Earthly Vocation as a Corollary of Justification by Faith

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A Proposal

"Earthly vocation as a corollary of justification by faith." A corollary is an immediate inference from something else; it is something that follows naturally—in this case from the doctrine of justification by faith alone. "Earthly vocation" is one's calling by God to faithful living here and now, on and for the earth in and through our roles in the world. The claim of the proposal that follows is twofold: That the doctrine of justification rightly understood leads directly and naturally to the concept and practice of earthly vocation. And, that spelling out the character and content of the Christian's earthly calling is crucial for protecting the doctrine of justification by faith from being misunderstood in some of ways that have occurred since the Reformation of the sixteenth century. ("Calling" is the English form of the Latin *vocatio.* In this essay "calling" and "vocation" will be used interchangeably.)[*]

Several points need to be made to support this twofold claim: *First*, that because God is believed to be the creator of all that is, it is God's will that humans live as good and faithful creatures on this earth. ("Earth" here is being used to include the natural and social world that God is continually creating, preserving, and renewing.) *Second*, that God graciously justifies people through faith in Christ both because that is the only way for sinners to be saved *and also* in order that people will be set free from the unnecessary endeavor to seek to achieve their own

[*] This essay is intended to be a constructive proposal rather than an effort in critical historical and theological research. It is intended not primarily for those who are specialists in Reformation theology and its contemporary descendants but mainly for non-specialists who are, nevertheless, interested in the doctrine of justification by faith. For this reason there will be few scholarly endnotes. I hope in this way also to honor Gerhard Forde, many of whose writings and lectures have served the broader church audience effectively as well as being valuable to theological scholars.

salvation and instead may focus on doing good in their lives on earth for the sake of other creatures in God's world. *Third*, that the earthly places of responsibility and varieties of roles which people have and acquire in living their lives *are* places and roles in which they are called by God to serve. All people have such places and roles, it should be emphasized, but only those who have been called to faith in God will understand service in those areas to be a divine calling or vocation. In addition, believers will trust that God is active in the creating and renewing of all things precisely in those places and roles—and, therefore, that they are God's co-workers on earth. And, *fourth*, that while the good works that believers do in their callings are not for the purpose of achieving their salvation, works can be understood as means by which God re-shapes people into the image of Christ.

Creation

First, that God is the creator of heaven and earth is a basic assertion throughout the Scriptures. This is made clear not only by the first two chapters of the Bible (Gen. 1-2) but throughout both the Old and New Testaments; for example, in Isaiah, Job, and above all the Psalms in the O.T., and in John, Romans, and Colossians in the N.T., to name only the most obvious places. With the exception of a few early Christian heresies that sought to distinguish the saving God present in Jesus Christ from the God who created the (supposedly evil) world, belief in the divine creation of all things was nearly unquestioned among Christians during at least the first sixteen centuries after Christ. While the church's teachings and practices at various times and places (for example, in some monastic movements as well as in most apocalyptic movements) often failed to appreciate the full biblical testimony to God's ongoing creative work,

nevertheless, even in the midst of primitive and often cruel ways of life amidst hardship and disease pre-modern Christians believed that God was the creator all things.

The early Protestant reformers thought that the church of their day had become wrongly focused on the necessity of human good works in achieving salvation, epitomized in the "work" of taking monastic vows and living apart from worldly pursuits. Because of their belief in the perennial Christian teaching of the divine creation of all things, the reformers rejected the emphasis on monastic works (which often became patterns for laity as well) and turned the focus of Christian living back to the "earth," to the so-called ordinary activities of life in creation. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and their colleagues were above all students of the Scriptures and they saw there not only the teaching that God was the source and origin of everything but also that this God of steadfast love was portrayed as being continually at work in the birth of new life, in the growing of trees and grain, in the rain and the rivers, the sun and the warmth, in human work with the soil and the animals, the creating and governing of social and economic life, the consequences of human actions, and on and on. Apart from a belief that the created world in all its aspects is good because it comes from God and is loved by God it would make little sense to command believers to serve God in earthly things. But given this belief, even with the awareness that God's good creation always also is affected by sin, there would seem to be no other option than to lift up earthly activities and responsibilities as the focus of Christian life, despite the propensity of some Christians in all centuries to retreat into "spiritual" and otherworldly preoccupations.

The real problem arises, of course, when belief in divine creation is challenged radically, as occurred in the Enlightenment period (in the eighteenth century and on). Here it proved possible and often preferable to explain "earthly" phenomena (that is, what Christians would call

"created reality") without any reference to God or God's creation. Every area of science, simply by virtue of its methods, tended to provide explanations and theories that excluded or at least had no need to posit the active involvement of God.

Some believers fought and continue to fight rear-guard actions, whether involving theories and claims to authority about the revealed truths of the Bible or so-called creation science, for example. But in most areas of life modern (i.e., non-religious) ways of thinking about the world have prevailed also among Christians. Sometimes believers have found hope in gaps in scientific understanding or in the collapse of some theory; or they have linked certain scientific theories to aspects of the traditional doctrine of creation (for example, linking the Big Bang theory to creation out of nothing). But such crumbs have proved to be too little to support a full-fledged theological view of reality.

A more sophisticated route has been that of (so-called) liberal theology, which has tried for over two centuries to construct explanations of reality that fit with a modern view of the world and also include involvement by God. These projects nearly always require criticisms and considerable revisions of traditional Christian teachings, but their value is that they refuse to separate religious truth from other kinds of truth. A limitation, on the other hand, is that these attempts often are not equally critical of the scientific knowledge to which they seek to relate Christian faith. Some postmodern approaches seek to address these discrepancies and limitations by at least raising questions about the automatic authority that people have granted to the basic claims of Enlightenment reason in all areas of life and thought.

If the idea of "earthly vocation" is to be credible we need a way of understanding what today is called "reality" to be God's creation—a place and time in which God is involved and calls people to be involved. Such a way may not look exactly like the biblical accounts, which

for the most part are pictorial and symbolic and reflect pre-scientific views which are not uniquely biblical and presumably need not be maintained by present day believers (for example, that the earth is flat). Contemporary theological proposals, however, must be able to offer an account of human experience of reality that includes God as source and actor and that makes at least as good if not better sense than secular alternatives. This will allow Christian believers to live in their callings informed by ways of thinking that connect their faith and their earthly activities. Such ways of thinking will prove themselves to be true (or not) as they are lived out. And, like most other aspects of Christian faith and practice, understandings of God, world, and faithful living constantly will require reform in light of new challenges and insights.

To summarize, if justification by faith alone has as one of its most important implications the doctrine of the Christian's *earthly* callings, then a lively and credible understanding of the world as coming from God's originating and ongoing creative work is a necessary foundation and presupposition. It both gives support for and substance to the idea of Christians living out their faith in the world rather than only or primarily in religion or in some supposedly spiritual realm apart from the world.

Justification

Second, in order to demonstrate that earthly vocation is a corollary of justification by faith the meaning of justification in the Bible and its interpretation by later Christians requires attention. The key biblical sources are the apostle Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Christians at Rome. In both cases the original context has to do with the Jewish origins of Christianity and what the coming of Christ means with regard to God's law—both for Jews and Gentiles.[1]

"Justification" before God has to do with a person's *right relationship to God*. The word comes from the same biblical root as "righteousness." In biblical thinking, to be righteous and to be justified amount to the same thing. Both terms first of all are *religious* concepts, not moral ideas. The religious question is: How does one become justified or righteous *before God*? Paul's own tradition of first-century Judaism had combined the idea of a nation being elected by God (through no merit of its own) with certain forms of obedience that were to follow from being chosen, that is, obedience to divine laws that were given to them particularly as God's chosen people. In some parts of Judaism, however, the forms of obedience had become nearly equal in importance with God's electing, so that the main focus of life became human obedience to God—ordinarily by keeping religious laws, above all, circumcision, which marked their identity as God's chosen ones.

When the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached to Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews), which became the focus of Paul's mission, the question arose among the original Jewish Christians about the need for these new Gentile Christians to obey God's law. Many Jewish Christians had taken it for granted that circumcision and faithful observance of God's laws were to precede faith in Christ—as had been the case in their lives. Yet Gentiles were hearing the gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins and through this proclamation the Holy Spirit was creating faith in them *apart* from the law. Did that mean that they now needed to be circumcised and keep various ritual and dietary laws as well as the Ten Commandments, just as the Jewish Christians had been doing? It seemed so, not least to Peter, James, and the other Jewish-Christian leaders in Jerusalem. This is the background of Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians (who were Gentiles). They had been converted by Paul's preaching of the gospel but after he had moved on

some Jewish Christians had come and told the Galatians that they also needed to keep the law if they were to be truly righteous (justified).

In response to this, Paul in his letter to them rehearses some of the recent debate about the place of the law—beginning with his own call to follow Christ and his discussions with the apostles (Gal. 1:18-19; 2:1-10), and especially Peter (2:11-14), concerning the sufficiency of the gospel alone altogether apart from works of law. The agreement reached there leads to Paul's basic claim: "We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (2:16), which then is developed throughout the remainder of this letter. Paul does this in several different ways. Sometimes he appeals directly to the experience of the Galatian Christians ("Did you receive the Spirit by works of law [Of course not!] or by hearing with faith?" – 3:2). He also addresses the issue of righteousness seeming to be separated from the law, as it has been raised by the appearance of the Jewish-Christian questioners, by appealing to the *faith*, not the works, of the O.T. patriarch Abraham (3:6-18).

Then what about the law of God? Paul asks. Is it *against* the gospel promises? No, it was added (to creation) because of sin, to restrain people from sinning and protect them from the sin of others, until Christ came to overcome sin and make things right again between themselves and God (Gal. 3:19-25). Now, in Christ Jesus, Paul writes "You are all children of God through faith." All the old distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, which seemed to have been based on keeping or not keeping the law, no longer matter; for now "you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:26-29; cf. also 5:2-6 and esp. 6:15: "For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!").

That is not all, however. The purposes of the law are to be understood differently than the Jewish-Christian opponents of Paul had claimed. The law never was intended to be a means

to gain righteousness before *God* (2:16; 3:10-12, 21-22). When it comes to being justified (righteous) before God, the law's only role is putting to death *the one who seeks justification by the law*—which Paul says is what happened to him when he was persecuting Christians in the name of the law and Christ first encountered him: "For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ" (2:19-20a). And, "if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (2:21).

There is more to be said about the law, of course, but now it is said in a vastly different context—not one of being in bondage to sin but of freedom: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery [a reference to the law in its inappropriate use as a means to gain righteousness.]" (Gal. 5:5). Freedom in Christ gives people the opportunity to look beyond concern for their own righteousness, which is now secure in Christ, and also beyond their own distinctiveness, and instead to be servants concerned for others. Now Paul states to the other (and ancient) purpose of the law: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (5:14). Christian freedom is life in the Spirit, according to Paul, and those who are led by the Spirit are not *under* the law (5:18)—not under its condemnation—yet new life in the Spirit leads to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; that is, it leads to things not prohibited by the law but also things that actually fulfill the law's other original purpose. So, he concludes, "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ;" "let us not grow wearing in well-doing;" and "as we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people" (5:22; 6:2, 9, 10).

To summarize, Paul says in Galatians that in light of justification through faith in Christ we can see that the law's primary focus is on the good of the neighbor and its other focus is on putting to death the self that instead seeks its *own* good by using the law either to attain

righteousness in God's eyes or to maintain a distinct and exclusive identity in the eyes of other people—as if Christ had not died for the sins of all. It is for these reasons that we should say "earthly vocation is a corollary of justification by faith," because earthly vocation is all about love for the neighbor and, therefore, also about preventing us from using the law to justify ourselves before God or lift us above our neighbors.

This seems to be clear and simple. Why has it gotten confused so often? Probably because the radical N.T. idea of being justified by faith in the crucified Christ, altogether apart from doing works of law, has been taken captive by our ordinary ways of thinking (which are both finite and sinful) rather than challenging and changing our ways of thinking.[2] This can be clarified by adding Paul's testimony in his letter to the Roman Christians, though it is already there in Galatians if we could see it. It has everything to do with the *eschatological* character of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[3] ("Eschatological" refers to the promised future hope for the rule of God that the N.T. portrays as breaking in to some extent already in Jesus' coming. *Eschatos* is the Greek word for "end.")

Paul makes many of the same points about the role of the law in Romans as in Galatians: for example, that righteousness before God comes through faith in Christ apart from the law (Rom. 3:20-22, 28); the reference to Abraham's *faith* that was "counted to him" as righteousness (all of ch. 4, but esp. 1-3 and 22-25); and the law being given because of sin (5:13, 20). This leads Paul to a question similar to that in Galatians: what about the law now that faith has come (ch. 6-8)? In his extended answer we see the eschatological "overlap" between God's in-breaking future and the present: in this new time, this overlap, now that we are right with God through faith in Christ, shall we continue sinning as before (6:1)? "By no means!" Paul declares, and then asks: "How can we who died to sin still live in it" (6:2)? We hear again what Paul had

written to the Galatians: that he had died, that he had been crucified with Christ, even though to all appearances he was alive just as he had been before. But appearances can deceive, for as Paul had written to the Galatian Christians: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20). Through faith in Christ and the hope that comes with it, death in an ultimate or eschatological sense is already behind him even as he lives as a mortal creature on earth.

In Romans Paul speaks of this in terms of *baptism,* which in the N.T. as well as in extra-biblical writings has the meanings both of literally being immersed and washed as well as of metaphorically going under, sinking, and drowning. He writes that Christians (now not only himself, as in Galatians) were buried by baptism into death; in baptism Christians have been united with Christ in a death like his. Why? So that even now just as Christ *was raised* from death they too can walk in newness of life; they can live in faith and hope that they *will be* united with Christ in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:3-5). One gets the sense of two overlapping "realities" in which Christians are involved: that they have died in some sense, even though they are still alive; and that they are already new even as they wait for the new life of resurrection. So, Paul writes, "You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:8-11). That is, of these two "realities," the promised one is "more real" than their present experience in which sin still seems to threaten them. For that reason, Paul tells his readers, you can trust that ultimately "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (6:14). This does not give them freedom to sin (as some must have thought) but instead of being enslaved or bound to sin, as before, they are now in their freedom "slaves of righteousness" (6:18), which is eternal life in Christ Jesus (6:23). This is very similar to "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1), but now we see the eschatological aspect more clearly:

believers in Christ truly are free even as they continue to live in this earthly time where sin abounds—all the while bound to Christ's righteousness.

It is a time, according to Paul, that desperately needs Christians' good works. This will not be easy, as becomes clear from the complicated conflict that Paul portrays in Romans 7, in which the law not only does not justify but in fact reveals and increases sin and finally kills the sinful self. It is not that God's law is bad but that sin finds its opportunity in the law and deceives people into keeping the law for *themselves*—which both rejects Christ and may not help the neighbor. Thus Paul speaks of a war going on in Christians between the good that the law commands them to do and their not being able to do it. It is in the midst of this that the Spirit of Jesus Christ sets them free at the same "time" that they are bound to sin. Believers, with the whole creation, are groaning in bondage to sin even as they walk in newness of life and wait for eternal redemption.

If earthly vocation is a corollary of justification by faith, then vocation must be understood to happen in this context of overlapping times, in which the truth of what we believe in and hope for in Christ transforms the way we understand and act in life now in our various earthly roles and places of responsibility. This is not a new idea, obviously, but it may seem more foreign now than during much of Christendom, when God's reality in our earthly context could be taken for granted even though it was no less difficult to understand in many of its particulars. Perhaps the situation of the original recipients of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome was more like ours in some ways, because the Roman Empire was not yet any friend of Christianity. Yet, even so, Paul treated the empire as belonging to God and ultimately even serving God, despite all the appearances to the contrary.

As Paul turns to the subject of Christians living as faithful creatures under the domination of the Roman Empire (in Rom. 12), he says that not only are they to offer themselves to God "as a living sacrifice" and not be conformed to this present age, but they are to be *transformed* by the renewal of their minds, which will prove what is God's will in some very explicit and down-to-earth ways (12:1-8). Christians are to love what is genuine and good and hate what is evil; they are to love one another, serving the Lord and being patient in tribulation, constant in prayer, and practice hospitality. Paul continues to urge on them these seemingly *ordinary* earthly works in verse after verse—not in order that they might become righteous through them but because they are already justified by faith in Christ and have no need for *extra*ordinary works; rather, God's creatures are blessed by ordinary works (12:9-21).

Then he goes even further, beyond the largely interpersonal and congregational/communal setting of chapter 12, to identify service to God also with participation in and obedience to earthly governing authorities (Rom. 13). Rulers are said to be God's servants for the good also of Christians. Again, Paul commends very ordinary public activities: paying taxes, not committing adultery, not killing, not stealing, not coveting—all for the sake of the neighbor, which in this case sounds much like what we today call serving the "common good." This chapter ends (13:11-14) with Paul reminding the readers of "what time it is," that they are in fact living very near to the age to come even while they live in the present age. This means that they are free to live in light of their hope in the midst of all sorts of present hope*less*ness. It is this involvement in seemingly ordinary activities, energized by a sure and certain hope of our righteousness in Christ, that is at the heart of the Christian's earthly vocation.

Earthly Vocation

Third, the several places of responsibility and roles which people have and acquire are, according to the preceding analysis, the very places in which we serve God. If God is the creator of and continually acts in earthly reality; and if God, despite our sin, justifies us through faith in Christ; then it is altogether natural and obvious that as free and righteous creatures God should call us be involved in doing just and loving actions in the creation that God loves. God justifies us by faith and not by works *so that* our works are free to be directed where they are needed—to the benefit of our earthly neighbors. This is our earthly calling.

As obvious as all this may seem from Scripture, this has *not* been the major tradition of Christian understandings of justification or righteousness, of the life of obedience to God, or of the words "calling" and "vocation." Rather, as has often been the case, if justification is thought (wrongly) to require human achievement, then obedience to God tends to focus not on the good of the earth or on the neighbor's needs but on the merit or worthiness of the one who does good works. Such "good" works, aimed at achieving righteousness before God, tend to be those we might call "religious" or "spiritual" rather than "earthly"—since ultimately they are being offered to *God* rather than to the creature/creation. (Or, in some decadent forms of the practice of Christian vocation the works were more earthly but involved getting rich and practicing philanthropy—which probably did help many neighbors in some cases—but the goal nevertheless was self-justification before God and therefore often did not help the neighbors God had placed in the person's employ, for example.)

The next (wrong) step is to begin to speak of Christian vocation primarily in connection with things religious: for example, ordained ministry or monastic vows, frequent participation in religious rituals and institutions, world-denying faith and practices, morality focused on

individual purity and perfection—all of these aiming at a higher order of Christian life than is practiced by "ordinary" Christians. Most Christian traditions, to be sure, have agreed that all Christians are called to faith, to following Jesus; but through the centuries there has been a continual tendency to speak of some Christians as having a "higher calling." This led to restricting the idea of "divine vocation" to the few who have the time and inclination to devote to things religious or the commitment and inspiration to excel in heroic acts of sacrifice and service.[4]

There is little room for *earthly* vocations in such a system. Not only do they seem far too ordinary but earthly roles are ambiguous and even the best roles are permeated by evil and failure, are part of systems that exploit and cause suffering, and are affected by greed and incompetence—all of which makes it very difficult to tell what is truly good for one's neighbor and for God's creation. Far clearer and simpler, the mistaken view would say, to give a testimony to Jesus than to the excellence of the vacuum cleaner or the value of the life insurance one is selling. Far better keep oneself unstained from the world than to work to remove stains from clothing or to put stain on someone's deck. Why? Ultimately, because this wrong system requires that we achieve at least part of our righteousness before God through our *works*; therefore, they had better be unambiguously good, that is, good for our own improvement and growth in righteousness before God. And as backward as it may seem to the careful reader of the Bible, this system is at least as prevalent among Christians in the twenty-first century as it was at the beginning of the sixteenth—despite the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther came to the doctrine of justification by faith apart from works through his study of the Scriptures. And very soon after his discovery, he drew the inference from justification by faith for earthly vocation. In contrast to what he had been taught, that the highest

vocation to which God could call a Christian was to the monastery, where one took vows as a monk or a nun, Luther saw that justification by faith alone on account of Christ alone led in another direction altogether. Made righteous entirely by God's gracious gift, the Christian is free from working for self-justification. But free for what? For works of love to the neighbor. But where and to whom? Right in the midst of the created world, in the families, towns, and institutions in which Christians already live.[5]

Right there, Luther told amazed believers, where you already *are*, God is calling you to serve. It is not true, he said, that only monks and nuns have divine vocations. (In fact, Luther often added, God calls no one to such useless activities.) All Christians have vocations of earthly service. It is not true, Luther continued, that Christian callings should be focused only on things religious, because all reality belongs to God and all creation is loved by God and you can serve virtually anywhere and be serving God. You do not have to make a pilgrimage, he said, or take vows or fast to serve God; in fact, if justification is not by works then none of these things helps God, your neighbor, or yourself at all. Where you are, or wherever you go or end up, *there* you are called to serve God by serving the neighbor. This is your vocation.

Luther took the same word that had been used wrongly—"vocation"—and defiantly applied it to the duties and activities of daily life (or what today might be called "secular life"). This came as great good news to his hearers—most of whom had thought they had no chance ever to have a divine calling and many of whom felt guilty for doing dirty and tiresome work, for devoting their lives to families and farms, and for enjoying the simple pleasures of rest and food and home. Luther's writings are full of examples of his using the most common, even vulgar, activities as service to God because they advance the good of others. These ranged from changing an infant's diapers to governing a kingdom, from being a student to milking cows to

serving the state as an executioner to defying an unjust ruler. His point was to emphasize familiar earthly roles and activities; Luther's ideas made service to God exceedingly concrete and readily available to believers of all sorts.

One of the most far-reaching results of the Protestant Reformation (in both its Lutheran and Reformed or Calvinist aspects) was this raising up of earthly roles and duties as having great value in God's eyes precisely *because* they were part of the world that God created and was now involved in, the world for which Christ died and which one day he would bring to fulfillment. No longer was celibacy held up as the highest form of Christian living. Instead, marriage and having and raising children were praised—also for clergy. No longer was withdrawal from the ordinary world seen as an especially righteous thing to do. Instead, occupations and other forms of involvement in daily life in ways that helped to feed, clothe, and shelter people and keep the society functioning in just and civil ways were said to be the most appropriate arenas of living for Christians.

In the rather static peasant society of early sixteenth-century Germany, Luther's focus was on people serving God by carrying out the duties that they *already had* as a result of their stations in society and their roles there. His point was *not* to bless the status quo, however, but to point out that there is a divine calling available to every believer, old and young, rich and poor, wherever they were or wherever they might go, whatever they were or whatever they might become. This often has been misunderstood, leading some people to claim that especially Luther's view of earthly vocation is static and has no relevance in the pluralistic and rapidly changing modern world, or that it is wrong because it leads Christians into an uncritical conservatism and a passive acceptance of the status quo (as has been the case for some Lutherans ever since the Reformation, although it has been less true for Calvinists). Being aware of these

criticisms is important in constructing a more credible understanding of the Christian's earthly calling.[6]

Christian Vocation Today

While the purpose of this essay is to show the theological importance of the relationship of justification and vocation, not least because of the difficulty Lutherans themselves have had in speaking of good works and the law. The category of vocation is a helpful vehicle for such speaking.

One of the greatest values of Luther's thinking on vocation is his insistence that vocation properly is part of the "first article" (of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds), that is, of the doctrine of divine creation. People are called by God to love their fellow *creatures* in all the places and activities in which they are involved, precisely by doing what their roles and situations require or make possible in relation to what is needed in those places. There is not necessarily anything peculiarly "Christian" about either the actions or the roles; rather, they are human and creaturely (and in that sense are profoundly Christian). A believer will know that the call is from God, but the actions and responses may be the same for believers and unbelievers alike. Some people are better at certain things, whether or not they are believers. Some people are wealthier or more talented or better educated or more compassionate and so they may be more effective at getting neighbors loved than others might be. Here a non-believer may accomplish just as much as or more than a believer; and in one sense God doesn't care (if we can speak that way) because God's concern in terms of the creation is the good of the neighbor. Or, the believer may in fact be more effective in doing good—but it may not be because of faith or Christian insight but because of the *creaturely* gifts and accomplishments of the believer. The point is that at the level

of life in this present age we should be able to speak of doing good works and works that are in accord with God's law in *positive* ways.

This is not to say that there are not some actions that are peculiarly Christian. Nor is it to say that Christian faith has no effect on doing good works and keeping the law. Of course, there are things that only Christians will do or can be expected or commanded to do. Bearing witness to God in Christ in all the forms that may take is surely something only for Christians. Jesus' teachings that go far beyond anything required by the law, such as turning the other cheek, denying oneself, loving one's enemies, going the second mile, and forgiving seventy times seven, are the sorts of things that are said only to his followers. God's law for *all* people does not require, nor will one's roles and places of responsibility usually ask for, such inordinate forms of obedience. Some non-believers might do such things, of course, but we would not necessarily expect this of non-believers even though we could expect it of other Christians.

If our vocation is part of God's creaturely work, does faith have anything to do with our doing good works and keeping the law? Some Lutherans seem to have separated salvation so far from creation that they have been led to deny any role for faith or the gospel in life in the present world of law.[7] Certainly faith is not the only factor involved, since both the nature of the action and the need for it are primarily creaturely things available to be known and addressed by anyone. But faith can be a factor in several ways: Faith helps believers to see that *God* is calling us to act through the needs of someone else or a situation. Faith will believe certain things about what is *good* and *right* that will be guides to determining what is good for the neighbor. Faith may *motivate* Christians and overcome their timidity or laziness or uncertainty. Faith surely will give believers the *freedom* to act as needed without undue fear of failure or falling into sin, because they trust in God's forgiveness. Faith may give *courage* and *vision* to Christians

because of their hope in God's promises, even when things seem hopeless. Faith will drive believers to *prayer* in the midst of any and all activities of daily life—prayer for God's help, God's guidance in decisions, God's presence in every time of trouble, God's correction, God's peace, or anything else that is needed from the One who provides for all creatures. And faith should give Christians a *critical perspective* (including the awareness of sin) as they encounter demands, different sorts of people, and varieties of situations.

Does faith make believers better persons than non-believers? Probably not, since God also is giving life each day to the non-believer and God's law (or will) is guiding the non-believer also (cf. Rom. 12). It is mostly arrogance that leads Christians to claim that faith makes believers better than those who lack faith. It could be, however, that an individual believer may be more committed and effective in her calling than she would have been without faith. On the human, historical level growth in all sorts of areas (other than righteousness before God) is possible. Luther says that increasing in "civil righteousness" is something that is expected of Christians. At one place he even writes that the law justifies people "on earth." [8] They are justified, that is, in the eyes of their fellow human beings—which is not at all unimportant for their neighbors' well being.

In light of this, the preacher informed by the doctrine of justification by faith may call or exhort her people to do good works as long as she makes it clear that this is not in order to gain or maintain their salvation or righteousness before God but instead is because God commands such works for the good of the neighbor or of society or of the earth. It is only wrong to preach good works *as the way of salvation*; just as it is only wrong to preach for faith if faith is used as an excuse to avoid good works for the neighbor or if faith is portrayed in such a way that it

becomes something that the hearer must achieve or produce. (E.g., “You must believe!” This turns faith into the “work” of belief and justification by faith in Christ into self-justification.)

Vocation and Salvation

Fourth, sometimes it might seem as if devout Christians are disappointed not to be able to contribute to their salvation. Not that they are overly proud but that in their thankfulness for all they have received they want their works for others to be of worth to God as well—and not only because God cares about the others who are helped by their works but because of the genuine good that the person of faith intentionally has done. Such feelings are understandable, but it seems that God has something far more radical in mind for our works to “contribute” to our salvation. This point often is missed in presentations on vocation, yet it is present at least implicitly in the apostle Paul’s writings and explicitly in Luther.

Here we must retrieve the language from Galatians and Romans about dying to the law, dying with Christ, and being crucified with him so that he will live in us, we will walk in newness of life, and in Christ there will be a “new creation.” This is familiar language but it is also language that is difficult to understand and easy to misunderstand. When it is combined with the words of Jesus to those who would be his disciples—that they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him—it is not difficult to see why a whole system of life-denying, world-fleeing, deprivational spirituality could grow up among very serious Christians, nor is it hard to see why modern critics have an easy target in lampooning Christianity as psychologically disastrous or at least wrong-headed to most ways of thinking.

Martin Luther knew both the glories and the problems with this spiritual system from his days in the monastery but also as it was practiced to some extent by the laity, who were

encouraged to imitate Christ's sufferings in some of these same ways. At the same time Luther knew that Christians needed to take seriously the biblical teaching that the Christian is to be crucified with Christ, to die with Christ, to suffer with Christ, and to bear one's cross. In each case, Luther notes, just as they were for Jesus, these are things *inflicted on the Christian*, not things that the Christian *does*. The error of the sort of penitential piety described above is that it turns dying with Christ, cross-bearing, and the others into a human project for becoming righteous. Yet if we are justified by faith, this makes no sense. Our business is to serve God as faithful creatures, not to become spiritual zealots. If we are preoccupied with finding ways to deny ourselves, with seeking out suffering and punishment, and with finding pain-inflicting, death-dealing "crosses" to bear, we will be of no earthly good to ourselves or to anyone else. In fact, we likely will be harmful to ourselves and to our neighbors, not to mention that we will have no sense of humor! This is a far cry from "For freedom Christ has set us free."

Luther added one more Pauline idea: the insight that one of the things that the law does is put us to death (Gal. 3:19). Understood in terms of the eschatological overlap of the old age and the promised new age, Luther speaks of our "old self" being put to death by the law. How does this relate to vocation? Luther and most of the other reformers, in line with much of the Christian tradition, thought of God's law not only as being contained in explicit commandments revealed in the Bible but also as being virtually identical with "natural law," which "God has inscribed on the soul of each [person]."[9] In this way, they could say that God's will for the creation is built into the creatures, so that even unbelievers know God's will (to some extent, at least) in their hearts. For example, the reformers claimed that all people know that stealing is wrong, even without knowing the Ten Commandments. To be caught stealing and to be

punished for it also serves to reveal sin to the one who has done it because God's law is known by all.[10]

In one's calling, as a teacher, for example, it is obvious that the teacher is to teach what is good and true and helpful, to work hard to help the students learn, and to evaluate them honestly and fairly. God's law as it is built into the teacher and also into school policy and leadership urges the teacher to do these things for the neighbors' good.[11] Yet, as every teacher knows, it is not easy to live up to these expectations even when we agree completely with them. Our failures—not being well prepared, being irritable with students and preventing their learning from us, our failure to encourage students at crucial times, or our smug satisfaction in giving an arrogant student a poor grade—not to mention even more serious violations of our trust as teachers—will accuse us and discipline us (whether in ourselves or through the words of someone else) and in the long run will condemn us. Luther understood this as part of the "daily dying" of the old sinful self (that self whose trust is only in the self). Luther's point in this is not to be morbid or pessimistic but to point out that *God's Spirit will see to putting to death our old sinful self in the course of our new self's devotion to the duties of our callings*. We don't have to work at this; the Holy Spirit uses the law to do it to us. We don't have to look for crosses to bear; they will be laid on us, Luther says, in the demands of our roles and responsibilities.

The amazing thing in all of this is the economy of God's working in and among us: the very same work that the new self does gladly in response to the command to love the neighbor, or simply because the neighbor's need is recognized, is at the same time the means by which God disciplines and kills (slowly or quickly) the old sinful self that only serves the neighbor for what is in it for himself. In our experience, to be sure, our old and new selves are thoroughly intertwined and we normally serve God's creatures for a mixture of good and bad reasons. The

point is that God is glad to see the neighbor loved and if some aspect of our sinful self is disciplined in the process, so much the better since God's intention is a new creation.

Conclusion: The Importance of Vocation for the Doctrine of Justification

A vibrant concept of the Christian's earthly vocation not only is a natural and useful way of expounding the place of good works as they flow from being justified by faith alone. It is that, but if that were all it would be of practical or ethical importance but not of theological importance, which would mean that it could be omitted or something else could serve in its place. The claim of this essay is that idea of the Christian's divine calling in the world also addresses key problems that are directly related to the *theological* understanding of justification.

1. Humans have a propensity to confuse law and gospel, to preach and practice works of law as a way to righteousness—thereby turning the gospel also into law and losing the promise of the forgiveness of sins, of life as new creation even now by faith, and eternal salvation. By connecting works of law with our callings in God's creation, for the good of creatures in the present age, works are praised and commended but yet are kept apart from justification. Also, being engaged in all the duties and challenges of our callings will not only keep us fully occupied but it will empty us, making room for God to create faith in us through the gospel.

2. Historically, among Protestants and especially among Lutherans, justification has been subject to several serious misunderstandings. One is anti-nomianism, which assumes that if salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, apart from works, then the law no longer is of any relevance for the Christian. That "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom. 10:4) is taken to mean that doing good works is not something that applies to the Christian. How one could draw such a conclusion may seem very puzzling, but the widespread phenomenon of "lazy Lutherans" ever

since the Reformation is an example of this anti-nomianism. The fear that many contemporary Lutheran preachers have of ever being caught preaching a word of law may be another example. The concept of earthly vocation, where the law is part of daily life and we serve it either gladly in faith or grudgingly, since we cannot avoid it because of the duties and demands that confront us in our roles, offers a way of thinking in accord with justification by faith alone that does not fall into anti-nomianism.

3. Still another problem to which justification by faith has been prone is that of legalism. This may seem surprising at first, in light of the previous discussion of anti-nomianism. But legalism seems to come about in reaction to the idea that God's justifies us freely the word of pardon for our sins, altogether apart from any worthiness on our part. In certain types of confessional Lutheranism there has been so much emphasis on the gospel being a word of totally undeserved forgiveness, in which we are "reckoned" or counted as righteous even though in fact we are not, that quite rightly there has been little interest in whether there is actual change of any sort in the lives of those who believe that word. However, some Christians whose response is more dramatic or visible—Pietism may serve as an example—have tended to make their own experience into a new form of law that is then expected of all believers to attest to the presence of true faith. Suddenly the law has become part of the way to righteousness—sometimes the most important part, despite having begun with the gospel in all its doctrinal purity. The "realism" of Christian vocation, which makes no claim to contribute to our righteousness before God, but which still demands something of all believers, can protect the doctrine of justification from legalism.

4. Another problem into which justification by faith apart from works has fallen quite frequently involves bolstering the total graciousness of God's saving work by magnifying the

sinfulness of human beings in order to be absolutely sure that no one could ever do a meritorious work. While we perhaps can understand the intent of doing this, it involves one in denying the continuing goodness of God's creative work and making sin more important than creation. Also, on the experiential level, over-emphasizing sin leads to believers erroneously thinking that the only divine truth about humans is that we are totally worthless. The doctrine of vocation takes sin with great seriousness, both in its awareness of the reality of sin in every aspect of created reality and in its insistence in the need for the sinful self to be put to death. And it takes God's continuing creative work so seriously that it recognizes that even while sin leaves no aspect of our being untouched (thus, we cannot be saved by works) there is still the capacity to do good in terms of life in God's world. In the call to be God's co-workers on earth the doctrine of vocation clings firmly to justification by faith alone while also being true to the classic doctrinal teaching that humanness (even apart from faith) is essentially good and sin (although very serious) is *not* essential to what it means to be human.

5. Finally, in the twentieth century especially, with the supremacy of individualism among most people in the Western world, along with existential philosophy, which became an important partner in the theological renewal of Protestantism, the doctrine of justification often has been understood primarily in individualistic and interior terms, with little relevance for public, historical, and moral concerns. Most North Americans seem to agree that religion is a private matter and an individualistic view of justification easily gets absorbed into such a mindset. The doctrine of vocation, with its robust and explicit claim on every aspect of life in the activities of the world, provides a powerful protection against such a misunderstanding. And it does so without falling into some sort of narrowly "Christian" politics or business or lifestyle because of its emphasis on God's law in the context of God's ongoing creative activity. At the

same time, it does not dissolve the personal aspect of faith, which the doctrine of justification requires, since it understands persons not as autonomous individuals but as persons-in-creation and its communities and structures.

For all of these reasons, earthly vocation as a corollary of the doctrine of justification must be seen to be of theological importance for believers generally as well as for theologians who stand in the confessional tradition that has as its chief article the teaching that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, apart from works.

NOTES

[1] The relationship of early Christianity to both its Jewish origins and its Roman surroundings long has been a topic of research and debate among scholars. While this essay attempts to be informed by and fair to both the biblical texts and the scholarly discussion, decisions made will not be supported by constant references to secondary sources. Two helpful introductions to the contemporary debate are in the Summer 2000 issues of the theological journals *Interpretation* and *Word & World*. The prejudice (a "fruitful prejudice," I hope) of the author of this essay is that it is most helpful to understand a topic or claim of a biblical writing in the context of the whole book (in the present case, Galatians and Romans) and in light of the way that the author develops his case to support his conclusions. Added to this, of course, must be attention to understanding the biblical language as it is rooted in its linguistic and religious contexts as well as awareness of what a biblical author says in other writings that might shed light on the writing in question. With Galatians and Romans that can be particularly helpful, since Paul probably wrote them in fairly close temporal proximity and both books address many of the same matters.

[2] An obvious example is turning Paul's criticism of life under the law into a reason for anti-Semitism instead of seeing it as an accusation of our own attempts at self-justification.

[3] This point is made in the very helpful article by James Boyce, "The Poetry of the Spirit: Willing and Doing in Galatians 5 and 6, *Word & World* 20 (Summer 2000) 290-298, esp. 293-296.

[4] A classic essay on the history of the understanding of Christian vocation is that of Robert L. Calhoun, in *Work and Vocation*, ed. John O. Nelson (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), ch. 2.

[5] In addition to drawing on Luther's own writings in describing his concept of vocation, I am also influenced by Gustaf Wingren's *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957 [Swedish orig. 1942]). For more resources on Christian Vocation see the list at the end of these notes.

[6] To show that Luther's point is not to bless the status quo it is helpful to read his comments on 1 Cor. 7, in which Paul's counsel to the Christians at Corinth is that they should remain in the state in which they were called to faith. Luther used Paul's comments here (1 Cor. 7:17, 20, 24), among other reasons, to show why the word "calling" can be used about Christians' earthly roles, but Luther's critics emphasize what they see as Luther's (and Paul's?) bias toward the status quo in the insistence that people should not change their roles. However, in the context of 1 Cor. Paul says this both because he believes the end-time is expected soon (7:29) and so changing roles wouldn't make much sense for most people (although he allows it when their present state in some way is a hindrance to faithfulness); and because different roles are of no consequence before God when it comes to righteousness (and here he uses the phrase that is also in Galatians—"neither circumcision counts for anything nor circumcision" 7:19). Luther does not disagree but *his* main point is that Christians do not have to go to a monastery to serve God but can do so in the roles and stations in which they find themselves or acquire in some way. LW 28:3-56, esp. 39-47.

[7] See, e.g., Karl Hertz's examples of such a drastic separation of the "two kingdoms" in his *Two Kingdoms, One World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) ch. 4.
[8] WA 40/1:209; LW 26:117.
[9] These are the words of Luther's closest colleague, Philip Melanchthon, who in the same passage says that "a natural law is a common judgment to which all men alike assent" because God has inscribed it in them. LW 45:127n.
[10] In addition to locating the law's accusing use in people's vocations, Luther of course also spoke of the *preaching* of the law, which reveals sin and accuses the hearer (for not having kept the law fully or at all); and even more, preaching the law condemns the sinful self and arouses hatred for the law-giver and finally sentences the hearers to death as the wages of sin. While this may be nothing new to preachers of today, it is nevertheless a very complex enterprise. In the end, the preacher cannot control how God's word of law (or gospel) is *heard*; even if it is intended to accuse (or, in the case of the gospel, to create faith) there is no guarantee that the preacher's intention will be realized. (This fact is the other side of the theological point that the preacher does not use the law; the Holy Spirit does.) The very same words can be heard as law by one person and as gospel by another, depending on the person's situation in relation to God and on the Spirit's use of the word for the particular hearer. When "Jesus died for your sins" is heard by the guilt-ridden or despairing person as great good news, it is probably in accord with the preacher's intention; that someone else hears it only as accusation and condemnation ("I must be a terrible sinner if the Son of God had to be crucified for me.") may come as a surprise. It can work the same way with a word that sounds like a command to most people. For example, "Follow me!" sounds like law, demanding that we do something; but to one who is drifting or has no options these words could be gospel—Christ's good news that he has not given up on us but has plans for us.

There is no need to set the law's killing function in preaching against the same function in one's calling. In fact, it is important to keep both of these together so that, on the one hand, the preaching of the law is related to actual life situations in vocation rather than only being part one of a sermon that brings the gospel in part two without the preached law actually having done anything to the hearer; and, on the other hand, so that the explicit word of God's law is brought to bear in our vocational experience so that we have a faithful understanding of what is happening in the burdens and challenges there.
[11] Because people are finite and also sinful, the way in which God's law is expressed in actual human beings and policies and laws will always fall short of being identical with God's will. One of the tasks of people in their callings will be to exercise their critical skills to see problems and work for corrections of those places with policies and practices are not serving God's creatures well. Christians under Christendom have tended to be much too uncritical of society's norms and structures both in their earthly callings and in the ways that the Christian message itself has been accommodated to the culture.