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by David W. Loy

Among the bevy of books, both popular and academic, that promise a path to purpose, a significant number have invoked the concept of vocation to help chart the course. Their accounts come in a variety of forms: Christian, generically religious, and even studiously non-religious. Yet a substantial number of these accounts share a common set of features. They define significance partly in terms of the subjective experience of satisfaction, they embed significance within their account of vocation, and as a result they portray vocation as a social or occupational arrangement not yet realized, toward which we are being called.[1] In order to find significance in life, we must hear the call and follow where it leads. The present becomes preparatory; fulfillment lies in the future.

Embedding significance into the concept of vocation in this way generates a series of problems that sabotage the usefulness and attractiveness of vocation as a means for finding purpose. If vocation is a calling, then its starting point is the one who calls. Yet the starting point for the search in significance is the place of the atomistic individual in a liberal social order. It thus falls prey to an excessive individualism that ultimately undermines the search for significance and denies our nature as finite beings created by a gracious God. Other problems flow directly from this individualistic manner of framing the search. Because "significance" involves an individual, subjective experience not yet enjoyed, vocation points away from the ordinary relationships so central to our identity and toward some future state of affairs. Vocation is severed from the ordinary social roles we inhabit, which (if vocation is the means for finding significance) robs these social roles of significance. Consequently, the account of vocation in view here denigrates the ordinary labor, paid and unpaid, that is rendered by large swaths of the human population. Caring for children or aging parents, driving a truck full of food from a nondescript warehouse to an equally nondescript distribution center, and numberless other forms of labor can no longer

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be understood as vocations, because they do not provide the significance that is sought. The final problem is the direct corollary of this denigration: because vocation (that is, a life of significance) is not available within the context of ordinary labor, it becomes available only to those whose socio-economic status permits them to find and retain paid or unpaid positions in which truly meaningful labor can be rendered. This account of vocation is thus hopelessly elitist.

An understanding of vocation inspired by Martin Luther can avoid these problems. The first part of this essay examines the problems in more detail. The second part argues that Luther used the doctrine of vocation to resolve a potential crisis in meaning that arose because of the disintegration of the medieval social order under the pressure of the evangelical reforms in the sixteenth century. The third part develops Luther's understanding of vocation to show that it not only avoids the problems associated with using vocation to search for significance, but also provides its own answer to the problem of significance in the modern world. This approach takes seriously both the one who calls and the concrete relationships into which he calls us.

Problems

Using the concept of vocation as a means for helping people find significance in life is not new. Max Weber addressed the search for meaning at the turn of the previous century in his lecture "Science as Vocation."[2] The roots of this search lie deep in the soil of the transition to modernity. While a variety of historical factors contribute to today's obsessive search for meaning, two are particularly relevant for the purposes of this article: the breakdown of the well-integrated medieval social order and the gradual relocation of authority from outside the subject to within the subject.[3]

The medieval European social order was characterized by relationships that integrated nearly everyone into a coherent, meaningful whole in which each could understand him- or herself to play an important role—the so-called *corpus Christianum*. The twelfth-century thinker John of Salisbury compared this social order to a human body, likening the prince to the body's head, officials and soldiers to the hands, and common laborers to the feet. "So long as

the duties of each individual are performed with an eye to the welfare of the whole," he wrote, "so long, that is, as justice is practiced, the sweetness of honey pervades the allotted sphere of all."[4] What is important here is not simply that everyone has a place in the social order, but that "otherwise disparate individuals and interests are reconciled and bound together. John adopts a 'physiological' approach to the political organism, according to which all of the organs cooperate reciprocally in order to achieve a common purpose."[5] Two elements of John's depiction are striking. First, John considers even common laborers to be part of the body politic, unlike Aristotle, who presupposed that a certain class of individuals will live in the polity without being members of the body politic.[6] Laborers are not, in the medieval social order, outsiders who contribute to the body politic without enjoying its benefits. They are full members who are to enjoy the benefits precisely because they are organs vital to the functioning of the body politic. Second, the body politic is united into a body by virtue of the common purpose at which all the organs aim. That common purpose, in turn, extends significance to the labor of each member of the body politic. The labor of common laborers is different—and has a different dignity, on the medieval understanding—than the labor of rulers or clergy, but their labor nonetheless makes a vital contribution to the well-being of the whole.

This social order cohered well with an understanding that moral authority is located outside the subject. Moral authority—that is, the standard that determines what is good and ought to be pursued over against what is bad and ought to be avoided—was thought to lie in scripture or the nature of goodness (a more Platonic articulation) or the nature of human beings (a more Aristotelian approach). The kind of life one ought to live, the kinds of goods one ought to pursue, and the way in which one ought to structure one's relationships were not matters for the individual to choose; they were given by scripture and reality. According to both revelation and reality, on the medieval way of thinking, the individual flourishes by directing her life to something higher than herself, particularly the body politic and contemplation of God. Accordingly, the medieval social order provided each individual with a social context for directing

herself to something higher and thus for flourishing as a human being. Certainly not everyone submitted to scripture and reality in their actions. One could, and many people did, choose the wrong kind of life, pursue the wrong kinds of goods, or structure their relationships improperly. Yet in departing from scripture and reality, these individuals also fell short of full human flourishing.

The transition from the medieval to the modern world involved a gradual relocation of moral authority from outside the individual to within. People came to understand themselves as arbiters of truth and as free choosers of their ways of life. And this is precisely the point at which a crisis of meaning begins to plague the modern subject. If the meaning of my life is no longer established by my conformity with an external authority, because I myself am the authority in my own life, then I must establish the meaning of my own life. The situation is aggravated by the modern liberal social order. Unlike the medieval social order, which (in theory at least) provided a common goal toward which all human labor directly or indirectly contributed, the modern liberal social order explicitly refuses to stipulate a substantive common goal toward which all labor contributes, because doing so would create an authority external to the individual, which would undermine the individual's status as a free chooser.

These two changes leave the modern subject seeking meaning in or for herself because it is not provided by external authorities or the social structure. A significant body of literature suggests that vocation can fill the significance gap.[7] This use of vocation is particularly evident in literature on higher education, which has suffered its own crisis of significance over the past century or more in the United States.[8] The underlying problem that this body of literature seeks to solve is the lack of meaning that afflicts people in contemporary society, particularly in the workplace—a lack of meaning that takes the form of failing to experience work as a component of a flourishing and integrated life. The solution is to help individuals identify work that contributes to the flourishing of other people while giving them what Weber calls "inner satisfactions."[9] Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation as "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" represents well

this use of vocation to reclaim significance in the contemporary context.[10] The key claim is that significance is to be understood as an inner sense of satisfaction that can be achieved by pursuing one's own interests and passions in order to meet the needs of others. Thus, certain occupations can be understood not merely as jobs but as callings,[11] and universities can help students with the process of vocational discernment so that they find significance not merely in career success but in occupations and civic roles where their talents and abilities can be employed for the common good.

This body of literature aims at two laudable goals: helping people find work that is meaningful to them and encouraging people to find meaning in work that helps others. The structure of the argument, however, makes a personal sense of satisfaction constitutive of vocation along with service to others. To understand why, it is helpful to reflect on the phrase "vocational discernment." The goal of vocational discernment is to help individuals attend to the voice of the caller, as it were—to identify and interpret the clues that indicate which direction one ought to proceed in one's life. One important clue is the needs of others. However, what sort of work an individual will find fulfilling is another important clue. This point is not necessarily explicitly maintained in the literature, but it is abundantly reinforced by the exposition. For example, David Cunningham contends that finding one's vocation can be understood in terms of exploring "the inner world of the person who is exploring, . . . and the outward realm."[12] To draw on language from ecclesiology, this account of vocation makes the individual's feeling of significance part of the *esse* of vocation. If an individual does not experience a personal sense of significance in a particular occupation or social role, then, by definition, the individual is not in a vocation, even if the individual is serving others. Yet some of our vocations arise without any inner soul searching, quite apart from any act of discernment on our part, and absent a sense of significance about our work in those roles. In such cases, "vocational discernment" might mean coming to understand an existing relationship as an opportunity to find significance in providing care I would not have chosen to provide on my own. Significance might

thus belong not to the *esse* of vocation, but to the *bene esse* of the individual in a vocation.

The underlying problem is that the understanding of vocation in play here remains overly individualistic despite its salutary emphasis on helping others. Its focus on the individual's "personal meaning and happiness" caters to an understanding of our roles in the world as places of individual satisfaction rather than places of responsibility, to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's phrase.[13] Such descriptions of vocation cast us as beings who can optimize the mix of our own personal satisfaction and the good we do for others by choosing to whom we will relate. These views of vocation are a perfect fit for Christians seeking a place in the liberal social order because they reassure the individual that seeking an inner sense of satisfaction can, in fact, coexist with helping others. Yet they also carry within them the individualistic assumptions of the liberal social order—namely, that the task of the individual is to choose the kind of life and the kind of relationships that will generate a subjective sense of significance the individual could not find in any externally imposed social order. They portray human beings as atomistic individuals who choose which relationships to enter in order to find meaning.

A second danger flows from this individualistic assumption. Vocation understood in this way hides from view the relationships we cannot choose—precisely those relationships, in fact, such as kinship, which cannot generally be abandoned without harm and yet which require our time and energy. It leaves the impression that vocation arises only outside of the ordinary social roles we inhabit. "Vocational discernment" as described in the body of literature described above turns out really to be discernment of what kind of occupations or full-time volunteer work college students should pursue when they graduate.[14] While the literature certainly focuses on the philosophical and theological questions related to significance, and while it encourages a kind of liberal arts reflection on the sorts of occupations and volunteer work that might prove to be significant, its focus on occupation and civic roles directs attention away from other social roles and activities that we have typically also taken

to be central to human flourishing (our own and that of others): friendship, intimate partnerships, parenting, caring for aging parents, participating in local voluntary associations, being a good neighbor, and the like. It thus runs the risk of severing those ordinary social roles from our human search for significance.

Because this understanding of vocation obscures the importance of the ordinary social roles we inhabit, it likewise risks devaluing the paid and unpaid labor of a large swath of the human population. It is within these ordinary relationships that we expend much of our labor—not simply the work for which we are paid, but much of the time and energy that we expend for the benefit of others. This is Luther's point when he suggests that a father who changes his child's diaper is carrying out a work of great significance both to God and to his fellow human being.[15] The significance of changing a child's diaper cannot be overstated—the infant who cannot care for himself relies on the labor of others to remain clean and healthy. Likewise, the servant girl who milked cows in a late medieval home was an integral part of the economic well-being of the household, providing services that kept children and adults nourished and healthy in exchange for the wages she earned, and enabling other members of the household to carry out activities that likewise contributed to its well-being.[16] Much of our labor is expended in the most ordinary of ways that may or may not generate any "internal sense of satisfaction" but that are nevertheless of the greatest significance for those for whom our labor is expended. The significance of human work—whether paid or not—may therefore arise as much or more from outside the one who labors than from within.[17] Yet, if significance is less about a sense of inner satisfaction and more about the way in which our labor contributes to the flourishing of those we serve in our various social roles, then any account of vocation must surely make a place—perhaps a prominent place—for the very ordinary acts whose significance, while rarely noted or appreciated, is nevertheless undeniably grounded in benefits we provide to others.

A final danger follows upon the previous ones. Understanding vocation as significance entails a kind of elitism. If nursing, for example, is a calling and not just a job, then what of accounting? Or driving a waste collection truck? And, to heighten the tension, if higher

education is to help students identify their vocations, then what of the students who attend an institution that has no such center to its curriculum and provides no overarching account of the significance of work? And what about those who do not have the opportunity or desire to attend college at all? Vocation, it would seem, is either restricted to certain jobs, or it is attainable only by those with the time and resources to obtain a bachelor's degree from an institution with a strong liberal arts foundation.[18] So limited, vocation is no longer a calling which anyone may hope to hear and follow, but a privilege arbitrarily distributed to a select few on the basis of accidents of history such as economic status or social capital. Vocation so understood is hopelessly elitist.

Luther's Use of Vocation

Luther used the doctrine of vocation to address a different potential crisis of meaning in the wake of the evangelical reforms in Lutheran territories. In the medieval social order, as mentioned, each estate contributed a particular kind of labor for the well-being of the whole: rulers directed, soldiers protected, serfs fed, and so on. However, what we might call spiritual labor also had an important place in the social order. In fact, spiritual labor was tightly integrated into the overall economic functioning of the late medieval social order, because grace, understood as a substance, could be given a value and transferred from one party to another. A closer look at the value of spiritual labor in the late medieval social order will help illuminate Luther's use of vocation.

According to late medieval theology, certain acts by Christians earned merits. Merits above and beyond those needed for salvation were added to the treasury of merits, which was administered by the church. Naturally, some Christians earned more merits than others. The saints had contributed a substantial number of merits to the treasury, but the monastic men and women who could keep the counsels of perfection likewise contributed to the treasury. The work of the spiritual estate was therefore not merely to mediate God to human beings, but also to do the works that earned merits and so increase the size of the treasury.

For such spiritual labor to contribute to the common good, however, the benefits had to be available to all. At the same time, the spiritual estate needed freedom from other forms of labor to devote themselves to spiritual work. Thus, spiritual labor found a place in the overall economy as one form of specialized labor. Nobles and wealthy landowners could provide funds in exchange for merits from the treasury—sometimes in perpetuity if they endowed masses. Those with fewer means could gain access to the treasury of merits in a variety of other ways, most notoriously by participating in crusades, but most frequently by purchasing indulgences. Thus, the labor or wealth of those who could not keep the counsels of perfection could be traded, via the universal form of exchange, money, for the labor of those who could keep the counsels of perfection. The result was that those who could not keep the counsels of perfection could nevertheless see their labor as contributing to the kind of spiritual ends that were so important in medieval life.

The Lutheran reformers' understanding of justification thus inevitably led to social and economic changes in evangelical territories.[19] Understanding grace as God's favor shown to sinners for the sake of Christ rather than a substance granted by God for the performance of certain acts implies that it cannot be transferred from one party to another. It can no longer be the object of an economic exchange. Whatever makes an individual's life more rather than less Christian was no longer located in the religious practices of the monastic institutions but rather in the faith of each Christian. Once the monastic institutions could no longer claim any particular significance in the economy, the need to maintain them dissolved. The role of priests changed from that of retailers of grace (to put the matter crassly) to proclaimers of grace—a change, in economic terms, from selling goods to selling services. Spiritual labor as it had been conceived in the late medieval social order no longer held any value in Evangelical territories.

The new social and economic order that arose on the basis of this theology stood at a significant distance from the late medieval social order. Christian life was secularized, as it were, when it was moved out of the monasteries and into the everyday world. It would no longer be entirely clear to any given individual how his or her

everyday life contributed to spiritual ends, since Luther's maid milking the cow no longer milked to produce the kind of goods that could be exchanged for the spiritual goods she could not acquire in her current way of life. The question of significance could thus arise, because the new social order opened a rift between Christian life and economic activity—that is, between faith and work.[20] In fact, it could be argued that Luther's theology helped to secularize society by separating questions of faith from other domains of life. On this reading, Luther becomes the progenitor of the transition to modernity that has created the very lack of significance for which the doctrine of vocation is supposed to provide an answer.[21]

However, reading Luther in this way misses an important aspect of his theology. Luther knew well that economic activity could be separated from faith; his understanding of the first commandment showed him that *any human activity*—economic, social, political, or even religious—could be separated from faith in Christ. Economic activity is not unique in this respect. Even as Luther secularized the Christian life, therefore, by collapsing the distinction between those who kept the counsels of perfection to earn grace on behalf of the entire Christian community and those who benefited from this treasury of grace by confessing, receiving the sacraments, and endowing religious communities for the performance of masses, he likewise sanctified everyday life by arguing that the life of faith is embedded in concrete social and economic relationships—or, rather, that the concrete economic and social relationships in which human beings live are precisely the context in which Christians "fear, love, and trust God above all things."[22] His two theses in *The Freedom of a Christian* ("A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all"[23]) capture not only the freedom of Christians, but also the divine significance of our everyday activities. Changing diapers does not merely provide one's cottage industry with future workers, but also enacts God's love toward the vulnerable and helpless. Thus Luther writes that faith sees the "divine approval" that adorns all the "insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties" that go with childrearing. It prays, "I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its

mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will?"[24] For Luther, everyday life is imbued with sacred meaning.

Thus, Luther emphasizes our existing relationships as the site of our vocations. For Luther, vocation does not arise only where one's deep passion happens to meet the world's needs; rather, vocations are constituted by the concrete social relationships in which one finds oneself.[25] Wingren expressed the point this way: "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."[26] As much as we might like to discern whither God is calling us, we must always be mindful that much about our lives is already given prior to and apart from any choices we make. Luther defined vocation to include these existing relationships, because it is precisely in our loving service to these neighbors that we are called to trust our gracious God. This point becomes explicit in Luther's argument that monastic vows are invalid because they violate the fourth commandment.[27] Before one can choose to become a monk, one is the child of his parents and owes his parents whatever the fourth commandment requires. If his pursuit of monastic vows leads him to treat his parents with less love and honor than God requires, then he is failing to love and trust the God who gave him those parents and called him to honor them. I should not see my existing relationships as a kind of platform from which God wishes to launch me into a vocation.[28] Rather, they just are my vocations, and God unfolds further vocations from within the existing ones. This emphasis on the ordinary encourages us to pay attention to the relationships that constitute so much of our identities apart from any decisions we make.

Further, on this account, vocation—or, to transpose the concept into a modern key, a life of significance—is in principle available to anyone. The qualifier "in principle" is important here. As Miroslav Volf has pointed out, the doctrine of vocation has been abused to justify dehumanizing labor conditions.[29] We live in a sinful world in which people treat one another poorly—and worse. However, Luther does not claim that every Christian will always find an

internal sense of satisfaction in every vocation. He claims, rather, that every individual lives in association with other people whose needs call forth the same kind of loving response from us that God has shown us in the face of our own needs.[30] If the significance of a vocation lies first and foremost in the loving service I render to my particular neighbor in that vocation, and if the God who loves us both has given me all I need to serve this person, then my labor is not in vain. It has meaning—first, for this person whom I serve, and second, as an expression of God's love for the person I serve. Luther's doctrine opens our eyes to the myriad ways in which each of us already has specific, significant callings from God within our existing relationships.

Vocation for the Modern Age

Understood in these terms, Luther's doctrine of vocation avoids the problems of excessive individualism, the devaluation of ordinary social roles and labor, and the elitism that plague certain accounts of vocation, as outlined above. For Luther, human personhood is grounded in the God who created and redeemed us, and it is always bound up with the creation in which he created us.[31] We are not first and foremost self-subsisting, atomistic individuals who decide which social roles we wish to inhabit; rather, we are individuals created and sustained by a gracious God who has placed each of us into a specific social context with a specific family and specific neighbors in a specific time and place. In the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, "I am someone's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle; . . . I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation."[32] Precisely because we are procreated, none of us exists apart from these objective relationships. We are conceived as sons and daughters. The reductionistic word "offspring" would be too weak in this case, because our biological origin always stands within a social context. Older, derisive words that designated children born out of wedlock bear witness to the importance of social context, as do the contemporary phrases "genetic parents," "gestational parent," and "social parents."[33] Whatever else I may wish to be, and even if I wish it were not true, I am always at least someone's child. And as someone's child, I am also

therefore a grandchild, a neighbor, and often also a sibling, cousin, and so on.

While I certainly make decisions over the course of my life, such as whether and whom to marry, and whether and when to have children, there is much in even these decisions that is not subject to my choice: how close my friends remain to me, how the individual I marry changes over the years, what our children will be like, and so on. And it is precisely within these sometimes and somewhat unchosen social roles that I live out my life as a Christian. Or, more precisely, it is precisely within these social roles that the God who reconciled me to himself in Christ uses me to care for the other human beings he has created. Any claim to independence from these social roles and their responsibilities is a claim to independence from the God who called me into them. It is a rejection of my creatureliness, and therefore of my very humanity. Luther's doctrine of vocation highlights the relationships which are an inescapable part of my existence. As a result, it protects against the kind of atomistic individualism that underlies many contemporary concerns about finding significance in life.

By locating the source of significance in the divinely granted privilege of caring for the concrete human beings whose needs confront me in the specific roles I inhabit, Luther likewise offers an account of significance that is inherently social. Take, for example, his account of how faith views raising a child, cited above. Luther was aware that most human beings do not spontaneously imagine themselves to be unworthy of smelling an infant's full diaper, much less of actually reaching into the mess in order to clean it up. At best, human beings are likely to view changing diapers as one of the necessary but unpleasant tasks that accompanies the other benefits associated with raising a child. At worst, we shirk the task as an unwelcome and unpleasant interruption of other activities we would rather be doing. However, in both best and worst case scenarios, the focus remains on us: on the benefits I, as a parent, derive from my role as a parent. Such a focus on my own satisfaction stems from the very nature of our human sinfulness; the sinner is *incurvatus in se*, curved in on her- or himself. The unpleasantness of changing diapers becomes one variable in the utility calculus the sinner

utilizes in striving to live the best possible life.[34] Yet Luther invites the Christian to understand changing diapers not as a necessary burden associated with some more pleasant good, but as the divinely granted privilege of caring for another human being. Not, "Is it really my turn?" but "How could I be counted so worthy?"

On this account, significance consists not in Weberian "inner satisfactions" but in the needs met as we care for others in our vocations. While it takes faith greater than a mustard seed to find inner satisfaction in changing a dirty diaper, it does not take much faith to see how significant the task is for the child whose diaper is changed. Even when the recipient of our labor is not so helpless as an infant, our labor nevertheless has great significance for the recipients. The truck driver is presumably not in a position to raise food for his or her own family or to sort out which load of oranges should go where. The logistics personnel, however, support the truck driver by connecting growers with wholesalers, who themselves support growers, drivers, retailers, and consumers by distributing food with greater efficiency (and therefore greater benefit to all parties) than any one party could do alone. Likewise, "faithful neighbors" (to use Luther's phrase from the fourth petition) render labor that is significant to one another in their talks across the fence—and, if there is any truth to the proverb that "good fences make good neighbors," even in respecting their neighbors' property and privacy. Examples could be multiplied, but the point is simple: human labor finds its significance first of all in the human needs that it helps to meet and in the human community that it helps to build. Significance arises objectively, from outside of ourselves, in caring for those whom God has placed into our care.

On the other hand, this account of vocation does not denigrate the inner sense of satisfaction so often sought by those living in the modern social order. It provides a path for integrating the individual's inner sense of satisfaction with his or her social context. While Luther does not embed the feeling of significance into his definition of vocation, he is open to individuals' pursuing particular occupations or civic roles because they will find them fulfilling.[35] Moreover, faith sets its eyes on Jesus Christ, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2 ESV).[36] Faith

perceives that Jesus gave his life in obedience to the Father—but in willing obedience, out of love for us sinners. Fulfilling his vocation to reconcile sinful humanity to the Father gave his work the deepest significance, because it is of the deepest significance for us. And despite the personal cost of fulfilling that vocation, and despite the depth of suffering it would cause him, he understood that it was in fulfilling this vocation for sinful humanity that he would experience joy at the right hand of the Father. Christian faith is formed by this act of vocational fulfillment; and by God's grace the Christian begins, however haltingly, to find joy in undertaking the divinely given privilege of meeting human needs.

It is this feature of Luther's account that prevents him from denigrating ordinary labor—the labor of changing diapers or milking cows, for example. The individual who changes an infant's diaper, like the individual who milks cows or governs a nation or even proclaims the gospel in public worship, is a means by which God is effecting his reign (left-hand or right-hand, as the case may be) in this world. It is true that a national leader affects more people and can effect greater good in the world than someone with a more limited vocational scope, but it is a mistake to assess the importance of vocations in terms of a utility calculus. Doing so would lead to problematic—and somewhat paradoxical—conclusions. For example, if it is the duty of each individual to effect the greatest possible good in the world, then each individual should strive for a vocational scope that is as broad as possible. Family life, domestic work, blue collar jobs, and even low-level management jobs have rather limited scopes, and thus it would be our duty to strive for something greater than these jobs. If, however, everyone attained the broader scope, then there would be no one left to accomplish the ordinary tasks that provide basic supplies and ensure the health of those too young, frail, or ill to care for themselves. Yet if children are not cared for and raised, if food is not raised and transported, if goods are not exchanged, then the world is less good. Thus, as Gilbert Meilaender observes, the utilitarian vision of acting always to increase the amount of good in the world is possible only when most people do not directly pursue that goal.[37] Changing diapers is, it turns out,

important for the good of the world, even if I am changing the diapers of only one or two children at a time.

There is no paradox, however, if the tasks associated with various vocations are the tasks necessary to sustain us human beings as the kinds of created beings we are. Changing diapers is important precisely because we are physical creatures who eat the fruit of the earth and digest food. The same is true for milking cows and driving trucks loaded with food. Likewise, teaching students is important precisely because we are social creatures who attribute meanings to our actions and social structures, who are born with only the most basic of instincts and yet can both transmit and also enrich our theoretical and practical knowledge structures from one generation to the next. Governing is important precisely because we are not merely social creatures, but creatures whose social organization requires the voluntary cooperation of a significant majority of society's members (and, because of our now fallen nature, incentives to render such cooperation).[38] The nature with which God has created us necessitates certain forms of labor which preserve and extend the life which God has given us. Even ordinary labor is thus valuable, because through it God preserves us and reigns in this world.

Luther's doctrine of vocation therefore militates against the kind of elitist consequences that arise when vocation is defined in part by finding an inner sense of satisfaction in one's work. The significance of labor arises from the fact that God uses it to preserve, extend, and enrich human life in this world out of his "pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy."[39] Once we no longer measure the significance of labor by the inner sense of satisfaction that it elicits or by the amount of good that it effects in the world, vocation is no longer tied to certain subjective experiences or certain socio-economic privileges. A sense of vocation—which means simply an understanding of the significance of our labors as a calling from God to care for the people whose needs confront us in our specific social roles—is available to anyone to whom the Holy Spirit reveals how God uses the individual's labor to preserve, extend, and enrich the life of the person's neighbors. This account of vocation offers a life of significance to anyone with eyes to see.

Conclusion

Several important points about the search for significance follow from the understanding of vocation defended in this article. For one, the search for significance arises not merely out of a sense of alienation from one's work or from society, but also out of alienation from the God who created and redeemed us. The desire to find a sense of satisfaction in one's work (paid or unpaid) arises when there is a rupture between the work one does and the good one hopes to accomplish in the world. The rupture manifests itself in a variety of subjective experiences, ranging from the desire to put one's talents to better use to, in extreme cases, moral distress.[40] The rupture often has a social component—sometimes because of the (lack of) value that a given society assigns to certain forms of labor, sometimes because a given form of labor is remote from those who benefit from it, sometimes because the labor demanded of one in a vocation violates the norms of that vocation. Whatever its cause, and whatever its social context, the rupture is a symptom of a deeper disconnect of one's labor, one's faith in God to use that labor for his good purposes, and the social context surrounding one's labor. What should have come together as subjectively and objectively meaningful work well received by others instead results in dissatisfaction. The possible reasons are many, but the underlying cause is the same: having disobeyed God, we no longer love one another, and our labor is subjected to frustration because of the curse.

Further, the subjective experience of significance is not by itself sufficient for gauging the significance of one's life. This observation cuts two ways. On the one hand, those who experience a nagging sense of insignificance may underestimate the good that God accomplishes in the world through their labor. A parent who foregoes a professional career in order to spend more time with children during their school years may well experience a subjective feeling of dissatisfaction. Parenting is challenging, but it is not intellectually challenging in the way that many professions are, and as each year passes, talents and training sink more deeply into the soil of a fallow field. The parent's labor is nevertheless significant, precisely because children are the kinds of beings who need to be cared for,

and God has used this parent to care for these children. On the other hand, those who experience deep satisfaction in their labor, paid or unpaid, may overestimate the importance of whatever it is that gave them so much satisfaction. Another parent who stays home with children during their school years without any dissatisfaction or regrets, and who finds nothing but joy in caring for them, could well have made family the idol which is supposed to provide life with all its significance. Yet such a life—however satisfied the one who lived it and however richly it is eulogized—is thus cut off from the one who gives the gift of family, the one whose love was unknowingly expressed through the parent's care for those children over those many years, and the one who reconciles even this sinner to himself in Christ. Neither the feeling of satisfaction nor the feeling of dissatisfaction with one's labor adequately captures whether one has lived a truly, fully, significant human life.

Finally, living in vocation requires faith, in four ways. First, to live as one called by God through Christ Jesus requires faith in Christ Jesus. Apart from faith in Christ, one simply cannot live as called, because it is only by faith that one hears the call. The work of the Spirit is thus central to vocation, because the Spirit mediates the call from the Father by creating faith in Jesus. Second, living as one called by God within specific vocations is a form of faithful confession: a confession that the God who has placed one in these vocations is likewise providing whatever is necessary to carry the vocations out. This includes not only everything included in the phrase "daily bread," but also our very eyes, ears, members, reason, and senses. There are no self-made men or women. What we have is from God, and those who live in vocation—who live as people called by God into their specific relationships—live in faith that God has provided and will provide what they need in their vocations. Thirdly, living in vocation means the faith to entrust the results of our labor to the God who calls us to it. The outcome of a person's labor is deeply contingent upon forces beyond the individual's control. Viewing the bombed remains of St. Michael's Church in Coventry, England, or the ruins of the Basilica of St. Benedict in Norcia, Italy, can certainly convince one of this truth, but even parenting a three-year-old may have the same effect. But this truth need not lead to fatalism. Instead,

living in vocation means trusting that God will use my labor to accomplish what he wishes to accomplish in this time and this place. As Meilaender notes, "we do not seek to understand the meaning of neighbor-love apart from such trust."[41] Finally, living in vocation may mean trusting that the God who has reconciled me to himself in Christ will one day overcome the rupture I now experience between my labor and a sense of significance. Not every form of labor in this sinful world generates a sense of satisfaction, and the human heart, beset by sin, may fail to find satisfaction in perfectly significant labor. But God has promised to make all things new. Living in vocation means living in that promise.

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NOTES

1. See the repetition of "future" and "futures" in David S. Cunningham, "Time and Place: Why Vocation is Crucial to Undergraduate Education Today," in David S. Cunningham, ed., *At This Time and In this Place: Vocation and Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3, 4, 6, and 11.

2. In German, "Wissenschaft (Scholarship) als Beruf." Weber delivered the lecture in 1917. For the text, see Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, ed. John Dreijmanis, trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008): 25–52.

3. On these factors, see among others Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2007) and Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. chs. 1–6. Edward P. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation: A Theology of Christian Call* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 74–80 and Weber, "Science as Vocation," 35–40 also have helpful analyses.

4. John of Salisbury, *The Statesman's Book (Policraticus)*, in Michael Curtis, ed., *The Great Political Theories: A Comprehensive Selection of the Crucial Ideas in Political Philosophy*, vol. 1, From the Greeks to the Enlightenment (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 171.

5. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), s.v. "John of Salisbury," section 8, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/john-salisbury/. See also R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1926; repr. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1962), 14–36.

6. See Aristotle's discussion of slavery in *Politics* I.4–7.

7. A short list of popular works includes Kurt Senske, *The Calling: Living a Life of Significance* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 142, 182 (although Senske rejects

the focus on the future, 17); Michael Novak, *Business as Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), ch. 2; and Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), especially ch. 1–2. For a scholarly work that takes this perspective, see J. Daryl Charles, "Take This Job and Shove It: Theological Reflections on Vocation, Calling, and Work," in *Wisdom's Work: Essays on Ethics, Vocation, and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2019), 129.

8. A sampling includes David S. Cunningham, "Time and Place" (see above, note 1); Cynthia Wells, "Finding the Center as Things Fall Apart: Vocation and the Common Good," in Cunningham, *At This Time and In This Place*, 52, 61, 67–68; James J. Farrell, "Good Work and the Good Life," in Kaethe Schwehn and L. DeAne Lagerquist, eds., *Claiming Our Callings: Toward a New Understanding of Vocation in the Liberal Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 29-47; and Shirley Hershey Showalter, "Called to Tell Our Stories: The Narrative Structure," in David S. Cunningham, ed., *Vocation Across the Academy: A New Vocabulary for Higher Education* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 88.

9. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al., eds. Guenter Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), I:302, quoted in Caryn Riswold, "Vocational Discernment: A Pedagogy of Humanization," in Cunningham, *At This Time and In This Place*, 87. At issue here is not the source of the inner satisfactions (e.g., extrinsic benefits—such as wages—related to one's job, the intrinsic reward of satisfaction with a job well done, or the even the intrinsic reward of the joy of working with others), but simply the fact that inner satisfactions are identified as an essential component of significance, and thus of vocation. On extrinsic and intrinsic rewards as relates to vocation, see Mark Pernecky, "Forty-Three and Out: On the Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Rewards of a Vocation," in Schwehn and Lagerquist, *Claiming Our Callings*, 83–92.

10. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, revised and expanded edition (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 119.

11. Phrases like this are often used with respect to nursing.

12. Cunningham, "Time and Place," 13. See also p. 4.

13. "Personal meaning and happiness" is from Marcia Bunge, "Renewing a Sense of Vocation at Lutheran Colleges and Universities: Insights from a Project at Valparaiso University," *Intersections* (Summer 2002): 12; in the same vein, see Robert Benne's report that a large majority of students at one Midwestern college described vocation as "following your bliss" or "shaping a successful life" despite the college's attempts to teach the doctrine of vocation, "The Great Evasion: The Calling of the Laity," in *Lutheran Forum* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 15. For the phrase "places of responsibility," see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 289; see also Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), ch. 4, and Kathryn A. Kleinhans, "Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities," in Cunningham, *At This Time and In This Place*, 99–121.

14. For exceptions, see L. DeAne Lagerquist, "' Getting a Vocation': Variations on a Lutheran Theme," in Schwehn and Lagerquist, *Claiming Our Callings*, 17–28; Ernest L. Simmons, *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1988); Scott A. Ashmon, "The Purpose of the Christian University: A Lutheran Vision," in *The Idea and Practice of a Christian University: A Lutheran Approach*, ed. Scott A. Ashmon (St. Louis:

Concordia Publishing House, 2015): 3–32; and *Rooted and Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities* (n.p.: Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities, 2018). These works provide a healthy counterbalance by locating significance in the importance our labor has for others.

15. Martin Luther, *Estate of Marriage* (1522), *Luther's Works*, American Edition, eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1955–86), 45:39 ff. (hereafter cited as LW); *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883ff.), 10 II:295 ff. (hereafter cited as WA).

16. See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis*, chapters 31–37, LW 6:10; WA 44:6. Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). Ozment alludes to the economic activity of the Reformation era household (64, 72 ff.).

17. See Robert Benne, "The Objective Worth of Human Life," *Lutheran Forum* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1998), reprinted in *Reasonable Ethics: A Christian Approach to Social, Economic, and Political Concerns* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 337. Benne, following Glenn Tinder, echoes Buechner's definition of vocation, but he observes that it "bestows meaning" because it is a "divine gift."

18. See Douglas Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 119: the "kind of freedom described above applies mainly only to a select group of people: middle- to upper-class members of society. For the poor, life is more about survival than self-actualization." Paul S. Minear points out that such ranking of occupations generates resentment, hypocrisy among the upper and middle classes who have the luxury of occupational choice, and "the aristocracy of the higher cultural groups" that fragments the community, "Work and Vocation in Scripture," in John Oliver Nelson, ed., *Work and Vocation: A Christian Discussion* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1954), 77.

19. Ernst Troeltsch fails to capture the social and economic consequences of the doctrine of justification. Lutheran theology clearly excludes at least one kind of social order—one in which spiritual labor as a means of "mining" grace is integrated into the economic system. See *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931; repr. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), II:562–69.

20. My claim is not that the question of significance actually arose among those living in evangelical territories in the sixteenth century, but only that the new social order failed on its own to answer a question that had been answered by the late medieval social order. However, the history of the word "vocation" in the following century suggests that the question of significance did, in fact, arise, particularly in Puritan circles. See Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 23.

21. On the accusation of individualism, see among others Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching*, 470. Michael Laffin provides an argument against this reading of Luther. Michael Laffin, *The Promise of Martin Luther's Political Theology: Freeing Luther from the Modern Political Narrative* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 10 ff.

22. Small Catechism I.2, First Commandment, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., and Charles Arand et al., trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 351 (hereafter cited as BC).

23. LW 31:344; WA 7:49

24. Luther, *Estate of Marriage*, LW 45:39, WA 10 II:296. See Robert Kolb, "Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther's Teaching on the Christian's Vocations," *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 133, 135.

25. My point here is not that Luther objected to serving where one's interests and the needs of others intersect, but rather that one's interests or passions are not constitutive of vocation. The individual who has lost interest in and passion toward a spouse still holds the vocation of spouse. On the other hand, one's interests may certainly point one toward certain vocations, especially in the civic and economic realms.

26. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957; repr. Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1994), 72. So also Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 73, 220–21.

27. See Luther, "The Judgment of Martin Luther On Monastic Vows (1521)," LW 44:326–336; WA 8:623–629.

28. Hahnenberg, *Awakening Vocation*, 45–46 distinguishes vocation "as the place *from which* we respond to God and serve others" from vocation "as the place *to which* God calls." Luther's account differs by seeing vocation as the place *within which* God calls us to serve others.

29. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 107–108. Volf cites this abuse as one of several reasons to reject this account of vocation. For a helpful response to Volf and other critics, see Schuurman, *Vocation*, ch. 4.

30. See Luther, *Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:364–68, especially 367; WA 7:64–66, especially 66.

31. See Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2008), 27–31.

32. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 220. See also Gilbert Meilaender, "Why Is Bob Benne So Cheerful?" in *Lutheran Forum* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 51–52.

33. "Through ART [artificial reproductive technology], a child can have many parents—genetic (those who contribute egg or sperm), gestational (the woman who carries the baby to term), and social (the people who raise the child)," Lewis Vaughn, *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases* 4th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 445. It is significant that bioethicists have come to choose the phrase "genetic parents" over "egg donors" and "sperm donors," and it is likewise significant that we sometimes use the phrase "sperm donor" to designate an absentee father.

34. Of course, different people understand this "best possible life" differently—in terms of pleasure, wealth, or even virtue. As Bonhoeffer has pointed out, even the noble striving to be virtuous is a sign of the sinner's sin, locating as it does the source of one's best life in one's own actions or virtue (see *Ethics*, 50–51).

35. Contrary to Hahnenberg, *Awakening Calling*, 55, and Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, 107. I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this journal for this point.

36. So also Minear, "Work and Vocation in Scripture," 64.

37. Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness: Basic Themes in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 94–103. See also Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 193.

38. That is to say, to borrow from Gilbert Meilaender (who in turn borrowed from Aristotle), that we are neither beasts nor gods.

39. SC II.2, first article of the creed, BC 354.

40. The phrase "moral distress" comes from the literature on nursing ethics. For an overview of the concept, see Richard H. Savel and Cindy L. Munro, "Moral Distress, Moral Courage," *American Journal of Critical Care* 24, no. 4 (2015): 276–278, https://doi.org/10.4037/ajcc2015738.

41. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness*, 113. See also Minear, "Work and Vocation in Scripture," 69: "The Christian is so set free from bondage to earthly results that he is ready to trust God's ultimate judgment concerning success or failure."