

Uncovering Our Calling: Luther's Reformation Re-emphasis on Christian Vocation

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What does it mean to be a confessional Lutheran? What unique contribution do we make to the life of the Body of Christ? What exactly would Christendom be missing if confessional Lutherans were suddenly to vanish from the face of the earth in a paradoxical rapture of non-millennialists¹?

Right now, I sense those assembled here about to rise from your chairs and answer as one man, "It's justification by grace through faith, stupid!" You would be right. Properly speaking, of course, justification by grace through faith is not Luther's teaching but Scripture's. Confessional Lutherans have no patent on the Bible's doctrine of justification, and we don't want one. Nothing would make us happier than to hear *Sola gratia!* and *Sola fide!* ringing out from every corner of the Christian Church.

That is not what we do hear, however. Across world Christianity, a clear proclamation of an unconditional Gospel—one that does not, in any sense whatsoever, leave their salvation up to the saved—is the exception rather than the rule. It brings us no great pleasure to make the observation, but it is true. By the grace of God such a Gospel can be clearly heard among confessional Lutherans. And it is a fact of history that God recovered an uncompromised, unconditional Gospel for the Church through the personal struggles and life's work of Dr. Luther.

It is the point of this paper, however, that Lutheranism also has a unique contribution to make in the area of Christian living. Like me, you may have heard Lutheranism called "a theology in search of a piety"—in other words, an understanding of certain truths about God that struggles to find concrete expression in the things that Lutheran people do every day. That may be true. We may be struggling. If we are, however, it certainly isn't Luther's fault. His writings are a goldmine of more "piety" than any "theology" could ask for. A distinctive Lutheran piety can be found, in detail and in abundance, in Luther's doctrine of vocation.

As I read Luther, vocation—and not, as is sometimes asserted, the "priesthood of all believers," though the two doctrines are closely related—is the second most frequent emphasis in his writings, after justification by faith.² The same emphasis reverberates through the Confessions.³ This makes it difficult to understand the near silence on this teaching among us for many years—a silence which has recently been broken by a spate of books, articles, and conferences. Luther's preoccupation with this teaching also makes it hard to account for a strange notion one sometimes encounters in our circles, *viz.*, that our fathers got their doctrine right, but somehow managed to fumble the ball when it came to Christian living.

Actually no, they didn't. The doctrine of vocation provides a vital, practical, and uniquely Lutheran approach to Christian living. Its genius is its tremendous breadth and its enthusiastic embrace of ordinariness, both of which make it easy to overlook. But when we overlook this doctrine, our loss—and world Christendom's loss—is incalculable.

In this paper, we will note that Luther's doctrine of vocation represented a complete break from the dominant concept of the Christian life at Luther's time. It also differs substantially from the way in which Christian living is generally taught and encouraged today.

We will observe that, while the doctrine of vocation is thoroughly Scriptural, Luther did not really discover it exegetically. Rather, it emerged spontaneously together with Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel and through his battles with monasticism.

¹ I am aware of the term "amillennial" and prefer to avoid it.

² Luther will often say that everything he has to teach pertains either to faith, directed toward God in heaven, or to love, directed toward the neighbor through one's vocation. See *e.g.* AE 21:34.

³ See, *e.g.*, AC XX 38; XXVI, 10; *Apology* XV, 25; XXIII 32, etc.

And, God willing, we will hear the doctrine of vocation gently calling us away from the “purpose-driven life” and back to the life of faith—the life that is “driven” by nothing but the Gospel.

For us Lutherans, our moment has arrived. Our vocation calls. Let us listen.

Vocation—What Was Old, What Was New

Martin Luther not only inaugurated a new concept of Christian vocation, but even the use of the term *Beruf* in our present sense.⁴ On one hand, in sixteenth-century Europe, the idea that God assigns each person to a particular place in life was nothing new. Medieval society was founded on the concept of the Three Estates, with one “masculine” estate for each of the three basic kinds of work that needed doing. Someone needed to rule and fight, and for that God had created the nobility. Someone needed to pray, and for that there were the clergy. Someone needed to grow food for those who rule and those who pray, and for that there were the peasants. Three “feminine” estates were defined, not by occupation, but by conjugal status: virgins, wives, and widows.

Reality, of course, was more complicated than that. Each estate could be divided further. There was frequent tension between, for example, regular and secular clergy, or between kings and nobles, or between burghers and farmers. New “estates” could arise, like financiers, or like an educated, non-religious class that included doctors, “clerks,” and lawyers. “Estate satires,” like the Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, dealt with the low comedy which resulted when certain “free spirits” chose to thwart society’s normal expectations for persons in their stations.⁵ On the whole, however, the medieval concept of society was hierarchical and conservative, and overturning it did not concern Luther in the least.⁶ Mere social revolution was far too trivial a matter to interest him.

What mattered to Luther was the state of his soul before God. From personal experience, Luther knew that to be in doubt about this was literally to experience hell on earth. Therefore, life for him had only one objective: the feverish pursuit of enough personal holiness to be assured of his salvation.

Exactly how much holiness would this take? Church teaching was vague on this point; but obviously the more, the better. There were several differing streams of Roman Catholic thought at Luther’s time. All of these, however, essentially agreed about one thing: religion was a contract between God and man.⁷ By the use of certain powers implanted in him by God, man could begin to fulfill his part of the bargain, though he could never complete it without help. That was where the Church stepped in. Through the sacramental system, the Church applied the grace of God to poor sinners, augmenting their meager abilities and furnishing whatever was lacking in their attempts to earn favor with God. Purgatory existed to take care of any debts that remained outstanding after death. Somehow, God, the Church, and the individual all worked together to bring the soul eventually to glory.

That may have satisfied most people, but it wasn’t nearly good enough for a conscience as serious as Luther’s. Luther demanded certainties. The Roman Church didn’t deal in certainties, but it did offer a somewhat straighter path to heaven for those who qualified. This was monasticism. Monasticism was for spiritual athletes who were ready to dedicate themselves to a life of prayer, fasting, and self-denial. The reward was the fast-track toward eternal salvation. Confidence in one’s salvation required a holy life, and a holy life required a holy vocation. This, it seems, is what led Luther into the monastery.

⁴ Weber, Max, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 207; Billing, Einar, *Our Calling*, trans. Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), 3.

⁵ Schwartz, Deborah B., “The Three Estates,” English 430 class notes, <http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwartz/eng1430/estates.html>.

⁶ To the evident frustration of, e.g., Max Weber, *op. cit.*, 85.

⁷ Kittelson, James M. *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 73.

People in church vocations were, of course, not only on the right course, but they had the shortest route since all they did in their vocations was thought to be God-pleasing and obtained good for their souls. Other people in ordinary callings of daily life were taking the slow route.⁸

Later, when Luther rediscovered the Gospel of justification by grace through faith, the idea of a holy vocation was an early and natural casualty. There is no advantage in a holy vocation because Christ does not save holy people, but sinners. There are no latent spiritual powers in man waiting to be teased into life as the beginning of a process of personal salvation. Salvation is not a process; nor is it a contract. It is a unilateral covenant in which God through Christ does everything. Man simply “holds open the sack”⁹ by faith and takes salvation as God’s gift. Grace is not a commodity dispensed by the Church, empowering our attempts at holiness and filling in the gaps where we fall short. Grace is God’s favorable disposition toward the sinner for the sake of Christ, and every sinner has God’s grace whole and entire.

Grace cannot stand it when we want to give to God or establish merit or pay Him with our works. This is the greatest of blasphemies and idolatries and is nothing less than the denial and even ridicule of God.¹⁰

Therefore, there is nothing to be gained by choosing one vocation over another on the grounds that it is inherently holier or more “spiritual.” To put one’s trust in the spiritual character of one’s vocation is the same thing as to try to buy God off with good deeds; it is to blaspheme, to worship an idol, to deny and even ridicule God. From the point of view of our justification, there is now only one calling that matters. That is the call to faith in Christ.

You see from this that St. Paul considers no single estate blessed except this one—the estate of being Christian; the others are free in the sense that they cannot in themselves further our salvation or damnation. All of them, however, can become blessed through faith or damnable through unbelief, even though in themselves they be well maintained.¹¹

The implications of this are profound. No path through this world offers a shorter route to heaven than any other. When it comes to the real business of life—finding peace with God—one’s vocation is irrelevant.¹² Actually, that should have been evident all along from the fact that we stand within our vocations only during this life. They come to an end with our death,¹³ and our Lord and Judge will make no inquiries at all about them on the Last Day.¹⁴

As we have said, at Luther’s time, the idea that God assigns each of us a place in life was nothing new. On the other hand, the idea that our place in life has no impact on our salvation—this was revolutionary.

Vocation and the Gospel

If our vocations do not save, how can they matter? This is like asking how persons will ever be persuaded to do good works once they are told that good works do not contribute toward their salvation. In reality, only those works are good that are *not* done in order to merit salvation. Faith wants no part of any

⁸ Rosin, Robert, “Luther Discovers the Gospel: Coming to the Truth and Confessing the Truth,” *Concordia Journal* 32 (April 2006), 153.

⁹ AE 51:171.

¹⁰ AE 14, electronic (unpaginated) edition.

¹¹ AE 28, electronic edition.

¹² See *Apology* XXVII, 38.

¹³ AE 21:23.

¹⁴ AE 21:278.

salvation that is not God's gift. It is this faith that invests our works with value, not the other way around.¹⁵ In the same way, our vocation not only retains its spiritual value when it is denied to have any power to save us. It only begins to have value at just that moment.

It is sometimes asked whether the doctrine of vocation belongs under the Law or the Gospel. To understand how Luther might have answered, bear in mind that our vocation has nothing at all to do with the question of how we come to stand in a right relationship with God. That answer is found solely in the Gospel. It is therefore misleading to locate the doctrine of vocation within the Gospel without qualification, as Einar Billing does.¹⁶ Billing does so out of a strong desire to treat absolutely everything in Luther's thought as a direct inference from the forgiveness of sins.¹⁷ But rather than to claim that vocation simply "is" the Gospel, it would be more accurate to say that our vocation is one of many things that the Gospel sets free. Now that we are saved by God's free grace in Christ, we no longer feel any pressure to turn our vocation into what it is not: a way of earning favor from God.

At that moment, freedom from anxiety about my own salvation releases a pent-up flood of spiritual energy, which can now be directed toward serving my neighbor in my calling. In this way the Gospel gives us "*carte blanche* to do good works."¹⁸ It changes service to God and our neighbor from a morbid, self-centered enterprise into one motivated by genuine love. It converts the hard work of religion into the joyful response of a heart set free. Now at last I begin to fulfill the purpose for which I was created, to be good for something and to somebody.¹⁹ Here is a typically Lutheran paradox. I enjoy God's favor most when I am thinking least about earning favor from God. I am purest at those moments when striving for purity, as the monks understood it, is the furthest thing from my mind.

Therefore though a common laborer, a shoemaker, or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch, still he may sit at home and think: "My God has made me a man. He has given me my house, wife, and child and has commanded me to love them and to support them with my work." Note that he is pondering the Word of God in his heart; and though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God.²⁰

It is God's task to justify us, not ours, and it always has been. It is when we manage to leave it to him and to mind our own business that we bask in his favor.

Therefore leave the angels up there in heaven undisturbed. Look for them here on earth below, in your neighbor, father and mother, children, and others. Do for these what God has commanded, and the angels will never be far away from you.²¹

Vocation and the Law

What exactly, then, is "my business"? It is that task—and only that task—that is laid on me every day by my God. To recognize our vocation, two things are necessary: 1) to open our ears and listen carefully to what God says in his Word, and 2) to open our eyes, look around, and observe where

¹⁵ Reu, M. "Introduction" to *A Treatise on Good Works*, published in Adolph Spaeth *et al.*, eds, *Works of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), Vol. 1, pp. 173-285. Reference is to the online edition at *Project Wittenberg* (<http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/work-01.txt>), 7.

¹⁶ Billing, 8, 16. See Gustaf Wingren's critique of Billing in *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 74f.

¹⁷ Billing, 4.

¹⁸ I believe the phrase is David Scaer's.

¹⁹ AE 21:35

²⁰ AE 21:34.

²¹ AE 21:36.

it is in life that God has put us. Conversely, confusion about our vocation results when we become dissatisfied either with God's Word or with our station and set either of these aside.

To discover one's vocation, it is necessary to hear the Law, not just the Gospel. Both Luther and the Confessions constantly harp on this point: Nothing is a good work without a commandment from God.²² To bypass God's Law and devise my own program of good works is second only to work-righteousness in its sheer arrogance. Nevertheless, the history of the Church is replete with examples.

We read about Hilarion that throughout seventy-three years he tasted neither meat nor butter nor milk. This appears to be a magnificent work; it practically stuns our reason. But if you ask whether Hilarion did this at the command of God or of his own accord, then this self-elected work, because it lacks the light of the Word of God, becomes utterly worthless and is truly a work of darkness, especially if, as usual, some spiritual pride was connected with it.²³

It was not only his desire to avoid the sin of pride, however, which compelled Luther to stress this point. For Luther, faith includes both the confidence that God is pleased with me as a person and the confidence that God is pleased with what I do. How can I ever be sure of this if I set aside what God's Word reveals about his will for my life, and invent good works of my own?

But one must keep in mind the axiomatic statement that whatever is not done out of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). Faith, however, cannot be separated from the Word. Therefore whatever is done without the Word is sin.²⁴

All self-chosen good works reopen the door to the *monstrum incertitudinis*—the monster of uncertainty. Luther bore deep scars from his battles with the monster in his youth, and he continued to fear it all his life. That is an important reason why he and the Confessors sternly warn against all self-chosen acts of piety and direct us instead to God's commandments. "Thus whoever knows that his own manner of life is embraced by the Word is a man of peace and conviction."²⁵

The teaching that nothing is a good work without a command from God is not meant to send us rummaging through the Scriptures in search of a specific Bible verse to sanction every last thing that we do.²⁶ The problem with this approach is not only that it results in some rather questionable exegesis, to say the least. The greater problem is that it is characteristic of an unregenerate person's relationship to the Law. Once one becomes a Christian, he is finished with all attempts to use the Law in order to justify himself. He lives in the confidence that both he and his works please God; he therefore "does whatever the occasion calls for, and all is well done."²⁷ He also understands that, for him, the Law contains one command: the command to love.²⁸ The Law's multiple regulations are simply variations on that single theme, made necessary by our flawed understanding of what love really is and by our sinful nature's diabolical way of using the word "love" as a cloak for pure selfishness.

To understand what God wants of us is not primarily a matter of asking, "What passage of Scripture specifically authorizes this course of action?" It is a matter of asking, "Have I chosen this course myself, or has it been laid upon me by God or his representatives?" The test of whether it is God who is calling me to act is equally simple: "Is this consistent with my God-given station in life? Is it called for by faith and love?" Advice from a brother can be helpful.

²² See e.g. Luther, M., "Treatise on Good Works" (*Works of Martin Luther*, Adolph Spaeth, L.D. Reed, Henry Eyster Jacobs, et al., trans. & eds., Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1915), vol. 1, 173;

²³ AE 2, electronic edition.

²⁴ AE 2, electronic edition. It is clear from the context that by "Word" Luther here has primarily the Law in mind. Similar statements are frequent in the Confessions; see e.g. *Apology* XV, 17.

²⁵ AE 17, electronic edition.

²⁶ Curiously, this approach typifies both the *Talmud* and the self-help, lifestyle Christianity of the evangelical movement.

²⁷ AE 44:26.

²⁸ Wingren, 200. See Luther in, e.g., AE 44:393.

One should be glad, therefore, to have a brother who says, ‘Brother, do this, for it is the call of your superior or of God (which is a call of faith) or of an equal (which is a call of love).’²⁹

A Christian will decline any assignment about which he cannot say, “God has called me to do this today.” It is here that monasticism went terribly wrong.

Vocation and the Monks

Luther’s personal struggle with the monastic ideal was the *Sitz im Leben* in which his teaching on vocation unfolded. As we have seen, monasticism promised a shorter path to heaven for those who were capable. Monks swore obedience to the so-called “evangelical counsels” taught by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount: the counsels of voluntary poverty, chastity, and obedience. By doing so, monks achieved a higher level of spirituality than what was attainable by laypeople, who did nothing more than obey the Ten Commandments. According to Aquinas,

It is proper to religious to be in the state of perfection, as stated above. But the state of perfection requires an obligation to those things that pertain to perfection, and this obligation is made to God by vow. Now it is evident from the foregoing that poverty, continence, and obedience belong to the perfection of the Christian life. Therefore, the religious state requires that one be obliged to these three things by vow.³⁰

“Perfection” did not mean that the monks had achieved sinlessness, but that they were trying.³¹ When a monk did sin, it was less of a problem than when a layman sinned, even if the act was identical.

But if a religious, out of weakness or ignorance, and not contempt, commits a sin that is not against the vow of his profession and does not give scandal (i.e., he sins secretly), he sins less gravely than laymen in the same species of sin. The reason is that if his sin is a light one, it is absorbed, so to speak, by the numerous good works he performs; and if it is a mortal sin, he can more easily rise from it.³²

Luther’s rediscovery of the Gospel led him to repudiate monasticism as fundamentally work-righteous. At the same time, Luther’s thinking on monasticism underwent a process of development. Early on, he seems to have been troubled considerably by the fact that he had, after all, taken vows.

A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church (1520), Luther’s attack on the Roman sacramental system, takes up this matter in its discussion of baptism. Monastic vows are merely a side-show in the whole circus of religiosity by which Rome distracts Christians from the real business of a child of God.³³

One thing I will add — and I wish I could persuade everyone to do it! — *namely, to completely abolish or avoid all the making of vows* [emphasis original], whether they are vows to enter religious orders, to make pilgrimages or to do any works whatsoever. Then we could remain in the freedom of our baptism, which is the most religious, rich in works, state of all. It is impossible to say how greatly that widespread delusion of vows weakens baptism and obscures the knowledge of Christian liberty.... Vows should be abolished by a general edict, especially life-long vows, and all men diligently recalled to the vows of baptism.³⁴

²⁹ AE 54, electronic edition.

³⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 186, 6 (vol 47, 141 in Jordan Aumann, O.P., ed.; Chicago: Blackfriars, 1973).

³¹ 2a2ae. 186, 2.

³² 2a2ae, 186, 10.

³³ Albert Steinhauser, trans.; Robert Smith, ed., *A Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Project Wittenberg online study edition, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-luther.html#sw-prlat>, 583, 3.37.

³⁴ 537, 3.35

The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows (1522) represents his further reflection on this issue and his advice to former monks who had turned evangelical, but still experienced pangs of conscience similar to his. Not only should vows not be made; those already made may safely be broken. Here in his condemnation of monasticism Luther is unrestrained.

Just look! The very foundation of the monastic vows is godlessness, blasphemy, sacrilege, which has befallen them because they spurn Christ, their leader and light, and presume to follow other things they think better. What else can he who deserts truth as his guide pursue but untruth? He who does not pursue the glory of God deserves to pursue blasphemies. This then is the second reason monastic vows are to be avoided and banished from under heaven, and why all who have vowed them should return to the road all other Christians take and follow Christ in a confident and good conscience. It is God himself who calls them to return, God who forbids their vows, God who condemns them, God who convicts them of the worst godlessness.³⁵

Luther clarifies that he does not object to vows in principle, but insists that any vow that is not God-pleasing may be set aside with impunity.³⁶ Monastic vows utterly fail this test. No vow is ever binding that contradicts the Gospel.³⁷ Besides, everything worthwhile in monastic vows is already included in a Christian's promise to follow Christ.³⁸ For example, the poverty which Christ in the Beatitudes declares blessed is nothing more than the detachment from the things of this world that characterizes every true Christian.³⁹ The grading of Christians on the basis of their obedience to these "counsels of the Gospel" is therefore false and contrary to love.⁴⁰ Additionally, monastic vows contradict the commandment to love our neighbor, in that they withdraw the monk from the world where his neighbor is to be found.⁴¹ Finally, monastic vows contradict the commandment to obey one's parents.⁴² Significantly, Luther prefaces this tract with a letter to his father, in which he admits that Hans had been right about monasticism all along.⁴³

Luther's further reflection on the topic produced additional insights. No one could object to the monasteries if they could be purged of work-righteousness and returned to the purposes they once served—*e.g.*, as centers for prayer, Bible study, and the training of preachers and statesmen—and if they once again became institutes which persons could enter and leave as they chose.⁴⁴ There might even be some temporal value in monastic discipline as a way of restraining the sinful nature.⁴⁵ At it stands, however, monasticism as an institution can only be condemned. In the first place, its man-made program of piety leads persons away from those vocations that God has ordained, and thus undermines any certainty that Christians may have that their lives are pleasing to God.

You chose what I did not delight in. The words are very clear. God does not want to put up with our counsels. Therefore we should accustom ourselves to follow the order which He has prescribed for us. Whatever you may be, son, servant, or maid in the meanest circumstances, stay where you are, because you are in a station where God has put you. Thus whoever knows that his own manner of life is embraced by the Word is a man of peace and conviction. The monk, on the contrary, proceeds with uncertainty because his career is self-chosen. He says, "I do the

³⁵ AE 44:261.

³⁶ 252.

³⁷ 254.

³⁸ 259.

³⁹ 356.

⁴⁰ 372f.

⁴¹ 361.

⁴² 331.

⁴³ AE 48:330-336.

⁴⁴ AE 44:174. See also *Smalcald Articles* III, 1.

⁴⁵ AE 28, electronic edition.

choosing.” God says, “I do not like it.” God will keep His “not-liking.” You see how you can keep your “choosing.”⁴⁶

Second, monasticism is the parade example of the kind of personal holiness project that God detests—the kind that seeks the doer’s own spiritual advantage, not the benefit of his neighbor. All such projects are bereft of both faith and love.⁴⁷ Additionally, the abuses connected with monasticism are notorious. Young people are often taken into monasteries before they can possibly make an informed judgment.⁴⁸ The institution makes a mockery of celibacy.⁴⁹ The mendicant friars in particular are a nuisance to the ordained, local clergy, who unlike the friars have truly been called by God to their office. In this connection Luther adduces the heartwarming story of how, after God created a parish priest, the devil tried to imitate him, but made the tonsure too wide—and the result was a monk.⁵⁰

But perhaps the mature Luther’s most interesting critique of monasticism was that, contrary to what most people thought at the time, it was not too difficult, but too easy. The truth was that most people entered monasteries in order to have life’s necessities provided for them.

Now consider the religious orders so famous up to our time. The first thing you notice is that they are most securely provided with all the necessities of the body. A guaranteed income, food, clothing, shelter, and all sorts of other things they have in superfluity, earned by the work and care of others and given to them, so that they are not endangered in any way nor wish to be. Furthermore, no one enters the religious orders, or wants to enter, unless he is assured that he will receive lifelong care for his body; and the majority in the monastic and clerical orders are on the lookout that their stomachs and bodies get their due.⁵¹

This is a worse sin than mere greed. It is an attempt to live life without trusting God, and therefore undermines faith. It is the nature of faith to look to God to supply each day’s need.

What else is this but to seek and have a position where one need not look to heaven and expect his daily bread from God or trust that God will provide? In short, in such estates faith has no place, no room, no time, no work, no exercise, for they sit prepared with everything, and that close at hand. Here is no *substantia rerum sperandarum*, no “conviction of things not seen,” as is characteristic of faith, but rather *certitudo rerum possessarum*, “the certainty of things at hand.”⁵²

It is interesting as well to note a progression in Luther’s attitude toward the rule of celibacy. Nature, Scripture, and experience all testify that celibacy is contrary to the will of God. It is a perverse attempt to be more holy than God, the creator of the sexes and the author of marriage.⁵³ Once again, it elevates a self-chosen “holiness project” above vocations that God has explicitly ordained and blessed: those of husband, wife, father, and mother.

In the mature Luther, one also finds the argument that celibacy, like monasticism, takes the easy way out. Marriage is superior in that it drives a man to work in order to support his family, and thus mortifies the flesh and strengthens the body. It teaches a man to rely on God to meet his and his family’s needs, granting opportunity for the exercise of faith.⁵⁴ It exposes man to the full range of domestic trials and annoyances. In

⁴⁶ AE 17, electronic edition.

⁴⁷ AE 21:281.

⁴⁸ See AC XXVII, 5.

⁴⁹ AE 28:10.

⁵⁰ AE 21:263.

⁵¹ AE 28, electronic edition.

⁵² AE 21, electronic edition.

⁵³ AE 1:135.

⁵⁴ AE 28, electronic edition. On 1 Cor 7:8.

other words, it places him under the cross in a way that celibacy does not.⁵⁵ A theory that seems plausible to me, but that I will admit to not yet having tested, is that the young, single Luther tends to emphasize the unnatural torture that celibacy inflicts on consciences. Luther the mature man and husband is more likely to refer to the God-ordained trials connected with marriage. In other words, with time Luther came to believe that while celibacy is hard, marriage is harder.

Monasticism may not pose the same temptation to us that it did in Luther's day. And probably the last thing that our generation is likely to do is to impose a regime of celibacy on itself in order to draw closer to God. But this is the species, not the genus, of a particular spiritual problem. According to Luther, the root is externalism—the tendency to exalt what looks like heroic spirituality above the simple faith and love that God requires. This, in turn, comes from our failure to humbly hear the Word of God. Luther's warning is still very much in place:

No false teaching or heresy has ever arisen without bringing along the distinguishing mark He points to here: that it has set forth works different from the ones which God has commanded and ordained.⁵⁶

One could hardly deny that externalism and obtuseness toward the Word are alive and well in the Church. Therefore, it is still in place to ask ourselves: What personal holiness-projects have we ourselves launched that our God would call “something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind” (Jeremiah 7:31)?

Vocation and the Cross

As we have seen, when we choose our own good works, we open the door to uncertainty about whether our path is pleasing to God. This is a problem particularly when the path becomes difficult—when, in other words, we find ourselves under a cross.

Like vocation, the Christian's cross is a dominant motif in Luther's theology. And just like the idea of an assigned place in life for every Christian, Luther's teaching that the Christian life is fraught with suffering was nothing new. Not only is it Scriptural; probably nothing was urged more often on believers in the Middle Ages than the duty to accept suffering from the hand of God.⁵⁷

What was new in Luther, however, was above all the emphasis that only the sufferings of Christ take away sin. Our sufferings are as worthless to do this as are our good works. Instead, they are the discipline that a loving Father sends in order to curtail our pride, mortify our flesh, drive us to him in prayer, and offer opportunity for the exercise of faith and godly virtues.

But a cross provides such an opportunity when—and only when—it comes to us in the context of our God-given vocation. When this happens, we can remain unflappable in every imaginable affliction; and we can boldly pray: “Lord, you put me here. Now, help me!”

Nothing but good fruit can come from the station that God has created and ordained, and from the man who works and lives in this station on the basis of the Word of God. With this you can now comfort your heart against thoughts like these: “Oh, it was this person or that who got me into this station. It causes me nothing but disgust and trouble.”⁵⁸

This comfort is unavailable to those who choose their own cross, as the monks did. Besides, for a Christian to seek his own cross is completely unnecessary.

⁵⁵ AE 24:377.

⁵⁶ AE 21:261.

⁵⁷ It is also striking how often the Confessions urge patient acceptance of suffering as a work that pleases God. See *e.g.* AC XX, 37; *Apology* IV, 8 and XV, 45; etc.

⁵⁸ AE 21:265.

If you can do nothing else, then get married, settle down, and make a living in faith. Love the Word of God, and do what is required of you in your station. Then you will experience, both from your neighbors and those in your own household, that things will not go as you wish. You will be hindered and hemmed in on every side, so that you will suffer enough and see enough to make your heart sad.⁵⁹

In all our sadness, however, Christ will make our cross bearable with his promise that those who do so will be richly blessed in the life to come.⁶⁰ God is also sure to mix the “bitter draft” with “honey and sugar,” the wholesome pleasures that this life affords. It is entirely appropriate for us to enjoy these.⁶¹

Therefore we should...command and urge such people [Christians who are sad] to have a good time once in a while if possible, or at least to temper their sorrow and forget it for a while.⁶²

But God’s comfort in affliction is forfeited by those who abandon one vocation for another in order to avoid suffering. Luther frequently discourages this practice as extremely dangerous. The *Table Talk* tells the story of a youth who had left his master, whom Luther advised:

See to it that you don’t lie. Fear God, hear God’s Word, return to your master’s house, and do the work of your calling. If Satan comes back, say to him, ‘I won’t obey you. I’ll obey God, who has called me to this work. Even if an angel should come from heaven [and tell me otherwise], I’ll remain in my calling.’”⁶³

It is the way of this world to flit from one vocation to another, as each soul “seeks out those stations and ways of life where it can have fun and does not have to suffer anything from anyone.”⁶⁴ God, however, usually brings it about that worldly people suffer twice—first, by being as just as liable as Christians to the vicissitudes of life; second, by having no recourse in their sorrow but to “batter things with cursing and swearing, and with their fists too,” so that they “make it twice as great and difficult, without finding any comfort or a good conscience.”⁶⁵ After they have abandoned one vocation for another, they quickly find that the grass is not in fact any greener—or, as the Germans charmingly put it, the udder on my neighbor’s cow is not any bigger. Once again, they find they have nowhere to go with their bitterness and regret.

Luther apparently believed that our thickheadedness makes the lesson worth frequent repetition. We ignore the word and example of Christ, and somehow come to believe that we are entitled to a comfortable, easy life. We become dissatisfied with our vocation because we lack the faith that it is in fact from God—either because it doesn’t seem very “spiritual”⁶⁶ or because it proves more difficult than we think it ought to be. We then abandon one vocation and take up another, and quickly find ourselves worse off than before. “The greatest temptation in the world is that nobody fulfils his calling faithfully but everybody wishes to indulge in idleness.”⁶⁷

As I have said, it is not without cause that I am emphasizing this, but because it is so necessary; for human nature is fickle and is easily swayed, and our flesh is very foolish.⁶⁸

⁵⁹ 20.

⁶⁰ 21.

⁶¹ 22.

⁶² 21.

⁶³ AE 54, electronic edition.

⁶⁴ AE 21:20.

⁶⁵ 20f.

⁶⁶ AE 54, electronic edition.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ AE 2, electronic edition.

It is hard to read remarks like these in Luther without wondering: did he have some premonition of our restless, frivolous age, which sees “fun” as an entitlement and its pursuit as the whole purpose of life? Or has human nature simply changed that little since Luther’s day?

Vocation and the Universal Priesthood

One often hears that the universal priesthood is the second most frequent point of emphasis in Luther’s writings after justification by faith. Generally this is accompanied by a lament that the universal priesthood is the great unclaimed legacy of the church of the Reformation.⁶⁹ As mentioned above, in my own reading of Luther I find him returning to the doctrine of vocation much more often. The doctrine of vocation and the doctrine of the universal priesthood should not be simply conflated, though the two are linked.

The doctrine of the universal priesthood is elaborated in what has been called Luther’s finest and most revolutionary work, if from a historian’s rather than a theologian’s point of view;⁷⁰ the work in which “Luther laid the ax to the whole complex of ideas upon which the social, political, legal, and religious thought of the Western world had been developing for a thousand years.”⁷¹ This is his *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520). A proper understanding of what Luther meant by a “universal priesthood” requires that we view the doctrine within its context in this important work.

In great part, Luther’s tract is a catalog of the deplorable state of Christendom. The pope exalts himself over secular rulers as well as over the church, and lives in unconscionable luxury.⁷² Rome is a moral cesspool where licenses to live in open debauchery can be bought and sold.⁷³ The Church has become a machine for making money, and the pope’s henchmen, having bled Italy dry, have now turned their attention to Germany.⁷⁴ Because of their inability to live up to the arbitrary rule of celibacy, many pious priests keep wives, yet do so secretly and with a bad conscience.⁷⁵ The universities ignore the Bible and lecture on commentaries, and on commentaries on commentaries.⁷⁶ The common people are ignorant even of basic Christianity.⁷⁷

According to Luther, there is no reason to expect the clergy to address these problems. The clergy are the problem.

I am carrying out our intention to put together a few points on the matter of the reform of the Christian estate, to be laid before the Christian nobility of the German nation, in the hope that God may help his church through the laity, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent.⁷⁸

To protect their privileged position and prevent reform, the clergy have barricaded themselves behind three “walls.” First, they claim that the spiritual estate, to which they belong, is a higher authority in principle than the temporal estate of the German princes. Second, no one may appeal to Scripture against them, because the right to interpret Scripture belongs to the clergy alone. Third, a reform council is an impossibility, because the right to call a council belongs only to the pope.⁷⁹ The clergy had thus managed to convince the rest of

⁶⁹ See e.g. August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” Curtis Jahn, ed., *The Wauwatosa Theology* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1997), vol II, 134f.

⁷⁰ Charles Jacobs, “Translator’s Introduction,” *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Project Wittenberg online edition, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/web/nblty-01.html>

⁷¹ AE 44:120. Although, as mentioned above, the last thing Luther wanted to be was a social revolutionary.

⁷² 140.

⁷³ 155.

⁷⁴ 141.

⁷⁵ 175.

⁷⁶ 204.

⁷⁷ 206.

⁷⁸ 123.

⁷⁹ 126.

society both that there was no limit to their own authority and that the state of the church was nobody's business but theirs. Clearly, reform was impossible as long as these claims remained unchallenged.

Luther's challenge was bold and direct.

Let us begin by attacking the first wall. It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy....All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office.⁸⁰

The division of Christendom into "Three Estates" is not absolute because Christ has one Body, not three. Princes who occupy positions of temporal authority are full-fledged members of the Body of Christ, and temporal authority is as much a divine institution as spiritual authority. Therefore, the claim that church authorities are not subject to the laws of the state is false. So is the objection that temporal authorities should keep their noses out of church affairs.⁸¹ Logically the clergy can no more prevent the "Second Estate" from doing its job than it does the Third.

If it were right to way that the temporal power is inferior to all the spiritual estates (preacher, confessor, or any spiritual office), and so prevent the temporal power from doing its proper work, then the tailors, cobblers, stonemasons, carpenters, cooks, innkeepers, farmers, and all the temporal craftsmen should be prevented from providing pope, bishops, priests, and monks with shoes, clothes, house, meat, and drink, as well as from paying them any tribute.⁸²

The implication for the doctrine of vocation is clear. No classification of vocations into "spiritual" and "temporal" really applies in Christendom. Any work in any office is "spiritual" if the person who does it is baptized, and if it meets a real human need. In making this claim, Luther does not so much diminish the clergy as he exalts the laity; and he most emphatically denies to the clergy the right to tell the laity that church work is none of their business. "So, then, I think this first paper wall is overthrown."⁸³

The second wall is even flimsier. There is no Scriptural warrant at all for the claim that only the pope may interpret the Bible. The "keys" (Matthew 16) are for forgiving or retaining sin, not for interpreting Scripture or establishing doctrine; and in any case they were given, not to Peter alone, but to the entire Church.⁸⁴ As handlers of Scripture the Romanists are manifestly incompetent, and this makes their claim to hold a monopoly on biblical interpretation absurd.⁸⁵ The test of an interpretation of Scripture is therefore not who proposes it, but whether or not it is right.

In his assault on the "second wall," however, Luther does not appeal to any so-called "right of private interpretation." Subsequent church history has demonstrated that it is as big a mistake to grant this right to each individual as it was to grant it solely to the pope. For Luther, the interpretation of Scripture that is authoritative is neither the Pope's nor the individual's. It is the one that is correct—the interpretation, in other words, that is consistent with faith in Christ.

Besides, if we are all priests, as was said above, and all have one faith, one gospel, one sacrament, why should we not also have the power to test and judge what is right or wrong in

⁸⁰ 127.

⁸¹ It is worth keeping in mind that Luther has in mind a Christian society in which holders of secular office, as Christians, are also kings and priests before God. The application of his thought to our situation today is not always direct.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ 131.

⁸⁴ 134f.

⁸⁵ 133.

matters of faith? ...Why, then, should we not perceive what is consistent with faith and what is not, just as well as an unbelieving pope does?⁸⁶

One the first two walls have fallen, the third falls by itself. There is no basis either in the nature of a Christian society or in Scripture for the Romanists' refusal to call a council. Therefore their threats can be safely ignored, and a council should be called without delay to deal with a long list of abuses in the Church.⁸⁷ Ordinary people and temporal authorities have the right and duty to do this, not only by virtue of their status as kings and priests before God, but because the crisis in the Church demands it.

Would it not be unnatural if a fire broke out in a city and everybody were to stand by and let it burn on and on and consume everything that could burn because nobody had the authority of the mayor, or because, perhaps, the fire broke out in the mayor's house? ...How much more should this be done in the spiritual city of Christ if a fire of offense breaks out, whether in the papal government, or anywhere else?⁸⁸

When he treats the same subject in his *Treatise on Good Works* (1520) Luther uses a very similar analogy. The distinction between vocations comes from God. God commands that we submit to authority in the Church, and normally such submission is just as necessary as obedience to parents. But the present spiritual authority is like a parent who has gone insane and makes rules for the children that, if they keep them, will destroy the household. In this case, disobedience is not only permissible; it is a moral duty.⁸⁹

This is the backdrop against which Luther's remarks about the universal priesthood must be read. The Church is in a state of crisis, and someone has to act. The temporal authorities and ordinary laypeople can and should do so because there are no inherently "unspiritual" vocations, because all Christians in all vocations are kings and priests, and because the deplorable state of the Church is the concern of every Christian.

The last thing, however, that Luther would advocate is that as a matter of regular practice the laity should abandon their vocations to go and preach. *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* affirms the doctrine of the public ministry every bit as emphatically as it does the universal priesthood. In fact, there is a direct relationship between the two.

For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop, and pope, although of course it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise such office. Because we are all priests of equal standing, no one must push himself forward and take it upon himself, without our consent and election, to do that for which we all have equal authority. For no one dare take upon himself what is common to all without the authority and consent of the community.⁹⁰

Ordination is the community's way of formally granting its consent to exercise the office.

Therefore, when a bishop consecrates it is nothing else than that in the place and stead of the whole community, all of whom have like power, he takes a person and charges him to exercise this power on behalf of the others.⁹¹

It is this "authority and consent," not ordination by a bishop, that is the essential thing. Here Luther uses the illustration of a group of laymen on a desert island which chooses one member of the group to function as their

⁸⁶ 135.

⁸⁷ 139

⁸⁸ 137.

⁸⁹ AE 44:90f.

⁹⁰ AE 44:129.

⁹¹ 128.

priest. “Such a man would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world.”⁹²

Those entrusted with the public ministry differ from their fellow Christians “in office and work”—in vocation, in other words—and not in status.⁹³ As we have seen, even this distinction between “office and work” is not a moral absolute. It is still not a trivial matter, however. A diversity of vocations is necessary if Christendom is to function as God intended. If everybody decides to go and preach, who is going to grow the food, punish the criminals, make the shoes, and tend the children? Preaching and administering the sacraments is obviously not the only work that faith and love requires. It is therefore not the only way to serve and glorify God. One who in his baptism has been “consecrated a priest and bishop” before God may serve God and his neighbor as a magistrate or policeman, a cobbler, a smith, or a peasant. The important thing is that, in love, he uses his position to promote the general welfare.⁹⁴

Interestingly, in *To the Christian Nobility*, Luther practices what he preaches. Just as he will brook no objections from the Romanists that sacred affairs are nobody’s business but theirs, so he, a cleric, does not hesitate to advise Germany’s princes on how they should get their own, temporal house in order. Some of his advice may strike a modern reader—and probably struck the German princes—as a bit naïve. Laws should be enacted against “extravagant and costly dress.”⁹⁵ The spice traffic is nothing but “another of the great ships on which money is carried out of German lands,” and it is totally unnecessary in a nation so richly blessed with good things to eat.⁹⁶ Everybody would be better off if there were more agriculture, less commerce, and less moneymaking by investing—which is objectionable if for no other reason than that Luther doesn’t quite understand it.⁹⁷ German gluttony and drunkenness are an international disgrace.⁹⁸ So is the prevalence of brothels, which should be closed immediately.⁹⁹ In temporal affairs, Luther says, Germany is in an awful state—although this cannot compare with the spiritual situation, which is an absolute disaster.¹⁰⁰

Whether or not we agree with every one of Luther’s proposals for temporal reform is beside the point. The point is that from this it is clear that Luther’s vision for Christian spirituality embraces all of life. To deny active participation to any Christian in the life of the Church is spiritual tyranny, since every Christian is a king and a priest before God—though the form of each Christian’s participation must be orderly, and it must respect the kingship and priesthood of his fellows. In the same way, there is no area of life, no vocation, on which faith and love cannot be brought to bear. There are, in other words, no purely “secular” persons or vocations in Christendom.

Today, almost five hundred years have passed, and Christendom as a concept is moribund in the West. All the same, might not Luther’s understanding of vocation be the real antidote to the compartmentalization of life that 21st century-Christians feel so keenly? When our members in “secular” occupations struggle with such compartmentalization, some of them decide that their only God-pleasing option is to stop making widgets and go and preach. In other words, they adopt a “holier” vocation, or perhaps add a “holy” avocation to an already overcrowded schedule. Might not the world be better off if we encouraged more of them to do instead the hard, but essential work of establishing how faith and love apply to the making of widgets—something that nobody but the Christian widget-maker can properly do? Should we not help the baptized learn to see themselves as one person, not several, and help them learn to carry faith and love everywhere they go?

Perhaps the best example of how Luther himself attempted to do this is his *Treatise on Good Works*, which could equally have been called a treatise on vocation. It therefore deserves our close attention.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ 129.

⁹⁴ 130.

⁹⁵ 212

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ 214.

⁹⁸ 215.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ 216.

“Secular” Vocations

The *Treatise* was written in 1520 at the urging of Luther’s friend Spalatin to counter the charge that Luther’s doctrine of justification discourages good works.¹⁰¹ Luther’s response in the *Treatise* proves that the charge is absurd. In his teaching, Luther has restored faith to its proper place as the source from which all good works flow. In fact, faith itself is the chief good work,¹⁰² the work required by the first and most important commandment.¹⁰³

As we have seen, for Luther, faith is the confidence that God is pleased with both the person and his works.¹⁰⁴ When a person lives in this confidence, every work he does is good, even if it amounts to no more than “picking up a straw.” Without this confidence a man could raise the whole of dead humanity back to life and the deed would be worthless.¹⁰⁵ Faith, then, makes all works good and of infinite and therefore equal value.

All distinctions between works fall away, whether they be great, small, short, long, many, or few. For the works are acceptable not for their own sake but because of faith, which is always the same and lives and works in each and every work without distinction, however numerous and varied these works always are, just as all the members of the body live, work, and take their name from the head, and without the head no member can live, work, or have a name.¹⁰⁶

What’s more, a Christian *qua* Christian doesn’t need anybody to tell him what to do in order to serve God. He simply does whatever the occasion calls for, confident that the occasion and its need come from God.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, he does it in a marvelous spirit of spontaneity and joy, and with a refreshing disregard for how many credits he is accumulating.

[A Christian] knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done, and does everything gladly and willingly, not that he may gather merits and good works, but because it is a pleasure for him to please God in doing these things. He simply serves God with no thought of reward, confident that his service pleases God.¹⁰⁸

The main problem with Rome’s teaching on good works was that it had all its distinctions in the wrong places. It clumsily lumped works done in faith together with works done apart from faith, when it is the distinction between these that is fundamental. On the other hand, it graded works carefully based on how much sacrifice they required and how holy they appeared, and all of this is immaterial.¹⁰⁹ On these criteria, certain works were judged to please God more than others. In the *Treatise*, Luther argues that no good work pleases God more than any other, since the main thing that makes a work God-pleasing is that a God-pleasing person—*i.e.*, a believer—performs it.

Practically, the result of Rome’s teaching is a definition of good works that is far too restrictive.

If you ask further whether they consider it a good work when a man works at his trade, walks, stands, eats, drinks, sleeps, and does all kinds of works for the nourishment of his body or for the common welfare, and whether they believe that God is well pleased with them, you will find that they say no, and that they define good works so narrowly that they are made to consist only of praying in church, fasting, and almsgiving. The other things they consider as worth nothing and

¹⁰¹ AE 44:17.

¹⁰² 23.

¹⁰³ 30.

¹⁰⁴ Another hypothesis that seems attractive, and that I also have not yet tested, is that in Luther’s usage the opposite of “faith” is not “unbelief.” The opposite of “faith” is guilt.

¹⁰⁵ 25.

¹⁰⁶ 26.

¹⁰⁷ 26

¹⁰⁸ 27.

¹⁰⁹ 29.

think that God attaches no importance to them. And so, through their damnable unbelief, they deprive God of his due and despise faith, though God is served by all things that may be done, spoken, or thought in faith.¹¹⁰

Elsewhere¹¹¹ I have argued that a too-narrow definition of good works is still one of Christianity's besetting problems. There's a widespread notion among Christians that they need to hold some kind of position down at church in order to really serve the Lord, or that service rendered at church somehow ranks higher than service rendered at home, on the job, or in their neighborhood. There's a notion that a pursuit has value only if it can be made overtly and explicitly "Christian," resulting in a perceived need to baptize activities that are already perfectly wholesome and worthwhile by pasting Bible verses all over them. Finally, there's the notion that, for a Christian, personal evangelism is the only activity that can really justify a human life. The rest is a matter of marking time until an opportunity arises to tell someone about Jesus.

There is obviously nothing wrong and everything right with encouraging Christians to participate in the life of their church, to bring their faith to bear on everything they do, and to tell everyone what the Lord has done. The attitudes mentioned above, however, sound suspiciously like the symptoms of a weak conscience—*i.e.*, an inadequate certainty that through faith, both I and all my good works are as pleasing to God as they can or need to be. In whatever he does, a believer plunges into action in the hearty confidence that, as a king and priest before God, he does not need to justify his life to anybody. When in faith he does whatever his occasion—*i.e.*, his vocation--demands, then whatever work he does is good. To promote faith, therefore, is to promote both faith and good works; to promote a particular work for its own sake is to promote neither.

How, then, does a Christian pursue a "secular" vocations? Luther's answer, above all, is "In faith"—in other words, in cheerful confidence that both the Christian and his work are pleasing to God. "In love," Luther would put in second place. In other words, a Christian acts simply and naively, and needs no other reason than that his neighbor needs him.

The bulk of Luther's *Treatise* is a rehearsal of the Ten Commandments in which he applies them to everyday life with amazing scope and clarity. As he does, he harps constantly on two themes: 1) Faith makes every work God-pleasing, and no work can please God without faith; and 2) Every Christian has enough to occupy himself for a lifetime in his own station, and more than enough to do to keep the Ten Commandments. To look outside one's station or God's commandments, then, is not only foolish, but dangerous.

From all this it is now clear that all other works which are not commanded are dangerous and easily recognized. The works which are not commanded are the building of churches, beautifying them, making pilgrimages, and all those things of which so much is written in the ecclesiastical regulations. These things have misled and burdened the world, brought it to ruin, troubled consciences, silenced and weakened faith. It is also clear that a man has enough to engage all his strength to keep the commandments of God, and even if he neglects everything else, he can never do all the good works he is commanded to do.¹¹²

Have we today "graduated" from such mundane concerns as how to take the Ten Commandments into the workplace, for example, so that our people can devote all their spiritual energies to service in their congregation? The obvious contemporary relevance of just a few observations from Luther suggests that this is hardly the case. First, he says that a Christian's dealings with his neighbor will be characterized by absolute faithfulness and honesty—and that not only with fellow Christians, but with everybody.¹¹³ Luther's teaching on the Seventh Commandment is that theft has taken place any time that money or goods change hands and both

¹¹⁰ 24.

¹¹¹ "Hidden in Plain Sight: Luther's Doctrine of Vocation," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 98:278-290.

¹¹² 113.

¹¹³ AE 28, electronic edition.

parties to the transaction do not benefit in equal measure.¹¹⁴ Christian love is quite hard to reconcile with *Caveat emptor*.

As Luther taught it, the Seventh Commandment also prohibits—in addition to outright theft—sloth, waste,¹¹⁵ and shoddy work.¹¹⁶ There is a saying attributed to Luther that a Christian shoemaker puts his faith into practice by making good shoes, not shoes with little crosses on them. The attribution is most likely false,¹¹⁷ but it has probably become widespread because the saying resonates. It sounds like exactly the kind of thing that Luther *would* say, if he witnessed the culture of contrived spirituality that has enveloped modern evangelicalism. There is no such thing as “Christian shoemaking.” There is, however, shoemaking that is done by baptized kings and priests, who make shoes because their neighbor needs them—and quality shoes at a fair price will obviously do the best job of meeting their neighbor’s need. A Christian in a “secular” vocation will offer to God his diligence, his honesty, his cheerfulness, and an absolute commitment to quality in everything he does—and do it in the confidence that God is delighted with all of it, because God delights in him.

A moment’s reflection on the contemporary world of work suggests that no, a great deal of it has not yet been won for Christ. Add Luther’s teaching about, for example, Christian marriage or the Christian home to his teaching about the workplace, and it becomes even more obviously true. We have more than enough to do.

What if we made it our business to send out into the world an army of laypeople who were equipped to share the Good News, but were also determined to serve their neighbor by their occupations, to be scrupulously honest and considerate in business, to give their employer a day’s work for a day’s pay and their customer full value for every dollar spent, and to show real, non-judgmental concern to the disadvantaged? What if, furthermore, they spoke the truth, stuck with their spouses no matter what, took responsibility for their children, bore their troubles without complaining, and stopped eating and drinking when they’d had enough? What if we taught them once again that the faithful do these seemingly ordinary works by “God’s will and express command,” that “God allows these works to please him for Christ’s sake and promises a glorious reward for them in this life and in the life to come,”¹¹⁸—that these works bring just as big a smile to the face of God as anything their pastor does? I submit that the shock and disbelief on the faces of the people of this world, as they witnessed this behavior from our members, would result in opportunities for evangelism like nothing we have seen so far. Even if it didn’t, it would be awfully fun to watch.

We implore you, Lord: bring it to pass among us. Amen.

¹¹⁴ *The Large Catechism*, I, 224.

¹¹⁵ 225.

¹¹⁶ 227.

¹¹⁷ Unattributed editorial, *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry*,

<http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/EditorialFall2005.shtm>

¹¹⁸ *FC*, “Solid Declaration,” IV, 38.

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