

AVAILABILITY

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This is an abbreviated, mildly revised version of a message I gave frequently to youthful Navigators audiences during the 1950s. World War II was still fresh in our minds.

Introduction

If we are wish to learn the biblical requirements for Christian leadership, a good place to look might be Acts 6:3 where, in connection with a certain problem that had arisen, the apostles instruct the emerging church in Jerusalem, “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.”

This suggests at least three basic qualities: spirituality, practical wisdom (what we might call ability) and availability.

Dick Halverson, long-time chaplain to the United States Senate, once told me, “The only ability God requires of all Christians is availability.” I’ve never forgotten that. So availability will be our subject for this session.

I. Why is Availability so important?

Because of the nature of God’s mission, which is both extensive and intensive. Frank W. Price, who before the rise of Mao Zedong was for many years a missionary to China, notes that God’s mission requires a global program, fluid strategy, and mobile striking forces.

The first is not possible with the second (God is working differently in Pakistan than in Taiwan, for example) and the second is impossible without the third; men must be available.

We are engaged in spiritual warfare against an enemy who, though essentially defeated, is clever and devious. During World War II President Roosevelt had a special untitled assistant, Harry Hopkins, who was available at a moment’s notice to go anywhere and do anything the President might wish. During the same conflict, Prime Minister Winston Churchill always maintained a mobile striking force east of Africa prepared to respond to any emergency in Egypt or Iraq or India.

II. In what respects in Availability necessary?

First, geographically. Am I able and willing to go anywhere in the world that God directs? I have a friend who believes God is calling him to be a missionary. But his wife cannot bear the thought of leaving the United States. She is unavailable and so, therefore, is he.

Second, time-wise. Am I able and willing to go now? You will recall the incident recorded in the Gospels where Jesus called a man to follow him. The man responded, "Yes, with pleasure – but first, let me go take care of some business."

Third, with respect to service. Am I able and willing to do whatever needs to be done at the moment, even if it means getting my hands dirty? You all know Charlie Riggs, one of the men Lorne Sanny trained. In preparation for one of the early Billy Graham crusades, Jerry Beavan, who was in charge of logistics, asked for volunteers. Charlie Riggs volunteered and was assigned an onerous task. He did it so well, and with such a positive attitude, that Beavan was greatly impressed and drew Billy Graham's attention to it. Today Charlie occupies a very prominent position in the Graham organization.

Fourth, socially. Am I able and willing to be used in all kinds of social situations? Doug Sparks, who comes from modest background, and was called as a missionary to Taiwan before he had a chance to finish college, nevertheless has had audiences with Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek more than once. It works the other way around as well. If you have been reared in affluence, will you be comfortable living and serving among the poor?

III. What Makes a Person Available?

I can think of a least a dozen things. Let me mention some just in passing, for your consideration, and then zero in on a few that I think are most crucial.

1. A person needs absolute faith in and submission to God's direction, on the one hand, and confidence in God's ordained leaders, on the other. The Old Testament patriarch, Job, could say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15). We need to trust not only God but our leaders as well. This is not always easy, but it is wisest.

A private in the army follows the directives of the commander in chief, but those directives come through a mediator, a whole chain of command. Always remember that your leader has a broader survey of the field than you have. A good verse to keep in mind is 2 Corinthians 8:5. Paul, the team leader is speaking, "Having given themselves

first of all to the Lord, they gave themselves by the will of God also to us.”

Cultivating the spirit of a volunteer is important. Isaiah said, “Here am I, Lord; send me.” God was under no obligation to send Isaiah, but God was never in doubt that Isaiah was ready and willing to go.

Maintaining one’s physical health is essential. Our bodies are God’s possession. It doesn’t pay to abuse another person’s property.

I have already noted the importance of being willing to do anything that helps meet a need, regardless of whether the specific activity appeals to us or not. And I have made reference to one’s ability and readiness to mix with any level of society. That’s one reason why, here at Glen Eyrie [at that time The Navigators training center] we have classes on etiquette and Christian diplomacy.

One factor often overlooked is the need to stay free of debt. Proverbs 22:7 points out that “the borrower is slave to the lender.” If you are somebody’s slave, it is unlikely you will be available to the Lord to go somewhere on short notice.

There is the matter of developing specialized training in language or other skills. I ask myself, What can I do that others cannot? And why has God given me this ability? Or led me to develop it? Recall that in Old Testament times, when God wanted a temple built, he chose a man noted for his specialized talent in the field. The story is told in 2 Chronicles chapter 2. And the book of Daniel records how young Hebrew men, taken captive by the Babylonians, were given specialized training with a eye to future service.

Today America has entered the global arena and more doors have been opened to missionary service than ever before. One eminently practical suggestion: along with whatever you are majoring in, study a language. What language? Pick one that serves vast populations: Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, for example. Yes, Chinese. One day the doors to China will re-open. Will you be available?

I am speaking to Navigators. You all know 2 Timothy 2:2. To be truly available to God, you must have a qualified man or woman to take your place when you are called. If you don’t have your Timothy prepared, you will be properly reluctant to leave. Moreover, your leader may not choose you for the new assignment. So get you man, train him well, and be ready to answer God’s call.

Above and beyond these, there are three other factors that demand our attention.

The first: You must cultivate a vision broader than your own immediate ministry. This is why the seventh star of Daws Trotman's Big Dipper illustration is World Vision. It's amazing how myopic some of us are. We pride ourselves on 20-20 vision. What we really need is bi-focal vision. Jesus said, "Lift up your eyes and look on the fields! They are ripe for harvest!" (John 4:35).

We all have a tendency to be preoccupied with what we are engaged in at the moment. As Paul said, "Everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 2:21). Reflect on the fact that a tiny pebble held close enough to your eye will block your entire field of vision.

Doug Sparks was not the first person Dawson Trotman invited to go to Taiwan. A more senior fellow – I won't mention his name – with a burgeoning campus ministry was approached initially. But he did not want to give up a good thing. Little did he realize that what God was doing in Taiwan was incredibly bigger and more fruitful.

The second: You must maintain a certain freedom from entanglements. I have already referred to indebtedness. What I have in mind now are possible entanglements in family, school, and work

The emphasis here is on entanglement. We all have obligations to our parents, our wives and husbands, our studies, our employers. But some of us are so tied up, we have no room to maneuver. Take family, for instance. Jesus was a loyal son, yet he insisted that his Father's interest had priority over his family (Luke 2:49). Speaking directly to the issue of marriage, the apostle Paul was prepared even to advise celibacy if necessary to "live in undivided devotion to the Lord" (I Corinthians 7: 35).

Take business. Roy Robertson, the first Navigator missionary, was in business with his father when Dawson Trotman asked him to go to China. Robertson had already cleared the decks, as it were, and he was packed and ready to leave within 48 hours.

Take education. For most of us in college, it is surely the Lord's intention that we complete our work and graduate on schedule with our bachelor's or graduate degree. But what if the Lord asked you to abort all that and accept a challenging assignment overseas? Would you be available? That was, in fact, the choice I had to make at the end of my junior year at Macalester when Daws asked me to go to the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Was Dr. Halverson right in asserting that the only ability God requires of Christians is availability? Perhaps he was exaggerating a bit to make a point. But if we are committed to taking the gospel to the whole world in the tumultuous times in which we live, we will need a fluid strategy; and an integral part of that overall plan must be the mobile strike forces Dr. Price spoke of. For this we will need women and men who make themselves unreservedly available to the Master. Will you be one of them?