

10 Practical Applications of Luther's Doctrine of Vocation (with Selected Quotations from Luther) Alan W. Gomes

I. Everyone has a calling.

"Thus every person surely *has* a calling. While attending to it he serves God. A king serves God when he is at pains to look after and govern his people. So do the mother of a household when she tends her baby, the father of a household when he gains a livelihood by working, and a pupil when he applies himself diligently to his studies."¹

II. Our calling is to be "other focused."

A. "The Christian life does not consist of that which such men as monks invent; it does not drive people into the wilderness or cloister. It is Satan who commands you to forsake men. On the contrary, the Christian life sends you to people, to those that need your works."²

B. "[Therefore] let everyone live in such a way that he serves others....All that we have must be of service to our neighbor. When the heart is ready and prepared to look out for the welfare of the neighbors, God disposes it in such a manner that there is absolutely no station in life that serves itself. It is the duty of a wife to serve her husband; it is the duty of a husband to serve his wife. Thus it is the duty of the government to serve the state, to punish the guilty, and to defend the innocent. But he who seeks glory does not have love. The life that serves the other person—that, in the final analysis, is a man's life."³

III. Your calling pleases God and glorifies him.

A. "You can see in every station of life how each person in his calling should do the work committed to him and practice the work of love. A servant, for example, who works and neither sees nor thinks any farther than this: 'My master gives me my wages and that's why I serve him; otherwise I have no regard for him.' He does not have a pure heart or intention, for he works only to obtain a bit of bread.... But if he were good and a Christian, this is what he would say: ...'All right, I will serve my master and take my wages, but the chief reason why I do so will be that in this way I shall be serving my dear God and Lord Christ, who has commanded me to do this and I know that this is well pleasing to him.' There you see a true work performed out of a pure heart."⁴

B. "...the works of all Christians are performed to God's everlasting pleasure; they will not be despised, as will those of non-Christians, but will have their eternal reward also in yonder life, because they are works done in Christ and grow from the Vine."⁵

¹ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 3: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20. Commenting on Gen. 17:9. [Emphasis added.]

² Luther, quoted in Wingren, 54-55.

³ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 30: The Catholic Epistles, commenting on 1 John 3:7.

⁴ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51: Sermons I, p. 270.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 24: *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 24 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 220-221.

IV. Have confidence in your calling and do not doubt it.

A. From Gustav Wingren:

“The incomparably clearest sign in God’s providence is the fact that we have the neighbor we actually have. In that fact lies the law, an evidence of a definite vocation. Uncertainty as to whether one is called is often due to regarding oneself as an isolated individual, whose ‘call’ must come in some inward manner. But in reality we are always bound up in relations with other people; and these relations with our neighbors actually effect our vocation, since these external ties are made by God’s hands.”⁶

B. The Augsburg Confession states, “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call.”⁷

V. Do not denigrate any calling: whether your own or that of others.

A. “If the monks really wanted to escape from people, they should be honorable and honestly flee, not leave a stench behind them; that is, they should not by their fleeing give other vocations and offices a stench as though these were utterly damned and their own self-chosen monasticism were pure balsam. When a person flees from human society and becomes a monk it sounds as though he were saying, ‘Shame on you! How these people stink! How accursed is their vocation. I want to be saved and let them go to the devil!’ If Christ had fled like this too and had become such a holy monk, who would have died for our sin or atoned for us poor sinners? Do you suppose it would have been the monks with their unsociable and austere mode of life?”⁸

B. “Our crazy reason refuses to pay attention to this. It decries it and thinks to itself: ‘Why, that is an ordinary thing that anyone could do in his own home!’ It yearns for something else that is strange and special, stares at it, and lets itself be led by all the clatter. Yet this is all just a pretense....Every pious husband, servant, maid or faithful worker, therefore, must be said to have a station that is excellent, high, and godly. If we could evaluate all occupations and stations correctly on the basis of the Word, then everyone could teach and live correctly, and everything would go along just fine. The proper stations then would be those which God has created and ordained and with which He is pleased.”⁹

VI. Do not lust after the callings of others

A. “But the blind and senseless world will not see this. It despises such stations so shamefully that it makes a pious heart bleed. ‘Never!’ it says. ‘What shall I do with such an unimportant secular station? I will serve God and become a monk or a nun, a priest or a hermit.’ And out of this wisdom there has developed such a lively fanaticism that the world is full of monasteries and institutions of so many different orders and factions, and everything fairly crawls and swarms with spiritual people.”¹⁰

⁶ Wingren, 72.

⁷ Augsburg Confession: I, art. Xiv.

⁸ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41: Church and Ministry III, p. 39.

⁹ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat. Commenting on Matthew 7:15.

¹⁰ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 13: Selected Psalms II. Commenting on Psalm 111:10.

- B. “Therefore it is necessary to observe the rule that everyone should remain in his calling and live content with his gifts but should not be inquisitive about other people.”¹¹
- C. “There are very few who live satisfied with their lot. The layman longs for the life of a cleric, the pupil wishes to be a teacher, the citizen wants to be a councilor, and each one of us loathes his own calling, although there is no other way of serving God than to walk in simple faith and then to stick diligently to one’s calling and to keep a good conscience.”¹²

VII. There is *no* legitimate calling that is off limits for the Christian.

- A. “[The monks] have introduced a special, self-devised sanctity, apart from and contrary to the common Word and order of God and the ordinary godly vocations....These things, they claim, gleam like precious gems. The others...father, mother, government, pious masters and mistresses in the home, servants and maids – they treat with scorn and regard as nothing.... Therefore we must again sweep out this filth of the devil and throw it away; we must cleanse this doctrine well and impress it on the hearts of men.”¹³
- B. “Now it would be quite un-Christian to say that there is any service of God in which a Christian should not or must not take part, when service of God is actually more characteristic of Christians than of anyone else. It would even be fine and fitting if all princes were good, true Christians. For the sword and authority, as a particular service of God, belong more appropriately to Christians than to any other men on earth. Therefore, you should esteem the sword or governmental authority as highly as the estate of marriage, or husbandry, or any other calling which God has instituted. Just as one can serve God in the estate of marriage, or in farming or a trade, for the benefit of others – and must so serve if his neighbor needs it – so one can serve God in government, and should there serve if the needs of his neighbor demand it. For those who punish evil and protect the good are God’s servants and workmen.”¹⁴
- C. “Hence from ignorance Jerome, Augustine, and others did not know how to judge various kinds of life, but turned their backs on business and government, thinking that these were dangerous in the presence of God.”¹⁵

VIII. Have a realistic view of your calling.

- A. “God has arranged matters very well. He places people in such callings and offices before they know and are aware of what has been mentioned. He hustles young people into matrimony with pipes, drums, and dancing. They enter the marital estate joyfully and think that it is nothing but sugar. In the same way He also confers great honor and glory on princes and lords, hangs golden chains about their necks, seats them on velvet cushions, lets people genuflect before them and address them with ‘Your Grace,’ gives them large castles, and surrounds them with splendor. As a result, people who do not know better suppose that this is nothing but joy and pleasure. But in this way God must lure them into

¹¹ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 3: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20. Commenting on Gen. 17:9.

¹² Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 3: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15-20, p. 128.

¹³ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16. Comment on John 14:10.

¹⁴ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 45 : The Christian in Society II, p. 99.

¹⁵ Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 17: Lectures on Isaiah: Chapters 40-66. Comment on Isaiah 54:11.

a net before He throws the rope over their horns. Then, when they are caught, they will find that things are far different. Their arrogance disappears, and their joy and pleasure are embittered by grief and sadness.”¹⁶

- B. “...good and bad, sadness and joy, must alternate, just as summer and winter, sunshine and rain, a good year and a bad year, do. Now there is sadness; then there is laughter; soon after this there is sadness again. Therefore keep this in mind and adjust yourself to it. It must happen to every person in his vocation that God inflicts on him some of the same sweat that was inflicted on Adam, and it will be unpleasant and hard enough for anyone to bear this patiently without becoming a rascal because of it.”¹⁷
- C. “Therefore, let misfortunes come as the Lord passes them out to each, whether in the household or in the state and church. We shall not allow ourselves to be driven to impatience. We shall not let them divert us from our concern for the state, the household, or the church. Such softness is not becoming to brave soldiers, to throw down their weapons and run away at the first attack of the enemy, as if we were intended for pleasures and idleness, not for work and activity. ‘Do not yield to evils, but encounter them more boldly.’”¹⁸

IX. Know that your calling is the arena in which sanctification will most occur.

“I ask where our suffering is to be found. I shall soon tell you: Run through all stations of life, from the lowest to the highest, and you will find what you are looking for....Therefore, do not worry where you can find suffering. That is not necessary. Simply live as an earnest Christian, preacher, pastor, burgher, farmer, noble, lord, and fulfill your office faithfully and loyally. Let the devil worry where he can find a piece of wood out of which to make a cross for you, and the world where it can find a branch out of which to make a scourge for your hide.”¹⁹

X. Take seriously the responsibility to inculcate the above truths in the church and in the home.

“These matters should be dealt with often and inculcated especially in the youthful age that it may learn to form a more correct judgment about these matters than the corrupters of law and the papists are accustomed to do, who do not cease to prefer the orders and rules of monks and nuns to domestic and civil offices, however much they are commended and adorned by God. Let them know that a woman suckling an infant or a maid sweeping a threshing floor with a broom is just as pleasing to God as an idle nun or a lazy Carthusian [monk].”²⁰

¹⁶ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16. Comment on John 16:20.

¹⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 24: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 14-16. Comment on John 16:20.

¹⁸ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 1: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5. Comment on Genesis 3:19.

¹⁹ Luther, quoted in Wingren, pp. 29-30.

²⁰ Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 6: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 31-37. Comment on Genesis 37:14.