



# Vocation—The Necessary Differential: A Pastoral Perspective on the Auto Industry

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## CARS, PEOPLE, AND VOCATION

Whatever kind of automobile you drive—domestic, foreign, big or little, guzzler or hybrid, average or extreme, one that is old and rusting or one with that “new car” smell—when you execute a turn, the wheels on the outside of the turn actually rotate at a different speed from the wheels on the inside of the turn. You probably knew this. On the drive axle, the device that allows the wheels on the outside of the turn and those on the inside to rotate at different speeds is called the differential. That’s the thing that, when you look under your vehicle, looks like a big pumpkin on the drive axle. From the very first days of the auto industry, the folks who made cars learned that the differential is essential if the two drive wheels are to work effectively together. Absent this “pumpkin,” driving your car would be much more of a trick than a treat: turning corners would be very bumpy and the tires on both sides would wear out early and unnecessarily. Whether it is made in Detroit or China, every automobile in the world has a differential. The differential allows the wheels to cooperate rather than compete against each other.

Ever since pedestrian days, every human has had a vocation. Abram and Sarai

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were issued theirs (Gen 12:1–3); so were Samuel, Isaiah, Mary, Matthew the bean counter, that brash, calloused fisher Peter, that widow who settled for crumbs from our Lord, and that educated, well-travelled missionary Paul. Regardless of their place in history or on the pay scale, every human has a vocation, whether they hear about it or not. Through the living word and over the lips of human beings, God speaks to us and issues us a call, our vocation. As Gustaf Wingren writes, “[Humans were] created in the beginning by the creative Word, and destined to live by that which comes from the mouth of God.”<sup>1</sup> A sense of each one’s vocation makes all the difference in our daily lives. It allows humans to cooperate and to see the neighbor as gift rather than adversary. In the simplest terms, our vocation is the calling from God to follow Jesus and serve the neighbor while we have life and breath. Luther put it in these familiar terms: “For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him....He has done all this that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.”<sup>2</sup> Many of us confess that this is most certainly true. Our vocation firmly plants our feet in this world to be a blessing to our neighbors near and far; it gives us the promise that even and especially as aliens in this world we can look forward to the last day and a better “economy,” a better *oikos*, a heavenly country, “a city that has real foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

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Until that day when Jesus comes again, sinners need to work together. That can be difficult for us. Ask Cain and Abel (Gen 4)! Or interview our forebears who made bricks for Pharaoh (Exod 1:5). In more recent history, look at the Haymarket riot in Chicago in 1886, and other similar conflicts at the end of the nineteenth century, when modern industry was dawning in the land of the free. While it is certainly not unique to the automobile industry, the difficulty of working together has been particularly noticeable in that sector in America. Perhaps it is because, more so than any other nation, Americans believe their cars equal freedom. Could you imagine being without yours? For a nation of individuals who link their liberty to their drive train, private transportation trumps public. At six hundred and seventy-five motor vehicles per thousand persons, America ranks fifth in the world in vehicles per capita.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, trans. Victor C. Pogue (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002) 13.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 1162.

<sup>3</sup>International Road Federation, *World Road Statistics 2007* (Geneva: IRF, 2007). According to the IRF, only Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, and New Zealand have more motor vehicles per capita.

Where freedom—real or perceived—is at stake, anxiety and tempers tend to run hot.

Another factor that perhaps raises the temperature gauge on the American auto industry is that Detroit is the “Motor City...birthplace of the automobile.” Every fourth grader in the state of Michigan learns this, and most of them take a memorable field trip to the Henry Ford Museum.<sup>4</sup> Now that the auto industry has “grown up” and gone global, issues of birthrights and hometown turf are contested. And any time birthrights and home turf are challenged, people tend to get touchy. Again, talk with Jacob and Esau (Gen 27) or with those Nazarenes who were none too happy at the threat Jesus posed to their turf (Luke 4:28–30).

In the competitive world of the automobile industry, tensions between labor and management are inevitable. Still, regardless of my place on the pay scale, the healthier my sense of vocation, the better I am going to be at working with others and the more I will foster a climate of trust and confidence. Conversely, the weaker my sense of vocation, the more likely I am to engender a climate of suspicion and doubt. As has been all too evident, people who work together to produce cars and trucks have often found themselves polarized. Real people—many of whom sit in the pew on Sundays—become “management” and “labor,” manufacturers and suppliers. By Monday morning they become unnecessary adversaries. The drive wheels have not worked as effectively together as they might have done, and rounding corners has been bumpy at best, and too often destructive to the very stakeholders themselves. The doctrine of vocation is the essential differential if managers and hourly workers are to work well together, if auto companies and their suppliers are to cooperate.

#### WHEN THE DIFFERENTIAL IS IN PLACE, AND WHEN IT'S NOT

Peter and I met through the church. We got to know each other on the trout stream and in the car, riding to and from trout fishing. A lifelong Christian of the Lutheran stripe, Peter comes equipped with a strong sense of vocation. He is a husband, a son, and father of grown daughters. For decades, he was employed by one of what we used to call “the Big 3,” the American automotive trinity of General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler, and then by a major supplier to auto manufacturers. Peter knows the factory floor and the board room, including the dark, sharp edges of each one. While he served as a chief manager at the international level, his vocation to follow Jesus and serve his neighbor sustained him in a work environment where the gears often grind, and the wheels on the inside and outside of the turn compete rather than cooperate. Not only did Peter manage to live through the twists, bumps, and turns of a job that grinds up many; it was precisely his vocation that made him good at it—and made those with whom he worked better at their

<sup>4</sup>To understand the automobile industry in America, three essential field trips for any adult include: The Henry Ford (formerly known as the Henry Ford Museum) in Dearborn, the North American International Auto Show at Cobo Hall in Detroit every January, and the nearest automobile manufacturing plant.

jobs. Peter's sense of vocation provided the essential linkage to allow the real humans on the outside and inside of the turn to work in concert and gain traction. To his company's credit, those above Peter recognized this and progressively put him in position to influence more and more people. One particular day, driving through the automobile state of Michigan with our rods and waders in the back, we were talking about Peter's work overseas. He said, "I've come to understand that part of God's calling for me is to create jobs for people who otherwise wouldn't have them. And even as I do so, I know that these are jobs that my own children and grandchildren here in America might have had one day." Certainly many homegrown voices have argued for keeping jobs in America, and some would even call Peter unpatriotic, but it is precisely his understanding of vocation that puts him in this difficult position. In the real world, to advantage some is often to disadvantage others, and the choices are not easy. An honest sense of vocation equips people like Peter to sort out what we need—and what others need—if we are to live as citizens of Christ's kingdom while we are yet occupied in this earthly one. Just as it has for my friend Peter, a sense of vocation can help Christians steer through the potholes of lesser allegiances that come with human kingdoms and profit battles.

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A sense of vocation also makes our daily bread taste better. It helps people who make cars—and those who drive them—recognize that our work and our income are a slice of the “daily bread” that God provides.<sup>5</sup> When I know that my work and my wage or salary are part of the loaf that God provides daily to all, I am more apt to receive them with thanks and less apt to fight against my neighbor for an ever larger slice—whether I am an hourly employee or a company executive. Perhaps nothing spoils the loaf more quickly than greed and entitlement. The disparity in wages between workers and leaders in the auto industry is legendary and has been an issue in many a labor dispute. The “I never have enough; I deserve more” attitude of Americans at the top and bottom of the company, while a major driver of success, is also our Achilles' heel. It puts the brakes on cooperation and tears the loaf apart. If I come to the table with a sense of vocation, it is far more likely that my neighbor will benefit and I will leave with more than just my fill of the loaves.

A sense of calling also leads to greater ownership of work on both sides of the differential. Instead of managers saying, “Hey, that's what we pay you for,” and employees saying, “That's not my job; what do I care?” those equipped with a sense

<sup>5</sup>See Luther, *Small Catechism*, 1164.

of vocation are more apt to respond to a curve in the road by saying, “Well, if we are in this together, we all have a stake in making this work.” This shared sense of vocation tends to foster built-in accountability. When I can see the common and inherent goodness of the work that my coworkers and I do, I am far more likely to have healthy expectations for myself and hold myself accountable. Where would you find yourself more productive: in a climate of trust and confidence or one of suspicion and jealousy? It is well documented that companies in which employees at all levels see themselves as key stakeholders enjoy better safety records and are more profitable in the long run than those where the wheels work in contention with one another.

Though he was addressing the relationship between nobility and peasants in pedestrian days, four hundred years before the automobile and big business, the preacher’s simple call addressed to fellow sinners in 1537 speaks yet today to those who would hope to work well together. In his sermon on John 1:12–13, Luther says, “A nobleman acts as the peasant’s tormentor and vampire; a rich citizen bleeds a poor one; so the peasant, too, will skin and flay the townspeople.” In order to deliver his hearers from the mistreatment of our neighbor, Luther instructs us to bear in mind the judgment day. On that day, God will ask everyone, “Have you used all these gifts [I have given you] for the welfare, the betterment, the comfort of your neighbor?”<sup>6</sup>

Dick is neither a peasant nor a nobleman. He is a husband, son, and father of grown children, and for most of his adult life, he made cars. Another lifelong Lutheran, Dick worked decades on the shop floor and he understood Luther’s admonition. If a tool was needed to just the right specifications, down to a tolerance of less than 0.002 of an inch, Dick was your man. He cared about what his company produced and he appreciated his job. He was also the guy who made the shop a great place to work. Anyone who walked into the shop knew they would not only get the highest quality work from Dick, they would also get a good-humored, honest fella who made you glad you had business there.

As smoothly as the wheels can turn when a sense of vocation is present, the ride is bumpy when it is absent. There is needless wear and tear, and people grow old, stuck, and worn-out before their time. If a clear sense of vocation unites sinners, an ignorance of their vocation tears them apart—and the wheels compete rather than cooperate. Without a strong sense that they are called to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love their neighbor as themselves (Mark 12:30–31), real humans begin rapidly to define themselves not by God’s calling, but by their perceptions of what they do. In the auto industry especially, some neighbors become “hourly workers,” “labor,” and then “the exploited class,” while other neighbors become “executives,” “management,” and then “the privileged class.” Without the differential of a shared calling, the wheels fail to work together—each one spins arrogantly and believes it deserves more—

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 22, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1957) 95.

and this notion of deserving rusts into greed and bitterness. Rusty wheels fall off and get you nowhere.

I remember a visit to a particular parishioner. The ribbon of blacktop that was his driveway wove through the hardwood trees for over a hundred yards. It opened onto a clearing where a big, two-story barn/garage was set off to one side. His treasures were stored up in it. The large, comfortable, well-decorated home and its attached garage sat on the other side of the paved clearing. Inside was Gene, age fifty-four, retired. Within two days of his high school graduation he had taken a job at one of the local auto plants. With the flashy lure of overtime dollars, greed hooked this young lad and reeled him in ever more deeply. By the time Gene was twenty-three years old, he had begun counting the years, months, and days until he

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had his “thirty in” and could get out. Both he and his employers had failed to instill in him any sense of purpose in work itself, any sense of responsibility for the other. Employers and employee were simply using one another in an unhealthy system. It is sadly all too common that men and women I know from the auto plants can, on any given day, tell you the exact number of years, days, and hours until they can “walk away.” Gene had barns full of his treasures, but he himself was grumpy, bitter, just plain no fun to be around. He didn’t even enjoy being in his own castle. He was the same age as Dick and worked in the same plant, but he was old, decayed from the inside out. Whatever life was left in him, Gene had rusted it over with bitterness. Given no sense of vocation, he had needlessly worn himself out, and now was stuck in the rut into which the devil loves to see humans sink. It is not at all a coincidence that Gene wasn’t a churchgoer. Without hearing and being fed by the word, what else was left for him? Jesus himself says to us, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (John 6:53). Gene had grown fat and empty on his fill of the loaves.

The “missing differential” of vocation has taken its toll on millions of men and women at all levels in the auto industry. Without a sense of vocation to help them work for the good of their neighbor and in concert with one another, both management and labor fell into decades of greed. Today, the state of the fiscal economies in manufacturing states like Michigan is a plainly visible indicator that the bill for those decades has come due.

## HOW ARE THEY TO HEAR THEIR VOCATION?

What is a Christian congregation’s ministry to people who need to work together until Jesus returns? Vocation is a consequence and concomitant of faith,

and as that most famous pedestrian missionary and preacher Paul knew, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). At the most fundamental level, a Christian congregation’s ministry is to get the word out—to deliver God’s speech in and for the public. The Christian’s vocation is born “not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). To make this vocation known so people can live it out, God uses Christian congregations. The primary means for this are not a surprise: word and sacrament ministry—preaching and teaching, the mutual conversation of Christians. It is in the local shop of a congregation’s ministry that God turns Christ loose on hearers and fuels them with their vocation. So sermons matter. Every sermon is an opportunity to deliver Christ and his calling to people dying for a word. The font and the Lord’s Supper are two events in which Christ gets hold of every one of us—regardless of our place on the pay scale. Whatever vehicles congregations can use—Bible studies, small groups, coffee hour, website postings, and all kinds of little opportunities—these can help sinners hear and live out their vocation.

It is particularly important and most effective for congregations to get laypersons engaged in showing and telling their vocation. Just a simple glance at the math illustrates how important this is: if four hundred people show up to hear the word on any given weekend, and one pastor preaches one good sermon, then that congregation sends 401 preachers out into the neighborhood—whether to the second shift on Sunday afternoon or the corporate boardroom on Monday morning. One of the best and shortest sermons I ever heard on vocation happened when an automotive engineer was given his turn in a group of about fifteen people. The “ice breaker” question we were all asked to respond to was: “What do you do with most of your time, and what do you do with some of your time?” David’s response was simple, brief, and beautiful. He said, “I’m a full-time Christian, and I work part-time for General Motors.”

If the differential of vocation is in place among congregational leaders, this can do a great deal to help others hear their calling. To teach a sense of vocation, pastors can start with a simple, basic definition: vocation is the calling from God to follow Jesus and serve your neighbor while you have life and breath. Congregations can offer classes that focus on justification and vocation. Pastors and laypersons can visit people in their workplace—again, at all levels—ask for tours, ask them about their work and their sense of vocation, and pray with them.

Congregations still live in the world, the kingdom on the left, so understanding their vocation will not insulate parishioners from all the nasty bumps and ugly traffic of daily life. Sometimes people on opposite sides of a picket line find that their only common ground is their church. This can be sad, but it can also be tremendously powerful and provide a rare glimpse of beauty when those who sign paychecks and those who cash them worship and kneel alongside one another. Even faithful Christians can find themselves in a labor dispute. When that happens,

it is vital that pastors be in touch with both sides. At the very least, they can send a note and pray for those involved. Demonstrating a calm presence, asking good questions, and praying with and for folks has great value. Jesus did this a lot.

Every automobile in the world has a differential that helps the wheels on the drive axle work together effectively and gain traction. This world can be a very slippery place, and curves in the road come faster than ever. Sinners who are forgiven by Jesus and gifted with a clear sense of their vocation can yet expect a rough road. They can also trust that Jesus gives them exactly what they need to ride that road and to work together with one another—until their wheels wear out and they inherit the kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. ⊕

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