

# Introduction

Ask people the following: when they are on the job, walking or standing still, eating, drinking, sleeping, or engaging in any activity that sustains the body or promotes the common good, do they consider their actions to be good works pleasing to God? You will find that they say no. They define good works very narrowly and confine them to church-related activities such as praying, fasting, and giving alms.<sup>1</sup>

The idea for this book was born in a church basement. I was talking to a group of adults at a congregational forum. I was speaking on Reformation Sunday and my charge was, on the surface, simple enough: explain why Martin Luther is important to the church of today. I started my talk with Luther's own life story and his spiritual crisis within the monastery. Next, we traced his rediscovery of Paul's message of justification by faith alone. And then, I made a wrong move—I began to go into some detail about the various theories of justification in the late medieval church and how Luther's views differed from them. As a church historian, this topic was interesting to me. I love tracing the nuances of historical theology and I make no apology for that. It is

1. Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works* (1520) trans. and introduced by Scott H. Hendrix (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 20.

important for students of theology to understand the major doctrines of the church.

But most of those in my church basement audience clearly understood Luther's message. They may not have known the subtleties of Thomas Aquinas or William of Ockham, but they did grasp the essential truth: that God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, loves the unlovable. However, they probably did not need to hear that morning about the distinction between congruent and condign merit. I saw it in their faces. Moreover, I knew some of folks personally. They were most likely thinking the following: it is true that justification by faith is a great teaching—an amazing combination of comfort and freedom. But what happens when I go home? What does this mean for my relationship with my kids and my spouse? Does it have any bearing on my friendships? Can I take it to work with me? How does it affect my role in my community?

Please know that this is not yet another screed about the failure of academic theology to address the real issues of Christian life. Leaders in the church ought to be deeply grounded in the Bible and the Christian tradition. If anything, the need for a learned and intellectually nimble church leadership is more crucial than ever before. A postmodern world necessitates that Christians today are able to engage in a wide variety of conversations on the relationship between faith and science, faith and culture, faith and other religions, and so on.

But we also need to recognize that Luther regularly preached his theology. Justification was one side of the coin. And the other side was vocation.<sup>2</sup> Luther made sure that the Word became flesh in the actual lives of his people. He wanted them to understand that the great truth of God's love is carried

2. Marc Kolden, "Luther on Vocation," *Word and World* 3, No. 4 (Fall, 1983), 382–90.

to the farmer's field, the mason's quarry, and the midwife's birth chamber. And it is not only within the realm of work. Our callings extend to conversations with friends and the trials and joys of marriage and family life. Moreover, as I will argue, we have a special vocation to steward our own gifts by caring responsibly for ourselves.

Note that the title of the book is *Martin Luther and the Called Life*. The indebtedness to Luther in each chapter will be obvious. We will mine the reformer's life and theology for each topic covered. However, we also want to be careful about getting stuck in the sixteenth century. As we shall see, Luther had some wise things to say about marriage, work, citizenship, and so on. But he also said these things five hundred years ago. It was a time before the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Thus, it seems silly to expect that all of Luther's ideas translate well today. On some things (the role of women, for example), he was just wrong, or better still, a child of his own time. So, while each chapter will have a foundation in Luther's thinking, we will also use the reformer's own catechism question, "What Does This Mean?" in the second part of the book to ensure there is a vigorous engagement with life in the twenty-first century. These sections will not be an exhaustive review of the categories being explored, but rather, offer some pointers about how to think about our various callings in the present age. Luther is the catalyst for these observations, but they are not a commentary as such on the reformer's own views.

Some may resist using Luther as a guide for thinking about life today. After all, we are concerned with questions about meaning and purpose. Luther, however, wasn't concerned about "the meaning of life." This, of course, is true. A question about life's "meaning" is a modern concern. If anything,

Luther's life had too much meaning! His life was a desperate struggle for faith, where he was caught between the warring powers of God and Satan. But perhaps, the struggle with meaning and purpose in the twenty-first century is the result of limiting our horizons to the secular realm. Luther's teaching on vocation invites the reader to consider a theological perspective in addition to the ones normally used in sociology, politics, psychology, and so on. In fact, he believes that we can't help but be "religious" because everyone has to trust something to give meaning and value to life. Luther would identify that object as a "god."<sup>3</sup> Like it or not, Luther believed a theological perspective was hardwired into the human condition. When conceived this way, perhaps the distance between Luther's world and our own is not as far as first thought.

There are five reasons why a book such as this is needed. The first comes out of my experience of teaching religion to college undergraduates for the past twenty years. I am convinced, more than ever, that Luther is a bracing and exuberant alternative for what most of them conceive as "religion." The reigning paradigm for thinking about faith is what Christian Smith called moralistic therapeutic deism.<sup>4</sup> In other words, religion mainly has to do with being good (as you personally conceive it), maybe turning to God for comfort in a crisis, and otherwise seeing very little connection between this "faith" and daily life. Unfortunately, for most of my students, most of the time, God is absent. They struggle with questions of purpose and meaning, but often, fail to connect with religion—at least, one that is not idiosyncratic.

3. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism" in BC:386–90.

4. Christian Smith with Melinda L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Luther's understanding of vocation is in complete opposition to this way of seeing life. To be sure, not everyone in my classroom embraces his views. But he provides a way of thinking about God and life that is not based on "performance," and in his teaching on vocation, he makes a case for a God who is present, a God who is deeply intertwined with creation.

Second, much attention has been paid to Luther's doctrine of justification. Luther himself invited this scrutiny when he declared in the Smalcald Articles that "nothing in this article can be conceded or given up."<sup>5</sup> For Luther, justification was the "chief article" and he drew the sharpest possible line between the righteousness given to us by God in Christ and the human righteousness that is exercised for the sake of the world.<sup>6</sup> In other words, God declares the sinner righteous—it is a powerful Word that transforms the sinner, and yet, it is a Word that remains outside of the recipient. One becomes holy because of one's relationship to Christ and not because a person has changed to become more like Christ. This is in contrast to alternatives to justification that emphasize the transformation of the sinner into a state of greater "holiness."<sup>7</sup>

This is the doctrine I was taught, and, when preached rightly, is powerful. However, being declared righteous in Christ does not happen in the abstract. It occurs to men and women living real lives in the midst of families, friendships, work, and communities. Without an understanding of vocation, the earthly corollary to justification, the Word may enter the mind, but it really doesn't return the justified sinner to the created world of real life. The earthly callings of

5. Martin Luther, "The Smalcald Articles," in BC:301.

6. Ibid.

7. See Gerhard Forde's *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) for a clear and masterful treatment of this important issue.

Christians need more attention than they have typically received. As we shall see, we have no better role model than the preaching of Martin Luther himself. The reformer's sermons are crowded with references to the vocation of his listeners.<sup>8</sup>

Third, there have been no book-length treatments of Luther's doctrine of vocation in English since Gustaf Wingren's magisterial *Luther on Vocation*.<sup>9</sup> This text has stood the test of time and remains an invaluable reference for anyone interested in a serious engagement with Luther's teaching. But it was first published in 1943 (it was Wingren's doctoral dissertation—English translation in 1957) and much has changed since the world was embroiled in the Second World War. Also, Wingren's text is especially strong for its investigation of the vertical relationship between God and the believer. The focus is on how faith leads to earthly service and how the latter, in turn, affects the former. Wingren's insights on these issues are profound and still deserve close consideration. But there is less attention paid to the actual callings of Christians in the world.

Most of what has been written by others seems to conflate earthly vocation with work. The writings of Gene Veith are an exception.<sup>10</sup> But even Veith has a modest amount to say about Luther's own views, and rather, keeps the spotlight on

8. Robert Kolb, *Luther and the Stories of God. Biblical Narratives as a Foundation for Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012). See especially chapter six.

9. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. by Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1957).

10. Among his many books see *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossways, 2002) and *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999). Mention must also be made of the work of Robert Benne and his *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003). This is a great resource on vocation and Benne's indebtedness to the Lutheran tradition is clear. He also links a sense of calling with life beyond work. But Benne's purpose is not to explore Luther's own vocation. Another good book is Douglas Schuurman's *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

contemporary application. The present work will ground its views in Luther's own life story, and then, make connections with modern life.

Fourth, while many Christian churches have embraced an understanding of vocation and see it as central to their work, there has also been a tendency to concentrate on what might be called a "heroic" view of the concept. In this perspective, it is demanded that we link vocation almost exclusively with a challenge to injustice in the world. The calling of Christians is to speak up for the voiceless, include those pressed to the margins, and to work to end poverty and the desecration of the environment.

There needs to be great care taken when discussing this topic. The church must address issues such as poverty, the environment, and discrimination. Our society needs faith communities to be a moral beacon and point out truths that discomfort, startle, and cause unease. After all, Jesus issues the call. According to the gospel of Luke (4:18-19), here are the first words of his public ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

However, there also needs to be recognition that our public witness concerning injustice is only one part of our actual vocation. Ninety percent or more of our time is spent in the nitty-gritty of life, far out of the spotlight. Marriage and family life demand large amounts of time that involve the arts of discretion, negotiation, compromise, and forgiveness. Friendships need to be nurtured, often by means of a listening ear. In our work, less than dramatic details need significant attention. As I tell my students, their most important calling

is to be the best learners they can possibly be: turn off the phones, do the readings, avoid sloth, show up in class, and participate in discussions. There is nothing very glamorous about any of that, but it is still a difficult calling to live up to.

It is my hope that this book can provide a corrective to this heroic concept of vocation. That will be a delicate task. After all, the Lutheran tradition has often been accused of quietism in its public witness.<sup>11</sup> The last thing needed is a return to a “private” faith that makes no connection with public life. But we also need to make room for a sense of calling in the large spaces of life that have been vacated by some churches and theological scholarship.

Fifth, and finally, I believe this book is timely. In 2017 the Lutheran church celebrates the 500th anniversary of Luther’s posting of the Ninety-Five Theses. Conversation and questions about Luther will only increase in churches and in the larger public realm. This is a great opportunity for those familiar with Luther and his theology to take yet another look at him through the less well-known lens of vocation. And for those not acquainted with Luther, there is no better place to begin study of him than with his reflections on how the Christian faith is lived out in daily life.

Furthermore, vocation has become a hot topic in many colleges and universities of the church. The reason for much of this increased attention is a multi-million-dollar effort by the Lilly Endowment to provide grants to schools in order to integrate vocation into the lives of their institutions.<sup>12</sup> As a

11. See William Lazareth’s *Christians in Society. Luther, the Bible and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 2–30.

12. Since 2000, the Lilly Endowment has awarded nearly one hundred grants to church-related colleges and universities interested in making a theological understanding of vocation integral to their mission. My school, Augsburg College of Minneapolis, was the recipient of one of these grants.



result, there has been a significant increase in discussion about the meaning of vocation—a good thing.

But sometimes this conversation lacks the proper rooting in the Christian tradition. Indeed, it has been my experience that the concept is vulnerable to a phenomenon that might be called “vocation lite.” This happens when the notion of a calling is cut loose from its theological moorings and is interpreted exclusively in therapeutic or psychological categories. To be clear, it is possible to talk about vocation in a meaningful way beyond the boundaries of the Lutheran and Christian heritage. But that tradition has some important things to say about vocation that need to be kept in mind by anyone seeking to interpret it for an audience in the twenty-first century.

So, this is a book on Luther’s theology of vocation in the context of his own life. It begins by setting Luther’s thinking within the late medieval world (1300–1500)—a time that cannot be understood itself without a glance back at the Greek roots of Western civilization. We will examine how Luther’s own sense of calling as a teacher and preacher developed out of his time in the monastery. Then, we will describe his theology of vocation, seeking to ground his views within the comfort and challenge of baptism. As Luther overturned the sacramental system of the late medieval church, he needed a new foundation for how to relate our salvation in Christ to our life in Christ. He found it in baptism, where the Christian daily dies and rises with Christ.

The second part of the book will look at the various arenas to which a Christian is called. In each chapter, we will begin with Luther’s own story, and then, ask, “What does this mean?” for Christians today. Perhaps surprising to some, we will begin with the individual. This is not a concession to modern

individualism, but, as we shall see, the very place where Luther himself begins to discuss the meaning of Christian life in the world. We then proceed to look at the various dimensions of the Christian's calling beyond the self. We will honor Luther's categories (he saw three basic "orders" in life—the domestic, civil, and ecclesiastical), but stretch them in a way that provides engagement with contemporary life. Basically, we will move in outwardly expanding concentric circles. Christ crucified, to whom we are joined in baptism, remains at the center.

Following the individual's vocation, we move to what Luther called the "domestic realm." There has been significant attention devoted to Luther's marriage to Katherine von Bora. Until fairly recently, there has been a tendency to sentimentalize "Katie" Luther as the ideal "housewife." Many accounts ignored the harsh realities of women's experience in the sixteenth century. Recent scholarship allows us a more realistic view of Luther's marriage.<sup>13</sup> Some of what he says about the calling of a husband or wife simply reflects his sixteenth-century context and is no longer applicable. But there is much in Luther's marriage that can still be instructive for today.

It is sometimes forgotten that Luther was not only married, but was also a father and a son. A generation ago, Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther* generated much controversy about the reformer's relationship with the father.<sup>14</sup> We will not revisit that dispute in any type of involved way, but rather, look at

13. See Susan C. Karant-Nunn and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Luther on Women: A Sourcebook* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

14. Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther; A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958). Erikson's thesis was that Luther's rebellion against the teaching of the church was rooted in his complicated relationship with his father.

Luther's actions as a son and a father and see how they might speak to those callings today.

Next, we move beyond the realm of home in order to look at the civil realm. The meaning of our calling to be citizens will be discussed here. Luther lived long before the advent of Jeffersonian democracy. So, we should not expect him to reflect the values of the United Nations charter on human rights. However, his two kingdoms theory (much misunderstood) can still serve as a helpful model for how to think about the relationship of faith and politics. Contrary to popular notions, Luther believed deeply that faith ought to be exercised in the political realm. His insights in this area can help us discern the calling of the Christian as one seeks to love the neighbor in the civil community.

Also to be examined is the calling of the Christian in the congregation. Luther is best known as the bold reformer who challenged the corruption and greed of the late medieval church. However, Luther not only operated on a grand historical stage, but was deeply involved in the parish life of the church in his home city of Wittenberg. From his preaching, we gain a good idea of what it means to participate in a Christian community. We also need to ask ourselves: What does it mean to be called to be a faithful member of a congregation? How does the congregation sometimes frustrate an understanding of vocation? How important is a congregational connection and worship itself for nurturing a sense of calling?

While it was technically part of Luther's understanding of the domestic realm, we will link work more directly with the outside world because that is a better reflection of modern sensibilities. In many contemporary accounts of vocation, this becomes equated with "calling." In other words, vocation

equals a job. As we have suggested, this was not the case with Luther. His revolution against the late medieval church's view of vocation certainly had huge implications for work, and we will describe how Luther's theology ennobled the entire realm of labor. For Luther himself, it will mean looking at his own efforts as a scholar and teacher. But this discussion will be set against a horizon that views vocation as something that includes all of life's activity and not just work alone.

There is little doubt that each of these proposed chapters on the various realms of vocation could be a book in itself. Moreover, the secondary literature on Luther's life and theology is nothing short of overwhelming. Indeed, as some writers have said, Luther is an "ocean." His own voluminous writings (120 volumes in the Weimar edition) have been exceeded exponentially by his interpreters. So, none of these chapters aspires to be the final word on Luther's ideas about vocation. Furthermore, the goal is to make this work accessible to the nonscholar. There is something ironic about a book on Luther's views on vocation that is intended only for the specialist. The whole point is to help people see how Luther might help them in thinking about their own callings as spouses, parents, citizens, church members, and workers.