

The Daily Life of the Christian, Part 2

This week we bring you a part two of Steve Kuhl's essay on the daily life of the Christian, which he wrote as an introduction to his lay education course of the same name. (Part one can be found [here](#).)

Also, a reminder that Steve's offer stands: If you would like to gather a group of Christians for the purpose of "Crossing Life with the Promise of Christ," please feel free to contact him at Steve at skuhl1ATwiD0TrrD0Tcom. He'll be happy to work with you in designing an event to suit your needs.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

On the Daily Life of the Christian, Part II: Implications of the Doctrine of Vocation for Daily Life

The fruit of this course will be in the unpacking of what this freedom [that is, the Christian's freedom *from* the deadly threats of the law and *for* the love and service of neighbor] means in the daily life of the Christian generally, and in the lives of students particularly. In anticipation of that goal let me conclude by making a few observations about what the concept of vocation does and does not provide to the Christian. Here I am indebted to several sources, including the section on "Vocation" in Werner Elert's book, *The Christian Ethos*, pp. 131-135; Kathryn Kleinhans's excellent article, "The Work of the Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective," in *Word & World*,

Vol. 25, No. 4, 2005: 402; and Gary Simpson's review essay, "Daunting Indeed! A Critical Conversation with The Promise of Lutheran Ethics," in *Word & World*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1999, pp. 187-200.

First, the doctrine of vocation corrects the very common misunderstanding that God "has a plan for my life" which I have to somehow figure out and get right. The doctrine of vocation neither prescribes nor bars certain occupational/vocational choices. Vocation is about recognizing that in whatever situation of life I find myself, I am there to serve my neighbor on God's behalf. It does not necessarily answer why I live in those circumstances, but it does tell me for whom I'm there: I'm there to serve others on God's behalf. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a case in point. The key feature of vocation, then, is its twofold freedom *from* the accusation of the law and *for* the service of neighbor. In his "On the Freedom of a Christian," Luther describes this dialectical character of the Christian life as living "spontaneously."

Second, the doctrine of vocation does not provide a blueprint on how to organize marriage, family, or economic, political, and societal life, but it does presuppose sociality or "relationality" (sic!) as an inescapable fact of life. "It is not good that *Adam* (the human) should be alone," says God (Gen. 2:18). That statement is not a psychological assessment about the dangers of loneliness, but a theological assertion about how God includes humanity in his ongoing creative and providential activity in the world as a whole. Humans are, by divine intention, "created co-creators," to use Phil Hefner's term. God calls us (V2) through our relationships with others (beginning with marriage and family and expanding from there into economic, civic, national and international networks) so that through those relationships all may know and experience God's creative and providential care—an effect given concise and poetic

rendering in the hymn "Praise and Thanksgiving" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* # 689).

Third, while the doctrine of vocation does not provide a blueprint for how to organize a society, it does provide a standpoint from which to critique aspects of any particular societal arrangement. Just as the doctrine emerged as a critique of the ecclesiastical classism that dominated late Medieval Society, so it also rightly provides, in my judgment, a critique of the kind of classism that pervades modern capitalist culture—particularly, the way it privileges capital over labor and the subsequent denigration of work and exploitation of the working class. The doctrine of vocation, at least as Luther develops it, has the "common good" as its focus. A good or just society is one that shows no partiality with regard to one's particular location or status in society and, therefore, values all necessary work by compensating it with a just or living wage. The presence of the "working poor" contradicts the doctrine of vocation. Luther's advocacy of public education for all, his writings on the practice of usury, his strong support for a community chest, and his teaching on the role of secular authorities to maintain order and justice for the sake of the common good are all rooted in his doctrine of vocation.

Fourth, the central feature of Luther's notion of vocation and the nature of the Christian life is that it is characterized as "life in the Spirit" as opposed to "life under law." Law and promise are aligned as stark alternatives. Of course, Luther is not the inventor of this idea. His source is Paul and such Pauline assertions as, "Christ is the end of the law so there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4), and "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law" (Gal. 5:18). In Luther's day this contrast between law and promise was blunted by both Roman Catholic and Reformed interpreters of the Christian life. The Roman Catholic tradition

(with its nature/grace theology) saw life in the Spirit or grace as providing sufficient strength to a Christian's human nature so as to assist him or her in fulfilling the demands of the law and in being justified on that basis. The Reformed tradition (with its sin/grace theology) saw life in the Spirit or grace as forgiveness of past sin, but in a way that confirms the law as the eternal will of God (under the category of the Third Use of the Law) which is still binding on Christians. Each tradition saw Luther's approach as antinomian and a pretense for licentiousness, whereas Luther saw their approaches as legalistic and a negation of Christian freedom.

Luther insists that his understanding of Paul (with his law-promise theology) is not antinomian. Although Paul was also accused of being anti-law by the Judaizers of his day, Luther thinks Paul successfully refutes that charge. This he does by seeing the personhood of the Christian, in dialectical fashion, as a battle ground between the old self subject to the law and the new self led by the Spirit. Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners: righteous by the measure of faith and Christ; unrighteous by the measure of works and the law. The call out of darkness into light is still unfolding; the old self is still in the process of passing away and the new self is still in the process of emerging. When physical death finally comes, the battle will cease: the person identified by faith and Christ will endure, and the person identified by works and law will cease. But, in the meantime, as that battle rages on, the law continues to have its twofold purpose of restraining and condemning the old sinful self of the Christian.

Even so, what ultimately characterizes the Christian life is the new self that is emerging in Christ. This new self is led by the promptings of the Spirit, which is freedom, and not by the accusations of the law, which is bondage. But that does not mean that the Christian life is anti-law. The new self that

characterizes the Christian is both “lord over all” and “servant to all,” including the law. This servant-lordship means that Christians are free to use or not to use the law insofar as it is fitting or helpful relative to their setting in life, that is, relative to the needs of their neighbors (Cf. 1 Cor. 6:12). Personally, this servant-lordship is the heart of Christian self-discipline. Christians can freely use the law in coordination with the promise to facilitate the life of repentance, the process of dying to sin and rising in Christ. Socially or vocationally (V2), a broad spectrum of responses to the law is open to the Christian as Lord over all and servant to all. Conceivably, there may be times when the Christian as “lord over all” might exercise his or her “service to all” by rebuking the law. This may happen, for example, for the sake of the gospel, specifically, or in service of bringing about some measure of needed civic peace or restorative justice through compromise. On the other hand, there may be times when the Christian as “servant to all” will vigorously use his or her “lordship over all” to defend, support, and employ the law. This may happen, for example, in response to social injustices that become exposed over time or partisan privileges that need rectifying. The point is, as Gary Simpson has summarized, “Christian freedom sustains and assists God’s law to discharge its civil function of protecting neighbors from the ravages of sin and evil, while preserving and promoting their temporal flourishing, and also to accomplish its theological function of revealing sin before the judgment seat of God” (p. 193).

Finally, vocation as both the call to salvation (V1) and the call to be Christ-like servants to our neighbor (V2) has its origin and continuing existence in faith in the Word of God. Therefore, an essential feature of the daily life of the Christian is being nurtured in that faith through exposure to the Word of Promise. In the *Smalcald Articles*, Luther identifies

five ways in which the gospel comes to us: through the spoken/received Word, through baptism, through Holy Communion, through the power of the keys, and through the mutual conversation and consolation of fellow Christians. It must be remembered that none of these five ways is simply a one-time act that is done and left behind. They are all activities of God, experienced (mediated) through the community of believers (the Church), that Christians make use of regularly, repeatedly, daily. It is no oversimplification to say that Prayer and Word are the sum total of the Christian life. The Christian life is a lively conversation with God. For as we experience suffering and joy, success and failure, guilt and vindication, pride and humiliation, emptiness and fulfillment in our exercise of our vocations in the world (V2), how can we not but turn to God in prayer? And, as listening prayers, when we hear anew the promise of his call to be Children of God, through such means as Word and Sacrament, keys and Christian conversation (V1), how can we not but be revitalized and equipped anew for our vocational placement in the world (V2)?

Objectives for the course: This course will help students understand better their calling to follow Christ in everyday life. By course end students will be able to do the following:

- Articulate what it means to be called to salvation in Christ (V1). Understand the law-gospel dialectic.
- Identify the various worldly callings (V2) that define their respective lives, whether chosen or thrust upon them. What “secular resources” do they use or need to develop for this service (through the exercise of self-discipline)? What do these callings do *to them*? What do they do *for them*?
- Describe how V1 and V2 are related in general and in their own particular life-circumstances, specifically. Give examples of how the gospel of Christ has informed the way

they live in the world.

- List the “spiritual” resources (V1) they use in sustaining their “secular” assignments (V2). Give examples of how they are sustained/supported/enlivened by the Word.