

What is the Christian Calling?

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One of the most impressive exhortations left us by the Apostle Paul in the pages of Holy Scripture reads as follows:—"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation [calling] wherewith ye are called " (Eph. 4: 1). In every age the call of God has been the governing factor in the life of every saint, who has been consistent with it. It is to be so today for us who are Christians, and therefore it is our solemn responsibility to learn from the apostolic writings what is the nature of the calling, wherewith God has called us and, having discovered it, to walk in consistency with it. We propose to enquire what the Christian calling is, inasmuch as we know that, "The gifts and calling of God are without repentance " (Rom. 11: 29); that is, God never "repents," or "changes His purpose." What He purposes, and establishes in His calling, always stands for ever.

The first occasion when God's call appears is in Genesis 12: 1, where we read that, "The Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee." The New Testament comment on this is, "By faith Abraham, when **he was called to go out . . . he went out . . .** " (Heb. 11: 8). Here at once we find a leading feature, which marks the call of God right through Scripture, whatever the nature of the call may be. It involves for those who are called a **separation** from the mass of mankind. This is so, whether God calls an individual, severing him from country and kindred and father's house, or whether He calls a nation, or still later an assembly composed of individuals, called out from all the nations.

Out of this call of Abraham there sprang the call of Israel as a nation, which separated them not only from Egypt but from all other peoples. The prophet declared, "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Hosea 11: 1). Though the ultimate reference was to the Lord Jesus, as we see in Matthew 2: 15, the more immediate reference was to that nation, as we see if we turn to Exodus 4: 22, 23. And further we have the prophecy of Balaam, when he said, "The people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23: 9).

In spite of Israel's unfaithfulness and apostasy, out of that nation according to the flesh sprang the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet they rejected Him, and this opened the way for the revelation of another calling on God's part. We have been called, "with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus **before the world began**" (2 Tim. 1: 9), though it had lain in God's mind undisclosed, and was not revealed until Christ, having died, was risen and ascended to heaven, and the Holy Spirit was shed forth.

This calling is the calling of the church, of which we form a part, and if our minds lay hold of the fact that our calling antedates the beginning of the world, we shall at once be prepared for the discovery that it carries us beyond and outside of the world, and the whole order of the material creation, into a heavenly position and destiny. The calling antedated the present creation, and will reach full fruition when this creation has ceased to be. It is this calling that we now propose to consider in its Scriptural setting.

The church of God being composed of individual saints, the call of God necessarily reaches each one, and is made good in each one of us, separately. We must consider it first from this individual standpoint, while ever remembering that the call of the individual is not to be divorced from that to which the church is called as a corporate entity, since we read, "Ye are called **in one body**" (Col. 3: 15). If we are to obey the apostolic injunction to walk worthy of the calling, we must certainly understand what our calling is. The Apostle had unfolded it in the first three chapters of the Ephesian

epistle.

His first prayer for the Ephesian saints was, "that ye may know what is the hope of His calling" (Eph. 1: 18) and this evidently refers to what he had indicated earlier in the chapter: that God the Father has "blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" and "predestinated us unto the adoption of children [unto sonship] by Jesus Christ to Himself." These marvellous words indicate what is the call, as regards the relationship, the place or sphere, and the endowment that it involves.

The **relationship**, to which we are called, may be stated in the one word, "**sonship**." What this means is elaborated for us in Galatians 3: 23-Galatians 4: 7, where the present relationship of the Christian as a son is contrasted with the place of Israel under the law, when the saint was like a child under age, and therefore under the schoolmaster, differing nothing from a servant. Our sonship is the fruit of the appearing of the Son of God, and His work, redeeming us not only from the curse of the broken law but also from the whole law-system. The work of Christ has been followed by the sending forth of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we may know the relationship, and brought into it, have the capacity to respond to God as our Father.

We must never overlook the fact that not only are we in the relationship of sons "by Jesus Christ to Himself," but we are there as "accepted in the Beloved." It is not only BY Him but IN Him, as the infinitely acceptable One. We participate in His life and nature, and hence sonship not only implies **intelligence** in the knowledge of God and His things, as we see in Galatians, but also **love**. This we see in Ephesians 1, for our ultimate destiny is to be "holy and without blame before Him in love." Even today we stand holy and blameless before Him, cleared judicially from all that formerly attached to us, and the love of God the Father toward us is as real and strong as ever it will be. But in the coming age what is true of us now judicially will be true of us absolutely and for ever.

The **place** or **sphere** to which we are called is not any spot upon the earth, for our blessings are "spiritual" and said to be, "**in heavenly places** in Christ." Our calling is "high," or, "on high," according to Philippians 3: 14, and elsewhere we are said to be, "partakers of the heavenly calling" (Heb. 3: 1). In contrast with this Abraham was called, "unto a land that I will show thee" (Gen. 12: 1). To that land were also the children of Israel called, when they were brought out of Egypt; a land which was said by God to be "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3: 17). The call of God to Israel will be verified in the millennial age, but the calling of the church envisages another sphere altogether. Even to Israel Jehovah had said, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are . . . My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55: 9). And we may apply such words to ourselves with a fulness of meaning that Israel can never experience.

The **endowment** connected with the heavenly calling is stated as, "**all spiritual blessings . . . in Christ**." We thankfully acknowledge that material blessings are conferred upon us. We commonly speak of them as **mercies** from the hand of God, and recognize that they indeed are **many**, but they are not all, for in the millennial age they will be showered upon the saved of earth far more lavishly than on us now. But, on the other hand, the spiritual blessings of the Christian calling are granted on such a scale as to be not merely many but **all**. And they are all **in Christ**, and ours as those who participate in Him. We may evidently say that not a spiritual blessing exists but it is conferred upon us by God Himself. Let us pause and think of this amazing fact, and we shall at once begin to see why later in Ephesians the Apostle wrote of "the **unsearchable** riches of Christ."

Another feature there is, which emphasizes the strong difference that exists between the calling of Israel as a nation and the calling of the church. Every individual who was included in the former owed his inclusion to natural birth. If a man or woman was born of the stock of Israel, he or she was in it,

irrespective of their spiritual state. Multitudes, as we know, had no faith, and perished in the wilderness.

But no one is embraced in the Christian calling apart from being redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, and born again by the living and abiding word of God, as is stated in 1 Peter 1: 13 and 1 Peter 1: 23. Only thus do we come into the "spiritual house," and "holy priesthood," of 1 Peter 2: 5. And again, reverting to the Epistle to the Ephesians, we find ourselves included as those who are "His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2: 10). Nothing short of this Divinely-wrought, new creation work has given us our part in it.

This verse in Ephesians, to which we have just referred, leads us on to the consideration of the corporate calling of the church, which of course is intimately connected with the calling of the individual. The verse stands indeed as a preliminary statement to the remarkable unfolding of "the vocation wherewith ye are called," which we find in Eph. 2: 10-22. Let us endeavour to summarize its notable features as revealed there.

The first thing that we observe is that the Apostle had specially before him those who had been called from among the Gentiles, whose plight without Christ, without hope, without God, he describes in Eph. 2: 11 and Eph. 2: 12. They had been "afar off" from God, but now in Christ they had been "**made nigh**" by His blood.

Ephesians 2: 14 brings before us those whom God had called by the Gospel from among the Jews, as well as those called from among the Gentiles. For a moment they stand before our minds as two distinct companies, but this is only that we may understand that God has, "made both one," since the middle wall that separated has been broken down in the death of Christ. So the calling of the church involves our being "**made one**," as well as our being "made nigh."

Yes, we may say, that is clear, but what is the character of the oneness? Is the Gentile in some way to be lifted to the level of the Jew? Or, is the Jew to be lowered to a Gentile level? The answer is, Neither the one nor the other. God has of the two made, "one new man." The word "make," in Eph. 2: 15, is the translation of the Greek word for "create." As in Eph. 2: 10, so here again, we have a work of **new creation**. Those called, whether Jew or Gentile, are the subjects of this new creation work, and in it-that is, "in Christ Jesus"-there is neither Jew nor Gentile. The old antagonisms disappear; the old man, that displayed them, is displaced, and only the new man in Christ remains. Thus peace is made.

In all these statements God's work is contemplated in an abstract way; that is, in its essential nature, excluding from our minds for the moment the complications introduced by failure in ourselves. Only by excluding them thus, can we gain an understanding of what God's work is in its intrinsic perfection. In the age to come we shall no longer have the flesh in us, and then its perfection will be fully displayed.

But there is more stated in Eph. 2: 16. Not only are we made nigh, and made one, and made new, but also made "one body," reconciled to God by the cross of Christ. Now the word, "body" introduces the fact of organic union in relation to Christ. It is a living organism. Had we Eph. 2: 14 only, we might have said, Yes, though formerly some of us were Jews and some Gentiles, we are now one. But, one what? One nation? One community? One federation? No, one body, and that implies unity, though in surprising diversity. "One body" is a figure of speech used to set forth the close and living nature of the unity that exists, no matter how diverse the individual members that compose it.

In Eph. 2: 18 the word "one" occurs for the fourth time. We are qualified and empowered to enter the Father's presence by the possession of "**one Spirit**"- the Holy Spirit of God. Israel of old knew God

as Jehovah, but had no real access to Him. We, who enter into the church's calling, know Him as Father, and have holy liberty of approach. We could not know Him as Father and yet be barred from His presence, or the standard of His Fatherhood would fall below that of merely human fatherhood. The human father who could not be approached by his children would not be considered much of a father! We may draw near with assurance since God is our Father. But we must certainly approach with reverence, remembering that our Father is God.

In the light of the foregoing the great facts of the church's calling, mentioned in the four verses that close this chapter, are to be understood. Though once as Gentiles we were, "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," we are now "no more strangers and foreigners." We are "fellow citizens," not with the inhabitants of Jerusalem, but rather "with the saints." We are "of the household," not of Abraham, or even of Moses and Aaron, but rather "of God." The thought of the Spirit of God moves on in an ascending scale; from the negative to the positive, and then on the positive side from association with the saints to being not merely in the kingdom but the very household of God.

But even this is not all, for the Spirit passes from the household to the house, whilst the church in its final completeness is to be the "holy temple in the Lord"-the shrine in which God will dwell. Then also at the present time it is God's dwelling-place by His Spirit. As a building it is "fitly framed together" (Eph. 2: 21), and so grows to its final completion. As one body, the church is "fitly joined together" (Eph. 4: 16), and so grows up in all things to its "Head, even, Christ."

At this point we may digress for a moment to observe that the church is presented to us in three aspects. First, as the sum total of all the saints, called of God and indwelt by the Spirit, between the day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts 2, and the predicted rapture of the saints, as in 1 Thessalonians 4: 16, 17. In this aspect we view it in the widest and largest way-the church in its completeness, as it exists today in the mind of God, and as it will be seen in the age to come. Examples of this are found in such passages as Matthew 16: 18; Ephesians 1: 22, 23; Ephesians 5: 27.

But second, as the sum total of the saints on earth today, or at any given moment. Examples of this are found in 1 Corinthians 12: 12, 13, 28; Ephesians 2: 22; 1 Timothy 3: 15. If the first of these Scriptures be considered, it becomes evident that the various gifts-including healings and tongues-are not set in the completed church in glory, for such things are not needed there, but the church as it exists at present on earth. Nor is it only the local church at Corinth that is contemplated, for all these gifts, including apostles and prophets, were not set there. If the other two Scriptures be read it is surely clear that the "habitation of God," in which Timothy was to behave himself rightly refers to the church on earth as a whole in its then present condition, and not to a separate local assembly, as though God had hundreds of "houses," scattered over Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, etc.

Then third, there is of course the local church in a given locality, as we see in Acts 9: 31, and such local churches have their own history and responsibility, as shown in Revelation 2 & 3.

But to return, the exhortation that with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering and forbearance, we should endeavour "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 2, 3), is given in the light of the truth we have been briefly considering. This exhortation bears upon the present, internal condition of the church on the earth, and is of the gravest importance. The value and weight of the church's witness largely depends on how we respond to it. The breakdown and failure, that has been so conspicuous here, goes a long way to explain the feebleness of our witness.

But now, in the light of the foregoing, we raise the question-What is the church's witness? A correct answer to this question will help to determine the course and witness of each individual Christian, since for practical purposes the witness of the church depends on the life and witness of the

individuals who compose it.

Before coming down to more particular details, we need an answer on broad and general lines, and this we find in the Epistle to the Ephesians. In Eph. 2: 7, "the ages to come," are before us, when the church will be the witness of "the exceeding riches of His grace." The grace of God will shine forth in those ages in connection with all His dealings with Israel and the nations, as well as with the saints of pre-Christian days. But to see the **surpassing** display of grace, men and angels will turn their eyes to the glorified church. Let us never forget that! We are surely right then in assuming that grace must characterize the witness of those who themselves are the recipients of grace in such surpassing measure.

A second answer is found in Ephesians 3: 10, where the church's witness is considered, not in relation to the ages to come but "now." The heavenly principalities and powers read in it "the manifold wisdom of God." If we mentally survey the practical state of the church today, we may wonder how the holy angels can see it! But we must remember two things. First, that they are deathless creatures and, though much failure is before their eyes today, they saw the church as it was Divinely instituted, and in the days of its first love before the failure began. Second, the wisdom of God being "manifold," they see fresh aspects of it in the way God deals with the failure displayed by us, and carries out His purpose in spite of it. The breakdown of the church in its responsibility will give occasion for the display of that manifold wisdom, which will ultimately triumph, in presenting the saints "faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). However defective our witness may be, there is going ultimately to be in the church an abundant witness to the surpassing grace and manifold wisdom of our God, and to the exceeding joy of our Saviour in the full fruition of His work.

These things being so, our witness to the grace of God is very simple. The words of our Lord were, "witnesses unto Me" (Acts 1: 8), and He said this just as He, the rejected One of earth, was about to ascend into the heavens. In keeping with this Paul wrote "Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ" (2 Cor. 3: 3). In spite of their glaring defects, the saints of the Corinthian assembly were Christ's letter to the world, seeing He was absent in heaven.

It is very evident therefore that our business as Christians is not only to testify of the grace of God, but also to set forth Christ in the way we live, and to serve His interests while He is still the rejected One. In the age to come God is going to "judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead" (Acts 17: 31). Referring to that age, Paul wrote, "Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?" (1 Cor. 6: 2). When He reigns we are to reign with Him. When He judges, we shall judge. But judging, which involves the public administration of that which is just, is emphatically not our business today.

When a British sovereign is crowned, the peers and peeresses, who have a right to be present in Westminster Abbey, bring their coronets with them. But they do not put them on till the crown is placed upon the sovereign's head. Today a good many Christians seem anxious to put on their coronets before the Saviour is manifested, crowned with His many crowns. Previously Paul had written to the Corinthians, "Ye have reigned as kings without us [the Apostles]: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you" (1 Cor. 4: 8).

So it is not our business to rule the world, or even to attempt to improve the world. The Lord Jesus Christ alone can set the world right, and if we attempt to do it before the time, we only display our folly, for it is impossible to impose Christian behaviour on those who are not Christian in any vital sense. Only the true believer possesses the divine nature, from which such behaviour would flow.

The programme of God for the present time is, "to take out of them [the Gentiles] a people for His name" (Acts 15: 14), not to educate nor to legislate the Gentiles into better social schemes. We very much fear that at the present time, even when the Gospel is faithfully and happily preached, there is a tendency to over-stress its social implications, and throw into the background the eternal issues that hang upon its acceptance or its rejection. It is quite true that the evangelical revival in Britain of two hundred years ago led to a considerable betterment in the social conditions of the country, but that was only a by-product of the work. The main result was that many thousands were taken out of the nation for His name, and added to the church; saved from their sins and from an eternity of woe.

It is a great mistake to magnify the secondary into the prominence of the primary; to treat the by-product as though it were the main thing. It is even a mistake to stress what the Gospel does **now** for the believer in such a way as to omit reference to what it does **for eternity**. We heard recently of a meeting for foreign students in London, when the speaker—a very true servant of our Lord—spent practically all his time in relating what the believer gets in the present—the happiness, the altered life, etc. When he had finished, an Indian student got up to claim that Hinduism if properly understood, produced altered lives, as witness, Gandhi, and others. Other students of other persuasions made similar claims, and the meeting ended in a very inconclusive fashion. If the speaker, while not omitting the mention of the present blessings of the Gospel, had given substantial place to its effects for eternity, stressing the claims of God in righteousness, and sin, and judgment, and heaven and hell, he would have travelled on to ground where would-be opponents could not so easily have followed.

Let us not forget the teaching of our Lord in Luke 12: 13-21. The man who interrupted His discourse, raised a point of social equity. The answer he got diverted his mind, and everybody else's, from the **social** side of things to the **eternal** issues. Covetousness was at the bottom of the business, and what would be the good of the inheritance to either brother, if he had to die that night? Death dissipates present gain. Over-concentration on the present is folly in view of eternity.

Our true witness in the first place is to be concerned to produce the fruits of the divine nature ourselves. And then, if we labour in the Gospel, and do so according to God's present plan, we shall have the joy of being used and of seeing fruit, not only for time but also for eternity.

If we spend time and effort in what is not God's plan, we shall not have fruit to show before the judgment seat of Christ. We beg our brethren to consider these things very carefully, for we fear that many are wasting their time trying to do what they are not told to do.

Then again, if Ephesians 4: 11-16 be attentively read, we see that the gifts that come from the ascended Christ, together with that which every joint of the body supplies, are to be, "for the perfecting of the saints," and, "for the edifying of the body of Christ," and for, "increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love." They are not given in order that this gifted man may gather a few saints round himself, and perfect them in his particular line of teaching; or that another may labour merely to edify and increase a group, that he regards as specially favoured or specially correct. Obviously no servant of God can do more than contact and help a few; not even the Apostle Paul could contact all. Yet the few that are contacted should be served as members of the body of Christ, and not as merely connected with the servant himself in some lesser way.

We urge that we should never forget that our calling is the church's calling, and that we keep before us nothing less than, or other than that. The words of the Lord Jesus were, "I will build My church" (Matt. 16: 18). Only what He builds is going to stand to the day of eternity. Men have built what they call churches. They have instituted religious unions, societies, guilds, missions, in almost endless variety and with greatly differing characters. Sad to say, the very best of them are often vitiated

as the years pass, inasmuch as corruption has permeated the professing church. None of them possess permanence. When the Lord calls His saints to meet Him in the air, no trace of them will be found in His presence, though the wreckage of some may be left on earth. In His presence will be found complete and glorious the elect church for whom He died: that, and **only that**.

If God's object becomes our objective, and we serve in subjection to His word, we shall not live our lives in vain. We grant at once that God's object is high and beyond all our natural thoughts, and that therefore we often fall far short of it in our character, our behaviour, our worship, and our service for the name of the Lord. But though we fail, let us keep the right thing before us, rather than be deflected from it to something more according to our own thoughts, and therefore less according to the Word of God.

We remember hearing that in a certain shooting match a first-rate marksman put every one of his bullets on the bull's-eye of a target, and yet when his score was announced, it did not amount to a single point. It was-0. And why? Because he had been firing at the wrong target! Accept this incident as a parable, remembering that it is better to be a poor marksman firing at the right target than a first-class shot firing at the wrong one! Better serve what is the will of God for the moment, even imperfectly, than accomplish what is not His will with apparent efficiency and success.

Let us seek grace to have our lives and our service ordered in keeping with the calling of the church. And let us each remember that we have to give account of ourselves to God at the judgment seat of Christ.