

## **The Doctrine of Vocation: A Deeper and More Connected Friendship** by Dave Lambert

In If Aristotle Ran General Motors Tom Morris brings the wisdom of the ancient Greek philosopher to life in today's world. Morris says that, "The fourth spiritual dimension of human experience is the spiritual dimension, that aspect of our nature which strives for unity or ultimate connectedness."

Morris states that our businesses and society should find a sounder meaning to spirituality. He believes it's all about fundamentally two things: depth and connectedness.

What role can the doctrine of vocation play in creating depth and connectedness?

### **Friendship: Aristotle to Aquinas**

Aristotle states that people cannot be happy without friends. Humans are "political animals" and tend by nature to live with others. Aristotle points to the many advantages afforded by friendship as not merely desirable, but indispensable for the person who wishes to live well.

Aristotle gives three kinds of friendships: utility friendship, pleasure friendship, and true friendship. The first two are concerned only with the moment and what suits a person's immediate needs. True friendship, though, consists of two (or more) people who are alike in virtue and goodness and constantly seeking truth and goodness for their friend and themselves.

David Thunder, a doctoral student at the University of Notre Dame, says that in order to consistently identify one's own welfare with that of another person for his or her own sake, and not merely for pleasure or utility, a person must be in concord with reason. One must also be in concord with the other person, not just in thought but in action. This kind of stability can only be achieved by a person who has virtue, since virtue is enduring, and reliable.

The New Testament points to the two-edged sword of friendship.

In John 15 we hear Christ saying:

Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because servants do not know their master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

However, in Matthew 26, we see the other side of the coin:

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief

priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for."

Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas sought to find the common ground between the New Testament and Aristotle. Friendship, according to Augustine, is: "...a delightful bond of souls in unity." True friendships seek to build the other up and aid them in their journey to virtue, while the bad look only to destroy through evil and thoughtless acts. In this way, it is incredibly simple for one to 'shape' their friend and lead him either higher or lower, all in the name of friendship.

Perfect human friendships, then, seek the ultimate and highest good: God, and look to bring others to Him.

According to Phillip Ney, a student at the University of Lethbridge (Canada), Thomas Aquinas maintains that charity is friendship that is based on virtue. The friendship of charity is first and foremost directed towards God, because of his virtue; charity directed to sinners does not consist of autonomous friendships, but is a necessary part of friendship with God. However, it must be admitted that virtue is not the cause of God's friendship towards man: "God does not love things because they are good... but they are good because God loves them." Ney states that Aquinas partially maintains the classical requisite that friendship be based on virtue, only he specifies that charity is based entirely on God's virtue, not ours or our neighbor's.

### **Did Martin Luther Reject Friendship?**

As a scholar and Augustinian monk, Martin Luther was heir to a long tradition in which "innumerable medieval anthologies and encyclopedias frequently included a chapter on friendship." Thomas Heilke, a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at the University of Kansas believes that Luther did not avail himself of that inheritance. In fact, Heilke strongly indicts Luther and the other Reformers for rejecting Aristotle's work on friendship.

Heilke says, "Luther, I have noted, explicitly rejected Aristotelian teleology, which, we might imagine, disables him from thinking about friendship in Aristotelian teleological terms."

According to Heilke, Luther's writings stress the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual believer and its accumulation of such individuals into a "flock," where the word of God is preached and whereby individual faith is instilled and nourished. In Heilke's estimation, the paramount importance to Luther and the Reformers was the status of the individual before God. All other concerns were subsidiary.

In Heilke's opinion, Luther probably disagreed with Aristotle and Aquinas that the quality of our friendships and the quality of our moral lives are inseparable. In fact,

Heilke is fairly confident that Luther's view of the moral life was bound up in the terms of duty, law, command, and grace, not in accounts of a friendship with God or of human beings one with another.

### **The Reformation and the Doctrine of Vocation**

Heilke clearly does not understand Martin Luther. Luther's concept of friendship was more radical in that it was linked with servanthood. He took it even farther by linking our servanthood with the nobility of our vocations.

According to Lutheran Church Missouri Synod Fort Wayne Seminary Professor John Pless, "The existence of the old Adam is focused on self. The old Adam is curved in on himself, to use the imagery of Luther. This egocentric existence stands in contrast to the life of the new man in Christ. The new man lives outside of himself, for his calling is to faith in Christ and love for the neighbor."

Luther and the Reformation did promote individualism. Yet, it was an "individualism" different from that of today. The Reformation doctrine of vocation focuses attention on each individual's unique talents and, at the same time stresses the important role of that individual within a community.

The term *vocation* comes from the Latin word for "calling." The doctrine of vocation is thoroughly Biblical (2 Thessalonians 2; 1 Corinthians 1; 1 Corinthians 7) and was developed with great rigor during the Reformation.

According to Dr. Gene Edward Veith, professor of English at Concordia University Wisconsin and director of the Cranach Institute, Luther taught that all Christians have callings from God, including those who work in the so-called secular sphere. God works through people, in their ordinary stations of life to which He has called them, to care for His creation.

Luther said that vocations are "masks of God." On the surface, we see an ordinary human face—our mother, the doctor, the teacher, the waitress, and our pastor—but, beneath the appearances, God is ministering to us through them. God is hidden in human vocations. The other side of the coin is that God is hidden in us. When we live out our callings—as spouses, parents, children, employers, employees, citizens, and the rest—God is working through us. Even when we do not realize it, when we fulfill our callings, we too are masks of God.

Luther identified four types of callings that every Christian has: as a member of the church, as a member of a family, as someone who works, and as a citizen of a community. In some ways, Luther's "callings" were a radical departure from what his contemporaries considered a calling. At that time, work in the church was seen as the only way one could truly serve God.

Dr. Veith states that the word "church," the *ekklesia*, is the assembly of those who have been called. Christians have a calling in the church. That is both the spiritual kingdom

and as a local institution. However, Luther emphasized that a Christian has important work to do outside of the church. Even today, there are those who believe that the only appropriate calling for a Christian is work for the church.

According to Professor Pless:

American Evangelicalism has spawned what may be referred to as neomonasticism. Like its medieval counterpart, neomonasticism gives the impression that religious work is more God-pleasing than other tasks and duties associated with life in the world. According to this mindset, the believer who makes an evangelism call, serves on a congregational committee, or reads a lesson in the church service is performing more spiritually significant work than the Christian mother who tends to her children or the Christian who works with integrity in a factory.

Christian service does go beyond the boundaries of the Church.

### **Vocation in the Family**

In the vocation of marriage, the husband is to love and serve his wife, and the wife is to love and serve her husband. Parents are to love and serve their child, and children are to love and serve their parents.

It is still God who creates and cares for little babies, but he does so through the vocation of parenthood. When parents bring their children to Baptism, provide for their needs, discipline them, bring them up in His Word, and raise them to adulthood, God is at work every step of the way.

### **Vocation in the Work Place**

The doctrine of vocation helps Christians see that the ordinary labors of work have meaning. It also helps put their work into perspective when they realize that God is working through the everyday work of human beings to love and serve others. On the job, the person being loved and served may be the boss, one's employees, or the customer.

### **Vocation in the Community**

In our vocation as citizens, our neighbors to whom we are responsible to love and serve are fellow citizens in need of good public policies.

One of Luther's key writings on vocation was a pamphlet titled Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved. Many Christians in the Reformation time, in the first flush of rediscovering the Bible, asked if loving our enemies meant that Christians could serve in the military? Also, if we are supposed to forgive sinners, can Christians serve as judges? In response, Luther stated that it is God, working through the offices of judge and soldier,

who takes life and punishes sin. Christians can indeed occupy these offices—to be called to them as divine vocations—so that a soldier is loving his neighbor when he protects his country; a judge is loving his neighbor when he puts a criminal in prison or delivers him over to the executioner.

### **Nobility of Vocation**

The doctrine of vocation is that of ordinary men and women expressing their love and service to their neighbor. The doctrine of vocation stresses how God is present in these roles. God uses our vocations to rescue, giving comfort, and protect through the interactions of other people.

Even though Tom Morris does not explicitly talk about vocation, he gives us the perfect example of the nobility of vocation in Brother Jeff. Brother Jeff is a custodian at Notre Dame who is, more importantly, a custodian of souls. He reaches out and makes a difference for good in the lives of those around him. Brother Jeff has discovered and lives out the nobility of vocation.

### **Providing Depth and Connectedness**

Tom Morris says that we need to free ourselves of the illusion of utter individual autonomy. He also says that our spiritual needs must be met in the work we do, or that work will be like a trek through the desert.

By re-discovering the doctrine of vocation, Christians can both serve their friends (connectedness) and find value in all of their work (depth).