

The Doctrine of Vocation
How God Hides Himself in Human Work
Gene Edward Veith



The purpose of one's vocation, whatever it might be, is serving others. It has to do with fulfilling Christ's injunction to love one's neighbor.

The word "calling," or in its Latinized form "vocation," had long been used in reference to the sacred ministry and the religious orders. Martin Luther was the first to use "vocation" to refer also to secular offices and occupations. Today, the term has become common-place, another synonym for a profession or job, as in "vocational training." But behind the term is the notion that every legitimate kind of work or social function is a distinct "calling" from God, requiring unique God-given gifts, skills, and talents. Moreover, the Reformation doctrine of vocation teaches that God himself is active in everyday human labor, family responsibilities, and social interactions.

For instance, to take one of Luther's examples, we pray in the Lord's Prayer that God give us our daily bread, which he does. He does so, not directly as when he gave manna to the Israelites, but through the work of farmers and bakers—and we might add truck drivers and retailers. In effect, the whole economic system is the means by which God gives us our daily bread. Each part of the economic food chain is a *vocation*, through which God works to distribute his gifts. Similarly, God heals the sick. While he can and sometimes does do so directly, in the normal course of things he works through doctors, nurses, and other medical experts. God protects us from evil, with the vocation of the police officer. God teaches through teachers, orders society through governments, proclaims the Gospel through pastors.

Luther pointed out that God could populate the earth by creating each new generation of babies from the dust. Instead, He ordained that human beings should come together to bring up children in families. The offices of husband, wife, and parent are *vocations* through which God works to rear and care for children. (1)

In other words, in his earthly kingdom, just as in his spiritual kingdom, God bestows his gifts through *means*. God ordained that human beings be bound together in love, in relationships and communities existing in a state of interdependence. In this context, God is providentially at work caring for his people, each of whom contributes according to his or her God-given talents, gifts, opportunities, and stations. Each thereby becomes what Luther terms a "mask of God":

All our work in the field, in the garden, in the city, in the home, in struggle, in government—to what does it all amount before God except child's play, by means of which God is pleased to give his gifts in the field, at home, and everywhere? These are the masks of our Lord God, behind which he wants to be hidden and to do all things. (2)

God, who pours out his generosity on the just and the unjust, believer and unbeliever alike, hides himself in the ordinary social functions and stations of life, even the most humble. To use another of Luther's examples, God himself is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid. (3)

Demonstrating Love of Neighbor

All of the vocations are thus channels of God's love. Gustaf Wingren, the Swedish theologian whose *Luther on Vocations* is probably the best book on the subject, summarizes the point:

In his vocation man does works which effect the well-being of others; for so God has made all offices. Through this work in man's offices, God's creative work goes forward, and that creative work is love, a profusion of good gifts. With persons as his "hands" or "coworkers," God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations, toward man's life on earth (food through farmers, fishermen and hunters; external peace through princes, judges, and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc., etc.). Through the preacher's vocation, God gives the forgiveness of sins. Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations, through both spiritual and earthly governments. (4)

Thus, God is graciously at work, caring for the human race through the work of other human beings. Behind the care we have received from our parents, the education we received from our teachers, the benefits we receive from our spouse, our employers, and our government stands God himself, bestowing his blessings.

The picture is of a vast, complex society of human beings with different talents and abilities. Each serves the other; each is served by others. We Americans have an ideal of self-sufficiency and often dream of being able to grow our own food, build our own homes, and live independently of other people. But our proper human condition is *dependence*. Because of the centrality of love, we are to depend on other human beings and, ultimately and through them, on God. Conversely, other people are to depend on us. In God's earthly kingdom, we are to receive his blessings from other people in their vocations.

The purpose of one's vocation, whatever it might be, is serving others. It has to do with fulfilling Christ's injunction to love one's neighbor. Though justification has nothing to do with good works, vocation does involve good works. The Christian's relationship to God is based on sheer grace and forgiveness on God's part; the Christian's relationship to other people, however, is to be based on love. As Wingren puts it, "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does." (5)

Certainly, human beings still sin in vocation. (6) We violate God's law and neglect our responsibilities to love and serve others selflessly in our work and offices. Though we resist God's project of working through us, there is something about vocation itself that makes good things happen despite ourselves. There is, in fact, as Wingren shows, a great conflict and irony, between our generally selfish motivations and the way the masked God works in vocation:

Here we come across what for Luther is the decisive contrast between God's self-giving love and man's egocentricity. The human being is self-willed, desiring that whatever happens shall be to his own advantage. When husband and wife, in marriage, serve one another and their children, this is not due to the heart's spontaneous and undisturbed expression of love, every day and hour. Rather, in marriage as an institution something compels the husband's selfish desires to yield and likewise inhibits the egocentricity of the wife's heart. At work in marriage is a power which compels self-giving to spouse and children. So it is the "station" itself which is the ethical agent, for it is God who is active through the law on earth. (7)

The vocation of marriage itself causes selfish human beings to care for each other and support each other more than they would on their own. The vocation of parenthood causes normally selfish adults to sacrifice themselves for the well-being of their children.

By the same token, the owner of a company may have no interest whatsoever in loving his neighbor or serving others. His sole motivation may be greed. And yet, because of his vocation, he manages to give jobs to his employees so that they can support their families, his company provides products that other people need or enjoy, and, he is, inadvertently, a blessing to his neighbors.

Beginning Where We Are

How do we know our vocation? Strictly speaking, a vocation is not something we choose for ourselves; rather, it is given by God, who "calls" us to a particular work or station. Talents, skills, and inclinations are part of one's calling. So are external circumstances, which are understood as being providentially arranged by God. Since vocation is not

self-chosen, it can be known, too, through the actions of others. Getting offered a job, being elected to an office, finding someone who wants to marry you are all clues to vocation.

Essentially, one's vocation is to be found in the place one occupies in the present. A person stuck in a dead-end job may have higher ambitions, but *for the moment*, that job, however humble, is one's vocation. Flipping hamburgers, cleaning hotel rooms, emptying bedpans all have dignity as vocations, spheres of expressing love of neighbor through selfless service, in which God is masked. Perhaps later, another vocation will present itself. But vocation is to be found not simply in future career decisions, but in the here and now. Nor can one use the excuse of "not having a vocation for marriage" for getting a divorce, or claim "not having a vocation for parenthood" as a way to dump child-raising responsibilities. If you are married, that's your vocation. If you have children, they are your vocation.

Vocations are also multiple. (8) Any given person has many vocations. A typical man might be, simultaneously, a husband (serving his wife), a father (serving his children), a son (serving his still-living parents), an employer (serving his workers), an employee (serving his bosses), a citizen (serving his country). Note how a person at a particular job can be both a "master," charged with supervising subordinates, and, at the same time, a "servant," answerable to superiors, whether a CEO or stockholders. Leadership and submission may both be called for, as the different vocations make their claims.

Different vocations have their own kinds of authority and spheres of action, and they operate under different rules. It would be the grossest immorality for someone to make perfect strangers take off their clothes and cut them open with a knife. But this is permissible for someone who is carrying out the vocation of being a doctor. (9) Having sex is immoral outside of marriage, but it is a great good within the vocation of marriage.

When someone injures us, our impulse is to take personal revenge, which is sharply forbidden by Scripture. Punishing crimes-whether this involves high-speed chases, shoot-outs, throwing someone in jail, or executing them- simply is not our vocation. This is, however, the vocation of police officers, judges, and the rest of the legal system (Romans 12:19-13:4).

A corollary is that problems will arise when people try to act outside of their vocations. When we work outside of our vocation-that is, without regard to our God-given abilities, authority, and station in life-we usually bungle the job or, more seriously, violate the moral law. It is possible-and common-to pursue occupations for which we have no aptitude. I have taught many students who choose their major in college based on which job pays the most, regardless of their own gifts. They turn themselves into accountants or managers or engineers, though they end up hating their work and not being very good at what they are trying to do. Their true vocation might be music or art, but they are trying to be "practical"-as if vocation were self-chosen-and they deny their true God-given gifts to pursue talents they do not really have. There are people in the teaching profession who do not really have gifts that enable them to be good teachers. There are politicians who just are not cut out to be rulers. On the one hand, the person in those stations does have a calling and a responsibility to serve as politician or teacher, but they would do better to build on their own specific gifts.

More serious confusion comes when those with one vocation trespass on the prerogatives of another vocation. Again, private citizens have no right to "take the law into their own hands," nor do rulers of the state have the right to take over the rearing of children, which is the vocation of parents. Luther was particularly vehement when earthly rulers presumed to tell pastors what to preach, expressing himself in a way that should put to rest the accusation that he was servile to secular rulers: "You fool," he told them, "you simpleton, look to your own vocation; don't you take to preaching, but let your pastor do that." (10)

All Christians are "called" by the Gospel into faith. The pastor's "calling" is, of course, a vocation of particular importance. Through the pastor's preaching, teaching, shepherding, and administering of the sacraments, God himself is working, bringing sinners to himself through the work of a human being. Laypeople too have vocations they can bring into the life of the church-playing the organ, administering property, singing in the choir, helping with the various committees and programs, and otherwise using their gifts in service to the church. The notion that "everyone is a minister," however, is a confusion of vocation. (11)

There have been times when I have had church obligations every night of the week-sometimes to the neglect of my vocation as husband (I need to spend time with my wife) and my vocation as father (I need to spend time with my children). Those vocations are "my ministry," more so than explicit "church work." To be sure, laypeople need to witness to their faith-but we can be most effective in doing so, not when we do the same things a pastor does, but

when we witness *in our vocation*. At the workplace, we are in contact with people the pastor may never see. In the family, we can witness to our spouse and children. As we serve people in vocation, we can help to bring them into the church. But to think that the "church work professions" constitute the only true service of God is to repeat the mistakes of the medieval church, which exalted "the religious orders" but considered the secular orders-including marriage and ordinary productive work-as having less spiritual value.

Thus, making a living, going shopping, being a good citizen, and spending time with one's family-that is, the "ordinary routine"-are all spheres in which God is at work, through human means. In a time when we define ourselves by our work and yet question its value, when we crave family values but are confused about our social roles, the doctrine of vocation can transfigure everyday life.

1 [[Back](#)] *Exposition of Psalm 147*, quoted by Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1994), 138.

2 [[Back](#)] *Exposition of Psalm 147*, quoted by Wingren, 138.

3 [[Back](#)] Cited by Wingren, 9.

4 [[Back](#)] *Ibid.*, 27-28.

5 [[Back](#)] *Ibid.*, 10.

6 [[Back](#)] And there are some occupations-such as robber, drug dealer, hit-man, or pornographer-that are not vocations at all, since they are intrinsically sinful, being incompatible with the love of neighbor, aiming to hurt and corrupt rather than to serve.

7 [[Back](#)] Wingren, 6.

8 [[Back](#)] *Ibid.*, 5.

9 [[Back](#)] A doctor who does such things outside of his vocation, on the other hand, would still be liable for the crimes of sexual assault or murder.

10 [[Back](#)] *Exposition of John 1 and 2*, quoted in Wingren, 114.

11 [[Back](#)] See *Modern Reformation*, March/April 1997, especially Michael Horton, "What About Bob?," 8-15, and D. G. Hart, "Recovering the Keys of the Kingdom in an Age of Equipped Saints," 16-20

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