

The *Be* and *Do* of Following Christ

Student's Name

BIB 100: Destiny and Calling

Dr. Steven Crowther

January 21, 2020

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Introduction

Many American Christians bring a ‘self-help’ mentality to their relationship with God. People often (mis)understand words like destiny, purpose, and calling to mean a ministry role at a local church or on the mission field. To make matters worse, the process of growth seems simple: envision an ideal outcome and take action to get there. The problem with this kind of thinking is that Christians do not save themselves, and their efforts to better themselves usually end in frustration. In Chapter 4 of Ephesians, starting in verse 17, Paul begins to lay out for his readers a new way of living. He tells them to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.”¹ Those who do not follow Christ “have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”² Paul wants Christians to live in a completely different way than those who do not know Jesus. He wants them to “lay aside the old self” and “put on the new self.”³

The starting point for growth needs to be re-examined. Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commandment before the Great Commission. Mark 12:30 states, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”⁴ This paper will make the case that there are things believers are called to *be* and things they are called to *do*. Before considering the second category, including ministry roles, it is helpful to look at the first.

1. Ephesians 4:17, English Standard Version.

2. Ephesians 4:19.

3. Ephesians 4:22-24, New American Standard Bible.

4. English Standard Version.

The Call to Be

The late Eugene Peterson noted that “the Christian life is going to God.”⁵ This is how one’s earthly pursuit of Christ starts, and this is how it will end. When a person recognizes their condition as a sinner and receives Christ’s free gift of eternal life, their relationship with the Father is restored. The Holy Spirit takes up residence within them and helps them become more like Jesus each day. It is trendy to talk about selflessness, but the believer’s aim is Christlikeness.

If the focus shifts to the Great Commission at the expense of the Great Commandment, Christians can easily become task-oriented and miss the heart of their calling as children of God. Paul said this well, “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”⁶ Dallas Willard’s words frame the issue well, “Spiritual formation in Christ is the process by which one moves and is moved from self-worship to Christ-centered self-denial as a general condition of life in God’s present and eternal kingdom.”⁷ The moment a person is saved, they are seen as righteous in God’s eyes. Christ purchased redemption from sin and gave his people a right standing with the Father. According to Romans 8:15, believers have received the Spirit of adoption as sons by whom they cry “Abba! Father!” The central aspect of a Christian’s calling is to fully walk in this kind of relationship, with a constant prayer connection and heartfelt devotion to God’s word.

There are unchangeable natural characteristics of a person that must also be taken into account. People do not choose their personality type, birth year, birthplace, parents, siblings (or lack of them), hair color, height, or ethnicity. Scripture teaches that God has created people with

5. Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2000), 45.

6. Philippians 3:10.

7. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 10th anniversary ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2012), 77.

these factors (see Acts 17:26). How believers think about themselves is often shaped by the culture around them. If they harbor negative views of how God made them, they are in disagreement with their Creator. Psalm 139:13 states, “you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.” Part of walking out a person’s calling is to be at peace with God’s plan in making them with these unique and unchangeable features.

On the topic of inward parts, a theme of the New Testament is Christlikeness. The term ‘character’ is commonly used to refer to the inward qualities that define how a person behaves. Michael Fletcher gave wise advice: “Value character over anointing and gifting. Anointing can come in a microwave, but character grows in a crock-pot.”⁸ The good news about Christianity is that it is not a self-help program; the Holy Spirit is here to form the character of Christ in his followers. The fruit of the Spirit’s work in a believer’s life is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal. 5:22-23).

Christ-followers are called to be conformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:29). This means fully living as sons and daughters of the Most High. The Holy Spirit is here to guide believers into all truth (John 16:13) as they develop Christ-like character. This leads to the question of what believers are called to do.

The Call to Do

The *be* and *do* of a Christian’s calling are inseparable. Said another way, what a believer does flows out of who he or she is. A point stressed in the Reformation is known as the priesthood of the believer. The church had grown to be clergy-centric in its practices (trained professionals do the ministry), so much so that it was scandalous to suggest that believers have a

8. Michael Fletcher, *Empowering Leadership: How a Leadership Culture Builds Better Leaders Faster* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2018), 89.

Bible of their own and in their own language. While modern Christians may think they have learned this lesson, it seems that a second look is needed.

The phrase ‘called to ministry’ often paints a picture of a person on the stage with a title. Certainly, God has appointed apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers (Eph. 4:11). The next verses explain why these gifts have been given to the church. The function of these giftings is to equip the saints for ministry, to build up the body of Christ toward maturity.

Some Christ-followers are called to serve in full-time vocational ministry to equip the saints. All are called to minister in other ways. Martin Luther King, Jr., is attributed with a quote that strikes to the heart of this issue, “What I’m saying to you this morning, my friends, even if it falls your lot to be a street sweeper, go on out and sweep streets like Michelangelo painted pictures; sweep streets like Handel and Beethoven composed music; sweep streets like Shakespeare wrote poetry; (Go ahead) sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who swept his job well.’”⁹ When a person is gripped by the realization of who they are in Christ, whatever they do can be done “as for the Lord and not for men.”¹⁰ The priesthood of the believer tells us that any work a Christian does is of value for the kingdom of God.

A Christian’s present vocation presents many opportunities to form Christ-like character. Ephesians 6:7 instructs Christ-followers on the job to render “service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.” A believer may have the worst boss ever or disagreeable co-workers, but

9. Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,” speech given at New Covenant Baptist Church in Chicago, IL, on April 9, 1967, as quoted by Erik Erickson, *RedState.com/Salem Media*, last modified August 27, 2013, <https://www.redstate.com/erick/2013/08/27/the-street-sweeper/>.

10. Colossians 3:23.

their diligence and good attitude will stand out. At the end of that chapter, Paul also gives a call to pray (even for those disagreeable people).

The Bible has quite a few other *do* statements. Christ-followers are called to be subject to earthly authorities and pray for them (Rom. 13:1, 1 Tim. 2:2), and love their neighbor as themselves (Mt. 22:39); husbands are called to love their wives like Christ loves the church (Eph. 5:25); wives are called to submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22); children are called to honor their father and mother (Ex. 20:12); the unmarried are called to please the Lord in body and spirit (1 Cor. 7:32-34). The believer's calling is counter-cultural in many respects and requires the grace of God through the present work of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to helping believers carry out these roles, the Holy Spirit also gives spiritual gifts to Christ-followers (see Rom. 12 & 1 Cor. 12). Michael Horvath defined spiritual gifts as “either new abilities, or newly-augmented natural abilities, that are given to individuals after they become Christians. This is in contrast to natural abilities, which are characteristics possessed by all individuals.”¹¹ Though spiritual gifts are life-giving to those who operate in them, these are for a purpose: the building up of Christ's body. By using these gifts wisely and with the right motives, believers get to play a part in Jesus' plan to build his church. Along with operating in their spiritual gifts, a believer may still wonder if they are called to full-time vocational ministry. If so, how can they know? The final section will give attention to that topic.

Linked Together for the Journey

It may be cliché, but there is much wisdom in the saying: “Don't assign yourself a title. Let the body recognize a gift that is in you.” It is assumed that a person is actively serving in

11. Michael Horvath, “Spiritual Gifts Inventories: A Psychometric Perspective,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*; Batavia 32, iss. 2, (Summer 2013): 125, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1437251886/fulltextPDF/158740A766EF47F3PQ/2?accountid=36664>.

their local church. There are two aspects to consider: service and others. The formation of a person's calling, or discipleship, does not happen on an individual level alone, but in community with other Christ-followers. Believers have a responsibility to engage in the process by finding ways to serve others. This presents opportunities for them to 'try out' their spiritual gifts and discover how their God-given qualities can be a benefit to those they encounter.

For example, when a complaint arose about the distribution of food among the early church in Jerusalem, the apostles' response is instructive. They summoned the disciples and asked them to pick out seven men of good repute (another way to say character), full of the Spirit and wisdom, to be appointed to the duty (see Acts 6). When it came time to pick these seven, it seems that a few stood out. The point is that when Christians engage in the process of *being* and *doing*, others will recognize the growth.

Finally, it is wise for believers to engage in the power of mentoring. That term carries many meanings, so it is important to define it in a biblical context. A mentor is someone who has godly wisdom from years of walking with Christ, a person to be vulnerable with about one's shortcomings, who believes more for one than they do and loves him or her enough to tell them the truth. The words of the late Eugene Peterson elegantly capture this idea:

When mountain climbers are in dangerous terrain, on the face of a cliff or the slopes of a glacier, they rope themselves together. Sometimes one of them slips and falls – backslides. But not everyone falls at once, and so those who are still on their feet are able to keep the backslider from falling away completely. And of course, in any group of climbers there is a veteran climber in the lead, identified for us in the letter to the Hebrews as 'Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in' (Heb. 12:2).¹²

Believers are not alone in this journey of following Christ. God has given faithful fellow travelers to help them along the way. As they connect to one another for healthy growth, they

12. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, 91.

experience Jesus' wisdom and care along the path. If a believer's list of available mentors is short, a good recommendation would be to make this topic a regular prayer request.

For those who sense a call to full-time vocational ministry, formal academic training is a great idea to become fully prepared for that role. Regardless of gifting, every believer has a calling to lead in their present contexts – to minister to those in their spheres of influence. The *be* helps Christ-followers *do*. The Lord's grace is with his people as they pursue their callings and help others in their journey toward Christlikeness.

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