

GOD AT WORK

Every Christian has a particular calling from God.

(First in a series)

by Gene Edward Veith

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God healed me.

I wasn't feeling well, so I went to the doctor. The nurse ran some tests; the lab technicians identified the problem; the doctor wrote me a prescription; I had it filled by the pharmacist. In no time, I was a lot better. It was God who healed me, and He did it through the medical vocations.

God gave me my daily bread.

He did it through the farmer who grew the grain, the truck driver who hauled it, the bakers at the factory, the stockers at the grocery store and the lady at the checkout counter. It was God who fed me—just as I prayed in the Lord's Prayer—and He did it through the vocations of ordinary people just doing their jobs.

God talked to me.

The pastor read God's Word. In the sermon, he drew out of the Bible God's Law, which cut me to the quick. Then he proclaimed the Gospel of how Christ has done everything for my salvation. When I confessed my sins, God, through His Word as delivered by the pastor, told me I was forgiven.

This is the doctrine of vocation. The term literally means "calling."

According to Luther, every Christian is called to particular offices and tasks, through which God Himself works to govern and care for His created order.

God teaches through teachers; He protects us through the vocations of police officers, firefighters, soldiers and government officials; He brings beauty through artists; He proclaims His Word and administers His Sacraments through pastors.

God could have created each new batch of children from the dust, as He did Adam, said Luther. But instead, He chose to create new life by means of mothers and fathers. It is still God who creates and cares for little babies, but he does so through the vocation of parenthood. When parents bring their children to Baptism, provide for their needs, discipline them, bring them up in His Word, and raise them to adulthood, God is at work every step of the way.

Lutheran distinctives

Medieval Catholicism taught that only priests, nuns and those in other church-work professions have a vocation, a calling from God. The Reformation taught that *all Christians* have callings from God, including those who work in the so-called secular sphere.

Reformed Christians also believe in the doctrine of vocation, but their emphasis tends to be on “Law”: what the Christian should *do* as a distinctly Christian parent, businessperson, artist or tradesman.

The Lutheran emphasis is characteristically on “Gospel”: what *God does* through our human callings.

Lutherans emphasize how God works through means: In His spiritual kingdom, He works through the Word and Sacraments as means of grace. In His earthly kingdom, He works through the natural order and through human vocations.

Just as we receive God’s manifold blessings through other people, God works through us to bless others. Though our relationship to God is based totally on His grace, to which we can add nothing of our own, our relationship to our neighbors does call for good works. The doctrine of vocation has to do with our duties to love and serve our neighbors.

Of course, in a fallen world, we also sin in our vocations. We do not use our vocations to the fullest to serve our neighbors, as God intends. We misuse our gifts, act outside our callings, and struggle to carry out our responsibilities. In Luther’s terms, we bear our cross in our vocations. The doctrine of vocation amounts to a comprehensive theology of the Christian life.

Vocation and the Catechism

Luther identified four types of callings that every Christian has:

As a member of the church, as a member of a family, as someone who works, and as a citizen of a community.

The *Small Catechism* includes a “Table of Duties,” which consists of Scriptural direction for the various vocations. (Technically, only a Christian—who has been “called” by the Gospel—has a ‘vocation.’ Luther uses other terms—“office,” ‘estates,’ “stations”—for positions held by non-Christians, through whom God also can work.)

As one reads the “Table of Duties,” it is evident that one person can hold a number of different vocations at once. A man might be both a husband and a father, a master (to his employees) and a servant (to his boss). He is subject to the governing authorities and, possibly, a leader in his church. In each case, God’s Word gives direction for how we should live out our callings.

The *Small Catechism* also addresses vocation in the section on “The Office of the Keys,” in the questions dealing with what sins we should confess. We are told to “Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife or worker?” The Second Table of the Commandments—from “Honor your father and your mother” to the injunctions to respect your neighbor’s property and relationships—all have to do with vocation.

With the doctrine of vocation, everyday life is transfigured. We realize that the way to serve God is not by some extraordinary act of mystical devotion, but by serving our neighbors in the daily circumstances of life—in our families, our jobs, our church and our involvement in the community.

With the doctrine of vocation, ordinary relationships, the 9-to-5 routine, taking care of the kids, the work-a-day world—the way we spend most hours of the day—become charged with the presence of God.

Editor’s note—This is the first of six articles by Dr. Veith on vocation. Next month, he will write about how God works through you in your vocation.

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