

## Review Essay

### The Reformation of Vocation\*

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#### **The Secularization of Vocation**

The concept of vocation is multifaceted and complex. In contemporary discourse, it is an idea that is perhaps most often connected with work of some kind, usually (but not always) work that involves remuneration. In the educational realm, vocational schooling is associated with skilled trades or learning forms of manual labor. What a person does for a paycheck is typically described as one's vocation, while what one does for other reasons, whether personal interest, amusement, or fulfillment of other duties, is understood as one's avocation.

There remains today a subset of discourse concerning vocation that locates it within a religious context, specifically the calling to the clergy. A person can be described as in the process of discerning a vocation, that is, discerning whether one is or is not called by God to pursue ordination. Thus, the concept has not been completely secularized, but the dominant usages of it today are either highly secularized, even economized, or narrowly ecclesiastical. Vocation is thus either worldly or religious, but not both.

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\* Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Andrew Pettegree, *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015); Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017); Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Faith that Made the Modern World* (New York: Viking, 2017).

This modern situation is intriguing in part because it represents an unmaking of or a reversion from the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on the religiosity of worldly vocations. The narrowly ecclesiastical understanding of vocation was perhaps at its apex at the turn of the sixteenth century, and an Augustinian friar named Martin Luther became increasingly critical of the entire structure of theology and society that divided the world into that which is holy (and the source of special, saving grace) and that which is worldly (an arena that was to be grudgingly admitted as necessary but certainly not praiseworthy). Thus, as the twentieth-century German Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer would characterize it: "Luther's path out of the monastery back to the world meant the sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity."<sup>1</sup> Luther retained the special sense of Christian calling that applied to the life of a monk, but he applied it not merely within the walls of the monastery or the doors of a cathedral but to every square inch of the created world. "Following Jesus now had to be lived out in the midst of the world," writes Bonhoeffer. "What had been practiced in the special, easier circumstances of monastic life as a special accomplishment now had become what was necessary and commanded for every Christian in the world."<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary secularization of vocation, as either narrowly worldly or narrowly ecclesiastical, can be seen as complementary to the premodern association of vocation with a special religious identity, a "higher" calling. Where the medieval church placed specifically religious vocations at the top of the moral hierarchy, our contemporary world leaves room for such special vocations but largely identifies vocation with worldly endeavors. These worldly endeavors, however, are secularized not only in that they are separated from religious institutions but also and more fundamentally in that they are separated from theology, from God. To speak of vocation nowadays leaves out the question of the divine Who—the one calling a person to do something and to be someone. In place of God is the self, the state, the dollar, or some combination thereof.

The modern secularization of vocation might well be seen as a consequence of the Reformation, and many have made that connection.<sup>3</sup> If so, it would correspond to an understanding of vocation that accords with an extreme version of a two-kingdoms doctrine, which distinguishes (and in some cases radically separates) the kingdom of God and the kingdom of humanity. Some versions, whether of the Roman Catholic or the Anabaptist variety, tend to restrict legitimate vocations to those in the ecclesial or religious sphere. Worldly versions might reject the validity of religious pursuits in favor of a mundane view of vocation. These visions differ in their relative valuations of the spheres but do not differ on the basic structure.

A better way of understanding the connection between the Reformation and vocation, however, is to see Luther's efforts as beginning the process of bringing the concept of vocation out of a specifically ecclesiastical sphere and into the entirety of human existence. Vocation should thus be understood not primarily in relation to the two kingdoms but in terms of Luther's understanding of the three estates. Luther, picking up on classical and medieval models of social thought, discussed the family, church, and government as "estates," institutions of society within which human beings live and flourish.<sup>4</sup> There is some irony, perhaps instructive, in the fact that the arena in which vocation is often identified today, that of the economic, is absent from Luther's structure of the estates. The classical notion of economy (Greek, *oikonomia*; Latin, *oeconomia*) had been associated with the family, and *oikonomia* was literally the "law" or "rule" of the household. It was for later thinkers to develop and apply this idea to the arena of social organization of families within society, first as political economy and later as economics as distinct from politics.<sup>5</sup>

On this half-millennium anniversary of the event that is popularly understood to have started the Protestant Reformation, the posting and publication of the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, it is worth revisiting the life and legacy of Martin Luther, particularly with an eye toward recovering his understanding of vocation and its broader implications for society, both then and now.

## A Reformation of and by Vocation

In some ways, the Protestant Reformation, catalyzed by Luther, is all about vocation, both in terms of the doctrine of vocation and the practice of vocation. As Scott H. Hendrix makes clear in his recent biography of Luther, in his efforts to correct errors in the church's teachings, especially as related to the doctrines of purgatory and merit and the practices of indulgences (and particularly as peddled by indulgence-merchants like Johann Tetzel), Luther simply understood himself to be doing his duty as a theologian.

This was, to be sure, Luther's vocation, apart from the particular form it took as an Augustinian friar. Luther thought of himself as a theologian whose task it was to faithfully interpret and apply the Holy Scriptures to the times. As Hendrix puts it:

To teach theology meant to explain the texts of scripture and to discuss theological questions and their relevance as they arose from those texts. As a result, academic lectures might sound like sermons or Bible studies, and Luther's lectures, all delivered in Latin, were often punctuated by the Latin word meaning "today" (*hodie*) because teaching theology also called for timely

application of a biblical text. When that application challenged the authority of the pope and his theologians, Luther's defense was simple: his doctorate mandated him to expound the "sacred page" as he understood it, regardless of the consequences.<sup>6</sup>

Thus we can see the inherent danger of theologians to social elites, particularly theologians and ministers of the Word and sacraments who are bound by conscience to expound and defend the Word of God against whatever corruption and decay they see in the world.

Luther's efforts at reform grow out of his institutional context and education at Erfurt and his responsibilities at Wittenberg and in the Augustinian order. When he became aware of the contemporary practices associated with the sale of indulgences, and combined with his experiences when visiting Rome, Luther penned ninety-five theses, which formed a disputation concerning "the power of indulgences."

The opening thesis reads as follows: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."<sup>7</sup> Luther's concern here is to reorient and reorder "the entire life of believers." Luther's reform is thoroughly theological in the sense that it is founded on and grounded in the Word of God. But it is also social and practical in the sense that it applied not only to what is supposed to be believed but also to what is supposed to be done. Since Luther's views increasingly came to criticize the pope and his authority to teach various things concerning salvation, Luther's reform efforts increasingly covered all areas of life. The scope of Luther's reform needed to match the scope of the pope's authority, and the result was a thoroughgoing "reformation of life."<sup>8</sup> Lyndal Roper writes that Luther's first thesis "is deceptive in its simplicity; in fact, it implied a root-and-branch critique of the whole edifice of the late medieval Church."<sup>9</sup>

If on the one hand this "reformation of life" was oriented against papal tyranny, it became clear to Luther soon enough that it must also oppose Anabaptist anarchy and libertinism. What began as a disputation against indulgences quickly grew to a holistic and transformative vision for all of human life. From its very beginning, the Protestant Reformation was concerned with whole-life discipleship.

Vocation is a touchstone for this reform, first practically as a result of Luther's own understanding of his responsibility as a theologian and an expositor of sacred Scripture. But quickly this exposition of the Word of God turned to an articulation of what was required of a faithful Christian in his or her calling. We can see this quite clearly in the early years of Luther's reform efforts following

1517, as Luther challenges first the pope and then civil authorities to undertake the necessary steps to correct the church's doctrine and practices.

Embedded in Luther's appeal to the emperor and the German nobility in 1520 is a vision of the reform of all of life to be pursued by each person in his or her own individual calling.<sup>10</sup> As Luther put it, "it is the duty of every Christian to espouse the cause of the faith, to understand and defend it, and to denounce every error."<sup>11</sup> This is part and parcel of the general duty of all Christians to serve their neighbor: "everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another."<sup>12</sup> This is as true for the cobbler as it is for the emperor and everyone in between. "All Christians," writes Alec Ryrie, "had both the right and the responsibility to reform the church, and they should act on that right whatever the priests say."<sup>13</sup>

Although he is not optimistic about the worldly prospects for success, Luther is committed to remaining true to what he sees as his primary responsibility as a theologian: faithful exposition and application of the Word of God. Describing the obstacles Luther faced and the struggles he underwent—spiritual, emotional, and physical—Hendrix writes that at times Luther's "words sounded defeatist, but Luther was not giving up. He dedicated the *Explanations* [in 1518] to Pope Leo and claimed that by the pope's own authority a doctor of theology like himself had the right to debate publicly the power of indulgences."<sup>14</sup> In 1520, Luther vows, "I shall sing my fool's song through to the end and say, so far as I am able, what could and should be done, either by the temporal authority or by a general council."<sup>15</sup>

In the end, concludes Luther, "the emperor and his nobles are duty-bound to prevent and punish such tyranny" as has been committed by the papacy.<sup>16</sup> Although Luther addresses his appeal to the emperor as well as the nobility, he does allow for the possibility that, just as the pope had failed to do his duty to reform the church, the emperor and princes might fail to act as well. Luther thus carries the logic of responsible authority through to its conclusion:

Every town, council, or governing authority not only has the right, without the knowledge and consent of the pope or bishop, to abolish what is opposed to God and injurious to men's bodies and souls, but indeed is bound at the risk of the salvation of its souls to fight it even though popes and bishop, who ought to be the first to do so, do not consent.<sup>17</sup>

Should the emperor, the princes, and the nobility fail to act, lesser authorities ought to act. If even these ordained authorities should fail, other authori-

ties, notably those of the universities and those like himself, the doctors of the church, and even individual Christians, must act out of faithful obedience to God. Luther's immediate and plaintive appeal in 1520, however, is that the emperor might live up to his vocation as a guardian of the church and true doctrine: "Let the German emperor be really and truly emperor. Let neither his authority nor his power be suppressed by such sham pretensions of these papist deceivers as though they were to be excepted from his authority and were themselves to rule in all things."<sup>18</sup>

## Luther the Individual

Luther's convictions on the responsibilities of the emperor and his own duties would come to a climax at the Diet of Worms in 1521 when Luther appeared before Emperor Charles. By this time, Luther had been formally excommunicated and his case was to be adjudicated by the emperor, the "court of last resort."<sup>19</sup> When repeatedly instructed to recant, Luther held firm. "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason," he confesses, "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience."<sup>20</sup> Hendrix observes that Luther's conscience "was not an internal moral meter that measured right or wrong" but was rather "loyalty to the highest authority on which one depended for the truth. For Luther in 1521, that authority was the gospel found in scripture."<sup>21</sup> Roper notes of Luther, "The courage he showed at Worms was breathtaking. For a commoner to stand up to the emperor and the most powerful princes in the empire, and to resist the might of the Church, was as extraordinary as it was unforgettable."<sup>22</sup>

Everyone is to reform within his or her own area of influence and sphere of responsibility, whether he or she is a pope, theologian, emperor, prince, magistrate, council member, or layperson. Thus Luther's efforts were a reformation *of* and *according to* vocation. If, for a theologian like Luther, that meant suffering and dying, such was the will of God.

What was it about Luther that allowed him to have the courage and the stubbornness to stand up in front of the emperor himself and refuse to recant? Roper's study explores, among other things, the psychological aspects of Luther, drawing particularly on his relatively unexplored correspondence. On Roper's account, Luther is largely a man apart, "For Luther's personality had huge historical effects—for good and ill. It was his remarkable courage and sense of purpose that created the Reformation, and it was his stubbornness and capacity to demonize his opponents that nearly destroyed it."<sup>23</sup>

Roper makes much of what might be called Luther's working-class origins. Even if his father was of the mining managerial class in Mansfeld, Luther was intimately familiar with the realities of manual labor and the danger that attended it. "Whereas most of Luther's generation of scholars came from the craft towns, and many were familiar with the large imperial towns and their elegant fashions and civic pride," writes Roper, "Luther's character was forged in a very different and much rougher world. His upbringing in Mansfeld would have given him a toughness and readiness to put himself physically on the line, qualities that would be tested to the limit in the years ahead."<sup>24</sup>

Luther's *Anfechtungen*—his spiritual sufferings and their attendant physical manifestations—figure prominently in Roper's study. One way of understanding Luther's entrance into the monastic life is as his embrace of a network of institutions that would provide comfort and constancy amid a life of uncertainty and doubt. For Luther, good works, vows, penance, and the entire structure of late medieval piety were oriented toward appeasing a holy, and wholly other, God. His growing dissatisfaction with the spiritual and existential consequences of this system set him on the road to discovering a firmer foundation for faith.

"Whereas the practice of indulgences permitted people to pay for one another, and fostered the creation of a whole series of cooperative prayers, sayings of Mass, chantries, and collective efforts toward salvation," writes Roper, "for Luther the Christian stood alone before God, devoid of any assistance."<sup>25</sup> As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31 KJV). Luther's great insight was that human achievements would ultimately count for nothing when standing *coram Deo*, "before the face of God." An intercessor is necessary, but it had to be one who, as the later Heidelberg Catechism says, "is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God."<sup>26</sup>

In Roper's account, Luther's soteriological individualism finds expression socially when she repeatedly describes Luther as insisting on his own way over and against that of collaboration and cooperation with other figures. His split with Andreas von Karlstadt, for instance, is shown to be a consequence of Luther's refusal to engage in a "communal Reformation." Instead, "Luther insisted on his leadership, not collective action."<sup>27</sup> In fact, says Roper, "If someone deviated from what he regarded as the correct theological position, they were at once called to account—Luther demanded complete intellectual and spiritual submission." Luther the humble friar of conscientious conviction had become a tyrant. Luther "was surrounded by yes-men. Indeed, the man who had done so much to fight for conscience and freedom and against spiritual tyranny was in danger of creating a church that was in some respects less tolerant than the one he had attacked."<sup>28</sup>

Undoubtedly Luther could be a bully, and the level of resoluteness that was required to stand before pope and emperor is not easily reconcilable with meekness. Roper's account, however, risks overlooking the ways in which Luther's thought truly opened up possibilities for community and mutual responsibility. An understanding of the newly emerging social order, catalyzed by technological innovation, helps show how Luther was in fact part of a community of reform. As attractive as it is to see Luther as single-handedly ushering in a new era, such valorization, even if it contains some elements of truth, overlooks the interdependencies at the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

## The Emerging Economic Order

Luther the individual could not have stood before Emperor Charles V, much less found refuge in the Wartburg and in Wittenberg, without a community of support. Foremost among his supporters were his political protectors, electors Frederick III (the Wise) and later John the Steadfast and John Frederick the Magnanimous of Saxony. *Pace* the individualist account of Roper's biography, Andrew Pettegree writes that "had Luther been such a solitary figure, a man alone, the voice crying out in the wilderness, his Reformation would quickly have died."<sup>29</sup> Roper herself, speaking of Elector Frederick's advisor and Luther's confidant, Georg Spalatin, observes in the context of Worms that Luther "was well aware that he owed his protection largely to Spalatin and others in the Saxon court; it was his friendship with Spalatin that probably saved him."<sup>30</sup> The connection between the magisterial Reformation and political authority (particularly the Protestant princes) is well known.<sup>31</sup> Pettegree's detailed and innovative study, *Brand Luther*, documents another aspect of the influence of the Protestant Reformation: the print market.

Luther the individual is at the center of this part of the story as well, but if the story centers on Luther it certainly does not end there. According to Pettegree, "Luther in effect invented a new form of theological writing: short, clear, and direct, speaking not only to his professional peers but to the wider Christian people."<sup>32</sup> In this sense, Luther took the nascent publishing market, which had previously been focused on a narrow slice of administrative and academic elites, and turned it into a mass market. Luther did this through the printed word, but what also becomes apparent from Pettegree's work is that it was at crucial points complemented by others, such as the famed artist Lucas Cranach the Elder. Pettegree makes the provocative but ultimately convincing claim that Cranach's famous portraiture of Luther and other Wittenbergers "was not even Cranach's greatest service to the Reformation movement. Here we have to take into account a far less heralded achievement of his artistic imagination, combined with his

extraordinary gifts as a business entrepreneur.”<sup>33</sup> That is, “the greatest contribution of the Cranach workshop to the promotion of the evangelical movement as a whole” is to be found “in his contribution to the Wittenberg book industry. The distinctive look of the Reformation *Flugschriften* as they emerged from the print shops of the 1520s owed everything to the design brilliance of Lucas Cranach. It was Cranach who would be the authentic creator of Brand Luther.”<sup>34</sup> The communal nature of the work is similarly apparent in the “Four Evangelists” of the Wittenberg Reformation, who were featured in a polemical tract by the erstwhile foe of the evangelical cause Johannes Cochlaeus: Philip Melancthon, Johannes Bugenhagen, and Justus Jonas appeared alongside Luther.<sup>35</sup>

Pettegree traces the development of the Wittenberg printing market from backwater to powerhouse. It was in many ways a counterintuitive and difficult path. In the first half of the sixteenth century, however, Wittenberg proved to have enormous competitive advantages. It had Luther. It had Cranach. It had an engaged and active clergy and university faculty. It had investment. And increasingly it had talent among the craftsmen. All of this resulted in a boon to Wittenberg’s material as well as spiritual fortunes. The market was eager for Luther’s works, and Luther and his compatriots were eager to supply that market. “In the years between 1521 and 1525,” writes Pettegree, “when the pamphlet war was at its height, Luther and his supporters outpublished their opponents by a margin of nine to one.”<sup>36</sup>

This imbalance was not driven primarily by confessional loyalty on the part of the printers. The realities of the market were such that demand, expected or real, motivated the publishing houses. “Most printers would cheerfully publish for both sides, or move from one to the other, if it was worth their while,” observes Pettegree. “The real disincentive to publishing Catholic works was the irrefutable evidence that those of Luther’s supporters sold much better.”<sup>37</sup> This dynamic is illustrated particularly in Leipzig, which prior to the Reformation was one of the major publishing centers in Germany. It was also under the political authority of an avowed anti-Lutheran, Duke George of Saxony, who prohibited Leipzig printers from publishing evangelical works. The result of this ban was that Leipzig’s publishing industry withered, as the printers, in their words, could not “print or sell anything new that is made in Wittenberg or elsewhere. For that which one would gladly sell and for which there is demand they are not allowed to have or sell. But what they have in over abundance [Catholic treatises] are desired by no one and cannot even be given away.”<sup>38</sup>

Luther showed remarkable adeptness in his willingness to write in the vernacular as well as in Latin, and to do so pointedly and in popularly accessible fashion. Luther’s goal was to undercut the monopoly of the Roman church on

the salvation of souls and the attendant material prosperity that was connected with that soteriological structure. He was able to do so by making use of a technology and a market that similarly militated against centralized control and monopolistic practices.<sup>39</sup> This meant, of course, that Luther did not have a monopoly on printing, even if he did exercise great influence on Wittenberg itself during his lifetime. If the market would bear it, there was little to prevent the propagation of works that Luther himself found odious. As Pettegree puts it in the context of the *Twelve Articles* of the Peasants' War, "For Luther there was a certain rough justice that the same medium that had brought him to national prominence was now used to broadcast and amplify what he could only see as a frightening perversion of his evangelical message."<sup>40</sup>

## From Then to Now

The legal historian Harold Berman identifies the Protestant Reformation as, at least in great part, the result of the breakdown of received legal and political authorities who were unable to cope with the stresses and complexities of an emerging social order. "This, indeed, was the revolutionary situation: that the apocalyptic vision of the Papal Revolution had failed, and that the political legal order, whose inner tensions had produced an overwhelming pressure for fundamental reform, was inherently incapable of accomplishing that reform," writes Berman.<sup>41</sup> The economic and spiritual forces unleashed by Luther and the Wittenberg presses were similarly not to be constrained or controlled by them. Authority, whether political, spiritual, or economic, was increasingly becoming decentralized.

Alec Ryrie's brisk and ambitious survey, *Protestants: The Faith That Made the Modern World*, traces the impact of those who might (or might not) be credibly described as Protestant, from the time of Luther to today. Ryrie focuses on the beliefs and practices of those who could be identified as Protestant rather than attempting to delineate what might be identified as Protestantism. The distinction is significant. Speaking of the "love affair" between a Protestant and his or her God, Ryrie writes, "Beneath all the arguments, the distinguishing mark of a Protestant is the feeling and memory of that love, one on which no church or human authority can intrude."<sup>42</sup> Where Protestantism has trod, no tyrants can tread without fear of rebuke and even rebellion. Ryrie says that this is "the true and enduring radicalism of Protestantism: its readiness to question every human authority and tradition."<sup>43</sup>

If Protestantism is the expression of decentrism (whether radical or otherwise) in the spiritual arena, then democracy is its corollary in politics and the market economy in economics. Thus, observes Ryrie, "the kind of sociopolitical struc-

ture that Protestantism engenders—based on free inquiry, participatory politics, and limited government—tends to favor market economics.”<sup>44</sup> The connection between these is not that of an iron law, however. There is more of an internal logic that finds expression in tendencies and affinities than there is direct and incorruptible causality.

Ryrie’s study advances beyond those of Hendrix, Roper, and Pettegree because it follows Protestants through the centuries succeeding the era of Luther and does so with a global perspective. Chapters on Calvinism and England lead into a treatment of “The Modern Age,” which focuses especially on the North Atlantic story of Protestantism, through the revolutionary era, to slavery and abolition, and to the Third Reich and the postwar West. The final section examines the historical background and contemporary situation in the majority world, particularly Africa, Korea, and China, before concluding with a chapter on global Pentecostalism and an epilogue on “The Protestant Future.” The sheer scope of Ryrie’s work defies extensive treatment here, but it is a work that sympathetically and accessibly covers some of the most difficult material of the last half millennium.

The one question that perhaps unites these diverse eras and Protestant and sub-Protestant movements concerns the locus of authority. The Protestant Reformation raised but did not finally answer the question of authority and obedience. As Ryrie puts it, “Obedience was a Christian virtue, but who exactly should Protestants obey? A godly prince? A tyrant? A preacher—and if so, which one? In the end, only their own consciences, before God and informed by Scripture, could answer that question.”<sup>45</sup>

The result of the Protestant emphasis on the individual conscience, following Luther’s profession at Worms, has been what the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck has called the “church-dissolving” element of Protestantism that corresponds to its “church-reforming” dynamic.<sup>46</sup> While the institutional and formal division of churches remains a scandal for Protestantism, it is also true that Protestantism does not insist on institutional unity, still less uniformity, as a condition for spiritual unity in Christ. This principle goes all the way back to Luther himself, who in 1520 clearly distinguished between Christendom as a spiritual union and the institutional form it takes among specific peoples and communions: “This community or assembly means all those who live in true faith, hope, and love. Thus the essence, life, and nature of Christendom is not a physical assembly, but an assembly of hearts in one faith.”<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion: The Human Person before God

Even if there is some truth to the tale of *Lutherus contra mundum*, the monk with a mallet who changed the world with a single blow, a fuller appreciation of Luther's reformation places his understanding of vocation—both his own and the concept in general—within the context of his social teaching.<sup>48</sup> For Luther, all Christians are called to follow God; there are not two distinct classes of callings, one for the more spiritually focused and the other for profane, worldly pursuits. Instead Christians live and work in family, church, and government:

The first government is that of the house, out of which come people. The second is the ruling of the city, that is, lands, people, princes, and lords, which we call worldly government. There everything is given—children, property, money, beasts, etc. The house must build this; the city must guard, protect, and defend it. Then comes the third thing, God's own house and city, that is, the Church which must have people from the house and protection and defense from the city.<sup>49</sup>

The Christian calling encompasses these three institutions, which are united in “the common order of Christian love.”<sup>50</sup>

Luther thus contextualizes the three estates within the broader “order of love” that unites all Christians, and this anticipates something like the extended order or civil society that would become characteristic of modern social order. It is a neglected “fourth” order or estate, which Luther describes as follows:

Above these three institutions and orders is the common order of Christian love, in which one serves not only the three orders, but also serves every needy person in general with all kinds of benevolent deeds, such as feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, forgiving enemies, praying for all men on earth, suffering all kinds of evil on earth, etc.<sup>51</sup>

The individual thus lives before the face of God and has no other mediator than Jesus Christ. But the individual's vocation is lived out within the context of divinely instituted orders, a complex set of relationships and institutions that differ from time to time, from place to place, and from person to person. Luther himself described in classical fashion the institutions of family, church, and government. This threefold model has continued to be commonplace in Christian social thought, although others, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper, have developed such typologies further.<sup>52</sup>

There is an inherent dynamism to Luther's own thought, however, as contained in the “common order of Christian love,” which is aimed at benevolent service

of neighbors. Likewise Luther says that “everyone should examine his gift. For just as we are unequal in our bodies, our talents, and our property, so we are unequal in spiritual gifts. Everyone should remain in his place in the moral law and the common right until God calls or compels him to do something special.”<sup>53</sup> Luther was undoubtedly called by God to do something special. Each individual, however, has his or her own unique vocation to live before God in the service of others in the context of family, church, government, and civil society.

Martin Luther’s reformation of vocation originally arose out of his own sense of calling and responsibility to faithfully interpret and apply Scripture. From this followed a reform of all of life, which took as a critical point of departure the vision of Christian vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ. Christians have one vocation: to follow Christ. This vocation, this call to discipleship, takes many forms and has diverse aspects, whether in family, church, state, or society. Each individual and unique person, created in the image of God, has many relationships, responsibilities, and ways of serving others.

Luther’s vision of vocation thus includes and does justice to elements of hierarchy, which is inherited from the medieval period, and equality, a legacy for the modern world. We are all, regardless of the level of our authority in this world, equal before God. Each one of us lives our lives before God. There are legitimate differences in the kinds and scope of authority and responsibility in temporal terms. But at the core of Luther’s reformation of vocation is a radical equalization of all Christians as disciples of Jesus Christ who are called to serve their neighbors through and according to their gifts, talents, abilities, and resources.

It is fitting to conclude in Luther’s own words:

Let us not exalt ourselves above others because we are above them by reason of our position; but let us acknowledge that although in this life grace has many forms and there are various kinds of vocations, the same God is the God of all, whether they are slaves or free, whether they are rich or poor, provided that they hold fast to the Word and persevere in the faith. This is a profitable doctrine. It confirms the fact that there are various stations in life, and it proclaims the mercy of God, who takes pity on all in the same manner.<sup>54</sup>

Here each one of us stands; God help us.

## Notes

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Martin Kuske et al., trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 48.
2. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 48. For the Lutheran contexts of Bonhoeffer's thought, see Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Reception of Luther* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
3. This is one way to understand the so-called Weber thesis. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (1930; repr., New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005). More recently, see Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2012). On the Weber thesis today, see Jordan J. Ballor, "Reformation Protestantism and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism," in *Martin Luther: A Christian between Reforms and Modernity (1517–2017)*, ed. Alberto Melloni, 3 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).
4. On the backgrounds of Luther's teaching on the estates, see Timothy Shaun Price, "Luther's Use of Aristotle in the Three Estates and Its Implications for Understanding *Oeconomia*," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 373–89.
5. On this development see Germano Maifreda, *From Oikonomia to Political Economy: Constructing Economic Knowledge from the Renaissance to the Scientific Revolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).
6. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 48.
7. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan et al. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–1986), 31:25. Hereafter *LW*.
8. On the connection between doctrine and life in Luther's thought, see Emidio Campi, "Was the Reformation a German Event?" in *Shifting Patterns of Reformed Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 20.
9. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, xix.
10. For a fuller elaboration of Luther's appeal to Charles V and his vocation as emperor, from which this section draws, see Jordan J. Ballor, "The Reformation's Constantinian Moment: The Significance of Luther's Futile Appeal to Imperial Authority," in *From Zwingli to Amyraut: Exploring the Growth of European Reformed Traditions*, ed. Jim West and John Balsarak (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 9–22.
11. *LW* 44:131.
12. *LW* 44:130.

13. Ryrie, *Protestants*, 26.
14. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 66.
15. *LW* 44:156.
16. *LW* 44:165.
17. *LW* 44:183.
18. *LW* 44:211–12.
19. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 100.
20. *LW* 32:112.
21. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 106.
22. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, xxiv.
23. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, xxvi.
24. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, 19.
25. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, 105.
26. Heidelberg Catechism, LD 5, Q&A 15, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: 1523–1693*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014), 2:773.
27. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, 226.
28. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, 304.
29. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 168.
30. Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet*, 161.
31. See, for instance, Jordan J. Ballor, “Discipline, Excommunication, and the Limits of Conscience: Magisterial Protestant Perspectives on Church and Civil Authority in the Era of the Reformation,” in *Das Gewissen in den Rechtslehren der protestantischen und katholischen Reformationen*, ed. Michael Germann and Wim Decock (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 110–24.
32. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 5.
33. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 156–57.
34. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 157.
35. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 170–80.

36. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 210. See also Ryrie, *Protestants*, 22–23:  
Luther’s literary achievement has no parallels in the whole of human history. If that seems an extravagant claim, consider the figures. During his thirty-year public career, Luther produced 544 separate books, pamphlets, or articles, slightly more than one every three weeks. At his peak, in 1523, he managed fifty-five. That year, 390 separate editions of his books, new and old, were published. Luther alone was responsible for over a fifth of the *entire* output of German presses during the 1520s.
37. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 217.
38. Quoted in Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 222.
39. On the transition from the ecclesiastical economy under the papacy, the source of many of Luther’s complaints of material oppression by the clergy, to a secular (that is, nonecclesiastical) economy after the Reformation, see Davide Cantoni, Jeremiah Dittmar, and Noam Yuchtman, “Reallocation and Secularization: The Economic Consequences of the Protestant Reformation,” *CEP Discussion Papers*, no. 1483 (May 2017), available at <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1483.pdf>.
40. Pettegree, *Brand Luther*, 238.
41. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution, II: The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2003), 39.
42. Ryrie, *Protestants*, 2.
43. Ryrie, *Protestants*, 29.
44. Ryrie, *Protestants*, 4.
45. Ryrie, *Protestants*, 59–60.
46. See Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, no. 2 (November 1992): 249: “In the Protestant principle there is indeed a church-dissolving element as well as a church-reforming one.”
47. *LW* 39:65.
48. The classic study of Luther’s doctrine of vocation remains Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (1957; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004). See also Gene Edward Veith, *Working for Our Neighbor: A Lutheran Primer on Vocation, Economics, and Ordinary Life* (Grand Rapids: Christian’s Library Press, 2016).
49. *LW* 41:177.
50. *LW* 37:365.

51. *LW* 37:365.
52. Helmut Thielicke, for example, divides his ethics roughly along the lines of the three estates. See Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, trans. William H. Lazareth, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966–1969). Bonhoeffer’s ethics adds a fourth estate, that of “work” or “culture” to Luther’s three. Kuyper’s doctrine of sphere sovereignty does not specifically define the number or size of the various spheres in keeping with his own understanding of cultural development. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Concrete Commandment and the Divine Mandates,” in *Ethics*, ed. Ilse Tödt et al., trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 388–408; and Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 461–90. For a survey of Protestant developments to the doctrine of vocation after Luther, see Jordan J. Ballor, “Doing Much Good in the World,” *Christian History* no. 110, 2014, available at <https://www.christian-historyinstitute.org/magazine/article/doing-much-good-in-the-world/>.
53. *LW* 5:310.
54. *LW* 3:143.