



Vocation in a Post-Vocational Age

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I. THE PROBLEM: RELATING SUNDAY TO MONDAY

It is no secret that church members find great difficulty in relating their faith to everyday life. Several research reports given wide circulation document that problem.¹ Luther's teaching on vocation—that daily activities constitute the sphere of one's Christian vocation—apparently does not receive resounding affirmation by contemporary Christians. The doctrine that was greeted with such enthusiasm by the laity at the time of the Protestant Reformation as giving new meaning and structure to life is today a seeming relic of an earlier era for great numbers.

Luther's understanding of *Beruf* or calling was part and parcel of his recovery of the message of Scripture. These new insights were to bring a break with the penitential system of medieval Catholicism and were the basis of a renewed Christian faith and life which emerged in the reformed churches. Contrary to the medieval views of vocation which placed the monastic orders on a higher plane than ordinary Christians living in the world, Luther's teaching on "the calling" was liberating, giving new stature to the laity and providing new motivation, guidance, and significance to daily occupations. The Reformation was not simply a rejection of the papacy and the medieval formulations of the Catholic faith; it was a response to the positive, life-fulfilling teachings of the Reformers.

Against this backdrop, the widespread difficulty of contemporary Christians to relate their faith to daily activities seems appalling. It would appear that

¹Merton P. Strommen, Milo L. Brekke, Ralph C. Underwager, and Arthur L. Johnson, *A Study of Generations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 182, and *The Bulletin of Reports*, Lutheran Church in America Convention, Baltimore, Maryland, 1974. See in particular the Research Conclusion vis-à-vis the Theological Affirmations Study.

we live in a post-vocational age. The problem is not that people today find their work to be lacking in importance.² The issue is rather that Christians do not see the relationship between their work, other daily activities, and their faith. The purpose of this essay is to probe this problem and to assess the viability of Luther's teaching for today.

II. TEN CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

The problem of communicating Christian vocation today is complex. Several factors play a part. It is not possible to sort out in general which ones give the most trouble. Individual situations are different, and the difficulties are of different kinds. By their very nature, some tend to be fundamental, while others appear to be minor by comparison.

1. The original context in which vocation became so meaningful is no longer with us. Monasticism, far from being an important institution in our society, is so rare that it evokes curiosity. The vocational value system of medieval Catholicism has faded, and with it has gone some of the significance of Luther's teaching on the calling as a counterpoint.

2. The medieval world view has been replaced by a secular world view which omits reference to God in attempting to explain the world as it is or will become. Recent cosmogonies explain what happened in the immediate period following the Big Bang without apparent need for reference to God. Even the weather has become predictable and daily life has become rationalized within systems. The Christian doctrine of vocation made humankind a co-creator with God. With the omission of God in secular thought, humankind becomes the creator, not the junior partner with assignments from the Senior.

3. With God omitted from the world "out there," much contemporary religious thought limits God to that *a priori* given of religious consciousness so that meaningful talk about God is limited to the relationship of God to the psyche. God is a private matter limited to our insides. The concept of vocation out in the world does not have much relevance to a religion that is focused upon the human psyche.

4. The deeply embedded concept of America as a New Israel established on the basis of a covenant with God by our founding fathers, which gave us a national calling as a people, has been rejected by many as presumptuous.

5. Industrialism—with its methods of mass production—reduced the sense of individual participation to a minimum and negated for many the idea that their work could be a personal contribution, a gift to God and to others.

6. A secularized version of the Protestant vocational ethic, "the gospel of work," has gained wide cultural acceptance in capitalist societies. Some turn away from the Reformers' teaching on vocation since it appears to have become an acculturated ideological support for capitalist society. The early Protestant vocational formula that "diligence plus thrift equalled service to God" was

²*Work in America: The Decade Ahead*, ed. Clark Kerr and Jerome Rosow (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1979).

changed in the gospel of work (e.g., the Horatio Alger stories) to "diligence plus thrift equals success."³

7. Some of Luther's ideas related to "the calling" were applications for his time and place and are not immediately applicable to late twentieth century America. Luther's views on authority, for example, seem strange in a modern democracy. Likewise, organizational concepts of participatory management would appear to be excluded by Luther's emphasis upon each office sticking to its own knitting.

8. Much of the theological emphasis upon vocation in the last decades—as well as that which has come from the World Council of Churches—seems to equate Christian vocation to resolving "big issues." The emphasis in the Life and Work section of the modern ecumenical movement, for example, has been a deliberate effort to get individual Christians to exercise influence in society on such issues as peace and justice, because the influence of the church as church appears to have seriously diminished.⁴ Many Christians, however, do not think they have

the opportunity to exercise great influence, and thus tend to think that Christian vocation is primarily for Christians who sit in the seats of power.

9. America is pragmatic. Luther's understanding of the calling was part and parcel of his theological system. He did not seek to justify it on the grounds of its pragmatic value. The "calling" was an outgrowth of his relationship to God and was to be evaluated on the basis of faithfulness to God and not on the basis of its social usefulness.

10. Christian nurture of the rising generation has not put much emphasis upon teaching doctrine. Studies of Christian nurture indicate that nurture is almost exclusively conceived in terms of personal care and fellowship with other members.⁵ Theology, apart from differentiating one's church from the church down the block, does not appear to be significant for organizing one's life. Relating Sunday to Monday, however, does not happen without basic theological understanding and on-going theological thought.

Taken together, these ten factors go along way to explain the problem that contemporary Christians have in relating Sunday to Monday. The question is this, "Can Christian vocation *become* a significant doctrine guiding Christian life in this age?" In seeking to answer the question, it will also be important to ask whether Luther's doctrine of vocation is relevant to today's realities. Can it, for example, provide guidance for Christians seeking insight on personal, social, and political issues? To this latter question we turn first. We shall delineate briefly Luther's formula for answering the question of how God guides us in making decisions in everyday life. In addition, we shall describe the adjustments in vocational thought brought about by twentieth century industrial and political developments. Finally, we shall assess the potential of more intentional efforts to teach Luther's doctrine of vocation. Since the conventional value system is

³Robert S. Michaelsen, "The American Gospel of Work and the Protestant Doctrine of Vocation" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1951) 221-224.

⁴Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) Chapter 12.

⁵*Congregations As Nurturing Communities: A Study of Nine Congregations of the Lutheran Church in America*, Division for Parish Services, L.C.A., 1979.

not conducive to conveying the meaning of Christian vocation, success in developing a clear sense of Christian vocation today will be, in part, dependent upon intentional efforts in all of the nurturing structures—home, church, and school.

III. VOCATION TODAY: IS LUTHER'S TEACHING VIABLE?

The genius of the Reformation was its recovery of the insights of the New Testament. Those insights today continue to be the source by which human life is transformed. The future of vocation in a post-vocational age is inevitably tied to the continuing power of the gospel to evoke response. The strength of Luther's doctrine of vocation continues to lie in its derivation from biblical understandings of the relation between God, the believer, and the world. The dynamic of Luther's theology of vocation is rooted primarily in three basic concepts: (1) justification by grace through faith; (2) simultaneity, or living under law and gospel at the same time; and (3) on-going creation focused around the created "orders." We shall deal with them in that sequence.

It is important in understanding Luther to understand how all of his concepts relate to justification by grace through faith. This is the heart of his theology. Luther's thought does not fit a mechanically oriented organizational frame. It is organic in its character, like the petals of a flower which are tied to the central pistil and stamen. In Luther's thought, justification by grace through faith is the central, life-giving core. The key element of sacred secularity, for example, is the understanding that we can offer our service to others as a service to God no matter how ordinary it may be or how morally ambiguous the context in which the service is offered might be, because we are saved by grace, not works. Likewise, the motivation of service to others is traceable to grace, since it is only because of God's prior love expressed in forgiveness that the evangelical faith active in love is possible. Even creation itself is tied to the forgiveness of sins since it is in Christ, the source of forgiveness, that all things are made new. The sacraments are the visible means of the forgiveness of sins, and the authority of the Scriptures is the Word, the living Christ, through whom we receive the forgiveness of sins. This is the living center of Luther's thought.

The second concept basic to Luther's doctrine of vocation is simultaneity. Luther, following the New Testament, says that we are at the same time sinners and justified. We are at the same time the free lords of all, subject to none, and the servants of all, subject to all. At the same time as we experience the world as a system of natural phenomena, we experience it as a gift of God directly from his hand. We are, for Luther, at the same time under the law and the gospel. In fact, it is law and gospel interaction in each situation or context which creates change leading to justice and love. This is the tension of the New Testament expressed in the concepts "in, but not of," the "old Adam and the new Adam," and the "two aeons."

The third key concept in Luther's teaching on vocation is his idea of creation. His understanding of creation is expressed most fully in his commentaries on Genesis. On the one hand, Luther's view of creation is dynamic, because God continues his creation every day, making it new. For Luther, God is

at work changing the world, building community. In the process he sometimes finds it necessary to break down existing structures as well as to build up new ones. From this perspective Luther is a perennial progressive, always to be found on the leading edge.

On the other hand Luther's interpretation of Genesis developed the concept of the orders. For Luther they are three: the order of the family, the order of the state, and the order of the church, each having its own domain. For him, these orders are God's way of preserving humankind from chaos and they are therefore deserving of respect. To them Luther attributed authority, but that authority, in his thinking, is limited to the designated spheres of each. Thus the family, for example, has the prime responsibility for the education of children, and neither the state nor the church should assume prime responsibility or claim higher decision-making power than that which inheres with the father and mother. Likewise, the state does not have power over the church, nor does the church have power over the state. Each is responsible in its own realm, and each has check and balance responsibilities with the other. For example, the church has the responsibility to hold the state accountable to the law by which it is to be judged in its administration of justice. The family is held accountable through the preaching of law and gospel in the church and accountable to civil law by the state. The church hierarchy is held accountable

by the people and by the civil governing authority for its faithfulness to gospel and law respectively.⁶ The secret in understanding Luther is to hold forces in tension and interaction. For it is only as these polar opposites interact that the dynamic emerges. These, then, are the concepts which constitute the heart of Luther's vocational ethic.

Are these theological insights both faithful to biblical teaching on the one hand and capable of coming to grips with our need for guidance on the issues of this day on the other hand? Our contention in the preceding paragraphs is that Luther's concepts which determine his teaching on vocation are expressions of biblical teaching. The question remains, "Are these concepts adequate for guidance on current issues?" The next several paragraphs will seek to come to grips with that question.

When Luther's understanding of continuous creation, in which God and his children are co-creators, is linked with his understanding of the orders of creation as God's way of preserving humanity from chaos, we have the formula for addressing life in the world today. Two kingdom theology is faithful to scripture and is creatively relevant. God gives guidance in the creative interaction of law and gospel.

The dynamic of Luther's theology which retains both simultaneity and sequencing is interesting to compare with the dynamic in a thesis-antithesis-synthesis system. In the latter, the synthesis represents a compromise between

⁶The concept of the "orders" became particularly sensitive at the time of the Third Reich in Germany. Both Bonhoeffer in his *Ethics* and Thielicke in his *Theological Ethics* stress the importance of holding each of the orders accountable to each other as well as accountable to God. A church which remained silent in the presence of civil tyranny had abrogated its responsibilities of accountability. Luther's injunctions against tyranny show the mutual accountability he understood to inhere in the orders.

thesis and antithesis. In Luther's system, sequencing or growth, however evaluated, takes place at kairoic moments when there is readiness. What emerges as the new stage does not have the character of compromise, since the tension between the kingdoms or reigns remains. Simultaneity continues until the last day when this world shall be dissolved and a new heaven and earth shall succeed this world. In Luther's system the tension between the two aeons is never relieved by sequencing prior to the parousia. In a thesis-antithesis-synthesis system, the new synthesis or compromise relieves the tension until a new force rises which is in antithesis to the compromise.

Luther's insistence on the continuing validity of the Ten Commandments in the life of the Christian, along with his insistence that faith must be constantly active in love—working in co-creation with God to build community—represent a powerful motivation system for growth. It is a powerful push/pull leading us to move to constantly higher stages of development, personally and socially. The charge of quietism so frequently leveled against Lutheranism is not sustainable as a charge against Luther's theology. Orthodoxy with its intellectualizing of faith and Pietism with its emphasis upon personal rather than social behavior have predominated in much of Lutheran history. Quietistic Lutheranism stems from those distortions, not from Luther's thought itself.

During the last half century, particularly in the United States, the Lutheran Church has become more socially active. Significant social statements, developed on the basis of Luther's

vocational. theology, have been adopted by Lutheran Church bodies. Major church social statements include a theologically derived address of such contemporary issues as world order, racism, nuclear weapons, economic order, bio-ethics, and church-state relations. The strength and relevance of those social statements attest the continuing viability of Lutheran theological ethics. Luther's concept of vocation has successfully engaged twentieth century social issues.

IV. TWENTIETH CENTURY DEVELOPMENTS INFLUENCING VOCATIONAL THOUGHT

There are several new developments in the area of work and vocation in the last fifty years. These new developments have forced thoughtful Christians to think through their implications. The process of thinking things through has brought several up-dating adjustments in the vocational ethic.

1. *Unemployment.* One of the areas for new insight has been the understanding of unemployment in industrial society. The Puritans in England had understood structural unemployment, since they had experienced the uprooting of the peasantry through the British policy of land enclosures. In America, however, the opportunities on the frontier created a conventional understanding of unemployment which maintained that only ne'er-do-wells, inebriates, and the lazy were unemployed. Since the Great Depression and subsequent industrial depressions (such as in steel and autos), we have come to understand the structural character of most unemployment and have adjusted to that reality within our ethical judgments.

2. *Consumption.* Since the era of Luther and Calvin, diligence and thrift have been honored virtues in the Protestant understanding of work and voca-

tion. The exercise of diligence and thrift was extolled as the proper stewardship of time, talent, and treasure. However, after it became clear in the twentieth century that mass production would create abundance, it was obvious that the old virtues would need to be modified. If the abundance produced by the factories was to be purchased, the consumer habits that were tied to the concepts of thrift would need to be changed. Installment buying and the desire to possess more than the bare necessities were required. In order to keep people at work, it was necessary to keep consumer power active.

3. *Creative Leisure.* The new orientation to abundance produced a Christian rationale for living with plenty rather than in poverty, and it has called for a constructive use of leisure. Standards of living have become a goal to achieve, an obligation for those who are leaders in politics, business, and industry. The virtues of abundance are now generally extolled as producing what God intended for each person. Likewise, play has had to be reinterpreted for those schooled previously in the need to show constant diligence. Play has come to be accepted as a fitting end in itself, and study—along with social life—is considered to provide the opportunity for fulfillment through constructive use of leisure.

4. *Worker alienation.* One of the issues which the teaching on vocation was forced to engage already in the first half of the century, as a result of the development of mass production, is the negative character of quantification and mechanization. The large industrial organizations tended to lose the dimension of the personal in dealing with workers. The growth of worker alienation from the work process and from the larger society required prophetic address so that

the causes of depersonalization and economic oppression could be overcome. In its initial stages great support was provided to the labor movement as a true worker's society able to overcome depersonalization in the work place. The official pronouncements of many church bodies gave sanction to this newly developing movement.

5. *Organizational involvement.* Another emphasis which has developed in the twentieth century largely through the efforts of the ecumenical movement has been the effort to assist individual Christians in exercising social influence through their vocations by calling together Christians in vocational fellowships either in small groups (faith and life institutes) or in large rallies (e.g., the German *Kirchentag*). Moreover, as the industrial age grew in its domination of Western society, the capacity to relate to the system on a personal basis or to influence it individually disappeared. It became obvious that there was need for a social ethic which related societies to societies and groups to groups. Being faithful in one's vocation required that one be socially intelligent and responsive. Belonging to organizations that were nationwide or worldwide and socially active became an assumed responsibility of vocation. Responsible membership in labor organizations, professional associations, cause-oriented movements, and world level assemblies was a response to the call of God. In the new environment of an industrial world society, leadership in those new communities was an important yardstick of a person's responsibility. The crux of the matter was that the sphere of usefulness in serving the will of God had expanded. Every person continued his or her family and local responsibility, but as opportunity presented itself also was obligated to assume a broader social role.

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Thus, in the twentieth century, there have been many new developments which have brought changes of emphasis in the meaning of Christian vocation. Luther's theology of vocation has been fully capable of responding to these new realities and, in fact, the social ethics of today represented in church body statements and individual theological works have led the way in articulating these adjustments.

V. TEN REASONS FOR CONTINUING VALIDITY

Our contention has been that Luther's teaching on "the calling" continues to have validity in spite of the negative factors which have contributed to the idea that perhaps we live in an era in which the concept has outlived its usefulness. We have pointed out the scriptural faithfulness of the concept and have given expression to the practical way in which it answers the question of how God guides. We have also briefly described new developments in vocational thinking which show how theological thinking on vocation has adapted to twentieth century realities. By way of summarizing the strengths of Luther's formulation of vocation, the following ten statements are offered. They are addressed to those who are gripped in some way by the Christian message. They are for those who are struggling with the question of how to give expression to their faith.

1. The doctrine of vocation or calling is true to the faith. It is not an import from some other system. It fits the belief system of evangelical Christians.
2. It is practical. It starts where we are. It begins with the present.
3. The centrality of grace through faith, the reality of a person's continuing sinfulness at the same time as being accepted by God in the act of forgiveness, makes possible a sacred calling in the midst of the world wherever human need exists, even in morally ambiguous contexts.

4. It is centered in God's action. It is theonomous rather than autonomous behavior.
5. The teaching of God's continuous creation through which the world is upheld, justice is achieved, and love made real is the ground for Christian optimism about the future and the basis for the Christian's vocations in the world as co-creator.
6. The two kingdom concept deals with the two realms which Christians acknowledge—without confusing these two realms or denying the sovereignty of God in both.
7. The two kingdom concept deals realistically with these realms because it acknowledges the presiding character of reason and law in civil society and the presiding character of gospel, or grace, in the Kingdom of the Called, the *ecclesia*.
8. The doctrine of vocation or calling provides a relevant guidance system to answer the questions, "How is God guiding, and what does God want us to do?" The continuous interaction between law and gospel creates new situations which are more redemptive and human-

ly fulfilling than those created by the application of the law alone or gospel alone.

9. The concept of orders gives sacred sanction to basic social structures and provides a stabilizing form for life in society by requiring mutual support and by holding performance responsible to God.

10. The understanding that Christian faith is not simply intellectual assent, but an active response to God in service to our neighbor's need, gives positive social consequence to the Christian's vocation.

Fifty years ago in his book, *The Divine Imperative*, Emil Brunner said this about Luther's teaching on "the calling":

This expresses one of the most profound truths of ethics, indeed one of the most profound truths which have ever been conceived by the mind of man, namely the idea of "the Calling," which is so characteristic of the thought and teaching both of Paul and of Luther. When Luther drew forth this forgotten truth from beneath the rubbish heap of ecclesiastical ethic which had been corrupted by Aristotelian and ascetic ideas it was an act of significance for the whole of world history, an act of overwhelming importance.⁷

Fifty years have brought significant changes. Brunner wrote before Nazi Germany, the atomic bomb, the landing on the moon, the continuing cold war, the United Nations, instant communications, etc. These realities are indeed changing our world view. The fact that Luther's teaching continues to provide the intellectual framework for Christian discipleship attests the truth of Brunner's statement that "it was an act of significance for the whole of world, history."

VI. TEACHING VOCATION: A NECESSITY FOR THE RECOVERY OF VOCATION IN A POST-VOCATIONAL ERA

What will it take to develop a cadre of lay Christians who understand themselves theologically and appreciate their opportunity to serve God in and through their occupations? Further, what would it take to lift up this doctrine so forcefully that each church member is forced to engage it in his or her development? In the light of the many negative factors making it

difficult to link Sunday and Monday, even the idea of developing a cadre of leaders who are clear about this teaching seems difficult of achievement. The vision of the whole church excited by the respective missions of its members in the world would seem impossible without certain intervening developments which would lead to a “readiness” for such a development—a new kairoic moment.

It is interesting to speculate about what developments might create anew appreciation of the doctrine of the calling. One possibility is the assault on one’s sense of personal usefulness and meaning brought about by artificial intelligence and automated systems. Since machines can now act intelligently and perform useful work, human status may need to be defined more particularly by the capacity to be responsive to God in what one does, by the possession of *soul* rather than by intelligence alone.

⁷Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (New York: Macmillan, 1937) 199.

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Three potential developments, among others, which might create more appreciation for Luther’s understanding of calling, in whole or in part, are as follows:

1. The development of a sense of individual mission as a result of the development of teamwork approaches in work situations.
2. The awareness of belonging to two kingdoms as a result of a religious revival.
3. Increased emphasis upon an intramundane vocation in order to distinguish socially involved Christianity from privatistic or other-worldly religious expressions.

The big movements of history do not appear to be developed by intentional actions. There are several examples, however, which indicate the capacity of leadership to influence the life of the church by developing a cadre of people who in turn can address the issues in local situations. The development of the *Word and Witness* program within the Lutheran Church in response to a need for evangelical outreach is a case in point. Within a seven year period, over fifty thousand people dedicated over three hundred hours each to gaining biblical insights and witnessing skills. A similar effort—developed around the need to educate the laity about the ways in which the ministry of the laity in the world can be carried out effectively—is a distinct possibility. The capacity for such a cadre ultimately to influence the life of significant numbers in congregations everywhere is high. Now is the time for all those who believe in the importance of this cause to join hands in preparing for this new emphasis.