

Martin Luther and Vocation

By Peter Gray

At the time of Martin Luther, it was believed that only professions of full time ministry were Godly and that all other professions were second rate. Luther rejected the narrow use of 'vocation' to refer only to religious callings because it gave the impression that one could serve God only by becoming a priest or joining a monastery. "Luther deliberately broadened the use of the term because he believed that any one could serve God in any calling. He believed that as a Christian used his time and talents to serve others, he was in effect serving God. And likewise as a person performed the duties of his vocation well, whatever it may be, he became in essence God's hands for providing the necessities of life to others." (Heine, online: 2001) Luther called it the priesthood of all believers and said "...being a good and honest butcher or shoemaker was as holy a vocation as being a priest of the church." (Buchanan, online: 2001)

The major implication of Luther's teaching is the freedom from striving and pressure that it brings and an affirmation of our self worth. When we view vocation within the sacred and secular framework, we are forced to view our job, what we spend the vast majority of our time doing, as merely human. There is no God in my work. So we strive to spend as much of our free time as possible doing Godly work, running church programs or leading youth groups etc. We become resentful of our work, as it is something that must be done, but we are really wasting valuable time that we could spend working for God. This is the serving of two masters that Jesus warns us about in Luke 16:13 "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." (NIV) Alternatively, if we follow Luther's point of view that God is at work in all vocations, not only are we freed from the pressure of striving, but also we see the glory of what we are doing. We see that we are participating in the work of God for His people, which is affirming of our self worth. "Vocation brings equalization. If our vocation is to carry on the work of God—then the physician who performs a heart transplant and the orderly who wheels the patient back to his room have the same spiritual significance. The custodian, carpenter and CEO are on equal ground because they have the same calling. The concept of Christian vocation liberates us from bondage to a value system, which measures worth according to educational degrees and earning power. We are all called. Every one of us is God's person in and for the world." (Barton, online: 2001)

God does not need people to help Him make the world work. He does not need the baker or the butcher or the farmer to keep his people fed. He could make bread fall from the sky. He does not need doctors and nurses to keep His people healthy. He could heal people all by himself. God does not even need men and women to make babies. He could speak them into existence. But He chooses to include us in His work so that we are his hands in feeding and healing His people. We are included in

the creative act of making children and the responsibility of raising those children. God is at work in every aspect of our lives.

“Every legitimate human occupation (paid or unpaid) is some dimension of God’s own work: making, designing, doing chores, beautifying, organising, helping, bringing dignity, and leading.” (Copenhaver, online: 2001) We seem to have lost the beauty of Luther’s teaching and still see the world divided into sacred and secular. When we hear a call to ministry in church we hear an invitation to do more or be more. “Like many of those who sit beside her at church, she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to do more—to lead the every member canvass or teach Bible School. Or she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to be more—to be more generous, more loving, more religious. No one has ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might involve her being just who she already is and doing just what she already does, with one difference: namely, that she understand herself to be God’s person in and for the world.” (Taylor, 1993: 28)

Many full time mothers feel undervalued and a lack of self worth due to the cultural stigma in our society surrounding motherhood. Luther showed us that motherhood is as valuable and Godly as priesthood. Motherhood is a God-given vocation. It is God who makes mothers. “Luther pointed out that God could populate the earth by creating each new generation of babies from the dust of the earth as He did Adam. Instead, He ordained that man and wife should come together to bring children into this world and bring them up in Families...God bestows the office of motherhood and places individual women in the vocation of mother. For the Christian, motherhood is a means to serve God. As she accepts the responsibility to care for her child, the Christian mother serves the Lord. As she selflessly sacrifices career or personal interests for the child God has given her, she fulfills her Christian vocation. As she undertakes the careful and diligent instruction of her child in faith and manners and how to work, she can look forward to hearing the words from her Savior, Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” (Heine, online: 2001)

Luther reacted against the medieval notion that only monks and priests are working in a Godly role. He showed us that God is at work in all people in all professions, which is liberating to us. We no longer need to think of our job merely as something we do to make money that robs us of time to do the spiritual things in life. While it is true to say that our vocation is more than our job and includes assist in church programs etc., I don’t wish to imply that our vocation is purely the spiritual things we do in our spare time while our job gives us the money to pay our bills. This is not what Luther was saying. Luther taught us that our job is spiritual if we approach it with a Christian view. We are God’s hands in His world. “For Luther the true being of a person consists not in his or her work but in the gift of God's calling to serve our neighbor.” (Moore, online: 2001)

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