

# God at Work

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## I. Every Christian has a particular calling from God.

God healed me.

I wasn't feeling well, so I went to the doctor. The nurse ran some tests; the lab technician 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 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 check-out counter. It was God who fed me – just as I prayed in the Lord's Prayer – and He did it through the vocations or 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 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 vocation. (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 Commandment: 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 injunction to respect your neighbors 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..

## **II. Masks of God:**

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

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 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, 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 conference, 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 12:30-31).

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 “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, or 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 the 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 the God is masked in our neighbor. Particularly when our neighbor is in need—when he or she is sick, hungry, thirsty, naked, a prisoner, a stranger—Christ himself is hidden. “Inasmuch as ye had done it unto one of the least of these my brethren,” the Lord says, “ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40).

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

### **III. Your Family Vocation: God works through us in our callings as parents, spouses and children.**

The church was packed for the funeral of a lady in her upper 80s. She and her late husband had had a lot of children, and here they were, along with a slew of grandchildren and a passel of great-grandchildren. Add in the spouses of the various generations, plus nieces and nephews and their children, and the church was pretty much filled with family, all coming before God to thank Him for her life and to commend her back to Him.

What if this woman *had not* happened to meet her husband in the 1930s? What if they *had not* gotten married? Half of the people in the church, from the middle-aged grandparents to the little kids squirming in the pews, would not exist. Their union had consequences they could never had dreamed about, leading to untold numbers of new lives down through continuing new generations, untold numbers of baptisms, new marriages and new children being born.

Clearly, God had worked through this woman, along with her husband and the family they started.

Every Christian—indeed, every human being—has been called by God into a family. Our very existence came about by means of our parents, who conceived us and brought us into the world. As Luther said, God could have populated the earth by creating each new person from the dust, as He did Adam, but instead He chose to bring forth new life through the vocation of parents.

In the *Large Catechism*, in his discussion of the Fourth Commandment, Luther says, “God has given this walk of life, fatherhood and motherhood, a special position of honor, higher than that of any other walk of life under it.” Luther describes how it is God at work in every human calling, no matter how humble, is a “mask of God.”

This is abundantly clear in the vocation of parenthood, through which God creates children, working through parents to nurture them, protect them, teach them how to live and bring them to faith. No wonder Christ teaches us to address God as our “Father.”

No wonder the calling of parenthood is lifted up in the Fourth Commandment, the foundational teaching of the Second Table of the Law.

“For all other authority is derived and developed out of the authority of parents,” Luther continues in the *Large Catechism*, relating parenthood to the other vocations. “Father by blood, father of a household [employees], and father of the nation [civic rulers]. In addition, there are also spiritual fathers [pastors].”

Not everyone is called to be a parent, of course, but everyone has parents. Being a child is also a holy calling, according to Luther, with a particular work (playing, learning) and particular obligations (honoring father and mother). Even when we are adults, as long as our parents are living, we are children to them, and this constitutes a major part of one’s family vocation.

### **Love and service**

Marriage is also a vocation from God. Just as God looms behind human parenthood, He is hidden in the intimacies and relationships of human marriage. In some remarkable passages of Scripture, St. Paul describes the union of marriage as “a great mystery,” which speaks of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:31-32). In that light, the wife sees Christ hidden in her husband, submitting to him as the church does to Christ (Ephesians 5:22-24). The husband, in turn, in his relationship with his wife, does for her what Christ has done for the church, giving himself for her (Ephesians 5:25).

Many people immediately jump to issues of authority when they think of vocation, discussing what authority parents have over their children, what authority husbands have over their wives—jumping to the other vocations to try to figure out what authority employers and civic rulers and pastors have over their charges. It is true that all

legitimate authority derives from God, who is indeed present in these vocations. But to reduce these relationships to matters of “obedience” is to construe the doctrine of vocation as Law, when it is really a matter of Gospel.

The essence and purpose of Christian vocation—from the point of view of the person holding the vocation and being a vehicle for God’s action—is love and service.

In a well-functioning family, the parents are loving and serving their children. The children are loving and serving their parents. The wife loves and serves her husband. The husband loves and serves his wife. (Just as employers and employees, pastors and congregation love and serve each other.)

### **Sin and repentance**

Since certain callings have authority, it is not usually necessary for those in those vocations to demand authority, since there is no reason to demand what they already have. Their charges will recognize their authority as a response to the love and service they have received.

To be sure, we sin in our family vocations. After exalting the authority of parents—and that of other earthly rulers—in the *Large Catechism*, Luther immediately calls them all to task. “Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement,” he writes, “as if it were no concern of our what they learn or how they live.”

Parents are not called to neglect or spoil or be cruel to their children. God did not bless a man with a wife so that he could dominate and misuse her. A woman was not called into motherhood to abort her child. Child abuse, mental cruelty, neglect, cold-heartedness, domestic fighting, provoking children to wrath (Ephesians 6:4)—these have nothing to do with God’s intentions for the family and are sins against our calling. These and other “dysfunctional family” problems are matters for repentance, confession and absolution, as the *Small Catechism* says when it encourages us to examine ourselves with the Ten Commandments “according to your calling.”

## Blessings

Even though the treasures of God's gifts are hidden in "earthly vessels"—our own fallen and fallible flesh—He continues to pour out His love through human beings, whom He has placed in

families. Parents are blessings to their children. Children are blessings to their parents. Husbands are blessings to their wives. Wives are blessings to their husbands. And when God works through parents to bring their children to Christ through Baptism, they are not only populating the earth, they are populating heaven.

## IV. Called to our Work

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 full-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 trash collectors, plumbers, sanitation workers and the sometimes-undocumented aliens who clean our hotel rooms. He heals us through doctors, nurses and pharmacists. 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 are *all* 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 down the spirit.

### Work can seem meaningless

Work often seems only a means to an end—survival, but it seems we survive only to work. It consumes our time, our emotions, our after-hours preoccupations. It takes away 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 24 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 take care of it" (Genesis 2:15) after the fall into sin, we labor in frustration and sweat: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food unto you return to the ground (Genesis 3:17-19).

### Charged with meaning

We live out our vocations—in the family, in the community, in the church and in the workplace—under the cross. Indeed, our vocations are part of the cross that we are called to bear. But the Christian can understand the ordinary labors of life to be charged with meaning. Through our labor, no matter how humble, God is at work.

Young people today are under intense pressure to “choose” their vocation, to decide what they want to do when they grow up, to pick a major in college, to pursue that perfect job. Indeed, there are many decisions to be made in regard to our life’s work. But in our choice-obsessed culture, the true meaning of “vocation” is often lost, even as we still use the word. Strictly speaking, our vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. It is something to which we are called by God.

We did not choose the family we were born into, not did we choose the society of which we are citizens. God placed us in these relationships, in these vocations of family life and citizenship. They are “given,” in the here and now.

When we started a family of our own, we might think we chose our spouse, but the spouse also had to choose us, and looming behind all of our apparent decisions lies the providential workings of God. When it comes to our employment, our “vocation” in both the secular and the theological sense, we do not have as much choice as we think.

### **Personal gifts from God**

Sometimes my college students, pressured as they are to find a good job so they can make lots of money, choose majors for which they have no vocation. They may do research and find that there is a good job market for accountants and decide that this is the field that can open up the life of prosperity they dream of. But if they are not good at math, they may flunk their accounting courses.

Tragically, they may tough out the math and actually get the degree, only to find themselves in a job they hate. And if they hate it, they probably

are not very good at it. They may not find an employer willing to call them to that line of work.

Finding one’s vocation involves recognizing one’s God-given talents and abilities. It also involves recognizing one’s God-given interests. It also involves recognizing God-given opportunities. Calling comes from outside ourselves—a company offering us a job, a marriage proposal made or accepted, doors closing in our face and doors opening elsewhere.

Each person’s calling is unique, a part of the way God created each individual whom He loves. Not everyone is called to go to college, and not everyone can work with their hands, or play a musical instrument, or teach in a classroom, or work the land. Those who have those abilities, interests and opportunities should see them as the personal gifts of God—part of their unique callings.

### **Callings often change**

A young man working his way through college may get a job in a fast-food restaurant. For the time being, that’s his vocation, and he is to love and serve his customers and his shift manager by flipping hamburgers. If he is fortunate enough to be going to college, he also has the vocation of being a student, which has specific obligations of its own (study!).

Eventually, he may get his computer degree and go into his life’s work. That will be his vocation then. And if the “dot-com” company goes bankrupt, and he goes from vast wealth back to flipping burgers, he has a new vocation. At every stage, whether his work is humble or exalted in the world’s eyes, he is serving his neighbor in a holy office.

## V. Called to Be

When the planes smashed into the World Trade Center, thousands of office workers rushed out of the building. Against the stream, police and firefighters were rushing *inside*. When the towers collapsed, hundreds of them, who had gone into the doomed building to rescue whomever they could, lost their lives. Afterwards, the firefighters, police and rescue workers worked round-the-clock in the wreckage, desperately wanting to find someone alive. In back-breaking, exhausting physical labor, they found clues and recovered bodies.

Here is *real* heroism, everyone agreed. Professional athletes and movie stars, accustomed to adulation, said with one voice that we are nothing—those cops, firefighters and other workers at ground zero are the heroes. Interestingly, when the heroes took a break long enough to be interviewed, they modestly put aside the praise. They said, “We are just doing our jobs.”

*That* is the doctrine of vocation. Ordinary men and women expressing their love and service to their neighbor, “just doing our jobs.” The doctrine of vocation stresses how God is present in these offices, rescuing, giving comfort, protecting through the interactions of other people.

### A divine calling

September 11, 2001, and its aftermath raise other issues of vocation. The great wave of national unity and patriotism was felt to be a good, healthy reaction in a formerly cynical and apathetic culture. The nation geared for war.

Some Christians, while caught up in the positive feelings, felt uneasy. Should Christians be patriotic? Is so much flag-waving idolatrous? Though many felt that retaliation is surely justified against the enemies who attacked our country and killed so many innocent people, aren't Christians supposed to forgive? While the

whole country rallied around their president and their military, some Christians were leery about these earthly authorities having life-and-death power.

According to the Lutheran doctrine of vocation, Christians—in addition to their callings in the family, the church, and the workplace—have a calling to be citizens. God is hidden in the offices of earthly government. God protects us through police officers, firemen and the members of the armed forces. God uses earthly authorities to administer the “first use of the law,” to restrain and punish evil in society. Otherwise we sinners would tear each other apart. As Synod President Dr. Gerald Kieschnick said to President George W. Bush when they met after the attacks, “You not only have a civil calling, but a divine calling.”

President Kieschnick cited Romans 13, which spells out in detail how it is that God is hidden in secular government, with implications for all of the vocations:

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment, but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.” (Romans 13: 1-6)



## To ‘bear the sword’

Since God is, properly speaking, the only one who can claim absolute authority in Himself, lesser offices derive their authority from His. The text also speaks about the purpose of earthly governments: to punish wrongdoers. To ‘bear the sword.’ Moreover, the earthly governor is God’s servant, God’s “agent.” In other words, just like God gives daily bread through the means of the farmer, He deals out punishment to evil-doers and protects law-abiding citizens through the means of the government authorities.

One of Luther’s writings on vocation was a pamphlet titled *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*. Many Christians in the Reformation time, in the first flush of rediscovering the Bible, maintained that since we are supposed to love our enemies, Christians may not serve in the military, which involved killing our nation’s enemies. Since we are supposed to forgive sinners, Christians may not serve as judges, who, instead, have to punish them. In response, Luther asked whether God was allowed to take a human life or to punish sin. Indeed, He is. It is God, working through the offices of judge and soldier, who takes life and punishes sin. Christians can indeed occupy these offices—to be called to them as divine vocations—so that a soldier *is* loving his neighbor when he protects his country; a judge *is* loving his neighbor when he puts a criminal in prison or delivers him over to the executioner (another valid vocation).

This by no means negates the commands to love our enemies and to “forgive those who trespass against us.” In their private lives, soldiers, judges and executioners must indeed love and forgive. But in their vocations, by virtue of these offices, they are authorized to “bear the sword.”

Those of us who do not have that vocation, however, cannot take the law into our own hands. Immediately prior to the Romans 13 text, St. Paul expresses the Christian’s duty to forgive wrongdoing in terms just as strong as in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:17-21).

## God avenges evil

We are not supposed to take personal revenge. We don’t have to. God will avenge us. And in the very next passage, we learn how He does this. As the New King James Version translates Romans 13:4, the earthly authority is “God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

It must be remembered, though, that most ordinary vocations do not have this authority. When someone commits a crime against us, we do not have to track down the wrongdoer. We call the police. Though a father has the vocation of protecting his home and though all citizens should resist evil-doers (as the hijacked passengers so bravely did on the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania), it is not up to us, as individuals, to bring the global terrorists to justice. Our law enforcement officials and our military are doing this on our behalf.

The social disorder that can come from acting outside of our vocations is evident in the Americans who took it upon themselves to beat up Arabs and vandalize mosques, acts that were clearly sinful and unjust.

## Wicked rulers

Romans 13 makes many Christians squirm, especially when they live under bad rulers. Are we *always* to submit to our rulers? Even the Hitlers of the world? Should the Christian missionaries imprisoned by the Taliban obey the law in Afghanistan not to proclaim the Gospel?

The Augsburg Confession, Article XVI, is clear, that “Christian owe obedience to their magistrates and laws except when commanded to sin. For then they owe greater obedience to God than to human beings.” The confessors cite Acts 5:29, when the disciples were forbidden by law to preach the Gospel: “We must obey God rather than men.”

But there is a special twist for Americans and others who live in a democratic republic. We elect our own governing officials. Ultimately, *we* rule *them*.

Christians should indeed obey the laws, pay their taxes and honor—and pray for—their governing officials. Feelings of patriotism and acts of civil mindedness are fitting responses to the blessings

God has given this country and to the citizenship He has called us to. But the calling to citizenship also includes such things as voting, debating issues, grassroots politics and civil activism.

Christians who mobilize for pro-life causes—even when this means criticizing officials and working to change laws—are acting in their vocation as citizens. Christians are called to be engaged not just in government but in their cultures as a whole, working through their various vocations to make their country, if only in a small way, a better place.

Christians may indeed wave the flag and not only sing but pray, “God bless America.”

## **VI. Called by the Gospel: Christians, both laypeople and pastors, have a vocation in the church.**

“Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Those are some of my favorite words in the Divine Service. They always astonish me. When I first heard them, before I had taken adult confirmation, I marveled, “How can the pastor forgive my sins?,” though even at the time I was impressed to find a church that believed such things.

Later, when I decided to become a Lutheran and took the pastor’s class, we learned that the absolution comes about not through the person of the pastor—a good guy, but not that much different from the rest of us—but “by virtue of [his] office.” He has been “called” by our local congregation to exercise the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” on our behalf. He has been “ordained,” set apart for this special ministry.

Nevertheless, the Catechism increased the mystery: “I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and, again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.”

Later, I gained a vocabulary for understanding what is happening: Christ is the one forgiving sins through the vocation of the pastor. When the pastor proclaims the Gospel, Christ is at work through His Word. When the pastor baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes through him. When the pastor presides at the Lord’s Supper, Christ Himself is present, feeding us with His body and blood, which the pastor distributes under bread and wine.

Christ is hidden in the pastor’s vocation. As we have seen, God hides Himself in all vocations.

Our Father in Heaven gives us our daily bread through the vocation of farmers, bakers, grocers and the person at the check-out counter. He heals by means of the medical professions. He protects us by means of police officers, judges, soldiers and firemen. He brings us into existence and cares for us when we are young by means of fathers and mothers.

As a rule, God works through means. He governs and cares for His earthly kingdom, even among those who do not know Him, through natural laws but also through human vocations. He tends to us spiritually through His Word and Sacraments. These, too, He administers through the human vocation of the pastor.

But *all* Christians also have a calling in the church. We all have been called to faith. And we all are called to a local congregation, where we each have a part to play in the community of faith.

### **Called to faith**

Becoming a Christian is itself a calling. That is to say, a person becomes a Christian by being called by God.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, *who have been called* according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Romans 8:28-30).

The passage about God’s providential care is familiar and often quoted, but the rest of the passage tends to be left out of the quotation. In all things God works for the good of those “who have been called according to his purpose.” The promise that God will work things out for the good of His children has to do with vocation. God’s good “purpose” is being fulfilled in those He has called. The next verses give another remarkable promise related to vocation. “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified.”

Here is the whole nine yards. Everything that pertains to being a Christian. Foreknowledge, predestination, justification, sanctification (being “conformed to the likeness of his Son”), glorification. They are presented not separately but together. And what links them is being “called.” Someone who has been “called” has them all.

And how are we called to this life of faith? By the Gospel. Again, the Catechism explains it best: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

“Vocation” literally means being “called.” And to be called means hearing a voice from outside oneself. It is God’s Word that calls us, the Gospel of salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ. That Word was given at our baptism, it is proclaimed in every sermon, it is announced in those words of absolution, it can be read on every page of the Bible. That Word creates faith in our hearts. “My sheep,” says Jesus, “listen to my voice” (John 10:27).

This means, among other things, that His sheep will gather in a church, where His voice can be clearly heard.

### **Pastor and laypeople**

The risen Lord told His disciple Peter to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17). The word “pastor” means “shepherd.” The pastor is someone who tends the often unruly and oblivious sheep that make up the congregation, feeding them with the Word and Sacraments, protecting them from the wolves of false teachers, seeking the lost, and leading his flock to the green pastures of everlasting life. Of course, Jesus Christ Himself is the real Shepherd—the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep, the One whose voice the sheep recognize (John 10:1-16) – so He is our true pastor. But just as our heavenly Father makes

use of earthly fathers, the Lord as our Shepherd makes use of earthly shepherds.

A division of labor took place within the church in its earliest days.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:1-4).

In this terminology, all of the Christian are called "disciples," but the Twelve – those schooled by Jesus Himself – exercised a leadership role in the church. It is significant that the church was concerned for the physical needs of its members, particularly its widows, who had no one else to care for them. Here and elsewhere in Acts, we see that the church is a "community of faith," not just a place to go for an hour on Sunday morning, but a place where Christians are involved in each other's lives. And yet, this was no idealized utopian commune, where all of the Christians are loving each other all of the time. Rather, even the church led by the original Twelve Disciples had its friction, in this case ethnic conflicts and that perennial complaint, "that's not fair!"

At any event, the Twelve Disciples in pastoring their flock found themselves spending so much time on the practical details of administration – getting the food together, keeping track of who gets what, "waiting on tables" – that they were neglecting their major vocation, namely, "the ministry of the Word."

Moreover, what with all of the complaints about inequity in the food distribution, they were apparently not doing a very good job with their administrative tasks. Running the church's food program was, evidently, not their vocation. So the church elected seven qualified laymen to handle

the practical, even secular, matters the church was dealing with, so that the Twelve could spend their time in "prayer and the ministry of the Word."

These laymen took care of things in the church. They no doubt had their own vocations, whether as fishermen, farmers or craftsmen. Though they were laymen, they still witnessed to the Gospel. One of their number, Philip, evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch, and another, Stephen, became the first martyr for the faith.

The word translated "church" in the Greek New Testament is *ekklesia*, which derives from the particle *ek*, meaning out, added to the verb *kalein*, meaning to call. The verb *ekkalein* means to summon or to call out. The church, the *ekklesia*, is the assembly of those who have been called.

So all Christians have a church calling. The church calls pastors. The church can call others to assist that office, such as teachers for its schools and other church-work professions.

Similarly the boards and committees, the Sunday School teachers, the trustees, the elders, the ushers and the altar guild, the choir members and the organist, the officers and the voters assembly, are all doing their part to serve one another and their fellow members, building up with the pastor the complex, living organism, that is the church.

Many Christians today are scornful of "the institutional church." They see its faults and its weaknesses, are distracted by the ordinary folks who make up the typical church, and are easily disillusioned with the way it operates. It is so "unspiritual," they think.

But minimizing the ordinary local church is a great mistake. Christ is hidden in His church on earth, and always has been. Just because He is not seen – just because there are so spectacular spiritual special effects, or because those who worship Him in church are not religious superheroes—does not mean He is not present. He is where He has promised to be: in the Word of God, in the Sacraments, and with those He has called to serve each other.