

# Ken Burton: Spiritual Advocacy and Being Chosen as Choosing

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## Spiritual Advocacy and Being Chosen as Choosing

I had originally intended to preach from the New Testament lection, and I'm still going to do that, but it came to me as I was working with the material from Exodus this week that I really could not pass up this opportunity to say something about what I think is a very important aspect of our spiritual experience, one which often gets neglected and which is there in the conclusion of the story of the golden calf, which is the Old Testament lection from the thirty-second chapter of Exodus. You'll recall that Moses has gone up on the mountain to engage in his own dialogue with God and the people have grown impatient with his absence and have suggested to his brother Aaron, his associate leader, that Aaron create this idol, this golden calf, which was going to be their god to go before them. Moses finally returns from the mountain and is not a little bit upset at what has happened, but his upset is nothing, nothing compared to Yahweh's. [Reads [Exodus 32:9-14](#) ]

Moses, as an act of intercession, argues with God. Here we have a form of spiritual advocacy, if you will, which I think many of us, certainly including me, are a little reluctant to engage in. Moses cites specific reasons why he believes what God is about to do is wrong and convinces God to change God's mind. I recognize that there is a certain tension here with

the "Thy will be done" mode of spirituality. While noting that, I am not going to deal with it this morning. I think that is a whole topic unto itself. Rather, what I want to focus on is this attitude of spiritual advocacy. Walter Wink, in his book *The Principalities and Powers*, has a chapter on prayer. He speaks to this point, saying "intercession is spiritual defiance of what is in the name of what God has promised. Intercession visualizes an alternative future to the one apparently fated by the mainstream of current contradictory forces."

Arguing with God is something that I don't spend a lot of time doing. Perhaps I should do more of it. I recall a little incident that happened out here one Sunday morning recently right after our service ended. As many of you know, Mary Cosby, during that time, carefully works her way down the steps in preparation for attending the ecumenical service. I spoke to her one Sunday, noticing the difficulty she was having walking, asking how her leg was. She said that it was really not as well as it might be. Then she raised her voice slightly in order to be heard not just by me but by anyone who might be standing around and said, "You all aren't praying hard enough for me." Well, I was somewhat taken aback at being accused of having some responsibility for the problem that Mary was having with her leg. That was not something that I had anticipated. Another Seeker, who heard this comment, said to me later. "You know, I've not been praying for her at all." I think this makes the same point that Walter Wink was making, that there is a role for spiritual advocacy in our intercession, and that it complements and goes along with our advocacy in the world. Whether we are talking about a change in societal conditions or a change in the lives of particular individuals, of particular problems they are having, we not only the right but the responsibility to confront God on these issues.

Ok. That's the first part of a sermon, the two parts of which

have very little to do with one another except that they both come out of the lectionary. So that's the first part, and we're going to take Walter Wink and Mary Cosby and Moses and spiritual advocacy and sort of put them over here and then move on to something else. I have a friend here who is going to help me out with this transition. [Moose puppet appears.]

[Addressing the puppet.] So were you one of the ones that was invited to the wedding feast? (Pause) You were. But you don't really look to happy about that. That's suppose to be a kind of happy occasion, but you don't look happy at all. (Pause) Oh! You were one of the people that were invited and chose not to go. Is that true? [Addressing the congregation.] Yeah, he was. He made the choice not to go to the wedding feast. [Addressing the puppet.] Well, there's another place in the Gospel where it talks about "seventy times seven", so you'll probably get another opportunity to answer the call, but you made the choice. (Pause) There's something you want to tell me. (Pause) No, this is not the Word for the Children. We've already been through that. We had a review of the whole of the Bible in the Word for the Children this morning. That part of the service is really over. You and I need to talk about this later, OK. We'll work that out. I have some other things I need to talk about now. [The puppet vanishes.]

The point I was hoping to make here is that this very difficult text about "many are called and few are chosen," which has been used in some rather brutal ways in the history of the church, to support the predestinarian perspective and other things that are difficult to deal with, that we really have a problem here about the voice of this verb. The active rather than the passive is what I am advocating. This is a very complex way of saying that *it is not so much about being chosen as about choosing*. Those who were called chose not to respond to that call with, in the story, some pretty horrible consequences. So the issue that I am suggesting that we need to deal with in how we handle call is not one of having to be

"chosen" in addition to being "called," but, rather, an act of choosing on our part.

I would like now to think about this specifically in the context of this community and in the context of the recommitment season. I find in myself and I hear sometimes in others of us lots of excuses for not responding to various forms of call. Some of us feel, erroneously, I believe, that we are just plain not good enough. There are people who have been in this community for years who think that they could not possibly ever even think about, much less act upon, becoming core members, because they are just not good enough. Other people have doubts about whether or not they could possibly sustain the level of spiritual energy that they feel is required to be in a mission group, or even to attend ten consecutive sessions of the School of Christian Living on Tuesday evening. If you are one of those people, and only you know that, you need to think about whether you are allowing you're own sense of lack of self-worth to interfere with making the choice, responding to the call.

Other excuses that come up in this context are "I simply don't have enough time to be in a mission group," or "It's too time consuming to every Sunday morning have to be there at 9:30; once in a while it's fine, but I can't do that consistently." Again, whose making the choices about your time? I'm making the choices about mine; you're making the choices about yours. And it is a choice that you have and that you are making.

A third rationale that comes up here is about not being disciplined enough. There are people who have been around along time who are not core members and who I have asked, in the course of my own reflection about moving in that direction, "Why aren't you a core member?" "Oh, I just can't deal with the disciplines. That's something I can't handle." I was discussing this with Emily a couple of weeks ago, and she said "Well, that's true of all of us. We all struggle with the disciplines." If that's a problem for you, you're right in

line with the rest of the community. It doesn't separate you from the community, but, rather, includes you in it. And that excuse, too, for not pursuing a further, deeper involvement in the life of Seekers, in my opinion, just won't wash.

We are seekers, meaning that we are intentionally on a path of Christian faith, working out both its inner and outer aspects in our lives. We are not people, any of us, who have arrived any where. If you feel you are, you're probably in the wrong place, because that is not how are life together is seen.

So we come to the question of taking the next step on your journey, of responding to the call as it confronts you today, which may be different from that in the past or from what it will be in the future. The season of recommitment is a particularly apt time to think about that. When we come to the recommitment litany next Sunday it would be helpful if each of us had in mind specifically what steps, what actions, I am going to take in response to the call that is different from what I have done in the past. Let me mention some possibilities.

This is strictly a matter of if the shoe fits, wear it; if it doesn't, throw it aside and find yourself another shoe. This is a highly individual matter, but I think that within each of us is the knowledge of what it is that constitutes taking the next step in response to our own call, whether that works out within the community or outside of it. So here are some suggestions.

It might be time for you to make a commitment to be here every Sunday when you're in town, whether you feel like it or not. There are some Sunday mornings when it would be a whole lot easier just to sleep. Maybe its time for you to make the commitment that you're not going to do that, that you're going to be here, whether you feel like it or not. Or maybe you're one that arrives consistently, but always at about 9:30, and the time has come for you to make a commitment to get here

twenty minutes earlier, to be here at 9:10, to participate in that special act of community that we call "Circle." Maybe that's the next step for you. Maybe the next step has to do with the school of Christian Living. Perhaps you've been around quite a while but have not been able to set aside the time or the energy on eight or ten consecutive Tuesday evenings to be in the School of Christian Living. Maybe that's the place that you need to work.

Maybe, unlike me, you're one of these raging extroverts who really has a lot of trouble dealing with silent retreat, who feels that spending a whole weekend in silence is something more than you can handle. As for me, I could probably do it once a month rather than once a year, but if you're a person who has that difficulty, that may be the place for your next step in Seekers. Or maybe it has to do with your proportionate giving. Maybe the proportion needs to be increased by a percentage point or two. Or maybe is the base of the computation that needs to be looked at. Maybe you need to move, for example from giving proportionately on the basis of your after-tax income to giving on the basis of all of your income. As we have been reminded repeatedly in this election season, "It's your money!" The only reason the taxing authority has any claim on it is because you have earned it, and it's yours, and perhaps as you compute your proportionate gift, you need to take that portion into account as well as the portion over which you have direct control of how it is spent. Or maybe, as the Homemakers Mission Group has suggested to us several times, you need to think of not only tithing on the basis of your income but also on the basis of your assets. Possibility, and this is one that I need to wrestle with, it's possible that it's time for you to start taking seriously Seekers commitment to children, both the children of this community and the children in the larger world. I have taken advantage of the fact that I am not a core member and have the luxury of dealing with the Seekers call on an *a la carte* basis, picking and choosing what I am comfortable with and

letting other things slide by. I have done that to avoid anything having to do with the children of the community, and that's a place that I need to work.

Perhaps it's time for you to think about joining a mission group. Or, if you're in a mission group, perhaps it's time for you to think about a different mission group. Now this is not an invitation to a game of musical mission groups. What I am suggesting is that call is something that changes, and just because you have been very comfortable in a particular mission group for a long time is not necessarily a reason that it is appropriate to stay there into the future. One of the very special things about our mission groups is that we have different kinds of groups. We have mission groups that deal with the inner life of the community, such as Learners and Teachers and Celebration Circle. We have groups that focus on a specific call in the world, such as Hope and a Home. Then we have groups that support people in their individual calls in the work that they do, such as the Artists Group and the Mission Support Group. So maybe its time for you to change the particular kind of group that you are in.

I don't know where you are in any of this. What I am doing is lifting up some possibilities of where it might be appropriate to make a choice, a choice to come to the feast rather than letting that slide by. Finally, there is this matter of core membership. People who have been part of the community for long time and who have not made that move need to recognize that it is the core members who assume the primary responsibility for the health and vitality and future of this community. If that is where you are, then perhaps you belong in core membership.

All of this was said from this place several weeks ago, perhaps more directly and more effectively, by Diane when she shared her mantra, "Get Dirty and Make Mistakes." Go give a sermon that has two parts that have nothing to do with one another. Take the risk of a missing group or the School of

Christian Living or whatever that next step is for you.

Growing up in a parsonage, my parents were both fond of a kind of slogan or saying about the church, which comes to mind at this moment. "The purpose of the church is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable." Most of us have, at one time or another, been both comfortable and afflicted. I would suggest that most of us in this room at this moment tend to be on the "comfortable" side, in need of "affliction" rather than the other way around, and that is what I have attempted to lift up this morning. (If that is not you, please let that remark slide by.)

Our call as Christians, our call as Seekers, is heard. It is out there. We have the choice of how we are going to respond. Many are called, but few choose. What you do about that is now up to you. Amen.