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The Importance of Knowing Our Calling

By

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“What matters above all else is that he should be a saint.

Given that, nothing else matters nearly as much”.

Stephen Neill, writing on the need for devotional training and the pastoral preparation of the African minister (Sundkuler 1960, 307).

We are all engaged in theological training. What are our hopes and dreams for the church? What is our vision for what our countries and region could be if God's word and the Holy Spirit had free reign to “convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment?” (John 16:82).¹

Are we content to transfer knowledge and assume our educational task is done? Do we assume that requiring practical work or internships will develop our students into effective pastors? I am not against Biblical and Theological courses that teach the great themes of the Christian faith. I believe that we should introduce our students to their sisters and brothers across the centuries who can teach them how to live and die for our Lord. These are important disciplines. To them we need to add the skills

¹All Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Version Update*. Words in italics and brackets have been included as though they were in the full text.

to lead a congregation in the cultural contexts in which they will minister. The gospel of Jesus Christ must be at the center of all Christian living, but social peace, economic sufficiency, public justice and national righteousness are goals that must be sought after in every situation. These are the marks of a transforming witness that speaks to the world around us. But what is the foundation stone that these are built on?

We know that we can lay no other foundation than that of “the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph. 2:20). What does it mean to be built on that foundation? It is more than knowledge. “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.” (James 2:19)

Nor are we built on that foundation because we are active in ministry. “Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’” (Matt 7:21-22).

What a ministry! Prophetic utterances, deliverance from demons, miraculous signs! This person would probably be accepted to minister in all our churches, and would pack in the people to see the signs and wonders performed. A person like that would have his/her own ministry, perhaps even start their own church or denomination.

Yet hear the Lord's verdict on them and their ministry. “And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS’” (Matt. 7:23). It takes more than ministry to be acceptable to our Lord and Savior. What is the answer, if it is not knowledge or activity?

The answer very simply is *being* before *doing*. In the same passage in Matthew from which the above verses are quoted, the Lord gives a lesson in horticulture. "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits" (Matt 7: 16-20). We cannot bear good fruit if we are not a tree that has the capacity to bear good fruit. For a tree to bear fruit depends on the environment. The eternal factors of temperature, soil, water supply, other vegetation, and animals are all factors. But these factors could all be perfect for the growth of bananas but you obtain no bananas from a thorn tree.

We are all thorn trees by nature. Often we read in the newspaper a story in which the innate goodness of humankind is portrayed. Someone does an act of kindness and the reporter waxes on about how down deep we are really good people. My response to that is to note that I have lived in Africa. Thorn trees abound in certain areas. The trees have an innate goodness in that giraffes eat the leaves of the thorn trees, especially the tender young leaves at the top of the plant. Their long tongues are especially adapted by their Creator to enjoy this delicacy. Branches from thorn trees are used to make cattle enclosures to keep out predators. But there is not much nourishment for humans from the thorn tree itself. So it is with human goodness. There is some use for it, but it is not the ultimate source of goodness. To continue the metaphor, we humans need to be changed from thorn trees to fruit bearing trees.

We are well acquainted with the process of conversion to Christ. We have experienced it ourselves, we have preached and taught it, and no doubt we have led others to the foot of the cross to accept Jesus Christ as their own personal Lord and Savior. Yet how many of our converts understand the Biblical teaching on what it means to be in Christ? What have we taught of what it means to go on in the Christian life? In many parts of the world, partly I must confess because of missionary teaching, getting on in the Christian life means keeping a set of rules. Some of these rules are very complete and elaborate, covering all sorts of behavior. But it is possible to keep rules without the corresponding inner development and growth that bring us into a more fruit-bearing relationship with our Savior. Rules deal with external behavior and, at least at a superficial level, are easy to measure. Do you refrain from this or that activity? If so, you are considered spiritual. Yet as I read the Bible, I am impressed that external behavior is not as important as inner attitude. Jesus brings this into sharp focus in Matthew 5:21-48 where five times the phrases "you have heard it was said" and "but I say to you" occur. Each time Jesus points to an inner attitude that those who would be His disciples are to demonstrate. Our goal is summed up in verse 48: "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." What does it mean to be perfect in the way our heavenly Father is perfect? I am increasingly interested in what has been termed "spiritual formation" because I believe Stephen Neill is right: nothing is as important as the spiritual development of our students. There could be no more important topic than what has been chosen for this conference.

The great danger for us as Christians is that we confuse activity with spirituality. It is possible for us to be activists without our activity flowing out of being. But if we really

understand who we are in Christ then our doing becomes an extension of who we are rather than our trying to become something by our doing. The great discovery of the Protestant Reformation was that God accepts us because of our faith in the finished work of Christ, not because of our works. Our righteousness is because of our standing in Christ, in spite of being flawed creatures. Martin Luther put it so well when he pointed out that the Christian is at the same time sinner and justified. But we have a tendency to forget that and think that we are accepted because of our performance.

There is a special danger for us involved in theological education. In our classes and even in our fieldwork, we evaluate our students. This is proper and correct but it is possible that we give a subconscious message at the same time that indicates to the students that performance is what really counts. Sometimes we learn more by failure than we do success, but how do we evaluate that in theological education? I certainly have learned more from some of my mistakes. Success often blinds us from a thorough evaluation of what really occurred. We rejoice in the success and do not take time to learn from the activity. Charles Handy, a visiting professor at the London Business School, tells of his experience in having successful chief executives address his business classes on their philosophy "only to listen to a bare record of their achievements, with no interpretation, no theory to explain them, no philosophy expounded." He goes on to state that "they have learned nothing from their successes, which makes it seem unlikely that they will be able to repeat it (*sic*)" (1990, 60). So it is the same for us, we need to understand why we were able to succeed.

The other danger is that we undertake what we know we can succeed at in our own strength. We do not develop spiritual muscles because we have not attempted what can

only be done by God working through us. We concentrate on what is possible in our strength because we do not understand what God has called us to be.

To understand what God has called us to be we need to turn to His word. One place we can turn to in the word of God is Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The church in Corinth is a wonderful example of a church whose members were at the same time sinners and justified. Speaking to a gathering like this, I know that you all have studied First Corinthians. I venture to say that not even the boldest among us, without a strong overwhelming sense of God's call, would even consider a call to pastor the church in Corinth. Who would want to go to a church where you know that there are personality clashes, factions, wrong teaching, blatant immorality and confusion over the very basics of Christian living and marriage? We all know how important the worship service is in attracting newcomers. The disorder during the worship services in Corinth would make attracting new people difficult. Taking the Corinthian pastorate is either answering a distinct call of God or the worst type of foolhardiness that can be imagined.

Yet we also know that Paul valued this Church. We could say that he saw them as they could be in Christ and overlooked their real condition. But to do so misses the point that this church was witnessing to the reality of changed lives in Christ in the midst of a pagan and hostile environment. There was a spiritual vitality in the church that was drawing outsiders, however disorganized their worship service (1Cor 14:23 -40). Or to express it another way, you do not have to be perfect to be a saint.

We note in Paul's greeting to the church in Corinth that he calls them "sanctified" (1Cor 1:2). Most versions translate the next phrase in verse two "saints by calling." The NIV is more

circumspect, perhaps anticipating the following chapters, and translates the phrase as "called to be holy." Some might be tempted to say that the Corinthians were not answering their call.

We are set apart for a relationship with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That is why we are saints. That is why Paul could refer to the Corinthians as saints. We are holy by our association with the Holy One, not by the intrinsic nature of the stuff we are made of, or by what we do. It seems to me until we regain the sense of who we are by relationship to God, we will have perpetuated the notion that holiness is a stage of Christian experience that not all Christians reach. Nor is it important to reach it.

Our concept of holiness is formed by the traditions we grew up in. Some of us are stricter in observing certain patterns of behavior. But the danger is that we miss the root sense of what it means to be holy. As I noted above, it is easier to keep rules than to develop a relationship. There is an interesting example of how this works out in practice when we compare the decision set down in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15: 4-30) with Paul's advice to the Corinthians. Peter announced that it was God's choice that by his mouth the message of life would go to the Gentiles, referring to his experience when he visited Cornelius. The high point of Peter's speech is vv. 10-11. "Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

Peter's meaning is plain. Neither our fathers nor we could be saved by keeping the Law. Neither can you or I be saved by keeping the Law. We are only saved by God's grace as revealed and enacted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was also present at the gathering in Jerusalem. He and Barnabas testified to what God was doing among the Gentiles through their ministry. The decision reached is interesting.

The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell (Acts 15:23-28).

Four relatively simple rules:

1. Nothing sacrificed to idols.
2. Do not eat or drink blood.
3. Do not eat anything strangled.
4. Do not commit fornication.

What are the cultural underpinnings of these prohibitions? All of them come from the Law of Moses. Three are concerned with Jewish dietary restrictions and would block any common meals between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The fourth seems a logical prohibition that all Christians should follow.²

What is the relationship of these four rules to salvation "through the grace of the Lord Jesus?" None of them are saving acts. The first three are an accommodation for life in the wider fellowship. Paul, who transmitted the ruling to Antioch, is able to later give the Corinthians advice on how to interpret the first rule.

Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who informed you and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of

²See John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (1990, 240-257) for an excellent discussion. Stott sees all four prohibitions as relating to the ceremonial laws. "To abstain would be a courteous and temporary (although in some circumstances 'necessary,' 28 RSV) concession to Jewish consciences once circumcision had been declared unnecessary, and so the truth of the gospel had been secured and the principle of equality established" (250).

God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved (1Cor 10: 25-33).

Paul does not treat this as an absolute prohibition, but one that is lived out in love. There are two relationships at issue. The believer's relationship to God and the believer's relationship to other people. Note in this text in Corinthians it is an unbeliever who is the host of the dinner and who is serving meat offered to an idol.³

In Romans, Paul makes a similar point with regard to a fellow believer.

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died (14:14-15).

Skipping down to verse 19, we read:

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean,

³The meat market in Corinth was next to the temples. As the meat was offered in the temple, it was passed on to the butcher shop behind the temple. Therefore it would have been difficult to buy "kosher" meat. Paul's point is that idols are nothing, enjoy the bounty of the earth as God has provided unless to do so would be a problem for a non-Christian.

but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles (Rom 14: 19-21).

The key to spirituality is not in prohibitions, necessary and good as these may be. The key is in attitude. Twice in First Corinthians, Paul repeats the phrase. "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable." First, in 6: 12 "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." Then 10:23: "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify."

What do we learn from these verses? That spirituality does not lie in prohibitions (all things are lawful) but in discernment over what things are profitable or useful for edification. How do we go about teaching discernment to our students? It is always easier to teach rules than relationship. We can be sure of rules. Just avoid this or that and we have sanctification. But to teach freedom in Christ poses certain risks.

There is always the danger of antinomianism.⁴ History is replete with those who thought that since grace abounded because of sin, the more we sin, the more we receive grace. Paul addresses that erroneous concept in Romans 6:1-2. "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?"

⁴Antinomianism (from the Greek *ἀντί* [against] and *νόμος* [law]) refers to the doctrine that it is not necessary to obey moral laws, especially the moral law of the Old Testament.

But the danger of antinomianism is overrated if in fact we understand what it means to have a primary relationship with God through Christ. If I really love my wife, I do not need rules to tell me how to relate to her or what to avoid so as not to cause her pain. If I really love my children I will not cause them unnecessary frustration or distress. In any relationship, it is the mutual commitment, not rules that bind people together. *We need to teach our students to fall in love with Jesus.* They should love Him for who He is, for what He has done for them and for what He has planned for them. Being in love with Jesus is the best cure for antinomianism.

There is another danger. Paul has already touched on it in the passages cited above. It is the differences in conscience between believers. As much as we, like the Jewish Christians of the first century, would like to establish these differences as theological doctrine, we must confess that they are in large measure a product of our cultural heritage. What can we say about traditional practices? Simply that they are customs, not binding regulations. It is good that we observe them, if only for our own wellbeing because to transgress them would cause us distress because of our associations with the prohibitions. But we must never elevate them to the level of doctrine. Again, the Apostle Paul gives us the parameters of our behavior in Colossians 2:20-23.

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-

made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of *no value* against fleshly indulgence.⁵

It is precisely because we believe that the decrees are of benefit against fleshly indulgence that we submit to them. They do have the appearance of godliness, but actually are the opposite because true godliness is to be found in a living relationship with Christ. What are the elements of this living relationship?

To illustrate this relationship in a way that might convey something more than our usual evangelical vocabulary which carries with it our own traditional notions of spirituality, I would like to use a prayer from the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is known as the Jesus Prayer and has a long history of use in monastic communities as a devotional aid. It is also in use by lay people who are seeking a deeper relationship with Christ. Most use it as a meditative technique often in what is called ceaseless repetition, but I am

⁵Emphasis added in verse 23. The whole passage is worth citing because it places behavior in a doctrinal context. Col. 2:16-19, "Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things which are a (mere) shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on (visions) he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God."

interested in the theology of the prayer to discover a framework for our relationship with Christ.

The prayer is simply, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." I maintain that in this prayer are the five elements we need to teach our students about a relationship with Christ.

The first element is faith. Our faith is not in our training, position, or behavior but only in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the Son of God and who died in our place. We confess Jesus as Lord and Savior. We can not proclaim that often enough. We teach theology so that our students know who Jesus is and what God did in and through Him. And what God continues to do in Jesus' name through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The second element is dependence. We need God's mercy. You and I need it every hour of every day. I cannot stand before God in my own righteousness for a moment. I am only in relationship with God through what was done on my behalf by Christ. If we give, verbally or by nonverbal signals, the message that we are who we are by our own efforts we condemn our students to a life of frustration and lay ourselves open to God's chastisement.

The third element is honesty. "Have mercy on me, a sinner." We need to be honest with God, our students, and ourselves that we are sinners. As I noted above, Luther so rightly pointed out our dual status as sinner and justified. We are sinners, saved sinners—but still sinners. Sinners whose desire has changed, but still sinners. There are times, by God's grace, when we are so close to God that our sinful nature seems to be dissolved. Our traditions have different theological names for this. Some call it the second blessing, others complete sanctification, etc. But the moment we forget

we stand where we stand by God's grace, we revert to being sinners.

The fourth element is confession. We don't make much of confession in our Protestant circles. We have rightly discerned that the Roman Catholics do not have the theology of the confession correct. But we should heed the injunction to "confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Because as the verse tells us, "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much." I am not advocating the establishment of a Protestant rite of confession, but I can testify to the power of public confession in a revival at Wheaton College four years ago. The students found a release from the controlling power of sin in confessing and receiving prayer from their fellow students. Secrets have a terrible power over our lives. The only way to be free from this power is to confess our sins so God's power can free us.

The fifth element is humility. By confessing our sins, we admit to ourselves and to others that we are not the superheroes we would like to think we are. We confess our weakness and our need to depend on the only true superhero—the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are going to teach our students about spirituality, we need to teach them about humility. There is a lot of false humility, but what is called for is an honest confession of our need for God's power working in us.

The great need of the church in our day is for leaders. We need leaders who are servants of each other and the church. Our Lord told us what would be the primary characteristic of a leader. He or she would be the servant of all. (Mt 20:26, 23:11; Mk 9:35, 10:43). That is because our Lord came to serve. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk

10:45). One of the best ways to teach our students to be servant leaders is to be servant leaders ourselves.

There are several marks that show we are the disciples of the Lord Jesus. One is the love we show for others in the body of Christ. The Lord told us what would be the mark of this fellowship and what would be the sign of being part of the fellowship. John 13:35, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." This is a standard that our Lord has given the world to judge us by. The world can see if we love each other without knowing one iota of Christian doctrine. That was the complaint of the Emperor Julian (332-63) who was finding it hard to put new life back into the ancient pagan religion of Rome.

Atheism [i.e. Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galilaeans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help we should render them (Neill 1986, 38).

Another is that we act as disciples should. "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him" (John 13:16).⁶ If we act in a way that appears we are greater than

⁶This admonition is given twice in John's gospel. John 15:20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word. they will keep yours also."

our Lord, then we betray the Lord and deny by our actions we are His disciples.

We can therefore see that any discussion of spirituality among theological students must eventually lead to a discussion of servanthood. There abound misconceptions of what it means to be a servant. Our Lord's own example demonstrated how one can serve without being subservient. The person who is subservient speaks to please the hearers. The servant speaks the truth, however difficult, because it is only the truth that sets people free. So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32).

We continue in Christ's words so that we can be made free. The point, if you like, of Biblical and theological studies is to know the truth, the truth that frees. Only if we have been set free can we hope to see our students set free. Do we manifest faith, dependence, honesty, and humility? Are we quick to confess our own sins? Are we servants in the manner of our Lord Jesus? Then we will teach by our lives and our words what it means to be in Christ and of Christ.

I conclude with a story that the Indian evangelist, P.T. Chandapilla told at the Urbana Missionary Conference in 1964. He spoke of an earnest missionary who could not understand why his finely crafted sermons with their telling and apt illustrations were not resulting in an increase of converts in the church. He went to Chandapilla for advice on how to better prepare his messages. Chandapilla, who had observed this man for some time, told him: "Your life is crowding out your words. Your life is speaking louder than your words, so your words are having no effect." As Chandapilla told this story to the assembled crowd of collegians, he drew his conclusion. "Your life is your

message. Make your life consistent with your message of the gospel.”

May it be so for us. May our lives, lived before our students, be consistent with the message of the One who came to be a servant and to give His life for ours.

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