



# The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective

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## FAITH AND WORKS

*For faith alone can justify;  
Works serve our neighbor and supply  
The proof that faith is living.<sup>1</sup>*

Lutheran Christians have a complex relationship with the idea of “work.” At the heart of Lutheran theology stands the bold claim that Christians are justified by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith alone, apart from works of the law. Coupled with this central theological claim is the equally bold assertion that good works necessarily follow faith as naturally as a tree bears fruit. Holding these two claims together can be a tough balancing act, especially in areas that call for concrete application. Focus too much on works as the necessary fruits of faith and risk being labeled a legalist. Focus too little on these works and risk being called, at best, lazy and, at worst, an antinomian. So how does one talk about work faithfully? Better still, how does one actually work faithfully?

Martin Luther’s 1520 treatise “The Freedom of a Christian” is one of the clearest explications of Luther’s view of the relationship between faith and work. Fundamental to Luther’s understanding is a distinction between the inner and

<sup>1</sup>Paul Speratus, “Salvation unto Us Has Come,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978) # 297:4.

*Just as God works faith in us through word and sacrament as means, so God works provision and sustenance for the world through us as means.*

outer person. The inner person “is justified by faith alone and not any works”<sup>2</sup> and is intimately united with Christ through faith. But Christians are incarnate beings, both spiritual and bodily, who live in the world. The outer person has to *do* something and thus occupies itself with works, both for the purpose of self-discipline (like an athlete in training) and for the service of others.

One cannot overemphasize the fact that, for Luther, the distinction between the inner and outer person is not a dualistic separation in which an inner spirit is simply housed in an outer and relatively expendable package. Luther’s anthropology is holistic. The language of “inner person” and “outer person” does not describe two separate component parts of the human being; rather it describes the whole Christian person from two different perspectives. In the relationship with God (*coram Deo*), faith alone in Christ alone matters. In our relationships with others (*coram hominibus*), however, we are evaluated on the basis of actions and results. Luther expresses this succinctly in “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,” written earlier in 1520, when he says, “We...cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; rather *we deal with men and with ourselves on the basis of works.*”<sup>3</sup>

#### VOCATION

*Confirm in us your Gospel, Lord,  
Your promise of salvation.  
And make us keen to hear your Word  
And follow our vocation.*<sup>4</sup>

The language of “vocation” has become a useful lens through which to consider Christian life and work in response to God’s gracious initiative. Martin Luther is generally credited with the recovery of the word “vocation” for general Christian use. Indeed, Jürgen Moltmann identifies vocation as “the third great insight of the Lutheran Reformation,” after word and sacrament.<sup>5</sup>

The word “vocation” literally means calling. Prior to Luther, vocation typically referred to a special calling to religious life, as a priest or as a member of a vowed order. Such a vocation was understood as a higher calling, set over against life in the household and in civil society.<sup>6</sup> Luther’s understanding of the gospel as God’s free gift led him to reject monastic life as an expression of a higher and more

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” (1520), in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 31:346 (hereafter *LW*).

<sup>3</sup>Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” (1520), in *LW* 36:42, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup>Konrad Hubert, “I Trust, O Christ, in You Alone,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, # 395:3.

<sup>5</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, “Reformation and Revolution,” in *Martin Luther and the Modern Mind*, ed. Manfred Hoffmann, Toronto Studies in Theology, 22 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1985) 186; cited in D. Michael Ben-nethum, *Listen! God Is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith, and Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003) 41. Another excellent resource is Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). Schuurman examines both the Lutheran and Reformed understandings of vocation.

<sup>6</sup>This understanding is still common within Catholic circles: [www.vocation.org](http://www.vocation.org) is a Franciscan site, while [www.vocation.com](http://www.vocation.com) promotes adoration of the sacrament for the increase of all religious vocations.

meritorious calling. He also rejected the division between sacred and secular spheres on which the medieval church's understanding of calling was predicated. In so doing, Luther broadened the concept of vocation from a narrow ecclesiastical focus to describe the life and work of all Christians in response to God's call. Luther insisted that "[e]very occupation has its own honor before God, as well as its own requirements and duties."<sup>7</sup> "Just as individuals are different, so their duties are different; and in accordance with the diversity of their callings, God demands diverse works of them."<sup>8</sup>

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*"Luther's 'two kingdoms' doctrine refers not to two separate, mutually exclusive spheres, but rather to two distinct ways in which God exercises divine authority: God is at work through the gospel, offering forgiveness and new life, and God is at work through the law, bringing order to the world"*

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Luther's so-called "two kingdoms" doctrine is illustrative here. In its mature form, it refers not to two separate, mutually exclusive spheres, but rather to two distinct ways in which God exercises divine authority: God is at work through the gospel, offering forgiveness and new life, and God is at work through the law, bringing order to the world. This twofold understanding of God's activity is the background for the distinct Reformation understanding of vocation as God's call to service in and for the world. The "secular" world is also God's world and is a suitable realm for divine service—not by serving God directly (since God does not need human works) but insofar as one serves the God-given neighbor. Seen through the lens of vocation, all human work becomes a means to participate in God's creating and sustaining activity on earth.

This Lutheran understanding of vocation is distinct not only from the Catholic understanding but also from the Anabaptist understanding. The Schleithem Confession, adopted by the Swiss Brethren in 1527, explicitly rejected the participation of Christians in "civic affairs," since worldly government and punishment are necessary only for those "outside the perfection of Christ." The Augsburg Confession, in turn, just as explicitly rejected the Anabaptist position, defending the legitimate participation of Christians in civil and military matters.

One might say that Lutheranism rejected the call to be "apart from" the world in favor of a call to be "a part of" the world. It was not the nature of a work itself that was determinative for the Lutheran understanding of vocation, either as affirmation of a special spiritual work or as rejection of a particularly secular work. What was determinative was responding in faith to God's call to be of service. According to Luther, the Christian "should be guided in all his works by this thought

<sup>7</sup>Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School" (1530), in *LW* 46:246.

<sup>8</sup>Luther, "Lectures on Genesis [Genesis 8:17]" (1535), in *LW* 2:113.

and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor.”<sup>9</sup> Christians may even be soldiers and executioners without sin when they use their authority to protect and preserve and not for their own advantage.

And yet a broadened sense of Christian vocation is not immune from abuse. While too narrow an understanding of vocation limits God’s call to a holy few, too general an understanding of all work as vocation can result eventually in a loss of meaning. The sense of calling that implies the existence of a transcendent caller is absent from vocational training programs, for example.

Even when the spiritual sense of vocation remains, however, there are dangers. When human work is imbued with religious meaning, the work itself can become divinized. Workaholism is a prime example of work pursued as an end in itself. Explicit talk of vocation has resurfaced noticeably in recent years, thanks to Frederick Buechner’s assertion that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”<sup>10</sup> While there is meaning and power in this articulation of vocation, Buechner’s language is easily romanticized and thus trivialized in an age that focuses as heavily as ours on personal fulfillment. Even more problematic is that affirmation of work as a divine calling may devolve into a passive justification of the status quo or even an active cover for injustice. Does emphasizing the dignity inherent in the humblest work make it easier for a society not to raise its minimum wage, for example? And when does doing a job well become the “just following orders” of Auschwitz or Abu Ghraib?

Luther’s understanding of vocation as service of the God-given neighbor was revolutionary in Luther’s day, but since then it has been too often domesticated or ignored. Over twenty years ago, in these very pages, Marc Kolden called for a revitalization of Luther’s idea of Christian vocation, grounded deeply in a law/gospel dialectic. More than a generation after Gustaf Wingren’s ground-breaking work, Kolden observed that Luther’s dynamic understanding of vocation had, to date, had relatively little impact on North American Lutheranism.<sup>11</sup>

#### VOCATION AND CREATION

*Bless, Lord, the labor we bring to serve you, that with our neighbor we may be fed.  
Sowing or tilling, we would work with you, harvesting, milling, for daily bread.*<sup>12</sup>

Luther’s sense of vocation is rooted in a dynamic doctrine of creation. In common parlance, talk of “creation” too often limits itself to consideration of what happened “in the beginning.” However, for Luther, God’s *ongoing* work as creator is a fundamental catechetical starting point. (See especially Luther’s explanations

<sup>9</sup>Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *LW* 31:365.

<sup>10</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 119.

<sup>11</sup>Marc Kolden, “Luther on Vocation,” *Word & World* 3/4 (1983) 382–390.

<sup>12</sup>Albert F. Bayly, “Praise and Thanksgiving,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, # 409:2.

to the first article of the Apostles' Creed and to the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer.) For Luther, to confess God as creator is to acknowledge not only God's original work but that God continually (daily!) sustains the creation by providing that which is necessary for life. Luther understands the necessities of life quite broadly, defining "daily bread" to include food, clothing, and shelter; physical health; family, friends, and neighbors; fiscal resources; and stable government—"in short, everything that pertains to the regulation of our domestic and our civil or political affairs."<sup>13</sup>

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Given this broad understanding of the scope of God's concern as creator, it should come as no surprise that God's sustaining activity on behalf of the creation is mediated. Just as God's saving grace is conveyed through word and sacrament as means of grace, so God's providential care of the world also occurs through tangible means—including not only natural structures (sun, moon, and stars; the laws of gravity, entropy, etc.) but also the work of God's human creatures. According to Luther, God "wants to act through His creatures, whom He does not want to be idle."<sup>14</sup> God now gives food through human labor rather than through the miraculous appearance of manna, and God now creates human beings through sexual union rather than out of dust. As Wingren explains it, "With persons as his 'hands' or 'coworkers,' God gives his gifts through the earthly vocations (food through farmers, fishermen and hunters; external peace through princes, judges, and orderly powers; knowledge and education through teachers and parents, etc.)."<sup>15</sup>

It is important to recognize that God works through humans not only through their individual efforts but also through their social and political structures. Luther frequently describes life in three "orders" or arenas of activity—the household, the state, and the church—each of which he understands as having been established by God for the common good. God's will for the creation can thus be expressed through socially constructed laws as well as through the laws of nature, and humans are subject to God's regulating activity in both of these ways. From the point of view of the Lutheran reformers, to withdraw from civic affairs, as did both monks and Anabaptists, was to deny the legitimacy of God's created or-

<sup>13</sup>Martin Luther, *Large Catechism* (1529), in *The Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 430.

<sup>14</sup>Luther, "Lectures on Genesis [Genesis 19:14]," in *LW* 3:274.

<sup>15</sup>Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) 27. This is the perspective that grounds theologian Philip Hefner's description of humans as "created cocreators." As Luther himself says, "Through faith a Christian becomes a creator"; *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 27:400, cited in Bennethum, *Listen!* 51.

ders. Indeed, to withdraw from civic affairs was to abandon the neighbor rather than to serve the neighbor.

#### VOCATIONS, PLURAL

*Be there at our labors, and give us, we pray,  
Your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day....  
Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,  
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.*<sup>16</sup>

One of Luther's distinctive contributions to the concept of vocation is his affirmation of the plurality of callings in the individual's life. The arenas of worldly activity identified by Luther are not mutually exclusive: one can be a parent, an employer or an employee, a citizen, and a member of the Christian community simultaneously. Luther's guidelines for the practice of confession demonstrate clearly his awareness that Christians are called by God to multiple responsibilities. Luther suggests that the best way to confess one's sins is to consider one's specific roles and relationships: How have I performed on the job? As a parent? Toward my neighbor? This advice is strongly reminiscent of Luther's image of God's law as a mirror. Just as a mirror reflects our physical image, so the law shows us who we are and allows us to see how we measure up. When I look in the mirror, I see neither a generic saint nor a generic sinner. I see the wife of this particular husband, the mother of these particular children, the teacher of these particular students, a citizen of this particular community and nation, etc. It is in these specific contexts that I am called to be of service.

This affirmation of the particularity and multiplicity of a Christian's callings clearly demonstrates the Lutheran conviction that one need not—and indeed should not—abandon one's existing circumstances in order to pursue a supposedly higher and more spiritual calling. Luther is fond of saying that one's own roles and relationships surely give one more than enough God-pleasing work to do without having to look for more. In Luther's time these roles and relationships were often given rather than individually chosen. Nevertheless, the Pauline injunction to "remain in the condition in which you were called" (1 Cor 7:20) need not result in an acceptance of social determinism at the expense of freedom of choice in daily life. Luther's point is not that one *may* not change one's station or office but that one *need* not do so in order to serve God.

Luther intended this recognition of our existing responsibilities as vocation to be reassuring. Unfortunately, the multiplicity of roles is often experienced in modern times as overwhelming. Competing demands result in feelings of fragmentation and, on a practical level, in the compartmentalization of work, home, and community life. The common-law principle that one's home is one's castle suggests autonomy and a private refuge from the demands of the outside world.

<sup>16</sup>Jan Struther, "Lord of All Hopefulness," in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, # 469:2, 3.

Yet the claim of vocation that one's home is also an arena in which one is called by God to the service of others may turn home into yet another workplace characterized by seemingly unending expectations and the consequent inability to measure up. Church, too, can become not only a place to receive and celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ but also a place where one is expected to contribute of one's time, talent, and treasure and where members are labeled according to their level of activity or inactivity. As a mirror, the law not only reveals our many callings but also thereby reveals our many shortcomings. To recognize the obligations of vocation does not give the ability to fulfill them. There are never enough hours in a day, even for Christians. The law always demands more.

Luther recognized that earthly vocation could become as burdensome as the monastic life in which he himself had known such struggles. An authentic understanding of Christian vocation cannot simply substitute earthly works for spiritual works in order to please God, or vocation becomes just another dead end. At the end of the day, the Christian's confidence is found neither in those things done nor those things left undone but in Christ alone. Nevertheless, our roles and responsibilities continue to call us to service of neighbor, however short we may fall. Yet in all these roles and responsibilities, the Christian remains united with Christ by faith, as branches are rooted in the vine.

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*“the Christian cannot do everything, but the Christian must do something”*

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Our inability to live up to the obligations of our many roles and responsibilities does not, however, absolve us of the need to bear fruit. The Christian cannot do everything, but the Christian must do something. Luther's advice to Melancthon to “sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly”<sup>17</sup> speaks precisely to the dilemma of uncertainty about the best course of action. Since the Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner, sin is inevitable in this life; but since Christ died for “true” sinners rather than “fictitious sinners,”<sup>18</sup> the Christian need not be paralyzed by the fear of making the wrong choice or doing the wrong thing. Justified by faith rather than by “getting it right,” the Christian is free to act, accepting the possibility of failure while trusting in Christ's victory over sin and death. Thus, the life of Christian vocation is characterized by daily dying and rising.

<sup>17</sup>Luther, “To Philip Melancthon, Wartburg, August 1, 1521,” in *LW* 48:282.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

## THE WORD AT WORK

*Listen, listen, God is calling  
through the Word inviting...*<sup>19</sup>

One of the texts used in my first-year systematics class at seminary in the early 1980s was Studs Terkel's *Working* (Pantheon, 1974). The reason for this nontraditional choice was simple: one had not learned to do theology unless one could apply both the law's diagnosis and the good news of the gospel to real people in all their lived complexity. Terkel's book provided case studies that were used to prepare future pastors for the people they would soon encounter in their parishes. "Grounding" in the faith was paired with "tracking" lived human experience, toward the end of "crossing" broken lives with the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

If vocation is God's call, there are too many Christians who expect that call to be difficult to understand. It is not uncommon to hear the assertion that God has a "personal plan for my life." The individual's responsibility, then, is both to find and to follow that unique, mysterious plan. One almost conjures up images of God on a cell phone, moving from place to place asking "Can you hear me now?" with the person on the receiving end of the call desperate to find the one right place where a clear signal is possible.

The Lutheran understanding of vocation offers an important corrective to this all-or-nothing, hit-or-miss mentality by focusing on how God is already at work in one's everyday life here and now. Within this framework, the "now" of "Can you hear me now?" suggests an incarnational commitment to any place and every place that Christians find themselves. One does not move farther away from God or closer to God depending on the choices one makes; rather the Christian's task is to discern God's will and to try to act responsibly in each concrete role or situation. Vocation is contextual theology.<sup>21</sup>

For Luther, the Christian's vocation is grounded in baptismal identity. Reflecting on Jesus' words, "Apart from me, you can do nothing," Luther insists: "I adhere to the fact that I am baptized, not to my life and my vocation but to the Man called Jesus Christ."<sup>22</sup> This is an especially important affirmation in the twenty-first century, given the pace of social and economic change. Today's college students are told to expect at least five career changes (not just job changes!) in their lifetime. To have one's sense of worth dependent on success in a specific work situation or family status is a recipe for distress. Being rooted in Jesus as the vine and nourished with baptismal waters provides a firm foundation for Christian identity, regardless of one's calling and as callings change.

The Lutheran understanding of vocation is also inseparable from the historic

<sup>19</sup>"Listen, God Is Calling," Tanzanian traditional text, trans. Howard S. Olson, in *With One Voice* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) # 712.

<sup>20</sup>See [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org) for further explanation and examples of this theological method.

<sup>21</sup>I am indebted to one of my colleagues, Dr. Lake Lambert, for this succinct observation.

<sup>22</sup>Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John [John 15:4]" (1537–1538), in *LW* 24:220.

Lutheran commitment to education. In his 1524 address, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany,” Luther called for the establishment of schools to educate both boys and girls in order to equip them to serve the needs of a changing society. Regardless of whether their primary responsibilities were in the workplace, in the public sector, or in the home, young people needed a strong foundation in languages, history, and the liberal arts so that they would be prepared to “take their own place in the stream of human events.”<sup>23</sup> Luther’s criticism of parents who prefer to set their offspring up with a good living rather than providing them with a general education is perhaps worth reviving today when a college diploma is frequently viewed as a short-term investment strategy that will eventually pay off in a better job and a bigger paycheck. Since vocation shapes our responsibilities here and now, students need to be helped to recognize their present calling precisely as students rather than to think of themselves primarily as future workers.

Christian vocation is theology for living. It informs how we earn our daily bread and how we live our daily lives. It shapes our sense of identity and our relationships with others.

*A world in need now summons us to labor, love, and give;  
To make our life an offering to God, that all may live....  
O God, who gave yourself to us in Jesus Christ your Son,  
Teach us to give ourselves each day until life’s work is done.*<sup>24</sup> ⊕

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<sup>23</sup>Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools” (1524), in *LW* 45:369.

<sup>24</sup>Frank von Christierson, “As Saints of Old,” in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 404:2, 3.