

## HUMAN VOCATION: Study 4

God's Excellent Way: Jesus Christ's Agape outworking

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY SERIES

The three primary points that these 6 studies are emphasising concerning vocation are firstly, that there is a **creational mandate**. Human vocation for all of humanity flows from God's creational mandate to 'be fruitful...' (Gen. 1:28; Psalm 8). Secondly, there is a **redemptional mandate**. Human vocation for consciously redeemed humanity includes the redemptive mandate to proclaim Jesus Christ, as the matrix of creation, through the setting forth of the gospel (Ephesians 3:8-12; Matthew 24:14; Matthew 28:16-20). Thirdly, there is **an excellent way, agape**, given to the new humanity, by which this occurs (1Cor. 13). This way is through God's love.

### GOD IS LOVE

Anyone who does not love does not know God, for **God is love**. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the *propitiation* for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:8-11).

Agape Love. Self-giving love. This is the way in which God goes about everything, for God is love. '*God's love has been poured into our hearts*'—irrigated, shed abroad—'*through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us*' (Romans 5:5b). The Holy Spirit brings us into union with Christ, through faith, by grace alone. As such we have been *crucified with Christ* Jesus (Gal. 2:20). Paul says that Jesus '*was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification*' (Romans 4:25). God's work of redemption in our lives, means that '*we love, because he first loved us*' (1John 4:19). Jesus said, "*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*" (John 15:12).

### AGAPE LOVE IS THE 'STILL MORE EXCELLENT WAY'

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead reveals to us that God's agape love is triumphant over the Satanic powers of evil, for '*the ruler of this world*' is '*driven out*' (John 12:31). God's love is victorious over the bitter outcome and cruel effects of human sin, including the curse that limits human fruitfulness, and success within the creation. *The wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23), *but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*'. Jesus Christ's defeat of his enemies is seen in his victory over death, sin and the devil or Satan. '*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end*'. (John 13:1c). In his holy love, Jesus exerts '*the power of an indestructible life*' (Hebrews 7:16). By God's grace, through faith, we are incorporated *into* the life of Jesus Christ. As those equipped with 'everything needed for life and godliness' (2Peter 1:3) our new way is to become 'participants of the divine nature' (2Peter 1:4). So then, as we share in Christ, in both the **creational mandate**, and the **redemptional mandate**, the way of love keeps us from being 'ineffective or unfruitful' (2Peter 1:8) in life and ministry. Paul calls the Corinthian church to put off their rivalry and factionalism, and their debates about the various gifts of the Spirit, and instead, to pursue the way of agape love.

And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

**Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

**Love never ends.** But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and **the greatest of these is love** (1Corinthians 12b—13:13).

The way of our vocation, our calling is self-giving love. Paul was so eager to proclaim the self-giving love of God in Christ Jesus, and the free gift of eternal life given through the gospel, that he even refused to attend to his work on the normal basis that the LORD has commanded, 'that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel' (1Cor. 9:14). Instead, Paul made very sure his ministry was 'free of charge' (1Cor. 9:18). While in the city of Corinth, Paul 'worked together' in his trade, with Aquila and Priscilla, as tentmakers (Acts 18:3). Paul learned from Jesus' that love never ends. Love endures all things. Love bears all things. Love is patient. Love is kind. Paul abandoned his former way of going about life, of threatening, or pressurising others to do what he wanted them to do—even of approving of their killing (Acts 7:59) to force them to stop preaching Christ as the risen Lord. Having met Jesus on the road to Damascus, this way of love, of suffering love, of self-giving love, was now to become Paul's way of being truly human too (Acts 9:1-22).

We need to pause and ask if this self-giving love is how we go about our lives, vocation, and ministries? No matter what area we serve God, to love, is our calling, Love never ends. Love hopes all things.

### LOVE HOPES ALL THINGS

'If I knew 'the world was to go to pieces tomorrow, I'd plant an apple tree today'. According to Justin Taylor, this quote is often attributed to Martin Luther, but there is no evidence that he said it.<sup>1</sup> That may well be so. Nevertheless, I am glad to say it myself. For I think it clearly indicates a profound approach to the doctrine of creation, and redemption. It is also a statement in which our vocational stewardship displays the truth that 'love hopes all things'.

Incidentally, from my reading of Gustav Wingren regarding Martin Luther's understanding of vocation<sup>2</sup> it appears that Luther's emphasis is exclusively upon *loving our neighbour*. It is *not* so much upon God's **creational mandate** to be fruitful and have dominion as such. What consumes Luther is the **redemptional mandate** to proclaim the gospel of grace, and to live by faith alone. For Luther, the reason for a shoemaker to craft an excellent pair of shoes is simply because *our neighbour* needs them. Luther's over-riding passion to press home the truth of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, and his framework of law and gospel, and his two kingdoms emphasis of heaven and earth, seems to me to have distorted his view of vocation, within the whole purpose of God.

The cross of Christ is grouped with the law, the old man, vocation, the earth. But the resurrection of Christ belongs with the gospel, the new man, the church, heaven. The old man is to be crucified and slain by the law, which in earthly life has taken for through worldly government. We are disciplined in vocation, in labor, and in the demands of social life. **Vocation is earthly, just as shockingly earthly as the humanity of Christ**, apparently so void of all divinity.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/5-quotes-that-luther-didnt-actually-say/>

<sup>2</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, Translated by Carl C. Rasmussen, Muhlenberg Press, Philadelphia, 1957.

In the crucifixion of Christ the divine nature was only hidden, not absent; it was present in the lowly form of love for robbers and soldiers.<sup>3</sup>

For want of time, space and a comprehensive grasp of Luther's position on vocation, I will not spend too long on this matter now, except to say this: Luther knew from his painful personal history that spiritual exercises and good deeds—'spiritual' or otherwise—could never secure a reconciled relationship to God. Only the gospel could do that. Sadly, the Roman Church and European society all hoped their good works, or money, might secure them. Wingren writes of Luther:

'The monk is always uncertain about his works; but in work which really contributes to the neighbour's well-being and is commanded by God, peace and certainty are found. The works of one's *vocation* are liberating, as are also the works of the gospel. The insight the gospel gives, that **no work** is to be done before God **for the purpose of conciliating him**, can also be mediated to us through the command to work for the sake of our *neighbour*, that is, through the command of our vocation. The works of our vocation are so puny that certainty of God's favor, even without those works, is implied in heedfulness to those commands. The commands of one's *vocation* can become the bearer of the gospel'.<sup>4</sup>

It is my contention that we who are heirs of Reformation, have been so well alerted by our evangelical churches and pastors, to the facts of Ephesians 2:8, that we cannot by works be reconciled to God, (but only through grace alone), that we are now gun-shy and hyper-suspicious concerning the topic of works. I believe that this distorts one's understanding of vocation. For we have been saved by grace, to do good works, in God's good purpose.

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works**, which God prepared in advance as our way of life (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Only recently an advertisement in Sydney, inviting people to undertake theological training, to learn how to disciple others, suggested that this course may lead to '*full time Christian work*'. Intentionally or not, it implied that only the work of discipleship, of vocation within the church, was ultimately—at the end of the day—really *Christian work*. This is part of our present day problem. I shouted at the advert in protest, 'what about the call of the Triune God to be fruitful in life, to be stewards of creation, to enter into marriage and family life, to enjoy Sabbath rest, and to embrace recreational activity, to be still in the midst of trouble, and to know that God is God? What about bearing witness to the power of Jesus' resurrection, and his cross, in the work of regeneration. What about the 'universal restoration of all things? (Acts 3:21)'. What about the human life of self-giving service within creation?' The creation is not merely the backdrop, or the stage on which the so-nominated *real* activities of life are played out. *All things have been made through Christ, and for him*. We are to live fruitfully now in this fallen world, participating in all of life, with a view to God's great day of regeneration<sup>5</sup>, of the totality of *the harvest of the Spirit*.<sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb. The trees of the field will clap their hands. The Spirit says that the deeds of those who die in the Lord, will follow them.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Wingren, p. 57

<sup>4</sup> Wingren, p. 73

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:28 'In the regeneration...' or NRSV 'At the renewal of all things...'

<sup>6</sup> Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control is the fruit or *harvest of the Spirit* in Jesus Christ's newly minted humanity (Gal. 5:22-23). This is 'the way' of Jesus' self-giving love. But all creation waits eagerly in hope, to be set free (Romans 8:21) from imprisonment to decay. We look forward to the redemption of our bodies.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 11:6; Isaiah 55:12, Revelation 14:13

## LOVE HOPES ALL THINGS—SOME EXAMPLES

**Hope for the West Coast Tasmanian:** A married couple—in Christ—took their car and caravan to visit some difficult-to-access places, along the rugged west coast of Tasmania. They came across a man who had built his home on the rocky outcrop at the windswept edge of the coastline—looking out towards, well, South Africa. He was a keen fisherman, who especially loved to harvest the magnificent crayfish, growing amidst kelp beneath the wild Southern Ocean. It required skill, courage, and ocean wisdom. The man's home was primitive; he confided that his wider family considered him an eccentric, even a hermit, perhaps. They thought he was crazy living out there, and generally dismissed his uncommon lifestyle. But to him it was glorious. The beauty of the world was his to enjoy—with few interruptions. He gave my friends some of his fresh delicious crayfish. My friends eagerly share the gospel with most people they meet; and this meeting was no exception. That God loved this man, gave grace to him in Jesus Christ to live eternally, was a message he needed to know, like us all. However, it was the photograph that got to him. My friend had the inexplicable ability to capture someone's own life in a photo. Not unlike the infamous portrait painting skills of Anh Do.<sup>8</sup> When the man saw his own life reflected to him—his vocation, his home, his glory as a human being, created in Christ with gifts to share—somehow captured in the photograph taken, and then framed as a gift for hanging in his home, the wild West coast cray fisherman was deeply moved. The photograph had communicated by the Spirit's power, the truth of his created life, 'crowned with glory and honour' and given 'dominion over all that swims along the path of the seas' (Psalm 8).<sup>9</sup> Gladness and thankfulness was awakened. Hope was renewed.

**Hope for Tomorrow:** My wife and I were driving from St. George to Dirranbandi in outback Queensland, near to the New South Wales border—and Cubbie Station. The land was so dry, hot and bleak looking, I said it reminded me of the red planet Mars. It was unlike any place on earth I'd seen before. And I've travelled a bit. The paddocks were dark, almost dead looking. There were hundreds of dead kangaroos across the bitumen road. Some little skinny pathetic ones were still alive, hiding from the sun under any little bush—they had been eating the bark on the trees. It was a sad place. I said to my wife, 'I don't understand anything about this region at all'. My friend is a farmer at Dirrinbandi. He invited us to stop and stay with him for a day or two. We soon arrived at his home. He dragged six dead roos from the car-shed. They crawled in there to die. They had been in drought for a couple of years. He invited me to attend a mid-week gathering for men, in his home, where he had a guest speaker come to share words of hope, and an understanding of depression with them. A few people prayed, and all had a good beer and BBQ tea together—along with fine conversation. The next day my friend invited me to come across early to see his cattle and his feed lot. I love cattle. To my surprise, he had a massive covered bunker full of sweet smelling chopped-feed, including silage and almond husks for his cattle. Then to my surprise I saw that he had about 2000 beef cattle all in magnificent condition, housed on his feed lot. He was drafting some off ready for sale. A couple of other workmen were there concreting further for more cattle yards. In this bleak land he was planning to expand his feed lot to manage up to 3000 head of cattle. It seemed like madness. No rain. No feed in any paddock. But hope. Strange hope. He told me that rain could come here from any direction. It was just a matter of when. He put a metal poker—over 2 metres—down into the soil to show me that there was residual moisture there. He also had an amazing underground bore, 1km deep, for watering his cattle on the farm. I took a photo of the yellow kayak on my roof, and of the barren farmland around. People of Facebook laughed, and thought it looked like a remake of Noah's days, waiting in faith for the flood. Quite some-time after I arrived back in SA the rains arrived in Dirrinbandi. The water was super-abundant. The crops he grew were magnificent. My friend hopes all things. He loves to share the gospel of God's good creation, and of the hope of redemption, and the patient way of

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://anhdoart.com>

<sup>9</sup> This is the basic story as I recall it being told to me. I gladly accept all clarification or revision.

love. Creation tells the glory of God, our rock and redeemer (Ps. 19). Only gospel attuned ears can hear.