

CALLED TO BE CITIZENS

America is caught up in feelings of patriotism and national unity.
Is it really OK to “wave the flag”?

(Fifth in a series)

by Gene Edward Veith

Reprinted with permission from the November, 2001 issue of The Lutheran Witness

When the planes smashed into the World Trade Center, thousands of office workers rushed out of the building. Against the stream, police and fire fighters were rushing *inside*. When the towers collapsed, hundreds of them, who had gone into the doomed buildings 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

Sept. 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” (Rom. 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 key 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 involves 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 life, soldiers, judges and executioners must indeed love and forgive. But in their vocations, by virtue of their 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” (Rom. 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 Rom. 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 “Christians 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 civic-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 civic 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.”

Next month, Dr Veith will write about our vocation in the church.—Ed.

Dr. Gene Edward Veith is professor of English at Concordia University—Wisconsin and director of the Cranach Institute, which is dedicated to the study and application of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation.