

The Heart of the High Call

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Phil. 1:9)

Years ago, I started meditating on texts from the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon). Reflecting on some of these great texts seemed an effective way to tangibly inject the perspective of the ages into my life. In time, the project took on a working title—Pursuing the High Call (an adaptation of Paul's picturesque language in Philippians 3:14). That's a roundabout way of explaining the title of this piece.

In the text quoted above, Paul intercedes for people he dearly loves and petitions God that their love for others would abound in accordance with biblical knowledge and with practical, moral discernment. The apostle does not petition God that they would be the fastest growing church in the Empire, or even in Macedonia. He does not pray that they would all be healthy, wealthy, and wise. He does not plead for substantial numbers of calls to the ministry, for new converts, or for new church plants. He does not initially petition God for their ever so correct, religious purity. He begins by praying that their love for others would abound.

Calvin once remarked: "For where love is wanting, the beauty of all virtue is mere tinsel, is empty sound, is not worth a straw, nay more, is offensive and disgusting." I must acknowledge that previously, I have been more impressed by the efficiency with which tasks were completed, the depth of knowledge demonstrated, and with tangible accomplishments achieved. An emphasis on love struck me as mushy and open to abuse. An unlikely source, Aldous Huxley of all people, succinctly summarized my ill-formed sentiments: "Of all the worn, smudged, dog-eared words in our vocabulary, love is the grubbiest, smelliest, slimiest. Shouted from a million pulpits, lasciviously crooned through hundreds of millions of loudspeakers, it has become an outrage to good taste and decent feeling, an obscenity, which one hesitates to pronounce. And yet it has to be pronounced, for after all, love is the last word."

I allowed a caricature of this highest of Christian graces to cause a recoiling reaction in my soul. Now I must return to what is basic. Christians are to be benevolent people, who set their faces to seek the best interests of those around them. We have divine resources to be this kind of people: "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us." (Rom 5:5). This love is not a spiritualized Woodstock. It is God's love poured out in our hearts, an unconquerable benevolence of soul. When I am filled with the Spirit, the very nature of God loves through me. Just as God has put up with things in me which are not of Him, so He puts up with things which are not of Him in others through me. And what is manifest is God's love, the love that suffers long and is kind, the love that does not take account of evil, the love that never fails.

The apostle continues. This embracing and sincere love is to be in accordance with biblical knowledge. We are to understand the Word of God as illumined by the Spirit. We do not know how to love. Our concepts are fundamentally flawed. We need instruction from the source book of the One who is love incarnate.

The apostle continues again. He prays their love will grow with insight. The term the apostle employs stresses moral perception and the practical application of knowledge to the myriad circumstances of our daily lives. God wants us to understand how he is mending our brokenness and desires that we be ready co-laborers in that process.

Years ago, the Lord gave me a vivid snapshot of abounding love in accordance with biblical knowledge and moral perception. For reasons I do not recall, I returned to school approximately two weeks early that year. I drove Saturday night so that I could be at my home church in time for the morning service and the sharing and prayer session that immediately followed. It was a time in the life of that church when the Spirit was moving in our congregation, and a wonderful vulnerability and honesty characterized us as people. Sometime during the sharing time, I suddenly realized that my apartment lease did not begin for two weeks and that I did not have a place to stay. Had I looked at the lease papers more closely, I would have realized this about four months earlier, but hey—details! I stood up and shared my needs. A couple in the congregation near eighty years of age took me in immediately.

Then, I was just thankful for a place to stay. Now, I am so thankful for the people I stayed with! Ed and Gladys Baldwin were choice servants of our Sovereign God. Those two weeks gave me with a living picture of abounding love in accordance with biblical knowledge and moral perception. There was not a day in that period where Ed and Gladys did not touch someone's life (in addition to my own) with the love of Christ in a tangible way. As I packed to leave, I knew God had privileged me to witness something incredibly special. If my life, fifty plus years down the road, mirrored what I had just observed, I would be but a hairsbreadth from God's bull's-eye, whatever my vocation, location, position, or station turned out to be. That is the abounding love that Paul prayed for his Philippian friends. That is the heart of the high call.