

Veith, Gene Edward, Jr. *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*. Crossway Books: Wheaton, IL (2002).

Dr. Gene Veith, Jr. serves as Provost and Professor of Literature at Patrick Henry College, in Virginia, and as Director of the Cranach Institute at Concordia Theological Seminary, in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. A prolific author and speaker, Veith formerly served as Culture Editor of *World* magazine and was on the faculty for 19 years as Professor of English at Concordia University, Wisconsin.

Having been deeply influenced by Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*, a book Veith credits for "helping [him] see [his] Christian life in a completely different way" (9), Veith sets forth his more accessible *God at Work* as "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" (21). Defining vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, meaning "to call"), Veith writes, "God has chosen to work through human beings, who, in their different capacities and according to their different talents, serve each other" (14); this is what it means to be "in vocation." Further, Veith argues in step with Martin Luther that vocation "is not so much a matter of what *we* do; rather it is a matter of what *God* does in and through us" (9).

Veith unpacks these assertions in 11 chapters which together explore the purpose of vocation, the ways in which God calls us to different tasks, how to discover one's vocation, specific problems common to all vocations, what it means to prayerfully "bear the cross" in vocation, and how God is present through what we do in our everyday lives (22-23).

Veith does well to make clear it is through vocation that we can "love our neighbors as ourselves" (cf. Matthew 22:39). Whereas faith serves God, good works—the fruits of faith—serve the neighbor. Citing Gustaf Wingren, he notes, "God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does" (38). Truly, the "essence and purpose" of vocation "is to love and serve one's neighbor" (39; cf. 92). God continues to pour out His love for all creation through human beings-in-vocation.

In this light, the doctrine of vocation helpfully responds to the perennial question, "What am I to do with my life?" by asking "What does your neighbor need?" and "How has God uniquely gifted you to lovingly fulfill that need?" Rather than approaching life-and-career decisions primarily from a standpoint of, "What do *I* want to do?" vocation reorders Christians to prayerfully and chiefly consider, "Who are my neighbors...and how can I serve them with the love of God?" (40). This divine intersection of neighbor-in-need and servant-in-love depicts vocation at its best: ordinary men and women expressing their love and service to the neighbor, as the Lord has called and equipped them to do, through their God-given stations in life (cf. 75).

Spirituality in America remains rife with a neo-Gnostic flavor which denigrates the material world and views God as a far-off mystical being, of sorts, whom we can access by tapping into a certain "special" knowledge. While Veith himself does not explicitly touch on neo-Gnosticism in America, the doctrine of vocation Veith conveys speaks powerfully in opposition to this Oprah-esque spiritual-cultural milieu. Indeed, vocation properly brings earthlings back down to the earth—to the soil from which we are made, to the place where God calls us to dwell, and to the fields into which He sends us to work. God does certainly work in mysterious ways, but He is most often present in, with, and under His creation through rather mundane, though "nonetheless wonderful," means (26).

Just as God Himself came to us in the flesh, through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God continues to be present in the world yet today through His children, and through the various vocations to which He calls us. To wit, God multiplies human beings through the vocation of husband and wife; He trains up children through the vocation of fathers and mothers; He maintains civil order through the vocation of police officers, attorneys, magistrates, and governors; He publicly proclaims the forgiveness of sins through the vocation of pastors; He heals through the vocations of nurses and

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doctors; He blesses materially through the vocation of philanthropists; He provides food through the vocation of farmers; and more.

When one begins to “see God” in this light, one quickly realizes that our Lord, at work in and through His children, continues to “tabernacle among us” (John 1:14) out in the world, each and every day. The doctrine of vocation dispatches with haste a neo-Gnostic understanding of God, the created world, and the relationship of the two. The One True God is not a disinterested and far-off mystical source segregated from the material world. Rather, our God selflessly and lovingly gets His hands dirty, and He calls and equips the dirt-borne human creatures He made with His hands and in His image to do the same. Certainly, God’s most poignantly evinces His selfless love for mankind upon the cross, the same cross He calls us to bear in vocation for the sake of our neighbor.

Perhaps the most potent implication of vocation, which Veith helps us discover, is the doctrine and its relationship to evangelism. Too often in the church, it seems, we imply that “being a faithful Christian” means “frequently volunteering at church.” To be sure, at-the-church volunteer opportunities can be meaningful vocations to which some of God’s people may be called to serve. At the same time, we do well to remember that people who are far from God—the same people the Lord calls us to influence in the world—are also far from church. That means unbelievers may not come to the fellowship picnic, nor will they mow the church lawn or trim the church hedges, and they certainly will not be at the stewardship committee meeting. Where will they be? Out in the world. Far from church.

It follows that Christians are to be out in the world, but not of the world (John 17)—for the sake of the Gospel. Veith offers, “It is in vocation that evangelism can most effectively happen. How can non-Christians be reached with the Gospel? By definition, they are unlikely to come to church. ... But in the workplace, non-Christians and Christians work together and get to know each other.” Indeed, “Christians penetrating their world in vocations have access to more nonbelievers than a pastor does” (67-68). He continues, “Laypeople are especially positioned to reach people *outside* the church, by virtue of their secular vocations, which put them in contact with people who would never darken the door of a church” (127).

The doctrine of vocation compels us to think not only in terms of service *at* church but of service *as* church, for the sake of the Gospel and our neighbors-in-need. Stated simply, the way we can meet and serve and love on and influence people who are far from God is to spend time meeting and serving and loving on and influencing people who are far from God! We can do this through our vocations—through those stations-of-service in life to which God calls us. And as we serve our neighbors through vocation, God will also present us with opportunities to gently and respectfully share with our neighbors a reason for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15), thereby addressing our neighbors’ greatest need of all—eternal salvation.

Pastors, teachers, and church leaders desiring to more effectively reach their communities with the love of Jesus Christ will find Veith’s book readable and energizing; unleashing the doctrine of vocation properly reorients our thinking from “How can we get people to come to church?” to “How can we more faithfully *be* the church?” To this end, Veith’s work holds great promise for those everyday men and women in the pews who yearn to see their 9-to-5 lives in a more meaningful and refreshing light. Truly, as Veith’s own experience attests, the doctrine of vocation may help readers see the Christian life in a completely different way.

Don Ray
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