



Healthy but Not Well: Reflections on Vocation and Wellness

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Martin Luther's understanding of vocation is far more comprehensive than most people realize. It includes all dimensions of life, including the need to care for our mental and physical health. However, in our time, care for self has become a mantra and a billion-dollar business. When it becomes separated from a robust view of vocation, it can easily degenerate into selfishness. In this article I will argue that Luther's understanding of what it means to be called into self-care provides a necessary corrective to a culture obsessed with wellness and points the way to an understanding of life rooted in faith and turned outward toward the neighbor.

I will begin with a focus on Luther's own context and provide an overview of his understanding of vocation. Far too often in the church it seems that discussions about vocation are closely confined to the world of work. Nothing could be further from Martin Luther's own vision of what it means to have a calling in life. He made a radical move in breaking with the hierarchical models of the late medieval church. The latter taught that vocations were limited to the monk, nun, and priest. In other words, they took seriously Jesus's admonition to leave all behind and follow him. By taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, they believed

The modern pursuit of physical wellness has become, for some, a dangerous obsession with ideals of physical prowess that actually give way to impossible states of being. Only through the transformative love of God that Luther champions can we find true wellness through the community gathered in and through that love.

they had status in God's eyes that was lacking for those in the "world," trapped as others were by obligations of family, work, and keeping order in society.

Luther's theological insights created a massive rupture in that traditional view of vocation.¹ The notion that human works—even noble ones—do nothing to boost a person's status before God meant that everyone has vocation, not just clerics and monastics. The humble work of a midwife, baker, or father was just as important as fasting and praying in the cloister. Indeed, Luther had significant doubts about the viability of the monastic life because so much of its energy was directed toward heaven. Above all, for Luther, faith in the crucified and risen Jesus (a trust enabled by the Holy Spirit) is what gives us "status" before God. Our works are now directed toward creation and neighbors near and far. So everyone has vocation, and we are called "24/7/365." All of life now flows from the fountain of God's goodness, through us in our callings, and out to our neighbors and the created order.

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We need to give our discussion more focus at this point. The issue for us is the calling to care for ourselves, our bodies, and our minds. Are there insights from Luther on this topic that might help us in communities of faith today? A work that comes immediately to mind is his popular *The Freedom of a Christian*. It is one of Luther's most beloved writings, went through many editions in the sixteenth century, and continues to be an entry point for people who study the reformer today. It was written in 1520, the year before his dramatic appearance before the Diet of Worms, where his excommunication was confirmed. He meant it to be an accessible work that summarized the basics of the faith.

The first part of *Freedom* is devoted to how God's love flows through his Word (Christ) and creates faith in people.² Included here is the magnificent description of the "great exchange" whereby Christ in an unfathomable act of love swaps his righteousness, forgiveness, and peace for his beloved ones' regrets, guilt, and anxiety. This love then flows through us out into the world of the neighbor. It is the second part of the treatise that is of special interest for us. Before getting to neighbor and creation, Luther is careful to note that this river of love flows over us as individuals.³

¹ For much of this section on Luther's understanding of vocation see Mark D. Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

² Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, ed. and trans. Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 49–70.

³ Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 71–79.

Luther's understanding of vocation means that God turns us "inside out." In other words, a genuine *metanoia* occurs as our grace-empowered faith moves into the world. This movement outward begins with a calling to take care of ourselves. There is little doubt that this section of *The Freedom of a Christian* is influenced by Luther's own lengthy experience in the monastery. Monks were warned that the body harbored desires that conflicted with the soul's desire for union with God. So Luther counsels the need for "moderate discipline" over the body via the traditional practices of fasting, prayer, and labor.⁴ None of these things are ends in themselves but rather serve as devices so that the Holy Spirit might engraft us more deeply into Christ and thereby free us for love of the neighbor.

Luther was well acquainted with the idea that these bodily practices could easily cross the line into self-justification. He later believed that his zealous pursuit of God's righteousness in the monastery caused him to do permanent harm to his health.⁵ So he counsels that every person has to discern the limits of the disciplines they observe. While it is necessary to "harness" the body and its desires, we must also be careful not to go to excess because it could threaten our mental health.

So, what does any of this have to do with the modern pursuit of wellness? Seen within the parameters of vocation, the goal of self-care is to equip the body to be of service to others. Luther recognizes that we move out into our callings with our actual *bodies*. In the monastery he tended to get stuck at this point because fasting, prayer, and work were means to gain merit and earn righteousness. His new insight into the nature of Christ's love means that any notion of divine reward for human effort has been eliminated. Now my callings as a parent, sibling, citizen, worker, and church member often require a certain level of physical and mental health. (From my own experience I have discovered it takes a fair amount of agility to accompany a three-year-old to a playground—it is not a task for those who, for whatever reason, are not able to climb slides and push swings!) Luther has "secularized" health and made the neighbor's need the gauge for how we are to treat ourselves.

It is obvious that Luther's notion of vocation, with its understanding of God as active and alive, working in a hidden way through our callings to uphold and preserve creation, is not a commonly held point of view in our time. As Max Weber and many others have noted, our world has become "disenchanted." God recedes further and further into the heavens (and, for some, ceases to exist), as any kind of active divine involvement in the earthly realm gives way to a personal and social existence that must be navigated without help from above. Charles Taylor states that we have moved from a framework of a "porous" self, or one that could be influenced by spiritual forces (both good and malign), to a "buffered" self that is impervious to external influences.⁶

⁴ Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 71–72.

⁵ Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017), 42.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25–43.

What does all this mean for our theme? It points to the way we human beings are poorly equipped to handle matters involving our basic worth and identity. We no longer have some type of sacred canopy above us, but our interior lives are still susceptible to guilt, fear, and anxiety. So we are thrown back on ourselves to figure it out. We now turn to our contemporary landscape and its tendency to focus on health for its own sake. As we shall see, when the self, with its limitless desires and insecurities, becomes the measure for what it means to be “well,” the door opens unto a world of shame and guilt that is often manipulated by corporate greed. I think there is plenty of documentation to support this claim: We may be healthy but we sure aren’t well.

Let me begin this section by stressing that this is not some screed against practices that can lead to good health. I watch my diet and exercise regularly. I still enjoy a good endorphin kick after a run. I try to heed the call to love God with heart, soul, mind, and self. For example, in my vocation as a teacher I know that if things aren’t well with my physical health, then everything else suffers as well. Lack of exercise means less energy for my classroom and less clarity in my mind. So the body-mind nexus must be tended to. And there is no “right” way to do it or one size that fits all. However, when health becomes *the* focus in life, that around which everything else revolves, then we need to be reminded that health is pursued in service of our callings and not as an end in itself.

In their book *The Wellness Syndrome*, Carl Cederström and André Spicer note the ways that “wellness” in our culture has become an ideology. The underlying cultural assumption is that of the autonomous self—that is, a self that is solely responsible for creating the future it will eventually have.⁷ When this is applied to matters of health, this puts us in charge of our well-being, both physical and mental. Discipline now becomes the watchword. Everything gets quantified, from steps to calories to pounds lost and gained. The objects of our strivings often include unattainable weights and subjective but illusive measures of happiness. And that is part of the point. We never reach the goal, so we are always susceptible to new marketing pitches for diets, coaching, exercise machines that promise to get us there. Once on the wellness treadmill, we get strapped in and it is very difficult to get off. And that is part of the genius of the entire design.

Most concerning, however, are the costs exacted by this ideology. First of all, if we are autonomous agents solely responsible for our health, then what does that mean for those who are not healthy? Do overweight people become bad people? Are people with ailments like diabetes or heart disease worthy of our care and concern? After all, where did they think all that salt and sugar would lead? Are smokers not only caught up in a bad habit but also worthy of our moral censure? How about that line of cars at the Dunkin’ Donuts drive-up? I sure thank God that I’m not like *those* people!⁸

⁷ Carl Cederström and André Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 6.

⁸ Cederström and Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, 32–61

David Zahl, in his fine book *Seculosity*, relates a funny story by the comedian Jim Gaffigan. Gaffigan runs into a friend at McDonald's. They are both embarrassed by being seen there. The friend tells Gaffigan he is just there to use the ATM. The comedian, caught off guard, says he is there to meet a prostitute. Anything, of course, but eat the food! Nothing could be further outside "our" system of moral values than a Big Mac and fries.⁹

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Second, this way of thinking takes a toll on mental health. If the "perfect human" is always held out before us but is forever beyond our grasp, we inevitably feel guilt and shame for not measuring up to the ideal. There are generally two things that happen with guilt and shame. One possibility is to simply double down or work harder. So we go to the gym more often. We become ever more watchful of our diets. We vow to be even more "mindful" and schedule fifteen more minutes a day for meditation. This might even make us more productive, and our employer will probably applaud our efforts (as long as we still do the work), but a sculpted body with a low BMI is something few achieve.¹⁰

The more likely outcome is that we succumb to guilt and shame because life itself inevitably intrudes through illness, injury, or even death. In her book *The Gospel of Wellness: Gyms, Gurus, Goop, and the False Promise of Self-Care*, Rina Raphael details her experience with a Peloton fitness instructor called Ally Love, who hosts something called *Sundays with Love*. Raphael says Love, outfitted in purple shorts and sports bra, is "beautiful" and "hard-bodied," and that she draws thousands of viewers to her weekend show. Moreover, she has an inspirational personal story involving her recovery from a serious accident. Raphael underlines that Peloton and various instructors like Love are advocates for something more than exercise. Indeed, faith claims are being made. The vow is to actually build a better self, create community, and use fitness to create unity in the world. The CEO of Peloton even noted that with the decline of organized religion, there was still a need for community and ritual. The remedy is obvious—hop on the bike and tune in to an inspirational workout.¹¹

Raphael's own story provides an interesting twist in her account of the wellness movement. She was fully invested in maximizing her health, but then her father died, and she found that the practices of self-care did little to assuage her

⁹ David Zahl, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance Became Our New Religion and What to Do about It* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2019), 121.

¹⁰ Cederström and Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, 9–31.

¹¹ Rina Raphael, *The Gospel of Wellness: Gyms, Gurus, Goop, and the False Promise of Self-Care* (New York: Henry Holt, 2022), 93–96.

deep grief. She didn't need exercise, but now she felt horrible for failing at the "program." Rather, she needed consoling, and it was clear that *Sundays with Love* wasn't going to provide that. Instead, to her own surprise, Raphael returned to her Jewish faith. It was the synagogue and its sense of community, as well as the saying of kaddish (the prayer for mourning), that gradually provided a sense of balance and purpose in her life.¹²

Let's now move from the modern obsession with wellness back to the first century and the encounter that Jesus had with an extreme form of illness, leprosy. Toward the end of the book of Luke we read that he is in the region of Samaria and is approached by ten men who have this dreaded disease that not only disfigured people but also ostracized them from society. The lepers plead with Jesus to be merciful to them, and he heals them. He then instructs them to show themselves to the priests so that they can be certified as worthy to reenter normal life. We are then told that of the ten men now healed, only one returns, "praising God" and throwing himself down at Jesus's feet while giving thanks for his miraculous recovery. Along with marveling at the ingratitude of the other nine, Jesus addresses the healed man before him: "Get up and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11–19).

A small detail sometimes lost in this story is that while all ten lepers were healed, Jesus says that only one has been made well—the man who had faith—the one who returned and gave thanks. It is clear that all ten men were restored to health—a remarkable gift, given the horrors of a disease like leprosy. But only one was literally "saved" (sozo in Greek) or made well. Jesus is in no way denigrating or minimizing the importance of physical health. But this story also seems to underline that physical health alone does not make us well.

We began this article with a discussion of vocation. Using the insights of Luther, we tried to show that the legitimate call to self-care only makes sense within a landscape that includes a larger community. Unfortunately, an entire industry has now grown up under the rather innocent-sounding goal of wellness promotion. And it is aided and abetted by the spirit of an age that has put the self at the center and banished God to the edges of life. But the ends of this entire endeavor need to be subject to greater scrutiny. The self simply cannot bear the weight we put on it. If taken too seriously, modern views of wellness lead down a path of guilt and shame. Moreover, it often leads to facile moral judgments of others based on the food they consume and the way they look.

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¹² Raphael, *The Gospel of Wellness*, 117–19.

There is a better way to think about what it means to be well! It involves expanding our horizons and recognizing that the love of God in Christ Jesus calls us to move beyond the borders of our own bodies and into the world of our neighbors near and far. ⊕

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