

The Daily Life of the Christian, Part 1

This week we bring you a part one of a two-part essay by the Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl, a frequent Crossings contributor who served as the President of Crossings for many years and who has just started a new position as Executive Director of Crossings.

Steve wrote this essay as an introduction to a course called The Daily Life of the Christian, which he teaches as part of the two-year [Diakonia program](#) of lay education in theology. As you'll see, he draws his students into the major themes of his course by focusing on vocation, particularly as Luther understood that term.

By the way, Steve is available to come to a location near you if you'd like to gather a group of Christians for the purpose of "Crossing Life with the Promise of Christ." He can be reached at skuhl1ATwiDOTrrDOTcom.

Peace and joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

On the Daily Life of the Christian, Part I

Purpose of the course: This course will explore the meaning and practice of the daily life of the Christian with the goal of helping students better understand the salvation to which they have been called and the implications of that "calling" for living out their particular "callings" in their daily lives. We will explore this overarching theme through the lens of what Luther called "vocation."

The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin word *vocatio* (summons, bidding), which in turn comes from *vocare*, meaning "to call." In Luther's day, 'vocation' (he also used the German word *Beruf*, "calling," to define it) referred to the calling of people into "spiritual" or "sacred" occupations (such as monks and priests) which were regarded as a superior (more perfect) form of life in comparison to "secular" or "profane" occupations (such as farmers and housewives). Luther rejected this classist view of vocation and said that all Christians share equally in the "spiritual estate" by virtue of their baptism into Christ, because baptism makes them all—equally!—Children of God. Moreover, because God shows no partiality with regard to worldly status or position—indeed, he assigns us these positions as part of his network of creative and providential care and governance of the world—Christians can therefore live out their singular baptismal identity faithfully no matter what their particular worldly or secular occupations or circumstances may be. As Luther states in his "Sermon on Keeping Children in School," "Every occupation has its own honor before God, as well as its own requirements and duties" (LW 46:246). And, as the *Apology Augsburg Confession* states succinctly, "All people, whatever their calling, should seek perfection, that is, growth in the fear of God, in faith, in the love for their neighbor, and in similar spiritual virtues" (*Apology* XXVII, 37).

'Vocation', therefore, as Luther understood it, has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it refers to how we as Christians are related to God through the gospel as children of God. Call this referent V1: the fact that we as Christians have been called out of darkness into light, from condemnation to salvation, from death to life. On the other hand, 'vocation' also refers to how God has inserted us into the world or assigned us our location in that dynamic, ever-changing network of relationships, activities, and events called creation. Call this referent V2:

the fact that God has placed us in our particular worldly locations to be good stewards of his creation. Through vocation (V2), God both provides for our every bodily need and assigns us a contributing place in that provisioning.

As compatible as V1 and V2 are in the life of a Christian, it is important also to note their difference. We are *born* into V2 “by nature” (with the complicating fact of sin as a congenital oppositional defiance of God), and that vocation is inherently temporal. Not only does it change in time but there will be a time when it will be no more. By contrast, we are *reborn* into V1 (a reconciled relation to God) “by grace through faith in Jesus Christ,” and that vocation is eternal or spiritual in nature. Therefore, the question that we will be probing as we explore the daily life of the Christian is this: How does that rebirth impact our natural placement within the world? How does faith in Christ (V1) inform our understanding and lived experience in those various “posts of responsibility” (V2) that we find ourselves in on this side of the resurrection, whether they were chosen by us or thrust upon us? What we will discover, as Kathryn Kleinhans has said, is that “Christian vocation is theology for living” or, better, “lived theology” (“The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective,” *Word & World*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2005: 402).

Therefore, when we inquire into the daily life of a Christian, we ask, What is distinctive about the calling (V1) of Christians in their various vocations (V2) or placements or occupations? Here the Christian art of distinguishing God’s law and God’s promise (gospel) is central.

The Christian, like the non-Christian, lives his or her life in a world that is characterized as “life under law.” Because the good relationships (V2) that God establishes for us humans to live in through his ongoing act of creation are threatened and

corrupted by our very own human rebellion against God (sin as a self-centered rather than God-centered disposition), God has laid down the law. The law of God is an expression of God's displeasure, anger or wrath upon sinful humanity. Its primary character is to call sinners to account for their stewardship, and it operates according to the principle of reciprocity ("as you sow, so shall you reap"). In general, the law of God is experienced by us as a sense of obligation over all that we are and do, and it is coextensive with human reasoning, critical thought, and the maintenance of just human relations.

As Luther emphasized, the law of God achieves a twofold purpose within the present sin-infested world. In "the meantime," it restrains sinners so as to bring about some measure of security, creativity, and stability within the fallen world. This Luther called the political or civil function of the law. It makes possible some semblance of civilization or discipline among sinners. (Cf. Gal. 3:24.) Ultimately, however, the law condemns sinners to death, putting a personal and historical end to their rebellion. Luther called this the theological or spiritual function of the law, and it coincides with Paul's dictum, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Genesis 3 is the classic text for describing, in parabolic or mythical fashion, this first great mystery of Christian theology: how the congenial creation of God could turn against its Creator and become life under law. What Scripture calls the law of God, then, was not part of God's original intention. "The law was added because of sin" (Gal. 3:19), says Paul, and has become integral to God's providential rule over a fallen world. Therefore, ever since sin entered the world, God's law has been a permanent feature of it and coextensive with every worldly calling a person has. In their vocations, people experience the world as an ambiguous place. For there, in their vocations (V2), they experience, on the one hand, the reality of sin, the restraining pressures of the law,

and the ultimate fact of death, and, on the other hand, the reality of God's providence which ensures a measure of stability, creativity, and security so that bodily needs are met. Through vocation (V2), God provides all those things that are comprehended, as Luther says, under the category of "daily bread." (Cf. Luther's *Large Catechism*.)

But God's word of law is not the whole story about God's interaction with his rebellious creation. Also indicated in the Genesis text (nascent in the call of Abraham) is God's promise to redeem sinful humanity from this law-inflicted predicament, the second great mystery of Christian theology. The material fulfillment of this promise happened when God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to redeem sinners from what Paul calls the "curse" of the law. This he did personally, in his own body, by exhausting the curse through his death on the cross and establishing life in the spirit through his resurrection from the dead. (Cf. Gal. 3:10-14.) The antidote to God's act of laying down the law *on* sinners, then, is God's act of lifting up Christ *for* sinners. In Christ God has established a new creation (described by Paul as "life in the spirit," as opposed to "life under the law") that is characterized by a twofold freedom: freedom *from* the imprisoning power of sin, the incriminating curse of the law, and the annihilating punishment of death; and freedom *for* a life marked by the liberating power of Christ's righteousness, the undeserved blessedness of his mercy, and the unsurpassable glory of his divine and eternal life.

It is important to note that the promise of Christ comes to fallen humanity as a second calling (V1) from God, in Jesus' call to "follow me." That calling always stands in tension with—indeed, in opposition to—the preceding, accusatory calling of the law: "Adam, where are you? What have you done?" Specifically, the call to follow Christ is an invitation to live in the world freely by faith in the promise, and not to live

slavishly in fear, denial of, or reaction to the law. That second calling directs us into the new reality that Paul labels "the new creation in Christ," and we enter into it by faith. To trust in Christ is to be in Christ. To be in Christ is to be under his kingdom, covered by his grace, as by an umbrella, even though we are still living in a world deluged in the rain (reign) of the law of God.

It is also important to note that the call of Christ (V1) is not a call for Christians to abandon the world under law or our particular vocational placements with it (V2). That was the Anabaptist mistaken counterpoint to the classist view of vocation in the Medieval Church. On the contrary, the second call reinserts us into our various worldly occupations in a new way that both fulfills the purposes of V2 and invites those whom we encounter there to have more than what V2 provides: to have V1, the call into salvation. No one lives by bread alone (V2); indeed, if people live they live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (V1), the call to salvation in Christ. As the Offertory Prayer in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* stated it, we as Christians are in the world for both "the care (V2) and the redemption (V1) of all that God has made."

As a result, the operative word for describing the daily life of the Christian for Luther is 'freedom', as indicated by the title of his seminal work, *On the Freedom of a Christian*. The Christian by virtue of faith stands under the grace of Christ and thus shares in the freedom Christ has won in his death and resurrection. As a freedom *from* the deadly threats of the law and a freedom *for* the love and service of neighbor, the freedom of the Christian is surprisingly paradoxical and counterintuitive to sinners not yet awakened to the bondage that life under law presents. Luther's thesis describes the daily life of a Christian as follows: "A Christian is lord of all, completely free from everything (V1); a Christian is a servant, completely

attentive to the needs of all (V2).” The Christian life as a calling from God is therefore lived in two dimensions simultaneously: in faith toward God and in love toward the neighbor. Through the Word, our faith in God’s promise is established and sustained; through this faith, we discipline ourselves so that the neighbor is provided for and sustained.