

The Vocation of Every Christian: Life in Christ as a Holy Calling

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- INTRODUCTION -

What does it mean to be a Christian? There are, perhaps, many ways to answer that question. We could say something like, “Being a Christian means believing in Jesus or accepting him as our Savior,” or “Being a Christian means seeking and doing God’s will in our lives,” or, “Being a Christian means loving God and our neighbors.” All of these have value and capture at least a part of what it means to be a Christian. But, is there not a better way to capture the essence of what it means to be a Christian, without making it sound like it all depends on us or what we do?

CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A CALLING

One way of speaking about what it means to be a Christian is to think of the Christian life as a calling: We are called by the Gospel to faith in Christ and through and from that Gospel we are called to a life of love and service. Now, to think of our lives in Christ in terms of a holy calling means that we should think of our lives as having, you might say, a certain directionality or movement. The Christian life is never static; it is never going nowhere. And this is because the Word through which God calls

His children, that Gospel Word, is a transformational Word. It does not leave us unchanged, indeed, it cannot, for it is a Word saturated with and energized by the living Spirit of God. It is dynamic. It is a living Word, which, as Isaiah says, “goes out . . . it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish” (Is. 55:11) what the Lord intends.

In this respect, the Word of the Gospel (as the Word of God in general) is unlike human words. Human words, powerful

though they may be, are merely descriptive. They describe; they give names to things that already exist. God's Word, on the other hand, is not merely descriptive, it is performative, it performs, it does what it says. It brings things into being that are not. God uses His Word to create *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. He simply speaks things into being. So, the Word of God is not static. Rather, it is vibrant, active, productive; alive with the power and Spirit of the God who is alive and who through His Word gives life.

So, the Gospel Word has an impulse about it, a thrust, you might say. It "goes forth." It gathers and it sends. It draws and disperses. It draws Christ's own to Him, by His Word, and gathers them around His Word. And it sends His own out into the world, dispersing them, with His Word on their lips and His love in their hearts. There is a two-fold thrust, therefore, about the Gospel — inward and outward, gathering and sending, drawing and dispersing; a two-fold calling.

A. THE CALL INTO CHRIST BY THE GOSPEL (BAPTISM)

Each Christian has a two-fold calling. First, the call of the Gospel draws us to Christ. The Holy Spirit gathers us by the Word of Christ. Through the Word of the Gospel, principally through Baptism, God gathers those who are His own. He brings them into His sheepfold, calling them by name and making them His beloved. Luther captured this well in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, where he said that the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth." The Gospel call involves an ingathering of God's children whereby He draws them to Himself.

And this Word affects every aspect of our lives in Christ and in His Spirit. Although sin lingers in the believer throughout his or her entire earthly life, and, at times, seems to get the upper hand, what the Gospel brings about is, as Paul says, "A new creation. The old has passed away" (2 COR. 5:17). The Gospel has that kind

of transforming power: to bring to life what was dead. Through the Gospel in Baptism, the believer is incorporated into Christ: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life,” Paul writes to the Romans (**ROM. 6:4**).

Thus, in a very real sense, we begin to shed our own individual identity. The Bible says this in a lot of interesting ways. We become conformed to Christ (**ROM. 12:3**) and are given his mind (**PHIL. 2:5**). In Christ we become members of a body (**EPH. 5:30; 1 COR. 12:12FF**), we are incorporated into Him. We live in Him, He lives in us, as Paul says in Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (**GAL. 2:20**). So, in a unique and mysterious way, the Gospel calls us in, it draws us into Christ, to live in Him through faith and to undergo a real transformation. There is no part of us that is unaffected by this transforming Word; no part that we can reserve as our own; nothing that we would wish to continue in the old way, to hold back from that new thing Christ engenders in us. For, “we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus . . .” (**EPH. 2:10**).

B. THE CALL OUT TO THE NEIGHBOR BY CHRISTIAN VOCATION

But the Gospel also has an outward thrust; it sends us out into the world, to proclaim God’s love in Christ and to live His love. It impels us, freely, to action, to charity. Now, I have to speak carefully here. Of course, the Gospel does not command anything of us; the Gospel is not about us at all. It is about Christ, what He has done, what He does. But the Gospel has what we often call motivational power, the power to motivate us to response. In this sense, the Gospel is a call, a sending, outward into the world, into our various vocations or careers or stations in life, there to live out the implications of the Gospel. It is in the world, at work,

at school, at home, where Christians manifest the “fruit” or the “implications” of the Gospel. God has not given the treasure of the Gospel for the church to hoard and protect within the safe confines of its sanctuaries. He has given it to be given. Those whom He calls, He sends. He sends them into all the world with the words of His love on their lips and His works on their hands so that, as they have been transformed by the power of God’s Word, they may likewise transform their realities through word and deed. Thus, there is an outward impulse of the Gospel whereby through telling and acting, those whom God has drawn draw others. They go out so that others might come in.

I am not speaking here of the special call into the Ministry of Word and Sacraments in the church. Rather, I am talking about a call, a vocation, which every single Christian has. It is a two-fold call, in fact. First, the call of the Gospel through Baptism or the proclamation of the Word into Christ to live in Him through faith, and the resulting call, or sending, out into the world to reflect the love Christ has shown by loving others.

**THE OUTWARD ORIENTATION OF THE CHRISTIAN
(INSIDE-OUT PEOPLE)**

So, if one can say it this way, and this is the way Luther says it is, “a Christian doesn’t live in himself. If he lives in himself, he is not a Christian.”¹ Christians, that is those who live in Christ through faith, are “outwardly referenced” people; they are “inside-out people.” That’s what Christians are, they are “inside-out” people. You see, there are just these two ways for a Christian to live — in faith and in love, these two.

That’s what Luther said about the Christian. He said, “In faith he ascends above himself to God and in love he descends beneath himself to the neighbor. The Christian always lives outside of

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Career of the Reformer I*, vol. 31, Luther’s Works, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 371.

himself — he lives in God and in his neighbor. If he lives inside himself, he is not a Christian.”¹ You see, to live inside oneself, that’s the old way. That’s to live in and for yourself. That’s the old way, which has passed away. Now a new way has come — living inside-out.

A. IN GOD THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST

The Christian lives in God through faith. You know, faith is the only appropriate response to a God who deals with people graciously. It is God’s way, the way of the Gospel, to give freely, without any consideration of our merit or worthiness. That’s the way God saves; solely on account of Christ, not on account of our works; “by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight,” Paul wrote (**ROM. 3:20**). In fact, what’s wrong with dragging the business of human righteousness into the question of how we get saved is precisely that it denies the graciousness of God towards sinners on account of Christ. Good works make a claim upon God, and in doing so, they destroy the gratuitous nature of our salvation.

Rather, God saves solely because of His favorable disposition towards us on account of Christ. The theological word we use to describe how it is that we come into possession of the favor of God apart from our own merits or worthiness is *faith*. Faith is, thus, a purely passive attitude whereby God is the Giver and we are the receivers of His favor. To intrude our so-called good works into the picture, which are really not all that good when all is said and done, is to commit, at best, an irrelevancy. Faith alone is the only response to a God who graciously bestows His favor upon us on account of the works of another; on account of Christ.

That we are justified by faith, apart from works of the law, gives us tremendous freedom. It frees us from the need to justify ourselves. That’s already been done. Everything has already been done. Christ did it all, and there is nothing left for us to do. There

are no finishing touches for us to complete. Our justification before God is as complete as it can be, for God Himself did it. It is finished. Our role is simply to receive it, simply to be given to. God's role is to give. And so He does. He gives us everything: Baptism, Absolution, Lord's Supper, preaching of the Gospel — everything. So, the Christian lives in God alone through faith.

B. IN THE NEIGHBOR THROUGH LOVE

Before God we are only passive and receptive. But before our fellow human beings, we are only active and giving. We live in the neighbor through love. Good works have nothing to do with our relationship of faith with God, but they have everything to do with our relationship of love with our fellow human beings. Our good works are irrelevant and even shameful before the perfection of Christ, but they are not only relevant, they are absolutely necessary before the needs of our neighbor. Thus, the Christian pours himself out and herself out in love for others and gives unstintingly in good works for the neighbor.

So, bringing forth a second freedom, the freedom to be in action, in our lives wherever we are called to live them out, what God has declared us to be through faith. Faith in love. No longer bound to store up our good works for ourselves, we are free simply to give them away to others. God doesn't need our good works. He has the perfect works of Jesus Christ and is fully satisfied with them. And we don't need our good works, either. We have everything that Christ died on the cross to give us. God doesn't need our good works, nor do we. So we are free to give them away to our brothers and sisters in Christ who need them, and sometimes desperately.

Gustaf Wingren beautifully summarizes the teaching of Luther in his 1535 *Commentary on Galatians* about how the Christian lives in and for the neighbor:

There is nothing more delightful and lovable on earth than one's neighbor. Love does not think about doing works, it finds joy in people; and when something good is done for others, that does not appear to love as works but simply as gifts which flow naturally from love. Love never does something because it has to. It is permitted to act. And earth with its trees and grass is the site of man's vocation. He who has the Holy Spirit knows it by the fact, among others, that in faith and gladness he fulfills his vocation. He rejoices in his labor.²

So, as Christians we rejoice in our labor, even as we live in our neighbor.

THE VOCATION OF A CHRISTIAN

This is the theological foundation for the teaching on the vocation of a Christian. The Christian has a two-fold calling, or vocation, both of which involve our living outside of ourselves. The first is the call to live in God through faith in Christ. That comes through the Gospel in one of its forms, Baptism, evangelism, the Word about Christ, etc. The second is the call to live in the neighbor through love. That comes from, it flows out from, the Gospel. In the first call, our good works are **nothing**. In the second, they are **everything**. So, we live out the implications of the Gospel call through our vocation as Christians.

A. CHRISTIAN VOCATION AND GOD

One of the things that is so impressive about this teaching is its radicality. It is radical in the sense that it penetrates to the *radix*, to the root of what it means to be a Christian. This Gospel Word is a radical word, it brings about a transformation which is complete and profound. The Christianity of a Christian is not something that

² Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 43-44. As the reader will note, I am heavily indebted to Wingren's excellent work in this article.

can be applied like a mantle or a veneer over the world. Rather it is something that transforms a person's entire existence so that he or she lives all of life, even and especially in what many judge to be the trivial everyday things, as a holy calling and appointment from God. And one's vocational connection to God is essential, and incarnational. It is actually God working through the vocation of a Christian.

Luther's teaching on vocation grows largely out of his rich and robust concept of creation, which is peculiarly concrete and vital. There is a direct connection between God's work in creation, or His ongoing creative work in divine providence,³ and His work through the various offices he has created for human beings to occupy. Luther generally speaks of three offices or estates within which every person is located according to his or her calling. At times Luther calls these estates economies, hierarchies or governments. Two are earthly, one is spiritual. The political economy encompasses all the relationships having to do with common life together in society, such as ruler or ruled. The domestic economy includes all domestic relationships such as father, mother, son, daughter, etc. The spiritual estate is the spiritual authority wielded by the pastor through the Word of God in the church.⁴ The offices may differ; mother, farmer, magistrate, teacher, pastor, but the purpose is always the same: it is a "participation in God's own care for human beings."⁵

So vocation belongs to this world, to the created order; it is directed towards the neighbor, not to God. Yet, through fulfilling his vocation, man is "an instrument in the hand of God who thus carries on his [i.e. God's] creative work."⁶ In this connection, Luther uses the at-first strange, but ultimately very helpful concept of

3 Ibid., 17.

4 See *ibid.*, 23-37.

5 *Ibid.*, 9.

6 *Ibid.*, 16.

“God’s masks.” The good things that a Christian does on earth are God’s creation and are directed towards the neighbor. Before God the good is not ours but God’s. Only before the neighbor does the good done appear as coming from the one who does it. Thus, Luther refers to the Christian as a “mask” of God. It is actually God acting, but only behind (“in, with and under”?) the actions of the Christian.⁷ God is hidden behind the “mask” of the neighbor. Thus, the connection between the ongoing creative work of God in the world and the vocation of a Christian is essential and intimate. And it is quite incarnational in the sense that God’s love and activity are “enfleshed” in the love and activity of those who through faith live in Him. In a remarkable passage, Luther says

*Through this work in man’s offices, God’s creative work goes forward, and that creative work is love, a profusion of good gifts. With persons as his “hands” or “coworkers,” God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations, toward man’s life on earth ... Thus love comes from God, flowing down to human beings on earth through all vocations ...*⁸

Luther says that an estate instituted by God is a “channel for God’s love to the world and his care of human beings.”⁹ God’s own love, he says, “reaches out to others through Christians as channels.”¹⁰ Thus, God’s love becomes concrete and actualized through the Christians. This is how you can tell if what you are doing is a good work or not. First of all, it must be discernible to others; “What love is must show itself in relation to time and place,”¹¹ he writes. That is, it may not be merely internal or

7 Ibid., 18-19. This notion of “masks” is an exceedingly rich concept, which Luther even applies to all created things. For example, he says that natural occurrences such as “storms and thunder, or sun, or rich harvests are also God’s masks, behind which his wrath and his love are hid.” See *ibid.*, 137 ff.

8 Ibid., 27.

9 Ibid., 125.

10 Ibid., 126. Luther also calls man “a tool in God’s hand.” See *ibid.*, 137.

11 Ibid., 120.

interior. Secondly, it must be solely for the neighbor, “If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbor alone,” he says, “then you should know that that work is not a good work.”¹² So, a good work may not be merely “spiritual,” that is, it must be tangible and for the neighbor.

B. CHRISTIAN VOCATION AND FAITH

Luther’s lively interpretation of the biblical teaching that faith is “the conviction of things not seen” (HEB. 11:1) is an important part of his teaching on vocation. Luther taught that we are brought in touch with the way things really are only by the Word of God, which often contradicts the evidence of our senses. God’s Word is definitive. It defines our lives. Our immediate apprehension of reality cannot be trusted because of our limitations and our sinfulness. This means that, if we really want to know how things are with us, we cannot trust our perception of things. Instead we must by faith listen to the Word of God. Only by faith do we know our real condition. And only by faith may we see our good works as the good works of God Himself. Only by faith may we see Christ in our neighbor.

Faith is necessary, first of all, in order to distinguish between God and His masks. Luther writes,

*He who does not have faith and, through faith, access to the heavenly kingdom, knows only different masks. He knows only the earth, where God appears solely as hidden behind his many masks: parents, rulers, neighbors, wives, children, etc. Without faith, a man cannot distinguish between God and his masks.*¹³

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 140.

Without faith, therefore, God is eternally hidden and cannot be known as the one who is intimately involved with His creation. Only faith sees God in, or behind, all created things, particularly behind the good works of Christians.

Faith is necessary, secondly, in order to see our humble works as the divinely good works of God Himself that they are. Their goodness can only be seen by faith. Luther writes,

Thus a Christian finds himself called to drab and lowly tasks, which seem less remarkable than monastic life, mortifications, and other distractions from our vocations. For him who heeds his vocation, sanctification is hidden in offensively ordinary tasks, with the result that it is hardly noticed at all that he is a Christian. But faith looks on simple duties as tasks to which vocation summons the man; and by the Spirit he becomes aware that all those “poor, dull and despised works” are adorned with the favor of God “as with costliest gold and precious stones.”¹⁴

Heeding one’s vocation enables a Christian to view his or her tasks, no matter how humble, as a high and holy calling from God. Is one’s vocation to be a mother and to tend to the care of children and home? It is an exalted calling from God Himself. Is one’s vocation to be teacher, a truck driver, a civil servant? All are raised up and are given the name “divine,” and are honored by God by the fact that through these estates He Himself does His loving and preserving work in the world.

Finally, faith enables the Christian to see the positive outcome God will bring about through our actions, even when all the evidence seems to indicate otherwise. Luther writes: “Faith trusts that the mandate of a man’s vocation leads to something good; behind all stations and offices stands the Creator, who is none

¹⁴ Ibid., 73.

other than the God of the gospel.”¹⁵ By faith we are given to see that “all things work together for good” (ROMANS 8:28) even when we are faced with arduous and thankless tasks and even when we cannot see the good outcome of our love. This is by no means rationale for fatalism and inactivity among Christians. Quite the contrary, it is an encouragement which should spur Christians on to spend themselves in good works and in service to all who need it, regardless of the likelihood of a positive outcome. Christian vocation is not merely a strategy for changing society, although it may at times involve that. To view it as merely that, however, would be far too limiting. What is happening as Christians live out their vocations in the Lord is far more than that they are bringing about a more just and equitable society, as desirable and necessary as that may be. What is happening is that God, who is at work through the lives and actions of Christians, bringing about His good and gracious will.

C. CHRISTIAN VOCATION AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Luther’s theology of the cross plays a central role in his theology of vocation. Simply put, the Christian is incorporated into Christ, His cross and His resurrection. Luther explicitly links vocation with the cross. He says that our vocation is necessary for a full incorporation into Christ’s cross. This means that living out one’s vocation may at times appear to be a rather difficult way to go. Christian life is lived under the cross, it is a life of service and suffering, just as the life of Christ was. Luther makes an analogy between the two natures of Christ and the dual nature of Christian vocation, as God’s works in the works of men. Wingren says,

Thus a Christian finds himself called to drab and lowly tasks, which seem less remarkable than monastic life, mortifications, and other distractions from our vocations. For him who heeds his vocation, sanctification is hidden in

¹⁵ Ibid., 211.

offensively ordinary tasks, with the result that it is hardly noticed at all that he is a Christian. But faith looks on simple duties as tasks to which vocation summons the man; and by the Spirit he becomes aware that all those “poor, dull and despised works” are adorned with the favor of God “as with costliest gold and precious stones.”¹⁶

What a beautiful way to say it! “Cross-marked vocation.” From the roughness of earthly life there opens up a vista of life and freedom in the coming kingdom, and only one way leads to it — subjection to the cross here.¹⁷ In fact, Christ’s suffering and cross give meaning and purpose to our vocation, particularly when our obedience to it involves us in suffering. Wingren beautifully expresses this in the following way, “A striking gladness rests upon the very hardships that underlie [Luther’s] words. In these simple difficulties on earth there is fellowship with God’s son, who was [also] mocked and buffeted.”¹⁸ In what we suffer because of our vocation, we are blessed to see the sufferings and cross of Christ, and to participate in them. Likewise, others are also given to see the Christ in those who live, serve, and suffer according to His vocation.

Another aspect of Luther’s teaching as it relates to the cross is that to fulfill our vocation is certainly a risky business. The primary risk is that we may scatter our good works also upon the unjust and those who are undeserving. Luther treats this danger colorfully, using the metaphor of the sun and the rain,

Despite their sighing, the sun and the rain nevertheless obey God, who is unstinting love and scatters his gifts upon an ungrateful world. Likewise the Creator is heeded by flowers, berries, trees, and singing birds; they bestow their gifts on any who pass by, even though it be the world’s worst cheat

¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

¹⁸ Ibid.

or knave. "It is written on all leaves and on every blade of grass; no bird, no fruit, no berry, no kernel of grain is too small to show this and to say, 'For whom do I bear my delicious fruit or berry? For the worst rogues and rascals on earth!'" This is the pattern for Christian love, which must be willing to be misused, and to be "a lost love."¹⁹

Accordingly, Christian love may be “lost” or “wasted” on those who do not deserve it. Our love may be abused or put to evil purposes. It may be returned to us in the form of hatred or scorn. Many certainly will take advantage of us. This is not an excuse for naiveté in the performance of our good works. But such is the pattern of Christian love. It is given as God has given His love in Christ; fully, without reserve and without the expectation of reward.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Christian vocation as participation in the cross of Christ, and the most mysterious, is that it is a gift. Just as the Gospel call to live in Christ through faith and the consequent vocation to live in the neighbor through love are gifts, likewise the cross of Christ is a gift. According to Luther, “The cross is not to be chosen by us; it is laid upon us by God, i.e. the cross comes to us uninvoked in our vocation.”²⁰ It is a profound mystery, perhaps the central mystery of Christian life, that Christians are enabled to see the crosses they bear as gifts of God’s grace. At least, it is essential to the Christian’s calling, and the cross marks our vocation as inextricably bound up with Christ and with our life in Him.

CONCLUSION: OUR CROSS-MARKED IDENTITY

Throughout this discussion of the Christian’s vocation we have been moving toward an inescapable conclusion that forms

¹⁹ Ibid., 170-171. Luther uses the German phrase *die verlorene Liebe* to characterize the kind of love God has for the sinful and undeserving world. It is a “lost love” poured out in unstinting measure upon all, even those who ultimately reject it.

²⁰ Ibid., 53.

the climax of Luther's teaching on the subject. The Christian's faith and life are inextricably bound up with Christ. We live in Him through faith. He lives in us through love. As we are called outside of ourselves, we begin to lose our old identity and take on a new one, marked by the suffering Servant — a "cross-marked identity." We take on the identity of the One in whom we live. Luther said, in a bold and risky statement, that Christians are "little Christs" to the neighbor. We now know, having looked briefly at his teaching on vocation, what he meant. Now we live as Christ lived. He lived not for Himself, but for others. So, when I live in Him, I live not for myself, but for you.

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