
EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE, EVERYTHING

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. Only a very few thought the Slave Trade wrong, evil.”

So opened a fascinating lecture on William Wilberforce given by his biographer John Pollock at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1996.

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.”

“That was a key moment in British and world history,” Pollock told his audience. “For a few months later, on Sunday, October 28, 1787, he wrote in his Journal the 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’—in modern terms, ‘habits, attitudes, morals.’”

Amazingly, no great reformer in Western history is so little known as William Wilberforce. His success in the first of the “two

great objects" was described by Pollock as "the greatest moral achievement of the British people" and by historian G. M. Trevelyan as "one of the turning events in the history of the world." His success in the second was credited by another historian with saving England from the French Revolution and demonstrating the character that was to be the foundation of the Victorian age. An Italian diplomat who saw Wilberforce in Parliament in his later years recorded that "everyone contemplates this little old man . . . as the Washington of humanity."

Equally amazingly, Wilberforce's momentous accomplishments were achieved in the face of immense odds. As regards the man himself, Wilberforce was by all accounts an ugly little man with too long a nose, a relatively weak constitution, and a despised faith—"evangelicalism" or "enthusiasm." As regards the task, the practice of slavery was almost universally accepted and the slave trade was as important to the economy of the British Empire as the defense industry is to the United States today. As regards his opposition, it included powerful mercantile and colonial vested interests, such national heroes as Admiral Lord Nelson, and most of the royal family. And as regards his perseverance, Wilberforce kept on tirelessly for nearly fifty years before he accomplished his goal.

Constantly vilified, Wilberforce was twice even waylaid and physically assaulted. A friend once wrote to him cheerfully: "I shall expect to read of you carbonadoed by West Indian planters, barbecued by African merchants and eaten by Guinea captains, but do not be daunted, for—I will write your epitaph!"

Perhaps most amazingly of all, William Wilberforce came within a hair's breadth of missing his grand calling altogether. His faith in Jesus Christ animated his lifelong passion for reform. At one stage he led or actively participated in sixty-nine different initiatives, several of world-shaping significance. But when Wilberforce came to faith through the "Great Change" that was his experience of conversion in 1785 at the age of twenty-five, his first reaction was to throw over politics for the ministry. He thought, as millions have thought before and since, that "spiritual" affairs are far more important than "secular" affairs.

Fortunately, a minister—John Newton, the converted slave trader who wrote “Amazing Grace”—persuaded Wilberforce that God wanted him to stay in politics rather than enter the ministry. “It’s hoped and believed,” Newton wrote, “that the Lord has raised you up for the good of the nation.” After much prayer and thought, Wilberforce concluded that Newton was right. God was calling him to champion the liberty of the oppressed—as a Parliamentarian. “My walk,” he wrote in his journal in 1788, “is a public one. My business is in the world; and I must mix in the assemblies of men, or quit the post which Providence seems to have assigned me.”

CALLING—THE CORE

Sadly, for every follower of Christ who, like William Wilberforce, chooses not to elevate the spiritual at the expense of the secular, countless others fall for the temptation. Wilberforce’s celebrated “near miss” therefore leads us to the heart of understanding the character of calling and the first of two grand distortions that cripple it. Earlier, I defined the notion of calling this way: *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, dynamism, and direction lived out as a response to his summons and service.*

Now it is time to unpack that truth further, beginning with four essential strands in the biblical notion of calling that we must always hold.

First, calling has a simple and straightforward meaning. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word that has been translated as “call” usually has the same everyday meaning as our English word. Human beings call to each other, to God, and to animals. Animals too can call. (The psalmist, for example, wrote that God “provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call.”) Under the pressure of theology and history, the term *call* has traveled a long way from this simple beginning, but this straightforward sense and its obvious relational setting should never be lost. When you “call” on the phone, for example, you catch someone’s ear for a season.

Second, calling has another important meaning in the Old Testament. To call means to name, and to name means to call into being or to make. Thus in the first chapter of Genesis, "God called the light 'day' and the darkness he called 'night.'" "This type of calling is far more than labeling, hanging a nametag on something to identify it. Such decisive, creative naming is a form of making. Thus when God called Israel, he named and thereby constituted and created Israel his people. Calling is not only a matter of being and doing what we are but also of becoming what we are not yet but are called by God to be. Thus "naming-calling," a very different thing from name-calling, is the fusion of being and becoming.

Third, calling gains a further characteristic meaning in the New Testament. It is almost a synonym for salvation. In this context, calling is overwhelmingly God's calling people to himself as followers of Christ. Just as God called Israel to him as his people, so Jesus called his disciples. The body of Jesus' followers as a whole is the community of the "called-out ones" (the origin of *ecclesia*, the Greek word for church). This decisive calling by God is salvation. Those who are called by God are first chosen and later justified and glorified. But calling is the most prominent and accessible of these four initiatives of God. Not surprisingly it often stands for salvation itself, and the common description of disciples of Jesus is not "Christian" but "followers of the Way."

Fourth, calling has a vital, extended meaning in the New Testament that flowers more fully in the later history of the church. God calls people to himself, but this call is no casual suggestion. He is so awe inspiring and his summons so commanding that only one response is appropriate—a response as total and universal as the authority of the Caller. Thus in the New Testament, as Jesus calls his followers to himself, he also calls them to other things and tasks: to peace, to fellowship, to eternal life, to suffering, and to service. But deeper even than these particular things, discipleship, which implies "everyone, everywhere, and in everything," is the natural and rightful response to the lordship of Christ. As Paul wrote the followers of Christ in the little town of Colosse, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men."

Everyone, Everywhere, Everything

In short, calling in the Bible is a central and dynamic theme that becomes a metaphor for the life of faith itself. To limit the word, as some insist, to a few texts and to a particular stage in salvation is to miss the forest for the trees. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be a “called one” and so to become “a follower of the Way.”

The third and fourth strands of the meaning of calling are the basis for the vital distinction elaborated later in history—between primary and secondary calling. *Our primary calling as followers of Christ is by him, to him, and for him.* First and foremost we are called to Someone (God), not to something (such as motherhood, politics, or teaching) or to somewhere (such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia).

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. We can therefore properly say as a matter of secondary calling that we are called to homemaking or to the practice of law or to art history. But these and other things are always the secondary, never the primary calling. They are “callings” rather than the “calling.” They are our personal answer to God’s address, our response to God’s summons. Secondary callings matter, but only because the primary calling matters most.

This vital distinction between primary and secondary calling carries with it two challenges—first, to hold the two together and, second, to ensure that they are kept in the right order. In other words, if we understand calling, we must make sure that first things remain first and the primary calling always comes before the secondary calling. But we must also make sure that the primary calling leads without fail to the secondary calling. The church’s failure to meet these challenges has led to the two grand distortions that have crippled the truth of calling. We may call them the “Catholic distortion” and the “Protestant distortion.”

THE “CATHOLIC DISTORTION”

The truth of calling means that for followers of Christ, “everyone, everywhere, and in everything” lives the whole of life as a response

to God's call. Yet this holistic character of calling has often been distorted to become a form of dualism that elevates the spiritual at the expense of the secular. This distortion may be called the "Catholic distortion" because it rose in the Catholic era and is the majority position in the Catholic tradition.

Protestants, however, cannot afford to be smug. For one thing, countless Protestants have succumbed to the Catholic distortion as Wilberforce nearly did. Ponder, for example, the fallacy of the contemporary Protestant term *full-time Christian service*—as if those not working for churches or Christian organizations are only part-time in the service of Christ. For another thing, Protestant confusion about calling—which we will examine in the next chapter—has led to a "Protestant distortion" that is even worse. This is a form of dualism in a secular direction that not only elevates the secular at the expense of the spiritual but also cuts it off from the spiritual altogether.

The earliest clear example of the Catholic distortion is in *Demonstration of the Gospel* by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea. A prolific but rather unpolished writer, Eusebius is the principal historian of the early church from the apostolic age down to his own day and an invaluable witness to the church's state of mind just before the "conversion" of Constantine in A.D. 312 and the Roman Empire.

Eusebius argues that Christ gave "two ways of life" to his church. One is the "perfect life"; the other is "permitted." The perfect life is spiritual, dedicated to contemplation and reserved for priests, monks, and nuns; the permitted life is secular, dedicated to action and open to such tasks as soldiering, governing, farming, trading, and raising families. Whereas those following the perfect life "appear to die to the life of mortals, to bear with them nothing earthly but their body, and in mind and spirit to have passed to heaven," those following the "more humble, more human" permitted life have "a kind of secondary grade of piety."

Higher vs. lower, sacred vs. secular, perfect vs. permitted, contemplation vs. action . . . the dualism and elitism in this view need

no underscoring. Sadly this “two-tier” or “double-life” view of calling flagrantly perverted biblical teaching by narrowing the sphere of calling and excluding most Christians from its scope. It also dominated later Christian thinking. For example, both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas praised the work of farmers, craftsmen, and merchants but always elevated the contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) over the active life (*vita activa*). The active life was depicted as second class, a matter of necessity; the contemplative life as first class, a matter of freedom. In short, Aquinas wrote, the life of contemplation was “simply better than the life of action.” Even today, when one can find examples of Catholics recovering a more holistic view of calling, “answering the call” is commonly the jargon for becoming a priest or nun.

The Catholic distortion created a double standard in faith that in turn produced an important irony. Monasticism began with a *reforming mission*—it sought to remind an increasingly secularized church that it was still possible to follow the radical way of life required by the gospel. But it finished with a *relaxing effect*—the double standard reserved the radical way for the specialists (the aristocrats of the soul) and let everyone else off the hook. Thus the irony: Monasticism reinforced the secularization it originally set out to resist. In the end the monasteries themselves succumbed to the secularization and became a central carrier of elitism, power, arrogance, and corruption.

It goes without saying that there were exceptions to this distortion even in the Middle Ages. The strongest, strikingly, were the mystics Meister Eckehart and Johann Tauler who condemned “all those who would stop at contemplation, but scorn action.” But for most people in Christendom in medieval times, the term *calling* was reserved for priests, monks, and nuns. Everyone else just had “work.”

Into that long-established, rigidly hierarchical, and spiritually aristocratic world, Martin Luther’s *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* exploded like a thunderclap in 1520. Writing as an Augustinian monk himself, Luther recommended the abolition of all orders

and abstention from all vows. Why? Because the contemplative life has no warrant in the Scriptures; it reinforces hypocrisy and arrogance; and it engenders "conceit and a contempt of the common Christian life."

But even these radical-sounding proposals pale beside the next paragraph Luther wrote: "The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone. . . . Indeed, the menial housework of a manservant or maidservant is often more acceptable to God than all the fastings and other works of a monk or priest, because the monk or priest lacks faith."

If all that a believer does grows out of faith and is done for the glory of God, then all dualistic distinctions are demolished. There is no higher/lower, sacred/secular, perfect/permitted, contemplative/active, or first class/second class. Calling is the premise of Christian existence itself. Calling means that everyone, everywhere, and in everything fulfills his or her (secondary) callings in response to God's (primary) calling. For Luther, the peasant and the merchant—for us, the business person, the teacher, the factory worker, and the television anchor—can do God's work (or fail to do it) just as much as the minister and the missionary.

For Martin Luther and subsequent reformers, the recovery of the holistic understanding of calling was dramatic. Writing about the "Estate of Marriage" in 1522, Luther declared that God and the angels smile when a man changes a diaper. William Tyndale wrote that, if our desire is to please God, pouring water, washing dishes, cobbling shoes, and preaching the Word "is all one." William Perkins claimed polishing shoes was a sanctified and holy act. John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*:

To know
That which before us lies in daily life
Is the prime wisdom.

Bishop Thomas Becon wrote, "Our Saviour Christ was a carpenter. His apostles were fishermen. St. Paul was a tent-maker."

Perkins's *A Treatise of the Vocations or Callings of Men* provides a typical Reformation summary: "The action of a shepherd in keeping sheep, performed as I have said in his kind, is as good a work before God as is the action of a judge in giving sentence, or of a magistrate in ruling, or a minister in preaching."

Little wonder that the cultural implications of recovering true calling were explosive. Calling gave to everyday work a dignity and spiritual significance under God that dethroned the primacy of leisure and contemplation. Calling gave to humble people and ordinary tasks an investment of equality that shattered hierarchies and was a vital impulse toward democracy. Calling gave to such practical things as work, thrift, and long-term planning a reinforcement that made them powerfully influential in the rise of modern capitalism. Calling gave to the endeavor to make Christ Lord of every part of life a fresh force that transformed not only the churches but also the worldviews and cultures of the Reformation countries. Calling gave to the idea of "talents" a new meaning, so that they were no longer seen purely as spiritual gifts and graces but as natural and a matter of giftedness in the modern sense of the term.

In short, the recovery of a holistic view of calling was powerful in culture as well as in the church, and calling was a vital element in the transition from the traditional to the modern world. It demanded and inspired the transforming vision of the lordship of Christ expressed in the famous saying of the great Dutch prime minister, Abraham Kuyper: "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me!'"



Do you want to accept a challenge that will be the integrating dynamic of your whole life? One that will engage your loftiest

The Call

thoughts, your most dedicated exertions, your deepest emotions, all your abilities and resources, to the last step you take and the last breath you breathe? Listen to Jesus of Nazareth; answer his call.