

Your Christian Vocation *in All of Life*

GOD *at* WORK



GENE EDWARD VEITH JR.

God at Work

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Introduction: The Christian's Calling in the World



When we pray the Lord's Prayer, observed Luther, we ask God to give us this day our daily bread. And He does give us our daily bread. He does it by means of the farmer who planted and harvested the grain, the baker who made the flour into bread, the person who prepared our meal. We might today add the truck drivers who hauled the produce, the factory workers in the food processing plant, the warehouse men, the wholesale distributors, the stock boys, the lady at the checkout counter. Also playing their part are the bankers, futures investors, advertisers, lawyers, agricultural scientists, mechanical engineers, and every other player in the nation's economic system. All of these were instrumental in enabling you to eat your morning bagel.

Before you ate, you probably gave thanks to God for your food, as is fitting. He is caring for your physical needs, as with every other kind of need you have, preserving your life through His gifts. "He provides food for those who fear him" (Psalm

111:5); also to those who do not fear Him, “to all flesh” (136:25). And He does so by using other human beings. It is still God who is responsible for giving us our daily bread. Though He could give it to us directly, by a miraculous provision, as He once did for the children of Israel when He fed them daily with manna, God has chosen to work through human beings, who, in their different capacities and according to their different talents, serve each other. This is the doctrine of vocation.

To use another of Luther’s examples, God could have decided to populate the earth by creating each new person from the dust, as He did Adam. Instead, He chose to create new life through the *vocation* of husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. God calls men and women together and grants them the unfathomable ability to have children. He calls people into families, in which—through the love and care of the parents—He extends His love and care for children. This is the doctrine of vocation.

When we or a loved one gets sick, we pray for healing. Certainly God can and sometimes does grant healing through a miracle. But normally He grants healing through the *vocations* of doctors, nurses, pharmacists, lab technicians, and the like. It is still God who heals us, but He works through the means of skilled, talented, divinely equipped human beings.

When God blesses us, He almost always does it through other people. The ability to read God’s Word is an inexpressibly precious blessing, but reading is an ability that did not spring fully formed in our young minds. It required the *vocation* of teachers. God protects us through the cop on the beat and the whole panoply of the legal system. He gives us beauty and meaning through artists. He lets us travel through the ministry of auto workers, mechanics, road crews, and airline employees. He keeps us clean through the work of garbage collectors,

plumbers, sanitation workers, and the sometimes undocumented aliens who clean our hotel rooms. He brings people to salvation through pastors and through anyone else who proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the lost. The fast-food worker, the inventor; the clerical assistant, the scientist; the accountant, the musician—they all have high callings, used by God to bless and serve His people and His creation.

Not that they always seem that way, from the point of view of the people in those vocations. It is easy to see how all of these kinds of work are blessings to the rest of us, who receive their benefits; but from the perspective of the people slaving away in these vocations, their work is often a daily grind, a hard, boring, thankless task. Those in any particular line of work are usually doing it not from some high ideal but because they have to make a living. There may be some professions that are innately satisfying, but even high-paid and high-status jobs can wear the spirit down. Work often appears meaningless. It is a means to an end—survival; but it seems that we survive only to work. It consumes our time, our emotions, our after-hours preoccupations. It takes away the time we would like to spend with our families—though the vocation of family life is often a frustrating struggle as well—and as current technology puts us on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, our work consumes our lives.

Though work is a blessing, enjoyed even by Adam and Eve who were employed in the Garden of Eden “to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15), after the Fall we must labor in frustration and sweat: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground” (3:17-19).

Though Christians believe that God is active in the world, and though a little reflection demonstrates that He is active in human vocations, it is also true that the Devil is active in the world. On paper things should go well, with people helping one another and promoting the goals of peace and happiness that everyone claims to seek; but sin spoils everything. Many people in the world do not get their daily bread. Many parents abuse—or abort—their children instead of caring for them. Many husbands and wives are at each other’s throats instead of being the “one flesh” that God called them to in marriage. Many politicians exploit, deceive, and tyrannize their people instead of protecting their interests. There are cops who abuse their authority, teachers who do not teach, doctors who kill their patients instead of healing them, pastors who distort God’s Word.

People sin in their vocations, and they sin against their vocations. And in not being aware of what their vocations are—and that there is a spiritual dimension to work, family, and involvement in society—they are plagued by a lack of purpose, confused as to what they should do and how they should live and who they are. At a time when, according to the polls, people’s major preoccupations are work and family, there has never been a greater need to recover the Christian doctrine of vocation.

It is odd that such a liberating, life-enhancing doctrine has become all but forgotten in our time, passed over in our seminaries, sermons, and Bible classes. But the doctrine of vocation makes up an important part of the spiritual heritage that contemporary Christians have, unfortunately, cut themselves off from and are in such great need of recovering. It is more than an understanding of work, more than the slogan that we should do all things for the glory of God, more than a vague theological platitude. The teachings on the subject by the old Reformation theologians are remarkably specific and realistic,

giving practical guidance for how this doctrine can be lived out in the real, fallen world. But more than that, the doctrine of vocation amounts to a comprehensive doctrine of the Christian life, having to do with faith and sanctification, grace and good works. It is a key to Christian ethics. It shows how Christians can influence their culture. It transfigures ordinary, everyday life with the presence of God.

VOCATION IN HISTORY

Today, in an age of unbelief, many of the old theological words remain, even after the faith that gave them meaning is gone. For example, people who know nothing of the authority of Scripture still use words like *inspiration* and *revelation*, applying them to a work of art or to a business idea. *Vision*, *mission*, *Spirit*, and even more technical terms such as *canon*, *hermeneutics*, and *synergism* are all examples of theological language drained of its original content and turned to more secular senses. *Vocation* also has a common meaning today. It has become just another term for job, as in “vocational training” or “vocational education.” The term, though, is a theological word, reflecting a rich body of biblical teaching about work, family, society, and the Christian life.

The term *vocation* comes from the Latin word for “calling.” The Scripture is full of passages that describe how we have been *called* to faith through the Gospel (e.g., 2 Thessalonians 2:14), how God *calls* us to a particular office or way of life (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 7:15-20). The doctrine of vocation is thoroughly biblical, as shall be seen; but, as with other scriptural teachings, it surfaced and was developed with its greatest rigor during the Reformation.

In the medieval church, having a vocation or having “a call-

ing” referred exclusively to full-time church work. If a person felt a calling, this was a sign that he or she might “have a vocation,” which meant becoming a priest, a monk, or a nun. The ordinary occupations of life—being a peasant farmer or kitchen maid, making tools or clothing, being a soldier or even king—were acknowledged as necessary but worldly. Such people could be saved, but they were mired in the world. To serve God fully, to live a life that is truly spiritual, required a full-time commitment. The “counsels of perfection” could be fulfilled only in the Holy Orders of the church, in which a man or woman could devote every day to prayer, contemplation, worship, and the service of God. Even marriage and parenthood—though recognized as good things, with marriage understood as a sacrament from God—were seen as encumbrances to the religious life. “Having a vocation” meant, among other things, the willingness and the ability to live a celibate life.

The Reformation came about out of a conviction that the church had drifted away from the truths of God’s Word, focusing on salvation through humanly invented works, as opposed to the Gospel of forgiveness through the work of Christ. In scrutinizing the existing ecclesiastical system in light of the Gospel and the Scriptures, the Reformers insisted that priests and nuns and monastics did not have a special claim to God’s favor, but that laypeople too could live the Christian life to its fullest.

The Reformation notion of “the priesthood of all believers” by no means denigrated the pastoral office, as is often assumed, or taught that pastors or church workers were unnecessary, or taught that everybody could come up with their own theology for themselves. Rather, it taught that the pastoral office is a *vocation*, a calling from God with its own responsibilities, authority, and blessings. But it also taught that laypeople as well have *vocations*, callings of their own that entail holy responsibilities,

authorities, and blessings of their own. Not all believers were pastors or church workers. They do not have to be in order to be perfect before God, a status attained through the blood of Christ; but all believers *are* priests. All believers, like the priests of the Old Testament, can come into the presence of God through the blood of the Lamb. All believers can handle holy things (such as the Bible, earlier denied to the laity). All can proclaim the Gospel to those who need its saving message. “The priesthood of all believers” means that all Christians enjoy the same access to Christ and are spiritually equal before Him.

“The priesthood of all believers” did not make everyone into church workers; rather, it turned every kind of work into a sacred calling. A major issue at the time was the prohibition of marriage for people in the religious orders. The Reformers looked at Scripture and insisted that marriage is ordained by God and that the family, far from being something less spiritual than the life of a hermit or anchorite, is the arena for some of the most important spiritual work. A father and a mother are “priests” to their children, not only taking care of their physical needs, but nourishing them in the faith. Every kind of work, including what had heretofore been looked down upon—the work of peasants and craftsmen—is an occasion for priesthood, for exercising a holy service to God and to one’s neighbor.

The Reformation was accompanied by great social change. This was largely due to the expansion of education to all classes and walks of life. Again, this was part of the priesthood of all believers, the conviction that every Christian should be able to read the Word of God. That meant that it was imperative to teach every Christian to read. Before, this skill was in short supply even among the wealthy and the ruling classes. About the only people who could read in the Middle Ages were people in

church work vocations. The bureaucrats and record-keepers necessary for government and business were, of course, also literate, and while laypeople could learn to read in church institutions, most of these functions were often performed by minor clergy—the word *clerk* comes from *cleric*. The Reformation churches, on the other hand, launched an ambitious general education program in an active effort to teach everyone—girls as well as boys, peasants as well as landowners—how to read God’s Word.

Someone who has learned how to read the Bible can then take that skill and read just about anything. Interestingly, though, the schools started by the Reformation churches went beyond basic literacy and Bible reading. They implemented the classical “liberal” education, pioneered by the Greeks and Romans to equip a free citizen to develop all of his gifts (the term coming from *libera*, the Latin word for “freedom”). Though the Greeks and Romans had a separate, occupational education for slaves, the Reformation offered even the lower classes a classical Christian education that would prove “liberating” throughout the social order.

The Reformation, concerned primarily with the individual’s relationship with God, bore fruit in the secular realm with social mobility, an economic boom, and eventually political freedoms. These were sparked not only by the new education, but also by the related teachings about the doctrine of vocation. Luther’s “Small Catechism” with its “Table of Duties” placed vocation at the center of every layman’s Christian instruction, just as his “Large Catechism” developed the doctrine in detail for pastors. Calvin and his followers likewise emphasized the Christian’s vocation in the world, and the Puritans applied the doctrine with a diligence and intensity that would shape American culture.

The doctrine of vocation looms behind many of the Protestant influences on the culture, though these are often misunderstood. If Protestantism resulted in an increase in individualism, this was not because the theology turned the individual into the supreme authority. Rather, the doctrine of vocation encourages attention to each individual's uniqueness, talents, and personality. These are valued as gifts of God, who creates and equips each person in a different way for the calling He has in mind for that person's life. The doctrine of vocation undermines conformity, recognizes the unique value of every person, and celebrates human differences; but it sets these individuals into a community with other individuals, avoiding the privatizing, self-centered narcissism of secular individualism.

The Reformation may have resulted in a "Protestant work ethic," but this was not due to the pressure to prove one's election by worldly success, as certain social scientists ludicrously maintain. Rather, the work ethic emerged out of an understanding of the meaning of work and the satisfaction and fulfillment that come from ordinary human labor when seen through the light of the doctrine of vocation.

That the Reformation was the time in which the Protestant church enjoyed its greatest cultural influence—in art, literature, music, as well as in social institutions—also has to do with the doctrine of vocation. Recovering this doctrine may well open the way for contemporary Christians to influence their cultures once again.

THE PURPOSE FOR THIS BOOK

This book is an exposition of the doctrine of vocation and an attempt to apply that doctrine in a practical way to life in the twenty-first century. First, it will explore the nature of voca-

tion—what is the purpose of vocation, how to find one’s vocation, how God calls us to different tasks and how He is present in what we do in our everyday lives. Then the book will address specific vocations and specific problems common to them all.

According to the Reformers, each Christian has multiple vocations. We have callings in our work. We have callings in our families. We have callings as citizens in the larger society. And we have callings in the Church.

Each of these has become a major concern—and problem—for contemporary Christians. What does it mean to be a Christian businessman or a Christian artist or a Christian lawyer, scientist, construction worker, or whatever? How can I serve God in my work? And what if I don’t have one of these fulfilling jobs? What about my dead-end job? And how can I know what God is calling me to, what my vocation is supposed to be? How can I know what I am supposed to do with my life?

And what does it mean to have a Christian family? How am I supposed to raise my kids? And what if I don’t have kids? What if I am single—that state largely ignored by “family-oriented” church programs? What if I want to be married but can’t find the right person? If I am married, how am I supposed to relate to my spouse? How are parents supposed to relate to their kids, and vice versa? What about all of these authority issues?

Should Christians become involved in politics? How can Christians function in a non-Christian or even anti-Christian culture? Should we take it over? Or let it take over us? Or abandon it? Do we always have to obey our rulers? How can Christians change things?

And what about the roles of pastors and laypeople in the Church? Who does what? Who submits to whom? How do church activities and responsibilities relate to our other activi-

ties and responsibilities? How do secular vocations relate to the work of, say, evangelism?

This book will address questions such as these. Not that it will in every case provide a straightforward answer to all of them, but it will provide a spiritual framework for thinking about such issues, and for acting upon them, perhaps, in a different way.

Unlike many books on how to succeed at work, how to succeed at family, and how to succeed at changing the world, this book will strive to be honest. The doctrine of vocation is utterly realistic, accounting for problems, sins, and confusions that beset each and every vocation. The Reformers had much to say about failing in vocation, about the times when our vocation seems to be bearing no fruit. What the Reformers say about “Bearing the Cross” in vocation, about the role of prayer in vocation and what it means to depend on God in desperate times, may be the most helpful and encouraging sections of the whole book.

I should say that this particular treatment of the topic is drawn mainly from Luther's understanding of vocation. Other theologians have written helpfully on the topic, from the Puritans to Os Guinness's recent book *The Call*. What is distinctive about Luther's approach is that instead of seeing vocation as a matter of what we should *do*—what we must *do* as a Christian worker or a Christian citizen or a Christian parent—Luther emphasizes what *God does* in and through our vocations. That is to say, for Luther, vocation is not just a matter of Law—though this is a part of vocation that neither Luther nor this book will neglect; rather, above all, vocation is a matter of Gospel, a manifestation of *God's* action, not our own. In this sense, vocation is not another burden placed upon us, something else to fail at, but a realm in which we can experience God's love

and grace, both in the blessings we receive from others and in the way God is working through us despite our failures.

Luther goes so far as to say that vocation is a mask of God. That is, God hides Himself in the workplace, the family, the Church, and the seemingly secular society. To speak of God being hidden is a way of describing His presence, as when a child hiding in the room is *there*, just not seen. To realize that the mundane activities that take up most of our lives—going to work, taking the kids to soccer practice, picking up a few things at the store, going to church—are hiding-places for God can be a revelation in itself. Most people seek God in mystical experiences, spectacular miracles, and extraordinary acts they have to do. To find Him in vocation brings Him, literally, down to earth, makes us see how close He really is to us, and transfigures everyday life.

How God Works Through Human Beings



G*od healed me.* I wasn't feeling well, so I went to the doctor. The nurse ran some tests, and the lab technicians identified the problem; so the doctor wrote me a prescription, I got it filled at the pharmacist, and in no time I was a lot better. But it was still God who healed me. He did it through the medical vocations.

God talked to me. The pastor was reading God's Word. In the sermon, he drew out of the Bible God's Law, which made me realize just how sinful I am; but then he proclaimed the Gospel, showing how Christ has done everything for my salvation and that I am forgiven in Him. I appreciate how God got through to me through the vocation of the pastor.

God fed me, not with manna but with what the teenager working at the fast-food joint gave me. *God clothed and sheltered me,* with the help of my employer. *God protected me,* though I wish the highway patrolman hadn't pulled me over. *God gave me pleasure,* thanks to the talents He gave that musician playing on my new CD.

All of this is to think in terms of vocation.

PROVIDENCE

This sort of talk seems strange today. We think of God in mystical terms, as an otherworldly magical power, not Someone so close to home. God works in mysterious ways, not in ordinary ways, we think. If He is going to heal us, we expect something spectacular—a miraculous rising from the wheelchair or hospital bed, something that doctors cannot explain. Sometimes this happens, but the usual way He heals us is more mundane, though nonetheless wonderful. If He is going to talk to us, we want at least an inner voice, if not a mystical vision. That He uses a Book—mere ink on paper—much less a preacher, whom we know is not that different from us, can seem like a letdown.

Our usual view of God today is that He is not part of the external world outside ourselves. He is either “far above” the everyday world or He is “inside us.” The world, we assume, runs pretty much on its own. The truth is, God does indeed transcend His creation, but He also governs it. “He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything,” says the apostle Paul. “He is not actually far from each one of us, for ‘in him we live and move and have our being’” (Acts 17:25, 27-28).

Christians in the past have taken for granted the notion of God’s “providence.” Coming from the word “to provide,” the term refers not just to God’s control in a deterministic sense, but to God’s *care* that He exercises over everything that exists.

One of the consequences of “modernity,” that secularizing frame of mind that has been dominant in the culture from the Enlightenment to the last century, has been to drain any trace of God—even any trace of meaning—from the objective world. Science, it has been thought, fully accounts for everything in

nature and society. Rational but impersonal natural laws explain everything that exists. Religion is fine, if someone needs it, but it is a wholly private matter, an inner, experiential, mystical set of feelings that might make a person feel better, but that can have no bearing on “the real world.”

The existentialists of the latter part of the modern era, laying the groundwork for postmodernism, went further. The external world, they said, is, strictly speaking, meaningless. Yes, it follows natural laws, but these are only absurd repetitions, as meaningless, to use one existentialist’s description, as a lunatic mouthing the same words over and over again. Meaning is a purely human creation. Though we live in a meaningless universe, human beings can create meanings for themselves—values, commitments, even religions—to enable them to survive with dignity in a meaningless world. It follows, of course, that meaning is private and such constructed “truths” are relative. One person’s meaning is not valid for anyone else. It cannot claim the status of objective truth. Existentialists could allow for Christianity, as long as it was a Christianity that did not intrude itself upon anyone else or insist on truth claims about the objective universe. Religion was allowed as long as it stayed inside a person’s mind. An objective God was ruled out, though a subjective deity, roughly equivalent to a divinized self, was socially acceptable.

Remarkably, Christians went along with this worldview. Even while many of them rejected the atheism of modernity, they cooperated in driving God underground. Faith became reduced to a subjective experience, and Christian morality became just a matter of personal behavior, rather than a social necessity. Christianity became, as Francis Schaeffer put it, an “upper-story” experience, compartmentalized away from everyday life. Christianity became more and more withdrawn from the world,

as did Christians, who generally went about their worldly occupations but did not see them as being related to the jolt of transcendence they sought from their faith. Even the Church, being a physical institution, fell out of favor for many religious people, who reasoned that if the spiritual life is purely interior, there is no need for external institutions. In the words of country singer Tom T. Hall, all that is necessary is “me and Jesus,” and even Jesus lives inside my head.

How did this happen? Why did the external world cease to be perceived as an arena for God and spiritual reality? Surely the claims of modernity were weak. How can a natural law be both rational and impersonal? Isn't rationality evidence of a mind, of a personality looming behind what we see? And what does it mean to say that life is meaningless? Isn't there order, design, and purpose in every stage of life, from conception to death? Isn't it rather the experience of meaninglessness that is subjective, coming from the anguished heart of a lost soul?

I suspect that one reason Christians capitulated so completely to the new God-forsaken vision of the universe is that, well before modernity, they had lost the understanding that God works through means. Before, it was assumed that God causes it to rain. Then the scientists of the Enlightenment presented data about air pressure, relative humidity, and cold fronts. *That's* what causes it to rain, they said; we don't need God to explain it. But knowing the chemical and meteorological processes involved by no means diminishes the fact that it is still God who makes it rain. He is the one who designed, created, and sustains all of these natural processes. He works through means.

The Christians of the Reformation understood this very well. Luther believed that God rules in two kingdoms: His spiritual kingdom, in which He brings sinners into the life of faith, in

which He rules in their hearts and equips them for everlasting life; and His earthly kingdom, in which He rules everything that He created (that is to say, everything).

God's spiritual kingdom comes through what both Luther and Calvin called the means of grace. God does not just zap people into faith. Rather, He employs certain means by which He converts the lost and sustains His people. God's Word is the primary means of grace, the revelation of God in human language—vibrations in the air; marks on paper—in which the Holy Spirit is active, calling people to faith and nourishing their growth in the Christian life (Hebrews 4:12; Romans 10:17). God's grace, the message of His love and forgiveness through Christ, comes to people too through the Sacraments, which are tangible manifestations of the Gospel (the union with Christ's death and resurrection in baptism; Christ's gift of His body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins in the Lord's Supper).

God's spiritual kingdom finds tangible expression in the Church, in which His redeemed people gather around His Word and Sacraments. God employs this institution to give spiritual care for His children and to bring His saving message to others. This includes the vocation of the pastor, who has been "called" into ministry. When the pastor teaches God's Word, proclaims the Gospel, baptizes, and presides at the Lord's Supper, there is a sense in which it is really Christ who is teaching, evangelizing, baptizing, and presiding, working through the "earthen vessels" of the ministers whom He has called.

Just as God works through means in His spiritual kingdom, so the Reformers thought, He also works through means in His earthly kingdom. God works through the natural laws that He built into creation. He rules the nations, including those who do not know Him, by means of His moral law. And He works in

the so-called secular world by means of vocation. That is, He institutes families, work, and organized societies, giving human beings particular parts to play in His vast design.

VOCATION IN THE BIBLE

The Bible gives a particularly direct discussion of how God works through the agency of human vocations in what the apostle Paul says about earthly rulers:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

— ROMANS 13:1-6

The whole issue of the vocation of rulers—what their “subjects” owe them and the limits of their authority—will be discussed in the chapter on the vocation of citizenship. For now, notice how the Scripture says God is operative in human callings, even in officers who do not acknowledge Him.

First, “there is no authority” that God has not “instituted.” This must include other nonpolitical and nonjudicial authorities as well—that of parents, employers (what the Bible calls “mas-

ters”), and other callings that involve one person supervising others, such as teachers, church leaders, and the like. The authorities “that exist have been instituted by God.” Strictly speaking, God is the only true authority, the only One who holds intrinsic supremacy, the only One who has the right to command. Those called to be judges, magistrates, and other civil officials exercise an authority that has been lent to them, one that is not their own but God’s. As one of these civil authorities, the centurion who came to Jesus, said, “I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me” (Matthew 8:9). Civil officials are themselves under authority—ultimately that of God Himself—so that if they abuse their authority or transgress the authority of God, they are acting outside their calling. (As we shall see, the doctrine of vocation is not a formula for sanctifying the status quo; rather, it is a critical model that subjects the status quo to the Word of God.) At any rate, the pattern is established: God’s authority finds expression in the authority borne in certain human vocations.

The Romans 13 passage goes further: Rulers are not only God’s servants (again, placing them under the greater authority of God)—they are God’s *instruments*. As the NIV translated it, they are the “*agent[s]* of God’s wrath” against evildoers. That is to say, *God* punishes murderers, rapists, and other criminals *by means of* human vocations: police officers, judges, juries, jailers, even executioners (those who “bear the sword”). This whole passage has reference to those authorities who bring evildoers to justice, not to political leaders as such. In a sinful world, evil must be forcibly restrained or we would tear each other apart, making life on earth and any kind of social order impossible. Though we are all sinners and evil in our hearts, God restrains the evil we actually commit, by means of vocation.

This passage teaches another important point about voca-

tion. In the text immediately preceding, St. Paul tells Christians not to take revenge:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

— ROMANS 12:17-21

Then the very next sentence is, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities," quoted above. First is the full-blown ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, teaching radical forgiveness and love even of one's enemies and evildoers. Then follows the seemingly harsher text in which the evildoers get punished after all.

Here is the principle (which will be discussed further in later chapters): What is permissible in one vocation is not necessarily permissible in another. In Romans 12, Christians are told not to punish evildoers. But this does not mean that evildoers will get off scot-free. God will punish them. "Never avenge yourselves," we are told; "'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." We are not to take it upon ourselves to repay evil for evil; rather, we are to "leave it to the wrath of God." Whereupon the next passage develops the notion that the civil magistrate "is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." When we are wronged, our part is to forgive, overcome evil with good, and repay wrongdoing with kindness. It is God's part to punish our enemies, since His wrath alone can be fully just. This may occur only at the Last Judgment. Or, in the

case of overt evildoing that destroys social peace and physically harms people, God will also avenge wrongdoing in the temporal plane, pouring out His wrath against evil through the vocation of the civil magistrate, who “carries out God’s wrath.”

Thus, when someone breaks into our car and steals our stereo, we are not to hunt down the culprit and shoot him dead. We do not have that authority. We do not have the vocation to do that. Rather, we are supposed to call the police. They do have the authority and the vocation to bring criminals to justice, and judges and jailers have the vocation to punish them. (More on this later.)

Other passages in the Bible support the notion that God works through human beings—indeed, that He is hidden in human vocations. God’s fatherhood looms behind human fathers, the marriage relationship is a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the Church, service to one’s master is service to Christ—these will be discussed later in the appropriate chapters.

Many Christians miss the point of these texts when they reduce them to “who has to obey whom.” Though the passages deal with issues of authority and power, their subject is vocation, in the context of God’s providence, which in turn means not so much control as care, how He *provides* for our needs. God uses civil magistrates to protect us. He uses fathers to take care of us, and spouses to bless us. As we shall see, each vocation, even the authoritative ones, also entails responsibilities for the well-being and care of those under its charge.

It should also be emphasized that God is working even through those who do not know Him. In His earthly kingdom, God is active in the secular sphere, even among nonbelievers. It has often been pointed out that the text in Romans refers to the legal system of pagan Rome, and other references St. Paul makes

to the Emperor refer to the decadent, ungodly Nero. But though we often think of Rome in terms of a totalitarian state, the actual legal system devised by that great civilization was a remarkably just one, despite the cruelties of some of its administrators, and Roman law is the foundation for much of our legal system today. Still, it is apparent that God reigns even in pagan nations and works through those who do not know Him.

This point is made explicitly by the prophet Isaiah, who tells how God would use Cyrus of Persia as a scourge to punish His people:

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed. . . . For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things.

— ISAIAH 45:1, 4-7

Part of the problem with the apostate Israelites was that they had come to think of God as just another tribal deity, pretty much in their control. The true God is far bigger than they dreamed, and His sovereignty is such that the greatest earthly emperors are at His beck and call and, indeed, owe their position and achievements to having been called by God: “I call you by your name.”

Theologians sometimes say that the term *vocation* ought to

be reserved for Christians. To be “called” into a particular work or position is surely a function of being “called” by the Gospel into a life of faith. While agreeing that God works through nonbelievers as well, they use other terms for their roles: *office*, *estate*, *station*. It is certainly true that a Christian, who understands his life in terms of God’s calling, will look at the work placed before him in a completely different way than will a person, doing the same work, who is lost in his sins. I agree with the distinction, though for the purposes of this book, for the sake of simplicity and to minimize terms, I will use the term *vocation* to apply to both believers and unbelievers, though I will certainly discuss the differences between them.

It is important, though, to realize that God’s power and His providential care extend beyond the Church, that He rules in the secular realm, even among those who are rebelling against Him. When He gave me my daily bread, did He use a Christian farmer? I have no idea. I would like to think so. (In the case of my daily bagel from a Jewish bakery, the particular people who baked it and sold it to me were most certainly not Christians.) It doesn’t really matter when it comes to the efficacy of that bread to nourish my body. Though it matters greatly for their sake in God’s spiritual kingdom, in His secular kingdom a Christian farmer or baker does not work that much differently than non-Christian ones. God’s plans for the way crops grow, His design for biology, chemistry, and human nutrition, are the same for everyone. “He . . . supplies seed to the sower and bread for food” (2 Corinthians 9:10). He also sends rain to both just and unjust farmers (Matthew 5:45). The scope of God’s power and care is far greater than we can imagine, and He is more intimately involved with all of His creatures than we can dream.

WORK CAN BE A DAILY GRIND—a hard, monotonous set of thankless tasks. In the midst of the ongoing toil, many are plagued by a lack of purpose, confused as to what to do and who to become. And while some of our vocations may seem more overtly *meaningful* than others', the truth is that most of us work because we have to. It is a means to an end—survival.

Given the enormous amount of time each of us spends *working*, we would do well to understand our callings and how God works through them.

Here culture expert Gene Veith gives us more than a simple understanding of work—more than a catchy slogan to “do all things for the glory of God.” He outlines a spiritual framework for answering questions such as:

- *What does it mean to be a Christian businessperson or a Christian artist or a Christian lawyer, scientist, construction worker or whatever?*
- *How can I know what I am supposed to do with my life?*
- *What does it mean to raise a Christian family? And what if I don't have kids?*

Unpacking the Bible's teaching on work, Veith helps us to see the meaning in our vocations, the force behind our ethics, and the transformative presence of God in our everyday, ordinary lives.

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CHRISTIAN LIVING

