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The Calling of the Christian and the Church (Chapter 3 of The Call to Authenticity, A Handbook of Hope for the Church)

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Chapter 3

The Calling of the Christian and the Church

As a prisoner for the Lord, then I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Eph. 4:1

There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it. Edith Wharton

Paul's Reminder of "Calling"

My exploration of the church began in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is an amazing book! And it has been popular through the ages. William Barclay, the Scottish New Testament scholar says that when John Knox (the founder of the Presbyterian Church) was near death, he requested Calvin's sermons on Ephesians to be read to him. Although scholars disagree on authorship, Barclay is convinced that Paul wrote it. Further, he wrote it from prison in Rome, near the end of his life in his theological maturity. It was written to Gentiles. The universal importance of Ephesians is heightened, if Barclay is correct, by the probability that it was written not to one single church, but as a "circular letter" to all of Paul's Asian churches. From style, universality, profound content and its remarkable ecclesiology, Barclay calls it Paul's "supreme letter." It certainly has been that for me.

After reading and studying it I was taken by a request Paul made nearly halfway through the epistle. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to be one of those significant phrases that implies far more than just the content of the words. Its placement seems to indicate that it is a summing up of much that has gone before, with the urgent appeal to apply all of that in how they lived. As I read and reread it, I realized that Paul's request grew out of the theological foundation he had laid earlier in the book.
The statement I am referring to is the first verse of chapter four: “As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (TNIV). I remember hearing, and later preaching messages on that text. It was an ideal text for an ordination service and was usually treated as if it stood alone. It was as if it were a simple and overt encouragement to live up to one’s calling. Wonderful advice! Not an inappropriate encouragement, of course, and who could disagree? But using it as a “stand alone” text, the speaker assumes very much. It is assumed that the hearer fully knows her or his calling and only needs to be reminded to live up to it. In such sermons the “calling” one is to live up to was probably (it was assumed) to be a “Christian,” a “preacher,” a “missionary,” or whatever else one felt called to.

As I thought more about the text, the assumption that one actually knew his or her calling seemed to belie the truth. It may be another example of an unexamined assumption. That Paul makes this appeal almost half way through the epistle implies that he has not assumed their knowledge of their calling, but has used the earlier part of his letter to make them fully aware of what it is. Indeed, the little word “then,” between “As a prisoner of the Lord,” and “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received,” implies that he is referring to something he has already discussed. That fact put the preceding three chapters in a very different light. Somewhere in them Paul must have given insight about the calling. That insight would give substance and meaning to his later appeal to live worthy of, or according to the calling. So, discerning the “calling” would be the place to begin. It must be the starting point for my exploration.

I was intrigued. What would I find? Would it be specific to the people of one church, or would it be more universal? Would it be particular to some professions, or to Christians in general? Would it apply to individuals only or might it relate to the collective church? Working through the first chapter of Ephesians proved to be an enriching experience. It laid the foundation not only for my study of the church, but for my understanding of what it means to be a Christian. In the following paragraphs we will work through Paul’s development of the calling.

Plunging into Ephesians!

After his customary introduction of being an apostle of Christ and identifying his audience, God’s holy people, Paul opens with his projection of grace and peace from God and Christ. He then gives a kind of prologue, but it contains the essence of their calling:

3Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accor-
dance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace 

that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

This is a marvelous prologue and it is filled with interweaving themes that help us get to the heart of the “calling.” Because Paul uses parenthetical phrases and extended descriptions it is helpful to look for major threads of thought. As we separate his key thoughts from the subordinate explanations we begin to see the very clear direction and feel the punch of these two paragraphs. We can analyze the text in this way:

v.2, grace and peace are the overarching words of this chapter. The overarching truth of the gospel and the church is grace and peace.

Next, we see three operant verbs that all point to one, and the same, result. In v.3, Paul says God has “blessed” us. In v. 4 the verb is “chose” us and in v. 5 the verb is “predestined” us. In each, God is doing the action. Of course, each of Paul’s statements goes further and elaborates:

— we are blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ,
— we are chosen in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless,
— we are predestined for adoption to be God’s children through Christ, according to God’s pleasure and God’s will.

The end result that follows these statements is in v. 6, “to the praise of his glorious grace.” If we pare down to the essence, and temporarily put aside the elaboration we begin to perceive a clear and interesting focus. When we consider these three sentences as a stream of thought, rather than as separate issues, they lead to one result, or one purpose. Observe what happens when we pull them
together in that way: God (and Christ) has blessed us, chosen us and predestined us to the praise of his glorious grace.

If we highlight and mark the text, the predominant theme also becomes more obvious:

3Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. 4For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—6to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.

Stated simply, God blessed us, chose us and predestined us to the praise of his glorious grace.

Paul then continues, elaborating on Christ, the “One he loves,” and what He has done for us:

7In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace 8that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, 9he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment— to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

11In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.

Notice the “funnel” effect. In the above (vss. 7 – 11), our redemption, our knowledge of the mystery of his will and our having been chosen, even predestined, are marshaled together to a single result. One clue is that after these five verses Paul funnels our focus with the words, “in order that.” This phrase guides our minds to God’s desired result of that which preceded:

12in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, MIGHT BE FOR THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.

Here we see for the second time the phrase dealing with the praise of God’s glory.

Paul is not finished. He continues by describing our salvation, which has the seal of the Holy Spirit. But again, Paul indicates a direction, a desired result:

13And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.
Note, this is the third use of that phrase, “to the praise of his glory.”
If the content of these two paragraphs is placed in outline form it might look like this:

Paul's greeting and praise to God

v. 2, grace and peace to you
v. 3, God has blessed us
v. 4, God chose us
  - before the creation of the world
  - to be holy and blameless in his sight
v. 5, God predestined us for adoption through Christ:
v. 6, TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORIOUS GRACE
  (this grace is freely given in Christ)

Next, Paul describes what we have through this grace in Christ:

v. 7, In him we have redemption (forgiveness of sins)
v. 9, We have knowledge of the mystery of his will
  (“with all wisdom and understanding he made known to us the mystery of his will”…“to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ”)
v. 11, In him we were also chosen (having been predestined)
v. 12, in order that we...MIGHT BE FOR THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.

Finally, Paul mentions our seal:

v. 13, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit
v. 14, TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.

To streamline this material and see its pointedness, it can be summarized like this:

God has blessed us, chosen us and predestined us to adoption in Christ to THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORIOUS GRACE. In Christ we have redemption, knowledge of the mystery of his will and we are chosen so we might be for THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY. You were marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit to THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.

It can be illustrated like this:
Our Calling

Only after I had read this passage numerous times did I notice Paul’s repetition. Three times he uses a form of the phrase, “to the praise of his glory.” Each time it comes at the end of a grouping, either stating or implying that it is God’s desired result. I began to realize that “to the praise of his glory” was the controlling purpose of the first chapter of Ephesians. I had never seen it before. Could this have something to do with Paul’s plea in chapter 4, to live worthy of one’s calling? I began to believe it did. When I considered the repetition and when I temporarily suspended Paul’s elaborative phrases it became crystal clear. We are called to live to the praise of God’s glory. That is the calling Paul later
refers to when he reminds them to live worthy of their calling (4:1). That is our calling!

Obviously then, we need to unpack the significance of that little phrase, “to the praise of his glory,” but before doing that we will mention some smaller details that are included in those first two paragraphs. While not necessarily crucial to seeing the flow of Paul’s thought, they add important insight to the reality of our calling.

In verse 4 Paul says that God chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. The word “holy,” or hagios in the Greek is the same root word as “saint.” The word “holy” is not unique to the New Testament; it was a major factor in Old Testament theology, particularly related to God’s nature. Dennis Kinlaw describes the ontological, moral and ethical uniqueness of Yahweh. God is totally “other,” and “this otherness comes to be expressed in the Old Testament by the word Yahweh claims as his own, the word holy.”

Kinlaw goes on, “If anything else possesses any holiness, it is because of its association with him. He says of himself, ‘I am the LORD, who makes you holy’ (Lev. 22:32 et al). And his command to his people is, ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy’ (Lev. 19:2).” Thus, when Paul indicates that we were chosen to be holy, he is referring to this association with God that makes us “other” than our former selves and the rest of the world, and like God. Holy (qadesh in the Old Testament) initially belongs to Yahweh alone. It is “uniquely Yahweh’s word.” But through God’s interaction with human beings, both in the Old and New Testaments, God makes a claim on us, effecting our transformation to become like God. Paul’s word, “adoption” becomes even more poignant in that context. We become God’s actual children, and increasingly like God, unique and different from everything else: holy.

At first it appears contradictory to use the word that is exclusively reserved for God to describe people. But that is exactly what Paul does when he calls all Christians “saints.” Rather than being a contradiction or inconsistency, it speaks of the profound effect God’s grace actually has on persons. The profoundness of this transformation becomes crucial in the role Christians can have in the world. This will be explored below. But for now, we see that the word “holy” is a descriptor of how our being like God is integral to living “to the praise of his glory.”

Twice in this passage Paul uses the word “predestined” (1:5, 1:11). This word is also common to both the Old and New Testaments. However, rather than become sidetracked in a “predestination/free will” debate we need to remember that neither the Old Testament writers nor Paul knew anything of the post reformation debate that linked the theological concept of predestination to philosophical determinism. For the purposes of this study and in relationship to the purpose statement where being “predestined” leads to living “to the praise of his glory,” either a Calvinistic or an Arminian interpretation can enhance the meaning. The key focus in this passage is not how “predestination” is interpreted, but that we are chosen for this particular and lofty calling.
Embellishments on the Theme

Other terms and phrases of Paul add beauty and richness to the truth of this passage. For example, we are blessed “with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (1:3), we are predestined “in love” (1:4-5), this predestination occurs “in accordance with [God’s] pleasure and will” (1:5), and God’s grace “which he has freely given us” (1:6). Forgiveness is in accord with the “riches” of God’s grace, which he “lavished” on us (1:7-8). It is in the context of God’s “good pleasure” that he revealed the mystery of his will (1:9), and that will includes bringing “unity,” or oneness to all in heaven and on earth (1:10). When the flavor of these descriptors permeates the call of living “to the praise of God’s glory,” one senses a freshness, freedom, generosity and joy in such living. It is not only envisioned by God, but made possible by God’s very character. Such a perspective is energizing.

One more observation is in order, although it remains (for me) in the area of conjecture or question. From verse 3 through 12 Paul uses the inclusive pronouns “us” and “we” when describing God’s blessing and calling. This relates to all he says, including two appearances of the phrase “for the praise of his glory.” In verse 13 Paul switches to the pronoun “you.” Again, this section ends with the purpose, “to the praise of his glory.” Does Paul use the two pronouns inclusively, with “we” referring to both himself and his audience? Or does he use “we” to refer to himself and possibly the first generation apostles in order to credential his authority and message? Is there possibly a shift from himself to his readers, but establishing relationship and continuity by concluding both the “we” section and the “you” section with the same directive: to live to the praise of his glory? It is clear that both the “we” and the “you” sections point to the same result: to the praise of God’s glory. Such questions are appropriate to a further study, but the focus here will return to an exploration of Paul’s directive, which is the pertinent theme of the chapter.

“To the praise of his glory”
But What Does It Mean?

Three times Paul uses the phrase “the praise of his glory” (or “to the praise of his glorious grace”). As mentioned above, his comments preceding each use of it seem to “funnel” toward the phrase. The repetition indicates that it is the primary focus of the first chapter through verse 14 and is the point of reference when he challenges his readers to live worthy of their calling (4:1). That being the case, it is imperative that we explore what Paul has in mind when he uses that phrase. As an aside, I am intrigued by how often I have seen a particular phrase in scripture or other literature and simply passed over it without explicating it. Sometimes familiarity leads us to assume understanding without actually gaining it. The value of study is that it enables us to dig deeper than the superficial and move beyond the limitations of our assumptions.
To open our understanding of our “calling” we shall explore Paul’s key phrase: “to the praise of his glory,” beginning with the word “glory.” It appears throughout scripture. “Declare his glory among the nations” (1 Chron. 16:24 and Ps. 96:3), “the land was radiant with his glory” (Ezek. 43:2), “may the whole earth be filled with his glory” (Ps. 72:19). Angels are reported saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven...” (Luke 2:14). But perhaps the most helpful text is in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God.”

What does the word mean? The Oxford Concise Dictionary begins its definition with “Exalted renown, honourable fame; adoring praise and thanksgiving.” While that describes what we offer verbally when we honor someone, I’m not convinced that it encapsulates the deeper meaning of the noun. Throughout scripture “glory” seems to be that which reflects God’s nature or even God Himself. It goes beyond words, which are one way of reflecting, to any means of communicating the nature of God. This communication can be to God, or to others about God. In the simplest and broadest sense glory is that which reflects.

Frederick Buechner comes at it sideways, and touches the deeper truth:

Glory is to God what style is to an artist. A painting by Vermeer, a sonnet by Donne, a Mozart aria — each is so rich with the style of the one who made it that to the connoisseur it couldn’t have been made by anyone else, and the effect is staggering. The style of an artist brings you as close to the sound of his voice and the light in his eye as it is possible to get this side of actually shaking hands with him. [...] To behold God’s glory, to sense his style, is the closest you can get to him this side of Paradise, just as to read King Lear is the closest you can get to Shakespeare.

One Saturday morning my wife and I were driving on the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge. It was a pristine day, the scenery was breathtaking and our relaxing drive was enhanced by beautiful music on the classical station. I commented about how lovely the music was and wondered aloud who the composer was. Without hesitating she responded, “It’s Beethoven.” I asked if she had heard that symphony before. She replied, “No.” I pressed, “How do you know it is Beethoven?” She answered, “I know Beethoven’s style.” We continued to enjoy the drive and the music. Finally the announcer mentioned the composer. It was Beethoven. “The style of an artist brings you as close... as it is possible to get this side of actually shaking hands with him.”

Clearly this is akin to the psalmist’s words, “The heavens are telling the glory of God” (Ps. 19). Or, as Buechner puts it, “Glory is the outward manifestation of [God’s] hand in its handiwork...” So what is glory? It is that which reflects God, or reflects God’s nature. When Moses encountered the burning bush something was communicated to him about the nature of God. It reflected that...
God was totally other than anything Moses had experienced, and was not able to be comprehended, explained or controlled. Glory does that. Glory reflects.

To return to Paul, what does it mean to “live to the praise of God’s glory?” Very simply it means to reflect God, to reflect God’s nature, to reflect God’s style. Recall Moses’ rejoining his people, after being in the presence of God. Exodus 34 speaks of Moses’ face being radiant, and that the people observed it. He would then cover his face with a veil “until he went in to speak with the Lord” (Ex. 33:34). Was Moses shielding the people from the brightness of his face because they could not tolerate the “glory,” or was something else going on?

In II Cor. 3:13 Paul explains. When the radiance began to fade, Moses did not want the people to see the change. So he “put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away.” This is significant to our study. Paul is very clear that our reflecting God need not fade, but continues! “We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face ….” The imagery is striking. Paul intensifies this meaning in his conclusion: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate (alternate word: reflect) the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” The Jerusalem Bible portrays the spirit of this truth in terms similar to how I am describing Paul’s view of calling: “And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect;” 10 Paul also mentions the concept of the “image” of God (Romans 8:29), indicating that it is God’s plan that we not only reflect God but are predestined to actually be conformed to the image of Christ. How effectively we then reflect God!

Without Paul’s interpretation of the Moses event we would be tempted to attribute Moses’ reflecting God’s glory to some sort of magical occurrence. That would be a safe way to avoid the actual effect of God’s presence and the reality of our calling. Instead, Paul helps us acknowledge that being with God does something in us and to us that actually reflects God to others! The potential of this is deeply moving … both to us and to those who are with us. The Exodus passage also reveals a cause and effect pattern: the radiance (reflecting) returned when Moses was in God’s presence. (Ex. 34:33-35) 11 Paul’s use of the terms “saints” and “holy” (for Christians) adds to the actual possibility that we can reflect God. Being restored to God’s image makes reflecting God possible.

Reflecting God and Authenticity

To live to the praise of God’s glory is to reflect God. Rather than just accept that as a new definition, it is enjoyable and beneficial to explore both the logical and emotional components of it. While difficult to put into words, we can begin by remembering experiences when we were reminded of the true God. I can think of moments when I suddenly became aware of, or remembered the reality of God’s nature. It may have been in a moment of overwhelming beauty, like a sunrise or a sunset or a mountainscape. Sometimes it occurred from interacting
with a person. What I clearly remember is that my response was consistently one of deep gratitude. My spontaneous response was to feel, think or say, "thank you!"

I have known people, who, after being with them I found myself unexpectedly thinking, "Thank you, God!" As I later analyzed these occurrences, it was not that the conversation was about God, or that the focus was "spiritual." It was just that after being with the person I felt lifted. It was surprising. Mysteriously, in being with them I felt God's presence. This seems to me to be quite paradoxical when I recall that the topic of conversation was not at all what one would expect would have that effect.

When I was restoring my 1930 Model A Ford I needed help on a particular technical task related to steering knuckles. I drove to another town to consult with a Model A enthusiast and he told me that the only person in the entire Portland vicinity who could help me was Gordon. Where did Gordon live? He told me the address. It was one mile from my home. Days later I went to see Gordon and he offered a Saturday to help me with the project. Thus began a friendship that led us into good conversations and ongoing help with my restoration. Consistently, when I drive by his home, even years later, a smile will cross my face and I'll think (without trying to), "Thanks, God." We'd never even talked about faith, but Gordon reflected God. He may not be aware of it, but it happened.

Sometimes in the middle of a busy day I'll think of a person in my life, my wife, my daughter, my son, a friend, a new acquaintance I just chanced to meet. A smile will cross my face. The smile sneaks out because of a memory of someone reflecting God.

When it happens through us it may take us by surprise. Kathleen Norris tells of such an experience and how it became a turning point in her own faith journey: "The dilemma so vividly described by St. Paul in First Corinthians 1:22-23 ("for the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified..." KJV) reflected my own situation. Seeking in vain for both signs and wisdom I experienced Jesus only as stumbling block and foolishness. But that began to change when an unlikely trio – a Pentecostal Baptist woman who had been my student in a writing workshop, a Roman Catholic bishop I'd turned to in seeking help for some deeply disturbed teenagers I'd encountered in a school residency, and a Lutheran friend who had been diagnosed with cancer – all happened to thank me for 'my love of Christ.' I didn't think I had any, but I began to realize that the joke might be on me."12

What do I do with that in terms of Paul's encouragement to reflect God, to "live to the praise of his glory?" I try to learn the ingredients, the dynamics of why and how those persons, those interactions initiated the "Thanks, God" response in me so I can attempt to be that kind of "flavoring" to other people. I have to be careful to not over analyze or over "spiritualize" what it means to reflect God. The sunset just "is," and as such it reflects God. The heavens "declare" the glory of God just by being what they are, authentically. In the sec-
The Call to Authenticity

Second century Irenaeus expressed this truth in his phrase, “the glory of God is a person fully alive.” I believe that I reflect God best when I am authentically what God created me to be, and when I have the awareness and desire to allow God’s true and gracious nature to be reflected through me.

Desiring to live such a life is not unrelated to Paul’s observation that we were chosen by God to be “holy.” Holy means “unique” and “other,” as it related to God in the Old Testament. Our being holy grows out of our connection with God (not to be confused with a compulsive striving for ritual and religious perfection) and thus our increasing authenticity. That means that the word “saint,” (the same root as holy) also implies authenticity and a life that unobtrusively reflects God.

Frederick Buechner defines the word “saint,” in a creative way. He refers to an earlier era when a woman could hint at romantic interest by subtly dropping her handkerchief. It was a simple act and if the man desired to respond, he could pick up the handkerchief and return it. If he was not interested, the act was ignored, and no one was offended. Reflecting that custom, Buechner suggests: “In His holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.” Paul invites us to reflect God, to be “handkerchiefs” dropped in a world hungry for love. As we reflect God, people may sense something about God that they may not have seen before.

A Clear and Simple Focus

We began this study of the church with Paul’s appeal in Ephesians 4:1, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” That calling is specified in chapter one. We are to live to the praise of God’s glory, or, stated simply, we are to reflect God. This is simple and direct, but it is paramount. To reflect God is the calling of every Christian, and therefore, collectively, it is the calling of the church. The corporate church, the church in the world has one calling, to reflect God. Nothing more is necessary. Nothing less is adequate.

Throughout my growing up years in the church I never heard that the single calling of the church and every Christian was to reflect God. What I saw modeled and heard preached were more “lofty” callings: to preach the gospel, to persuade people of the rightness of Christianity, to draw people into the kingdom, to teach people, to grow, to build marvelous buildings that honor God. Of course, each of these can be good. But they may or may not be directly related to reflecting God. When they become the primary focus, noble as they may be, people seem to become so preoccupied with them that they lose the perspective that what we are really to be about is reflecting God; these other actions may or may not grow out of that calling. What was consistently missing in my learning years was the singleness and priority of our calling: we are called to reflect God, individually, as Christians, corporately, as the church.
A glance at history reveals that too often the church became sidetracked from this calling and busied herself with tangential activities. Europe is noted for its spectacular cathedrals. I believe the motive of the architects and builders was to reflect God and the architecture and stained glass windows did function as a guidebook for the illiterate. However, somewhere through the years the “reflect God” calling became obscure and rather than being living houses of learning about and reflecting God they became monuments to what many now view as a dead religion. Had the calling remained focused it is likely that the initial purposes of those buildings would continue to be realized. My comments are not a criticism of the magnificent structures that were erected by dedicated Christians over hundreds of years. Nor are they a criticism of their motives. Rather, I believe that the early vision of reflecting God, and using one’s abilities to do that gradually gave way to building projects that had more to do with erecting an edifice than finding creative ways to reflect God.

While there may be honest and valid questions about how the building of cathedrals relates to our calling to reflect God, other church “practices” of the past (and present) clearly do not relate to that calling. One of the most tragic chapters of Christian history is the story of the Crusades. When we read the chronicles of how crusaders went into battle under the banner of Deus Vult!, God’s will! how they killed and looted in order to retake possession of the Holy Land it is impossible to harmonize such behavior in any way with reflecting God. Unless, of course God is a god of violence, harsh judgment and territorial protection. Hardly the God of love portrayed in scripture and in Jesus’ example.

I once had a thoughtful conversation with a Jewish friend about Christianity. He was open minded, a seeker of truth and respecter of Jesus. But his assessment of Christianity was clear and direct. Christianity could not be correct. The evidence was summed up in one word: Crusades.

If the Crusades were directly opposite to reflecting God, the same could be said of the Inquisition. The stated intention was to protect people from heresy. But the practice involved prohibiting people from reading suspect literature (the Index from the sixteenth century) and torturing or killing those who didn’t align their beliefs with what the church considered orthodox. It was as though the church’s task was to protect God from any thought unworthy of Him, and to insulate people from anything that might smell of heresy. The result was a church that tried to gain a monopoly on human learning, and maintain control of human behavior and thought. The church reflected a vengeful, exclusive and harsh God, rather than the God of love, mercy and truth. Protecting God and people from unorthodox thought and heretics? A very different purpose from reflecting God to people.
Mother Teresa or the Inquisition?

Both the Crusades and the Inquisition are tragic examples of the church's diametrical opposition to living to the praise of God's glory. She lived to the praise of power, control, authority and one-dimensional thinking. In those years the church demonstrated the reality that Pascal observed: "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." And when a group or movement is institutionalized, its momentum greatly increases. The crusades and the Inquisition were powerful expressions of the institutional church. Had the institutional church accepted the calling of reflecting God, who knows what the difference would have been? It seems that historically individuals are more prone to live by such a calling than institutions. Consider Mother Teresa. One wonders what the result would be if the church at large, the Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches took seriously the fact that the only reason for their existence, the singleness of their calling is to reflect God. The power of institutional momentum could make an incalculable difference in the world...something not out of harmony with the teaching of Paul and Jesus!

But that would take a miracle.

For the present moment let's return to the individual's calling to reflect God. Those who have not discerned it, but followed the example of the institutional church give evidence to the cynics, or honest questioners who see no value in the unique claims of Christianity. Many of us resonate with the bumper sticker that reads, "I don't have a problem with God; its his fans that trouble me." Fortunately, others such as Mother Teresa and millions of unnamed Christians have clearly discerned that message and decided to accept the call. As they reflect God the world is changed and God is seen. So, which shall we choose as our guide as we attempt to reflect God, Mother Teresa or the Inquisition?

We Don't Need More; We Can't Have Less

What is the calling of the Christian and the church? To reflect God. We don't need more than that, but we can't have less. I shared that statement with a small class of students. They enthusiastically grasped the concept and were excited about the far reaching implications such a simple and straightforward "calling" could have. The phrase: "Reflect God: we don't need more; we can't have less" became a kind of motto for the group. When they later designed a class sweatshirt they included the motto, but with an added touch of humor: "Reflect God ... more or less." I love students' humor and satire; it makes teaching pure fun. Paul's truth had penetrated their hearts and thinking. It is a simple truth, but it is profound and foundational. For the church, and the Christian to be what God has in mind, we must begin with the foundational, simple truths. The simple truth in chapter one of Ephesians is that Christians and the church are called to do one thing. We are called to reflect God. No more, no less. This is the foun-
Our Calling and Our Recent History

Over the last two generations (at least) movements have arisen within the church to breathe new life into it. In the 1970s it was the “bus ministry,” busing children to Sunday School from all over town. The idea was that if the children became involved, their parents would follow. Some churches mushroomed from a few hundred to thousands in attendance. Then there was the “mega-church” concept as seen in Robert Schuller’s “Crystal Cathedral.” It began by holding services in a local Drive-In theater so people would feel anonymous and unthreatened. The goal was to make the gospel more accessible to those who were not comfortable going into a church building, or initially going “public” with their needs. The idea succeeded and the numbers increased. Once the size grew, a certain anonymity could be had in a building because the crowd was large enough. Again, attendance grew to the thousands. It was creative and novel. Others tried it, with varying degrees of success.18

D. James Kennedy’s “Evangelism Explosion” approached the problem of church growth by going into the community with a singular and very clear focus based on a question: do people “know,” right now, where they will spend eternity? Teams went out weekly in groups of two to visit people, ask the question and then guide them to the way of conversion and assurance. Converts were often enthusiastic enough that they would be trained and join the corps of evangelistic visitors. Many churches “exploded” with new members.

Then there came the “seeker friendly” churches, whose approach was to make the gospel both relevant and friendly to people who had either tried church and were dissatisfied or had never darkened the door of a church. Learning from the entertainment industry, seeker friendly churches made everything in the service conform to the laws of relevance, attention span and professionalism. Again, their growth has been remarkable.

Most recently the “emergent church” movement has been gaining attention. Responding to cultural dissatisfaction with the traditional church, the emphasis is on relevance to the “modern culture through creative worship and the re-examination of theology.”19 “Emerging” churches are finding relevance to the present culture by responding to the perceived needs of that culture. Programs and styles of worship are designed to either answer the objections that contemporary persons have about their previous church experience, or to respond to their spiritual quest in ways that the traditional church might not.

Are those programs or approaches “wrong?” Of course, not. The goals are admirable and the programs “work.” But the deeper question still must be asked. Is the program, even in its uniqueness and its ability to reach a particular segment of society the real foundation? Or, is its strength also its weakness? Will the present solution simply become another approach that will ultimately
become irrelevant to the culture at large? Will it be continued merely because it becomes part of the institution and therefore has a life of its own?

Were we to focus on Paul's foundational calling, I believe we would find greater longevity and ever increasing flexibility in our programs and approaches. "Reflecting God" becomes a lifestyle and an awareness rather than a program. Programs and creative ideas will certainly grow out of such awareness, but if the calling is kept in focus the danger of becoming sidetracked, institutionalized and irrelevant (such a bad word in church growth circles) is greatly reduced, or even contradictory. The practice of reflecting God to others and to society and the world will never become old or irrelevant because it responds to genuine human situations, not temporary fads. Just as eating or providing food will never become irrelevant, so reflecting God will not either. Creating light is God's work; reflecting that light is our work. The church is called to reflect God. No more. No less.

Questions for Reflection

And now to the practical: As I have thought about Paul's description of our calling, how clear and straightforward it is, I've tried to explore practical ways to learn how to do it. One of the ways I can learn how to reflect God is by examining the times and experiences when God has been reflected to me and when that has happened through me. The following questions have been helpful in beginning the process.

For individuals:

1. What is a specific experience when I sensed God being reflected by others?
2. What were the dynamics of that interaction?
3. Was the person aware of reflecting God, or did it seem to happen more subtly and spontaneously?
4. What specific things did that person do that touched me so unusually?
5. Can I think of times when a person was so intent on reflecting God that it subverted the experience?
6. Can I think of times when I sensed that I reflected God to others?
7. What were the specific actions and dynamics that facilitated it?
8. What are some behaviors that I do as a Christian that, even though not bad or wrong, do not actually relate to this goal?

For the church:

1. What does it mean for a group, the local church to reflect God?
2. What are some things that churches have done that fulfill this goal?
3. What are some things that churches have done that work against this goal?
4. What are some things that churches have done that, while not subverting this goal, do not really fulfill it?
5. What might the church do intentionally to reflect God to individuals?
6. What might the church do intentionally to reflect God to society?

Understanding that in all I do I am to reflect God and in all the church does we are to reflect God, I (we) desire to learn what that actually means in day-to-day living and to do it.

Unrealistic Expectations?

Is such living possible, or is it an unrealistic expectation? Alone and in mere human strength it is too lofty a goal. However, if we understand Paul's initial greeting as more than a formal "hello," he guides us to the resource that makes us capable of reflecting God. After identifying himself as the writer, and the people he is writing to, Paul's first word is "grace." "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." That is significant. It is also Paul's last word to the churches: "Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love." (Eph. 6:24) This is Paul's pattern in all of his letters.21

Perhaps the last thing, the most important thing Paul wanted them to remember was God's grace. Alone, we are incapable. But, by God's grace, God's freely extending God's own strength to us, we are able to fulfill our calling.22 Note Paul's confidence in the closing verses of chapter 3. This familiar "benediction" is even more powerful when seen in light of our calling to reflect God: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory [ah, the reflecting of God] in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." (Eph. 3:20-21)

Paul's word to the church and to every Christian is clear. Our calling is to live to the praise of God's glory. We are called to reflect God to others and to our world. God empowers us to do it.

That is our calling. Let us live worthy of it.

Notes

1 Edith Wharton, 1862-1937, US Novelist; Vesalius In Zante, poem written in 1902.
3 Barclay, 83.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 63.
9 Ibid. Buechner ends his sentence with “just as holiness is the inward.”
10 The Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
11 In the context of Moses' radiant, or "shining" face, and the overall Pauline calling to reflect God, it is interesting to see the parallel theme in the term given to Quakers as "children of light."
14 Buechner, 82.
15 Bruce Shelley quotes a contemporary account of the crusaders' capturing Jerusalem: “Some of our men ... cut off the heads of their enemies; others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers; others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. ... It was necessary to pick one’s way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the Temple of Solomon (where) ... men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies.' At nightfall the crusaders' hands were still bloody when they folded them in prayer and knelt at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, 'sobbing for excess of joy.'” *Church History in Plain Language*, Bruce L. Shelley, Word Publishing, Dallas, 1995, 189.
16 For an insightful article that analyzes a contemporary example of literature see “The Enemy Church, Pullman’s Agenda in ‘Compass’ and Beyond,” *The Christian Century*, January 15, 2008. Professors Higgins and Johnson demonstrate that author Philip Pullman (*His Dark Materials*, the fantasy trilogy that includes *The Golden Compass*) portrays a “reductive” Christianity that is “reminiscent of the Inquisition,” rather than Biblical Christianity and the true God of scripture. This is another example of when the church does not reflect God, such an image remains in society's memory. It calls the church to live up to its true calling.
18 Dale Galloway followed Schuller’s example in Portland, Oregon in the 1970s, and had similar results with the building of the New Hope mega church.
20 I first heard the phrase, “Creating light is God's work” in the homily at President Ronald Reagan's funeral, delivered by former Senator John Danforth. My immediate response, when I heard it, was, “yes, and reflecting that light is our work.”
21 This is also Paul's consistent theme. Every letter of Paul, except Romans, ends with the reminder or blessing of God’s grace. It is always the last verse, except for 1 Corinthians, where it is the penultimate verse. Even in Romans it is sprinkled in the last two chapters, just not the last verse.
22 John Wesley was a strong proponent of God's grace as that which not only forgives us, but restores us to God's image, with new abilities to fulfill His plans for us. A nice couplet says it creatively: God loves us just the way we are, but God loves us too much to let us stay that way. For a more thorough discussion of Wesley's view of how God actually transforms us, see my *Social Justice Through the Eyes of Wesley*, 115 – 118, (Joshua Press, 2006) and "Transformative Dimensions within Wesley's Understanding of Christian Perfection," *The Asbury Theological Journal*, Vol. 59, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 117-126.