

The Doctrine of Vocation



Introduction

In making conversation with a new acquaintance, one of the first questions we tend to ask is, “What do you do?” We’d be surprised if someone answered, “Well, I do a lot of things. I sing in the shower. I eat sushi. I mow my lawn every Saturday. And I watch a lot of TV.” That’s not the kind of answer we’d be looking for. What we really meant to ask was, “What do you do for a living? What is your job?”

We tend to think that, in large part, a person’s *job* defines who that person *is*. In describing ourselves, we might even say, “I am an auto mechanic.” “I am an engineer.” “I am a teacher.” Those who do not get paid for their work, such as homemakers, full-time students, or retirees, may feel out of sync with such an approach. Why? Because a person’s job serves as an indication of his or her status in the world.

Vocation, however, includes more than just one’s occupation. According to an individual’s many callings in life, a person may be a husband or a wife, a father or a mother, a son or a daughter, a friend, a neighbor, a citizen, an employer, a mentor, or a volunteer in the community. The list goes on and on.

Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions proclaim and teach the true meaning of vocation. As children of God, we not only have a place in God’s heavenly kingdom, but we also have been given a new status here in God’s earthly kingdom. How do we balance this dichotomy?

Christians are faced with many questions about living a Christian life in a secular world: How can I live a Christian life in a secular workplace? Is my job, which is not directly affiliated with the Church, God-pleasing? How can I balance my calling as a Christian with my calling as a citizen of this community?

This study will examine these questions from a distinctly Lutheran perspective. The richness of the Gospel will be extolled as we explore this doctrine of vocation—a Christian’s service to others and their service to us in this world.

God’s Gifts through Vocation

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true. (Martin Luther, explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed in the Small Catechism)

In the late 1980s, the world was instructed in the philosophical wisdom of Bobby McFerrin with his catchy little tune “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” In it, McFerrin warns against worry because when we do, we “make it double.” In contrast, Jesus instructed His disciples, “Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on” (Luke 12:22).

1. What is the difference between McFerrin’s carefree, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” attitude to life and Jesus’ words of consolation to His disciples?

God Provides All That Is Needful

2. Read Luke 12:23–28. How does Jesus show that God provides for all of His creation? What special place in this world has God given to human beings compared to the birds or the flowers in the fields?
3. How do we know—especially in the midst of sickness, suffering, and death—that God will provide for our daily needs?
4. How does Luther’s explanation of the First Article of the Creed, quoted above, relate to the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread”?
5. Discuss some of the many ways that God provides for our daily bread. Through whom does He provide it?
6. Read Luke 12:29–34. What gift is even more important than God’s provision of clothing, food, and drink? How does knowing this help us to keep things in perspective when we believe we are in want?
7. List some of the differences between the ways that believers and unbelievers consider their temporal goods.

God’s Gifts to You and through You

What else is all our work to God—whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in war, or in government—but [means] by which He wants to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things... We have the saying: “God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand.” God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the bull by the horns; that is, you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask. (Martin Luther, AE 14:1 14–15)

8. Luther described the various occupational roles—parents, farmers, laborers, soldiers, judges, retailers, and the like—as being “masks of God” (*larvae Dei*). Discuss how God has served you and continues to serve you behind the “masks” of other people. Give concrete examples.
9. Discuss how God is actively serving others through the vocations you have been given.

Gospel Character of Vocation

The doctrine of vocation is a great comfort for the Christian. Although vocation is an exercise of God’s Law, it is very much driven and enabled by the Gospel. Because of sin, we all fail in our vocations, but God is continually with us, offering us the forgiveness of sins through Christ. He serves others through us despite our failures. Ultimately, we cannot take credit for the good works that we do because they are God’s work.

10. Read John 15:5. Why is it not possible to do anything good apart from Christ (see also Romans 14:23; Ephesians 2:1)? How does your relationship with Christ affect your relationship with others?
11. How might God be serving others through you, perhaps even without your knowledge or despite your imperfections and sinfulness?

Spiritual Exercises

- This week, write on a sheet of paper the many ways that God is serving you through the vocations of others. Meditate on Psalm 145, praying portions of it each day and thanking God for each of these gracious provisions.
- Take time to examine yourself, identifying your many vocations and relationships with others, as Luther teaches in the section on Confession in the Small Catechism: “Consider your place in life

according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?” Confess your sins privately to God; to your neighbor, if you have harmed him or her; or if your conscience is troubling you greatly, confess to your pastor, and receive the forgiveness of Christ.

- Reflecting upon what you’ve learned in this lesson, read Matthew 6:1–34. Study the section on the Lord’s Prayer in Luther’s Small Catechism.

Point to Remember

Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Matthew 6:8

To prepare for “Faith, Love, and the Christian Life,” read 1 Thessalonians 1:1–10.