

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

Vol. XX, Vol. 3

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May/June 1996

CONFIDENCE IN YOUR CALLING

by Gary North

Not that I speak in respect of want: for 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 (Phil. 4:11-13).

Philippians 4:13 is a familiar verse to those fundamentalists who, like me, used Bible memory cards instead of a catechism to learn the fundamentals of the faith. Paul said he could do all things through Christ. Now, there's a promise! Perform brain surgery? No problem! I'll just pray about it.

The trouble is, the Bible memory card did not include verses 11 and 12. Those verses provide the theological context of Paul's affirmation. The context is the shifting conditions that Paul experienced in his gospel ministry, most notably his present place of residence: a Roman prison. To the Corinthians, he wrote:

Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches (II Cor. 11:22-28).

He did not have to do all this. He could have stayed in Israel. He could have settled down, done some tentmaking, enjoyed the company of newly converted Jews who had at last found the Messiah, and enjoyed the good life. But no, he hit the road. He went off to spread the good news to people who had never heard about the Messiah. Now he was in a Roman jail. And whose fault was that? His. He had been warned by a prophet what would happen if he went to Jerusalem:

And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And

when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done (Acts 21:10-14).

Ready to die? Good show! But he did not die. Instead, he was arrested on false charges, thrown into prison, kept there for two years because he refused to pay a bribe (Acts 24:26-27), sent to Rome, suffered shipwreck, suffered snake bite, and now was locked up in a Roman jail. Death? That would have been a great deliverance, as he wrote to the Philippians: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better" (Phil. 1:21-23).

Then why was he content, as he told the Philippians that he was? Because he had a calling before God: to care for the churches. "Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith" (Phil. 1:24-25).

Job vs. Calling

Paul's job was making tents (Acts 18:3). He was not foolish enough to go through the sufferings he listed to the Corinthians in order to make tents. Nobody was persecuting him because he made tents. Tentmaking was merely his means of employment, a way to put food on the table. Paul was called by God to do more than make tents. Tentmaking was a means to an end: the preaching of the gospel and, later, the care of churches.

We are not told if he was a great tentmaker or just average. But one thing is sure: he was a highly educated tentmaker. For a man who had studied at the feet of the great rabbi Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), his occupation must have been a step down the social ladder. "My son, the tentmaker!" was not the typical Jewish mother's boast.

He suffered persecution for the sake of his calling. He was the man God had picked to take the message of salvation to the gentiles. In a way, this decision on God's part reminds me of the U.S. Army. Here was a man trained as a rabbi. So, where

does God send him? To the gentiles. Meanwhile, an ex-fisherman is running the operation back in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish education. As they say these days, "Go figure!"

Paul's calling was not his job. There were a lot of people who could be tentmakers. There was apparently nobody available who could have done a better job bringing the gospel to the gentiles. Why else would God have given him a vision of a man in Macedonia praying for him to come and help (Acts 16:9-10)? So, God picked Paul for the job: the best man available. (This is where God stops reminding me of the U.S. Army.)

Who could have replaced Paul? Barnabas perhaps. But at the time, Barnabas was Paul's assistant: "on the calling training," we might call it. Paul was the man of the hour, or, as the case was, of the three decades.

This leads me to a conclusion about the calling. **The calling is the most important task that a person can perform in the kingdom of God in which he would be most difficult to replace.**

Choosing a calling is a lot more difficult than choosing an occupation. An occupation offers success indicators: money, paid vacations, a pension, etc. It also has a series of required barriers for applicants to surmount as a means of training themselves to perform it. A person knows in a broad sense what is expected of him because he is replaceable. If he fails, there is someone else waiting to fill the job. The job is familiar enough to have predictable performance standards. People can train for it. People can get letters of recommendation for it. They can send out resumés when applying for it. You become a cog in some machine, a slot in some corporate hierarchy.

A calling is less specific, unless it is also a job. There are a few jobs that serve as callings. Ordination to the ministry is one of them. You get paid to do your calling. Teaching in a Christian school can be a calling. Being a housewife is both a calling and an occupation. Biblically speaking, a wife has to die before she can be replaced. That surely makes her legal position as a wife her most important task. It is not just difficult to replace her; it is supposed to be illegal, except for cause: covenant-breaking.

Women's Liberation Means Husbands' Liberation

The coming of no-fault divorce laws has transformed the wife's calling into a job. This is why no-fault divorce is a true social revolution, transforming the most familiar calling in American society into a mere occupation - one without much job security or a fully funded, fully vested pension plan. It has in effect made women into would-be prostitutes: paid for a time for services rendered, and then replaced. But at least a prostitute gets paid. These days, husbands ask their wives to enter the workplace and bring home their share of the bacon.

Women's liberation means women's replaceability: first in the job market, then in the home. This is the heart of the women's lib movement's covenantal demand. Women are to be liberated from their callings in order to enter the job market. A wife's calling becomes an occupation. The more radical feminists call for husbands to pay wives for services rendered: as close a demand to make wives into domestic servants and prostitutes as anything we have seen in history. The whole idea of payment for services rendered is that the person doing the paying can fire the wage-earner for unsatisfactory performance.

Payment for services rendered is a market transaction. There are not supposed to be monopolies in the free market. But a covenant is a monopoly. The woman's lib movement is dedicated to removing covenant status from marriage.

The feminists have been successful in this campaign because covenant-breaking men have seen the value of an alliance with the libbers. This alliance has produced universal no-fault divorce laws since 1970, which has enabled husbands to shed their aging, less sexually competitive wives. Here is the great irony: the women's libbers have been successful in attaining their political agenda only because calculating male lawyers and politicians have seen their opportunities and have taken them. The typical Washington beltway marriage has now become the national norm. This undermines wives' confidence in their callings.

Paul's Confidence

Paul's confidence in his calling was in part based on the fact that it was not his occupation. Again and again, he reminded churches that they did not provide him with the funds necessary for him to carry out his calling. He was not economically dependent on them.

Another factor in his confidence was the fact that he knew that nobody in his right mind would replace him unless called by God, and probably not without being dragged, kicking and screaming, into the calling. Paul was eminently irreplaceable.

To understand the nature of Paul's calling, try to write a "calling description" in the form of a job description. It might look something like this:

Wanted: highly intelligent man, familiar with Greek philosophy and literature, to tell crowds of idol worshippers that their local gods are impotent. Must be willing spend his life on the road when not locked up in jail. Must be willing to pay his own expenses. No salary. No draw against commissions. No commissions.

Not what your typical yuppie would apply for, is it? But the person who answers God's calling knows that he is irreplaceable. That builds confidence.

If a job is bad enough, it becomes a calling. Nobody else wants it. The hard part about identifying a calling is not judging its irreplaceability. The hard part is judging the task's value to the kingdom of God. As a man who has several occupations - writers are afflicted with low specificity - and at least one major calling, with two additional ones looming, let me say that assessing the value of a calling is the hard part. That something which doesn't pay needs to be done is easy enough to assess. Lots of non-paying tasks need to be done. Large armies could not do them all. The difficult question is this: "Does this need to be done soon, and by me?"

Conclusion

Paul had a job: tentmaking. He also had a calling: evangelism and caring for churches. His calling was more important than his job, but his job secured the irreplaceability status of his calling. He did not get paid to perform his calling. His job was menial. His calling was crucial. **If you seek a crucial calling, forget about status.**

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