

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 3 H. ETHICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Christian vocation

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Our human need to have a job and to hold on to it is a major driving social force in contemporary society. This is even more important in times of economic uncertainty and change. What we do outside of paid work is perhaps home life, or home duties, leisure, volunteering or simply 'time for me', but we tend not to regard these activities as part of our vocation. For us Christians, however, there really is no distinction between our paid work and what we do after we leave the paid workplace. For we have more than one vocation. Our vocations include our paid work as well as our work at home and in the family as parents, wives, husbands, or children, and our work in the church and community as volunteers. How can our vocations be so all-encompassing?

VOCATIONS AND CALLINGS

The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin word, *vocatio*, which is derived from the verb, *vocare*, to call. The English equivalent would be the noun 'call' or more precisely, 'calling'. The dictionary defines calling as occupation, profession, trade, work, or perhaps even 'job'. That is quite clear for us, but we do not ask someone what her/his calling is because 'calling' still retains a spiritual connotation.

WE ALL HAVE VOCATIONS

Martin Luther rescued the term 'vocation' and freed it for the common person by declaring 'secular' work to be just as valuable in God's sight as 'religious' work. Before Luther, the Roman Church used the term to refer to the special calling to become a priest, monk, or nun. Only those in religious orders, therefore, had a vocation.

For Luther, however, it was not just the clergy and religious who had a calling or vocation. All Christians have a calling to serve others wherever they are placed in life, beginning with the family. In fact, Luther went so far as to say that the clergy of his day denied themselves a calling because they were so intent on serving God that they had ceased to serve others, which is the main way we serve God. The problem was that in the church of his day, most people were doing so-called 'good works' to earn salvation. These good works included such things as pilgrimages, the veneration of relics (the remains of dead saints), fasting, entering monasteries and the purchase of indulgences to reduce time in

purgatory. But Luther taught that God does not need our good works; our neighbour does. He separated works from salvation. We do not do good works *in order to* be saved but *because we are saved*. Luther, therefore, uncoupled works from salvation and connected them with vocation. They are bound to our life in this world, where the neighbour needs our works here and now, not in the world beyond. In other words, works are service. So vocation, for Luther, becomes an expression of our faith and the living out of God's purposes in our daily life and work.

Luther tried to redefine the concept of priesthood so that in a broader sense it applies to all Christians. For him the priesthood of all believers refers to the baptised people of God who gather for worship on Sunday (or any other day) and then go out into the world to serve God as his holy priests in their various vocations and places of responsibility. There they bring others to God in prayer and God to others through word and service.

Discussion question:

What do you think of Luther's teaching that our good works should not be directed to God but to our neighbour who need them?

God calls us to faith. That is our common calling or vocation. But this faith is then lived out by each of us individually in our different vocations. The point Luther makes is that you don't have to be a pastor or church worker to have a holy calling. A vocation in the church is no holier in itself than any other lawful vocation. Luther said that the maid who sweeps the floor (or the husband who looks after his sick wife or child) is doing just as holy a work as a monk who prays, if this work is done in faith. Luther's point is that we exercise our priestly vocation by serving others where God has placed us in life: at home, at work, in the church, and in the community. Faith is active in love, in the smallest and most insignificant things in everyday life.

OUR VOCATIONS SERVE GOD'S CREATION

Luther's understanding of vocation begins with his dynamic doctrine of creation. This is not just about the beginning of all things but acknowledges that God sustains all he has made by providing everything necessary for life. This includes food, clothing, shelter, health, family, friends, neighbours, financial resources and stable government. God provides all these good gifts by means of other people. For instance, he gives us daily bread through the work of many people, beginning with the farmers and ending with the retailers and those who prepare it to eat. Luther calls these people God's masks. They are God's agents. But unbelievers see only the agents, only the masks, and not God, the giver of all, who conceals himself behind them and is 'seen' only by faith.

Discussion Question:

In what way do you act as God's masks in your various vocations?

So, if God is continuously at work in creation, and people are one of the means through which God works, then it is important that Christians work faithfully and well in their individual callings, as parents, children, plumbers, doctors, nurses, teachers, mechanics, employers, employees, and so on, knowing that they are God's masks and that God is working through them to help, care and provide for others. Luther argued that vocation, or work, is not only a response to the gift of faith. It is also part of God's overall plan and will for his creation.

God wants us to work. He established work as a good gift, even before the fall (Gen 2:15). Work is not the result of the fall although since the fall work can become drudgery. Paul had to warn some Christians at Thessalonica against idleness. He writes,

we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you ... For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'Anyone who is unwilling to work shall not eat'. (2 Thess 3:7–10)

THE CHURCH, FAMILY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

For Luther, vocation was the Christian's work on earth. Luther described this work in terms of three arenas of activity, or 'orders': the church, the household (marriage and family) and the state (civil society). God established these orders and works through them to preserve order in the world. Each of these orders has various stations or areas of responsibility. In the household, for example, marriage makes a person a husband or wife; family makes one a father or mother, son or daughter. Each of these roles has a set of general responsibilities that are given by God (see the Table of Duties at the end of Luther's *Small Catechism*) while the precise way in which these are carried out will be shaped by culture. Luther also saw that these orders were equal in importance before God, but the people operating within them had different responsibilities to society and the neighbour.

Discussion question:

Do you find Luther's three 'orders' or arenas of activity a helpful way to think about human existence on earth? Why/ why not? Think of some modern activities. Where would they fit in Luther's concept of the orders/ For example, caring for the earth and reducing carbon emissions; counselling; working as a volunteer at your local school or as a pastoral assistant in your congregation.

The church is the faith community where the gospel is preached, believed and lived. The family (the order of the household) is the place for raising and training children and enjoying community. Importantly, it is in the family where children are brought up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4), where they are taught the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments; it is in the family where they are taught to say table grace and morning and evening prayers. The family is also an important training ground for nurturing courage and 'staying power', patience, love and humility, all of which are vital personal qualities for life in civil society. This third order, civil society, provides protection, security and justice so that people can live in peace and harmony.

Importantly, Luther affirmed that we have multiple callings in each of these three orders. These callings are interdependent. One can be a spouse (a wife or husband), a parent (a father or mother), a child (a son or daughter), an employer or employee, a citizen, and a member of the Christian community, all at the same time.

OUR INDIVIDUAL VOCATIONS ARE UNIQUE

Luther also affirmed that each person's vocation is unique and that God considers each person's vocation to be of equal value. This shows that we need not abandon our present calling, mundane as it might be, in order to pursue a supposedly higher and more spiritual calling. Luther said that our own areas of responsibilities give us more than enough God-pleasing work to do without having to look for more. In his time, roles and relationships were often fixed, and there was little freedom of choice. When Paul said to the Corinthians that they should remain in the situation (literally, calling) they were in when God called them (1 Cor 7:20) he meant that if they were slaves they should not agitate for freedom, if they were married they should not think that they would serve the Lord better by being unmarried or vice versa. In other words, Paul is saying that a Christian's vocation or station in life is not negated by the call of the gospel. However, this does not mean that Christians today have no freedom to change their vocation or paid employment.

The major implication of Luther's teaching is that we are freed from the pressure to do more with our lives and jobs, in order to serve God better. It is easy to succumb to the temptation of seeing our daily work, outside of our church activities, as merely human, with no spiritual element. Some people might try to spend as much free time as possible doing church work, as if this is more pleasing to God than spending time with the family. If we

accept Luther's teaching, however, not only will we be freed from this form of striving, but we will see God at work in everything we do.

VOCATION IS SERVICE

Our vocations are lived out in relationship with others through our paid work, because we use our paid work to provide for our families and to care for God's creation. For instance, the farmer grows food and wool for his own income, for his family, for the local community and the state. But today he also provides for the entire world. The administrative assistant who ensures that the boss's presentation is accurate and thereby assists in winning new business for the company helps support the families of other employees. Everything we do, in one way or another, is serving the neighbour. Paul wrote: The commandments ... are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Rom 13:9). Remembering this will be an effective counter to the selfishness and self-centred striving, individualism and consumerism that is prevalent in our modern society.

Our entire lives, therefore, are a celebration of what the triune God has done and keeps doing for us. Every arena of activity we are involved in forms part of God's calling to us and becomes our Christian vocation. This is enormously important for Christians, particularly young Christians, to understand. While there may be obvious blessings from special mission experiences, we need to remember that God is already at work in our everyday lives here and now. We do not move further away from God or closer to God as a result of the choices we make—providing they are God-pleasing choices. Rather, the Christian's task is to discern God's will and try to act responsibly in each concrete role or situation. This, then, is what makes our vocations unique. Our task and challenge is to give expression to our faith in the concrete situations where God has placed us.

Discussion question:

Think of the different roles in your life. How can/ do you serve God and others in each of them?

So often, however, embarking on a career coincides with getting married, starting a family, and beginning an active social life. Competing demands can result in unwanted personal stress and the compartmentalisation of work, home and community life. Rather than being a privilege, vocation becomes a burden. At such times we need to remember that our identity is not found in our busy-ness, but in Christ alone. While we may not be able to live up to the many expectations that others may have of us, we are still called to serve faithfully, to bear fruit and to remember that at the end of the day it is God's judgment that counts, not human opinion. And if we act in faith and do what God has given us to do, we can be certain that he will be pleased with us.

PAID WORK

What about our paid work? Is that not a calling?

Well, yes and no. Luther noted that there are three orders: church, family, and government, or civil society. All places of responsibility within these orders are equal. So our paid work is just one of the many vocations or callings we may have. Our work as parents, or as children, or as students, or as volunteers in the church community or in community organisations, or our involvement in recreation and leisure activities, are all arenas in which we fulfil our Christian vocation.

We noted earlier that Christians can be trapped into thinking that church work is more godly than other work. But if we have the notion that our paid work is the sum of our vocation and the source of our personal identity, then we may be in danger of workaholism. It can be easy to throw all our energy into our paid work to the neglect of our

families, our community and church life, and even our own personal health and well-being.

Discussion question:

How might 'workaholism' be idolatry? What idol(s) might be involved?

Another issue for the modern career person is that she/he may be forced to change careers several times during her/his working life. Pinning one's sense of worth on just one job in a particular situation may lead to personal distress and crisis when faced with the prospect of having to change jobs.

The purpose of our paid work, along with our other callings, is to serve our neighbour. A legitimate occupation, however, may be the abuse of a Christian vocation if it is used for selfish ends. Christians are called, like Jesus was, to be part of this world, and through our occupations in the paid workforce we can serve other people and reflect Christ through our service.

VOCATION IN A TIME OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Because of the many social changes in our day, we need to think how Luther's teaching on vocation speaks to these situations also. We can only make some brief observations about four of these.

UNEMPLOYMENT

In a culture where our worth and identity are tied to our performance and achievements, we need the liberating knowledge that our identity is not based on what we do but who we are as people created in the image of God. Christians know that their identity is ultimately given to them by God as a gift.

At no time is this understanding more necessary than at a time of real crisis in one's career, such as the loss of a job through sacking, or redundancy in a time of economic downturn, or because of organisational restructuring, or retirement. Once again we need to affirm our brothers and sisters who find themselves in such situations. They remain valued members of God's creation and church, simply through God's works of creation and redemption. And they still have a vocation to serve in their families and communities.

For those of us who remain in paid employment, it is important that we remember that most unemployment is structural; that is, many people will be out of work because of economic conditions. 'Blaming the victim' is an all too common reaction. Rather, we all have a duty to love and support someone who has become unemployed, whether you sense they have brought it on themselves or not.

RETIREMENT

For people who have viewed their paid work as the sum total of their vocation, retirement may come as a shock and precipitate a time of crisis. Suddenly the paid work, that which defined the person's identity and gave meaning and purpose to life, has disappeared.

Again, retired people need to hear that their dignity does not depend on what they do but who they are as God's created and redeemed people. And how vital it is to learn that they still have important vocational responsibilities, for instance in serving their spouse or family, including grandchildren, or in voluntary activity in the community and congregation.

VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering is an activity that contributes to the general well-being of not-for-profit organisations or projects in the community or congregation. This contribution is given freely by the people who volunteer. Although no payment is involved, volunteers should be treated and valued in the same way as paid employees. Most of the work we do in our congregations falls within this category.

Our volunteering efforts, however, can be broader than the work we perform in our congregations and in the wider church. There are many opportunities to be of service in the community, from school parents' groups to sporting associations, from emergency services to various forms of support groups.

LEISURE

Our society gives a great deal of attention to leisure, and many leisure activities are expensive and self-indulgent. But leisure is important. It enables us to 'recharge our batteries', particularly if we have busy and demanding paid work. Leisure activities, such as walking, jogging, and visiting the gym, help to keep us fit and healthy so that we can continue to serve others to the best of our abilities. Socialising with friends and relations helps to maintain our sense of social well-being and keeps us connected.

Discussion question:

In what way can leisure also become an idol in our western culture?

An important part of our leisure is observing the day set aside for public worship, where the triune God comes to us through the sacraments and the public preaching of his word. In the divine service of the church, the emphasis is on God serving us. Worship then is a special time for resting in God and gaining spiritual refreshment for the remainder of the week. The Sabbath rest for Christians is no longer tied to the Saturday but is fulfilled in the Lord's Day (Sunday). When we observe the Lord's day we cease from our work so that the Lord can do his work. We can relax in his presence and 'enjoy God forever'.

HOW CAN CONGREGATION CAN SUPPORT PEOPLE IN THEIR VOCATIONS?

- One of the simple ways may be to find an occasion, a designated Sunday perhaps, when the congregation celebrates the vocations of its members. Invite members to share their work and family experiences.
- Congregations could identify senior members, who could potentially mentor younger members as they grapple with the stresses of identifying a career for themselves, or of juggling the multiple roles people often have. The mentoring role could be ideal for the recently retired person, who would be able to pass on invaluable life experiences.
- Lutheran schools could be encouraged to give due attention to career education. School pastors and chaplains can provide leadership in helping young people reflect spiritually on the career and broader vocational choices that are open to them.
- *The Lutheran* could be encouraged to have a regular feature that celebrates the vocations of ordinary Australian Lutherans.
- Congregational prayers and intercessions should be offered regularly for people in their various vocations, including our leaders in both church and state.

CONCLUSION

Our Christian faith is lived out through our various simultaneous vocations where we are called to serve God by serving others. Our vocations may encompass seemingly mundane domestic duties, as wives, husbands or children, ordinary paid work, such as assembly workers, receptionists, plumbers or mechanics, and voluntary work in our church communities, like ushering or making the after-service morning tea. As we carry out these diverse tasks as God's children, we rest in the understanding that God is present in all that we do in order to bring blessings to others.