What does it mean to be called as a husband, a wife, a parent, a child? How does the grace of the gospel impact how we carry out these particular callings? How does God's presence address the struggles that our own family faces?

Gene Veith joins forces with his daughter Mary Moerbe to explore these kinds of questions in light of Christian vocation and its applications for family life. They show how the Christian faith is lived out precisely in our ordinary relationships, and how a biblical understanding can equip us to move away from common confusions and dysfunctions to persevere in love.

Written with sensitivity and wisdom, Family Vocation addresses the perennial problems and joys of family life and provides a compelling paradigm for creating loving families in the face of cultural pressure.

“Gene Veith is one of the most powerful thinkers and apologists in the Christian world today. In this book he and his daughter really hit the mark. We must learn to think of marriage and families as vocations from God. Here is an ancient and sacred vision that we would do well to understand, promote, and most importantly live out.”

CHUCK COLSON, Founder, Prison Fellowship and the Colson Center for Christian Worldview

“In this luminous book, Veith underscores the centrality of family, marriage, and parenting. Engaging and absorbing, this book arrives on the scene at exactly the right time.”

TIM GOEGLEIN, Vice President, Focus on the Family

GENE EDWARD VEITH JR. (PhD, University of Kansas) is provost and professor of literature at Patrick Henry College and the author of several noted books on Christianity and culture, including God at Work.

MARY J. MOERBE (MA, Concordia Theological Seminary) is a professional deaconess in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, serving as diaconal writer for the Cranach Institute.
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INTRODUCTION

Confusing the Family

*God settles the solitary in a home.*

PSALM 68:6

The institution of the family is necessary to our very existence, basic to our culture, and critical to our happiness and well-being. As children, we were brought to life, nurtured, and shaped by our family. As adolescents and young adults, we were preoccupied with finding someone with whom we could start a family of our own. Adults who have managed to do that spend much of their time working to support their families and, if they have children, laboring to raise them. No one is more important to us than our parents, our spouse, and our children. Typically, we want to spend more time with our family, which we consider to be our haven in the storms of life. We rhapsodize over “family values” and want to bring them back. So why is family life so confusing? Why do marriage and parenthood often seem so difficult to get right?

Married couples often quarrel and fight, arguing about sex, money, and their own clashing personalities. Parents agonize over how to raise their children and often feel they have made terrible mistakes. Children sometimes break their parents’ hearts, turning into ungrateful little rebels. And parents sometimes break their children’s hearts, inflicting
emotional wounds that make the child desperate to get away. The man, the woman, and the children often become casualties of divorce, which leaves indelible wounds of its own. If a person’s family is the source of the greatest joys in life, it can also be the source of the greatest miseries.

Christians know that God looms behind the family. They know that God established the family and its different roles, that he upholds parenthood in the Ten Commandments, that Christ has something to do with marriage. But Christians have the same challenges in their families as nonbelievers. They even have additional challenges that nonbelievers do not have, such as the biblical mandate for the wife to submit to the husband, which, as it plays out in ordinary life, can drive some husbands to tyranny and some women to rebellion or despair. Christian marriages often come apart and end in divorce.

To be sure, many Christians do have strong and loving families, despite their occasional problems. What is their secret? Even those who have a good family life may not be able to explain the inner workings of a family functioning according to God’s design. They may not realize that God not only established the institution of the family in general but that he also established their actual, personal family. Christian husbands and wives may assume that to say “Christ is in marriage” is a figure of speech or a pious aspiration rather than an actual presence in their relationship. Christian parents will acknowledge God as “father,” but they may not recognize how God exerts his fatherhood through their own relationships with their children. Christian children, whether young or all grown up, may not see the connection between their relationship with their parents, however old they might become, and being a child of God.

God is present and active in families, bringing his gifts and working his purposes. He and his works may be hidden in the mundane-seeming details of ordinary life, but it is useful—both in times of family difficulties and when everything is going right—to catch a glimpse of him.

The Family and Contemporary Culture

Our culture, to put it mildly, is confused about the institution of the family. This cultural confusion throws off Christians as well as non-Christians. As a result, we have no consensus about how husbands and wives should treat each other or how to raise children. We are very confused about sex. We desperately want to have a strong family, and yet too often
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our families are falling apart, with husbands and wives, parents and children, at each other's throats.

So far we Americans still value marriage surprisingly highly, with four out of five adults getting married eventually. But we have stripped away its moral significance. Marriage is no longer seen as a prerequisite for sex (61 percent of Americans believe it is morally acceptable to have sex outside of marriage); or for living together (51 percent of married couples 18–49 lived together first); or for having a baby (55 percent of Americans believe that having a child out of wedlock is morally acceptable). There is no longer a cultural consensus that marriage should be permanent (70 percent of American adults believe that it is morally acceptable to get a divorce).

If marriage is no longer necessary for sex, cohabitation, or parenting, and if it is no longer a permanent relationship, what is left? There is romance. Companionship. But romance and companionship can come in many different forms.

Thus, we have problems even knowing what marriage is. If marriage is just a matter of romantic attachment, why shouldn’t same-sex couples who are romantically attached to each other be able to get married? Following this reasoning, some states and nations have changed their laws to allow men to marry men and women to marry women. Ironically, as same-sex couples clamor for marriage, an increasing number of opposite-sex couples have found that they can do without marriage altogether. In Scandinavia, which has had gay marriage for over a decade, cohabitation—“just living together”—has virtually replaced marriage as the norm.

What about parenting? In one sense our culture loves children, and we value having children. Many couples go to extraordinary lengths to have a child, and reproductive technology—both in traditional medicine and nontraditional experimentation (sperm banks, egg donors, surrogate mothers, genetic engineering)—has become a big business. But so has the technology of not having children.

Contraceptives have become more than a tool for spacing children; they have had the effect of largely separating sex from procreation. If sex is just a physical pleasure, with no essential connection to having babies, why not enjoy that pleasure any way you like? Sex no longer needs to be with someone you are married to since the prospect of parenthood is no
longer an issue. Sex can just as well be with someone of your own gender, or in the virtual fantasies of pornography, just with yourself. Should sex sometimes result in pregnancy—which seems strangely surprising to some people when it happens—there is always a medical procedure to take care of the problem: abortion.

Parenting too has been separated from the family. Women who do want children are increasingly raising them by themselves, without the father in the picture at all. As many as 40 percent of the children born in 2007 were to unmarried women. In 2008, one-third of America’s children, 33 percent, lived without married parents.7

The family is the basic unit of the culture. So the instability of the family brings with it all kinds of cultural instability, from the hypersexualization of our entertainment to the alienation and misery of those who grew up feeling abandoned. This cultural dysfunction, in turn, pulls families further apart by creating unrealistic expectations that no one can live up to and by distracting people from addressing their problems.

Christians, in particular, have been concerned with the state of the family, both their own and those in the broader culture. Christians have a basis for marriage and child raising that secularists do not have. Some are saying that, given the cultural forces that are undermining the family, Christians should just pursue their own family values. Why should the state have laws regulating families at all? If the culture wants to encourage serial polygamy or same-sex marriage or out-of-wedlock births, let it. In the meantime, the church will bless lifelong marriages in which two parents will raise healthy, well-adjusted children. The church will be the place of strong families. Individuals who yearn for a rich family life will come to the church, which will thrive as an attractive counterculture in the midst of the larger cultural collapse.

But there is a rather large problem with this scenario. Christian families are often as dysfunctional and unstable and confused as the families of secularists. According to George Barna’s 2008 study, 33 percent of American adults who have married have been divorced. Among “born-again Christians,” the divorce rate is 32 percent. Barna has another category of “evangelicals,” who not only say they have been born again but who also have a high view of the Bible and who hold to traditional Christian doctrines. These “evangelicals” do have a lower divorce rate, in fact, among the lowest of all of Barna’s categories. But
that rate is 26 percent. So one-third of America’s Christians have been divorced. One-fourth of America’s conservative Christians have been divorced. Breaking down the religion factor in more detail, 33 percent of “non-born-again Christians” had been divorced, the same as for the converted. Roman Catholics, whose church does not permit divorce at all, had a somewhat lower rate of 28 percent. Ironically, atheists and agnostics had fewer divorces than most believers, with a still substantial rate of 30 percent. Sociologist Bradley Wright has taken issue with Barna’s research, finding that the more seriously Christians take their faith, the stronger their marriages and the fewer divorces they have.

Still, we Christians must confess that we too have problems with marriage, parenthood, singleness, and sex. What plagues and confuses the culture often plagues and confuses us, also. We need to recover, both in theory and in practice, the Biblical estate of the family.

How This Book Is Different

Many Christian books on the family offer psychological advice, practical tips, moral judgments, and pious exhortations. Much Christian discourse on the subject is preoccupied with the overriding concerns of obedience, whether of the wife or of the child, or self-fulfillment, whether through one’s marriage or through one’s children. Such books risk unintentionally emulating the culture in reducing marriage and parenting to the exercise of power and the pursuit of personal subjective satisfaction, both of which can be poisonous to marriage, as well as to parenting and even to being a child.

Moral exhortations, too, can have little effect if they demand external behavior without changing the heart, something only the gospel of Christ can do. But even urging couples to “put Christ in your marriage” does not always help. What does that mean, exactly, and how can this be done? And doesn’t the Bible teach that Christ is already in marriage? Perhaps what we need is to discern his presence, his actions, and his self-sacrifice.

This book will attempt a paradigm shift. It will offer a different framework for thinking about and living through family-related issues. But this paradigm is not new. Rather, it draws on the history of the church, on another time that the church had to recover the significance and the disciplines of the family.
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In the Middle Ages, marriage and parenthood were often treated as nothing more than a concession to the weakness of the flesh and the necessity of procreation. Those who wished to achieve full spiritual perfection would take vows of celibacy—rejecting marriage, sex, and parenthood—to enter a “holy order” in the monastery or the cloister. To be sure, marriage was a sacrament, but it was not a calling. The Latinate word for calling, “vocation” was reserved for God’s summons into the religious orders, into being a priest or a monk or a nun.

Martin Luther, however, as he was recovering the gospel and the Word of God, insisted that all of life in the world is a realm for Christian service and that our everyday activities in the workplace, the culture, the church, and especially the family are vocations from God. Luther specifically described the family as a “holy order,” a special realm of Christian love.10

Thus with the Reformation came a new emphasis on the spirituality of the family in all of its different offices and functions. What does it mean, in Christ, to be a wife or a husband, a mother or father, a child? How does each of these holy orders function together with the others? What do they all mean? What do they have to do with Christ and the life of the redeemed?

The insights of the Reformation will help us answer such questions. However, this book will not attempt to bring back the family life of the Reformation era. After all, since the family is the basis of every culture, the family is bound to that culture. Our focus will be on contemporary families and the unique challenges of our own times.

But what we can learn from the Reformation is that the solution to our family problems will not be a matter of more laws, more rules to live by, or more principles for successful living. The major contribution of the Reformation was to place the gospel of Jesus Christ—justification by grace through faith in the atoning work of Christ—at the center of every facet of Christian teaching and every facet of the Christian life, including the family. And the key to making that application and renewing contemporary families is the doctrine of vocation.
The word “vocation” is the Latinate form of the English word “calling.” In today’s secular usage, the word “vocation” has become just another word for “job,” but its Christian meaning is that God calls us to the different roles that he asks us to play and in which he is active. A key scriptural text on the subject is this: “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him” (1 Cor. 7:17). The idea is that the Lord “assigns” us to different kinds of lives, and that he then “calls” us to them.

Again, we often think of a job as our “vocation,” and so it is. But the text in Corinthians is referring to marriage. God may call us to lead different kinds of lives—to marriage, parenthood, a job, a church, a community. It is in our various vocations that we live out our faith in love and service to the various neighbors that God brings into our lives. Not only that, God works in and through all of these vocations and the unique individuals he calls to fill them, including us.

Vocation is a profoundly biblical doctrine. But the great theologian of vocation is Martin Luther. Evangelicals of all persuasions appreciate how Luther reformed the church with his emphasis on the gospel and
the Word of God. His third great contribution, however, the doctrine of vocation, has been all but forgotten. Since vocation is the key to how Christians are to live in the world, the loss of this teaching has been accompanied with the loss of Christian influence in the world. Luther considered the family callings to be the most important of all the earthly vocations.

This chapter will sketch out what the doctrine of vocation is. The later chapters will then apply these teachings to the specific callings of husband and wife, father and mother, child, and the other family relationships.

God Working through Vocation

God made you. But notice how he made you. He made you by means of your mother and your father. God gives you this day your daily bread, and perhaps you thanked him for your food before you ate your last meal. But notice how he gives you the physical nourishment you need to stay alive. He feeds you by means of farmers, bakers, factory workers, and the hands of whoever prepared your meal. God heals you by means of doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers. God protects you by means of police officers, firefighters, soldiers, and our legal system. He gives you the blessings of technology by means of scientists, inventors, and engineers. He builds up your faith by means of your pastor and other people in your church. This is the doctrine of vocation.

The doctrine of vocation has to do, above all, with the way God works through human beings. Contrary to what we might assume, vocation is not primarily about what we do or what we are supposed to do. That enters into it. But vocation is mainly about God’s action. Christians are used to talking about “what God is doing in my life.” Vocation emphasizes “what God is doing through my life.” And, by the same token, “what God is doing for me through other people in my life.”

We sometimes speak of God’s “providence,” referring to the way God governs and controls every aspect of his creation. The term comes from the word “provide.” God not only rules over us all, but he also provides for us, and he has chosen to distribute his gifts through human beings. God doesn’t have to go this route. He can feed us without farmers, as he did with the manna in the wilderness, and he can heal us without doctors. But his usual way of giving his gifts is through other people
exercising their particular tasks that God has called and equipped them to do, that is, through vocation.

Just notice everyone who does things for you: Your parents who brought you into existence, brought you up, and cared for you. The other members of your family. Your friends. But also people you don’t even know: Whoever made your clothes. Whoever built your house. The artists whose music or drawings or stories you enjoy. The experts who designed and built and programmed your computer. All the people behind the scenes who keep you safe and make your life possible. Consider that God looms behind them all, blessing you through all of these people working in their vocations, that he is as close as your neighbor.

Now consider that God also works through you. You do things for your family, your friends, the people in your church. On the job, you do things for your customers and people you work with. You provide goods or services that help others (otherwise, your employer wouldn’t stay in business very long). Perhaps God has given you the vocation of marriage. That means he works through you to bless your spouse. Perhaps God has made you a parent. That means he works through you to produce one of the most amazing miracles of them all—to create new life, to engender an immortal soul—and he works through you to bring up that child. And if you are a child—and who isn’t or hasn’t been, no matter how old you are?—God works through you to bless your parents. According to the doctrine of vocation, God remains intimately involved in everything that he has made, and he stays close to his loved ones in part by means of human love.

God Working through the Physical Realm

Luther understood something that all Christians used to realize but that modern Christians have gotten away from—that God works through physical means. His Word is a book, consisting of ink printed on paper, that can be put on a shelf or opened and read; and yet that physical object conveys the personal saving revelation of God himself. Luther also believed that God conveys the gospel of his Son—who became physically incarnate in the real world, physically died to atone for our sins, and physically rose again to save us from our own death—through the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Furthermore, God, who created everything, governs and rules this physical world, including ourselves in our physical lives, by providentially working through the natural order
and through the vocations of ordinary human beings. This means the body and things of the body—sex, childbearing, eating, drinking, working, providing for our physical needs—have profound significance and value. They are gifts to us and tools in God’s hands.

Today, people, including Christians, tend to separate the physical from the spiritual. We look to the spiritual realm—by which we generally mean something interior, immaterial, and mystical—for our significance and value, while the physical, which takes up most of our attention day to day, just doesn’t matter that much. Non-Christians do this, as with the movie star notorious for her sexual promiscuity bragging about how she is such a “spiritual person.” In her mind, what she does with her body makes no difference to her spiritual life, which is an ethereal kind of personal experience that has nothing to do with her everyday, objective, physical life.

Christians, too, can feel that their everyday lives have no meaning. They want to escape their mundane lives by means of transcendent spiritual experience. In 1 Corinthians 5, we see that believers can also imagine a disconnect between their daily lives and the faith they profess. They may try to justify immoral behavior as the movie star did, insisting that what they do in the body has no effect on their spiritual conditions. More common, though, is the notion that they have to do “spiritual things”—church work or Bible study or witnessing—in order to serve God, sometimes at the expense of their families. This devaluing of ordinary life can be so firmly rooted in our expectations that many Christians will accept only extraordinary supernatural experiences as counting for their spiritual lives, while missing God’s presence in the ordinary and the everyday.

The doctrine of vocation, in contrast, brings the physical and the spiritual together, so that spiritual reality becomes tangible. The ordinary doesn’t need to be a burden we yearn to escape when we learn to discern God’s presence in the everyday patterns of life. Physical reality, including our everyday tasks and callings, becomes transfigured with the presence of God.

The Estates of God’s Love
Luther taught that God created three institutions or “estates” for human beings to live in: the church, the state, and the household. And in these
estates, he gives us not just one but multiple vocations. God calls sinners, by the gospel, into his church, where they form a community in time and eternity that is no less than the body of Christ, who is truly present with his people. Here some are pastors, through whom God proclaims his Word, and some are laypeople, perhaps holding different offices as elders, teachers, musicians, and the like. Thus, all Christians have vocations in the church.

God has also ordained that we live under governments, in communities, as part of cultures. Romans 13 explains how God restrains sinful human beings by working through the vocation of lawful magistrates, thereby allowing even sinners to cooperate together and live in societies. Thus, some people have vocations as police officers, members of the military, judges, local officials, governors, legislators, and presidents. We also have the vocation of being citizens of our country and our community, with civic obligations such as, in a democracy, informing ourselves about the issues of the day and voting accordingly. This also makes us a part of the culture in which we find ourselves—that is, in which God has assigned us—and so we are called to be salt and light in our various societies. We are where we are as servants of the Lord. Thus we have vocations in the state.

But the household—that is, the family—is the primary estate and the site of our most important earthly vocations. The family is God's ongoing creation of humanity, the foundation of culture, and the image of our relationship with God on earth. God brings us to existence by means of fathers and mothers and thus assigns us to a family—including all of the siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and a lineage going back to Adam and Eve. He gives us talents and opportunities and lets us grow. He even makes it possible (though not all have this calling) for us to have the calling of forming a family of our own. And all this is a gift and an earthly reflection of God the Father and God the Son, as we will explore in later chapters.

Within a single family, our vocations are multiple. A woman may have the calling to be a wife to her husband in marriage. She may also have the calling of being a mother to her children. At the same time, she may still have the calling of a being a daughter to her own parents as long as they are living. She may also be an aunt, a cousin, a grandmother. Each of these callings has its own tasks and relationships, and in each
of them God is present and active. The subsequent chapters of this book will explore what that means.

Notice how personal this is. No person has exactly the same callings as anyone else. God creates us as unique individuals, and he assigns to us and calls us to unique relationships. God gives us these relationships precisely so that we can live out our faith and share his gifts, whether physical or spiritual. Through our lives, God gives personalized care to those we interact with. And he gives us personalized care through others as they carry out their vocations.

Johann Gerhard, the seventeenth-century spiritual writer, called family the “nurturing estate.” Husbands and wives nurture each other. Fathers and mothers nurture their children. And God nurtures everyone through these offices.

God’s Economy
So if the three estates in which God assigns to us vocations are the church, the state, and the household, what about “vocation” as in job or profession? Did the Reformation writers on vocation not have a place for our more common use of the term? Is there no estate of the workplace? Luther does discuss one’s work as a calling from God. Significantly, though, he includes economic activity under the estate of “household”; that is, not as a separate sphere, but as part of the family.

In his day, families generally made a living by working together. If you made a living by farming—and this holds true even today, though not as much as it used to—father, mother, and all of the kids each performed important tasks. The father would plow, cultivate the crops, and harvest them; the mother would sow the grain, pull the weeds, turn the produce into food, and preserve it for the year; each child would have his or her “chores”—tending to the animals, gathering the eggs and milking the cows, drawing water—so that they served as essential helpers to their parents and made a significant economic contribution to the family. Similarly, if you were a craftsman—a carpenter, a tailor, a shoemaker—the whole family pitched in.

The Greek word for “household” is oikos, which literally means “house” but included the family that lived in it, along with any servants and the land around it. The Greeks also spoke of the nomos, with its plural form nomia, meaning “laws” or “principles.” Oikonomia referred to what
it takes to manage and operate a household. This is where we get the word “economy.” Originally, “economic activity” meant what you need to do to take care of your family. Economic vocations—jobs by which we make money—are thus the way we “make a living” for our families. In doing so, we also provide goods, services, and other blessings to other families.

The Industrial Revolution, of course, shattered that unity of work and family life. Men, women, and originally even children left their homes to go to work in the factories. In the modern world, people, as we say, “work outside the home.” Today, the demands of work and the needs of family life are often in conflict. But it was not always so. Men, as well as women, worked inside the home, which meant that fathers were available to their children round the clock just as their mothers were. In some cases, today’s Internet technology is allowing both men and women to work inside the home again. But most people today find themselves living in two different realms—the home and the workplace—and feel pulled in two different directions. Mothers torment themselves over whether they should stay home with the children or pursue their own careers. Fathers are often so busy with work that they have no time for their children. Under the doctrine of vocation, it is not as simple as just choosing either family or work; the task is to bring these realms together in God’s personal calling.

The vocations of family are spouse (husband, wife); parent (father, mother); and child (son, daughter; dependent or adult). Each one serves within the relationships of marriage, parenthood, or childhood. Luther called these “offices,” each of which has its own prerogatives, responsibilities, and proper work. Both the office and the individual are part of God’s creation and his good will. Offices serve in a general sort of way, while individuals fulfill offices in a personal sort of way. For example, motherhood is connected with its services to children, yet every mother still is a unique woman. In the same way, vocations often have basic services associated with them that are fleshed out by the individuals and circumstances involved.

Often our interactions are determined by our vocational relationships. Pastors do not preach in church because they are sons and fathers, but because they are called to preach God’s Word to his people as pastor. A wife is not usually expected to perform surgery on her husband, but
to live with him, love him, and serve him in other ways. Fathers are to be fathers to their children and not simply friends or coaches. Parents should parent in ways suited to their particular children, and children should honor and obey their parents but not every adult who crosses their paths.

God lends his authority to particular vocations. Parents have authority over their children. As we will see, God also gives certain prerogatives to particular vocations. For example, husbands and wives, by virtue of God’s calling them into marriage, are authorized to have sex with each other. Sexual activity apart from marriage is sinful—you have not been called to have sex with someone you are not married to—but within marriage it becomes a good work.

Loving God by Loving Your Neighbor

The purpose of every vocation is to love and serve one’s neighbor. God is always calling us to love him and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:26–28). This is true in every estate and in every office. In the church, pastors are to love and serve their congregations, and laypeople are to love and serve their pastors and fellow Christians. In the state, rulers are to love and serve their people, and citizens are to love and serve their fellow countrymen. In the workplace, workers of every kind are to love and serve their customers. Each vocation has its own set of neighbors whom we are to love and serve with the particular tasks we are called to perform.

In the family, this means that fathers and mothers are called to love and serve their children. Children are called to love and serve their parents. The vocation of marriage is, perhaps, unique in that it entails only one neighbor whom one is to love and serve. The husband’s neighbor is his wife, and his calling is to love and serve her. The wife’s neighbor is her husband, and her calling is to love and serve him. As we shall see, the husband and the wife each have some distinct ways of serving each other, just as parents and children do, but mutual love and service are what characterize a strong family in God’s design.

Notice that the purpose of vocation is not to serve God, as such, but to serve the neighbor. Our relationship with God is based on his service to us. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). “In this is love,” says the apostle
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John, “not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” But having done so, God sends us out to love our neighbors. “Beloved, if God so loved us,” John continues, “we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:10–11).

In Luther’s day—as well as in our own—Christians sometimes had the notion that they had to do things for God in order to earn a high standing with him. They constructed all kinds of spiritual works, exercises, and pious observances and spent their time in prayers, meditations, and rituals. In order to do so, they took vows of celibacy (promising not to get married and not to have children), poverty (promising not to pursue the economic callings), and obedience (following church authority over that of the state).

Those committed to this kind of spirituality stressed that salvation was a matter of good works. In his day Luther asked, in what sense are these humanly-devised spiritual disciplines good works? Do they actually help anyone? God doesn’t need our good works, Luther would insist. God needs nothing. Our relationship to him is based solely on his grace, which he offers us freely through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Though God doesn’t need our good works, our neighbor does. Our neighbor is in need. God commands us to love and serve that neighbor.

The good works we need to do as Christians—the arena of our sanctification—are not elaborate spiritual exercises or spectacular feats of accomplishment. Rather, they are to be found in our ordinary interactions with the actual human beings whom God brings into our lives every day: the way we treat our spouse, the things we do for our children, what we do for our customers and fellow workers, how we get along with the other Christians in our church, how we treat the people we meet in the broader society. Our faith, “working through love” (Gal. 5:6), bears fruit in vocation. It is precisely in marriage, parenthood, economic activity, and life in the culture and congregation that we encounter the neighbors whom God wants us to love and serve.

Today’s Christians often fall into a similar syndrome as the medieval monastics. They assume that “church work” is holier and more spiritually significant than spending time with their families or attending to their other vocations. Congregations often have so many things going on that we could spend every night of the week doing church activities. It is easy to become so busy with “spiritual” activities—Bible studies,
witnessing, meetings, projects—that we neglect our marriages and our children. But the work of our vocations is also a “spiritual activity” that God specifically calls us to.

Luther believed that changing a baby’s diaper is a holier work than that of all the monks in all the monasteries. A holy work! Why? Because the mother and father (yes, Luther specifically talked about fathers changing baby diapers) are loving and serving their child. In God’s eyes, this is holy. And so are the other works of family life, from having sex with your spouse to driving your kids to soccer practice.

Thus, in our desire to serve God we do not need to distance ourselves from the vocations of daily life. On the contrary, as Christ himself tells us, “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers”—feeding the hungry, ministering to the sick, visiting the prisoner—“you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). These are not always strangers—sometimes your child is the hungry, sick, and imprisoned one! But it turns out, when we serve our neighbor we are serving Christ after all.

God is hidden in vocation, and Christ is hidden in our neighbors. Thus, we love and serve God precisely by loving and serving our neighbors. We live out our faith in concrete ways, face-to-face with the people God has provided for us in our daily lives.

Sacrifice by the Priesthood of All Believers

The doctrine of vocation falls under the theological category of “the priesthood of all believers.” Contrary to the common perception, this does not mean that all believers get to be pastors or that we don’t really need pastors. It means rather that we do not have to be pastors. The pastoral office is indeed a vocation from God through which he works, so that we speak of someone being “called” into the ministry, and churches “call” their pastors. The priesthood, though, is something different. A priest is someone who offers sacrifices.

Although Christ sacrificed himself once and for all to accomplish our salvation (Heb. 7:27; 9:26; 10:14), there are still sacrifices to be rendered: sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise, sacrifices when we “walk in love” (Eph. 5:2) and give to others (Phil. 4:18). We New Testament Christians are told specifically to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). These sacrifices are offered in vocation. The father who comes home bone tired from a day on the job has presented his
body as a living sacrifice for his family. The mother in the throes of hav-
ing a baby, the ten-year-old helping around the house, the husband set-
ting aside what he wants to do for the sake of his wife, the wife putting
up with her husband, the couple scrimping and saving and doing with-
out to pay for what their children need—all of these are living sacrifices.
All of these are acts of priesthood, done by Christians in the service and
presence of God.

Protestant churches seldom call their ministers “priests.” Roman
Catholic churches do so because they believe that the priest offers up in
the Mass a sacrifice for sin. Protestants say that Christ was offered up as
our sacrifice once and for all, so that the role of the clergy is to preach
(thus, be a “preacher”); function as a shepherd to feed, guard, and care
for his flock (thus, be a “pastor”); and serve his congregation (the word
“minister” coming from the word meaning “to serve”). All Christians are
not clergymen, but all are called to offer living sacrifices and so to be
priests.

God is in vocation. As we shall see, the Bible clearly teaches that
Christ is in the family. When we love and serve our neighbor, Christ is
loving and serving the neighbor through us (Gal. 2:20). When we put
that neighbor’s need before our own, we are sacrificing ourselves. This,
of course, is a pale shadow of Christ’s sacrifice. And yet, Christ’s sacrifice
is in what we do. He takes up our sacrifice, however small, into his great
sacrifice (Romans 12; 2 Cor. 1:3–5; Col. 1:24–29).

Sometimes we have difficulties in our vocations, in our families. We
often fail to serve, insisting on being served instead. We thus sin in our
vocations. The cross of Christ’s sacrifice is there for us for our forgive-
ness. Sometimes we suffer in our vocations, in our families, through no
fault of our own. We bear crosses, sometimes horrible ones. But, again,
Christ takes our crosses into his for our healing and to restore our hope.
“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for
good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).
Notice that this applies “for those who are called”; thus the passage
speaks of vocation. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny him-
self and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). All of these
daily self-denials are part of what it means to follow Jesus, and these take
place precisely in all of our different vocations.

The rest of this book will look at what the Scriptures have to say
about the different offices of family and will explore what God reveals through these vocations about his relationship with us. We will look at his constant presence and his active work through marriage and parenthood. We will explore how people within a family can serve each other in love, sharing God’s gifts through his callings. Included in each part will also be a chapter on the crosses we may be called to bear in these vocations. We will thus address some of the difficulties and sufferings that are part of our lives in this fallen world. Above all, we will look for God’s presence in the different vocations of the family and revel in Christ’s sacrificial love that transfigures every family relationship.
This newly redesigned book unpacks the Bible’s teaching about the doctrine of vocation. Gene Veith guides readers in discovering God’s purpose and calling in those seemingly ordinary areas of life by providing a spiritual framework for thinking about and acting in each sphere.
What does it mean to be called as a husband, a wife, a parent, a child?

How does the grace of the gospel impact how we carry out these particular callings?

How does God’s presence address the struggles that our own family faces?

Gene Veith joins forces with his daughter Mary Moerbe to explore these kinds of questions in light of Christian vocation and its applications for family life. They show how the Christian faith is lived out precisely in our ordinary relationships, and how a biblical understanding can equip us to move away from common confusions and dysfunctions to persevere in love.

Written with sensitivity and wisdom, Family Vocation addresses the perennial problems and joys of family life and provides a compelling paradigm for creating loving families in the face of cultural pressure.

“Gene Veith is one of the most powerful thinkers and apologists in the Christian world today. In this book he and his daughter really hit the mark. We must learn to think of marriage and families as vocations from God. Here is an ancient and sacred vision that we would do well to understand, promote, and most importantly live out.”

CHUCK COLSON, Founder, Prison Fellowship and the Colson Center for Christian Worldview

“In this luminous book, Veith underscores the centrality of family, marriage, and parenting. Engaging and absorbing, this book arrives on the scene at exactly the right time.”

TIM GOEGLEIN, Vice President, Focus on the Family

GENE EDWARD VEITH JR. (PhD, University of Kansas) is provost and professor of literature at Patrick Henry College and the author of several noted books on Christianity and culture, including God at Work.

MARY J. MOERBE (MA, Concordia Theological Seminary) is a professional deaconess in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, serving as diaconal writer for the Cranach Institute.