

9/23/09

"Developing a Christian Mind, How to Get One and Keep It"
Bob Bullock

Session II
Responding to the CALL to Live a Focused Life
Problem Question: How do we put things in focus?

In 1943, Oxford professor, C.S. Lewis gave the third of three talks on the BBC entitled, *Beyond Personality* during which he said, "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become."¹

In 1998, Os Guinness continued Lewis' compelling idea in *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, when he wrote:

"Only when we respond to Christ and follow his call do we become our real selves and come to have personalities of our own. So when it comes to identity, modern people have things completely back to front: Professing to be unsure of God, they pretend to be sure of themselves. Followers of Christ put things the other way around: Unsure of ourselves, we are sure of God. No one has captured this tension more movingly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer from his cell in Berlin as the last days of his life and the last days of WWII ran together."²

Who Am I?

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would hear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.

¹*Beyond Personality* (1943) along with *The Case for Christianity* (1942) and *Christian Behavior* (1942) were later published as: C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1952), 225.

² Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 25.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know myself,
restless, and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
hungry for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
thirsty for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,
caught up in great expectation of great events,
powerlessly grieving for friends at an infinite distance,
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
faint, and ready to lay farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others?
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me something still like a beaten army?
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.³

Who has not experienced personal dismay to some degree in considering the incongruity between our various callings in life and challenging life experiences? Guinness analyzes the situation in this way.

*"Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. Only such a purpose can inspire us to heights we know we could never reach on our own. For each of us the purpose is personal and passionate."*⁴

The nineteenth century, Danish, Christian, existentialist philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, who wrote 7000 pages in his thirteen volume Journal put it this way...

*"The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die."*⁵

In the thinking of Os Guinness, 'Calling' answers the ultimate "Why?" for living. He writes: "...the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are,

³ "Who Am I" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer from *Letters and Papers from Prison, The Enlarged Edition* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, Ltd., 1971).

⁴ Guinness, 3.

⁵ Soren Kierkegaard, *Journals*, Vol. 3.

The Call
B. 2014

Proverbs 3:5/6

everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service."⁶

Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the life of William Wilberforce who would become the greatest social reformer of all times. One biographer recounts:

"One evening in 1787 a young English M.P. pored over papers by candlelight in his home beside the houses of Parliament. Wilberforce had been asked to propose the Abolition of the Slave Trade although almost all Englishmen thought the trade necessary, if nasty, and that economic ruin would follow if it stopped. Wilberforce's research pressed him to excruciatingly clear conclusions. "So enormous, so dreadful," he told the House of Commons later, "so irremediable did the Trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for Abolition. Let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition."⁷

What we see happening here is the power of Wilberforce's realization of his calling to a focused life. Prior to this time, Wilberforce's journals and letters show that his mind had been all over the place. Numerous lines of his thought converged on culture and society which along with Abolition of the slave trade would become one of his two life long passions. In a letter to a friend he sounded this note: *"It is the universal corruption and profligacy of the times, which taking its rise amongst the rich and luxurious has now extended its baneful influence and spread its destructive poison through the whole body of the people."*

On October 28, 1787 he would restate this in his Journal in words that have become famous: *"God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners."*⁸ All of this was the result of a "Great Change" conversion experience in 1785 at the age of twenty five from a somewhat profligate life of drinking and card playing⁹ and built in skepticism about traditional Christian beliefs and Methodist enthusiasm.

Wilberforce's deepening spiritual life and the daunting challenges he faced created a crisis of belief which caused him to consider leaving Parliament so that he might lead a quiet and focused life. He wrote a letter to his best friend and political ally and confidant,

⁶ Guinness, 4.

⁷ John Pollock, from a lecture given at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1996 by one of Wilberforce's biographers who in 1977 published, *Wilberforce: God's Statesman*.

*⁸ 'manners being habits, attitudes, morals.' Guinness, 27.

⁹ Along with his close friend, William Pitt the younger, Wilberforce was known for belonging to seven card clubs and to quite adept as winning 'the pot.' See Eric Metaxes *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2007) 41f.

Thomas Jefferson & Wilberforce

Amazing Grace
↓
Newton

William Pitt, in which he spoke of his need to turn from all that he had known and “live now for God.” It was during this time that he also turned to his childhood pastor who happened to be the former slave trade ship captain turned pastor, John Newton. Newton biographer, Jonathan Aitken describes it as Newton receiving “a strange letter from William Wilberforce. Its emphasis on the need for secrecy was so mysterious that, but for the reference to Parliament, it would almost have come from a spy seeking to arrange a clandestine assignment:”

Wilberforce ↓

“I wish to have some serious conversation with you, I have had ten thousand doubts within myself whether or not I should discover myself to you; but every argument against it has its foundation in pride. I am sure you will hold yourself bound to let one living know of this application, or of my visit, till I release you from the obligation...P.S. Remember that I must be secret and that the gallery of the House is now so universally attended, that the face of a Member of Parliament is pretty well known.”¹⁰

Newton did of course see Wilberforce and “was able to reassure his confidant by speaking to him with the authority of personal experience about upheavals that the Holy Spirit can create in the heart of a new convert. This wise counsel was matched by equally wise political assurance. Newton strongly advised Wilberforce not to withdraw from politics, not to desert the Prime Minister and other friends in the government, but to serve God as a Christian Statesman.”¹¹

That is exactly what Wilberforce did, and the rest is history.

Whether listening in on the lives of Bonhoeffer or Wilberforce, we see the tremendous challenge to living out God’s call to a focused life of Christian discipleship.

Here we need to remind ourselves that Guinness’s definitions of “call and calling” are dynamic metaphors to living the life of faith. Very much like Martin Luther, Guinness sees the big picture of calling and vocation as:

“Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and from him.

Our secondary calling, considering who God is as sovereign, is that everyone, everywhere, and in everything should think, speak, live, and act entirely for him.”¹²

“Calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.”¹³

¹⁰ Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007) 300.

¹¹ Aitken, 303.

¹² Guinness, 31.

Scripture teaches that "Calling," like all aspects of our responding to God in conversion, salvation, and sanctification, is the work of the Holy Spirit. We have but to look at Jesus conversation with Nicodemus in John, chapter 3 or in his conversation with the Samaritan Woman at the Well in John, chapter 4, and most certainly in the call and spiritual formation of the disciples through the Gospels and throughout the Acts of the Apostles. We see this in God's preparation and call of Moses and their ensuing conversations through Exodus. We hear it when in I Samuel, chapter 3, as the boy Samuel hears God calling him in the night and responds, "*Speak Lord for your servant is listening.*" We see this yet again when the young King Solomon responds to God's call by asking for wisdom and God responds magnanimously in I Kings 3. We hear it yet again in God's call in Isaiah 6 to which the prophet responds, "*Here I am, send me.*" We hear and see it in the call of Saul to become Paul in Acts 9 and throughout the Epistles of Paul. And we see it in those acknowledged in "The Faith Hall of Fame" in Hebrews 11. Ultimately, we see God's call and calling lived out in Jesus of Nazareth who shows us what it looks like and means to live a fully human life, full of the Holy Spirit, and in complete interdependence with God the Father.

How timely then are Os Guinness words to us today: "*The notion of calling, or vocation, is vital to each of us because it touches on the modern search for a basis for individual identity and an understanding of humanness itself.*"¹⁴

Jeremiah 9: 23-24
Hebrews 11:
Meaning of Faith -

¹³ Guinness, 4.

¹⁴ Guinness, 20.