

Sunday, October 2, 2011: Philippians 3:4b-14

by [Clay Oglesbee](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue

An organization was leading a training seminar for professionals. At one point the leader asked participants to imagine themselves setting out on an adventure with only ten items in each of their packs. A few minutes later, they were told that an imagined mishap had occurred and that it was necessary to leave behind five items and keep five. Soon they were required to reduce their possessions to three, and finally to only one. Many participants found that even after losing a great many things, they still had enough "stuff."

What would you choose to keep and what would you leave behind? What would be the one remaining possession? The choice would depend on the nature of the trip and your goals.

As Christians, sufficiency is a function of our God-donated direction in life—and the work or way to which we're called. "My grace is sufficient," God insists.

It's easy to get confused on this point, even delusional and mystified. We forget that the goal of life's development and calling is not sizable bank accounts, shelves of trophies or prestige in the eyes of our colleagues. The goal of life, according to Paul, is to gain a specific spiritual character and a specific spiritual destiny by becoming Christlike. Romans 8:29 offers a similar word: we are to be "conformed to the likeness" of Christ (NIV), who is "the radiance of God's glory" (Heb. 1:3, NIV) and "the visible image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15, NLT).

In *By Way of the Heart*, Jesuit author Wilkie Au wrote about the challenging passage a person faces in sorting out commitments to a vocation, an enduring relationship or a particular cause. He portrayed what happens as we wrestle and struggle with choosing a direction or a goal. We pray about the options, hesitating to make the choice and fearful of making a mistake, pestering and plaguing God for guidance. We weigh motives, desires and voices of influence. One friend followed Au's counsels and reported that the only answer he seemed to receive was, "I don't care what you do. My concern for you is the kind of person you become. Will you show the fruit of the Spirit? Will you become loving, gentle, patient and generous? Will you

display the beatitudes of Christ—mourning over the sorrows of the earth and seeking to become a peacemaker in every circumstance?"

My friend hoped that he'd soon receive God's real answer to his dilemma, something more exciting or less demanding. But the answers were right in front of him. God does not gladly frustrate us. The goal really is Christlike hearts, minds, lives and ultimate destinations.

The first time I heard Christians referred to as "little Christs" was in one of Martin Luther's works. The notion seemed presumptuous and weird. Many years ago a church member told me repeatedly that he thought I was Christ. He then told my superintendent, my bishop, the Roman Catholic hierarchy and a few other people the same thing. His perspective was a bit askew—he also thought himself to be God the Father!

Martin Luther's comment, however, was not based on an extravagant or neurotic misunderstanding of Christian teaching. It was a simple and profound insight about such teaching. Luther knew that the early followers of Jesus Christ were derogatorily called "little Christs" by their critics and enemies—a phrase probably first used by Roman officials at Antioch as early as 40 AD—and he used it to remind us that our goal is to embody and re-present Christ's presence in the world.

We should not be intimidated about seeking this goal. Marcus Borg tells of being in a church in Assisi, Italy, that was erected in honor of St. Francis. After touring the church, Borg reported that although it was "a masterpiece of architecture filled with some of the world's greatest art," Francis "would not have wanted such wealth spent on honoring him. He would have said, 'It's not about me.'" But building the basilica was not a mistake, added Borg, because "it reminds us of Francis . . . and because Francis pointed beyond himself to God and Jesus."

The same thought applies to "the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." The church points to Francis and all the saints by means of creeds, worship forms and magnificent artwork and through ministries of mercy, justice and witness. The saints in their witness say, "It is not about me" and point to Jesus. Jesus in turn points beyond himself to the reign of God and to the rule of God's mercy and justice among God's people. In our discipleship, we must always press beyond ourselves toward the immediacies of our time in the faces of the needy, the marginalized and our neighbors, even as we press toward the horizons of our hope—"forward to what lies ahead."