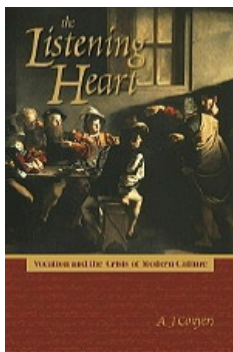


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# The Loss of Vocation and its Recovery — *The Listening Heart*

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The concept of vocation — in the theological sense of a calling — has all but disappeared from contemporary society. The late Professor A. J. Conyers blames this loss on the rise of confidence in personal autonomy and an absolute demand for personal choice in all dimensions of life.

In *The Listening Heart: Vocation and the Crisis of Modern Culture* [Spence Publishing], Conyers said he was writing for readers “who cannot, for their life, take modern western culture at face value,” and for those “who suspect that the modern, western world, even with its productivity, lacks something essential to the human spirit.”

Conyers pointed to the loss of vocation as a central symptom of the age — a loss that explains so many other losses. In his words:

*The idea of “vocation” – of being “called” is at first commonplace until one actually begins to think what an extraordinary thing is suggested by such language. It suggests of course, that life does not center on the choices of individuals, and that community does not emerge entirely by appealing to those choices the way modern societies ever since the industrial age assumed, being wholly distracted by the wealth-making power of the market and its appeal to the individual consumer. Vocation instead implies that a larger obligation presses itself upon persons and draws them into a community of mutual sacrifice and affection. Not centering in the individual, the obligations and the affections are understood as coming from a transcendent source. Yet while they are not centered in the individual, they are necessarily addressed to the individual, and therefore necessarily personal—and if personal they can only be described as coming from a divine source, from God. It is that extraordinary premise of community life that the modern age, like the builders of the tower at Babel, wished to defy, even if it could not altogether deny it.*

The concept of vocation, if it means anything at all, means that we are called in the context of a community — indeed for a community. It is based in a knowledge of what the community needs and a knowledge of how persons within the community are gifted.

Conyers added:

*It is important to note that this word “call” is an experience, or speaks of an experience, that runs in the opposite direction from the social experience most often articulated by modern people. Here is an idea that pictures the self being “laid hold of” by another, having a claim made upon his time, his future, his destiny, the shape of his life that originates from outside the self. It is the opposite of “choice,” or of freedom in the sense of self-determination.*

And, recognizing the biblical root of the concept:

*Therefore, the Pauline “vocation” is always to a higher unifying reality, namely the body of Christ. It is, furthermore, an eschatological reality for which one might hope and a reality for which one might long to suffer for its greater glory. “He must increase, but I must decrease” are words appropriate to this sentiment of a greater good calling for the suffering, longing, and diminishing of the person. The Enlightenment state also calls for individual sacrifice, but it does*

*so posing as a deliverer from the petty tyrannies of traditional authorities, such as the church, the tribe, and the family. The irony of this trade-off is apparent, for it profits from diminishing the ties to which the individual is born, or in which the individual abides in common faith, by preaching the enlargement of the individual's sphere of action and privilege. At the same time, it requires the kind of sacrifice that is implied in the individual's relationship to family or community of faith.*

There are important insights in these words. Conyers rightly saw the atomistic inheritance of the Enlightenment and the need for a recovery of the only context in which calling and vocation could make sense. But added to this must be the recognition that the most authentic community in which vocation is to arise and be affirmed is in the church. The local congregation of believers is the most important context for the recovery and discovery of vocation. In the fellowship of fellow believers and under mutual submission to Christ we discover who we are and what we are called to do for God and for each other.

Conyers concludes:

*Only when members of a community understand life as a response to a large and generous world, created by a great and merciful Providence, will the possibilities of life together become more fully realized. Otherwise, without this spirit infusing and animating people, existence is reduced to competing forces, clashing at twilight, grasping whatever is left of power, fame and fortune, before the darkness descends. For then, while the isolation becomes rooted in every human domain, its end is necessarily found in the dust of death. But with this spirit of vocation, this conviction that we are not after all, our own, but belong to Another, the world opens up, becomes a place for others, and is illuminated by a spreading and abiding hope.*

A. J. Conyers was a gifted teacher who will be greatly missed. Nevertheless, this book, published after his early death, represents a lasting legacy.

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