

# MISSIONARY LIFE AS VOCATION

By ANNIE H. SMALL

THIS is a plea for the more serious consideration of the principle that a divine call is and must always be the supreme factor in the choice, preparation, going forth, and subsequent ministry of the true missionary of Jesus Christ.

Divine election—calling—vocation : we shall not linger to discuss the significance of the terms,<sup>1</sup> that which must deeply concern us in entering upon any such consideration is that we should have clearly before us the essential Christian belief implied in these terms, the belief, namely, that for each human life there is a divine purpose, and that to each human life, whether at its outset or at some later crisis, there is addressed an individual summons to fulfil its purpose which should be recognized and met by an individual response, and that this double experience acts in such fashion as that in the sequel there can be no doubt that the will of God has been fulfilled. It must be confessed that this belief has been very partially and very inadequately taught. Until within the last few months many thousands of educated young men and women, themselves Christian and members of Christian communities, have chosen their profession practically haphazard, unconscious of the privilege of a special calling wherewith they were called ; as for the less educated and the poverty-bound, they have never, as we constantly confess, been permitted to ‘come to their own.’ In this

<sup>1</sup> Yet the terms have their significance, which should not be lost sight of. Vocation, for example, is more than election and more than calling ; it is calling and election *made sure*.

respect Christian societies are not unjustly mirrored in the scathing words—

‘Light half-believers in our casual creeds,  
Who never deeply felt, nor clearly willed.’

In this paper we shall hold as granted three primary and mutually complementary ideas which seem to us to lie at the foundation of the Christian conception of life :

God has a purpose for the passing of the earthly years of each of His human children ; only in the fulfilling of that purpose in each case is His will done upon earth as it is in heaven.

God awaits the fulfilling of His purpose in the search after and choice of His holy will, both through the individual and through the family and society which trains him.

The more Christian the mental attitude of society, family, individual, the more sure it is that in the exercise of the free gift of choice discoveries are made of divine movement, gracious and compelling, acting in such wise as that a perfect harmony is discovered between the will of God and the will of man. The seal of human privilege ‘ You are an eternal thought of God ’ has upon its obverse side ‘ Every life has some note of power.’<sup>1</sup>

If this be the true doctrine of vocation—and we believe that no Christian will deny it—regions of guidance and of obedience hitherto only partially explored seem to be brought within our reach. It is clear, for example, that all exercise of parental compulsion must be set aside. Hannah devoted her son to God from his birth, and in her case the call of God confirmed the offering of the mother ; but the father and mother who dedicate their new-born child to missionary service and insist upon imposing their vow upon the tender conscience of their son or daughter, are arrogating to themselves a prerogative which is not

<sup>1</sup> ‘ For our ignorance we pay. It is estimated that seventy-three men out of every hundred are in the wrong job ; that most men utilize only about a third of their mental and spiritual force . . . ’—Edward Earle Purinton, in an article on ‘ Efficiency ’ in *Pearson's Magazine*.

theirs. In the baptismal vow the child which is God's is given back to God for His good will and purpose, and his future is an unwritten volume upon the title-page of which God alone may inscribe name and calling. The task of the family and of the Church, both corporately and through the individual members most nearly concerned, is surely this, that they be keenly sensitive to the indications of the purpose of God for each young life committed to their charge, and that they prepare such influences and such training as shall make the recognition and attainment of the true vocation possible. Further, since all vocation, however humble, is a grace, an opportunity, 'wherein we may find depths of mercy and of beauty which the world can never fathom,' the first brave act of each true man's life is the free offering of that life to God: 'I am Thy liege man of life and limb, and of earthly homage and worship, and troth will I bear Thee'; the second is, that he go forward reverently and without bias to interpret the signs of His holy will. There is no compulsion; a man may prove faithful to the fine preparatory discipline of prayer and deliberation, of the baffling influences of circumstance, the opening and the closing of doors, the gratification or the thwarting of natural desires, in which case our whole faith is vain if his true calling be not revealed to him; or, he may shrink from it, and possibly without direct refusal may decline upon a second or even a third best.

'When God smote His hands together, and struck out thy life as a spark  
Into the organized glory of things, from deeps of the dark—

Say, didst thou shine, didst thou burn, didst thou honour the power in  
the form,

As the star does at night, or the fire-fly, or even the little ground-worm?'

'I have sinned,' she said,

'For my seed-light shed

Has smouldered away from His first decrees!

The cypress praiseth the fire-fly, the ground-leaf praiseth the worm:

I am viler than these.'

. . . . .

'When God on that sin had pity, and did not meet it as such,  
But tempered the wind to thy uses, and softened the world to thy  
touch;

At least thou wast moved in thy soul, though unable to prove it afar  
Thou couldst carry thy light like a jewel, not giving it like a star.'

'I have sinned,' she said,

'And not merited

The gift He gives by the grace He sees.

The mine-cave praiseth the jewel, the hill-side praiseth the star:

I am viler than these.'

There is one further thought which belongs to this preliminary and general view of the subject. The first calling may not prove to be the permanent state. The servant of God cannot allow himself to become insensitive to indications of further orders. Vocation may indeed be found to be a progressive experience. It is because Elisha, with his eye fixed upon the leaders of his twelve yoke of oxen, drives a straight furrow, that he is fitted for discipleship under the great prophet; it is because he is a disciple of the first order that he becomes his master's successor. Lawrence, the incompetent servant, bravely enters the monastery kitchen that he may through discipline be cured of his awkwardness; he remains indeed the monastery cook, but, obedient to his progressive vocation, becomes the beloved Brother Lawrence who has taught many thousands since his day how they may practise the presence of God. 'The best reward for having wrought well already is to have more to do, and he that has been faithful over a few things must find his account in being made ruler over many things. This is the true and heroical rest, which only is worthy of gentlemen and sons of God.'<sup>1</sup>

It has become a commonplace of our speaking and writing that in so far as the awful crisis through which the Christian nations are passing bears upon it the marks of the permissive presence of God as distinct from the wrath of man, it represents an awakening or probationary purpose, an opportunity, a challenge, surely the greatest since the

uplifting of the cross of Jesus Christ; and the danger which besets individual Christian and corporate Christianity alike is that through false shame or self-complacency, through inertia or moral and spiritual cowardice, we fail of our chance, by frittering it away in the easy reformation of a multitude of minor details, and leaving to following generations the heritage of our tragic collapse. Surely we are convinced by the experience of the last two years that the time past has sufficed for a Christianity which is less than Christian.

A consideration of vital importance to any reconstruction would assuredly be this: that each child of the Christian state should have all possible opportunity to discover, foster, prepare for, honour and fulfil his true calling. It is almost impossible to conceive the effect upon any community, large or small, of such a genuine belief in vocation; it would revolutionize education, it would uplift the standard of service in every department of human labour; it would bring God into the very heart of life where indeed He should ever be. There would cease to be higher and lower, secular and sacred callings—save in a limited sense—for the highest and most sacred sphere of service for any man must be that he should find himself within the holy will of God. At the end of his short day, which is the beginning of his eternity, that alone must reckon.

We pass on to the consideration of vocation in its relation to the conditions of the life and service of the foreign missionary.

Every vocation is, as we have seen, a divine gift, and in the truest sense there can be no higher or lower calling. This is a fact not easy to realize, for the distinctions of the worldly world still haunt the Christian Church; perhaps we best realize it when we remember that the call of God to *do* is, in the first instance, His call to *be* in the doing, and that it is in the *being* that any true vocation is fulfilled. Certain callings are, however, special; they require special qualities of personal gift and character, special and long

continued preparation ; they contain both in themselves and in the conditions of their fulfilment the most subtle spiritual dangers and temptations to which our nature is liable, yet they call for the exercise of the divinest graces both moral and spiritual. To do may be comparatively easy ; to be, to be at all times, and to continue to be, is a superhuman task. Of such callings by far the most special is that of the missionary of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The end of this calling is, first and last, *the bringing in of the reign and kingdom of God by means of the submission of men and women who have not hitherto known Him, to His message of grace in Jesus Christ His Son, our Lord.*

Let us note a very few of the more obvious conditions under which the missionary calling is exercised and its end accomplished in our own time. We believe that it will become more and more evident that there never was at any time so urgent a necessity that the responsibilities and the graces of a consciously realized vocation should be present in the case of every man and woman sent out.

There are the conditions obtaining in the world itself. The millenniums of isolation and of comparative simplicity are past ; everywhere the missionary is brought into contact with peoples conscious of the advantages of a so-called civilized life—education, social progress, national ambition, international relationship and the like—and pressing forward to attain them ; they are too preoccupied to listen to ‘the simple message of the Gospel,’ and the missionary, who is indeed largely responsible for the conditions, must apparently accept them, and learn how to accomplish his one end by charging every act of the manifold service required of him by these conditions with the living force of the Gospel, and to be himself in every part of his life the convincing illustration of its grace.

There are also the conditions produced by the modern conception of missions at the home base. This conception includes the thoughtful and scientific study of the subject in every aspect of it, the education of the Church, the

production of a great literature, and above all, the demand for a missionary body of men and women of the highest order, who have been carefully equipped for their service. There can be no question at all of the influence and weight of this demand. It would not, we venture to say, be difficult to convey to candidates not only an impression, but a firm conviction, that intellectual gifts and an intellectual equipment rank most highly in the regard of many missionary leaders. That way lies grave danger. The missionary vocation can never be permitted to become one of the learned professions.

Let us look at it as from the corresponding conditions in a missionary centre. The very fact that the life is so strenuous, so complex, so considered in every sense of the word, suggests a condition which emerges in no calling save this—it may become fatally easy to slacken, not in labour, nor in thoughtfulness, nor in leadership, nor in statesman-like qualities of purpose and action, but in spiritual costliness, such a costliness as cannot fail to work conviction that the winning for Christ of the men and women and little children for whom He gave Himself, and the inauguration of His spirit and sway, are the supreme motive of each word and deed. Further, within the vocation of the missionary, as means to its end, professions which under other conditions are themselves vocations—medicine, teaching, industrial arts—are practised, and let any missionary who is an enthusiast in his subsidiary calling tell of the temptations which beset him to permit that, and not his missionary vocation, to absorb his attention.

It is, however, when we turn to the consideration of the missionary's personal life that we find our strongest arguments for laying a greater emphasis upon divine vocation, and reducing mistakes and misunderstandings to a minimum. We submit two; they will suggest many more. There is the argument from the experience of disillusionments and disappointments, perplexities and temptations; all the strain and stress of the earlier years,

through which only the interior assurance of an original call and obedience will carry any man or woman with faith unshaken and spiritual perceptions undimmed. Again, the vocation of marriage and the Christian home if offered to God for His glory is an invaluable missionary asset; but when the education of children comes to be considered, parental responsibility seems to many of the most devoted men and women to be paramount, and either the home is broken up, or, as not infrequently happens, the missionary conceives it to be his duty to resign and to return with his family to the homeland. The case of women missionaries is similar. Marriage engagements are often contracted even within the first term of service, although the young missionary is prepared as a rule 'to work out her five years'—the phrase is frequently used—before relinquishing her post. Thus the missionary station loses men and women just as they attain to a measure of fitness, and it should not be difficult to realize the weakening effect of each such withdrawal both upon the work and upon the minds of all concerned.<sup>1</sup> We must not be understood to express criticism of these and similar cases; on the contrary, since there are no promises nor binding vows, men and women must obviously follow the dictates of their own judgment in the matter of the disposal of their lives, but we do venture to plead that the supreme importance of the factor of the election and calling of God to missionary service should, in all its bearings upon the personal life, be urgently pressed upon and considered by every missionary candidate, both for the sake of the spiritual value of the

<sup>1</sup> 'I cannot tell you how I have seen work crippled by these incessant changes in the staff. When new workers come every nerve is strained to set them free for language; they seem hardly to have taken hold when we are called to bid them farewell. In the case of marriage engagements many women have not the self-control to settle to work when their hearts and hopes are elsewhere; and, as you know, to be effective work has not only to be done but done with undivided mind and heart. We are rapidly losing the sense of "this one thing I do." On the other hand many young missionaries do their work with efficiency, devotion, and enthusiasm, who yet lack something, a lack to which Indians of all people are most alive, and which I should describe as *the sense of a spiritual vocation*.' [From a private letter.]

life and service which are offered, and for the honour of the cause which it represents.

How then is vocation to be discovered ? What are the marks of a true missionary vocation ? Is it possible to make full proof of the election and calling of God ? In what attitude of mind and spirit should the student of the purpose of God for his life approach decision ? How shall he maintain the true balance between a passive waiting for the revelation of the will of God and an active search into the various indications of that will ? Is vocation necessarily for life ?

There would be little wisdom in attempting any categorical reply to these and the many similar questions which emerge here ; to each seeker after the mind of God his own problems, to each his own solutions and his own manner of arriving at them. It is doubtless for this reason that so few of our spiritual masters have dealt with our subject in any detail. The literature of the subject of vocation is largely Roman Catholic, and deals especially with the vocations of the priesthood and the religious orders. But there is a small book, too little known among us, which contains a passage incomparable for wisdom and faithfulness which ought to be conned and prayed over by every Christian man and woman when brought face to face with great decisions. It is the Exercise upon ' Election ' in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius.<sup>1</sup>

In his introduction to the subject St Ignatius sees men who desire to be received under the standard of Christ in three classes, according to the motive which guides them : Those who strive to rid themselves of all hampering desires in order that they may themselves live in peace with God ; those who, while desirous of living in union with the will of God, hope to attain that union rather through the yielding of the divine will to their will than through their submission to it ; those who, accepting the privilege

<sup>1</sup> The word ' election ' is used by St Ignatius in this passage in the sense of the human, not the divine, election.

of natural and lawful choice, yet resolutely submit their spirit to the one end, the fulfilling of the glory of God through their lives.

The first two of these groups find their motive in self, the third finds it in God. Probably there are very few of the young men and women of our day who would deliberately place themselves in the first group. The idea of entering the service of Christ for the sake of personal spiritual advantage has become alien to our thinking. Few also would be willing to confess that they belong to the second group; it has nevertheless a very large number of adherents, and from its ranks no doubt the majority of mistaken 'elections' occur. 'He gave them the desire of their heart,' and unless of His grace and their own wisdom such pass over into the third group, leanness to their own soul and the souls of others.

The mood in which all the choices of life should be approached is indicated in three short meditations. The true servant of Christ enlists freely but for willing obedience. Self-will, self-importance, self-assurance, self in any form save that of self-knowledge denies divine calling in the beginning and continues to deny it to the end; and forasmuch as the individualistic and independent mood of our age will endure no human rule, a real and not a fictitious substitute for rule must be found at the outset, in a secret discipline of subjection whereby the will becomes obedient to the will, and in the cultivation of a quick sensitiveness, and humble response, to every indication of the will of God. There will then be little danger of 'mistaking a bad election for a divine vocation, which is,' says Ignatius, 'ever pure and bright, free from any carnal affection or the taint of a perverse will.' Submission of spirit, poise of the will, the imitation of Jesus Christ in the mood of His elections, with prayer to be received under the standard of Christ—these conditions are essential; while, as a prelude to making the election, the eye of the intention should be single and pure, and a clear distinction should be kept between the end and

the means: e.g., to enter upon any calling, which ought to be the means, and afterwards in that calling to serve God, which ought to be the end, is to make God second, and not first, in our election.

Lights and inspirations of God are transient, not permanent. This fact, verified again and again in the history of men and of nations who have failed to know the day of their visitation, was doubtless present to the keen though deeply sympathetic perceptions of Ignatius when he wrote of the 'Three times which are most opportune for making a right election.' No apology will be required by any reader who is practically interested in the subject for quoting here directly from the *Exercises*.

The first time will be when God our Lord so moves and draws to Himself the will that all hesitation, yea even the very faculty of doubting is taken away from the mind as to the following such an impulse; as we read that it happened to St Matthew, St Paul, and many others, Christ calling them. The second time is, whenever the divine good pleasure is sufficiently clear and open, this being taught by some previous experience either of consolations, or of different spirits. The third time is, when any one, in tranquillity of mind, the end being considered for which he was created, i.e., for the glory of God and his own salvation, chooses a certain kind of life placed within the limits of the Catholic Church, through which, as by a means, he may advance to his end more easily and securely. Moreover, this tranquillity is known to be present as long as the mind, agitated by no contending spirits, may exercise freely his natural powers. . . .<sup>1</sup> The election having been made, to fall quickly to prayer, to offer it to God perfectly, if it may please Him at length to receive and to establish it.

It is possible that the guidance offered by St Ignatius—here most inadequately represented—may seem to some readers to be remote, vague, possibly too elaborate. This will not be felt by those who realize that it forms part of a manual of spiritual exercises, intended to be studied and practised at leisure, in quiet retreat, in the presence of God. Here too lies wisdom. The interpretation of the purpose of God, that mandate which is the last word with every

<sup>1</sup> Necessarily shortened. St Ignatius here proceeds to deal with certain methods by which the 'third time' may be rightly used should neither the 'first' nor the 'second time' have occurred to aid in the election.

humble and faithful Christian, can only be truly approached through a patient silent waiting upon Him, an exercise which is of itself one of the great formative acts of life. To such as still crave more specific guidance towards their consideration of the missionary calling, we suggest that they prepare for themselves a series of additional exercises : e.g., an exercise upon missionary qualifications :

What are the natural gifts, and what are the qualities of character which mark the true missionary, and to what extent are these present in me ? Have I the beginnings of an aptitude for adaptation to circumstances, tasks, people ? Have I staying power ? Have I disciplined emotions and a disciplined will ? Have I a nature which faces outwards ? Have I the grace of love—love for God and in God, love for Christ and in Christ, love for my brethren, which measures itself by no less a measure than the divine love itself, love therefore which leaps forth in response to the insistent call of the world's need, and which wills to expend itself in a service to which there is no limit—‘Ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake’ ? What of the missionary message ? For the only true missionary is the missionary of the Cross, the truest act of his calling is the telling out of the message of the Cross, every service, however humble or however great, which he renders is a showing forth of the spirit of the Cross, and he himself is the living illustration of the power of the Cross to redeem, to sanctify, and to charge the entire being with the force of a love which joyously gives itself to the uttermost to and for those for whom God, in his person, renews His own unspeakable gift. Have I any grip at all of the message ? for myself ? for the world ?

And after each such exercise let him ‘fall quickly to prayer, to offer himself to God perfectly, if it may please Him at length to receive and establish his calling.’

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