

Interview with Os Guinness on Calling

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Mars Hill Forum- www.marshillforum.org



Mars Hill Review: You have been known for your insightful critiques of culture and trends. Now you seem to be pursuing a new direction, with your upcoming book on vocation.

Os Guinness: I think it is one of the most important books I've undertaken. The subject of vocation has been deeply important for me over the past thirty years. And it's nice to be able to turn toward something constructive-not just an analysis of culture, but something that's a statement of the central truth of the gospel.

When I came to Christ in the early sixties, the central search for me-second only to the joy of knowing Christ-concerned my sense of sorrow at how marginal and pathetic much faith is in the modern world. Part of my response to that has been to look back at times in the past when faith has been dynamic and very powerful, and to examine the truths that made it so.

Two or three truths always emerged at the top of the list. One was calling. When you think of many of the great leaps forward-such as the constitution of the Jewish people, the Christian movement in Galilee, the contribution of faith to the rise of the modern world, or the Puritan movement-calling has always been central.

I deeply believe that in times of chaos and confusion about the notion of calling, a recovery of a scripturally based idea of the subject provides a major step toward recovery of Christian integrity and effectiveness.

MHR: What is the confusion?

OG: On one side is a spiritual distortion. Often, calling is equated only with kindness. Such Christians say, "God called me here or there." But what they really mean is, "He guided me." Yet that is only a minimal part of what calling truly is.

On the other side, calling has been equated merely with occupation or work. That is purely a secularization. And behind it you can see two enormous distortions over two thousand years.

The first distortion I describe as the "Catholic distortion." This creates a higher-lower, sacred-secular divide, which goes all the way back to people like Eusebius. He spoke of the Christian life in terms of two types of believers, "perfect" and "permitted." The perfect included monks, nuns, and priests-people who "had a calling." The permitted were soldiers, farmers, businesspeople-those who "just had jobs."

That represents a kind of spiritual aristocracy of the soul. I'm afraid Augustine, Aquinas, and many of the great names of the west followed this line of thinking. And, oddly enough, the

Catholic distortion is still very much alive and well-in evangelical circles! Phrases such as "full-time Christian service" are commonly heard.

The other distortion is what I call the "Protestant distortion." This distortion is opposed to spiritualizing the concept of calling. There is no question that the genius of the Reformation was in its affirmation of calling as including work too. Yet it has put so much emphasis on work and vocation that one's work, what one does, has become virtually synonymous with one's calling.

At the high point of the Industrial Revolution, work was made sacred-an idea that isn't scriptural at all. (Scripture is much more realistic than that.) And calling was made secular-what one does. This Protestant notion is as much a distortion as the Catholic one, only in the opposite direction.

I have tried to set out a balance of the two. There is a primary call, which is by the Lord, to the Lord, for the Lord. And there is a secondary call, which is what we do as we follow the Lord-meaning, we do everything as unto him. And, of course, the secondary should never become the primary.

MHR: Many people have a crisis in the middle years of life-a crisis of calling, worth, impact. How does the crisis of vocational impact have both a spiritual and psychological dimension?

OG: Many people have a midlife crisis because they choose a career without thinking of calling. Ultimately they become square pegs in a round hole.

The challenge is to have both a rich personal life and a rewarding work life. Often these things seem to combine when we're young. If our job is sufficiently well paid or glamorous or popular, our inner sense of how our giftedness fits the job doesn't really arise. But as we approach our forties or fifties, we begin to hear around the bend in the river the rapids of ancient death-and we realize we want to be doing only those things that are really us. At this point, many of us see that the career we've chosen does not match our giftedness. And we begin to utter phrases such as, "I can't see myself doing this the rest of my life," or, "This job really isn't me."

So, the crisis can be negative. But it can be very positive too, if people use the crisis to discover what they should have done in the first place. They must know their giftedness, know their calling, and then choose their job. If they have chosen their jobs for external reasons, then they are inevitably bound to face that problem. We can't depend on the external rewards, such as pay, success, and celebrity.

MHR: How has the church failed to give people a sense or realization of their giftedness?

OG: Many Christians have fallen into the Catholic distortion, the notion of "spiritual as higher." They are all out for Christ, the ministry, evangelism, the mission field. And that leaves the rest of us on the hook. That is one problem.

But a lot of people, without realizing it, fall into the secular trap by merely looking around for the best career. Yet there are spiritualized versions of this as well, such as "strategic careers or callings"-as if we could decide! This is an absurd notion, because it is the Lord who gives the gift. Should we say in a particular age, "Let's all go into law, or to the inner city, or the mission field"? That is ridiculous. We should each always say, "Who has made me, what are my gifts, and which way should I go?"

There are all sorts of formidably bad teaching swirling around, which prevent people from truly tangling with the question of, "What is my gift and calling?" Some megachurches have developed new strategies for people to "discover" their calling. Yet, most of this is presented in the service of discovering spiritual gifts. The effect is that once people discover their spiritual gifts, presto! the church puts them to work in the church-or, more accurately, merely employs them.

The real challenge is to discover not just our spiritual gifts but our natural gifts. The church should be releasing people to be free to do the things they are cut out to do by the Lord.

MHR: What is the distinction between the spiritual gifts and the natural gifts?

OG: Most of the spiritual gifts of the New Testament are to be employed for the ministry of the members of the body of Christ. It doesn't tell us what to do with most of the rest of our life.

I once went to a church in Washington D.C. that was holding a "Recognition of Calling" Sunday. I thought it would be terrific service, because I had never heard calling taught well in any American church. The pastor said, "When I mention your calling, stand up, and at the end of the service I will pray for you."

As it turned out, all the callings he mentioned were church-oriented. Now, this was a church where some of the best-known television personalities in D.C. attended-and there was nothing mentioned that gave them any reason to stand. All the people who were less well-known were standing, simply because they were doing something in the church. And some of the most interesting people in Washington were sitting on their hands. The whole reason was this flaw in theology.

MHR: Is the flaw you're talking about what may be called "being in service to the church"?

OG: Exactly. The church should be discovering people's giftedness and calling. And it should be releasing and empowering people to do and be those things in a secular world.

MHR: It sounds like the church is being discriminatory, in that sense.

OG: Yes, unwittingly.

MHR: What aspects of our culture enhance that dichotomy?

OG: I think of a great irony in terms of Protestants and Catholics. First, the present Pope is closer to Martin Luther and the Reformation than most Protestants are. And, second, many Protestants are closer to the Catholic position that Martin Luther rejected than many Catholics are. In other words, Catholics have a healthier sense of God's calling-including work-than Protestants do.

There are many such ironies. Calling is probably the truth of the gospel that, more than any other, has shaped the United States. An idea like "manifest destiny" is a nationalized distortion of calling, in an egotistic direction. (The Puritans wouldn't have believed that concept; it's purely a nineteenth-century invention.) Likewise, the "American dream" is an economic distortion of calling.

There is no question that calling put its stamp on the United States and provided a tremendous sense of American dynamism, descending as it did from the Puritans. And yet, despite that, the community that brought it in, the Protestants, have almost lost it. Catholics sometimes teach it much more clearly than Protestants do.

Intriguingly, many atheists and new agers use the word "calling" as an attempt to reintroduce the idea of dignity in work. Even an author as popular as Marilyn Ferguson has a chapter in her book called "Calling and Work." She says that with our crisis of the dignity of work, we must reintroduce the notion of calling. The problem is, she doesn't stop to ask, "What is calling, if there is not a caller?" The same is true of Thomas Moore's work. He uses the word "calling" in a totally new age sense.

So, others are teaching more about calling than Christians are, though they've got the concept all fouled up.

MHR: The new age gives dignity to the banal, mundane tasks of life. Society seems to be moving that way, but the church doesn't.

OG: One of the main features of Puritanism was the dignity of the menial. If you read the early sermons of John Cotton in New England, you get a terrific sense of that.

Hudson Taylor used to say, "A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing." In that sense, we see the holy in the humdrum, the vital in the meaningless-which is a key part of the Puritan definition of calling. George Herbert has a poem about the man who sweeps to the glory of God. So, we must look back to our own Protestant roots, which we've forgotten.

One modern buzzword is "responsibility." We hear it from both the left and the right. The World Council of Churches talks of a "responsible society." And the conservative Newt Gingrich and his group on Capitol Hill have a "Personal Responsibility Act" in their "Contract with America." Everyone is talking about responsibility. And this brings up another irony: With the collapse of all the virtues, two are left-tolerance and responsibility-and responsibility is almost never challenged, even when tolerance is. Yet, before the nineteenth century, responsibility wasn't considered a virtue but, rather, a foundational concept.

Not only has responsibility been made a virtue in itself, but its meaning has shifted. It used to be responsibility to, not for. In a modern sense, we are responsible for our bodies, for the environment. We are responsible for all sorts of things-but never responsible to. Yet responsibility is an absolutely meaningless concept unless we are responsible to. What can we be responsible to? At the end of the day, we are responsible only to society-although we're too individualistic for that; or to God-we're too secular of a society for that.

If you look at responsibility from an historical standpoint, you see it comes from the notion of calling. We are made to be "response-able." We are called to respond. That is where the notion of responsibility comes from. And the word will never mean anything unless it is put back in touch with the roots of that notion.

MHR: Have your writing and thinking shifted from ideas of cultural critique toward more personal expressions of faith?

OG: No. I feel strongly that one part of my calling is to make sense of the gospel to the world. That is the arena of apologetics. Yet I also want to make sense of the world to the church. And that is the discipline of cultural analysis. I have always tried to analyze where we are and then read the signs of the times in biblical terms, for the church's sake.

MHR: L'Abri was a shaping experience for you. Do you believe that experience will continue to inform all that you do?

OG: I owe a great deal to Francis Schaeffer. I don't mean that in terms of the content of ideas, but much more so in terms of the style in which he approached everything.

I realize this is far too simplistic a summary, but you could say that Schaeffer's secret was in the way he had such a passion for God, such a passion for people, and such a passion for truth, all together. He was very close to the Nietzschean aphorism, "All truths are bloody truths to me." Schaeffer took truth and God and people very seriously. I learned that from him.

I also owe my understanding of evil to him. By the end of my time at L'Abri, I realized that people are as affected today by ideas as they are by the shape of our modern society and the way it influences our lifestyle and thinking.

MHR: Your critique of the sixties, *The Dust of Death*, seems to be having a resurgence.

OG: The odd thing about the decade of the sixties is that the farther you get away from it, the more important you realize it was. It was probably the most decisive decade in the twentieth century. For Christians to understand where we are in the nineties, we need to understand the sixties.

MHR: It has become clear through your work with the Trinity Forum that you have a particular desire to reach non-Christians with the gospel. In what context in American society can the gospel be placed so that it's heard?

OG: There has been an incredible vacuum in the American culture. Yet many things are coming together at this moment.

On an international level, a discussion is growing on the comfort of civilizations. There's a growing sense that differences make a difference, rather than the old notion that all roads lead the same way and that all truth is relative. There is a clash between what are Confucian, Asian, Christian, and Muslim ideas, and this clash is becoming vital. People are realizing they don't know their own faith. On a national level, there is a palpable sense that with so many breakdowns—so many areas of American life becoming dysfunctional, and so many crisis situations—there really aren't many answers. Yet the gospel always makes it to the final rounds.

On a personal level, the reigning mood of postmodernism is so radically negative that, first of all, it's not satisfying. You simply can't build a personal philosophy around something that is so negative. And, second, it is inevitably transient. You can't sustain a culture on something that negative. So, there must be an answer beyond that.

When you put all these factors together, you get a very definite openness to searching across the board—whether it's taking place on campuses, among business leaders, or among political leaders. There is a remarkable new openness.

The tragedy is that we have fewer post-Christian rivals to the gospel, and yet we aren't taking advantage of it. Most of the secular alternatives to the gospel are in total disarray. The only dominant ones are negative, and as such they won't survive because they aren't satisfying.

MHR: What do you mean by the "dominant ones are negative"?

OG: I'm referring to postmodernism. And humanism in any sixties sense, in which hardly anyone believes anymore. There are hardly any optimistic, post-Christian answers around. So we have one of the greatest apologetic opportunities we've had for five hundred years.

And yet most churches have lost their hold on apologetics. Many Christians don't even know what the term means. Those who do know what it means usually quarantine it very carefully in the seminaries on the east or west coasts. It never actually gets out to the streets to reach real people. As a result, we're missing one of the major moments of our time.

MHR: What has silenced the church? What keeps us from responding to this opportunity?

OG: There are a great number of factors. Many conservatives have lost their genuine passion to reach outside of themselves. They're now immersed in a political-cultural warring mode, which attacks people rather than tries to win them.

I also think the American church has an underlying insecurity. The larger culture is disintegrating-and yet, rather than having an incredible confidence in the truth of the gospel in a time of cultural disintegration, Christians sense that it's all over for the church and the gospel. There are many other reasons we're not responding to this incredible opportunity we have evangelistically and apologetically. But, in any case, we're not exploiting it.

MHR: You mentioned that some of the grand philosophies are failing, such as postmodernism. Would you say the gospel has relevance only outside of postmodernism, or could it have relevance within as well?

OG: I think the gospel has relevance both outside and inside. Both modernism and postmodernism give tremendous opportunity to the gospel, and both provide deadly challenges to the gospel as well.

Modernism, to its credit, had a very strong sense of truth, and a strong sense of the importance of truth and reason. Modernists may have thought the Christian faith was untrue or simply a bad faith, but at least they would discuss it.

Postmodernism is more welcoming. The postmodern attitude is, "You come from where you come from," so that more positions are level on the playing field. Yet, this perspective is built on a radical relativism that, at the end of the day, destroys everything.

I think a good apologetic based on scripture should be flexible enough and creative enough to survive and thrive in any situation. I don't agree with those who see postmodernism as either radically dangerous in some extraordinarily novel way, or as a great advantage. The important thing is that we must speak from a position of our faith.

MHR: Is postmodernism a primarily American phenomenon?

OG: No, it's prevalent in Europe as well. The really seminal thinkers are Europeans-Jacques Leotarde, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida. They are European intellectuals who have come into vogue in America.

Yet it all flows from Nietzsche. The twentieth century has been described as "a footnote on Friedrich Nietzsche." That is an incredibly accurate description.

MHR: There are many definitions of postmodernism. What is the definition from which you're speaking?

OG: A key to remember is that postmodernism is not postmodernity. Many evangelicals make the mistake of thinking that if we are postmodern-which we are-then we must be living "after modernity."

On the contrary, postmodernism is a set of ideas which follows the collapse of modernism, not modernity. If you define modernism as the ideas that are part of what is sometimes called the Enlightenment project-the ideas that have flourished from the Enlightenment until today-then those ideas have collapsed. Modernity, on the other hand, is not just as a set of ideas, but is based on great structural revolutions, such as capitalism, industrialized technology, and modern telecommunication. And although modernism may have collapsed-the belief in truth, reason, progress, science-modernity is actually at its high noon.

In simple terms, postmodernism is a set of ideas that is flourishing at the high noon of modernity. Yet because many evangelicals have confused modernity and modernism, some think that because we are postmodern we've waved the wand and gotten rid of modernity.

Quite the contrary is true. The challenge of modernity is stronger than ever. There is no foreseeable means of dismantling modernity, short of the Lord's return or a nuclear disaster of unimaginable proportions.

If we in the west think we can give up modernity, then the Asians would be only too happy to take over. In other words, modernity will not simply be rolled back or dismantled anytime soon. Postmodernism is just a western phenomenon within the overall context of modernity.

MHR: Is it your prediction that postmodernism will fade?

OG: I don't believe postmodernism can last, because it is essentially negative. You couldn't build a family, sustain a university, or run a country on postmodern ideas for very long. Let me suggest an example.

At the moment, one of the Christian claims that seems embarrassing is the claim to truth. If you claim anything close to absolute truth on a modern campus, you are seen as Neanderthal, obscene, politically incorrect. A kind of "brave new world" feeling is prevalent, in which people are saying that truth is dead, following Nietzsche's thought-and that if truth is dead, then knowledge is simply power. The underlying idea is that if you simply understand the gender, race, or class of the person who makes the claim to truth, you will then discover the real bid, which is the bid for power. Everything is reduced to the role of power.

At first that sounds very brave, as you unmask and demystify. But it is an absolute myth. When all is said and done, if knowledge is only power, and if truth is dead, then everything is left to manipulation.

Many people are starting to recognize this problem. For example, how many western liberals admire Vaclav Havel and his role in the Czech revolution? The Czech revolution maxim was, "Truth prevails for those who live in truth." That's actually very close to the scriptures. Havel's point was that in facing a Marxist regime-an empire built on lies-there were only two ways to overcome it. One was by being strong, which, of course, the dissidents weren't. The other way was to live in truth: "Truth prevails to those who live in truth."

What fascinates me is the vast number of western liberals who admire that thought deeply-and rightly so-but who don't have a view of truth upon which they could do the same thing. And if you follow that line of argument around, you come back to Jesus' words: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Whether it happens on the level of interpersonal relationships, or in the realm of grand political things, people are casually giving up truth today with the "brave new idea" that knowledge is power and truth is dead. And, ironically, what looks like a great embarrassment-the Christian claim to truth-is actually one of our great trump cards. I think it soon will be seen to be so.

MHR: Soon?

OG: Marxism, for all its tyranny and technology, lasted only seventy-four years. That is a mere blinking of the eye in terms of history. Modern choice and change are coming so fast that the shelf-life of idols is very brief. I don't think postmodernism will be around in ten years' time.

MHR: At present, is the church making a mistake by trying to understand the gospel's relevance to postmodernism?

OG: No. You must understand that the gospel has relevance to everything while it's in vogue. But those who try to adapt too much will be washed up when the next thing comes along.

For two hundred years, that has been the mistake of liberalism-following Frederick Schleiermacher-in trying to reach a culture that despises the gospel. Liberals have joined the culture and stayed there.

Today, there is a near equivalent within evangelicalism, in the name of reaching the unchurched for the sake of relevance. The trouble is that the church often has adapted too much. Much of evangelicalism is every bit as liberal as liberalism. One could easily make the argument that evangelicalism is the worldliest tradition of the modern church.

I know liberals who describe themselves as chastened liberals. They chased every idea in the sixties, whether the idea was politics, therapy, or whatever. And they adapted the gospel to every one of those and sold out. Today they are amazed not that they were chastened by all those events, but that they see evangelicals doing the same things in the nineties.

MHR: It seems the church has adopted a posture of adaptation or encampment.

OG: I'm sure there is still some of that old-style encampment or ghetto mentality left, but only very little. One of the features of the modern world is that it has upset the old balance. The idea of being "in but not of the world" was met with the liberal wing going too far to get in, and the conservative wing going too far to get out. Today there is very little of the latter, for a very simple reason: the world is almost impossible to escape. There are no wildernesses left, especially with modern technology. There is no solitude left. So the old "world denying" stance has almost disappeared. I hardly ever see it anymore.

I came to the United States in 1968. I remember speaking at a church in the south, during which I referred to an Ingmar Bergman film-and I was booed. Nowadays, as we think of the types of films we evangelical families see together or allow our children to see, we wish we'd stopped at Bergman. And that has happened in just thirty years.

In the early seventies at Oxford, Brian Wilson was my tutor. He once asked me, "By the end of the seventies, who will be the worldliest Christians in America?" He answered his own question by saying, "I guarantee it will be the evangelicals." That startled the others in our seminar, because evangelicals and fundamentalists used to be "world denying" by definition. Today it is the other way around.

MHR: Given that you foresee the demise of postmodernism, what is coming next? Certainly whatever it is will still be built upon the foundation of modernity. But what will it be?

OG: I haven't a clue. I'm not a prophet.

MHR: We look forward to watching you interpret whatever it is that unfolds.

OG: It's challenging. Clearly, our Lord had a perfect understanding of timing. He had a sense of his ministry beginning as the ministry of John the Baptist finished. He had a great sense of his personal vocation, as well as the crisis of his time. He had an incredible sense of public and personal timing. He alone could get it perfectly right.

Yet, he blamed his generation for not reading the signs of their times. So, we today have to be, on the one hand, incredibly skeptical and aware of our own stupidity and ignorance, and, at the same time, able to read the signs of the times as best we can. That's a tricky balance.

Most futurology, whether secular or Christian, is a matter of extending present trends into the future and dressing it all up with a bit of hype. Think of the nonsense about decadology, or about particular generations-Generation X, for example. Most of it is spurious, if you examine it more closely.

Yet, we nevertheless are called to read the signs of our times. Christians are very happy to go along with the pop-cultural and fashionable language that is currently available. But they don't have a truly biblical sense of discernment.

MHR: The church-particularly the right wing of the church-speaks of creating the times, as opposed to reading the signs of the times. Are you saying that the idea of creating the times is a fairly unbiblical approach?

OG: When the church obeys, it is powerfully influential. But the idea that any person or group can put its stamp on history is hubris. The scale of history, and also of modern institutions, is so

enormous that it would overwhelm us apart from the sovereignty of God. And to think we could know enough or be powerful enough to affect it is problematic. We may think of individuals who exerted their influence, such as Napoleon or Julius Caesar, but I don't think we're in the same kind of situation today.

Take, for example, the notion of identity. When we consider identity, we find various alternatives to the gospel. I describe one of these alternatives as being "constrained to be." In this view, our identity is our class, our gender, our race. There are huge modern categories into which I am "constrained to be," by virtue of the fact that I am male and white. That is my identity. Yet, the trouble is that this gives me virtually no sense of individualness.

A second type of alternative to the gospel is the one that Tillich proposed. This is "the courage to be," and it is much more existentialist. It says, in short, "You are the master of your own destiny."

The problem here is that most of us are not strong enough, wealthy enough, or healthy enough to survive that particular illusion very long. (The American version of this lies in the idea, "You can be anything you want to be.") This is actually a very silly notion. Most of us are so heavily influenced by other factors that the mere notion of having enough courage to be anything is fairly stupid.

The appeal of the new age idea is that we all are "constituted to be." It's the acorn theory: you have to discover the acorn of your gifts in childhood. That's what you're constituted to be, fated to be. This is the teaching of Thomas Moore's friend, James Hillman.

I think there should be an additional position—one classified as "called to be." We are not only created to be something—indeed, we are given some things at birth—but we are called to be something as well.

It's fascinating to see this borne out in the scriptures. People who met the Lord face to face almost invariably fell flat on their faces (with a few exceptions, such as Joshua, who was too big for his boots and thus was told to take off his shoes). In most instances, such people are like Daniel and Ezekiel, who fell absolutely prostrate.

The Lord's words to them are almost always the same: "Stand up." In other words, calling not only singles us out—so that it's our name being called, and not someone else's—but it also stands us up. We arise to be what Christ alone knows us to be.

Many people say the Greeks had excellence and that there is no Christian equivalent to that excellence. But there is—and it lies in calling. Oswald Chambers' phrase "my utmost for his highest" is exactly that. As we are called, we rise to become the full stature of what we are created to be. It's not something we're constituted to be, and then fated for the rest of our lives to follow the lines of the script. We actually rise to be, in the obedience and faith of following the call.

MHR: As you ponder the future, do you see other books in the making—or perhaps other elements to your calling?

OG: When I left L'Abri in the early seventies, I had listed in the front of my diary twenty-five books I wanted to write. I have only written about eleven of them. Three of the most important ones are still to be written, if the Lord spares me.

I would deeply love to write a book that is an apologetic. I have already written one on apologetics, but I am looking forward to writing an actual apologetic. There are too few books you can give directly to non-Christians that speaks in their terms. And that is one I would love to do.



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