
The Meaning of Vocation

BY A. J. CONYERS

“Vocation” is distorted by two disastrous misunderstandings: a secularized idea of “career” and a monastic concept of the religious life. Both are less than the biblical idea of vocation, of which Jesus’ raising Lazarus is a rich image. Vocation is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but are “called forth” to a divine purpose.

The meaning of the term “vocation,” even in the context of the church, but much more so in the world at large, has suffered at the hands of linguistic habit. Like many terms that were once rich with religious implications, it has over time become first narrow in its association with only certain forms of religious life, and then secularized. While early in the life of the church, the teaching on vocation by Origen and Augustine would have included the call to every Christian, even to every human being, the later monastic movement so powerfully affected people’s notions of the extent to which one might go in answer to a divine call that “vocation” came to be associated with that one role in the church. Luther and the Protestant Reformers sought to reintroduce the teaching that everyone, no matter their occupation, was a proper object of divine call. The correction was long overdue. But the unintended effect was to suggest that vocation had merely to do with occupation; thus the way was open to a purely bourgeois and secular use of the term.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the celebrated young German theologian who was executed in a German prison during World War II, thought that the typical Protestant teaching tended finally to suggest “the justification and sanctification of secular institutions.”¹ In its Biblical roots it must mean more than

that, thought Bonhoeffer. For vocation “in the New Testament sense, is never a sanctioning of worldly institutions as such; its ‘yes’ to them always includes at the same time an extremely emphatic ‘no,’ an extremely sharp protest against the world.”² The monastic system had at least provided the death-defying “no,” even if it had failed to adequately provide the life-affirming “yes” of Christian vocation. The meaning of vocation, for most Christians of the modern world, therefore, has been sorted out between “two disastrous misunderstandings.” Both misunderstandings, “the secular Protestant one and the monastic one” are less than the Pauline and biblical idea of vocation deserves, and less than the church has at times seen in its fullness.

TOWARD AN AUTHENTICALLY CHRISTIAN DEFINITION

The familiar term “vocation,” whether used in religious or secular contexts, is rooted in the Latin *vocatio*, meaning a “call,” a “summons,” or an “invitation,” and is related to Latin-based words such as “voice” and “invoke.” The Greek word is *klesis* and is found in our words “cleric” and “ecclesiastical.” It is the root of the New Testament word for the Church, *ekklesia*, a point that can be over-stressed since assemblies of all kinds were referred to with the same term. However, to say that the church consists of those “called out” is significant for more reasons than can be traced through linguistic usage: it is the reality of being called by God to which the church has always attested.

In order to disentangle the term “vocation” from both its religious and secular misunderstandings, and restore a sense of its original mystery and power, let’s examine how, at several points, it should be disengaged from modern assumptions. We must do this first because, in truth, it is a term that does not fit well in the philosophies that have sprung up in opposition to a supernatural view of life—in other words, philosophies that are marked by the Enlightenment (during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the West) and its extended shadow that we call modern thought.

In both Jewish and Christian contexts, the human sentiment of a divine call plays an important role, and gives to the society in which it is embedded a certain character that is distinctly non-modern. Four distinctions must come to mind. First, the idea of a call implies an agent outside of the one who is subject to the call. One does not simply “choose” a course of action, but one responds to a summons. A person might be “free” in either case; but in the case of one responding to vocation, the freedom is not an inner-directed impulse, but the use of the will to respond to an unforeseen and perhaps unknown reality. This summons is characteristic of various reports, in a great variety of instances, from the summons of Abraham and the divine election of Moses, to the call of Isaiah, the baptism of Jesus, the blinding of Paul, the spiritual apparitions of Joan of Arc, and the divine compulsions of Martin Luther. Characteristic of each case is the summons

that is *external* to the person who is called.

Second, the summons is often *against* the will of the one who is called into service. Abraham at first doubted that God's covenant with him could be fulfilled. Moses complained that the Israelites, to whom God sent him, had never listened to him and therefore neither would Pharaoh, "poor speaker that I am" (Exodus 6:12). Jeremiah, the Hebrew prophet, not only resisted the call, but continued to complain that God had overpowered him and placed him in an impossibly difficult circumstance, even protesting that God's call had made him "like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (Jeremiah 11:19). Jonah attempted to flee from the Lord to Tarshish, rather than going to Nineveh where he had been called. Jesus prays to be delivered from his appointed calling.

By way of contrast, we can think of the way early Enlightenment thinkers emphasized reason. The real character of their emphasis is now almost always lost. The false implication is that they (the 'modern' Enlightenment thinkers) emphasized reason while earlier ages neglected it, or preferred superstition and unreason. Yet, who indeed were more devoted to the arts of reason than the disciples of Aristotle in antiquity, or those who, in medieval times, submitted everything to reason in the most rigorous fashion, the schoolmen from Anselm to Aquinas and beyond? The specific way in which the Enlightenment

used reason was *as a replacement for the idea of vocation*. One could then make *reasoned choices*. The true locus of personal decisions was to be found in the individual who "thinks for himself," as Kant would put it, and who declines to depend upon the "guidance of another."³ While vocation contradicts the will of the person being called, reason is the instrument by which the modern person thought his will could be enforced. Science, as Descartes said, is what can make us "the masters and possessors of Nature"—an extraordinary claim if we weren't so used to these exaggerations!

That reason does not have to be thought of in this individualistic way was shown by Gerhart Niemeyer when he said that the "creators of philosophy never spoke of reason in the way Enlightenment thinkers did." In fact, what they said was closer to the idea of vocation:

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Parmenides experienced the Is in a vision; Socrates, Plato, and others experienced being “drawn,” “pulled,” even “dragged” to the true reality beyond the cosmos. They respond to these experiences with something they call “the quest,” “the arduous way,” “the search,” clearly conveying that the authority of truth is not found in themselves, nor in their method, but in their participation in a higher reality. Their attitude was one of love of the cosmos and of divine wisdom. Where in the Enlightenment do we find mention of “love” to characterize the attitude towards the cosmos or divinity? Enlightenment focuses on the objects of knowledge which mind can convert from multiplicity to unity, or from unity to composing parts, all for the sake of human control and mastery over nature.⁴

Next, the calling involves in almost every case hardships that must be overcome in order to answer the summons. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Paul all found themselves under threat of death by their community. The very central fact of Jesus’ life and ministry is that he was called to die for the sake of others, and that he called others to follow the way of the Cross. Jesus’ moment of public vocation (his baptism) is followed by temptation in the wilderness. Paul’s vocation is accompanied by physical ailments, imprisonment, beatings, and exile.

Finally, from the point of view of answering to the summons, the greatest danger appears not in this kind of resistance, but in the possibility of being *diverted* or *distracted* from the goal. The whole of Joshua’s reiteration of the covenant with Israel, after they had settled the land of Canaan, was devoted to the threat and the consequences of being distracted from their promise to “serve the Lord” and to the warning against being tempted by other gods. In all of the Deuteronomic history of Israel—that history contained in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—the chief standard by which the nations of Israel and Judah and their kings are judged is their faithfulness to God, measured by their resistance to distraction by the religions of their neighbors. And the last petition in Jesus’ model prayer, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” is an invocation against this distraction.

VOCATION IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Early Christian theologians saw the idea of vocation—God’s call to the human being—as being rooted in some of the earliest words of the Bible: “God created humankind in his image” (Genesis 1:27). Christians, especially since Origen, have understood this not as a static description of the human endowment, but a promise directed toward each human person.

Origen made this point by indicating the two ways in which these words are used in Genesis. First the text says, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (1:26). Then, as God fulfills this stated intention, the text says, “So God created humankind in his image, in

the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). Such was Origen's respect for the very words of scripture that he believed the omission of "likeness" in the second statement could scarcely have been accidental. It must have been intentional; and it must therefore have meaning.⁵ Origen concluded that, while one can say that a human being is created in the image of God, the image is not yet perfected. That perfection of the *imago* as one grows in fellowship with God is represented by the word *similitudo*, likeness. Thus the idea of an image endows human beings with a fundamental calling that pertains to their entire living history in God.

From the story of Abraham forward, the Old Testament concern for the "call of God" generally pertains to the community. Israel is bound to God through its acceptance of a covenant, by which God binds himself irrevocably to the community of Israel. The covenant illuminates the moral dimension of the nation's life. To Abraham, the Lord says, "I am *El Shaddai*; walk before me and be blameless." And the covenant also binds God to this people: "And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:1, my translation, and 17:8).

The concern of the Old Testament covenant, and of the Prophets of Israel who proclaim on the basis of that covenant, is clearly tied to the national life of Israel. Even so, as Israel is led into exile, the continued existence of the national life depends, at least in part, on the faithfulness of individuals and families

who refuse to be drawn off into the culture of their captivity, first among the Babylonians and later the Persians. Ezekiel's message, while clearly communal in its concern, is addressed, more than was pre-exilic prophecy, to the individual. "O house of Israel," says the God of Ezekiel, "I will judge all of you according to your ways" (Ezekiel 33:20b).⁶ In

this transition from pre-exilic Israelite theology to post-exilic Judaism, we see the rise of the focus on the individual.

A similar movement can be seen in the Deuteronomic (prophetic) history, when for example the story is told of Elijah's encounter with the prophets of Baal and its aftermath. Here we see the contrast between, on the one hand, the overpowering public display of an Almighty God, who—

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as in days of yore—answered with fire, proving his presence in outward demonstration of his power and, on the other hand, his private answer to Elijah. It is in the cave on Mount Horeb that the true center of the story is found. There it is no longer the God of the parted waters, the plagues in Egypt, and the consumed altar on Mount Carmel, which is in evidence. Until this point in the narrative, such was always the nature of God’s actions

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among the nations: it was an outward and public display that was, in the most ordinary sense, a communal act—the act of a national God. On Mount Horeb, however, all of the old signs—the great natural powers—are on display. First is the great wind, then the earthquake, and finally a fire. But the text reveals that the Lord was not in any of these things. Instead, “after the fire a still

small voice.” It was in this small voice that only Elijah could hear that the Lord was authentically present (1 Kings 19). The public, outward, and historic acts of God are now deepened into a recognition of God’s summons to the individual; yet the summons is given for the sake of community.

In the New Testament, an even more remarkable transition takes place. While it is the individual that makes the response toward God, it is no longer also a move toward a covenant nation in an historical sense. Instead, it is toward a new body, a supra-national community. The communal concern here is no longer national, but ecumenical. And it is no longer a legacy from the past, but a promise regarding the future. It retains both a sense of the dignity of the individual and the communal destiny of the individual. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that at no time is a person more alone than in becoming a Christian, but the alienation is for the sake of a new community.⁷ Furthermore, this community transcends the usual divisions. As the Apostle Paul stated it, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

There is no doubt that we are most indebted to Paul for the richness and the depth of the Christian idea of vocation. He is, as one writer commented, “on several counts...destined to remain the most memorable author on the subject.”⁸ Two features of Paul’s writings should strike us in this regard. One is the fact that his language reflects precisely those

sentiments that occurred to Gerhart Niemeyer when he was commenting on the broader phenomenon of “reason.” The founders of philosophy, Niemeyer said, thought of reason as something that called them to step outside of themselves and to undergo hardships and dangers. Their whole attitude is hardly that of an “enlightenment gentleman” reflecting comfortably from his armchair based upon superior calculations; rather it is the attitude of one engaged in an adventure. Their emotional tone conveys that they do not quite know the outcome of such a journey. Notice in Paul, for instance, his continual reminder to his correspondents of his vocation. I am “Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (Romans 1:1-2, except for “slave” which I render here literally to emphasize the arduous nature of the calling). I write to those who also are “called to be saints” (Romans 1:7). In the letter to the Romans, this gospel holds him captive, lays obligations upon him, and is a power which compels him. What has been wrought through him has been “by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God” (15:19). To the Corinthians he describes himself and the other apostles, called along with him, as being like people “sentenced to death,” who have become “a spectacle to the world,” “fools for the sake of Christ,” “held in disrepute.” Furthermore, he says, “we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless ...the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things” (1 Corinthians 4:9-13 *passim*). For the call of the gospel, he endures “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” (2 Corinthians 6:4-5). And in the Galatians letter, he reminds his readers that “I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body” (6:17).

I once ran across a book that was actually titled *How to Choose Your Vocation!* It is important to recognize that this reduced notion of vocation bears no resemblance to what Paul had in mind when he said that God “made us alive together with Christ...raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.” We do not simply “know” about our vocation as we would an itinerary on a travel schedule. Much less do we choose it! Instead vocation is something that happens to us. It is an experience. Its truth is captured in the words “we are his workmanship” (Ephesians 2:5, 10, RSV).

The other matter of remarkable importance for Paul is the use of the corporate imagery of the body, the temple, and the household. We find these references throughout the Pauline letters, and they are similar in concept, whether from Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, or Ephesians 2. The idea of body is quite dissimilar, and dissimilar in important ways, from the Enlightenment attachment to the organized state. Through liberal democratic ideas (developing out of Thomas Hobbes’ idea of the state and then taking on their democratic form with the help of English and American thinkers,

including John Locke, John Stuart Mill and John Dewey), the most important feature of the 'members' of the political 'body' came to be equality. Of course, what makes members of a body significant in the original Pauline metaphor is not their equality but their difference. The hand is different from the eye and so they can each contribute to the unity of the body in their distinct ways. They exist, furthermore, not for themselves but for the sake of the body. This is an organic concept. The modern idea of the state is, by contrast, the concept of an organization. It is conceived mechanically rather than organically. Equality emphasizes the interchangeability of parts; while the organic body metaphor depends upon the interdependence of the parts. Equality jealously guards the rights of individuals; but membership in a body emphasizes the contribution to the whole. Liberal democracy values the uniform relationship of the parts to the whole, while the Pauline "body" concept values the eccentric and multiform relationship of the disparate members. I might say that equality has an important place in the Christian view of life—we are equally loved by God and equally accountable to God, and we are equally made in the image of God—but equality has been used in modern language in a way that actually loses its original Christian import. In the Christian context, as opposed to the secular, equality adds to rather than diminishes the importance and strength of community.

THE BALANCE OF VOCATION

John Calvin, unlike many of his later disciples, had a gift for exploiting theological balance, which came in part from his appreciation of the basic paradox of the Christian message. He used this lively sense of balance in his teachings on vocation. He saw the idea of vocation as having a double focus, one upon the earthly duty and the other upon the heavenly destiny. In this way the common tasks of the Christian, as well as those roles more greatly honored in society, are held in new esteem. He writes in the *Institutes* of those tasks as bearing a certain nobility when the person "will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness, and anxieties in his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God." In this way, "no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."⁹

We might think of Jesus' raising of Lazarus as a rich image of the deepest meaning of vocation. Lazarus is not merely healed, but raised from the dead. From the isolation of death, he is called by Christ's powerful voice to the community of the living. His grave clothes, in which he is bound, are loosed and he is made free to respond as one living before God and in the power of God. Each of us is so called. Vocation, *vocatio*, is about being raised from the dead, made alive to the reality that we do not merely exist, but we are "called forth" to a divine purpose.

NOTES

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 250.

2 *Ibid.*, 251.

3 Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" [1784], *The Philosophy of Kant: Immanuel Kant's Moral and Political Writings*, edited by Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library, 1993), 145-153.

4 Gerhart Niemeyer, *Within and Above Ourselves: Essays in Political Analysis* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1996), 369.

5 With regard to Origen's doctrine of vocation I am in debt to Fr. José Alviar, *Klesis: The Theology of the Christian Vocation According to Origen* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1993).

6 The context is God's reply to the people's complaint that their exile unfairly punishes some faithful individuals: "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turn from their righteousness, and commit iniquity, they shall die for it. And when the wicked turn from their wickedness, and do what is lawful and right, they shall live by it. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge all of you according to your ways!" (Ezekiel 33:17-20)

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 105-114. He says, for instance, "Through the call of Jesus men become individuals. Willy-nilly, they are compelled to decide, and that decision can only be made by themselves. It is no choice of their own that makes them individuals: it is Christ who makes them individuals by calling them. Every man is called separately, and must follow alone. But men are frightened of solitude, and they try to protect themselves from it by merging themselves in the society of their fellow-men and in their material environment.... But all this is only a cloak to protect them from having to make a decision" (105).

8 Robert B. Shaw, *The Call of God: The Theme of Vocation in the Poetry of Donne and Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1981), 5.

9 John Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 10, 6.

**A. J. CONYERS**

is Professor of Theology at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, in Waco, Texas.