

Faith and Work: Martin Luther

By Alistair Mackenzie

Luther elevated the status of everyday discipleship, including work.

Martin Luther's life is the story of an ongoing struggle with the meaning of vocation. He entered the monastery with a strong feeling of a personal calling. Luther was conscious that God had encountered him and commanded him to embrace the monastic life.

However, once in the monastery, Luther was forced to examine the monastic ideal. Surely there is only one will of God and it is binding on every person. And there is only one level of relationship with God. A person either has God and has God completely, or they do not have God and therefore stand under God's wrath. The way to God is not through some mystical experience, but attention to the clear word of God that shakes the conscience. It is faith which takes this call of God seriously and leads to a true and secure relationship with God.

Even before 1517, in his lectures on Romans, Luther's thinking is clearly moving in this direction, as he uses the example of Abraham to emphasise the sort of faith that needs imitating. Previously the example of Abraham leaving his home in response to God's call had been used to support the monastic ideal. But Luther emphasises that a calling like that of Abraham's is available not only for the monk, but for all Christians who receive the Gospel in their heart. For Luther, even the smallest work performed at the right place in response to a divine commission stands ethically on the same level as that which appearances suggest is the greatest work. Hence, even within the world, the highest level can be reached by the fulfilment of assigned duties. In this way Luther emphasises even more strongly than Tauler that the duties of an office are a call through which a person is summoned to God's service (Holl 1958: 150). In fact, Luther went so far as to reprimand his own sovereign, Frederick the Wise, for neglecting his administrative functions in order to devote himself to devotional exercises, as if in that way he could serve God better.

From 1519 on we find Luther clearly affirming that God has established a universal priesthood, and concluding that through the Gospel a call of God is addressed to every Christian, thus elevating all believers to the highest position of direct fellowship with God. The concept that some pray for the welfare of all Christians while others work to support them is now shattered for Luther.

Monasticism was no longer a unique class or special order with sole rights to pray for the universal church. Not that Luther immediately condemned monasticism. He was willing to allow it to exist, so long as it is understood that the work of the monk stands no higher in God's eyes than the normal work of a farmer or housewife performed in sincere faith. It was only later, in 1521, that Luther condemned monasticism. And this was prompted by the suggestion that by their vows monks offered something to God that moved along a more certain way to salvation.

For Luther, with his emphasis on justification by faith alone, this suggestion was abhorrent. As a result he dismissed belief in the special calling of the monk and started to assert that all Christians, in so far as they belong to a class or profession, should feel themselves called to that vocation. And the duties which this vocation involves are to be accepted as the command of God directed to them.

So it is Luther who first uses this terminology previously only connected with a priestly or monastic calling, and applies it to all worldly duties. He was emphasizing that being a husband, wife, peasant, or magistrate was also a duty assigned by God. No longer is there something uniquely spiritual about the traditional priestly estate: "All Christian men are priests, the women priestesses, be they young or old, masters or servants, mistresses or maids, learned or unlearned. Here there are no differences unless faith be unequal ... Therefore the estate of a priest is nothing else in Christendom than an office....Hence it follows from this that layman, priest, prince, bishop and as they say, spiritual and worldly, have no other difference at bottom than that of office and work, not of estate, for they are all of the spiritual estate, truly priests, bishops, popes."

For Luther, the religious aura which surrounded the clerical vocation now permeates all worldly tasks. To work in one's estate is a divine calling. A person's 'estate' is their divine appointment to serve God by fulfilling the duties of the office that this estate requires. If some object that they have no calling, Luther replies, "how is it possible that you should not be called? You will also be in some estate. You will be a husband, or wife, or child, or daughter, or maid". Hence, "everyone should take care that he remains in his estate, looks to himself, realises his calling, and in it serves God and keeps his command".

For Luther all work is understood to be divinely appointed, not just some particular offices. Everyone is called. No calling is more spiritual than any other. Work is part of God's creation. Work was instituted not just because of sin, but even before the fall. So Adam "had work to do, that is ... plant the garden, cultivate and look after it". Work is honourable and a blessing. Work has fallen under the curse of sin and so is wearying and disappointing and involves toil and trouble. But the Christian sees work beyond the curse. And a person is blessed when they work industriously...

Luther's conception of calling is one of duty rather than position. He understands calling as a call to service that comes to a Christian within the midst of their sphere of work. Hence vocation is primarily a summons to work for a neighbour's sake within one's estate. In this sense a vocation is distinguished from a person's work; "the eyes of God regard not works but our obedience in them." As a result, vocation requires a right use of one's office. A person who is not a Christian cannot have a calling. They lack the faith which alone is pleasing to God. And some types of work are not part of God's calling. Luther lists a number of sinful orders like robbery, usury and prostitution. Each of these is a false 'estate' in which no Christian with sustained faith and love can remain. A person must avoid estates which are sinful.

According to Luther, vocation is not confined to occupation, but also includes domestic roles and any action that concerns the world or a person's relationship with their neighbour. There is nothing which falls into a private sphere lying outside of estate, office or vocation. It is clear that every Christian occupies a number of different offices at the same time. Also vocation has nothing to do with salvation. Faith in God and willingness to serve one's neighbour constitute an organic unity. Salvation comes only through faith. Vocation is not the Gospel and does not give us heaven. Luther is most concerned that people should not place ultimate confidence in the work of their own hands. There is a marked difference between the certainty that our work matters to God and is part of Christian discipleship, and the certainty of our salvation which only the Gospel can give. Luther separates the heavenly and earthly (eternal and temporal) realms so that work is not over-valued as a means of salvation or eternal identity, significance or status. While Luther speaks about God's continuing work of creation through a person's work in their various estates, he also makes plain that this only refers to a person's co-operation in response to God's initiative in the earthly realm (Wingren 1958: 17-18).

.How is this loving service of God expressed? Firstly, as a loyal member of the church, the community of the justified, and secondly, through serving God in the orders of creation, the family, the political order and the economic order of property and labour. The work of citizenship expresses both love of neighbour and service of the commonwealth. Whatever is necessary for social health is good work for the Christian. Ian Hart concludes his study of Luther's view of work with this summary:

"The most obvious and most important element in Luther's overall teaching about work is the high valuation he placed upon it: the life God wants most people to lead is the life of daily work, and therefore such a life is holy and sacred and fully pleasing to God - in no way of less value in God's eyes than a life spent in prayer or church work. His other important thrusts were that each person should regard their job as a calling and stay in it; that menial work is of equal value to work more highly regarded by men; that one's work must serve one's ... neighbour; and his concern for honesty and fair dealing in one's work." (Hart 1995a: 51)

From this point on, in Protestant circles, the word vocation signifies something quite different to the meaning it held throughout the history of Monasticism. Monasticism suggested the monk alone had a true calling through pursuit of the contemplative life. But Luther ends up maintaining that the only true calling of God must be realised within the everyday world and its work, and hence it is monasticism which has no genuine calling. Not that Luther secularises calling the way the Enlightenment would do later, as if God's will is done just through fulfilling the simple secular demands of a job. Rather, Luther was attempting to renew the original monastic ideal that God is to be held present in every moment of life. But, in opposition to monasticism, Luther maintains that this is most fully experienced where believers participate most fully in everyday life with all its pressures and disappointments and struggles. A truly moral life can only be achieved in the consonance between the inner call, which a person receives in the Gospel, and the voice which forces its way through to us from our circumstances and what they demand of us. And this is no longer true just for those who hold high office, such as the statesperson, but for every office and service when it is exercised genuinely as a calling, i.e. as an office assigned by God and therefore to be carried out by God's Spirit. Luther elevated the status of the everyday discipleship of ordinary Christians, including their daily work.

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