



What Luther *Didn't* Say about Vocation

The quotation is all over the net, so it must be true. Martin Luther, we are told, said this about vocation:

The maid who sweeps her kitchen is doing the will of God just as much as the monk who prays—not because she may sing a Christian hymn as she sweeps but because God loves clean floors. The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship.¹

It seemed such a tempting nugget for authors writing on vocation, as most of the writers in this issue do. At least one wanted to use it. Indeed, the editor of *Lutheran Partners*, William Decker, did use it to introduce a recent issue of that journal dedicated to the theme of “Vocation and Identity,” but, to his credit, he reported his inability to trace it to Luther himself.²

We are reminded of that other delicious “quotation” that Luther never said: “If I believed the world were to end tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today.”³ If he had only said that one, I could have used it in my editorial for the last issue on apocalyptic! But we now know that he did not. In his thorough investigation of the matter, Martin Schloemann wonders nevertheless whether the quotation is “Luther gemäß”—whether it is “appropriate” to Luther, whether he *might* have said it.⁴

¹Nowhere could I find a website that made reference to any of Luther’s works when quoting this alleged statement. Instead, the reference, if any, is to the September 5, 1994 (Labor Day), usage in “Our Daily Bread,” the daily devotional provided by Radio Bible Class; see <http://www.rbc.org/odb/odb-09-05-94.shtml> (accessed 11 August 2005).

²William A. Decker, “In Search of Quotes,” *Lutheran Partners* 20/2 (March/April 2004) 5; available also at www.elca.org/lp/0403_02.html (accessed 11 August 2005). Decker, in fact, invited help in his quest to find the saying in Luther, but received no responses (phone conversation, 7 July 2005).

³This one is ubiquitous, of course (in several variants), showing up in posters, banners, books, sermons, and websites galore (not surprisingly, for example, as one of Treelink’s “tree quotes” at www.treelink.org/linx/Quote-search.php—accessed 16 August 2005).

⁴Martin Schloemann, *Luthers Apfelbäumchen: Ein Kapitel deutscher Mentalitätsgeschichte seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994) 246–251.

Not, says Schloemann, if it assumes a life committed only to the present and not marked by a hope and longing for—indeed, an immediate expectation of—the last day, which Luther never relinquished. The quote sounds like Luther, according to Schloemann, only if it refers to a “creaturely service of neighbor and world” within a fully Christ-centered eschatological perspective.⁵

So, what about the maid sweeping to the glory of God because God loves clean floors and the shoemaker doing his Christian duty because God is interested in good craftsmanship? Decker thought that “the gist of the quote” could “come directly from the heart of this teacher and preacher of the faith,”⁶ but I’m not so sure. This does indeed sound something like other sayings of Luther, but I was suspicious at the outset because this “quote” seems altogether too slick.⁷ More important, its background notion that work is made “Christian” by singing hymns or appending little crosses seems altogether too modern. Luther’s foil for his doctrine of vocation was neither piety nor kitsch but rather the then Roman Catholic idea that only the call to the monastic life was a true “vocation,” not the call to make shoes or marry a spouse. The alleged word properly rejects the claim to monastic superiority, but it misunderstands vocation at its most crucial point. Work, it says, is pleasing to God because God likes quality work. This would be the American work-ethic version of vocation, theologically endorsing work as an end in itself. In the hands and mouth of a modern boss, good craftsmanship and clean floors (or a clean desk or a signed contract) to the glory of God could be a potent and tyrannical tool to promote the bottom line. Schloemann was right: what marks Luther’s doctrine of vocation is the insistence that the work is done in service of the neighbor and of the world. God likes shoes (and good ones!) not for their own sake, but because the neighbor needs shoes (and, as our African American sisters and brothers know, because someday we will need them to “walk all over God’s heaven”—Luther would no doubt have appreciated that eschatological perspective).

It was the slippery malleability of the “Luther” behind the invented “apple tree” quote that bothered Schloemann and that he fully documented in his book. The saying has been used to imply a Luther imprimatur on the cause of the moment, some of them good and some not so good—but all too often unconcerned with the heart of Luther’s thought: the gospel of Jesus Christ and an eschatological ethic that serves Christ in the neighbor. In my opinion, that is the problem with the apparently invented quote on vocation. It rejects a certain kind of contemporary piety only to embrace a contemporary managerial vision of work, in both cases missing the mark of Luther’s actual teaching on vocation.

⁵Ibid., 248 (my translation).

⁶Decker, “In Search of Quotes,” 5.

⁷For the record, the supposed quote does not turn up in an electronic search of either the American edition of *Luther’s Works* or, as far as I can tell, in the critical German Weimar edition (trying a variety of translations back into German). Should someone find it, I will, of course, report it, but I am convinced in advance that the context will support Luther’s fundamental understanding that vocation is in service of the neighbor.

Here, for example, is something Luther *did* say about work, whether the work of the prince or the work of the laborer:

The prince should think: Christ has served me and made everything to follow him; therefore, I should also serve my neighbor, protect him and everything that belongs to him. That is why God has given me this office, and I have it that I might serve him. That would be a good prince and ruler. When a prince sees his neighbor oppressed, he should think: That concerns me! I must protect and shield my neighbor....The same is true for shoemaker, tailor, scribe, or reader. If he is a Christian tailor, he will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor. When a Christian does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living.⁸

Vocation is a tricky notion. Rightly understood, it sets us free in Christ to give ourselves for the service of the neighbor to the glory of God. Wrongly understood, it enslaves us to the boss, who now has divine authority to press us to produce cleaner floors. God may indeed like good craftsmanship, but Christian vocation is not finally about production (though production will result), just as it is not ultimately about my own satisfaction (though it will surely satisfy);⁹ it is about the neighbor, about giving oneself to the other in love and service in the glorious freedom of the gospel. And God will welcome all our efforts to that end, however skilled or hesitant they might be.

F.J.G.

⁸Martin Luther, "Sermon in the Castle Church at Weimar" (25 October 1522, Saturday after the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 60 vols. (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–1980) 10/3:382 (my translation).

⁹To be sure, as Gustaf Wingren points out, Luther could refer to humans as coworkers and cooperators with God, recognizing "an independent ethical subject with a certain amount of free and unshackled activity"—an idea supported by the biblical creation account's recognition that human work is a gift before it becomes a curse (Gen 2–3)—but this wonderful and creative work, too, is for the sake of the other. Just as it is the neighbor who needs shoes and not God, so it is the garden that needs tilling. As Wingren notes, "Co-operation takes place in vocation, which belongs on earth, not in heaven; it is pointed toward one's neighbor, not toward God" (*Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957] 123–124). Kathryn Kleinhans gets the balance right in her article in this issue—recognizing both the value of work under God and the danger of divinizing it ("The Work of a Christian: Vocation in Lutheran Perspective," *Word & World* 25/4 [2005] 394–402).

Word & World mourns the death of our friends and colleagues

Gerhard O. Forde †August 9, 2005

Richard M. Wallace †August 30, 2005

“For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.” (1 Cor 15:22)