

MASKS OF GOD

God works through you in your vocation, whatever it may be.

(Second in a series)

by Gene Edward Veith

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When I go into a restaurant, the waitress who brings me my meal, the cook in the back who prepared it, the delivery men, the wholesalers, the workers in the food-processing factories, the butchers, the farmers, the ranchers, and everyone else in the economic food chain are all being used by God to “give me this day my daily bread.”

This is the doctrine of vocation. God works through people, in their ordinary stations of life to which He has called them, to care for His creation. In this way, He cares for everyone—Christian and non-Christian—whom He has given life.

Luther puts it even more strongly: Vocations are “masks of God.” On the surface, we see an ordinary human face—our mother, the doctor, the teacher, the waitress, our pastor—but, beneath the appearances, God is ministering to us through them. God is hidden in human vocations.

The other side of the coin is that God is hidden in us. When we live out our callings—as spouses, parents, children, employers, employees, citizens, and the rest—God is working through us. Even when we do not realize it, when we fulfill our callings, we too are masks of God.

When a woman and a man, called into marriage, become parents, they sense the miracle that has happened, that God has created a new life through them. The miracle continues as God uses them to bring that child into His eternal kingdom when they bring their baby to Holy Baptism.

The sense of the miraculous may wear off in the routines of changing diapers, dealing with temper tantrums, earning a living to keep the kids fed and clothed, going to parent-teacher conferences, driving to soccer practice, and everything else. But Christian parents can have the confidence that God, who has given them this holy vocation, is hidden in their parenting, that He is caring for their child through them.

The purpose of vocation, according to Luther, is to love and serve the neighbor. Scripture says that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:20-31).

Our relationship with God is based solely on His grace and initiative, what He has done for us in Christ, and not by any works of our own. Our relationship with our neighbors, though, does involve our “works.” As Gustav Wingren, in his classic book *Luther on Vocation*, summarized Luther, “God does not need our good works. But our neighbor does.”

During the Reformation, Luther denied that those who sought to base their salvation on their good works—allegedly “serving God” through their ceremonies, fasts and elaborate spiritual

disciplines and mortifications of the flesh—were actually doing good works at all. “Who are you helping?” he would ask. A work that is truly good has to be of actual benefit to one’s neighbor.

In the spiritual kingdom, it is not a question of serving God with our works: He serves us through *His* works, in Word and Sacrament, which bring us into the redemption He achieved in the work of Jesus Christ. But the faith of the Christian bears fruit naturally and even unconsciously in love for one’s neighbor, a love whose source is God and which is carried out in vocation.

Christians would do well to echo the lawyer who asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). In the vocation of marriage, the husband is to love and serve his wife, and the wife is to love and serve her husband. Parents are to love and serve their child, and children are to love and serve their parents.

On the job, the neighbor being loved and served may be the boss, one’s employees, the customer. In our vocation as citizens, our neighbors to whom we are responsible to love and serve are our fellow citizens in need of good public policies.

To be sure, we often sin in and against our vocations. God did not call parents to abort or abuse their children, but to love and serve them. God called physicians to bring His healing to patients, not to kill them. God did not call businessmen to cheat their customers, but to provide for their needs. Government officials are not called to oppress their citizens, but to protect them.

Less dramatically, husbands and wives are to serve each other in love, not neglect each other. Workers need to do their jobs to the best of their ability. (The Reformation doctrine of vocation is said to have contributed to the so-called and fast-departing “Protestant work ethic.”) In the catechism, under “The Office of the Keys and Confession,” to the question, “What instruction does Dr. Luther give us for examining ourselves before Confession?” we are told to apply the Ten Commandments, very specifically, to our vocations:

“Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, master, mistress, servant; whether you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful; whether you have grieved any person by word or deed; whether you have stolen, neglected, or wasted aught, or done other injury.”

And yet, even though we sin and fall short in our vocations, God continues to work in them, even despite ourselves.

Wingren gives the example of a business owner who cares nothing for his neighbor; his only concern is to make money. And yet for all of his sinful selfishness, God still uses his business to provide useful products or services to the community (otherwise, he could never stay in business) and to provide employment so that his workers can take care of their families. Similarly, God brings children up through even imperfect parents (as we all are). He brings His saving Word and Sacraments even through imperfect pastors. God has a way of delivering His gifts in earthen vessels, but that by no means diminishes how valuable they are.

If we are masks of God, even when we do not realize it, it is also true that God is masked in our neighbor. Particularly when our neighbor is in need—when he or she is sick, hungry,

naked, a prisoner, a stranger—Christ Himself is hidden. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren,” the Lord says, “ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40).

In serving our neighbors, we end up serving Christ after all.

Next month Dr. Veith will write about our vocations in the family.—Ed.

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