

Season of Saints Bible Study—Martin Luther on Vocation

The Latin word *vocatio* comes from the same word we get “vocal” and “voice” from, so vocation is a synonym for “calling.”

A little history. As you know, God’s people always, not just in the Old Testament, have a tendency to focus on the wrong things. Just as the Pharisees focused on rules and forgot about having their hearts right with God, many Christians in the early years of the church were so focused on what we call the vertical (our relationship directly with God) that they forgot about the horizontal (our relationship with our neighbor). This led to the monastic approach. People took vows of celibacy and poverty and went off into the desert (*eremos* in Greek) to live lives of prayer, fasting, and bodily discipline in an attempt to shut out all the distractions of normal, everyday life. Our word hermit comes from *eremos*, by the way.

Through the Dark Ages and into the Middle Ages the idea of monasticism took root powerfully, so that by Luther’s time people felt like you could either be a holy monk or an unholy lay person. The monks did all the good stuff, and the lay people essentially “bought” the good deeds of the monks by their church attendance and donations.

Luther tried this out, but discovered it was a sham—the monks weren’t any more holy than anyone else! So Luther turned the Bible and discovered that there was no call for Christians to remove themselves from society. Rather, the Bible called people to a life of serving God through serving their neighbor.

Read Matthew 25:31-46. How does Jesus want to be served?

St. Paul really develops the concept of every person, not just the clergy, participated in Christ’s work in the world. Read Romans 12. What metaphor for the Church does Paul use? Verse 6 uses the Greek word *charismata*, literally “grace things,” where we translate “gifts.” So the idea of the Church working together to accomplish God’s purposes is based on the idea that God gives gifts that his people then use.

Read 1 Corinthians 12 to see St. Paul further develop this concept. Notice the use of “spiritual” here, even though so much of what Paul is talking about is pretty ordinary stuff, not the specialized work of clergy.

Look at Ephesians 4:1-16 to explore what St. Paul thinks of the clergy/lay distinction. What does verse 12 say is the job of the leaders of the Church? Who does the work of the ministry?