governing the important spiritual and, yes, even temporal affairs of an organization of millions spread all over the world?"

Marvin, who had felt a little cornered by the relentless warmth of Houston's questioning, smiled an air-conditioned smile. "I'd teach them correct principles and then let them govern themselves."

"Well now, I think that's a marvelous answer. In fact, I think it's just exactly what the Lord would have each and every one of us do . . . ultimately. But in the meantime, Brother Chisolm, tell me. How do you teach people those correct principles? I mean, how do you *really* teach them? And how do you get people — and believe me I'm including myself here — how do you get them to really govern themselves?"

When Marvin didn't answer immediately, Kevin bored in like a trial lawyer on a scent. "If we just talk to everybody, tell them about it, will that do it? If we just preach at 'em a little on Sundays, will they learn those principles, and will they live by them?" A snicker went through the class. "No one seems



to want to say 'yes.' Well, why not then? What, when you get right down to it, is the only truly effective way to teach the gospel?" He turned to the blackboard and took a piece of chalk. "I think we all know that to teach effectively, we've got to teach by . . ."

"By the Spirit!" Rachel Holbein, the Cutters, and the missionaries, all bleated out in unison.

"Well, of course. Certainly, you've got to teach by the Spirit, now don't you?" And Kevin wrote SPIRIT in block letters on the board. "That's an excellent answer, and we're going to get right back to it too. But before you can teach by the Spirit, you've got to teach by something else first." He wrote again: EXAMPLE. "You've got to teach by example. Isn't that right, Brother Cutter?"

"Sure is," Cutter grinned. "Actions speak a whole lot louder than words."

"They certainly do; and if you've got to be an example in order to lead the people of God, then maybe it's about time we took a good hard look at just what kind of examples our leaders are." Kevin paused and paced slowly across the front of the room in apparent self-absorption, bouncing a piece of bright yellow chalk in the palm of his hand. When he reached the windows banked shoulder high across the mint-green cinderblock wall on the far side, he stared out into the sunlit spring morning for a moment and then whirled, as if with sudden inspiration.

"Now take Peter," he announced, "the very first chief executive officer of the Church, the George Washington of Christianity, so to speak. Now just what kind of a man was this Peter. Was he an all-American? Ask yourselves! Was he a genuine, all-conference, all-Church champion, or was he just some guy off the street looking for a job? I mean," he raised his open palm to a vertical plane in direct line with his nose, "what do we really know about Peter?"

The class was a little stunned; and when no one showed any sign of responding, Kevin called on the elders' quorum president. "Arlon?"

Arlon Crisp, who was in the habit of speaking before he thought, always divided his sentences into two distinct parts, a universal or boiler plate introduction and a more specific, though equally formulaic, conclusion joined by varying periods of awkwardly searching silence.

"Well, one thing we can say for certain," he began, and then foraged his crowded mind several seconds long for whatever it was that could be so certainly said, "is . . . is that . . . that . . . that he was chosen of the Lord." He smiled. But Kevin was not buying.

"Oh no, Arlon, that's too easy. What we have to figure out here today is why the Lord chose Peter in the first place. What did this man have that someone else didn't? Was it prestige? Was it education? What did the guy do for a living?"

"He was a fisherman, wasn't he?" A very pretty young girl, a convert of only a week or two, spoke with soft hesitancy from the third row.

"A what?" Kevin put his hand to his ear.

"A FISHERMAN," the missionary on her right confirmed boldly.

“FISHERMAN?” Kevin’s obvious incredulity made both respondents wince as if some terrible and terribly obvious mistake had been made. “You mean he didn’t have a Ph.D. in religion? He wasn’t an expert on theology? Are you trying to tell me that the man chosen by the Lord to preside over the Church didn’t have a doctor’s degree, or a master’s degree, or even a piddly little old bachelor’s degree? Why, next you’ll be trying to tell me, he wasn’t even an intellectual, that he was some sort of simple, honest working man. Well, well. Well, well. Well, well.” He spoke his “wells” in melodic pairs and crossed back to the other side of the room.

“Tell me,” he readdressed the third row in slow, dramatic dismay, “was he just any old fisherman? Do we know anything else about Peter?”

By this point, most of the audience was beaming, though a few, predictably, smoldered. None, however, was foolhardy enough to take up Kevin’s newest invitation to dance. His sure orthodoxy was too subtle, too deceptive, too unorthodox. And though they loved (or loathed) the tune, no one had any further illusions about being able to mind the step. Kevin would have to answer his own question.

“Well, brothers and sisters, we know this much. We know he owned his own boat. Owned it outright. And he hired other men to work for him. This man they called ‘the big fisherman’ wasn’t looking for any handout when the Lord and the Church came along. He supported himself, supported his wife, his children — we don’t know for sure how many he had, but you can bet your life he had more than two. Why, he even supported his mother-in-law. Now that should tell you something.” Kevin paused for the accumulating appreciation to catch up with him.

“Now,” he continued, “I’m going to tell you another thing, something not many people have figured out yet. Old Peter was a pretty darn good businessman. When the Lord called him in to head up the Church organization, he was already worth a considerable amount of money. He had a savings program. Made sound investments. He was a man who’d magnified his ‘talents’ (and some of you had better look up the real meaning of that old Jewish word in your Bible dictionaries).

“Now,” he continued, “do you want me to tell you how I know about this, how I’m absolutely certain of it? Well then,” he accepted the rapt silence as assent, “I will. If you’ll take your Bibles and look up First Corinthians 9, verse 5, you’ll find out that when Peter was called to go out and preside in the mission field, he took his good wife right along with him. Now, in my father’s family, as some of you know, we’ve had considerable experience in this area, and let me admonish all those priesthood bearers here today. Brethren, believe you me, you do not take your wife into the mission field unless you’ve first put more than enough money aside to support her in the manner to which she is bound and determined to remain accustomed. And that is the gospel truth.”

When the laughter finally paled, Kevin became serious again. “In those rough, ancient times when thieves and shiftless beggars, when high-paid parasite priests and crooked, Roman tax-collectors were the norm, in those dark



times, not unlike our own times today, here was a man who carried his own weight, who took care of his family, who got ahead in business, a man with the stature and with the financial means and know-how to truly serve his Church. Now that's something we know how to appreciate even today.

"That man was as solid and reliable as a rock. And, in fact, my brothers and sisters, did you know that 'rock' is the very meaning of the name Peter, a name, by the way, which was not given him by any earthly power. Why, his parents thought his name was Simon." Kevin shook his head in good-natured recognition of human folly. "The Lord himself gave Peter his proper name when he called him to the work. Now, don't you just suppose that the Lord knew exactly what kind of man he was hiring. Don't you just suppose that when he gave old Simon Bar-Jona, that successful, self-reliant, maritime businessman from Galilee, the name 'Peter,' he was sending you and me a message, telling us that here was the kind of man the Lord is looking for, an ensign to the nations, an example to each and everyone of us." A wry wrinkle gathered itself on one side of Kevin's forehead. "Or do you suppose he gave him that name just because he had nothing better to do on a Saturday afternoon?"

Kevin waited patiently until the familiar, if now more hesitant, hands began to collect in quantum spurts and flutters, and then once again looked beyond them to the back of the room.

"Dr. Boulder, what is your opinion?"

The class froze. Kevin was having it all his own way. Chisolm was long since vanquished, and Damon Boulder's uncharacteristic silence seemed to confirm once and for all the calling and election of the new order in Gospel Doctrine. So why this? Why taunt the dragon?

Boulder himself seemed surprised. He sat a while thinking before he answered. "The giving of a name in itself is not really very remarkable, Kevin. It was a common practice for Jewish rabbis to give titles to their disciples, usually some word that pointed to promise in a situation or placed an obligation on the bearer. Christ, of course, did this more than once, and there are various examples in the Old Testament."

He paused and looked around. "As to this particular title, well, I really don't think it was a product of financial analysis, Kevin, nor of character analysis for that matter. In fact, it has always seemed to me more like wishful thinking. I, at least, would be hard put to think of a title less descriptive of the man's actual behavior."

"What do you mean by that?" Sunday School President Sarvus was standing in the back of the room where he had been watchfully presiding since shortly after the beginning of the lesson. The clarion annoyance in his voice sent a shiver through the more timid in the room, and attention closed in around the discussion like a crowd around the scene of an accident.

"Well," Boulder continued unperturbed, "he didn't show himself to be much of a rock, now did he? The man was almost fatally impulsive. When, for instance, Jesus called to him on the Sea of Gennesaret, he was all hot to get out and walk on the water, but two or three steps and his self-assurance collapsed. He nearly drowned. More importantly, he was the first and the loudest

of the disciples to confess his loyalty to Christ, but we know he was also the first to deny him . . . and the most insistent. He had a temper. He was violent. Threatened people. Even cut off some poor fellow's ear. How often did he have to be slowed down, cooled off, rebuked? Oh, he mellowed as he got older, but he wasn't cured. Even after he'd been called to lead the Church, he couldn't stay out of trouble. In fact, he got into so much trouble with the law in Jerusalem, he had to be released from that highly visible, presidential position and sent out into the boondocks to preside over a mission (an expedient, by the way, which is not unknown to the Church in our own day). But in the mission-field I think Peter finally hit his stride. He was a great teacher, you know, a baptizer, and because doctrinal purity was far from chief among his passions, inside the Church he became a capable politician. Perhaps the best she's ever had."

"Politician?" Kevin Houston, who had been listening intently, arched his eyebrows into pointed interrogatories.

"Certainly. Somebody had to mediate between those pureblood Jewish hardliners up in Jerusalem and Paul and his liberal rabble in Rome. No easy task, you can be sure, and no one to set him apart for it, but he carried it off like a ward politician with consummate pragmatism.

"With what?" Rachel Holbein had been lost for ten minutes. None of this was in the manual.

"Pragmatism, Rachel, consummate political pragmatism. Paul complains in Galatians that his old friend and fellow missionary Peter knows all too well which side his bread is buttered on. Oh, he's an ally of sorts; but when the occasion and the realities of power require, he is not in the least above dissembling and backing down to those starched bureaucrats in Jerusalem, even when doing so violates his own inner convictions. And that, for good or for ill, is political pragmatism."

"I don't understand." Bennett Sarvus broke in again, but this time directed his metallic gaze and his question to Kevin Houston. "Is Brother Boulder insinuating that the Apostle Peter was some sort of cheap political hack?" His measured enunciation and crystal tone made it clear that he was very upset.

"Oh no," Boulder quickly responded before Kevin might intercede, "he was a very fine politician, a very successful one. He did more, perhaps, than any other to keep an early and sorely divided church together, to prevent schism. And I don't think political successes like that come cheaply either. They are almost always bought at great personal cost. In a way that's Paul's point, isn't it? — that too often we pay out again in personal integrity whatever it is we win for the integrity of the community? In any case, I was only wondering out loud — and at Brother Houston's invitation, of course — if perhaps, in retrospect, 'Simon Politikos,' (Simon the Politician) might not have been a more accurate title, and, consequently, higher praise."

Boulder leaned back in his seat with his face carefully blank and with an air of dreadful satisfaction. And indeed, the marvelous spell holding the class enthralled before Kevin had so rashly conjured this spirit was gone. The crowd was visibly restless, palpably unsure and disoriented. Yet Kevin stood among

the ruins of his Sunday School lesson as calm as a summer's morning. "You know," he said so quietly and with such intense reflectiveness that the class immediately forgot its agitated milling and whispering to listen, "You know, I think Brother Boulder is right."

Even Damon Boulder glanced up.

"I think he's reminding us that though Peter was a good man, a great man, a chosen man, he was not, in fact, a perfect man. Like you and like me, he was human. Isn't that right, Brother Boulder?"

Surprised at being invited back into the discussion, Damon nodded. "Peter shows us pretty clearly everything that the call to leadership involves in human privilege and weakness."

Pursing his lips Kevin nodded. "Yup, there is certainly something to what you say. But you are wrong on one point, Damon — the point about the name — because the Lord knew exactly what he was doing when he gave that imperfect fisherman the name Peter. You know," his voice took on a sudden air of confidentiality, "when I was preparing this lesson, I ran into a real puzzle. I looked up that name Peter in a fancy dictionary I have at home. It's an old Greek dictionary. Now, the New Testament was written in Greek. Isn't that right, Damon?" Damon nodded. "And in Greek the English name Peter is spelled P-e-t-r-o-s."

Kevin wrote it on the board, turned, and winked at his audience. "You see, there's a bit of the scholar in some of the rest of us as well. And do you know when I looked up P-e-t-r-o-s in that dictionary, it didn't mean *rock* at all. The real Greek word for *rock* is P-e-t-r-a." He spelled it out on the board and wrote the translation directly underneath. "So just what do you suppose P-e-t-r-o-s means?" He pointed to the still empty space under the first word on the board; and when everyone, including Boulder, remained silent, Kevin turned and wrote out the answer. "It means 'stone,' an ordinary stone.

"Now," he whirled and faced his audience with a bolt of new energy, "that might not seem like a very big difference to some of you, but think about it. What is a rock? I mean there's the Rock of Gibraltar and the Rock of Ages; there's the man who built his house upon a rock, and then, of course, there's the rock of revelation upon which the Lord has built this magnificent Church. Surely a rock is something pretty big, pretty darn substantial. But if that's a rock, what then is a stone?"

For a moment or more he scanned the ceiling while he dug in his trouser pocket, then pulled a smooth round chip of shale out into the sunlight and held it up between his thumb and forefinger for all to see. "Now there is a stone, and a stone, my brothers and sisters, is also a rock. It's a little rock, a rock you can put in your pocket or skip across a lake. And so I asked myself, why did the Lord want to go and call that big, strapping, six-foot fisherman and business tycoon 'Mr. Simon Little-Rock?' It puzzled me all morning long. And then . . . then suddenly, like a revelation, it came to me that it was nothing so very remarkable at all, that, you and that I, that all of us do the very same thing almost daily."

Kevin advanced to a still open expanse of the bright green blackboard. "Now, take a name, almost any name like Bill, or Tom, or Jim, or even 'Rock.'" He listed the names in a column. "What do we call Bill or Jim or Tom before he's grown up, before he reaches the full stature of a man? Why, we call him Billy or Jimmy or Tommy." He added the diminutive ending to each name as he spoke it. "And we mean 'little Bill' or 'little Jim' or 'little Tom.' He's our 'little man' we say, just as those old Greeks could have told us that 'Petros' meant 'little Rock.' So you see, surely Peter was a rock. He was all rock, nothing but rock! Yet a rock, let's admit it, with a great deal of growing to do before he reached the full, magnificent stature of a perfected, celestial rock. Now doesn't that just make sense? I'll tell you it does. I'll tell you, the Lord knows just what he's doing, and just exactly what he's saying. Doesn't he?"

Flames of affirming attention that had dimmed and sputtered now burned brightly again all over the room.

"And do you know, brothers and sisters, I pondered that name." He turned to the board and filled in the final "y," then, placing the chalk on its side, drew a broad, yellow circle around the name. "'Rocky' . . . there's something special about that name, isn't there, something out of the ordinary? We don't just give that name to children. In fact, we associate it with tough guys, with fighters, and with a special kind of indomitable spirit."

"Remember, back at the outset of class I said that we would get back to the spirit. Well, I'm going to keep my promise, because recently I was taught something truly wonderful about spirit, something that has a tremendous bearing on the lesson the Lord wants us to learn here today. Recently, I had the privilege of attending, with my good wife, the final in a series of three remarkable films, all of which, amazingly enough, bear that same name given nearly twenty centuries ago to an enterprising Galilean fisherman with tremendous celestial potential."

While Kevin underlined the crucial name once more on the board, Marvin Chisolm, his nausea and piqued impotence at full mast, twisted around nearly 180° in place to fix Damon Boulder with fierce, "for heaven's sake, do something!" eyes. Damon, however, waved Marvin off with a gesture of hand-washing indifference.

"I'm sure," Kevin continued, "some of you saw those movies as well, but let me tell you about them. Let me tell you about a young man without education or wealth or worldly sophistication, without social position or powerful friends or political influence. Let me tell you how that young man, starting from the absolute bottommost rung of a corrupt and indifferent sport world, with only his vision, his pure heart . . . with hard work and an indomitable spirit to sustain him through setback and suffering, through temptation, trial, and travail, — when those nearest and dearest forsook him, when none believed in him or in his vision or in the transcending power of his spiritual resolve . . . let me tell you how that young man became a world champion . . . and how he endured to remain a champion, overcoming the fierce enticements of worldly success, overcoming even the brutal, crushing physical onslaught of a veritable angel of hell. Yes, let me tell you about a real man with real spirit."

And Kevin Houston told them. He told them the parable of "Rocky," the difficult core of an ancient story made plain and simple in the bright, allegorical shell of a new one. He showed them the Hebrew fisherman as secret, inspiring foreshadow of the tenacious Italian Stallion, the triumphant Philadelphian in vivid similitude of the intrepid Galilean. And when he had finished his story, when he was done, somehow . . . somehow it was as if Rocky himself were right there among them, bruised, pummeled, punished, exhausted, and, yes, victorious, as magically, improbably, and inevitably victorious as virtue and goodness and truth.

Then, after a moment, Kevin Houston stepped forward into the idolizing hush and, like Dan Rather at the last day, drew the sum.

"So you see, brothers and sisters," his full, round baritone contracted to a flesh- and soul-penetrating whisper, "you see, Damon Boulder is right. The Lord cannot supply perfection in those all-too-mortal men he calls to show us the way. But he loves us, and because he loves us he gives us, instead, the very best men there are."

Kevin paused and seemed to look every man, woman, and child directly and simultaneously in the eye. "He gives us champions, *world* champions of the spirit, heroes from his very own Righteousness Hall of Fame, to captain the team, to pace us on that straight and narrow course, to set the inspiring, endure-to-the-end example that God's loyal fans all over the world will follow to success, salvation, and celestial glory." He paused again with a fatherly and summarizing smile. "Peter may not have walked upon the water as the Lord did; but among mortals those two or three halting steps still make him the all-time, number-one, water-walking champion of the world. And that, Brother David Zimmer, my dear brothers and sisters, o ye nations of an unregenerate world, that is why we must all gladly, gratefully, humbly follow the brethren."

The ensuing silence was as tight and translucent as Jello, one of those sweet, shimmering moments that are a passionate teacher's only genuine wage. And Kevin Galinghouse Houston let it roll and glide and glitter voluptuously during the few brief seconds that remained before the final bell. When the bell rang, however, it found him alert and ready.

"Brother Boulder," there was honeyed olive branch in his radio voice, "would you please say a closing prayer for us?" The tactic was bold. Like a rabbit surprised in the brush, Damon Boulder seemed to shudder in his seat. Kevin, meanwhile, fixed him with gentle, "would you please" eyes. The day was won. It lacked only the formalities of concession. "Damon," he entreated, "we'd like your benediction."

Boulder made no move, though he stared back in what some have described as stunned disbelief. The many in the class who understood what was going on, began to fidget. Yet Kevin only smiled with the long-suffering beneficence of a Buddha and waited.

After an agonizing silence, Boulder finally arose and made his way to the front of the room. When he arrived, he seemed to have found his resolve and, to the relief of everyone, turned decisively and faced the class. With ritual

solemnity, he tilted his round face earthward and held it in commanding obeisance until all present fell into a cough-stifling, child-threatening silence. Kevin closed his eyes.

What happened next can be recounted. It cannot be conveyed.

"Give me an R." The words were spoken clearly enough, but even so remained wholly unintelligible to a class poised comfortably over a familiar prayer wheel. "Give me an R." This time Boulder said it louder, and several listeners glanced up as a check against their obviously errant hearing. After the third time, half the class was looking at him from under its still inclined eyebrows. "Give . . . me . . . an . . . R!" he intoned slowly, this time with pedagogical emphasis. Boulder was staring resolutely back at his timid onlookers with one fist raised to the height of his shoulder in punctuating encouragement.

At some point during the fourth incantation a light flickered, though, oh so ephemerally, in the communal confusion. It flickered just enough to catch the attention of Marvin Chisolm, and then, for Marvin alone, it flashed again brilliantly. His head came up. His eyes cleared, and he came very near to raising his hand. "R," he stammered with experimental insecurity; and when Boulder cocked his head in recognition, he took courage and repeated himself with conviction, "R!"

Damon Boulder smiled. "Give me an O," he inveighed, raising his other fist, and Marvin Chisolm responded in tempo.

"O!"

"Give me a C!"

"C!" came the answer, and this time a second voice chimed in. It was the pretty young girl in the third row, so wide-eyed and freshly baptized that her name was still known only to the missionaries who hovered around her in dense-pack.

"C!" she sang out in a fresh, green soprano that took even Damon Boulder's breath, while the missionary on her right, the carefully combed and old-spiced boy who had baptized her, recoiled helplessly. His much younger companion on the left, however, joined with equally helpless enthusiasm in the response to Brother Boulder's subsequent calls for a "K" and then for a "Y."

"Y!" they all sang out, a chorus of three voices now, or as some insist, four (though no one will name the fourth accomplice, and none has come forward to confess). But whether three or four, Boulder pushed them relentlessly on into the finale, raising his alternating fists in rhythmic emphasis, if also with the self-conscious awkwardness of a tubby and sedentary older man.

"Give me an "R . . . O . . . C-K-Y!"

The room reverberated with the answer, and Damon Boulder stooped as low as he dared to rise up again with his revelers and with the trombone glide of the triphthong to a dramatic, tiptoe climax.

"YYYYEEEEAAAAA ROCKEEEEEEEEEEY!"

When it was all over, a matter of seconds, the entire cheering section was on its feet, though at the first poisonous look from his companion, the young missionary dropped back into his seat like a cinderblock. Marvin Chisolm, mean-



while, trotted to the front of the room and grabbed Damon Boulder's hand.

"Now, that's spirit, Damon. That is definitely championship spirit!" He squeezed hard and then turned quickly to Kevin, who was off a little to the side in the strange, semi-crouched position he had assumed at the first words of Damon's benediction and had not abandoned. He looked strangely contracted. Marvin reached down a little and pumped his hand as well. "I think you've really taught us something here today, Kevin. Yes sir, and that is not an every Sunday occurrence." He pumped again and strode out of the room. The young lady, meanwhile, had disentangled herself from her gaggle of anxious missionaries and was pursuing Damon Boulder who had already escaped down the hall. No one else had moved. No one.

It was quiet again, but the quiet was no help. The strange silence seemed to demand filling; and Kevin, though Marvin Chisolm seemed to have pumped him upright again, could find no words. He struggled, but the hundred formulae churning up from his mental archives filed back as mutely as they had come, and it was a long overdue release when Rachel Holbein broke for the door and scuttled sideways down the hall toward the bishop's office.

The rest of the story, the official aftermath, is, of course, sealed up in the records, and the bishop has expressly forbidden everyone, including Ardmoore, to talk about it. But there was one other thing, not a matter of record, which he confided to Carmen Stavelly.

When he had entered the bishop's office just moments after the distraught Rachel Holbein had left it, he had found the bishop swaying precariously on his loudly squeaking, vinyl swivel chair, great round tears streaming down his flushed and helpless face. To the alarmed clerk he seemed out of control, as if he were suffering some terrible seizure, some convulsive and almost wanton attack of hysteria.

"Oh my!" gasped Carmen Stavelly involuntarily. And when that same afternoon she recounted the entire affair to her closest and most trusted friend, and then later, of course, to her family over dinner — in fact, at every subsequent retelling — she inaugurated her story with a heartfelt expression of concern for the bishop. "The poor man," she sighed with a grave, sympathetic shake of her head, "the poor, dear man." And then she paused for her listeners to look up expectantly.