

## **Introduction: The Christian's Calling in the World**

When we pray the Lord's prayer, observed Luther, we ask God to give us this day our daily bread. And He does give us our daily bread. He does it by means of the farmer who planted and harvested the grain, the baker who made the flour into bread, the person who prepared our meal. We might today add the truck drivers who hauled the produce, the factory workers in the food processing plant, the warehouse men, the wholesale distributors, the stock boys, the lady at the checkout counter. Also playing their part are the bankers, futures investors, advertisers, lawyers, agricultural scientists, mechanical engineers, and every other player in the nation's economic system. All of these were instrumental in enabling you to eat your morning bagel.

Before you ate, you probably gave thanks to God for your food, as is fitting. He is caring for your physical needs, as with every other kind of need you have, preserving your life through His gifts. "He provides food for those who fear him" (Psalm 111:5); also to those who do not fear Him, "to all flesh" (136:25). And He does so by using other human beings. It is still God who is responsible for giving us our daily bread. Though He could give it to us directly, by a miraculous provision, as He once did for the children of Israel when He fed them daily with manna, God has chosen to work through human beings, who, in their different capacities and according to their different talents, serve each other. This is the doctrine of vocation.

To use another of Luther's examples, God could have decided to populate the earth by creating each new person from the dust, as He did Adam. Instead, He chose to create new life through the vocation of husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. God calls men and women together and grants them the unfathomable ability to have children. He calls people into families, in which--through the love and care of the parents--He extends His love and care for children. This is the doctrine of vocation.

When we or a loved one gets sick, we pray for healing. Certainly God can and sometimes does grant healing through a miracle. But normally He grants healing through the vocations of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians, and the like. It is still God who heals us, but He works through the means of skilled, talented, divinely equipped human beings.

When God blesses us, He almost always does it through other people. The ability to read God's Word is an inexpressibly precious blessing, but reading is an ability that did not spring fully formed in our young minds. It required the vocation of teachers. God protects us through the cop on the beat and the whole panoply of the legal system. He gives us beauty and meaning through artists. He lets us travel through the ministry of auto workers, mechanics, road crews, and car dealers. He keeps us clean through the work of garbage collectors, plumbers, sanitation workers, and the sometimes undocumented aliens who clean our hotel rooms. He brings people to salvation through pastors and through anyone else who proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost. The fast-food worker, the inventor; the clerical assistant, the scientist; the accountant, the

musician--they all have high callings, used by God to bless and serve His people and His creation.

Not that they always seem that way, from the point of view of the people in those vocations. It is easy to see how all of these kinds of work are blessings to the rest of us, who receive their benefits; but from the perspective of the people slaving away in these vocations, their work is often a daily grind, a hard, boring, thankless task. Those in any particular line of work are usually doing it not from some high ideal but because they have to make a living. There may be some professions that are innately satisfying, but even high-paid and high-status jobs can wear the spirit down. Work often seems meaningless. It is a means to an end--survival; but it seems that we survive only to work. It consumes our time, our emotions, our after-hours preoccupations. It takes away the time we would like to spend with our families--though the vocation of family life is often a frustrating struggle as well--and as current technology puts us on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, our work consumes our lives.

Though work is a blessing, enjoyed even by Adam and Eve who were employed in the Garden of Eden "to work it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15), after the Fall we must labor in frustration and sweat: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground" (3:17-19).

Though Christians believe that God is active in the world, and though a little reflection demonstrates that He is active in human vocations, it is also true that the Devil is active in the world. On paper things should go well, with people helping one another and promoting the goals of peace and happiness that everyone claims to seek; but sin spoils everything. Many people in the world do not get their daily bread. Many parents abuse--or abort--their children instead of caring for them. Many husbands and wives are at each other's throats instead of being the "one flesh" that God called them to in marriage. Many politicians exploit, deceive, and tyrannize their people instead of protecting their interests. There are cops who abuse their authority, teachers who do not teach, doctors who kill their patients instead of healing them, pastors who distort God's Word.

People sin in their vocations, and they sin against their vocations. And in not being aware of what their vocations are--and that there is a spiritual dimension to work, family, and involvement in society--they are plagued by a lack of purpose, confused as to what they should do and how they should live and who they are. At a time when, according to the polls, people's major preoccupations are work and family, there has never been a greater need to recover the Christian doctrine of vocation.

It is odd that such a liberating, life-enhancing doctrine has become all but forgotten in our time, passed over in our seminaries, sermons, and Bible classes. But the doctrine of vocation makes up an important part of the spiritual heritage that contemporary Christians have, unfortunately, cut themselves off from and are in such great need of recovering. It is more than an understanding of work, more than the slogan that we should do

all things for the glory of God, more than a vague theological platitude. The teachings on the subject by the old Reformation theologians are remarkably specific and realistic, giving practical guidance for how this doctrine can be lived out in the real, fallen world. But more than that, the doctrine of vocation amounts to a comprehensive doctrine of the Christian life, having to do with faith and sanctification, grace and good works. It is a key to Christian ethics. It shows how Christians can influence their culture. It transfigures ordinary, everyday life with the presence of God.

### Vocation in History

Today, in an age of unbelief, many of the old theological words remain, even after the faith that gave them meaning is gone. For example, people who know nothing of the authority of Scripture still use words like inspiration and revelation, applying them to a work of art or to a business idea. Vision, mission, Spirit, and even more technical terms such as canon, hermeneutics, and synergism are all examples of theological language drained of its original content and turned to more secular senses. Vocation also has a common meaning today. It has become just another term for job, as in "vocational training" or "vocational education." The term, though, is a theological word, reflecting a rich body of biblical teaching about work, family, society, and the Christian life.

The term vocation is simply the Latin word for "calling." The Scripture is full of passages that describe how we have been called to faith through the Gospel (e.g., 2 Thessalonians 2:14), how God calls us to a particular office or way of life (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 7:15-20). The doctrine of vocation is thoroughly biblical, as shall be seen; but, as with other scriptural teachings, it surfaced and was developed with its greatest rigor during the Reformation.

In the medieval church, having a vocation or having "a calling" referred exclusively to full-time church work. If a person felt a calling, this was a sign that he or she might "have a vocation," which meant becoming a priest, a monk, or a nun. The ordinary occupations of life--being a peasant farmer or kitchen maid, making tools or clothing, being a soldier or even king--were acknowledged as necessary but worldly. Such people could be saved, but they were mired in the world. To serve God fully, to live a life that is truly spiritual, required a full-time commitment. The "counsels of perfection" could be fulfilled only in the Holy Orders of the church, in which a man or woman could devote every day to prayer, contemplation, worship, and the service of God. Even marriage and parenthood--though recognized as good things, with marriage being seen as a sacrament from God--were seen as encumbrances to the religious life. "Having a vocation" meant, among other things, the willingness and the ability to live a celibate life.

The Reformation came about out of a conviction that the church had drifted away from the truths of God's Word, focusing on salvation through humanly-invented works, as opposed to the Gospel of forgiveness through the work of Christ. In scrutinizing the existing ecclesiastical system, in light of the Gospel and the Scriptures, the Reformers insisted that priests and nuns and monastics did not have a special claim to God's favor, but that laypeople too could live the Christian life to its fullest.

The Reformation notion of "the priesthood of all believers" by no means denigrated the pastoral office, as is often assumed, or taught that pastors or church workers were unnecessary, or taught that everybody could come up with their own theology for themselves. Rather, it taught that the pastoral office is a vocation, a calling from God with its own responsibilities, authority, and blessings. But it also taught that laypeople as well had vocations, callings of their own that entailed holy responsibilities, authorities, and blessings of their own. Not all believers were pastors or church workers. They didn't have to be in order to be perfect before God, a status attained through the blood of Christ; but all believers were priests. All believers, like the priests of the Old Testament, can come into the presence of God through the blood of the Lamb. All believers can handle holy things (such as the Bible, earlier denied to the laity). All can proclaim the Gospel to those who need its saving message. "The priesthood of all believers" means that all Christians enjoy the same access to Christ and are spiritually equal before Him.

"The priesthood of all believers" did not make everyone into church workers; rather, it turned every kind of work into a sacred calling. A major issue at the time was the prohibition of marriage for people in the religious orders. The Reformers looked at Scripture and insisted that marriage is ordained by God and that the family, far from being something less spiritual than the life of a hermit or anchorite, is the arena for some of the most important spiritual work. A father and a mother are "priests" to their children, not only taking care of their physical needs, but nourishing them in the faith. Every kind of work, including what had heretofore been looked down upon--the work of peasants and craftsmen--was an occasion for priesthood, for exercising a holy service to God and to one's neighbor.

The Reformation was accompanied by great social change. This was largely due to the expansion of education to all classes and walks of life. Again, this was part of the priesthood of all believers, the conviction that every Christian should be able to read the Word of God. That meant that it was imperative to teach every Christian to read. Before, this skill was in short supply even among the wealthy and the ruling classes. About the only people who could read in the Middle Ages were people in church work vocations. The bureaucrats and record-keepers necessary for government and business were, of course, also literate, and while laypeople could learn to read in church institutions, most of these functions were often performed by minor clergy--the word cleric comes from cleric. The Reformation churches, on the other hand, launched an ambitious general education program in an active effort to teach everyone--girls as well as boys, peasants as well as landowners--how to read God's Word.

Someone who has learned how to read the Bible can then take that skill and read just about anything. Interestingly, though, the schools started by the Reformation churches went beyond basic literacy and Bible reading. They implemented the classical "liberal" education, pioneered by the Greeks and Romans to equip a free citizen to develop all of his gifts (the term coming from libera, the Latin word for "freedom"). Though the Greeks and Romans had a separate, occupational education for slaves, the Reformation offered even the lower classes a classical Christian education that would prove "liberating" throughout the social order.

The Reformation, concerned primarily with the individual's relationship with God, bore fruit in the secular realm with social mobility, an economic boom, and eventually political freedoms. These were sparked not only by the new education, but also by the related teachings about the doctrine of vocation. Luther's "Small Catechism" with its "Table of Duties" placed vocation at the center of every layman's Christian instruction, just as his "Large Catechism" developed the doctrine in detail for pastors. Calvin and his followers likewise emphasized the Christian's vocation in the world, and the Puritans applied the doctrine with a diligence and intensity that would shape American culture.

The doctrine of vocation looms behind many of the Protestant influences on the culture, though these are often misunderstood. If Protestantism resulted in an increase in individualism, this was not because the theology turned the individual into the supreme authority. Rather, the doctrine of vocation encourages attention to each individual's uniqueness, talents, and personality. These are valued as gifts of God, who creates and equips each person in a different way for the calling He has in mind for that person's life. The doctrine of vocation undermines conformity, recognizes the unique value of every person, and celebrates human differences; but it sets these individuals into a community with other individuals, avoiding the privatizing, self-centered narcissism of secular individualism.

The Reformation may have resulted in a "Protestant work ethic," but this was not due to the pressure to prove one's election by worldly success, as certain social scientists ludicrously maintain. Rather, the work ethic emerged out of an understanding of the meaning of work and the satisfaction and fulfillment that come from ordinary human labor when seen through the light of the doctrine of vocation.

That the Reformation was the time in which the Protestant church enjoyed its greatest cultural influence--in art, literature, music, as well as in social institutions--also has to do with the doctrine of vocation. Recovering this doctrine may well open the way for contemporary Christians to influence their cultures once again.

#### The Purpose for This Book

This book is an exposition of the doctrine of vocation and an attempt to apply that doctrine in a practical way to life in the twenty-first century. First, it will explore the nature of vocation--what is the purpose of vocation, how to find one's vocation, how God calls us to people and situations and how He is present in what we do in our everyday lives. Then the book will address specific vocations and specific problems common to them all.

According to the Reformers, each Christian has multiple vocations. We have callings in our work. We have callings in our families. We have callings as citizens in the larger society. And we have callings in the Church.

Each of these has become a major concern--and problem--for contemporary Christians. What does it mean to be a Christian businessman or a Christian artist or a Christian

lawyer, scientist, construction worker, or whatever? How can I serve God in my work? And what if I don't have one of these fulfilling jobs? What about my dead-end job? And how can I know what God is calling me to, what my vocation is supposed to be? How can I know what I am supposed to do with my life?

And what does it mean to have a Christian family? How am I supposed to raise my kids? And what if I don't have kids? What if I am single--that state largely ignored by "family-oriented" church programs? What if I want to be married but can't find the right person? If I am married, how am I supposed to relate to my spouse? How are parents supposed to relate to their kids, and vice versa? What about all of these authority issues?

Should Christians become involved in politics? How can Christians function in a non-Christian or even anti-Christian culture? Should we take it over? Or let it take over us? Or abandon it? Do we always have to obey our rulers? How can Christians change things?

And what about the roles of pastors and laypeople in the Church? Who does what? Who submits to whom? How do church activities and responsibilities relate to our other activities and responsibilities? How do secular vocations relate to the work of, say, evangelism?

This book will address questions such as these. Not that it will in every case provide a straightforward answer to all of them, but it will provide a spiritual framework for thinking about such issues, and for acting upon them, perhaps, in a different way.

Unlike many books on how to succeed at work, how to succeed at family, and how to succeed at changing the world, this book will strive to be honest. The doctrine of vocation is utterly realistic, accounting for problems, sins, and confusions that beset each and every vocation. The Reformers had much to say about failing in vocation, about the times when our vocation seems to be bearing no fruit. What the Reformers say about "Bearing the Cross" in vocation, about the role of prayer in vocation and what it means to depend on God in desperate times, may be the most helpful and encouraging sections of the whole book.

I should say that this particular treatment of the topic is drawn mainly from Luther's understanding of vocation. Other theologians have written helpfully on the topic, from the Puritans to Os Guinness's recent book *The Call*. What is distinctive about Luther's approach is that instead of seeing vocation as a matter of what we should do--what we must do as a Christian worker or a Christian citizen or a Christian parent--Luther emphasizes what God does in and through our vocations. That is to say, for Luther, vocation is not just a matter of Law--though this is a part of vocation that neither Luther nor this book will neglect; rather, above all, vocation is a matter of Gospel, a manifestation of God's action, not our own. In this sense, vocation is not another burden placed upon us, something else to fail at, but a realm in which we can experience God's love and

grace, both in the blessings we receive from others and in the way God is working through us despite our failures.

Luther goes so far as to say that vocation is a mask of God. That is, God hides Himself in the workplace, the family, the Church, and the seemingly secular society. To speak of God being hidden is a way of describing His presence, as when a child hiding in the room is there, just not seen. To realize that the mundane activities that take up most of our lives--going to work, taking the kids to soccer practice, picking up a few things at the store, going to church--are hiding-places for God can be a revelation in itself. Most people seek God in mystical experiences, spectacular miracles, and extraordinary acts they have to do. To find Him in vocation brings Him, literally, down to earth, makes us see how close He really is to us, and transfigures everyday life.