



Get A Life: Winning Choices for Working People

by Paul Valler

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reviewed by Sally Orwin

Paul Valler describes his mission as 'helping people to make the right choices'.

His own career has involved some interesting changes of direction: formerly Finance and Human Resources Director of Hewlett Packard, he now leads a portfolio lifestyle including a role as Associate Speaker on faith and work for the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity.

In his book, *Get a Life*, he presents his reflections on how individual choices have the potential to lead us into the *shalom* that God intends for us. Valler uses the contemporary vocabulary and concepts of the psychologist and the manager to frame the problem. He explains how the malaise of his own life was challenged when he was 'forced to get to grips with the tension between three key dimensions of my life: who I was (identity), why I was here

(purpose), and what I should do (choices)' (p.17). In an 'always-on' world (p16) we become 'tired, trapped and troubled' by our lack of awareness of who we are and why we are here, resulting in a life of *fragmentation* as opposed to *integration*.

In three parts to the book he addresses these three dimensions in 'bite-sized' chapters. He adopts this style in order to meet the stressed and time-pressured worker at their point of need: grabbing a sandwich at lunchtime, or the half hour spent on the daily commute. He is frank about drawing on his experience as a professional man working in the world of corporate business, but he includes anecdotal snapshots of individuals with whom most readers will identify. His suggestions and application of scriptural insight will resonate with the experience of men and women of all ages and

circumstances. He addresses what lies at the heart of our discontent, namely 'worshipping our own little 'gods' of money, work, property, status, popularity, sex, our children, another person, our self-interests'. Our attention and passion is diverted and we fail to stay focused on the true and living God (p.25).

In part 1, *Living Authentically*, Valler offers practical suggestions towards living with an 'authentic, open and consistent Christian identity' (p39). It is not until we recognise we have a problem that we can begin to frame the solution. The route to integration lies in understanding and living out our identity as those redeemed for a new life in Christ. Seeking identity in the fickle world of work creates anxiety and deception when we hide our identity as Christians at work. Instead, Valler encourages us to stay connected in a community of believers who can help us face

the reality of a fallen world, and to ground the whole of our lives in prayer with others to help overcome our sense of isolation or 'exile' at work (pp.52-57). Valler's contribution to raising awareness and providing suggestions to help Christians tackle these issues is timely and valuable.

Making the right choices is the theme of part 2. Valler considers to what extent we are honest with our own internal struggles, how trust nurtures powerful relationships, the power of time and money and how our misguided worship of self leads to corruption in our use of them. We become slaves to time and money instead of regarding them as valuable resources with which to serve God's purposes in the world.

The book goes on in part 3 to examine how we might negotiate the process of *developing purpose*. In Chapter 22 entitled *Spirited Conviction*, Valler speaks of Jesus' relationship with the Father and how we see the 'quiet working out of choices in his heart in communion with his Father' (p.145). Valler's scripturally authoritative exploration of this relationship within the Trinity speaks volumes in a world where we look for the quick fix. He speaks of 'the quiet purpose and passion of someone who is clear about their "calling"'

(p.151). He breathes new life into the tired old mission statement through recognising that this is not something that is born of self but of prayerful, joyful, occasionally painful reflection and submission to Christ (p.152).

Whilst Valler does acknowledge that behind all our motives 'lurks the idol of self' (p175), I suggest the thrust of the book would benefit from a frank acknowledgement of God as a jealous God. We struggle in an age of postmodern individualism to understand what it means for us that God's jealousy of His glory is expressed in His longing to draw us back to Himself and restore a right and intimate relationship between Himself and His people. Both collectively as the church and on a personal basis He chose us first. In the light of this overwhelming love, Valler's exhortation to us to make *God our primary focus* (p.176) appears not quite radical enough.

It is in the times when we are most tired, trapped and troubled that we question our enlightenment-fuelled right to make choice. It is the radical and overwhelming intimacy of God's choice to love us first, often portrayed in Scripture in the language of human relationships which allows us some hope of grasping the significance of God's choice to love us, given that by

our nature as His creatures we will always fail to chose Him before we choose Self.

Valler does acknowledge that 'God's solution is to take us out of ourselves to love him... The key principle is 'all-ness', wholeness, entirety. When our heart, mind and will are oriented towards God, when our spirit, soul and body seek him, valuing him above all else and enjoying him, we are in Shalom' (p.175), but it is only through God's initiative to take us out of ourselves in the first place. Valler touches on this in chapter 20 in which he explores the fact that 'instinctively we know that there is something missing in the purely rational approach' (p.130) in which 'our mental reasoning is incomplete without this heartfelt conviction' and the deeper level of assurance of knowing God's will which can only be found in making a choice to 'create a space where God can reach me' (p.112).

Valler encourages us through a process of recognising and abandoning the gods of money, status and power, and ultimately the service of self. His practical and heartfelt suggestions to help us negotiate the circumstances of modern life are invaluable as we stumble towards living integrated lives in response to God's unconditional grace and love. ■

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■ Sally Orwin has degrees in History and Psychology, and provides consultancy in change and development to charities, individuals and small firms following 10 years as Practice Director of Arca, an architectural practice she co-founded in Manchester in 1998. Her expertise lies in supporting organisational and individual performance through professional and personal development. ■