



Women and Vocation: Co-Creating with God

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LUTHER'S TEACHING AND PRACTICE OF VOCATION HAS IMPACTED WOMEN'S LIVES dramatically, but history's jury is at odds over the results. Should we praise the doctor and his doctrine or vilify them? Is Lutheran vocation a liberator from oppressive monastic ideals or an oppressive power upholding the tired and sometimes dangerous traditions of the status quo? It has been used both to affirm female sexuality and to encourage women to stay in abusive relationships. It has been seen both as empowerment for boundary-breaking ministry and as bondage to patriarchy's yoke.¹ Which is it, really? How does a Lutheran understanding of vocation affect women and shape their ministry?

I. LUTHER ON VOCATION

It is not that this is such a commonly known teaching, although it is simple enough. I remember one Sunday School teacher recruitment season when the harvest was particularly meager, and I had become numb to the guilty explanations of those who opted out — until I heard Mary's. "Mary, would you like to teach Sunday School?" "Oh, pastor, I would love to do the Lord's work, but I'm really too busy being a foster grandparent at the hospital." Oh, Mary, you didn't know it,

¹For the critique, see Merry Wiesner, "Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys," in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 123-137. For affirmation see J. Bethke Elshtain, "Luther *Sic*-Luther *Non*!" *Theology Today* 43:2 (1986) 155-68.

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but you were most certainly doing the Lord's work, as holy as any. You needn't wring your conscience for your defense.

For her, as for many, taking care of kids was viewed as ordinary, common, "secular" work. According to Luther's lights, it was also Christian vocation, although Mary wouldn't dream of framing it that way for herself. Too bad. For we women routinely trivialize our own work, whether traditional or pioneering. My hunch is that a certain mindfulness of "work" (broadly conceived) as vocation could be a powerful and creative remedy to undervaluing our lives, and ourselves.

Luther's approach to vocation is quite simple and direct, although it up-ended medieval understandings. If man or woman wanted to do "the Lord's work" in the medieval church, they left the farm and kitchen to others and entered into monastic life. (Men had one more option: go on a crusade.) For the most part, Christian vocation was defined as prayer. Other work was profane. In effect, sacred space was limited to the church, the monastery. Luther shifted the notion of sacred space when he affirmed that God's presence and work was in the world—behind a plow, in the nursery, at the kitchen table. In his explanation to the first commandment in *The Large Catechism*, Luther embraces the sacramentality of creation.

Creatures are the only hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, God gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant, and...gives grain and all kinds of fruits from the earth for our nourishment....Therefore, this way of receiving good through God's creatures is not to be disdained.²

Through our ordinary tasks in daily life, then, God is working as if behind a mask to renew creation and, above all, to serve the neighbor. The holy is in the midst of creation. Therefore, there is no need to go in search of vocation. It is where one already lives, in one's God-given "station" (not employment) in life as parent, child, teacher, builder, CEO—and we might add citizen and earthling, too. Luther urged people to stay where they were and fulfill the duties of their station, thereby upholding creation and serving others.³

Put in Luther's context, we can begin to see where the kettle meets the fire for women. On the one hand, the ability of a woman to live out Christian vocation by marrying, raising children, and managing a household was good news for most of the women of the day. The full blessings of the church and one's confidence in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit could only help the difficult life of medieval women. Family life was no longer profane, nor a second best way to love God, but at the very heart of God's will for women. And Luther's affirmation of marriage blessed the goodness of sexuality just as profoundly as the monastic ideal questioned it.

However, with Luther's repudiation of monastic life was lost the one sanctioned alternative to marriage and childbearing for women. The convent was in part a refuge from the hard labor of family life, the maternal exhaustion of a house

²*The Large Catechism in The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 368.

³For a thorough overview of vocation, see Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

full of children and the prospect of more, the economic dependence of women on men. Monastic life offered women a community of women, opportunity for solitude, reflection, some education, and different ways to exercise leadership. The loss of this option—and the exclusive embrace of marriage and children as a result—is the source of many of the arguments with Luther’s work in vocation.

A sustained critique is offered by Merry Wiesner. Using the Mary and Martha story (Luke 10:38-42)—a classic vocation text—Wiesner argues that “for Luther, the ideal woman in the home is Martha, seeing to the preparation of the food and overseeing the servants, not Mary, trying to understand Christ’s teachings better.”⁴ To be sure, Luther thought of the role of mother and wife as part of God’s order of creation for women. It was according to woman’s nature (we’re the ones with the wombs, after all); monastic life was not. It gets worse. Luther shared typical sixteenth-century misogynistic views of women which found theological expression. “If a woman forsakes her office and assumes authority over her husband, she is no longer doing her own work, for which she was created, but a work that comes from her own fault and from evil. For God did not create this sex for ruling, and therefore they never rule successfully.”⁵

Yet Luther is famously and fortuitously multivoiced, and in this matter gives women another way through. Rather than disparage the role of Mary, as Wiesner argues, he in fact honors it and applies it to all women, and men. Speaking at first from the perspective of Jesus, Luther says,

You, Martha, are anxious about many things; you are busy. It is fine to work, to manage house and home, to be a burgomaster, to be a servant, to be a pastor. [Note the female and male roles here. Martha is every Christian. So is Mary.] But this will not attain the goal. Mary has chosen and found the right thing to do. She is sitting at My feet and listening to what I am saying....Later on Mary will also do what you are doing now, solicitous Martha. That will all be attended to in due season....[Here Luther begins to address his congregation directly:] Let Martha go into the kitchen and wash dishes; let Martha put the house in order and you become a Mary....For Mary bears in mind that she should not seek after works and merits but rather hang on Christ’s lips and believe Christ’s word.⁶

It seems that the death of this Mary has been exaggerated! To be sure, Luther does change the emphasis in the Mary and Martha story. No longer is Mary the ideal of contemplative monasticism, a common interpretation of the day. Luther gets her out of the convent and into the home, where she was to begin with, and where she becomes the model of evangelical faith for all people. He does not cut off the fullness of the gospel from women’s embrace, but describes the dance of faith and daily work, and the call of women and men alike to catch its rhythm.

It can be a creative and liberating dance. Vocation is a matter not of gospel but of law, where Christians exercise evangelical freedom. Because salvation is not at stake, they can take considerable risks for the sake of the neighbor. Indeed, they must, for they serve the neighbor as “little Christs.” Luther’s language here again

⁴Wiesner, “Luther and Women,” 128.

⁵*Notes on Ecclesiastes* (1526), LW 15:30; quoted by Wiesner in “Luther and Women,” 126.

⁶*Lectures on John’s Gospel*, LW 23:247.

is inclusive: women and men alike are called to be Christ to those in need. So, we women bring all our resources to bear – we pray and think and ponder scripture and consult others and remember experience and use our gifts and training – and get to work as God’s co-creators in the task of world-building and people-serving.

Luther’s revolution was to move the locus of sacred space out of the monastery and into the world. How ironic that, for women, our sacred space was just as cloistered when it was confined to the home. Old arguments which stuck us there, based on the order of creation, cannot be the last word theologically. In Christ we are a new creation. The Spirit is still making all things new, including cultural norms of “engendered” expectations. It is only the call to love the neighbor which directs the shape of vocation in the world. Realizing the full implications of Luther’s shift of sacred space, then, means affirming the sacramentality of the world and acknowledging finally that the living room is not “by nature” more sacred for women than the board room or the chancel. Through each, the neighbor and creation can be served by “little Christs” in freedom, risk, and passion.

II. OUTCOMES OF LUTHER’S VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY

These theoretical considerations are important. But another way to get at the question of women and vocation is to look at actual outcomes; that is, how Lutheran teaching and practice of vocation has impacted the lives of real women, especially women with the least power. Acknowledging that multiple cultural, economic, and historical factors are at play here, it is nonetheless helpful to seek out the likely results of Luther’s teaching.

What do we see? For starters, that the closing of the convent doors to protestant women did mean that no valued vocational option remained for those who were single – for over 400 years. How has this shaped our sexual politics and self-understanding? Single women, those who are married without children, and single parents have all been seen as incomplete, and never in that state by choice. Is this still true? Are these women still considered “unnatural”? We do see greatly enhanced options for and images of single and childless/childfree women through the changes brought about by the latest incarnation of the women’s movement. But this remains an issue, if we judge only by the psychic and social pain of women struggling with infertility.

What else do we see? We see women being counseled to stay in abusive marriages. The sanctity of marriage and the biblical denunciation of divorce play their parts here, but so does an overly rigid application of the counsel to stability in vocation (“Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called,” 1 Cor 7:20). Although Luther’s use of this verse in his *Corinthians commentary* of 1523 emphasizes the freedom of the Christian (there is no need to leave home for the monastery), he also used it to affirm that one’s freedom before Christ has nothing to do with one’s external situation of bondage. In this connection, Luther criticized the peasants for their unwillingness to endure suffering: “You have heard...that the gospel teaches Christians to endure and suffer wrong and to pray to God in every need. You, however, are not willing to suffer, but like heathen

you want to force the rulers to conform to your impatient will.”⁷ This logic that upholds stability over justice would also keep women in abusive marriages. And when Luther argues from the order of creation, as he did with regard to women’s leadership above, the status quo is greatly empowered, indeed made sacrosanct. To change one’s station, except to uphold faith (which was Luther’s rationale for urging monks and nuns to leave the monasteries), appears to subvert God’s will.

This is a serious problem for women who suffer abuse at the hands of their husbands or partners. In my pastoral practice I have encountered too many women who have been counseled by pastors to remain in abusive marriages. It is sometimes presented to them as the super-Christian thing to do: sacrificially to give up their own “happiness” (safety!) for the sake of the children, or even for the abusive husband. One woman was advised to stay in order to help her husband’s newfound sobriety, even though his abusive behavior continued. Women who are most concerned about doing God’s will are most susceptible to this counsel. To be sure, there is no direct line between Luther’s work on vocation and domestic abuse, but a frozen vocational ethic, which would define women’s role only in relation to others, counsel staying in a marriage above all other considerations, define suffering exclusively as proper Christian sacrifice, and limit women’s economic independence, feeds domestic abuse and is morally untenable.

The law of love is only marginally helpful here. The abused woman could leave her husband in good conscience for the sake of her children, as an act of love for them and in full congruence with her vocation as mother. But what about leaving the marriage for her own sake? Self-consideration cannot be secondary in such instances. We must invoke the inherent dignity of the person, recall that God’s intention in marriage does not include suffering abuse, and support actions which protect the physical and emotional safety of mother and children alike. Luther’s insistence that vocation exists solely for the neighbor’s sake cannot be understood as requiring neglect or abuse of the self. We have yet to plumb the wisdom of the great commandment (Matt 22:37-38) which affirms the unity of the love of God, neighbor, and self.

Sacrificial love, however, is not an oxymoron, nor a patriarchal manipulation. In the logic of vocation, love of neighbor remains the touchstone and may involve sacrifice, while yet embracing this unity of God-other-and-self-love. Of course we must acknowledge that in the sixteenth century, counsel to endure suffering and stay put may well have been an argument from necessity as much as a conclusion from the cross. Women and children on their own faced uncertain if not dire prospects, economically and socially. But it is not so for us. We must clarify the doctrine of vocation and the language of Christian love so that neither can be used to support any kind of abuse.

What else do we see developing from vocation? A third set of outcomes for women points in another direction. For some women broke through cultural conditioning, not in spite of but because of their understanding of vocation. These

⁷*Admonition to Peace: A Reply to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants in Swabia* (1525), LW 46:35.

chose service, sometimes apart from marriage, through deaconess communities and mission fields. The first American Lutheran woman missionary to India, Dr. Anna Kugler, pushed to get her medical degree in order better to serve the needs of the women there. At the turn of the century, talented women were sought out and trained to serve as medical and educational missionaries “for the betterment and freedom of womankind throughout the world” (Augustana Synod). But “ordinary” women in congregations made their mark, too. Women’s missionary societies were taken seriously by men when they began to raise most of the church’s money for missions and development.⁸

These outcomes point to the strength of women and the lively attraction of Luther’s dynamic of vocation: since we are saved by grace, we can be freed in our vocation to take great risks on behalf of our neighbor, cultural norms be damned. Of course, these were churchly vocations. Living for Jesus brought out great courage. The challenge before us is to push through to the full implications of Luther’s doctrine, which would inform us that teaching confirmation and voting and changing diapers and building houses and mayoring cities are each aspects of partnership with God. In each we can serve our neighbor. In each we can sustain creation. Then perhaps as great a courage and perseverance might be marshalled among us for the tasks at hand in earth-healing and peacemaking and community-building.

One who embodied this holy energy was Ruth Youngdahl Nelson, mother of the year, pastor’s wife, citizen, lawbreaker. She peppered her representatives in Congress with letters advocating nuclear disarmament. She was arrested in Puget Sound doing civil disobedience to stop a Trident nuclear missile-bearing submarine in her grandmotherly years. Of course she baked brownies and raised her brood and had guests over for dinner—and for her it was all cut from the same cloth: serving the beloved creation of God. It was clear to her that the status quo must sometimes be seriously challenged, out of love for neighbor and creation.

Yet most of the time our lives, choices, and work are prosaic. We’re not out in a dingy in Puget Sound taking on evil. We are thumping melons or chauffeuring kids or figuring out the checkbook or listening to the boss’s new project on the job. If we have a job. And this is where one of the most quoted descriptions of vocation falls short. Frederick Buechner, a favorite enlivener of sermons, describes vocation this way: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”⁹ Ah, yes! What a gift when such a meeting occurs! When our passion and joy can feed the world’s needs and become our life’s work. But it doesn’t always happen. As Gail McGrew Eifrig, English professor at Valparaiso University, says,

Buechner’s wonderful sentence is poetically satisfying, but it fails to provide any lasting nourishment. Who would not want to be where “deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”? But most people spend most of their time working

⁸Lani Johnson, *Led By the Spirit: A History of Lutheran Church Women* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Church Women, 1980) 12-13.

⁹*Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) 95.

at jobs that keep them alive, and for most of them, being a source of blessing in your work seems scarcely relevant, may even be a joke.¹⁰

Eifrig's critique points to Luther's strength, that work does not have to be satisfying or joyful or even chosen in order to be vocation. Not that God wills drudgery or that oppressive working conditions are acceptable. But the reality of life is that its deep gladness is fleetingly glimpsed. The holy beauty of the newborn gives way to the pooppy screamer every time. To affirm fully the holy in creation, to participate in that holiness through our vocation, calls for an embrace of the screamers, the struggles, and the boredom. Heaven knows, the zillions of ditsy duties that go along with parenting do not demand the best use of personal gifts. Sometimes our work is simply sacrificial. Perhaps the assurance that picking Cheerios off the floor really *is* a holy task—keeping chaos at bay—can shore up maternal mental health. A comic spirituality of the absurd, perhaps, but as a hedge against maternal depression, it works just fine.

What may indeed lie behind the deep gladness of the most fortunate of us in vocation is not the primary experience of joy, but of suffering. Elizabeth O'Connor, writer and staff member of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., notes that Alexander Graham Bell's mother and wife were both deaf and that Thomas Edison was afraid of the dark. She comments:

At the center of our pain, we glimpse a fairer world and hear a call. When we are able to keep company with our own fears and sorrows, we are shown the way to go....Hope begins to grow and we are summoned to the work that will give us a feeling of wellness, and make possible that which we envision.¹¹

Check this out. Ask people with some passion for their calling how they came to be doing what they are doing. Don't be surprised to find the geneticist whose son died of a genetic disease or the theologian whose first big quest was figuring out what God had to do with the death of her father. Vocational vision arises out of our deep-in-the-flesh encounters with real life, cruciform life, holy life. And Luther's doctrine of vocation can be a helpful bearer of this vision. As it urges us to discern blessing and partnership with God in our ordinary tasks, it can support the meaning of our lives. As its energy draws us to the neighbor's needs, it can help us break through boundaries of expectation and empower bold loving.

This year the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the ordination of women in the United States. The dynamics of the decision sparkle with holy energy as God's call to some women has been given room to move more freely in the church. But this holy energy is properly claimed by all women. For it roams through all the sacred space of the world, calling us to be in cahoots with God to keep chaos at bay and to nurture creation. Wherever we live, whatever our job, we are called to be co-creators with God. ⊕

¹⁰"Called Back Into the Darkness: A Response to Frederick Niedner," *The Cresset* 46/7 (May 1983) 16.

¹¹*Cry Pain, Cry Hope: Thresholds to Purpose* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 84-5.