



Vocation and Wellness: Baptism and Everyday Neighbors

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Scandinavian creation theology seeks to recover Luther's theology of creation, particularly its understanding of vocation as lived out in the estates of everyday life, civil society, and political action. "In the program of Scandinavian creation theology we find elaborated an argument for a strong and affirmative view of everyday life as the third space of society, mediating between the political government and the particular life of the church."¹ Christian existence in the world finds its primary meaning and purpose in ordinary life and everyday relationships. This is the domain of God's created goodness, where vocation is embodied.

In *The Ethical Demand*, Knud E. Løgstrup grounds the human relation to God in relation to the neighbor.

According to the proclamation of Jesus it is at the point of my relation to the neighbor that God determines his own relation to me, then God, through his relation to me, must also be doing something decisive with

¹ Niels Henrik Gregersen, Bengt Kristensson Uggla, and Trygve Wyller, eds., *Reformation Theology for a Post-Secular Age: Løgstrup, Prenter, Wingren, and the Future of Scandinavian Creation Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 19.

Drawing on the theological work of Scandinavian Lutheran theologians such as Gustaf Wingren and Knud Løgstrup, this article examines the relationship between vocation and personal wellness, seeing them as reciprocal expressions of living out our baptism calling.

respect to the neighbor. All the while God is determining his relation to me [God] is also caring for that other person, the neighbor.²

Løgstrup contends there is an implicit demand in every interpersonal encounter, an ethical demand. In every instance, we are confronted with a decision whether to exercise power to serve the neighbor or to serve ourselves.³ This demand must be addressed with “insight, imagination, and understanding.”⁴

Gustaf Wingren summons theology, and thereby Christian existence in the world, to return from its “flight from creation.” This entails rejoining the biblical understanding of creation to the practices of everyday life.

Masses of actions which people have performed over the centuries are independent of the Christian faith in that they were carried out in the service of life by Christians and non-Christians alike. These include caring for one’s child and working for one’s living. . . . The gospel does not add anything new to our everyday store of knowledge, and yet the actions within our everyday spheres are not situated beyond the scope of God; on the contrary, they are gifts of the Creator of the same type as rain and sun.⁵

This conviction reestablishes the significance of the first article and challenges Christians to recalculate the value of everyday life as the primary realm of Christian existence.

The command to neighborliness belongs at the heart of Jesus’s teaching: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:39). The ethical demand placed upon us by the neighbor cannot, however, be resolved by following biblical injunctions. This contrasts dramatically with theocratic efforts to establish biblical law as binding for all society.⁶ “It is to the needs of the neighbor that we must respond, and these needs cannot be anticipated in detail in the Bible.”⁷ This elevates the role of conscience and ethical responsibility for evaluating actions carried out in everyday relationships with neighbors.

Trusting in God and our “consequent willingness to be at God’s disposal for service to [the] neighbor, is the purpose of Creation, and therefore the purpose in every birth.”⁸ He later states:

² Knud E. Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Theodor I. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 4.

³ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 56–57.

⁴ Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*, 22–23.

⁵ Gustaf Wingren, *The Flight from Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971), 49–50.

⁶ Keri Ladner, “The Quiet Rise of Christian Dominionism,” *The Christian Century*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/quiet-rise-christian-dominionism>. Cf. Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 13–15, on the pervasiveness of Christian nationalism.

⁷ Gustaf Wingren, *Credo: The Christian View of Faith and Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), 59.

⁸ Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961), 94.

The power which activates them is the power of the Creator, and however eagerly [people] may throw themselves into their performance, they are in fact God's dealings with the world—birth, feeding, finding shelter, etc.⁹

Wingren operates with a strong sense of divine concurrence (*concursum dei*). The providence of God is at work through human acts of serving neighbors.

For Christians, the sacrament of baptism is the origin of vocation. Through baptism we become members of a diaconate, “the daily service of all the baptized.”

But the primary factor which gives rise to service is *baptism*. . . . Every baptized Christian is a deacon, even though his service consists in the simplest of daily tasks for [the neighbor]. The Church must give heed to this expression of service, if it is not to lose what has been an essential aspect of its work among [humanity] from the very beginning. . . . The Reformers also preached, but instead of healing they kept emphasizing vocation, or quite simply [one's] place of work, as the sphere in which baptism is to be carried into effect.¹⁰

This means the church is primarily a ministry by the laity with baptism as “a sacrament that is opened to daily life and the service of our neighbor, and it is worked out in daily death and resurrection.”¹¹ Under the law, we are held accountable for the welfare of the neighbor in daily life; according to the gospel, we are set free for our vocation on behalf of neighbors.

How are the baptized equipped for this vocation of neighbor love? At worship we are formed for service, then sent back to our worldly vocation. “Coming out of worship today the worshipper may instead turn . . . thoughts to the decline of family life, the problems of teenagers in the neighborhood, or the intrusion of the means of mass communication wherever [one] turns.”¹² Later Wingren continues:

The Church is at work wherever its members are engaged in their various callings, each living the life of *baptism* in [one's] own occupation. But these separate individuals are also bound together in a unity through being members of the same body and being vivified by the same blood which flows through each of them. The function of the Lord's day is to refashion this unity and give substance to the life of baptism in “the acts which follow,” notably in the preaching of the Gospel and the administrations of the Lord's Supper.¹³

⁹ Wingren, *Creation and Law*, 104.

¹⁰ Gustaf Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 160.

¹¹ Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, 186.

¹² Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, 226.

¹³ Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, 240, with reference to the work of Oscar Cullmann on early Christian worship.

The goal of salvation is, in Wingren’s phrase, “becoming human again.”¹⁴ “Baptism makes [one] truly human and not just a member of a particular Church.”¹⁵ This humanity is lived out in the arenas of daily life. Martin Luther’s teaching about the universal priesthood of believers remains an unfulfilled promise of the Reformation. If justification and vocation are the twin pillars of the Lutheran Reformation, justification has gained prominence, while vocation never realized the promise of Luther’s teaching.¹⁶ Instead of developing Luther’s theology of vocation in tandem with justification, the universal priesthood has been marginalized.

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Wingren retrieves Luther’s proposal in his text *Luther on Vocation*. Luther consistently maintained the view that vocation refers us to the stations of daily life—“a multitude of offices at the same time”—in family, at work, and in society.¹⁷

Devotion to office is devotion to love, because it is God’s own ordering that the work of the office is always dedicated to the well-being of one’s neighbor. Care for one’s office is, in its very frame of reference on earth, participation in God’s own care for human beings.¹⁸

The gospel occurs through the proclamation of the word and the administration of the sacraments; the law, in its first use, sends us out through vocation into our respective stations in daily life (“domestic life, officialdom, labor, kinships, talents with correlative stations”¹⁹). Christians live out these stations under the sign of the cross, taking suffering upon themselves for the sake of neighbors in the ordinary tasks of daily life.²⁰ In exercising these stations, the Christian serves as a “mask of God” in service to others.²¹

At the time of the Reformation, the universal priesthood made a radical claim about the equal status of all believers before God based on baptism. It was designed to overcome the dependency of the laity on the ministrations of a clerical hierarchy. To affirm baptism as the primary ordination of Christians lends significance and status to the baptized as ministers of the gospel. By teaching baptism as

¹⁴ Bengt Kristensson Uggla, *Becoming Human Again: The Theological Life of Gustaf Wingren*, trans. Daniel M. Olson (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016). The title and cover photo of Wingren speak to this theme: <https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/51ye+RL9OfL.jpg>.

¹⁵ Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, 11.

¹⁶ Cf. Mark Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 164.

¹⁷ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 5.

¹⁸ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 9.

¹⁹ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 28.

²⁰ Cf. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 29–30, 72–73.

²¹ Cf. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 180.

ordination to ministry in the diaconate of all believers,²² how might we take the formation of the baptized for their service in daily life as seriously as we do theological education in the formation of deacons and pastors?²³

As demonstrated through Scandinavian creation theology, the primary vocation of Christians is to live out the covenant God in Christ made with them at baptism. In the familiar promises of the baptismal liturgy, these are “to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.”²⁴

Today we give focus to four arenas for living out baptismal vocation: family, work, civil society, and church. In the family, the baptized serve as ministers to their neighbors as a son/daughter, sister/brother, aunt/uncle, spouse, or parent. In the workplace, the baptized serve their neighbors in their designated responsibilities and relationships. In public life, the baptized care for the common good, for example, through volunteer work, caring for creation, or participating in the political process. Through church, the baptized gather for worship and are sent into varied forms of service, including evangelizing and care for the suffering ones. Each of these arenas is located within the context of creation, whose elements, flora, and fauna we also are called to serve as neighbors from God.

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In recent decades, ecumenical discussion has reclaimed the universal priesthood as “the diaconate of all believers.” In *Diakonia in Context*, published by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the gifts bestowed at baptism by the Holy Spirit are the grounding for “the priesthood of all believers” that “can be reformulated as the diakonia of all believers to which all baptized are called and equipped, regardless of their apparent status or social condition.”²⁵ The “diaconate of all believers” is a form of “individual diakonia, which normally is spontaneous in everyday life and expressed through a wide variety of good works.”²⁶ *Called to Transformation*, issued by the World Council of Churches (WCC), gives significant attention to

²² World Council of Churches, *Called to Transformation: Ecumenical Diakonia* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2022), 16–17, gives new attention to “the diaconate of all believers, based on the view that God’s Spirit graciously empowers and equips for discipleship, from the youngest to the oldest, men and women (Acts 2:17).”

²³ The Life of Faith Initiative states: “The purpose of the Life of Faith Initiative is to stir up a culture change that frees us to make *the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life* the central focus of the church’s mission.” “Life of Faith: Trusting Jesus, Serving Our Neighbors,” <https://lifeoffaith.info/>.

²⁴ This formula is taken from the Lutheran tradition; see “Affirmation of Baptism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 237.

²⁵ Lutheran World Federation, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Diakonia* (Geneva: LWF, 2009), 27.

²⁶ LWF, *Diakonia in Context*, 47.

the diaconate of all believers, based on the view that God's Spirit graciously empowers and equips for discipleship, from the youngest to the oldest, men and women (Acts 2:17). From this follows that the diaconal vocation in the first place relates to everyday life: the family that cares for its members and in particular children and the elderly, the neighborhood and the workplace, civil society, and other arenas for social action.

This document also recognizes that "diaconal activities organized by local congregations and other church structures, including professional diaconal agents, depend on and are largely borne by the diaconate of all believers."²⁷

For Christians, the meaning of vocation is grounded in the promises of God in Christ made at holy baptism. Baptism gives us an identity as those unconditionally loved and forgiven; we are joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptismal existence involves daily dying to sin (cross) and daily rising to life in Christ (resurrection). The Holy Spirit bestows gifts to be shared with others for the common good.

Baptismal vocation has its primary expression in the arenas of everyday life, and only secondarily in those activities organized and carried out in the name of the institutional church. Although the work of congregations remains important and meaningful, congregations will better fulfill their calling by taking seriously that their primary missional impact occurs through the roles, relationships, and involvements exercised by members of the body of Christ in the everyday.

Revitalizing congregations in this post-Christian era—a time when church has lost privileges and credibility in society—requires that we return to the basics that sustained the church in the first centuries. Three commitments deserve highest priority: (1) intentional focus on forming Christians for their baptismal vocation in all gatherings for worship, learning, and community; (2) building capacity to share and interpret the faith to others in everyday relationships; and (3) validating, learning from, and accompanying the baptized as they perform service to neighbors in the arenas of daily life.

To take seriously the centrality of baptismal vocation requires a transformed theology of ministry that places the ministry of the baptized in daily life at the forefront of the church's mission. This means orienting all other church offices (deacon, pastor, and bishop) to equipping the baptized for this service. This paradigm shift holds exquisite promise for revitalizing the church according to its originating purpose and greatest commandment (Matt 22:37–40).²⁸

Wellness in the Bible means shalom. Shalom is God's ultimate goal for creation. The Hebrew word shalom needs to be understood in its most fulsome sense. Shalom means more than peace, especially when peace is reduced to the absence of conflict. Rather, shalom involves the fullness of life-giving relationships with God,

²⁷ World Council of Churches, *Called to Transformation*, 17.

²⁸ The Life of Faith Initiative, <https://lifeoffaith.info/>.

others, and all of creation. We are well when we experience life-giving relationship with the triune God in worship, prayer, and spiritual practices. We are well when we experience mutually fulfilling and caring relationships with other persons. And we are well when we experience harmonious relationships in God's creation.

The triune God desires our wellness through the gift of the gospel. Jesus Christ comes to us through word and sacrament to bestow our identity as beloved, forgiven, and precious children of God. This gospel is the ultimate source of all wellness in body, mind, emotions, and spirit. The gospel generates vocational wellness through the gifts bestowed in holy baptism and shared in service to neighbors. And the gospel imparts interpersonal wellness by placing us in family and binding us together with others—family, friends, and companions—in circles of intimacy.

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God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit wants us to be well. We are called by God to attend to physical wellness through eating, sleeping, and exercise habits that maximize our life energies. Through the care of physicians and medical professionals, we seek regular monitoring of our physical health and reach out for help in times of illness. Because there is scarcity of medical care for those without adequate income or insurance, we are called to advocate for basic health care as a human right for all people.

God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit wants us to be well. We are called by God to care for intellectual wellness through lifelong education that prepares us to engage the challenges of life with the best possible knowledge and methods of understanding. Through educators and educational resources, we are equipped to face difficult problems with creativity and imagination. Because there is much misinformation and manipulation of truth claims, we are called to test sources of authority for their reliability and value in promoting the common good.

God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit wants us to be well. We are called by God to care for emotional wellness by learning to interpret our own lives charitably, and by reaching out to counselors and support groups in times of need. Every person faces crucibles that belong to the human condition: illness, accidents, losses, aging, grief, and death. Because not every family is nurturing and many people endure adverse childhood experiences that mark them for life, we seek out mental health professionals for ourselves and caringly refer others for such support.

God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit wants us to be well. We are called by God to tend to spiritual wellness by participating in worship, prayer, and spiritual practices. Spiritual wellness means availing ourselves of opportunities to hear the gospel and receive the sacraments to affirm time and again our

belovedness, forgiveness, and unconditional acceptance. Spiritual practices center us prayerfully in a life-giving relationship with God and inexorably turn us toward serving others by exercising our baptismal vocation in the arenas of daily life.

Wellness is rooted in the shalom of God.²⁹ The Bible's focus on life-giving relationships converges with the findings of the longitudinal study of Harvard University on what makes for human happiness: deep relationships and close connections with others.³⁰ What God desires for human flourishing coincides with what we humans desire in order to be happy. Wellness as shalom begins with life-giving relationship with God and then extends outward in concentric circles to life-giving relationships in family, church, school, workplace, local community, civil society, and all the world including creation.

What happens when relationships are distorted or severed? This is one of the most painful experiences of life. *Tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם) in the Jewish tradition refers to efforts to repair the world. God is at work to repair and restore shalom wherever life-giving relationships have fallen into disrepair. This involves serious human commitment to repentance, making amends, and repair in processes that seek restoration.³¹ We are called to engage in these challenging processes according to an ethics of forgiveness.³²

The Ten Commandments provide teaching about how to structure the world to safeguard shalom: God-relationship (1–3), family relationships (4 and 6), societal relationships (5, 7, 8, and 9/10). Martin Luther's explanation of the commandments frames our responsibilities to others as commitments to enhance relationships, not merely to avoid or repair broken relationships.

Life-giving relationships with God, others, and creation extend hope for the future, without which we can neither survive nor thrive.³³ Baptismal vocation in service to neighbors in daily life contributes to conviviality—"the art and practice of living together"—in a diverse, multiracial society by attending to the wellness of relationships at every level.³⁴ Conviviality "means starting very close to the diverse everyday life of people and being 'on the spot' to foster encounters."³⁵

Vocation and wellness belong together in reciprocity. Attending to our own wellness prepares us for vocational wellness; vocational wellness serves the

²⁹ For a discussion of shalom and *tikkun olam*, see Craig L. Nesson, *Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as a Ministering Community* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), especially 9–10.

³⁰ Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, "What the Longest Study on Human Happiness Found Is the Key to a Good Life," *The Atlantic*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/harvard-happiness-study-relationships/672753/>.

³¹ Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (New York: Beacon, 2022).

³² Craig L. Nesson, *Free in Deed: The Heart of Lutheran Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2022), 125–31.

³³ Casey Gwinn and Chan Hellman, *Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life* (New York: Morgan James, 2018).

³⁴ Tony Addy and Ulla Siirto, "Conviviality as a Vision and Approach for a Diaconal Society," in Godwin Ampony, Martin Büscher, Beate Hofmann, Félicité Ngnintedem, Dennis Solon, and Dietrich Werner, eds., *International Handbook on Ecumenical Diakonia: Contextual Theologies and Practices of Diakonia and Christian Social Services—Resources for Study and Intercultural Living* (Oxford: Regnum, 2021), 399–411.

³⁵ Addy and Siirto, "Conviviality as a Vision," 404.

wellness of others. Baptismal vocation sends us into the arenas of daily life to foster life-giving relationships with others in the shalom of God. Our baptismal vocation of serving neighbors in family, at school or work, in local communities and creation, and through civic engagement fosters wellness in the community. ⊕

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