

# Newsbrief

## Christian Vocation—Not Just for Pastors

### The 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation

One of the great gifts of the Reformation is the re-imagining of the doctrine of Christian vocation. Prior to the Reformation, vocation was understood to be exclusively in the domain of church. Only priests, monks and nuns were considered to have a vocation.

The word vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, which means to call. Thanks to Luther, we now hold an understanding that God calls more than church professionals. We understand now, that through Baptism, God calls us each into Christian service. Christian service is much broader than serving in the church, whether as professionals (pastors and other church workers) or as volunteers. Christian service, according to Luther's understanding of vocation, is serving God in all that you do.

As Luther wrote in his "Treatise on Good Works,"

"There is no work better than another to please God; to pour water, to wash dishes, to be a shoemaker, or an apostle, all are one, as touching the deed, to please God."

Indeed, Luther, to some extent heartens back to the Apostle Paul who uses the metaphor of the body to lift up different gifts.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of

activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone....All of these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” (I Corinthians 12)

God has created us with different gifts and talents. And God calls us to use those gifts and talents to the glory of God and for the benefit of our neighbor. This expansion of the understanding of vocation opens up all kinds of consequences. Luther himself talked of the dignity of doing one’s job well, whether as priest or as laborer, as a way to glorify God. Luther himself had been preparing to be a lawyer, when in a panic in a thunderstorm he made a vow to become a monk if only he could be saved from death. He lived, and he fulfilled his vow, becoming a monk. That was when he still lived under the assumption that being a monk was more pleasing to God than anything else.

Donald Heiges, in his book, “The Christian’s Calling,” describes Luther’s shifting understanding of vocation:

“Having rejected the basis for the medieval double standard of Christian living, Luther had two alternatives before him in regard to vocation: (a) he could proceed to deny the validity of vocation with reference to any station in life; or (b) he could extend vocation to include all stations in life, clerical and lay, “spiritual” and “secular.” He chose the second alternative, and thereby ushered in a new era of understanding of and concern for Christian vocation in the Western world.”

For Luther, vocation was not limited to careers in the church—after his encounters with various church officials who disagreed with him became very cynical about such people. But for Luther, vocation was a natural outcome of Christian life.

It is in Baptism that we are called to serve. It is because of our baptism that we are called to serve God and neighbor. How we serve depends on the gifts and opportunities we are afforded.

To those who questioned their own vocation, Luther wrote: “How is it possible that you are not called? You have always been in some state or condition; you have always been a husband or wife, a boy or girl, or servant...See, as no one is without some commission or calling, so no one is without some kind of work.” (From “Sermon on Day of St. John the Evangelist” quoted in “What Shall I Say?”)

Luther lived in a time when practically everybody was a part of the church. He could assume that all were baptized, that all were church members. Today it is quite different. Being a church member is entirely voluntary, and not at all universal. Many people in contemporary society maintain strict boundaries between their church selves and their normal selves. Luther’s doctrine of vocation reminds us that we are not bifurcated, that the “separation of church and state” that Americans so value does not mean that our faith does not permeate all that we do.

Donald Heiges summarizes Luther’s understanding of Christian service to the world this way:

1. Every Christian has a vocation in the world because every Christian has a station in which to serve others.
2. Vocation in the world is given structure by means of divinely established orders and offices.
3. Everything a Christian does in his or her vocation in the world is for the sake of human welfare.
4. All service in vocation ranks the same with God, but not all offices have the same significance in society.

5. Christians should be grateful to have God-given vocations to loving service.
6. All young persons should have the opportunity to prepare for the offices for which they are best qualified.

Does this sound like a campaign pitch for education and employment? Well, it is in some ways. Because what all of this means is that God does not create winners and losers, and God does not create worthless human beings. As Christians we believe that God has created each of us in God's own image, and that God has a plan for each of us. That plan is vocation.

As Christians we are called to serve. Part of that is our service within the community of faith. But it does not stop there. We serve God through serving our neighbors in our everyday lives. Donald Heiges lists how we do this.

1. A Christian's vocation is to glorify God by being of service to all people, regardless of their status.
2. A Christian's vocation is to glorify God by making the best possible use of the gifts God has given him or her.
3. A Christian's vocation to glorify God must be grounded in God's command and renewed by God's grace.

Vocation is more than career choice. It is listening to God and to the community, and responding with your life. Heiges concludes:

1. Be a faithful member of the household of God.
2. Respond in obedience to the claims God makes on your life.
3. Rejoice in your present station in life, but don't accept it as final.
4. Grow in your knowledge of yourself and of the various fields of your vocation.

5. Pray for God’s guidance and help in every aspect of your vocation.

Vocation is how we respond to God’s call in everything that we do, in our relationships, in our jobs, in our families, in our neighborhoods. Vocation is how we work and how we vote, how we recreate and how we pray.

As Lutherans we believe that everyone has a vocation, that everyone serves God and neighbor, and that our field of service is not only the church, but indeed the whole world. Luther lived in a time when the understanding of the world was undergoing radical change. Explorers were finding lands and peoples that Europe had no idea existed. 1492 was not only the first encounter of Columbus with the western hemisphere, it was also the year that Spain expelled the Jews. It was Muslims who welcomed the Jews into their lands. Europe was still feeling beleaguered from the east, from the Muslim world. Luther is famously quoted as declaring that he would prefer to have a competent and just leader who was “a Turk” rather than an incompetent and unjust one who is Christian.

We live with much more information about the world than Luther did. But we still live with all our human limitations. Poverty still exists, illness and natural disasters, wars and injustice still disrupt people’s lives. Through our baptism we are called to serve our neighbors.

And if we ever wonder who those neighbors are—it is the world. We are called to serve the world, especially the poor and those in need.

We live in a far more individualistic society that Luther did. We are encouraged to seek individual potential, to maximize individual gifts. Christian vocation is not just about the individual. It is about the individual as part of a community—part of a faith community, and part of a wider human global community.

With different gifts, we serve in different ways. But we serve. In community. That is our vocation. That is our calling. We are in this together.

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