

VOCATION

Our English word 'vocation' was used in my youth for those employments that involved a sense of *calling*. Examples would be ministers, doctors, or nurses for whom the primary motivation was not financial reward but contribution to society. It has rather fallen into abeyance with many people. 'Vocation' implies 'designation or destination to a particular profession'. It is appropriate here because the basic meaning of the Greek word is 'invitation' and Paul immediately adds that the Ephesian believers were 'called' to this vocation. For Christians our spiritual calling underlies everything that we do giving both a sense of purpose and a sense of responsibility in every department of life be it home, employment or community.

I. Vocation and designation

A. Designation is fundamental to task accomplishment

Knowing what has been assigned to us to do, we must get on and do it. Homework is assigned by the teacher and the pupil is expected to do it. You can see the word 'design' at the front of 'designation' and as a verb 'to design' can actually mean 'to designate'. Just as the architect designs the building and produces a plan, the contractor must decide and *designate* which of his employees will do the bricklaying, electrical work, etc. and then deploy them accordingly. To leave everything haphazard would be a disaster. There must be a thought through purpose and a corresponding plan whereby each participant is assigned their role. Things do not happen by chance. Chaos theory sees no ultimate plan in the universe. On this view it is left to man to make sense of what is. The logical result of evolutionary thinking is that there is no rational plan and consequently no possibility of spiritual vocation. Paul's view is fundamentally opposite. Life is not about chance happenings in a chaotic universe without vocation.

B. Divine designation is fundamental to Paul's view of Christian vocation

The Christian's life is not haphazard, meaningless or fortuitous. It is always a great comfort to know that all is unfolding in exact conformity to an eternal plan involving purposeful vocation. Verses 3-6 of Ephesians Chapter 1 are pertinent. Christian experience is not by chance. It is the result of divine planning. Paul writes, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved'. We notice the following characteristics concerning the designation that undergirds our lives here: (a) it is a *divine* designation ('he hath chosen us'); (b) it is a *Christ centred* designation ('in him'); (c) it is an *eternal* designation ('before the foundation of the world'); (d) it is a *life changing* designation ('that we should be holy and without blame before him in love'); (e) it is a *familiar* designation, that is pertaining to a family ('Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself'); (f) it is a *sovereign* designation ('according to the good pleasure of his will'); (g) it is a *gracious* designation (his grace); and (h) it is a *God glorifying* designation ('To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved'). True Christians can thus be conscious in every situation and condition that life is not vain, arbitrary, meaningless, without direction or fruitless but rather full of purpose and that of the highest conceivable purpose - to the glory of God.

Application. We should be as Paul who wrote to the Philippians, 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me' (Philippians 4.11-13).

II. Vocation and calling

In the words, 'wherewith ye are called' Paul links vocation and

calling.

A. Eternal predestination comes into effect in time by calling

There is an outward and general call of the Gospel. The outward call of the Gospel comes indiscriminately to everyone even the worst of sinners as we see from Isaiah 1.18, 'Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool'. Everyone hearing this call has an immediate responsibility to respond. This call to get right with God should be refused by no one; 'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3.23-24). There is no other way of forgiveness and acceptance. Christ alone paid the price for the sinner's release from the slavery of sin. The situation is urgent for 'now is the accepted time, behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Corinthians 6.2). We all know what 'now' means. The mother's 'Do it now' means just that, not tomorrow, not this evening, not in one hour's time but 'right now'. Nothing is more important than salvation but many foolishly decline the call. The Christians in the church at Ephesus had believed and received Christ. They were 'the faithful in Christ Jesus' (1.1). Their call was clearly inward, spiritual, special, effectual and particular for 'many be called, but few chosen' (Matthew 20.16a). In this there is an unbroken chain right back to the infinite compassion of God. Paul can, therefore, write, 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did *foreknow*, he also did *predestinate* to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also *called*: and whom he called, them he also *justified*: and whom he justified, them he also *glorified*' (Romans 8.28-30). Effectual calling is one link in the golden chain stretching from the heart of God in eternity past and reaching to the eternal glory yet to come.

B. Effectual calling, therefore, defines our entire life from the day it took place, throughout our days and forever

The life of the believer has changed. He or she has a new vocation. When you start a new job it is no good looking over your shoulder to your previous employment. It is no longer your employment. A previous employment contributes to our experience and sometimes in a negative way. We might learn in our new employment that our previous employer was flouting the regulations and laws he should have been keeping and we were involved in the transgressions. Paul sees in marriage another example. It would be quite wrong for a widow to try to re-live in a new marriage a previous relationship terminated by death. So it is with believers. We are no longer provoked by the restraints of the law to disobedience and rebellion. We are no longer terrified by the threats of the law and trying to justify ourselves by keeping it. Paul sums up the change in Romans 7.4-6 as follows: 'Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, *that we should bring forth fruit unto God*. For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; *that we should serve in newness of spirit*, and not in the oldness of the letter'. We are no longer under the covenant of works but within a covenant of grace. The law which terrified us is now our friend. Paul can say, 'I delight in the law of God after the inward man' (Romans 7.22). That which we only knew on 'tables of stone' is written in fleshly tables of the heart (2 Corinthians 3.3) to fit us for true service to God.

III. Vocation and responsibility

Paul's exhortation to us is to 'walk worthy of the vocation' wherewith we are called.

A. The spiritual application

Paul explains what is involved. In verses 2-3, he writes, 'with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. We are urged not to brash self promotion as supposedly being better than everyone else but to lowliness and meekness.

Charles Hodge comments, 'Meekness is that unresisting, uncomplaining disposition of mind, which enables us to bear without irritation or resentment the faults and injuries of others' (Commentary on Ephesians p. 200). We are not to be quick tempered and fault-finding with one another but 'longsuffering, forbearing one another in love'. We are not to be out to pick a fight but 'endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'. In a word our spiritual vocation is holiness.

(2) **The secular application.** Strictly the Christian has no 'secular' life. All life is for Christ, at home, in the workplace and elsewhere.

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