

BECAUSE I WAS CALLED . . .

Charles W. Allen

*Affiliate Professor of Theology
Christian Theological Seminary*

Last week, David Bundy promised that I would be talking about my own pilgrimage of faith. Many of you know that I loathe the phrase, “faith journey,” so I won’t call it that, but you can if that phrase doesn’t yet make you retch. I am going to talk about my “faith journey.” But I aim to talk about a lot more than that. It’s not all about me, much as I am tempted to make it so. It’s about all of us, and all of us includes you, and even more importantly, God. So this is not going to be a full-fledged autobiography. Instead, all I can offer are some revealing snapshots – a few glimpses through some knotholes – and hope to shed some light on how all our lives intersect in the communion of God’s Spirit in Jesus Christ.

Let’s start by solving one mystery. You’ve been given half the title for this Knothole Lecture, and you were promised last week that I would give you the second half today. There’s no better way to finish the title than to read the passage where it occurs in Will Campbell’s autobiography, *Brother to a Dragonfly*.

Thad Garner was, I suppose, the most profane man I have ever met. And, I suppose, in a way he was also the most profound. Whatever he was, he made a deep impression on me at the time. He was a preacher in Louisiana, down the road from where I was a preacher. He had been there for a long time when I got to Taylor and he sort of took me under his wing.

Both of us were Southern Baptist preachers. When we first met it seemed easy for me to think of him as a Southern Baptist preacher. He was older than I, had a much larger church, held lots of revival or protracted meetings, was popular with the young people, played a small harmonica in his nose while playing a larger one in his mouth at the same time, played golf and was an ardent hunter, was Chaplain of the Volunteer Fire Department, had been a professional boxer, had been to the Holy Land, attended the Baptist Seminary in Louisville as well as two years at Yale, and had recently hosted the state annual meeting of the WCTU.

I did not do any of those things and was just out of a liberal Yankee divinity school. Not only was I younger than Thad, I wore white buck shoes and a tweed cap – even in hot Louisiana summers – smoked a calabash pipe, committed sermons to manuscript, had never held a revival meeting, conducted a building campaign, spoken to a Sweetheart banquet. I had not been to the seminary in Louisville, a sort of union card in those days, and did not even have a map of the Holy Land.

Then I discovered that Thad had once worn white bucks and a tweed cap, still smoked a pipe, conducted revival meetings for the money, had gone to the Holy Land only because his congregation had lifted a surprise love offering for that purpose, and had bought the set of color slides he showed to youth groups in the Tel Aviv airport, really disliked teenagers, drank a lot of wine . . . and cussed a lot.

Learning those things made it easy for me to think of myself as a Southern Baptist preacher and increasingly difficult to think of Thad as one. I believed some rather definite things about the Faith while Thad would not admit to believing anything. Yet somehow you did not get the feeling that you were in the presence of a fraudulent or deceitful person. You didn't think of Elmer Gantry . . .

There was just a fascination that you had not met anyone quite like this before.

Sometimes I would go hunting or fishing with him. I was not really a hunter but he taught me how to shoot and how to avoid copperheads and quicksand, and he would compare both these enemies to various aspects of the pastorate.

On one occasion we were about to conclude an all day and totally unproductive bird hunt. The dogs had pointed at everything from rabbits to starlings but not one quail had been flushed. Thad had excused them by saying the weather was too dry, and he had maligned them as stupid, useless mutts. He had pampered and cajoled them, and he had dragged one of them across a barbed wire fence by the tail as punishment for pointing a brown thrasher. Now the three of them were frozen in a hard point position at what was sure to be the biggest covey of quail in the parish. At least that was what Thad allowed. And when the flush signal was given, that proved to be the case. Even when I am expecting it, even when I have seen the movement of the little critters through the underbrush, I am always startled by the sudden fluttering of quail wings, lifting their fat bellies like giant bumble bees from the earth and away from their pursuer. Consequently I seldom got a shot before they were well out of range. This time Thad got off three quick shots, each BOOM! blending with and echoing the last. As his last shot was dying away I jerked the trigger and waited for the jolt against my shoulder and the ringing in my ears. But nothing happened. The thing was not even loaded. Despite the three volleys in such rapid succession nothing lay dead for the dogs to retrieve. Thad had missed as surely as I had with my empty gun . . . Though I had not led what one would call a sheltered existence during my life, and my own language did not always measure up to garden party standards, I was not familiar with some of Thad's words. For a full sixty seconds the big Louisiana field was filled with his expletives. At the dogs, and the birds, at me, at the gun, at

the manufacturer of the shells, at the Almighty – all were profaned and reviled because of this misfortune. When he had quieted down he sank backward onto an eroded levee. I sat on the ground not far away. It was an occasion for a question I had wanted to ask him for some time.

“Thad, why did you ever decide to be a Baptist preacher?” He looked puzzled and not just a little hurt. He pondered my question for a long time, sighting and squinting down the barrel of his shotgun. Finally he looked me straight in the eye and answered my question: “Cause I was *called*, you goddam fool!”¹

So now you know the full title: “Cause I was *called*, you goddam fool.” I assume you can understand why David and I thought it better not to print the whole thing on any public postings. But I hope you can also appreciate how rich a statement it is, appearing at that point in this story. And I hope it will come to mind at those low moments *you* will face when you wonder if your life, your vocation, makes any sense at all. Try repeating it then: “Cause I was *called*, you goddam fool.” And know that, because the gospel is true, you have been called, and are still being called, no matter how much you keep confusing God’s calling with your own pet agendas. Just look at all the good company you’re in.

“Cause I was *called*, you goddam fool.” There have been times when that stubborn, brutally honest way of putting it was practically all that got me through. I think I’ve had more than my fair share of good reasons to do something else with my life besides what I’m doing now. And I *would* be doing something else if I could ever have shaken off the conviction that I had been called to do something very much like what I have wound up doing: celebrating the truth of the gospel in just about as peculiar fashion as I might ever have imagined.

There are some interesting circumstances surrounding this story I’ve just read, how it came to me, and the memorable times

¹Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), pp. 171-173.

when I've shared it with others. Some of you on the faculty remember my reading this as one of our devotions at the Faculty Retreat ten years ago. It made quite an impression on Clark Williamson, I remember, and not just because of its profanity, though one thing Clark and I both delight in, maybe a little too much, is finding startling ways to mix the sacred and the profane. I also remember sharing this story with my older brother on, of all days, the day of my wedding, and how touched I was that he liked it enough to ask for a copy of the book.

The marriage, by the way, was to Pam Payne, whom I met at the same Southern Baptist seminary Thad Garner attended, who later earned her M.Div. from here, *summa cum laude*, and who had better be completing her Ph.D. in theology at Vanderbilt even as we speak. Her topic is "A Post-Holocaust Feminist Christology," which we have agreed ought to carry the subtitle, "Anything You Say Might Tick Me Off."

Now of course mentioning Pam, and the fact that she lives in Tennessee, already gives some of you an idea of how peculiar things can get, because obviously our marriage did not last. Yet our friendship did and does. Marrying Pam, we both believed, was supposed to be a crucial step in what people would now call my "reparative therapy." That was by no means our only reason. We really did love each other, and we both wanted a family. Still, a fringe benefit of getting married was that it was supposed to help free me from those forbidden desires that I had always considered a barrier to my vocation – the same desires that I *and* Pam now affirm as *part* of my vocation in my work on a theology for the welcoming church.

But wait, it gets even stranger. I had first confessed those desires in 1971 to my pastor and mentor, Paige Patterson, not long after I had told him that I believed myself called to become a theologian – yes, that's right, a theologian, and maybe a pastor too along the way, but ultimately a theologian. After that confession I believed myself miraculously cured. And I became so intensely loyal to Paige that I tried my best for several years to shake off the liberal, religiously tolerant upbringing of my family and become as strictly conservative as he was (at least theologically – I always remained a

liberal Democrat politically). I actually got to the point where I refused to take communion with other Christians who had not been baptized the right way, and I wasn't quite sure if those other Christians were really Christians at all. I was such a tiresome prig! That phase didn't last too long, and fortunately Paige left our church before I did.

Now I brought Paige into the picture here because he went on to achieve a certain notoriety. The year of my wedding, Paige launched an ultimately successful campaign to take over the Southern Baptist Convention and purge its seminaries of its best minds, since they were all too liberal for him. And this year, as I begin to teach a welcoming theology, Paige got elected president of the Convention, and he and his wife Dorothy managed to pass that infamous amendment to the denomination's doctrinal statement – you know, the one about wives graciously submitting to their husbands. Imagine what he and Dorothy must think of the likes of me, and the kind of seminary that would employ me! And yet there was a brief time when I would have shared his judgment on both counts.

By the way, I can't resist this aside. I hold before you an important theological work by Dorothy, entitled *The Sensuous Woman Reborn*. I'm particularly struck by the description on the back – I'm not making this up, either: "Dot Patterson has many labels . . . While Dr. Patterson pastored in Arkansas, Mrs. Patterson hosted her own television show, taught public seminars in womanhood, and [pay attention here] *annually entertained the University of Arkansas Razorback football team in her home.*"² Now is it just me, or does that last phrase conjure up a different picture in your mind from the one the publisher intended? And these days, mentioning Arkansas only makes it worse. It certainly gives "gracious submission" a whole new meaning.

Now, back to Will Campbell. Here's another ironic twist that connects his story to mine. Look at the inscription inside: it reads, "To Charles and Pam with best wishes – M. Soards." It was a wedding present from Marion Soards – his friends call him Marty –

²Dorothy Patterson, *The Sensuous Woman Reborn* (Dallas: Crescendo Publications, Inc., 1976), back cover, emphasis added.

who now edits that *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* series and teaches New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. More recently, he's written *Scripture and Homosexuality*,³ a book defending the Presbyterian party line: gays and lesbians are welcome, sort of, in the way that alcoholics are. To be ordained they must agree that their *kind* of desire for intimate, self-giving union with another is against God's calling, and therefore something they can never pursue as *part* of God's calling no matter how unselfishly they might want to pursue it. So a book that still sustains me in my calling was originally a present – a wedding present, no less – from a friend who cannot in good conscience approve of the way I understand my vocation today, a friend who probably agrees with me on most other issues, but not this one, which for me, I'm afraid, can never be an incidental issue when I consider my calling.

Are you tracking all this so far? I'm utterly fascinated by all the intersections here. How the story lines involving Thad Garner, Pam, Paige and Dorothy, Marty, and CTS keep weaving together with and apart from mine. They don't appear to follow any prearranged plan – I'm too influenced by Whitehead, and maybe even the Bible, to think that they would – but I wouldn't exactly call them haphazard either. They remind me of Frederick Buechner's remarks from *The Alphabet of Grace*. The events of our lives, he said, are something like an alphabet. To be more specific, though, "the alphabet is finally the Hebrew alphabet. There are nothing but consonants, and it is left to the faithful to fill in the vowels with faith."⁴ Of course, even that analogy is too cut and dried, as if we could ever say exactly where the events themselves – the consonants – end and our interpretations – the vowels – begin. (But Gerry Janzen said last week that it's not a good analogy if it doesn't break down, didn't he?)

Of course, the question needs to be asked: if the faithful fill in the vowels with faith, why shouldn't the doubtful do the same with doubt? And indeed, wouldn't that be the easiest way to make sense

³Marion L. Soards, *Scripture and Homosexuality: Biblical Authority and the Church Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

⁴Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), p. 101.

of all this? Here are all these people I've mentioned – Thad, Pam, Paige and Dorothy, Marty, and yours truly – convinced that they are pursuing genuine callings, and yet each convinced that at least a few of the others are wrong. Each can give you more reasons for his or her position than you might ever have imagined. None can give you enough reasons to compel your assent. Or just look at how many times I've wound up having to redefine the very terms in which I have understood my own calling, practically reversing my stand in places I had once thought immovable. Surely the safest conclusion is that nobody here has any real knowledge of anything, at least not anything ultimate; that each of us has done nothing but make a god out of our own pet agendas.

That option does have its appeal. And most of my professional life has been spent listening carefully to the people who claim to live by such blanket suspicions, the likes of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – you always have to mention these guys – or the likes of Antony Flew and A. J. Ayer. There is something heroic and admirable about the stands they take. Listen for a moment to the haunting prose of Bertrand Russell's "A Free Man's Worship."

Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow fall, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.⁵

⁵Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), pp. 115-116.

A little over-dramatic, perhaps, recalling those bygone days of great oratory. But I don't know how anyone can read or listen to these words and not be moved to admire the courage and defiance they express.

But for all that I've listened to suspicious voices like these, I've finally realized that I'm never going to be one of them myself. I can't completely explain why. Any reasons I might give you could all be made to look like mere wish fulfillment. So I find myself driven to say in a stubborn voice like Thad Garner's, "'Cause I was *called*, you goddam fool." That too has its own kind of courage and defiance.

Interestingly, I think most of what I learned from my years at the University of Chicago was a more academic terminology for saying pretty much the same thing. I first learned that oft-misused phrase, "hermeneutics of suspicion," from David Tracy and Paul Ricoeur. (Ricoeur actually invented it.) But I also learned from them to regard all suspicions as pointless if not rooted in a more pervasive, if elusive, trust that we have gotten at least some things fundamentally right in our efforts to understand ourselves and those around us. That's no guarantee that we won't be surprised, sometimes agonizingly, by new and compelling insights. But it reminds us that we have nothing better to do in the meantime than to keep living by the truths that claim us most radically here and now. And it assures us that, no matter how much we change, our pasts will always be worth reviving in new, if eccentric and broken, renditions. Put more biblically, we are summoned to find ourselves by losing ourselves, trusting that what we find will prove worth the effort in ways we now can scarcely imagine.

Here's something *I* could scarcely have imagined. I've spoken to some of you about the fact that ever since I came out in order to pursue a theology for the welcoming church I've observed an interesting dynamic at work. I've been getting religion. For the first time in over twenty years I have found myself actually *wanting* to cultivate specific practices of spirituality, for the most part those related to observing the Anglican tradition's Daily Office: reading scripture daily, praying regularly and at length. Suddenly these

practices became vital to me, not just as a Christian, but as a Christian theologian. And along with that has come a newfound inclination to say more directly what I believe the gospel to be and how I find the God it heralds at work among us all. I seem to have rediscovered a sense of vocation. It never completely died out, but it hasn't been so vivid in years. I have no hesitation in saying that right now, standing here, I'm doing what I've always most wanted to do and what I've always been summoned to do: celebrating the truth of the gospel as only *I* can.

And by the way, in case you're wondering what that gospel is, I'll tell you. Listen:

In eccentricity and brokenness,
the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ
embraces each and every one of us just as we are
and draws us to embody that communion for all others,
now and always.

I start all my courses now with this rendition of the gospel, and then I have the audacity to say of it something like the following:

This gospel is true. It has to be true, because if not I would no longer be sure what "true" means. And if I don't emphasize its truth at the outset, my love for and attention to perplexing questions, my propensity to pile on nuance and qualification, may give the impression that I am not already rooted in and by certain convictions. Yet it is precisely because the gospel is true that I am free to love questions as much as answers, to expect people of differing convictions to be able to teach me as much as I can teach them, to resist people who think that the certainty of their convictions entitles them to silence or belittle dissenting voices. Oddly enough, I have never known a better reason for celebrating diversity (while standing for justice) than the truth of the gospel.

I never would have imagined starting a course this way before now. But I do. And I do it because I was *called* to do it (etc., etc.).

Maybe you've already gotten the point, but let me make sure. This is not a privileged claim that I now possess a special *gnosis* that you don't have, that I'm somehow better at hearing God's summons than you are. It's not a trump card that I can use to silence my critics. It's an invitation to all of us to stay engaged in conversation. And by conversation I don't mean polite chattering. I mean speaking passionately with and to one another about things that matter most. And I invite you to see in just such a frank conversation, a conversation willing to risk hurt feelings for the sake of truth, an eccentric and broken conversation, nothing less than an embodiment of the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, in all *its* eccentricity and brokenness.

So yes, I do know that I was indeed called and am still called, but the truth that now claims me even more stubbornly is the sense that all of us are called, called distinctly, singularly, but not separately; called to make the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ more evident even in our sharpest disagreements; called to find ourselves welcomed into communion even, or maybe especially, in the profanity of Thad Garner's strangely sacramental response: "Cause I was *called*, you goddam fool."

