

Do Children have a Vocation?
Exploring the Theology of Vocation with a
“Child in the Midst”

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When I started school, I fell in love with my first-grade teacher and determined, as a six-year-old, that I wanted to be a teacher just like her. If anyone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, my answer would always be, “A teacher!” In my free time, I played school, teaching my little sister and neighbor children. When I became a teenager, I begged the Sunday school teachers to let me help them teach the younger children, eventually becoming experienced enough to teach my own class. I tutored other students throughout high school. My dream finally became a reality when I received my teaching degree from a university and began teaching in a Christian elementary school. One might say that I had realized my “calling.”

Clearly, there were stirrings of that call or “vocation” throughout my childhood and adolescence, although my faith tradition did not use the term “vocation.” My God-given gifts and abilities were unfolding and developing, and I sought out ways to exercise them, grateful for my parents and church family, who supported my endeavors. Although their modeling and mentoring were not always intentional, they certainly did not deter me from serving. They helped me to see that I had a purpose and was able to make a significant contribution even though I wasn’t an adult, even though I didn’t know all the answers.

In Ephesians 2:10, Paul writes, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Paul’s words describe an aspect of vocation that speaks of living out our faith as disciples in a much more comprehensive way than simply a career. This verse, and the broader theology of vocation, must be read with

a “child in the midst.” Are children created to do good works *as children*? Does this verse apply to children, or is it something we simply prepare them to do in the future? In my personal story, was my vocation simply something to which I aspired and then grew up to fulfill, or did God have good works for me to do as a child?

Throughout the history of the church, theologians from both Catholic and Protestant traditions have written about calling or vocation in the Christian life,¹ but the majority of those writings appear to overlook or exclude children. Bringing a child “into the midst” raises several questions that this article hopes to address. Do children have a vocation? (It is my belief that they do.) If so, what is the vocation of children? How do Scripture and theologians talk of vocation in general, of the vocation of children, and what aspects of their teaching can be applied to children? What are the implications for families and the church? How might we better encourage children in their vocation? Exploring these questions about children and vocation will help establish a deeper theological foundation that can inform the practical side of child-rearing and ministering with children.

The attempt of this article to answer the question of the vocation of children begins by defining vocation. It then moves to a description of the theology of vocation based on Scripture and tradition, seeking, at all times, to allow the “child in the midst” to inform the theological reflection. It looks at examples of children in the Bible who reflect a sense of vocation, followed by an exploration of what theologians have written specifically about the vocation of children. Using Scripture and sources from tradition, the article identifies several dimensions of children’s vocation. Finally, it suggests some implications for parents and the church.

What is Vocation?

The word vocation comes from the Latin word *vocare*, which means “to call.” “Vocation” and “calling” essentially have the same meaning. However, interpretations of the concept of vocation vary. Some people use the word

¹ For an overview of key theological writings, see William C. Placher, ed., *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

vocation to describe the job they do: their career or occupation, similar to my experience. Others who are preparing for full-time ministry talk about a “call” to ministry, a special word or sign from God that leads them to full-time “vocational” service. Still, others focus on whatever gives them purpose, meaning, or fulfillment in life. While each of these interpretations applies to the concept of vocation, the full meaning is much broader and deeper, encompassing our entire lives. As Christians, central to our idea of vocation is the notion “that God is calling us to a life centered in Christ and to ways in which we meaningfully participate in and contribute to God’s work in the world.”²

For Christians, vocation, in its general sense, is based on Jesus’ teaching in Mark 12:30-31 (cf. Matt 22:37-39): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” The call to love God and love our neighbor, a general calling, is common to all believers, regardless of age, gender, or class. It is a call to be a child of God, to follow Christ as his disciple, and to live out our faith daily in the world. “It has to do with God’s presence in the world and with how he works through human beings for his purposes. For Christians, vocation discloses the spirituality of every-day life.”³ Vocation begins with the worship of God and moves to participation in his redemptive work in the world, “to enjoy, hope for, pray for, and work toward God’s shalom. This is what it means for Christians to be in Christ and to follow Christ.”⁴ Simply put, our general vocation is to love God and love others.

² Marcia J. Bunge, “The Vocation of the Child: Theological Perspectives on the Particular and Paradoxical Roles and Responsibilities of Children,” in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 32.

³ Gene Edward Veith Jr., “Vocation: The Theology of the Christian Life,” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 14, No. 1 (Spring 2011): 119, accessed September 21, 2017, <http://www.marketsandmorality.com/index.php/mandm/article/view/14/12>.

⁴ Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 18.

But vocation also has a more nuanced personal application. God also calls people to “particular” vocations. The terms may vary: “offices,” “stations,” “roles,” or “places of responsibility,” but in every case, it is a call for people to use their gifts, talents, and abilities to serve the well-being of others in their sphere of influence, whatever that sphere of influence may be. “God’s call to be a Christian must qualify every aspect of life: marriage and family, employment relationships, political life, as well as the life of the church. The call to love and serve the Lord, made active in a person’s life, transforms all spheres and activities into so many callings.”⁵ Therefore, the particular calling or vocation, or the way an individual loves those who are closest at hand, will manifest itself differently for every person. It becomes the channel for each person to express his or her love and faith in a concrete manner. As Luther strongly asserted, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbor does.”⁶

In looking at general vocation from the perspective of loving God and others and understanding a particular vocation as living out our faith with those in our spheres of influence, it seems very natural to apply the doctrine of vocation to children. Although their expression of faith may not look like adults’ love, children can love God with all their hearts as they grow as disciples. Children are quick to love, and they are able to express their love in practical ways, serving others who are closest to them—their parents and family members, friends, neighbors, and teachers. When the definition of vocation is limited to a religious calling or an occupation, it excludes children who do not yet have a role as a worker or are too young for vocational ministry. The broader, more encompassing definition demonstrates the reality that children can have an active role as disciples of Jesus, impacting their world. Vocation *does* apply to children!

A Theology of Vocation

Historically, the doctrine of vocation developed as a result of the Protestant

⁵ Ibid., 35.

⁶ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1957), 10.

Reformation, becoming a distinctive and influential feature of both the Lutheran and the Reformed wings of the Reformation. “According to this doctrine, all relational spheres—domestic, economic, political, cultural—are religiously and morally meaningful as divinely given avenues through which persons respond obediently to the call of God to serve their neighbor in love.”⁷ Viewing vocation in such all-encompassing terms marked a significant shift from the understanding of the Catholic Church, which saw vocation solely as the calling to serve within the church as a priest, monk, or nun. As the Reformation spread throughout Europe, support grew for the expanded doctrine of vocation that included all Christians. “Every Christian had at least two vocations: the call to become part of the people of God (Luther called it ‘spiritual calling,’ the Puritans later called it ‘general calling’) and the call to a particular line of work (for Luther, ‘external calling,’ for the Puritans, ‘particular calling’).”⁸

While both Martin Luther and John Calvin wrote on the doctrine of vocation, Luther, by far, was the most prolific. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, based on 1 Peter 2:10, formed a key foundation for his theology of vocation. Luther wrote:

For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest. . . . It follows from this argument that there is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests, princes and bishops, between religious and secular, except for the sake of office and work. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way, many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body

⁷ Schuurman, 4.

⁸ William C. Placher, “Every Work a Calling: Vocations after the Reformation, 1500-1800,” in *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*, ed. William C. Placher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 206.

serve one another [1 Cor 12:14-26].⁹

Luther emphasized that all believers are called to love God and serve their neighbor, expressing their faith in works of love. No occupations or states of life were superior or more spiritual than others; all could benefit the church and the greater community. While today it may not seem to be a radical thought, the idea that “any station in life (and by ‘*Stand*’ or station, Luther meant family role as a parent, grandparent, child, and so on, as well as a job) could be equally a place from which to serve God constituted a great breakthrough toward equality.”¹⁰ Galatians 5:6 also supported the equality of all: “For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” For the Reformers, faith expressing itself through love was the essence of living out one’s vocation for every believer.

Scriptures describing the body of Christ and spiritual gifts, including Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4:10, also have been used to give support to the doctrine of every believer having a vocation. In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Martin Luther refers to 1 Corinthians 12:12, writing, “. . . all Christians are truly of the ‘spiritual estate,’ and there is among them no difference at all but that of office. . . . We are all one body, yet every member has its own work, whereby it serves every other, all because we have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are alike Christians.”¹¹ He even goes so far as to use the image of the body to speak about believers’ role in all of society, suggesting that throughout society, every person has a calling that is part of a greater whole.¹² Using the image of the body powerfully illustrates the equality of believers; every part

⁹ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86), 44:129-30.

¹⁰ Placher, 207.

¹¹ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” in *Luther’s Works*, 44:128.

¹² Marc Kolden, “Luther on Vocation,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 1, No. 2 (October 2001), accessed Sept 22, 2017, <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1015>. Kolden is referring to *Luther’s Works*, 45:100.

is different, but all are interdependent. They need one another, and each part must do its work to make the body function according to its design. God gifts each believer differently, with the purpose of building up the whole body. Paul even uses the terms “calling” and “gift” interchangeably in his passages on spiritual gifts, possibly suggesting that the specific gifts and offices of the church are also callings.¹³ Therefore when believers use their spiritual gifts as part of the body of Christ, they are fulfilling their vocation.

When a child is put in the midst of the theology of vocation, based upon the doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and the body of Christ, all that is written readily applies to children as well as adults. If all believers are priests, any child who is a believer also is a priest. The work of children is consecrated to God. And if children are believers, they are part of the body of Christ. They may be one of the weaker parts, but Paul writes that those parts are indispensable (1 Cor 12:22). The body cannot say to a child, “I don’t need you!” because we are one body. Additionally, since children are a part of the body of Christ, they are gifted by God to serve. First Peter 4:10 says, “*Each one* should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” Saying “each one” includes children, for they are part of the body. Children DO have a place in the theology of vocation!

The challenge in practically applying a theology of vocation to children is that vocation largely has been thought of and written about in adult terms. At least three factors contribute to such a view.¹⁴ First, most theologies of vocation emphasize discernment, a cognitive skill, rather than the experiential. Children lack such capacity for rational thought because of their developmental limitations. Second, children do not have the same

¹³ Schuurman, 30.

¹⁴ Kiara A. Jorgenson, “Wild Rumpus Revisited: the Benefits of Outdoor Play in the Vocation of the Child,” *Word & World* 35, no. 4 (September 2015): 359, accessed Sept. 21, 2017, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=0cece324-c917-4816-8e11-21e361ed07db%40sessionmgr4010>.

freedom of choice as adults. Third, children have limited influence on others. They cannot bear the same level of responsibility or be as capable as adults. Therefore, the question with which we need to wrestle is: What does vocation look like in practical terms for people who have no job and are still growing and developing, possibly unaware of the gifts they have been given? In order to answer the question of children's vocation, Scripture, tradition (what theologians have specifically written about the vocation of children), and developmental theory must be considered.

The Vocation of Children in the Bible

Samuel embodies the concept of vocation as it applies to a child. Even before God called him in 1 Samuel 3, we learn that "Samuel was ministering before the Lord" (2:18), "the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with men" (2:26), and "the boy Samuel ministered before the Lord under Eli" (3:1). Samuel, a boy, is serving the Lord and serving Eli. We do not know the specifics of the tasks, but he has favor with people, meaning his service has an impact on the people around him. His growth in favor with God makes his heart open and receptive to God when God calls him for a specific task. The fact that he runs to Eli when he hears the voice demonstrates that Samuel is fulfilling his general vocation in serving Eli. And Eli's discernment helps Samuel understand God's call. Samuel is only a child, but God speaks both to him and through him, anointing him as a prophet even when young. Samuel's life displays both a general and particular vocation.

Naaman's servant girl is less known, but she still embodies the concept of vocation. In 2 Kings 5:3, the Israelite girl, captured in war and made to be a servant, tells her mistress, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." This short passage shows, first, that the young girl has faith in God. Second, she is expressing her faith in love, even in what must have been a difficult circumstance for her. She did not have to tell Naaman about the prophet Elisha, but she demonstrated love and compassion. Ultimately, her act of compassion leads to Naaman's healing and his belief in the God of Israel.

A third child living out his vocation is David. In 1 Samuel 16, the

prophet Samuel comes to Jesse's home to anoint the next king. Jesse doesn't even think of bringing David to the sacrifice but leaves him out tending the sheep. The Lord has to remind Samuel that "the Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (16:7). When David finally is summoned, Samuel anoints him to be king, and the Spirit of the Lord comes upon David in power from that day forward (16:13). In the anointing, David discovers his specific calling, something that would unfold in the future, but the Holy Spirit comes upon him and empowers him as a child. As David's story continues in 1 Samuel 17, the story of David and Goliath, David's repeated referral to his God and the demonstration of his unwavering faith in God (17:26, 36,37, 45-47), express his general vocation of loving God. The simple fact that he serves as a shepherd and is obedient to his father in taking food to his brothers (17:17-20) gives evidence of the chores or tasks that are a part of his childhood, giving him an opportunity to act out his faith in love for others.

One final example of a child living out his vocation is found in the New Testament: Jesus. Luke 2:39-52 records the incident of twelve-year-old Jesus being found in the temple with the religious leaders. When questioned by his parents, Jesus replies, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (2:49). In reflecting on this passage, John Carroll suggests, "Though the details are hidden from us, the narrative intimates that Jesus' emerging sense of vocation springs from his religious formation within a household where fidelity to God's ways matters."¹⁵ As a child, Jesus expresses that general vocation of loving God. However, "a less than submissive reply to his mother exhibits his awareness that he is God's Son—and that this filial role transcends his family ties to Joseph and Mary. This is the family to which he belongs, the one that defines his identity and vocation

¹⁵ John T. Carroll, "What Then Will This Child Become?: Perspectives on Children in the Gospel of Luke," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle, Loc. 2229.

and claims his allegiance.”¹⁶ Even though Jesus has an awareness of his particular vocation, he returns with Mary and Joseph and “was obedient to them” (v. 51). Like Samuel, “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men” (v. 52). Jesus fulfills his vocation as a child in being obedient to his parents and in finding favor with those around him.

Theologians’ Perspectives on the Vocation of Children

Throughout church history, there has been a minimal focus on children in general, and theologians have been virtually silent on the topic of the vocation of children. Martin Luther is one theologian who reflected on children quite deeply and also incorporated them into his theology of vocation. In declaring that baptism welcomes everyone into the vocation of priesthood, he destroyed all barriers, including age.¹⁷ Time and time again, he included children in his list of those who are called. “Every person surely has a calling. This includes kings who govern, mothers who tend babies, fathers who earn a livelihood, pupils who apply themselves to studies, and children who honor parents.”¹⁸ It is easy to see that, for Luther, vocation referred not simply to a person’s occupation but to all relationships, situations, and involvements. Because Luther believed that everyone has a calling, including children, he wrote on the roles, duties, and responsibilities of children, regardless of age, that would benefit the family and the community.¹⁹ He firmly believed that the first responsibility of children was to their parents, showing them love, honor, and obedience. We see this in his *Large Catechism*, written to help parents and the church raise children in the faith. In this and other writings, Luther demonstrated a belief that children could

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Loc. 2250.

¹⁷ Timothy J. Wengert, “Luther on Children: Baptism and the Fourth Commandment,” *Dialogue* 37 (Summer 1998): 186, accessed September 22, 2017, <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=ad04e0ee-537b-4d28-b0e4-72c777cf8bb4%40sessionmgr103&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWVhc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=ATLA0000985805&db=rfh>.

¹⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis 17:9,” in *Luther’s Works*, 3:128.

¹⁹ Bunge, “The Vocation of the Child,” 36.

love God and love others, living out their faith in practical ways as was fitting to their role. Luther even extended his views on vocation to education. “Excellent schools help develop the gifts of young people so that they can live out their particular vocations and take up particular roles or offices that serve others and contribute to the common good.”²⁰

William Perkins, a seventeenth-century English scholar, also referred to children. In *A Treatise on Vocations*, Perkins declared, “Every person, of every degree, state, sex, or condition without exception, must have some personal and particular calling to walk in.”²¹ In considering children, Perkins wrote,

It is the duty of parents to make a choice of fit callings for them before they apply them to any particular condition of life. And that they may the better judge aright for what callings their children are fit, they must observe two things in them: first, their inclination; secondly, their natural gifts. Touching inclination, every child, even in his first years, does affect some one particular calling more than another. Second, the natural gifts which parents are to observe in their children are either in their bodies or in their minds.²²

Although Perkins was looking more at the eventual occupation of the child, his call for parents to attend to the gifts and inclinations of the child showed remarkable sensitivity to the way children have been uniquely created.

August Hermann Francke, another German theologian, followed Luther’s teaching on vocation. Francke believed that every person has a special calling or vocation and that every person has unique gifts and abilities to be

²⁰ Ibid., 36.

²¹ William Perkins, *A Treatise of the Vocations* (London: John Haviland, 1631), 750-76. Quoted by William Placher, *Callings*, 266.

²² Ibid., 271-2.

used to glorify God and serve others.²³ Francke wrote quite positively about children, desiring to discover a child's unique gifts and talents so that the child could develop those talents to bring glory to God and to serve others around him.²⁴ He showed an acute awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit in children, believing that the Holy Spirit is working in children, even when they or adults were not aware of it. "Francke also believes that it is almost easier for the Holy Spirit to move in the hearts of children than in the hearts of adults and that children can have rich spiritual lives. . . . Thus, children are able to accept the call at any time, even when they are young."²⁵ In Francke's understanding, the vocation of children was Spirit-led as they utilized their gifts and abilities.

As the Reformation spread across Europe, many churches and scholars began to write catechisms and household manuals, guiding parents in what was considered the "duties" of the Christian child. The vocation of the child, according to these writings, consisted of two main types of duties: "(1) the duty of the child to love God, neighbor, and self and thereby to become beloved to others; and (2) the duty of the child to be loved by parents, guardians, and others."²⁶ The second "duty" was more of a call to parents and caregivers to nurture children. In the society of that time, roles for children were delineated quite clearly. While children had household duties and chores to perform, those duties were still seen as an expression of loving God and loving their neighbor, those with whom children had most intimate contact.

Having looked briefly at Scripture and what theologians have written

²³ Marcia J. Bunge, "Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism: Perspectives from the Work of A. H. Francke," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 268. Bunge is quoting from *Ordnung und Lehart, 165-167*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

²⁶ John Witte and Heather M. Good, "The Duties of Love: The Vocation of the Child in the Household Manual Tradition," in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 268.

about vocation, including the vocation of children, it can be asserted more strongly that children, indeed, do have a vocation. But what does a child's vocation look like? How do children live out their specific calling to love God and love their neighbor? The reality of practicing that love will look different for children than for adults. In *The Vocation of the Child*, Marcia Bunge creates an excellent summary of eight dimensions of the vocation of a child, drawing from Scripture and tradition.²⁷ These eight dimensions, presented in a slightly different order than what Bunge proposes (and with the addition of one other dimension from outside Bunge's work), form a framework from which to explore the specific practical applications of vocation to children.

Nine Dimensions of the Vocation of Children

1. Fear and love God. The Bible is clear that everyone, including children, should fear (or revere) the Lord, and Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30; cf. Deut 6:1-5; 14:23; Prov 1:7; 14:26-27; Matt 22:37). Loving God is a child's first and most essential vocational duty. When children understand they belong to God, and when they cultivate that relationship daily, their outward activities become a tangible expression of that love.

The foundation of a child's Christian vocation is the love of God. . . . The child truly loves God by living a life in profound, awe-filled reverence to God. This love for God involves a tenderness of feeling and a deep personal attachment to God that flows from God's power and majesty as the giver and sustainer of life. Love of God, in accordance with the first commandment . . . leads a child to honor of parents.²⁸

A child's love and reverence for God will not be expressed in the same manner as an adult's love for God, but that does not mean it is any less sincere. Children have a simple way of worshipping and connecting with

²⁷ Bunge, "The Vocation of the Child," 40-50.

²⁸ Witte and Good, "The Duties of Love," 189.

God, and their relationship with him can be nurtured in ways appropriate to their understanding and level of development.

2. Honor and respect your parents. The fourth commandment says, “Honor your father and mother” (Exod 20:12, cf. Deut 5:16; Lev 19:3; Eph 6:2-3). In his *Large Catechism*, Luther explains what honor looks like.

For it is a much higher thing to honor than to love. Honor includes not only love but also deference, humility, and modesty, directed (so to speak) toward a majesty hidden within them. Honor requires us not only to address them lovingly and with high esteem but above all to show by our actions, both of heart and of body, that we respect them very highly and that next to God, we give them the very highest place.²⁹

The concept of honoring parents, in Luther’s view, has three facets. First, it means esteeming them and valuing them as “the most precious treasure on earth.” Second, not criticizing or speaking discourteously to them shows parents’ honor. Third, children honor parents through their actions by serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, or poor.³⁰ By loving and serving parents, children fulfill the command to “love your neighbor as yourself,” since parents are their closest “neighbor.” But honor also is a child’s response to everything parents do in caring for her. “It is our duty before the world to show gratitude for the kindness and for all the good things we have received from our parents.”³¹ The vocation of honoring parents carries on throughout childhood into adulthood.

3. Obey your parents. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph 6:1; cf. Col 3:20; Deut 12:28). Obedience speaks of submitting to parents and doing what they say. Christian household manuals and

²⁹ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 315.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 315

³¹ *Ibid.*, 319.

church catechisms from the earliest traditions have articulated the duty of children to obey their parents. *The Book of Common Prayer* (American Version, 1789) describes the child's vocation in the following way: "To love, honour, and succor my father and mother: To honour and obey the civil authority: To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors, and masters: To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters."³² Luther's *Large Catechism* states that there is no work greater and nobler than obeying father and mother,³³ but he also expands the definition of "parent," identifying four types of parents that should be honored and obeyed: parents by blood, parents of a household (speaking to servants), parents of the nations, and spiritual parents.³⁴ When asking children to obey, there is an assumption that they are still learning, not yet able to discern right from wrong, so they need to learn from and follow the example of those in authority, including their parents.³⁵ Traditionally, obedience is normally what is thought of when considering a child's role or vocation.

4. *Disobey your parents and other adult authorities* (Ez 20:18-19; Luke 21:16-17). Surprisingly, part of a child's vocation is *not* to obey her parents when parents' words go against God's law or if the wishes of parents or others in authority would cause her to sin. Luther wrote, "If God's word and will are placed first and are observed, nothing ought to be considered more important than the will and word of our parents, provided that these, too, are subordinated to God and are not set in opposition to the preceding commandments."³⁶ Bunge reminds us, "All children are made in the image of God, and even as young children, they are active moral agents with growing moral capacities and responsibilities of their own. Since they are made

³² The Protestant Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York, 1789), x.

³³ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 317.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

³⁵ Marcia Bunge, "The Vocation of the Child," 41.

³⁶ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 317.

in God's image, they are to honor God above all things."³⁷

5. *Learn about and practice the faith.* Moses told the Israelites, "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children" (Deut 6:6-7a, NIV; cf. 11:18-19, Ps 78:4; Prov 22:6; Eph 6:4). Even from an early age, children can learn the Word of God, pray, worship, and obey God. However, when it comes to learning about the faith, children cannot fulfill this vocation without the help of adults. Parents and other adults are commanded to teach children the Word of God and to model faith in practical ways for their children, and children should be encouraged to ask questions about faith as they seek to make it their own. Several prominent theologians, including Chrysostom, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Francke, and Bushnell, have emphasized the importance of the parents' role both in teaching faith and modeling faith to children.³⁸ Many of the early catechisms were written to help parents instruct their children in the faith, and some include very strong admonitions to parents to take their vocation seriously in raising godly children. "Think what deadly harm you do when you are negligent and fail to bring up your children to be useful and godly. You bring upon yourself sin and wrath, thus earning hell by the way you have reared your own children, no matter how holy and upright you may be otherwise."³⁹ Children's faith is both caught and taught, and parents play a key role in helping children fulfill this dimension of their vocation.

While teaching children is important, parents and other adults must remember that children may practice or express their faith quite differently than would a mature adult. For children, life is filled with wonder, awe, creativity, and spontaneity, and those qualities will inform their faith expressions. Since discipleship is a life-long process, adults must encourage

³⁷ Bunge, "The Vocation of the Child," 43.

³⁸ Descriptions of each theologian's teachings on the roles of parents in faith formation are outlined in *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia J. Bunge. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

³⁹ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 326.

the growth they see in a child's life, even if the child is not yet spiritually mature.

6. *Teach adults and be models of faith.* In Matthew 18:1-5 and 19:13-15 (cf. Mark 10:13-16), Jesus overturned the conventional understanding of children, presenting them as those from whom adults could learn. In his teaching, Jesus used children “as moral witnesses, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, representatives of Jesus, and even a paradigm for entering the reign of God. Jesus identifies himself with children and equates welcoming a little child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him.”⁴⁰ When adults take time to observe and listen to children, they become open to the lessons God may want to teach them through children. Bonnie Miller-McLemore describes it in this way: “One thing children do is form adults. . . . They help us see things we have never seen before. They renew our hope. They reinvigorate adulthood.”⁴¹ Because children see God and the world differently than adults, God can use them to help adults understand him and his kingdom in unexpected and different ways.

7. *Contribute to family well-being by doing chores.* Although Bunge does not mention this dimension of children's vocation, many of the catechisms and household manuals call upon children to work in the context of their families. Luther exhorted children, saying, “If you do your daily household chores, that is better than the holiness and austere life of all the monks.”⁴² Even though children in twenty-first-century western culture generally have few responsibilities in supporting their family, the picture is quite different in other parts of the world, especially in rural areas. In many cultures, chores are an important or even an essential part of children's support of their family. All children can be guided to understand their work at home as a way to serve the good of their family and community. Miller-

⁴⁰ Bunge, “The Vocation of the Child,” 48.

⁴¹ Janel Kragt Bakker, “The Vocation of Children: An Interview with Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Parts One & Two,” in *Bearings Online* (April 21 & April 28, 2014), accessed September 22, 2017, <http://collegevilleinstitute.org/bearings/vocation-children/>.

⁴² Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 322.

McLemore comments:

When the family is seen as a working unit or a domestic church, chores in childhood are understood as contributing to family justice and solidarity as well as the common social good. They are, in other words, one piece of a greater whole that includes work, love, and play in fluctuating balance among its members. . . . In this context, chores gain vocational meaning.⁴³

When children see their chores genuinely and meaningfully contributing to family life, not just a punishment for misbehavior or doing “busy work,” doing their chores becomes vocational.

8. *Go to school and study diligently for the future.* Although this particular dimension of vocation is not mentioned in Scripture, tradition often has emphasized the responsibility or duty of children to go to school, to study diligently, and to cultivate their gifts and skills so they can love and serve others, including society in the future. Luther was one of the first to passionately write about universal education, giving every child the opportunity to learn. In his *Large Catechism*, Luther writes, “For if we want capable and qualified people for both the civil and the spiritual realms, we really must spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world.”⁴⁴ In *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School*, he chastises parents for wanting their children just to learn to make a living and not giving children the opportunity to study, saying, “Certainly we must either be crazy or without love for our children.”⁴⁵ For Luther, the act of keeping children out of school is a sin to children, but it also wrongs the wider community by withholding (human) resources that

⁴³ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Children, Chores, and Vocation: A Social and Theological Lacuna,” In *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 309-10.

⁴⁴ Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 326.

⁴⁵ Luther, “A Sermon on keeping children in school, 1530,” in *Luther’s Works*, 46:141.

could be of service to the church and society.⁴⁶

Most children today have the opportunity to go to school and learn. In some senses, school is children's work because it consumes so much time in their lives. But school also becomes a context where they can live out their faith and love for their neighbor, contributing to the life of their classroom community. Doing well in school also has implications for children's future. Through studying and learning, children grow in knowledge, but they also develop skills, aptitudes, and awareness of interests that will serve them in the future.

9. Play and be in the present. Children are gifts of God (Ps 127:1-3) and sources of joy (Gen 21:6-7; Luke 1:14). It seems odd to think of play as a vocational responsibility, but a great deal of a child's way of being in the world is determined through play, especially unstructured play (as opposed to organized sports). Developmentally, it has been said that play is a child's work, particularly for younger children. As children enter fully into play, they live in the present, unencumbered by concerns of life. Their hearts are open and more attuned to the voice of God. Children's play can enliven families and the community, providing a positive social impact on others.

Although children are called to utilize their cognitive and moral abilities and their gifts and talents to serve others in the future, they have a critical role in enhancing and vitalizing our communities *now* through play and contagious zeal for life. Children have tremendous power to influence with their laughter, curiosity, and joy for simple things.⁴⁷

The Bible even includes images of children at play in future visions of restoration and peace (Zech 8:5; Isa 11:6-9). As such, while children's play gives us joy, it also is a picture of hope for God's future.

Recognizing the multi-dimensional vocation of children *as children* endows them with significance and dignity. They have much to contribute to

⁴⁶ Jane E. Strohl, "The Child in Luther's Theology," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 151.

⁴⁷ Jorgenson, "Wild Rumpus Revisited," 360.

others. But at the same time, it must be remembered that children are not adults; they have limitations and cannot be autonomous.⁴⁸ For children to fulfill their vocation as children, they need the help of adults. Therefore, to help children to live out their vocation fully, several implications for parents and the faith community must be considered.

Implications for Parents

Parenting is a vocation as well. Luther saw parenting as both a temporal and a spiritual calling wherein father and mother serve as priests and bishops to their children, acquainting them with the gospel, nurturing them in faith, and helping them develop their gifts to serve others.⁴⁹ He called it “the noblest and most precious work.”⁵⁰ The teaching of children may come in formal settings, such as family devotions, but more often will come in the serendipitous teachable moments of daily life. While parents have an obligation to teach children spiritual truth, they also are to model faith and be good examples to their children.⁵¹ More than anything else, children need to see examples of a vibrant, living faith in Christ, and parents are the examples children watch most closely.

While church tradition has written much on the need for parents to be the primary teachers of faith to children, in recent years, with more parents working outside the home and with the rise of the Sunday school, many parents have abdicated their role as primary spiritual nurturers, leaving it to the children’s ministry of the church. In cultures that place a high value on education, sport, or financial success, parents are more likely to invest their time and energy making sure children gain other skills and abilities than helping them develop a deeper walk with God. Spiritual nurture is not always seen as a priority. Many parents lack the confidence or capacity to

⁴⁸ Elmer J. Thiessen, “The Vocation of the Child as a Learner,” in *The Vocation of the Child*, ed. Patrick McKinley Brennan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 386.

⁴⁹ Luther, “Estate of Marriage,” in *Luther’s Works*, 45:46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ Bunge, “The Vocation of the Child,” 41.

talk about faith with their children, answer their questions, listen to their wondering, and help them see that their gifts and talents are to be used for God's glory. Yet creating that openness for dialogue and encouragement is a critical aspect of spiritual nurture. "Try to leave a lot of space for children's gifts—recognizing, affirming, welcoming, and cultivating their particular gifts. Sometimes these aren't easy to recognize or see, but it is wise to invite and nurture and make space for them."⁵² As parents take their role seriously to nurture the faith of their children, both through modeling and teaching, they will assist their children in fulfilling their vocational roles.

Implications for the Church

The vocation of children also has significant implications for the faith community. Most obvious is the need for the whole faith community to embrace the call to nurture the faith of children, including them more fully. In many churches, children have been taken out of congregational life, only experiencing the children's programs. There is merit to teaching children in age-appropriate ways, but if children never interact with the rest of the congregation, they miss having the experience of learning what it means to be the church. Because children learn through experience and modeling, they must participate to fully embrace the faith. Janel Kragt Bakker says:

Participation in the liturgy provides children with both the stories and the vocabulary to explore what it means to be not just children but children of God. Participation in the liturgy, in other words, helps children learn who they are. The liturgy is a gift of space—both place and time—in which God's people can come to meet God, and through participation in the liturgy, children are given the tools they need to enact and embrace their relationship with God, becoming—in community with adults—who they already are.⁵³

⁵² Bakker, "The Vocation of Children: Pt. 2."

⁵³ Mindy G. Makant, "Bearing Gifts and Receiving Burdens: a Theological Approach to Ministry with Children," in *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 3, no. 3 (2012), 17, accessed

Children need the church so they can learn how to worship and be in community with other believers as part of the body of Christ. But the church also needs to be willing to make space for the questions, the curiosity, the energy, and even the noise that children will bring.⁵⁴

Because children are part of the body of Christ, it is important to consider the roles children play and the gifts they bring to the body. Too often, children are overlooked, dismissed, or not taken seriously. When the church treats children as such, they communicate that children are unimportant. However, in doing so, the church also misses children's unique insights and perspectives. The gifts children bring may look quite different than what adults consider spiritual gifts. "Children . . . contribute to the human capacity for doxology and wonder, since their own delight in discovery proves contagious for those who watch and listen. While these may be the contributions of the "weaker" members of the body, they are by no means negligible."⁵⁵ The body of Christ is incomplete without the contributions of children.

My personal experience is a reminder that children's emerging gifts and abilities also need to be utilized and encouraged within the faith community. Children are eager to serve and be useful, and the church can provide opportunities to help them understand how service to and with others is a fulfillment of their vocation. Their zeal, energy, and compassion for people, with mentoring and guidance from adults, can be a great asset for any faith community.

Conclusion

Children do have a vocation in the present, *as children*, not just when they

September 21, 2017, <http://childhoodandreligion.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Makant-Nov-2012.pdf>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁵ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Finding a Place for Children in the Letters of Paul," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle, Loc. 3027.

grow up. Scripture and tradition support this assertion. Exploring the vocation of children has sought to deepen awareness and understanding of the significant roles they play in their families, faith community, and beyond. God first calls children to himself, and then he calls them to love and serve him and others in ways that are appropriate for their age and development. Those with influence in the lives of children—parents, teachers, and Christian adults—have a role to play in teaching and modeling faith, answering questions, encouraging gifts and abilities, and providing children with the freedom to respond to God and to the opportunities they see before them to live as his children in their world.

When viewed from the perspective of Christian vocation, children are not an investment or achievement from which one expects a return. They are not slaves to adult bidding. They are a gift that one hopes will flourish. Part of that flourishing involves work . . . done in the best of circumstances for the good of creation and its redemption. Christian theology encourages us to consider children's call to contribute to the common good around them.⁵⁶

As children live out their vocation, loving God and loving their neighbor in ways specific to children, they give glory to God. Asking a child, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is not sufficient; let us also help them see their vocational significance here and now.

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⁵⁶ Miller-McLemore, "Children, Chores and Vocation," 322.

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