



# THE AUDIENCE OF ONE

OS GUINNESS

A The preceding story, which is told so well in Joseph Frazier Wall's biography *Andrew Carnegie*, highlights a vital point for understanding calling. When we discuss our plans and endeavors, we automatically think of notions like "aims," "ambition," "achievements," "assessment," and so on. But we often overlook the vital part of "audience."

Only madmen, geniuses, and supreme egoists do things purely for themselves. It is easy to buck a crowd, not too hard to march to a different drummer. But it is truly difficult – perhaps impossible – to march only to your own drumbeat. Most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, do things with an eye to the approval of some audience or other. The question is not whether we have an audience but which audience we have.

This observation underscores another vital feature of the truth of calling: A life lived listening to the decisive call of God is a life lived before one audience that trumps all others – the Audience of One.

In Genesis Abraham's call is to live a life of trust in God as he journeys before God. Usually God calls Abraham, but at one point he appears and says, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." Behind the voice of God is the eye of God and behind the eye the face and behind the face the heart. To follow the call of God is therefore to live before the heart of God. It is to live life *coram deo* (before the heart of God) and thus to shift our awareness of audiences to the point where only the last and highest – God – counts.

Jesus intensifies this same emphasis. He reminds those he calls that their Father "knows" and "sees." God notes the sparrow hopping on the ground, and

he numbers the very hairs of his followers' heads. Contrary to the universal human desire to parade virtue and to give in order to be recognized and honored, Jesus required that our good deeds be secret. "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

This stress on living before the Audience of One was prominent among the Puritans. John Cotton expands on the theme of audience. Quoting St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he describes the calling of servants as "not with eye-service as man-pleasers." Rather, he says, "we live by faith in our vocations, in the faith, in serving God, serves men, and in serving men, serves God." But is this language simply Puritan word play? Far from it. Living before the Audience of One transforms all our endeavors – "he doth it all comfortably though he meet with little encouragement from man, whereas an unbelieving heart would be is contented that he can find no acceptance, but all he doth is taken in the worst part."

That is why Christ-centered heroism does not need to be noticed or publicized. The greatest deeds are done before the Audience of One, and that is enough. Those who are seen and sung by the Audience of One can afford to be careless about lesser audiences.

When asked why he was not stung by a vicious attack from a fellow Member of Parliament, Winston Churchill replied, "If I respected him, I would care about his opinion. But I don't, so I don't." Similarly we who live before the Audience of One can say to the world: "I have only one audience. Before you I have nothing to prove, nothing to gain, nothing to lose."

Needless to say, the modern world is light years from the Puritan world. We have moved from the "inner



directed” world of the Puritans, in which calling acted as an inner compass, to the “other directed” world of modern society, in which our contemporaries are our real guides – and roving radar ranges to pick up their cues. We see this in teenagers listening to their peers, women following the beguiling images of womanhood in magazines and designer fashions, politicians aping polls and slavishly following focus group findings, and pastors anxiously following the latest profiles of “seekers” and “generations.” One large church pastor told me, “I’m haunted when I look into the eyes of my congregation and realize they are always only two weeks away from leaving for another church.”

Curiously, the twentieth century, which began with some of the strongest leaders in all history - some good like Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, many bad like Lenin and Stalin – ended with a weak style of leadership codependence on followership: the leader as panderer.

“I hear it said,” Churchill remarked in a speech in the House of Commons on September 30, 1941, that “leaders should keep their ears to the ground. All I can say is that the British nation will find it very hard to look up to the leaders who are detected in that somewhat ungainly posture.” “Nothing is more dangerous...” he said another time, “than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup Poll – always feeling one’s pulse and taking one’s temperature.”

Though almost always impressive before audiences and sometimes dazzling, Churchill himself was described by his friend Violet Bonham Carter as being “as impervious to atmosphere as a diver in his bell.” Similarly Harry Truman, whose presidency included such momentous decisions as the Marshall Plan and the first use of the atomic bomb, once said: “I wonder how far Moses would have gone if he had taken a poll in Egypt.”

By contrast, as great a genius as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart could write (in a letter to his father), “I am never in a good humor when I am in a town where I am quite unknown.” Extreme examples of “other direction” or “outside-in” thinking are easy to find and poke fun at. For instance, an old French story tells of a revolutionary sitting in a Paris café who suddenly hears a disturbance outside. He jumps to his feet and cries, “There goes the mob. I am their leader. I must follow them.” Churchill’s friend and colleague (and later prime minister) David Lloyd George was famed for his acute sensitivity to public opinion.

Lord Keynes was once asked what happened to Lloyd George when he was alone in the room. Keynes replied, “When Lloyd George is alone in the room there is nobody there.”

Screen goddess Marlene Dietrich even issued recordings of her cabaret ovations – two sides of nothing but applause. Her biographer tells us that she frequently gathered friends to listen and insisted on plying both sides to Judy Garland and Noel Coward. “That was Rio,” she told them solemnly, “That was Cologne. That was Chicago.”

Such narcissism may be fatuous, but we are all affected by the overall shift. The Puritans lived as if they had swallowed gyroscopes; we modern Christians live as if we have swallowed Gallup polls. Or as Martin Luther King wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, “in those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.” Leaders or panderers? Only those who practice the presence of the Audience of One can hope to attain the former and escape the latter.

Growing awareness of the Audience of One has greatly helped me in the vicissitudes of my own calling. Part of my calling, as I have discovered it and tried to fulfill it, has been to make sense of the gospel to the world (as an apologist) and to make sense of the world to the church (as an analyst). I have sought to do both in a way that stands between high, specialized, academic knowledge and ordinary, popular thinking.

This attempt to bridge means that no single human audience is my sole, natural audience. In fact, each audience sometimes scorns the effort to reach the other. No sooner does one side dismiss it as “mere popularizing.” So I find it a tremendous comfort as well as a continual challenge to remember that above and beyond the impossible-to-satisfy constituencies is the one audience that matters – the Audience of One.

To live before the Audience of One truly makes a demonstrable difference. The character and life of the great nineteenth-century Christian soldier General Charles Gordon, sometimes known as “Chinese Gordon” or “Gordon of Khartoum,” is a striking example. In his book on the recapture of Sudan, Winston Churchill described General Gordon as “a man careless alike of the frowns of men or the



smiles of women, of life or comfort, wealth or fame.” But these words came almost directly from Gordon himself. “The more one sees of life...” Gordon wrote, “the more one feels, in order to keep from shipwreck, the necessity of steering by the Polar Star, i.e. in a word leave to God alone, and never pay attention to the favors or smiles of man; if He smiles on you, neither the smile or frown of men can affect you.”

General Gordon was eventually abandoned and left to die in the siege of Khartoum because of the moral cowardice of Prime Minister William Gladstone and his Cabinet in London. His end at the hand of the Mahdi and his fanatical followers is legendary. But his calling-inspired strength was equally legendary throughout his entire life.

“Do you know, Gordon Pasha,” snarled the cruel King John of Abyssinia in an earlier incident, “that I could kill you on the spot if I liked?”

“I am perfectly well aware of it, Your Majesty,” Gordon replied. “Do so at once if it is your royal pleasure. I am ready.”

“What, ready to be killed?”

“Certainly. I am always ready to die...”

“Then my power has no terrors for you?” the king gasped.

“None whatever!” Gordon answered, and the king left him, amazed.

After Gordon’s death John Bonar, a Scottish friend, wrote to Gordon’s brother.

“What at once, and always struck me was the way in which his oneness with God ruled all his actions, and his mode of seeing things. I never knew one who seemed so much to ‘endure as seeing Him who is invisible.’” Gordon, he concluded, seemed “to live with God, and for God.”

General Charles Gordon, peerless military strategist, legendary commander, and mostly all-conquering victor, lived so closely before the Audience of One that when his time came he had only a short step home. Like all for whom God’s call is decisive, it could be said of him, “I live before the Audience of One. Before others I have nothing to prove, nothing to gain, nothing to lose.”

Do you wish to be inner-directed rather than other-directed and truly make one audience decisive, the Audience of One? Listen to Jesus of Nazareth; answer his call.

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