

CALLED BY THE GOSPEL

Christians, both laypeople and pastors,
have a vocation in the church.

(Last in a series)

by Gene Edward Veith

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“Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Those are some of my favorite words in the Divine Service. They always astonish me. When I first heard them, before I had taken adult confirmation, I marveled, “How can the pastor forgive my sins?”, though even at the time I was impressed to find a church that believed such things.

Later, when I decided to become Lutheran and took the pastor’s class, we learned that the absolution comes about not through the person of the pastor—a good guy, but not that much different from the rest of us—but “by virtue of [his] office.” He has been “called” by our local congregation to exercise the “keys to the kingdom of heaven” on our behalf. He has been “ordained,” set apart for this special ministry.

Nevertheless, the Catechism increased the mystery: “I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, and, again, when they absolve those who repent of their sins and are willing to amend, this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself.”

Later, I gained a vocabulary for understanding what is happening: Christ is the one forgiving sins through the vocation of the pastor. When the pastor proclaims the Gospel, Christ is at work through His Word. When the pastor baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes through him. When the pastor presides at the Lord’s Supper, Christ Himself is present, feeding us with His body and blood, which the pastor distributes under bread and wine.

Christ is hidden in the pastor’s vocation. As we have seen in the rest of this series, God hides Himself in all vocations. Our Father in Heaven gives us our daily bread through the vocation of farmers, bakers, grocers and the person at the check-out counter. He heals by means of the medical professions. He protects us by means of police officers, judges, soldiers and firemen. He brings us into existence and cares for us when we are young by means of fathers and mothers.

As a rule, God works through means. He governs and cares for His earthly kingdom, even among those who do not know Him, through natural laws but also through human

vocations. He tends to us spiritually through His Word and Sacraments. These, too, He administers through the human vocation of the pastor.

But *all* Christians also have a calling in the church. We all have been called into faith. And we all are called to a local congregation, where we each have a part to play in the community of faith.

Called to faith

Becoming a Christian is itself a calling. That is to say, a person becomes a Christian by being called by God.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, *who have been called* according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified” (Rom. 8:28—30).

The passage about God’s providential care is familiar and often quoted, but the rest of the passage tends to be left out of the quotation. In all things God works for the good of those “who have been called according to his purpose.” The promise that God will work things out for the good of His children has to do with vocation. God’s good “purpose” is being fulfilled in those He has called. The next verses give another remarkable promise related to vocation. “Those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified.”

Here is the whole nine yards. Everything that pertains to being a Christian. Foreknowledge, predestination, justification, sanctification (being “conformed to the likeness of his Son”), glorification. They are presented not separately but together. And what links them is being “called.” Someone who has been “called” has them all.

And how are we called to this life of faith? By the Gospel. Again, the Catechism explains it best:

“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

“Vocation” literally means being “called.” And to be called means hearing a voice from outside oneself. It is God’s Word that calls us, the Gospel of salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ. That Word was given at our baptism, it is proclaimed in every sermon, it is announced in those words of absolution, it can be read on every page of the Bible. That Word creates faith in our hearts. “My sheep,” says Jesus, “listen to my voice” (John 10:27).

This means, among other things, that His sheep will gather in a church, where His voice can be clearly heard.

Pastors and laypeople

The risen Lord told His disciple Peter to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17). The word “pastor” means “shepherd.” The pastor is someone who tends the often unruly and oblivious sheep that make up the congregation, feeding them with the Word and Sacraments, protecting them from the wolves of false teachers, seeking the lost, and leading his flock to the green pastures of everlasting life. Of course, Jesus Christ Himself is the real Shepherd—the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, the One whose voice the sheep recognize (John 10:1-16)—so He is our true pastor. But just as our heavenly Father makes use of earthly fathers, the Lord as our Shepherd makes use of earthly shepherds.

A division of labor took place within the church in its earliest days.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:1-4).

In this terminology, all of the Christians are called “disciples,” but the Twelve—those schooled by Jesus Himself—exercised a leadership role in the church. It is surely significant that the church was concerned for the physical needs of its members, particularly its widows, who had no one else to care for them. Here and elsewhere in Acts, we see that the church is a “community of faith,” not just a place to go for an hour on Sunday morning, but a place where Christians are involved in each other’s lives. And yet, this was no idealized utopian commune, where all of the Christians are loving each other all of the time. Rather, even the church led by the original Twelve Disciples had its friction, in this case ethnic conflicts and that perennial complaint, “that’s not fair!”

At any event, the Twelve Disciples in pastoring their flock found themselves spending so much time on the practical details of administration—getting the food together, keeping track of who gets what, “waiting on tables”—that they were neglecting their major vocation, namely, “the ministry of the Word.”

Moreover, what with all of the complaints about the inequity in the food distribution, they were apparently not doing a very good job with their administrative tasks. Running the church’s food program was, evidently, not their vocation. So the church elected seven qualified laymen to handle the practical, even secular, matters the church was dealing with, so that the Twelve could spend their time in “prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

These laymen took care of things in the church. They no doubt had their own vocations, whether as fishermen, farmers or craftsmen. Though they were laymen, they still witnessed to the Gospel. One of their number, Philip, evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch, and another, Stephen, became the first martyr for the faith.

The word translated “church” in the Greek New Testament is *ekklesia*, which derives from the particle *ek*, meaning out, added to the verb *kalein*, meaning to call. The verb *ekkalein* means to summon or to call out. The church, the *ekklesia*, is the assembly of those who have been called.

So all Christians have a church calling. The church calls pastors. The church can call others to assist that office, such as teachers for its schools and other church-work professions.

Similarly the boards and committees, the Sunday-school teachers, the trustees, the elders, the ushers and the altar guild, the choir members and the organist, the officers and the voters assembly, are all doing their part to serve one another and their fellow members, building up with the pastor the complex, living organism that is the church.

Many Christians today are scornful of “the institutional church.” They see its faults and its weaknesses, are distracted by the ordinary folks who make up the typical church, and are easily disillusioned with the way it operates. It is so “unspiritual,” they think.

But minimizing the ordinary local church is a great mistake. Christ is hidden in His church on earth, and always has been. Just, because He is not seen—just because there are no spectacular spiritual special effects, or because those who worship Him in church are not religious superheroes—does not mean He is not present. He is where He has promised to be: in the Word of God, in the Sacraments, and with those He has called to serve each other.

This is Dr. Veith's last of six articles about vocation. For copies of the complete series, call The Lutheran Witness office at (314) 996-1228.— Ed.

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