

A New Testament Professor's Rediscovery of the Doctrine of Vocation

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Imagine the average layperson in your church—the owner of a bike shop, a truck driver, a doctor, a secretary, a lawyer, a school teacher. If you were to ask him or her, “How does your pastor expect you to apply your Christian faith to your work,” What would they say?

I can imagine the average layperson answering the question posed above in two ways. First, he or she might respond, “My pastor wants me to work diligently and honestly so I can make a lot of money and tithe.” And, yes, it’s true that the biblical authors expect God’s people to give generously to others in need and to the advance of the gospel. In 1 Timothy 6:17-19, for example, Paul writes,

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.¹

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians, chapters 8-9, Paul exhorts the believers in Corinth to sow generously in their giving on behalf of the needy believers in Jerusalem, with the expectation that they would reap generously—and thus be able to continue supporting God’s purposes.

Second, when asked what their pastor expects from them in their work, the average layperson of an evangelical church would likely respond, “My pastor expects me to share the gospel with my co-workers.” This biblical obligation, like giving, is also undeniable. In 1 Peter 3:15, the apostle writes to believers in Asia Minor:

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.

Similarly, in Ephesians 6:15, Paul exhorts believers to have their “feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.” In other words, they are to be ready to proclaim the gospel of peace as they walk throughout their daily lives.

So, yes, so-called “ordinary” believers or laypersons are to give generously to the church and to share the gospel with their unsaved co-workers. But, is that all? Unfortunately, for most evangelical Christians, that *is* all. There is widespread ignorance among both clergy and laypersons as to the rich heritage of biblical reflection on work that we find in Christian history—especially since the Protestant Reformation. In the last five years, much to the credit of Ken Magnuson and the Commonwealth Project, I have gradually come to a deeper understanding of these issues. It’s my hope and prayer that through continued initiatives like the one we are participating in this conference that the doctrine of vocation will not only be rediscovered by professors and pastors—but be disseminated and understood among students and laypeople.

Only recently did I become aware of *The Flower of Godly Prayers* written by Thomas Becon (1511-1567). The volume is 644 pages long and one portion of it is filled with beautiful prayers for the practitioners of different professions—a prayer for lawyers, a prayer for merchants, a prayer for landlords. Listen to these words taken from the prayer for landlords.

The earth is thine, O Lord, and all that is contained therein, notwithstanding though hast given the possession thereof unto the children of men, to pass over the time of their short pilgrimage, in this vale of misery. We heartily pray thee to send thy holy Spirit into the hearts of them that possess the grounds, pastures, and dwelling-places of the earth, that they, remembering themselves to be the tenants, may not rack and stretch out the rents of their houses and lands, nor yet take unreasonable fines and incomes after the manner of covetous worldlings; but so let them out to other, that the inhabitants thereof may both be able truly to pay the rents, and also honestly to live, to nourish their family, and to relieve the poor. Give them grace also to consider that they are but strangers and pilgrims in this world, having here no dwelling-place, but seeking one to come; that they, remembering the short continuance of their life, may be content with [what] is sufficient, and not join house to house, nor couple land to land, to the impoverishment of other, but so behave themselves in letting out their tenements, lands, and pastures, that after this life they may be received into everlasting dwelling-places, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.²

Can you imagine a landlord in your church having that passion and vision for his profession—a maturity that overflows in neighbor-loving, Scripture saturated prayer. Indeed, it's hard not to conclude that in our day we face a situation similar to Luther—where only a small percentage of people are viewed as being professionally “called” by God, while others are seen as supporting that work and perhaps, at best, providing a second rate attempt to duplicate the evangelistic calling of full-time ministers.

Five years ago, a traumatic personal experience brought home to me the disservice we have done to laypersons in giving them no categories or instruction for understanding their vocational callings. *Vocational* callings ... In this audience, I realize there is no need to pause and define vocation, but in recognition that these papers will be published for a broader audience, please allow me a few words.

When I grew up in Tennessee in the 1970s and 1980s, the word “vocation” conjured up images of schools training young persons to service HVACs or repair diesel engines. Vocational schools, as far as I knew, trained manual, blue-collar laborers—people who will not go to college.

The word “vocational” comes from the Latin *voco* or *vocare*, meaning to call. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, only priests, monks or other professional

ecclesiastical offices were considered divinely called to their offices. With Luther, however, there arose a proper recognition of the priesthood of all believers, which entailed not only a universal calling to salvation among God's people, but calling to all legitimate (non-sinful) roles and stations in life.

So, you're wondering about the personal traumatic experience that began my journey deeper into the doctrine of vocation. Yes, it was nearly five years ago that my father was nearly killed when a sixteen year old girl, apparently distracted by her smartphone, ran into the side of his Toyota Corolla. With bleeding on the brain, he had emergency surgery. He spent literally forty days in the hospital, much of it in the ICU. There were several points where he was close to death.

After his recovery, my father told me that he wanted to tell me something. It seemed that he was wanting to have a serious talk, and I did not know what to expect. Oddly enough, at the time, I remembered a story I had read in the paper about when the patriarch of a family was dying, he called his family around and confessed to them that when he was in Japan as a soldier at the end of World War II, he looted a Japanese palace, taking a royal Japanese sword with him that he had hid to that day. The guilt of the theft had bothered his conscience and he sought relief in his dying confession.

Once when visiting my family, the time came for this serious talk with my father. He sat in his recliner to my right, and I was on sofa next to me. He did not confess to me the theft of a samurai sword. Instead, he narrated his humble upbringing in rural Tennessee, the difficulties of having an invalid father (struck at an early age by rheumatoid arthritis), the inadequacies of his public education, and his unlikely path to college. He spoke of the challenges of succeeding in college when he had not been sufficiently prepared by his prior education, and then his admission to one of the most prestigious veterinary medicine programs in his day, at Auburn University. This journey continued with a brief stint in a dead-end rural veterinary practice in Russellville, Kentucky, followed by an unusual opportunity in Nashville, Tennessee. Finally, with the untimely death of an owner of the practice, he was able to buy into both the practice and the property.

Similar to one's experience in reading the book of Esther, I found that my father was hinting at the Lord's gracious guidance throughout his life while only rarely making such explicit affirmation. This was a sacred story of divine calling. My father had been divinely called and gifted to be a

veterinarian—and through his ministry of veterinary medicine he had loved and served thousands of his human neighbors, not to mention fulfilling the Proverb 12:10, “A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal” (NIV84).

Think about the dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of other men and women who sit around us in our churches on Sunday morning. They too have sacred stories to tell of God’s calling to their work, but they too lack the encouragement or categories to see their own journeys clearly enough to speak about them to others.

In the five years following this pivotal conversation, I have come to rediscover several key theological and biblical insights about work, which I will list and comment on now.

1) WHEN HUMANS WORK, WE REFLECT THE IMAGE OF GOD.

To understand work, we must go back to the very beginning... to creation. In Genesis 1:27-28, we read:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

This text is called the Cultural or Creational Mandate, and it should rightly take its place alongside the Great Commission and Great Commandment for believers as they seek to understand the Lord’s will for them in this earthly life. In Genesis chapter 1, we see that God creates humans in his image. What does this mean? Much has been written on this topic, and scholars disagree about the particulars, but if we look carefully at the passage, we can agree, I think, that the image of God in humans must include vice-regency over the world. Indeed, immediately following the declaration that humans are created in God’s image, God commissions them to rule and subdue the earth. So, whether rulership and subduing are inherent in the divine image, or simply an implication of it, the relationship between image and vice-regency is undeniable.

This passage teaches us that to experience full humanity in God’s image,

we must take the animals, plants, and minerals of this world and exercise creative dominion over them. Humans working creatively reflects their creator who took the dust of the earth and formed man out of it. As one pastor has noted, God “got his hands dirty” in creation. The Triune God of the Bible is not depicted as some distant deity, but as a “blue collar” deity, rolling up his sleeves and getting down in the dust. Indeed, it is striking when the second person of the triune God became incarnate, he also was a worker—following the construction trade of his adopted earthly father (Mark 6:3).

One implication of both the way God created the world and the way we are called to reflect his creative work is that *all* forms of legitimate (non-sinful) work have dignity. All work done well reflects the Creator who formed us and has called us to create and subdue—to bring the creative potential out of this amazing world he gave to us.

While Islam predicts the afterlife will be a time of leisure for those who truly pleased Allah, Christianity has a different vision. In Isaiah 60, in the picture of the new heavens and new earth, there is mining, farming, building, shipping, and trade. We realize these are likely symbolic images in some sense, but they point to a continuity in the old and new creation (much like we find in the resurrection body). How exactly, for eternity, will redeemed humans reflect the image of God in creative production, discovery, and rulership? We can have anticipation, but we can't be certain. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:9, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (NIV84).

Between work in paradise and work in the new creation, however, we find a broken world that frustrates our best creative efforts. This frustration, of course, is due to the Fall, where God cursed the ground and said that the home would be marked by pain and strife (Gen 3:16-19). Both the economic realm of the home and the marketplace are broken and in the end, our creative skills die with us and we leave our work to be forgotten or destroyed by others (Eccl 2:17-19).

If humans must work to accurately reflect the image of God, that fact has implications for the flourishing society and culture we hope to help shape as Christians. For example, recent studies on recidivism show that prisoners who work while in prison—which is usually monotonous labor-intensive tasks like doing laundry—adjust significantly better to life outside prison. Regardless of how menial the task, there is something truly humanizing

and purposeful about doing labor that serves others. If we want to create a more flourishing society, let's take insights from studies such as these to make prisons less of a revolving door and to help persons with disabilities find more purpose in their daily lives.

Inviting Christians to subdue the earth for the glory of God and love of neighbor finds a memorable example in the life of George Washington Carver. Born a slave in 1864, Carver became a scientist who also had a devout Christian faith. One common story about Carver says he once prayed, "Creator, show me the mysteries of the universe," to which God replied, "Little man, that's too big for you, but I will show you the mysteries of the peanut—which is more your size!" Although this story is perhaps legendary, it is true that Carver discovered more than 300 uses for the peanut—including oil, plastics, paint, etc. Carver's discoveries were a boon to Southern agriculture, helping countless families prosper. What would it look like today for countless Christians in thousands of different industries to pray, "Creator, show me the mystery of _____" and then apply their God-given creativity to further discovery and invention for the benefit of their neighbors?

2) GOD'S PROVIDENCE AND SOVEREIGNTY EXTEND TO OUR EMPLOYMENT AND OTHER ROLES IN LIFE, SUCH AS BEING A HUSBAND, WIFE, FATHER, MOTHER, CITIZEN, STUDENT, ETC.

This is perhaps one of the two main points that Luther intends to make when he talks about a doctrine of vocation. His main verse to support this assertion is 1 Corinthians 7:20. The text comes in the midst of Paul answering the Corinthians questions about marriage. Apparently, the ancient Corinthians had such an over-realized eschatology that they thought the normal social structures and roles of this life were already falling away. No, says Paul, if you are married, becoming a Christian means not only that you stay faithfully married to your spouse (as far as it depends on you), but you also now have concern for your spouse's salvation. In the midst of this discussion of marriage, Paul also mentions slavery and being circumcised or uncircumcised. These are social statuses or descriptions of that remain unchanged when one becomes a believer. The language of Paul here is striking. Of the slave or the married or the uncircumcised man, the apostle says, "Each one—in the calling in which he was called, in this, he must remain" (1 Cor 7:20, my

translation). The words translated “calling” or “called” here are normally words applied to believers in their effectual calling of God to salvation. Note also the divine passive verb, “was called.” If we explicitly add the implied divine agency clause, it would read: “. . .the calling to which he was called by God.”

Isn’t that shocking language? Why are you in a particular job or status in society? Because the supreme ruler of the universe has divinely appointed you to this role!

Elsewhere, Luther points out that such an understanding of vocation is nothing other than an implication of Bible’s teaching on the sovereignty of God. If not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God’s will and all the hairs of our heads are numbered (Luke 12:6-7), how likely is it that the various roles in our lives are outside his sovereign care?

Similarly, we might point out that in his speech on Mars Hill, Paul says:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

So, if God sovereignly has determined the living places and relationships of pagans, how likely is it that his sovereignty does not similarly extend to the living places and employment of his covenant people?

Of course, we should not understand God’s sovereignty over our roles as fatalism. To the slave who has been called by God *as a slave*, Paul also says, “If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity” (1 Cor 7:21). The point is that some roles we should never be changed (e.g., one’s role as a spouse), but other roles (e.g., employment) can be changed. Still, as long as one has a particular role—specific work in one’s hands to do—one should understand that work as a divine calling and do it for the glory of God and love of neighbor.

In Colossians 3:17, Paul writes, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. A bit later, speaking directly to slaves, he says, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col 3:23-24). All of our actions are to be done with a consciousness

that we belong to the Lord and serve him. We worship him by doing our work well, loving our neighbors with integrity, in a manner befitting those who bear the name of Jesus.

In recently talking with a group of missionaries about this doctrine of vocation, I asked them to list their roles. They said things like, "Missionary, business owner, mother, father, child, language student." I told them to think of these roles as placed along a horizontal axis." Then, I asked them to imagine "the Great Commandment" (Matt 22:37-29, love God, love neighbor) as a vertical axis intersecting every one of those roles. That's a picture of doctrine of vocation. How in my various roles in life am I to love God and love neighbor?

Another visual image I gave them was a picture of the resurrected Christ with his palms up, arms stretched out towards them. In Jesus hand he held a list, and on that list there were their various roles: language student, mother, business owner, missionary. Each day, Jesus was specifically commissioning each one of them to fulfill these roles in faith and love. How would laundry and cooking look different if one embraced these tasks as part of the roles given by our great Savior? How would the struggle of learning language look different if I really believed, "God has appointed me in this particular time and place to learn French." And, as I work diligently as a student, I am loving my teacher, I am loving my fellow students, I am loving the people who sacrificed to send me here, and I am loving the future French speakers who will hear the gospel in their native tongue.

A failure to recognize one's roles as ordained and pleasing to God means that some people better suited to one role will wrongly grasp for another. I recently had a conversation with a highly skilled cyber-security expert. He was thinking of quitting his academic post to go be a missionary in the most remote corners of the world, but he was concerned that his and his wife's health would not be able to endure the harsh conditions. Quite frankly, he did not seem to have a missionary calling or gift, but was more concerned that to really and fully love God, he needed to surrender all by going on the mission field.

I asked him if he would be willing to use his gifts to help missionary agencies keep the identities of their missionaries secret. And, I talked to him about how to be a winsome witness to the students under his tutelage at a secular university.

I do not know the mind of God, but it seems that this man was uniquely gifted and effective in his vocation of keeping data safe and teaching others to keep data safe. What he needed was to see how that gift was loving others—and to think more deliberately about using that gift for the benefit of the Kingdom—as well as how to overflow with love and redemptive words in his non-Christian secular environment.

3) RATHER THAN DIRECT MIRACULOUS INTERVENTION, GOD USUALLY CARES FOR HIS CREATION THROUGH HUMAN AGENTS.

From my untutored reading of Luther on the doctrine of vocation, this point seems like the other major the Reformer is making. Gene Veith has skillfully summarized this dimension of vocation accordingly:

God healed me.

I wasn't feeling well, so I went to the doctor. The nurse ran some tests; the lab technicians identified the problem; the doctor wrote me a prescription; I had it filled by the pharmacist; In no time, I was a lot better. It was God who healed me, and He did it through the medical vocations.

God gave me my daily bread.

He did it through the farmer who grew the grain, the truck driver who hauled it, the bakers at the factory, the stockers at the grocery store and the lady at the checkout counter. It was God who fed me—just as I prayed in the Lord's Prayer—and He did it through the vocations of ordinary people just doing their jobs.

God talked to me.

The pastor read God's Word. In the sermon, he drew out of the Bible God's Law, which cut me to the quick. Then he proclaimed the Gospel of how Christ has done everything for my salvation. When I confessed my sins, God, through His Word as delivered by the pastor, told me I was forgiven.

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God teaches through teachers; He protects us through the vocations of police officers, firefighters, soldiers and government officials; He brings beauty through artists; he proclaims His Word and administers His Sacraments through pastors. God could have created each new batch of children from the dust, as He did Adam, said Luther. But instead, He chose to create new life by means of mothers and fathers. It is still God who creates and cares for little babies, but he does

so through the vocation of parenthood. When parents bring their children to Baptism, provide for their needs, discipline them, bring them up in His Word, and raise them to adulthood, God is at work every step of the way.³

For Luther, Psalm 127 is a key support of this dimension of vocation. The Psalm reads:

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep. Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. (Ps 127:1-3)

Take children, for example. Where do they come from? We observe that children are the result of intimate sexual relations between a man and a woman. Yet, any specific act of procreation is ultimately attributable to God, who made the sexes and stands behind human activity. "Children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward" (Ps 127:3).

We also read of God's loving superintendence of his creation through natural means in Psalm 145:

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. (Ps 145:15-16)

God does not feed his creation by providing species-specific manna every morning, but through countless intermediate agents and their activities.

Gustaf Wingren, in his book, *Luther on Vocation*, quotes Luther on this dimension of vocation. Luther says:

Instead of coming in uncovered majesty when he gives a gift to man, God places a mask before his face. He clothes himself in the form of an ordinary man who performs his work on earth. Human beings are to work, "everyone according to his vocation and office"; through this they serve as masks for God, behind which he can conceal himself when he would scatter his gifts. God would be able to create children without making use of human beings, but it pleases him to conceal himself in marriage, in which he lets men and women think that they bring the

children into the world, “but it is he who does so, hidden behind these masks”⁴

For the missionary conference where I recently taught, I used the FedEx logo as a visual marker of the “masks of God” dimension of a theology of vocation. If you carefully examine a FedEx logo, you will notice that between the final E and x, there is an arrow pointed to the right. The image has this beautiful “hidden” image within it that captures the essence of FedEx—purposeful movement. Likewise, there is a hiddenness to God throughout creation, but once one sees it, it’s hard to miss, either in experience or Scripture. Like the ubiquitous FedEx symbol (and the hidden arrow you will henceforth forever see), so the invisible and sustaining work of God stands behind creation.

There is much more that could be said about a theology of vocation, but what are some practical implications of these truths?

- 1) There is great dignity to all legitimate (non-sinful) work because all work reflects the creative work of God. So, we should show genuine appreciation and honor to all workers.
- 2) Rather than implying that non-ministerial callings are less important, we should celebrate them. We should instruct church members in how to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus. Church members should not think that they need to be situated in the interior of a church building to serve God. Rather, we should help them see how they can glorify God and love their neighbor through their daily work.
- 3) We should be humble about our own callings and roles. Such roles are ultimately distributed by God, so if we have any pleasing abilities or statuses, those are nothing other than divine gifts. Or, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”

1 English Bible translations from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

2 P. 24-25, <https://archive.org/stream/prayersotherpiec00becouoft#page/24/mode/2up>, accessed October 26, 2017.

3 From *The Lutheran Witness*, accessed online.

4 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (trans. Carl C. Rasmussen; Eugene, OR; Wipf & Stock, reprint, 2004), 138.