



Luther on Vocation

MARC KOLDEN

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The popular view of Martin Luther's teaching about Christian vocation is that it has to do with one's occupation. That is, when one is "called" to follow Christ one's occupation becomes the "calling" in which one serves God.¹ This is not a completely wrong interpretation of Luther as much as it is one-sided and incomplete. It may reflect the more general notion of vocation which has permeated much of western culture so that an occupation is referred to as one's vocation or calling without any reference at all to a call by *God*.

The loss of Luther's meaning may be due in part to Luther's interpreters, who frequently consider vocation in Luther's theology as a subtopic under the "Orders of Creation."² Here the standard treatment is to see life in this world as life under natural law, linked to various institutions in society, in which the Christian is understood to be called to service in a particular "station" or "office" or duty. In terms of activity there is said to be nothing which distinguishes the Christian's involvement in an office from that of a non-Christian.³ Again, this is not a completely wrong interpretation of Luther as much as an incomplete and finally misleading one. And in its insistence that one's calling is related to life in the *world* it retains a very important part of Luther's teaching, especially since Luther developed his understanding of vocation in opposition to the medieval Roman Catholic view. That latter view saw vocation as referring explicitly to churchly occupations, unless the term was used to refer to the general call to be a Christian.⁴

It might even be suggested that Luther's own claim that vocation is to be understood primarily in relation to creation and law is responsible for the trun-

¹See, e.g., the article by H. Echternach, "Work, Vocation, Calling," *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, ed. Julius Bodensieck (3 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1965) 3.2502-2505.

²Cf. Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), who speaks of vocation briefly in chapter 3, "Stations and Vocations (The Orders)." See also Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), in which vocation is a four-page subtopic in chapter 3, "The Natural Orders."

³See, e.g., Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, 39-40.

⁴Robert L. Calhoun, "Work and Vocation in Christian History," *Work and Vocation*, ed. John O. Nelson (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954) 82-115.

cated view of his position common today. Given the difficulty of constructing a doctrine of creation which is persuasive in our secular age, it is easy to see why a view of vocation dependent on a sense of God's ongoing creative involvement in the dynamics of history would go into eclipse. If the world is assumed to be basically godless, then the best one could do with vocation would be to consider it as a way of working for the good of others. That is no small

gain, for it is considerably better than looking at life simply in terms of autonomous humans pursuing their own personal careers with no obligations beyond their own families. Yet it hardly gets at the much more comprehensive understanding which Luther has of vocation. His view is grounded in a richer view of God's creative work and the expression of God's law as permeating creation. This whole picture needs to be recovered if we are to deal adequately with vocation.⁵

I. WINGREN'S INTERPRETATION

Probably the most important work on this topic is Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation*.⁶ Wingren relates vocation to the comprehensive structures of Luther's theology. Such a foundation allows for both a more complete understanding of Luther's view of vocation and for a more profound relation to the Christian's life in the world today. Despite the importance of Wingren's work, its influence apparently has not been widely felt among American Lutherans. Luther is still often seen in light of the pietism or quietism of later Lutheranism, and vocation functions as a conservative and protective stance toward life. The dynamic view of creation and vocation which Wingren describes is clearly foreign to the popular American Lutheran mentality.⁷

Wingren's interpretation moves along the following lines. Vocation belongs to our situation between baptism and the final resurrection—a situation in which there are two kingdoms (earth and heaven, in Luther's terminology), two contending powers (God and the devil), two antagonistic components within the Christian person (the old self and the new self), and when Christians are involved in constant struggle. Vocation is our calling in our situation in life, through which we serve God's creative work by being under the law. It is the place in which the person of faith chooses sides in the ongoing combat between God and Satan. The "old self" must bear vocation's cross as long as life on earth lasts and the battle against the devil continues. After death there will be a new kingdom free from the cross, heaven will take the place of earth, and the "new self" will be raised from the dead.⁸

In this summary "vocation" refers to more than mere dedicated service in one's occupation. It refers above all to the whole theater of personal, communal, and historical relationships in which one lives. The eschatological situation of

⁵Gustaf Wingren, "The Church and Christian Vocation," *This Is the Church*, ed. Anders Nygren (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1952) 281-293.

⁶Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957 [Swedish original published 1942]).

⁷See, e.g., Merton P. Strommen et al., *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), chapter 5, esp. p. 103; chapter 6, p. 150; chapter 8, pp. 181-182; and the summary in chapter 12, esp. pp. 286-92.

⁸Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* 250-251; also xi, 8, 91.

struggle and ambiguity, the sense of the need for the Christian's sinful self to be put to death within and by the demands of daily life in vocation, the choice involved in life lived in the freedom of being called by Christ, and the way in which this view holds creation and redemption together if it is to make any sense at all—these themes give a most promising basis for understanding Luther's position. They should make it possible to include both his radical emphasis on Christian freedom and his insistence on the depth of human sinfulness, one or the other of which is often muted in discussions of vocation.⁹ At the same time, the distance between

Luther's view of the world in this summary and most present understandings of reality points to the challenge involved in retrieving his doctrine of vocation.

II. VOCATION AND LAW

It can be argued with good reason that the most basic distinction in Luther's theology is that between law and gospel. This distinction is made repeatedly in his "Lectures on Galatians (1535)," which is probably the most comprehensive single presentation of this theology.¹⁰ When one begins to understand Luther in terms of the law-gospel distinction, one of the first points that needs to be seen is that of the two uses of the law: the political or civil (first) use and the theological or accusing (second) use. As far as salvation is concerned for Luther, it is the law's second or accusing use that is crucial, for it reveals our sin to us, convicts us, crushes us, and finally puts us to death so that the gospel can do its life-giving work of forgiveness, liberation, restoration, and resurrection to new life.¹¹ It is this dialectic which underlies Luther's understanding of justification by faith apart from works of law, and it is this use of the law that has been called the most important use.

To stress the importance of the second use of the law should not lead us to neglect its first use. In the commentary on Galatians Luther praises the law in its first use as "the most excellent of all things in the world."¹² Here we see the eschatological tension between earth and heaven or between this life and eternal life which Wingren sees as so important for Luther. On earth, the law (in its first use—guiding, compelling, leading us to good works, coercing, protecting, punishing) is a most excellent thing. It is the basis for a just and wholesome society. It is only where the law intrudes "in heaven" (that is, into our relationship with God in terms of our eschatological salvation) that Luther's harsh criticisms of the law apply. Here it functions in a different way (in its second use—revealing our self-centeredness, our attempts to rely on our own works rather than on God's free grace, our pride, and our rebellion against God). As

⁹Donald Heiges, *The Christian's Calling* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958), sees the aspect of freedom lived out in vocation, but the sense of sin demanding a death of the self in vocation is largely missing. I have tried to sketch a more balanced view in my *Called by the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), chapters 7 and 11.

¹⁰*Luther's Works* (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76) 26.117, 126, 313. For the importance of this work see the judgment of Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1962) chapter 4.

¹¹*LW* 26.122, 148, 309-310, 345.

¹²*Ibid.*, 5.

long as the law remains "on earth" in our social relationships to our families, work, nation, etc., it is not only appropriate but necessary for the Christian and for all persons.¹³

What remains to be said concerns what happens to the law when the Christian hears the gospel and faith is created. Luther surely sees Christ as the end of the law (Rom 10:4), but not in the sense that the Antinomians took this—that there is no law at all for the Christian. It is more accurate to say that the law is ended in terms of its condemning voice terrifying the conscience of the sinner; the gospel quiets that voice.¹⁴ John Calvin and some later Lutherans speak of a "third use" of the law, a special use only for the Christians who have been reborn and forgiven and now may be thought to keep the law willingly.¹⁵ It is difficult to find this in Luther, however, primarily because for him the Christian remains throughout life a sinner—forgiven, but still a

sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*—at the same time righteous and sinful). If this is the case, the Christian will still need the law, but only in the same way as everyone else does—in its first and second uses. This is so because the Christian will not yet keep the law willingly inasmuch as he or she will still be under the power of sin and thus will need to be both compelled and accused, again and again.¹⁶

Yet to stop there would be to ignore the newness which the gospel brings: a new relationship to Christ, a new presence of the Spirit, and a new freedom from the self which faith involves. Faith spontaneously springs into acts of love, according to Luther. It does not let us remain “in heaven” but returns us to earth. This is another way of saying that the gospel frees us from the law for the law. The gospel returns us to the law; it frees us to use the Law for the good of our neighbor. The gospel allows us to see the law as God’s good will for us. The law in its first use gives content to our acts of love, and the Christian knows through the gospel that the demands and needs experienced in life are the pressures of God through the law for service toward our neighbors.¹⁷

Finally, Luther never lets us forget that both uses of the law will always be present for the Christian—as long as the sinful self remains. Even in our obedience, even in our faith acting in love, the law will always also accuse us, revealing our sin, convicting us, and putting us to death. This is God’s alien work, which serves his proper work of saving us by the gospel.¹⁸ The gospel without the law would be cheap grace; the law without the gospel would be only bondage.

III. BEYOND OCCUPATIONALISM

Luther’s understanding of vocation follows from this way of thinking about the

¹³Ibid. On the first use, 6, 14, 116-117, 183, 308; on the second use, 309-310, 313, 365.

¹⁴Ibid., 157, 276, 306-315, 344.

¹⁵Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 2.360-361 (II, vii, 12). For a brief discussion of the third use of the law in Lutheranism, see Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, 294-303.

¹⁶This judgment is nearly a consensus, represented by persons such as Althaus, Elert, Wingren, also Gerhard Ebeling and Wilfried Joest.

¹⁷LW 26.6, 14, 35, 116-117, 306-315, 334.

¹⁸LW 2.134n.

Christian faith. His most basic assumption in this regard is that the world is God’s good creation, not only in terms of its original coming into being but especially in terms of God’s ongoing creative work in upholding and directing all that is and in constantly doing new things.¹⁹ Here is where the first use of the law finds its place: it is God’s will structured into life itself and clarified in the commandments, in the teachings of Jesus, and in the words of the prophets and apostles.²⁰

Just as God’s redemptive act in becoming incarnate affirms that salvation is not an escape from creation but a restoration and fulfillment of it, so also the Christian life will not be an escape from creaturely life but a calling to it. The call to follow Christ leads not to any religious vocation removed from daily life, but instead it transforms the attitude and understanding one has of the situation in which one already is.²¹

Luther began his thinking in this regard with 1 Corinthians 7:20: “Everyone should

remain in the state in which he was called.” This was interpreted initially against the prevailing idea that one had to leave one’s previous way of life and become a member of a religious order or a priest in order to serve God truly. Against this Luther claimed that a person is already in avocation:

How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or station; you have always been a husband or wife, or boy or girl, or servant. Picture before you the humblest estate. Are you a husband, and you think you have not enough to do in that sphere to govern your wife, children, domestics, and property so that all may be obedient to God and you do no one any harm? Yea, if you had five heads and ten hands, even then you would be too weak for your task, so that you would never dare to think of making a pilgrimage or doing any kind of saintly work.²²

The call comes from Christ, but it locates one in a calling in the creation doing works for one’s neighbor. As is clear from the above quotation, “vocation” refers not only to one’s occupation but to all one’s relationships, situations, contexts, and involvements (including, of course, one’s occupation, if one is employed). It is true that Luther often speaks about specific occupations, but the purpose in doing so is not to restrict vocation to occupation but to affirm that even the most mundane stations are places in which Christians ought to live out their faith; such work serves other people, unlike religious vocations which serve no one but the person involved (and not even that person, if it is seen that salvation comes not by pious works).²³

Probably the vocation the early Luther speaks about most often is marriage. He saw it as the most natural and creaturely calling there is. It applies to

¹⁹LW 45.317-337; also 6.6-9. Cf. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 8, 159-160.

²⁰See, e.g., LW 45.317-318 as well as Luther’s constant insistence that God institutes the stations and offices by which society is maintained. See also Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, chapter 2.

²¹LW 45.41-43. See also *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. Theodore Tappert (4 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 3.13-20.

²²*The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. John Lenker (10 vols.; Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands Co., 1905) 10.242; hereafter cited as *Writings of Luther* (Lenker).

²³*Ibid.*, 10.239-249. See also 7.267-310.

all people because males and females were made to complement each other. It is part of God’s will in order to populate the earth. And it is seen as the premier way of affirming the goodness of God’s creative working. Initially, this was said in opposition to the practice of celibacy, but it also remained an important theme in Luther’s later years. Even prior to his own marriage, Luther strongly favored it for most people, even though he was quite realistic about the difficulties of married life. But faith in Christ is said to reveal to husband, wife, children, and others in the household that this state also is a calling from God, and as such it is to be treated as God’s gift to them, his creatures.²⁴

As the mention of marriage shows, rooting one’s calling in the institutions of creation gives extreme concreteness. Here Luther speaks of “office” or “station”; these terms include occupation, but they also include one’s other relationships. Thus, at any given time one will have

avocation that involves many different offices or stations: child, spouse, parent, student, employer or employee, citizen, community member, etc. Luther uses the image of the body with many members from Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 to speak about society and not only about the church; in society each one has a calling that is part of the whole. While each calling is different, none is to be despised as less important or exalted as more important. In every calling that serves the good of the neighbor one can serve God if one fulfills one's duties faithfully.²⁵

IV. VOCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION

The strengths of Luther's position for seeing all of life in relationship to God are apparent. Many interpreters have drawn out the implications of vocation for Christian obedience in terms of "natural law."²⁶ According to this approach, the church is closely aligned with society and with all its people—not only Christians—since the correctness of laws and mores can be known apart from faith in God.

The possible dangers of vocation understood only in these terms quickly come to mind, however. There is a static and conservative side to the idea of natural law that has been revealed in many traditional societies. Whether in Lutheran or Catholic expressions, tying church and society together in terms of natural law has usually meant that the status quo is held to be divinely instituted. Conversely, any movements for change are considered to be revolutions or "chaos" and are judged to be against God rather than against unjust or anachronistic forms.

A second possible danger of understanding vocation only in relation to law in its first use (correlated to natural law) is that both human sin and divine forgiveness tend to be separated from life in society. Sin will be seen as largely a

²⁴*Selected Writings* 3.13-29. *LW* 45.41-43.

²⁵*LW* 45.100; *Writings of Luther* (Lenker) 10.249.

²⁶Luther himself spoke of "natural law," of course; see, e.g., *LW* 45.127, and the note citing Melancthon's definition: "A natural law is a common judgment to which all men alike assent, and therefore one which God has inscribed upon the soul of each man." See also P. Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, chapter 2, for a typical interpretation of Luther along these lines. For a quite different interpretation, see Gustaf Wingren, *Credo* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), chapter 2.

matter of individual morality in terms of whether one acts honestly or obediently in one's occupation or family, but it may be less stressed in terms of one's social or political acts or failures to act. Forgiveness is then in danger of being thought of only as a verdict rendered on the individual apart from the social context. Perhaps the problem is that law is seen here in the abstract rather than as God's will manifested in the needs of society, as Luther would have seen it.

Einar Billing accepted the view that Luther's doctrine of vocation left us in such a predicament, and he sought to reinterpret vocation primarily in terms of redemption rather than creation and law. He defined redemption as the forgiveness of sins, though not merely as a verdict but as God coming to be united with persons and motivating them to be his co-workers on earth. There is much to be commended in Billing's view, and it does call attention to an important part of Luther's thought. But Billing leaves out Luther's eschatological framework almost completely, and thus he also downplays the persistence of sin in the Christian's life. In his view vocation tends to be a special obedience for the Christian which largely omits Luther's idea

of the “cross” in vocation which puts to death the old self; the cross is limited to sacrificial love for the neighbor, in Billing’s view.²⁷

Wingren’s interpretation is more adequate because it reminds us of the actual connections which Luther himself makes in the doctrine of vocation between creation and redemption. As Wingren interprets Luther, vocation is related to both law and gospel, not just to one or the other, and to both uses of the law, not only the first.²⁸

Luther speaks of the work of the law (second use) as putting us to death, and he says that this is the way that God carries out our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. According to Luther the Christian “dies daily” (is “drowned through daily repentance”, as the Small Catechism puts it). The idea of daily dying has often been spiritualized, to the effect that dying is only understood metaphorically as being penitent for sin. Yet the more realistic emphasis to the effect that each day we actually die a bit seems equally true to Luther, because he also thinks of the eventual physical death of the old sinful self when he uses the phrase “dying daily.”²⁹

Where does this dying happen? In one’s vocation, in which the “cross” of family, hard work, demanding times, etc., gradually (or more suddenly) puts us to death. In addition to being our participation as co-workers in God’s ongoing creative activity (according to the law in its first use), our vocation is also the location of God’s sanctifying work of mortifying the flesh, of putting to death the sinful self (the work of the law in its second use); all of this is so that on the last day only the self that is righteous in Christ will live.³⁰

²⁷Einar Billing, *Our Calling* (Rock Island: Augustana Book Concern, 1951). On Billing, see G. Wingren, “The Church and Christian Vocation.”

²⁸For an excellent summary, see G. Wingren, “The Concept of Vocation—Its Basis and Its Problems,” *Lutheran World* 15 (1968) 87-95.

²⁹See G. Wingren’s discussion, *Luther on Vocation*, 53-63, and the many references there on this complex point. Cf. *LW* 45.17-49, also Vilmos Vajta, *Lutheran Worship* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958) 169 (note 23 and references).

³⁰The most succinct statement of this point, with references to Luther, is in G. Wingren, “The Church and Christian Vocation.”

What is especially important here is that creation and redemption are held together. The same acts of love that the new self, born in faith, does spontaneously in response to the gospel are those acts (of love!) which the law demands—and the old self needs that law. And for Luther the actions are set firmly in our vocations. Vocation without gospel is only drudgery or condemnation, for then the purpose of the law as love for the neighbor will not be seen. However, love is drudgery only for the old self. The gospel invites us to see our vocation as a concrete way of expressing our faith—not as a limitation on love but as a channel for it.³¹

This all depends on the dynamic notions of vocation and even of the orders of creation present in Luther’s thought. In the distinction which he makes between person and office, Luther uses it not only to justify a person doing things in a given office that no one would do as an individual (e.g., to do the work of an executioner) but also to allow for disobedience against a person who is not filling the office justly (as when he counsels soldiers not to obey a prince who commands them to fight in an unjust cause).³² The order of government and the office of government leader are not to be identified only with one form of carrying out these functions. Luther recognizes criteria which would reject certain forms.³³

In our day this could mean that involvement in movements for social change might be interpreted precisely as a way of preserving and correcting the order of government, just as participation in democratic elections would be a valid way of changing the person holding an office. Likewise, in our more fluid social situation, seeking to move from one place in a social structure to another could be seen as a legitimate and even necessary aspect of vocation (e.g., living in accordance with new civil rights legislation). The difference for the Christian is that such decisions and involvement would be approached in terms of service to the neighbor. In addition, Luther's view of the pervasiveness of sin would serve as a critical and corrective principle of both persons and institutions.

The Christian would have no edge in terms of innate goodness over non-believers, since all persons are to be understood as constantly created good and constantly sinning. Yet, in terms of understanding that situations and demands are aspects of God's ongoing creative work, the Christian might have a better insight into what would be appropriate actions.³⁴ Moreover, the Christian would have a basis for understanding the redemptive importance of the crosses of vocation—that they are to be borne and not rejected, not out of a resigned passivity nor for the sake of self-hatred, but in obedience to God's way of freeing the new self which is “in Christ.”

V. OUR VOCATION

A great deal needs to be done in order to rejuvenate the idea of Christian vocation. If these thoughts lead us to return to Wingren's masterful work, and if that

³¹*Writings of Luther* (Lenker) 10.242-45. LW 45.100.

³²LW 46.102-103, 130.

³³LW 45.93-100. The criteria have to do with opposing evil and injustice done to one's neighbor.

³⁴Gustaf Wingren, *Gospel and Church* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964) 113-117.

in turn leads us to a new Concern for Luther's theology of vocation, much might be gained. Such a view of vocation—set in the struggles between this age and the age to come, between God and evil, and within the believer—may be jarring to North American Christians. It might have made better sense during the Great Depression or World War II, when the lives of all Americans were affected. In more recent struggles, such as those for civil rights and peace, it seems as if the majority is not involved. They (we) pursue our careers and families and keep our institutions alive almost as ends in themselves. Vocations are used not in service to the God of peace and justice but as “dugouts”³⁵ of security and escape. True, God may be served also by those who are selfishly seeking only their own profit, but much good is omitted by such people as well.

If we read Luther with a naive literalness when he speaks of the Christian's calling to family, work, and citizenship, then we might justify our modern irresponsible conformity. But in his day those were controversial words; they were the antithesis of the official Christian position, and they turned upside down many of the structures of society (cf. the destruction of much of the educational apparatus when the monasteries and cloisters were emptied). The need of the neighbor—and the neighbor as the one with the greatest need—was Luther's criterion for making the calling a response to the God Who is doing new things, not a means of protection for oneself and one's own group. That criterion could hardly be used to justify a way of life oriented merely toward surviving the coming lean years.

“How can you say you have no calling?” Luther might ask us. “Are you not in a position to withhold taxes for nuclear weapons or at least to oust the politicians who plan for war? Are you not in the midst of luxuries for which you have no real need? Are you not confronted with glorious opportunities for sacrifice in a way no people on earth have ever been before? If you had five heads and ten hands, you would still not have enough to meet such possibilities.”

Defining vocation as occupation allows us to restrict it largely to self-serving actions (unless we are in some of the privileged service occupations, and even here the rewards are greatest for ourselves). Seeing vocation as the situation in history and society in which we find ourselves enlarges it almost beyond our strength. But responding to such a calling will surely allow God to sanctify us and empty us so that Christ will be all in all.

³⁵Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1950) 190.