

YOUR FAMILY VOCATION

God works through us in our callings as parents, spouses and children.

(Third in a series)

by Gene Edward Veith

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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 back in the 1930's? 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 have 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 vocation, so that 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 (Eph. 5:31-32). In that light, the wife sees Christ hidden in her husband, submitting to him as the church does to Christ (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 (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 ours what they learn or how they live.”

Parents were not called to neglect or spoil or be cruel to their children. God did not bless a man with a wife so that he would 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 (Eph. 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 “earthen 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 Holy Baptism, they are not only populating the earth, they are populating heaven.

Next month, Dr. Veith will write about our vocations in the workplace. — Ed.

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