



Vocation, Work, and Identity and the Church's Mission*

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I. AN UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATION IS *IMPORTANT* FOR THE CHURCH'S MISSION

When we Christians want to think about our faith, creation is basic. If God had not created, there would be nothing to think about (and no one to think). And when we begin with creation, then we see that Christ's redemption is for the sake of God's whole creation. We Christians are meant to be faithful creatures. As the old saying puts it: "Christ does not make all new things; rather, he makes all things new."

The church's mission is to be about this sort of salvation-bringing. We are to call people to trust God's Word that it is good to be a creature. We are to announce in Christ's name that people are forgiven their sin of fleeing their creatureliness and seeking to be like God or of rejecting the responsibilities that come with humanness and seeking to be less.¹

Human creatures living in the world have "stations" and "offices," to use the traditional terminology.² The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals to us that these places

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¹The overall perspective in this paper is heavily informed by the work of the Swedish theologian, Gustaf Wingren. See especially his books: *Credo* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981); *Gospel and Church* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964); and *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958; reprinted in 1983 by Concordia Publishing House). See also Wingren's chapter "The Church and Vocation," in *This Is the Church*, ed. Anders Nygren (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1952) 281-293. A helpful and accessible treatment of vocation is available in Donald Heiges, *The Christian's Calling* (Philadelphia: Fortress, rev. ed. 1984). For some of my other attempts to discuss this topic, see Marc Kolden, *Called by the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), esp. chapters 7 and 11; "Cleaning Up Our Language about Ministry," *dialog* 25/1 (1986) 33-38; and "Luther on Vocation," *Word & World* 3/4 (1983) 382-390.

²On these terms, see Franklin Sherman, "Secular Calling and Social Ethical Thinking," in *The Lutheran Church—Past and Present*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 185-205, esp. 189-190. Sherman says that while these terms are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction between them. "Station" (German *Stand*) is descriptive of the position or location that a person occupies: prince, mother, citizen, employee, etc. "Office" (*Amt*) refers to the duties or functions a person has because of the station: ruling, parenting, paying taxes, working, etc. While one may judge certain stations to be immoral (e.g., being a criminal), it is usually thought that one's office is the primary place for ethical/theological reflection (e.g., how one rules, parents, etc.). The application of *calling* to these concepts clearly adds further dimensions to the discussion.

and roles which we have are precisely where God calls us to serve by loving others. Here—in our homes, communities, nations, places of work, and in our roles as family members, citizens, workers, friends—we keep the world going, cooperating with God, being stewards of creation,

getting our neighbors loved. The church's message is to bring a Word that enables people to see their stations and offices as callings—"vocations" to use the traditional term. The church's Word is to make us aware that each context in life is a means to serve God and is the means by which God calls us to concrete tasks.

Despite the wide use in our society of the terms vocation and calling to refer to the jobs of all people, strictly speaking it does not make any sense to speak of having a calling if one does not believe in a God who calls. All persons have stations and offices (i.e., places and roles), but only believers have callings. Also, calling or vocation does not refer only to occupation in its Christian meaning. It includes occupation, but it also includes all our other roles and responsibilities; all the world and all of life come from God, and God calls us to serve in all aspects of life. It is perfectly possible for children or unemployed or retired persons to be said to have callings. It is very important to distinguish between occupation and vocation or a person may come to identify so much with a certain occupation that when retirement or loss of occupation occurs the person loses identity and sense of worth. God calls us wherever we are, including in our occupations, but not only there.³ Finally, it is important to see that in the Bible work is not considered to be a punishment for sin, as people sometimes think. Work is already given by God to humans in the creation narrative, prior to the story of sin's entry. Work is part of God's good ordering of life, part of the way God intends things to be, not something to be avoided. In the Bible, sin is seen to make work more difficult, because we pervert it to other ends than serving God; but work itself remains part of God's good creation. The church's Word is to help us see all this.

"The vocation of the church is to sustain many vocations."⁴ The church's message and its practice must support us in our callings, by interpretation, guidance, inspiration, and forgiveness. The church should let us know that *God* works through the structures and activities of daily life and that God's law helps us to see what needs to be done there. And even though this is an old teaching, central to the Protestant Reformation, it seems that people do not know it. Too many think that God is only related to religion and spiritual life.

The preaching of the gospel of justification by faith alone, apart from works of the law, sets us free to live in the world of law without concern for our own justification. We are free to be concerned above all for the well-being of others. Such a gospel allows faith to discriminate among the demands made on us in our callings, since some of those structures in which we live and some of the demands we face will be unjust (i.e., not from God). But the first point is to see that it is in our daily life, in the world of law, reason, force, and ambiguity—in the "kingdom on the left,"

³Regarding the theme "Vocation, Work, and Identity," it is important to note that with respect to God our identity and worth are to be seen much more in terms of our manifold vocations than only in terms of our work, although clearly work may well be for most people the most profound organizing principle of life next to their faith in God. One reason the farm crisis may affect people so deeply is that when they lose their farm they do not lose only their work but also their homes and in some ways their family and probably their community. In other words, the loss of a farm affects many more aspects of one's vocation and thus of one's identity than "only" losing a job would involve.

⁴Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 203.

to use Martin Luther's language—that we find our callings from God. God governs the world through these roles and structures and through the persons who function in them. God calls us to

service in and through the very functions and demands which confront us. Taking these realities seriously will allow God to use us to bless people regularly, routinely, and predictably. We will be reliable servants. This is the point of Luther's *ad vice* to remain in our callings; his point is not that we may never change, but that we may help keep the structures of life going for the sake of all people.

The gospel helps us to see that our "ordinary" roles and tasks are God's callings in God's world: that being a family member, citizen, a worker, or whatever is not only to be understood sociologically or psychologically or economically but also theologically; it is serving God. In daily life, we do business with the Creator's ongoing ordering, preserving, and innovating work. Here we deal with God's will as it comes to us in the law, in its first use. The need of others is a way God sees to it that the divine will is carried out, even when we may not like meeting such needs.⁵ The first or civil use of the law gets good done even when the doer is sinful. The gospel breaks down our opposition to the law—by revealing that it is God's law and by forgiving us for resisting it. The gospel frees us from being "under the law" (i.e., seeking our own righteousness through it and being condemned by our failure to keep it) so that we may use the law as it was intended—for the good of others and never for our own justification. The need of the neighbor demands to be met (the law!), but faith is free when it comes to how to meet it. In Luther and Paul's words, faith is simply to be active in love. Luther further speaks of the Christian as having the "freedom to do or not to do" when it comes to seeking to keep the law for the neighbor. No so-called law should be allowed to keep us from helping our neighbor. Therefore, he says, we should understand what God commands to be the same as what the neighbor needs. This is an understanding of the Christian faith that anchors us to earth, just as God in Christ came to earth.

Some Implications:

1. This way of understanding our callings requires a sturdy doctrine of creation as God's present, ongoing creative work in every moment. Without such a view there is no way of speaking intelligently about serving God in the mundane world. With an understanding of creation as the lively working of God in every aspect of the life of every person and of the life of society and nature, and with ourselves as God's co-workers on earth, then vocation makes sense.

2. This view requires also a rehabilitation of the idea of the first use of the law—as God's dynamic will, embodied in the world, built into reality, impinging upon us in events and persons, in institutions and structures, in needs, challenges, and opportunities. God is involved in each life and in each event—though not as the sole actor (God does not will evil) but "in, with, and under" all else. So, we should respond to everything that happens in ways appropriate to our "doing business" also with God there.

3. Implicit in this whole way of thinking also is an assumption that the world is in a struggle—between the good God and the powers of evil—and that our daily

⁵James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), chapters 4 and 5, makes a helpful distinction between "destiny" (understood in terms of "self-actualization" in contemporary developmental psychology) and "vocation" (with its focus on the need of the neighbor); he goes on to show how much more closely the latter term fits with a biblical understanding.

life is in the midst of this struggle. This is why an understanding of the idea of vocation is so

important to the church's mission: it directs us to be about God's business right in our stations and offices even though these will not look godly or spiritual. To put it bluntly: "It is individual men and women in their place of daily work who are the church."⁶ It is here that God struggles with the devil over us. Luther understands that the devil tempts us to misuse our offices (for selfish gain of some sort) or to flee from them or perhaps to escape into them (using our work as an excuse to avoid other ways in which our neighbors need to be served by us, for example). The aspect of struggle and conflict in which good people get caught in ways far beyond their control is evident in the farm crisis; the resulting pain and loss may help us to see the importance of this profound biblical way of looking at life.

II. AN UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATION IS *NECESSARY* FOR THE CHURCH'S MISSION

If salvation comes by an eschatological promise that our sins are forgiven; and if we have this new life not in ourselves but in Christ through faith and hope; and if the new creation breaks into the world that is still old and that waits eagerly for the final resurrection; then, one of the things the church needs to be concerned about is our new lives in this old world.

In Christ, Christians are new creatures. In ourselves, we are still sinful. We are not half and half; if we were, we could spend our lives trying to whittle down the sinful part and build up the righteous part. But our righteousness is not our own. We are accounted righteous by God because of Christ, while in ourselves we remain faithful to Adam (and Eve), constantly perverting the good creative work that God does.

God gives new life to people through the gospel. The church's mission is to proclaim that gospel to all people so that all might believe and come to the knowledge of the truth. But the Word of God also functions as law; law's work is not to save but to rule here on earth to keep evil from getting out of hand, to guide, teach, compel or coerce people to do God's will in this old order. Part of the church's mission is to see to it that people know God's will and are led to do it.

But there is more to it. As sinners, we need to be put to death. The old that still lives in us and even dominates us in opposition to the new that is promised to be ours in Christ needs to be drowned, to be put to death, to be disciplined (disciplined). We need to die daily, as Martin Luther put it. That too happens by the law, as St. Paul said. (Luther called this the "second use" of the law.) That is, the law not only tells us what to do, but it reveals that we have not kept the law, it convicts and accuses us. More than that, it crushes and kills us. This is God's "alien work" (life and salvation are God's "proper work"), by which in mercy God puts sin to death in order to bring righteousness to life.

Where does this mortification happen? Through the law, to be sure. But not through religious exercises and practices, primarily; nor through sorrow or contrition for sin, primarily; nor through penance or spiritual exercises, according to Luther. All of these are of no use in God's economy. They all risk immediately becoming some sort of program for self-improvement or self-justification. No, the

⁶Wingren, *Gospel and Church*, 226.

place where the law disciplines us and puts us to death is in our callings in the world—where we

work ourselves to death, so to speak, in loving our neighbors in our various situations and offices. That is, these same locations and situations in which our new righteous self (in faith) is active in love, spontaneously doing what the law requires (i.e., what the neighbor needs), are also the locations and situations in which the old, sinful self, still loyal to Adam, is forced to serve, is disciplined, and is daily brought nearer to death.

This is sanctification, in Lutheran terms. As the old self is put to death by the law expressed in our callings, only the self which is righteous in Christ is finally left (at our physical death). Then we are justified by faith alone, and not by works, for there is nothing of us left to want to do self-justifying works.⁷ Sanctification is the result of justification, the other side of it—never resulting in “empirical” holiness, but hidden in the mundane tasks of service to our neighbor in our callings. Sanctification is never ours. In God’s economy we are made righteous in a way that is useful to others. Our works in our callings kill us and give others life.

Vocation is *necessary* for the church’s mission for the sake of each member’s sanctification. If the church does not make each member’s vocation a concern of its message and mission, it risks ending up with cheap grace: seeking to have resurrection without crucifixion, heaven without earth, the Creator without the creation, faith as merely belief—without love and without the death of the old self that love involves.

III. CONCLUSION

Faith crosses the boundaries between the two kingdoms. Faith makes life in the kingdom on the left flexible, critical, and creative. Faith helps keep our stations and offices open to the new, even though all aspects of the left-hand kingdom themselves tend to become static and old. The changeable element in our callings comes about because faith gives birth to love. But if we love only ourselves (i.e., we have no faith), then our callings become burdensome, rigid, and oppressive.

This whole understanding of vocation and mission means that the church will not prescribe each thing we are to do; but it will set us free, tell us the great commandments, and then, in our callings, good works will pour in upon us from outside ourselves, through the movement of life.⁸ God works through all persons, of course, but Christians in faith and through prayer open doors for God to do things that other office holders might ignore or resist.

A notion of vocation gives concreteness to our life of faith and anchors us in the work and the will of God. And as it empties us through service to others we are opened to live by faith alone. Vocation thus makes room for Christ, so that he may be all in all.

⁷See Gerhard Forde, *Justification: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

⁸Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 117-118.