

# Luther and the Lutheran Confessions on Vocation

JOHN A. MAXFIELD



**I**N THE THIRD PART OF HIS *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528), Martin Luther wrote a comprehensive confession of his faith "before God and all the world." He opens this confession with an observation that errors were increasing in the church and he feared that after his death others would appeal to his person or writings to confirm their own errors. In this opening paragraph, which is quoted in its entirety in the Formula of Concord, Article VII, the Reformer concludes:

Let no one make this out to be a joke or idle talk; I am in dead earnest, since by the grace of God I have learned to know a great deal about Satan. If he can twist and pervert God's word and scripture, what will he not be able to do with my or someone else's words?<sup>1</sup>

This essay is an investigation into how the Lutheran Reformation treated the subject of a Christian's vocation. I introduce this investigation by referring to this confession of Luther's faith because this text clearly reveals the Reformer's own treatment of the chief articles of faith, including his understanding of the Christian's vocation, in the form of a written testament for posterity, much like the later Smalcald Articles. In the midst of so many genres of Luther's writings—from polemical treatises to sermons and biblical lectures to catechetical treatises to personal letters—the testamentary writings of Luther stand out as the Reformer's own statement of what he wanted posterity to view as his confession of the gospel and of Christian doctrine.

Noteworthy in this confession is that the Reformer places his condemnation of monastic orders and his positive teaching concerning "the holy orders and true religious institutions established by God" immediately after his confession of the Trinity and within his confession of the person and work of Jesus Christ. In other words, for Luther the doctrine of the Christian's vocation is an element of the central article of the Christian faith. The Christian's vocation is part of the ongoing, sanctifying work of Jesus Christ in the lives of sinners who are justified before God by faith. The Christian's vocation is

therefore an element of Luther's teaching concerning Christian righteousness, and not simply a Christian subset of the broader teaching concerning civil or human righteousness. This was a major turn in the understanding of Christian ethics, for since antiquity Christian ethics had most often been viewed from within the perspective of various classical, philosophical world-views, whether it was the ethics of Aristotle or of Stoicism. In Luther's time, the ethics of Aristotle reigned. Central to this system is that one becomes righteous, or ethical, by practice. It is a thoroughly human endeavor, by which a good man becomes a better man. In the various Scholastic systems, God's grace is necessary to perfect the human righteousness that every person is capable of through the exercise of free will, but this grace-empowered human righteousness is still a human work, and therefore it is meritorious.

Luther's view of justification turned this ethical system on its head and placed Christian ethics into two realms of life in God's world. In the divine realm, or right-hand rule of God, Christian righteousness is something that proceeds from faith alone and is therefore impossible apart from faith. No matter how good a person is in terms of ethical behavior (what the Lutheran reformers call human righteousness), such a person has no Christian righteousness without faith in Christ, from which Christian righteousness blooms as fruit from a good tree. On the other hand, while the Christian living by faith already has perfect Christian righteousness according to the principle of *simul iustus et peccator*—simultaneously totally righteous and totally a sinner—such a person nevertheless still has to work very much at it to develop good practices of ethical behavior in the other realm, the realm of human righteousness, or God's left-hand rule. Like the unbeliever, Christians are accountable for their actions in this realm of existence, and they cannot simply appeal to forgiveness to remove from themselves that accountability. In the realm of human righteousness, also known as civil righteousness, the Christian is not essentially different than an unbeliever who is striving to live a good life. In fact, as I will later show, Luther views the works even of godless, unbelieving men as the holy work of God in the world

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1. Martin Luther, *Studienausgabe*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius (Berlin, later Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987–1999), 4:245.4–246.4 (hereafter cited as *St.A.*); cf. *LW* 37:360–61. In quotations from this text I have supplied my own translation of the German text, and also given the reference in *LW*.

when these people are participating ethically in the left-hand rule of God, through the orders that God has established for the preservation of his world.

But first we need to wrestle with the way Luther viewed the worldly vocations of Christians as outlets for *Christian* righteousness. This is indicated by the fact that in his 1528 *Confession*, the Reformer placed his discussion of vocation within the second article of the Creed. Indeed, so central is the doctrine of vocation to Luther's understanding of Christian righteousness that within this section of 112 lines (in the critical edition) devoted to Christ's person and work, the Reformer devotes 77 lines, or about two-thirds of the whole, to the righteousness Christ works in the lives of believers, a righteousness that is wholly Christ's work and gift, and yet it is a righteousness that Christians participate in through their daily life in the world. It is necessary to grasp how Luther relates the Christian's vocation to righteousness in Christ before we can explore how the Lutheran Confessions treat the subject of the Christian's vocation in the world, for in the Confessions vocation is most often treated under the broader topic of what constitutes Christian righteousness, sometimes called Christian perfection.

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### ***Luther relates the Christian's vocation to righteousness in Christ.***

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Luther, in this testament of his faith, treats Christian righteousness as part of the work of Christ in the Christian first by condemning monastic traditions and institutions as non-Christian, even idolatrous, and then by confessing a totally different conception of Christian life from the Catholic conception passed down from late antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages. In this essay I will first give an exposition of Luther's confession regarding the Christian's vocation in this testament of his faith; then I will show how the Book of Concord incorporates the Reformer's understanding of vocation throughout its many confessions articulating the doctrine of the Lutheran church.

#### **MARTIN LUTHER'S CONCEPT OF VOCATION AND CHRISTIAN RIGHTEOUSNESS**

Consider the significance of the fact that Luther's discussion of the Christian's vocation comes within his confession regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. Within this central article of Christian teaching, after confessing the incarnation of the Son of God in the man Jesus and articulating the two natures in Christ, Luther describes the Lord's suffering and death for sinners. The Reformer then confesses his faith regarding the original guilt that all men inherit from Adam; he condemns "as sheer error all doctrines which glorify our free will, as diametrically contrary to the help and grace of our Savior Jesus Christ";

and finally he rejects "the new and the old Pelagians who will not admit original sin to be sin, but make it an infirmity or defect."<sup>2</sup> In short, after confessing Christ's person as true God and true man, Luther proceeds to confess man's total slavery to the sinful nature inherited from Adam and condemns all Pelagian views of salvation, that is, all views that make salvation something that human beings are capable of by the exercise of free will, whether that capacity be total, as in classical Pelagianism, or partial, as in the various Scholastic systems which held that God must add grace to man's efforts in order for the human being to be saved.

At this point in his *Confession* the Reformer condemns monastic institutions "as sheer devil's rabble and error." These traditional forms of pursuing Christian holiness—even though they are ancient—were instituted by men apart from Scripture, Luther says, though he acknowledges that "many great saints have lived in them."<sup>3</sup> In an important paragraph, the Reformer relates the tradition of monastic orders to the vocations of Christians. If monastic institutions were devoted to training men to become pastors and competent people for serving in the civil government, and to training "fine, respectable, learned women capable of keeping house and rearing children in a Christian way," then they would be a good thing. "But to seek there a way of salvation, that is the devil's doctrine and creed, 1 Timothy 4, etc."<sup>4</sup>

To these humanly devised religious institutions the Reformer contrasts the "holy orders and true religious institutions established by God . . . : the office of priest, the estate of marriage, the temporal authority."<sup>5</sup> Here we come across the three orders of God's creation that are sometimes referred to as the three hierarchies; in Latin texts, Luther uses the terms *ecclesia*, *oeconomia*, and *politia*. Not just the priesthood or pastoral office but the whole order of life and office in the church is one of the sacred orders that God has created in the world. Not just marriage but the whole order of life in the household and the economic sphere of labor and production is likewise an order created by God in which his people can live out the life of faith and holiness. Not just political offices but the whole civil order with all its relationships of rule and obedience, patronage and service to the state—this is a realm in which the Christian can

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2. *St.A.* 4:246.12–249.4; see *LW* 37:361–63.

3. *St.A.* 4:249.5–20; see *LW* 37:363–64.

4. *St.A.* 4:249.21–27; see *LW* 37:364. Later in the confession Luther expands on this rejection of monastic holiness, including the priestly offering of the mass as a sacrifice: "Above all abominations, however, I hold the mass when it is preached and sold as a sacrifice or good work, for upon it stand all religious foundations and monasteries, but, God willing, soon they shall be overthrown. For as I have indeed been a great, grievous, and shameful sinner, and also my youth I have damnably spent and wasted, so still my greatest sins are that I was such a holy monk, and with so many masses I so horribly enraged, tormented, and plagued my dear Lord for over fifteen years. But may praise and thanks to his inexpressible grace be said into eternity, that he has led me out of such abomination, and still daily upholds and strengthens me in the right faith, despite my ingratitude" (*St.A.* 4:256.1–10; see *LW* 37:370–71).

5. *St.A.* 4:250.1–2; see *LW* 37:364.

serve God by faith, and such service is a holy work of God when it is done in conformity with the word of God, in particular when it is done by faith.

In the next paragraphs as Luther develops this point, he uses vocabulary that specifically calls to mind the concepts of relics and holy places that were so central to ancient and medieval Catholic concepts of holiness. Not *Heiligkeit*—the abstract word for “holiness”—but *Heiligthum* is the word Luther uses as he defines the place where Christians are to pursue the holy life of faith and service. *Heiligthum* means “holy place”—it is the German word used to refer to a shrine or sanctuary for holy relics. *Where* and *how* is the holy life of the justified sinner to be lived out? Not in a monastery or through pilgrimages to shrines, not through acts of devotion or penance before holy relics or icons, but in the orders that God has created and governs according to his Holy Word—these are the holy places where the Christian lives out a life of holiness and thus participates in the holiness of God.

Luther shows first of all how the pastoral office and ministry of the word together with diaconal service (described as the supervision of the “common chest” or local welfare systems created under Luther’s recommendation<sup>6</sup>) are “works which are altogether holy in God’s sight.” The holy work of such churchly service is not surprising, although it is important to note that churchly service for Luther is much broader than the divinely instituted office of preaching. Churchly service for Luther is everything that pastors, supervisors of the common chest, and sextons—yes, even the “messengers or servants who serve such persons”—do in the name of Christ through churchly institutions. Christians serving in these institutions, whether ordained pastors, other full-time church workers, or lay volunteers, are accountable to the church and are living out their vocation within the divine order of *ecclesia*, or churchly service.<sup>7</sup> They all have churchly *vocations*, a term that traditionally had been reserved for secular priests and religious clergy, that is, monks and nuns. Service in any and all of these churchly vocations is the holy work of God for the benefit of the world.

But such churchly service is not the only holy work in which all Christians are called to live out their vocation. Consider now how Luther goes on to describe holy service through the other two orders created by God for life in this world:

Likewise, any fathers and mothers whose house is well-governed, and children raised to the service of God, [this] is also sheer “holy place” [*heiligthum*] and holy work and holy order. Similarly, where [*wo*] children and servants are

obedient to parents and masters is also sheer holiness [*heiligkeit*], and whoever is found therein, is a living saint on earth.

Likewise also prince or sovereign, judge, civil servant, chancellor, notary, laborers, maids, and all such servants—all obedient subjects—everything is sheer “holy place” and a holy life before God. For these three institutions or orders are included in God’s word and command. But what is included in God’s word, that must be a holy thing [*heilig ding*], for God’s word is holy and sanctifies everything that is connected with it and is in it.

Above these three institutions and orders is the common order of Christian love.<sup>8</sup>

Luther here defines the various places where sanctification and the Christian life are pursued as places where Christian love for the neighbor can be put into practice. The holy life takes place in the household, where parents carefully raise their children to serve God according to his word. The holy life takes place in the civil realm, through wise governance and obedience to civil laws. In short, for Luther the holy life does not take place in the myriad of religious activities that human beings create and pass down as traditions of the church, but rather in the activities that God has prescribed in the created order itself. And love is what binds these orders together—not just any love but *Christian* love, which is the fulfillment of God’s law (Rom 13:10). The Christian lives a holy life when in his or her vocation—comprised of church, household and work, and activities in the civil realm—God’s word is upheld and honored, all under the overarching practice of Christian love.

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***Churchly service for Luther is everything that persons do in the name of Christ through churchly institutions.***

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What is remarkable about this description of Christian holiness or sanctification is that these activities of the Christian all take place in both realms of God’s rule at the same time. It is not true, at least in a simplistic way, that the order of *ecclesia* is under the right-hand governance of God but that the *oeconomia* and *politia* are under God’s left-hand governance, and therefore that the basic division is between church and state, or even between church and secular society. No, the question is rather whether the individual serving in these orders is doing so by faith, and therefore is living out Christian righteousness, or is doing so only under the realm of human righteousness.

6. On this see Luther’s *Preface* and the text of the *Ordinance of a Common Chest* for the city of Leisnig, 1523 (LW 45:159–94).

7. *St.A.* 4:250.2–7; see LW 37:364. Luther considers these churchly vocations as part of the divine order of *ecclesia* even though in the territorial church system of Luther’s day, such offices were under the jurisdiction and in the employment of the civil government. Even today in Germany, social welfare and health care institutions and employees are referred to under the churchly terms of diaconal offices and institutions.

8. *St.A.* 4:250.7–19; see LW 37:364–65.

Not just any father and mother who love their children but only those fathers and mothers who rule their household according to the word of God are practicing Christian righteousness: their household is a holy place before God, and they are living saints on earth. Not just any prince or public official who governs wisely, but specifically when Christians serve in these offices and do so as an expression of faith working through love does the order of *politia* become a place wherein the Christian can live out Christian righteousness and therefore be a continuing extension of Christ's person and work in the world. As Christians serve in any of the three orders God has instituted in the world, they participate in both realms and are servants both of God's right-hand rule and his left-hand rule.

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At the same time, however, these holy orders are so directly connected to God's work that Luther confesses God's holy work to be done in them even when these works are performed by the godless, and even though the godless are not saved through this participation in God's holy work. Describing the works of Christian love 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.," Luther calls all these "down-right good and holy work"; nevertheless no such order is a way to salvation [*zur seligkeit*]. The Reformer explains:

For it is entirely different, to be holy and to be saved. We become saved alone through Christ, but holy both through such faith and also through such divine institutions and orders. Also the godless may indeed have much about them of [this] "holy thing," but they are not on that account saved therein. For God wants to have such works [done] by us to his praise and glory. And all who are thus saved in the faith of Christ do such works and retain such orders. . . . Now if these orders and divine institutions do not save, what can we say about the effects of the devil's institutions and monasteries, which have sprung up entirely without God's word, and further strive and rage against the only way of faith?<sup>9</sup>

Here Luther has turned the traditional Catholic concept of holiness on its head. Participation in the created orders of God

is participation in God's holy work, even though such participation does not save and those who participate without faith are not saved. While traditional Catholic views of holiness held that Christian righteousness or perfection is pursued by abandoning the world, and that such perfection mediates salvation to oneself and to others, Luther views holiness as a righteousness that God works in the world through Christians and sometimes even through unbelievers, but it is not necessarily a righteousness that saves. If such Christian love is extended by faith, it is Christian righteousness. Similar acts done without faith are mere human righteousness. But God is doing a holy work through them all, out of love for his creation and for its preservation.

This confession of the Christian's vocation in the three orders or hierarchies is elaborated by Luther in many of his works, but perhaps most noteworthy are his lectures on Genesis where the Reformer richly narrates the lives of the patriarchs and demonstrates how these holy men and women of old lived out their faith in their daily life in the world through these orders established by God. Also in the Genesis narratives appear men without faith—men such as Abimelech and Pharaoh—who nevertheless conduct themselves ethically in their civil offices and therefore participate in the holy work of God. I treated many of these texts from the Genesis lectures in my presentation at the 2002 Congress on the Lutheran Confessions when I spoke on the vocations of women, and also in a book on the Genesis lectures.<sup>10</sup> Presently I will turn to investigate how Luther's doctrine of vocation did not remain his own confession alone but came to be confessed as the doctrine of the evangelical Lutheran Church in the Book of Concord.

#### VOCATION IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

There is no article in the Lutheran Confessions devoted specifically to Luther's concept of the Christian's vocation. However, the Reformer's teaching of Christian righteousness, foundational for the doctrine of justification, the central doctrine of the Lutheran Reformation, is taught throughout the Confessions and therefore Luther's doctrine of vocation is taught in many different articles. The most extensive treatment of vocation is within Article xvi of the Augsburg Confession (On Civil Government, one of the three orders instituted by God). There the princes at Augsburg confessed that civil government is established by God and that Christians may take part in the various responsibilities of civil governance, including the punishing of evildoers, waging just wars, possessing property, and so forth (AC xvi, 1–2).<sup>11</sup> The Augsburg Confession condemns the Anabaptists who were teaching that none of these things

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9. *St.A.* 4:251.1–12; see *LW* 37:365, which erroneously places these lines into a new paragraph.

10. John A. Maxfield, "Martin Luther on the Vocation(s) of Women," in *Feminism and the Church: Papers Presented at the Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, Bloomingdale, Illinois, April 4–6, 2002*, ed. John A. Maxfield (St. Louis: Luther Academy, 2003), 1–20; and *idem*, *Luther's Lectures on Genesis and the Formation of Evangelical Identity*, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, 80 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008).

11. All references to the Book of Concord are from the Tappert edition.

is Christian. Then, in a paragraph that shows the confessors' adoption of Luther's view of Christian righteousness in its relation to the vocation of Christians, the article continues:

Also condemned are those who teach that Christian perfection requires the forsaking of house and home, wife and child, and the renunciation of such activities as are mentioned above. Actually, true perfection consists alone of proper fear of God and real faith in God, for the Gospel does not teach an outward and temporal but an inward and eternal mode of existence and righteousness of the heart. The Gospel does not overthrow civil authority, the state, and marriage but requires that all these be kept as true orders of God and that everyone, each according to his own calling, manifest Christian love and genuine good works in his station of life. Accordingly, Christians are obliged to be subject to civil authority and obey its commands and laws in all that can be done without sin. But when commands of the civil authority cannot be obeyed without sin, we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). (AC XVI, 4–7)

Here we have the elements of Luther's teaching in summary form. First, there is the condemnation of views of Christian perfection such as in monasticism, and now also in the Anabaptist movement, which viewed Christian holiness as achievable only by withdrawal from the world. Second, the article presents a view of Christian righteousness or perfection that is grounded in "proper fear of God and real faith in God," for Christian righteousness is the righteousness of faith in the heart. Finally, when those who are righteous by faith seek to live out their faith by living a holy life, this is done not by abandoning the world but by living as a Christian in the worldly orders of the state and marriage. The article lacks the power of Luther's language in the 1528 *Confession*, where he had talked so concretely about the holy life within the "holy place" of the household and the civil realm. But the same concepts are clearly there: holiness or righteousness is something that the gospel bestows but is also something to be lived out in the Christian's daily life through his vocation, for God is doing a holy work through these vocations in the world. Also following Luther, the confessors at Augsburg were careful to note that it is not just any life within these orders instituted by God, but it is the life lived in obedience to God in these orders that is a holy life of Christian righteousness. Yes, even when obedience to God necessitates disobedience to civil authority when it cannot be obeyed without sin, there the Christian pursues a life of holiness. This point needs emphasis in the wake of later Lutheran traditions of political quietism that have been accused, not always unjustly, of allowing a dualistic view of the two kingdoms to prevail in which the civil realm has not always been held accountable to its role as an order instituted by God, with divinely mandated powers and limitations on its powers. Luther got it right, the Augsburg Confession got it right; the Gnesio-Lutheran confessors in Magdeburg later developed this into a full-blown doctrine of political resistance, but the view of civil government that prevailed among Lutherans adopting the

Formula of Concord articulated instead a view of civil government that placed the Lutheran territorial churches and their governance much too firmly under the control of civil rulers.<sup>12</sup> Lutheranism was held captive under the growing absolutism of early modern European monarchies while the originally Lutheran doctrine of political resistance to tyrannical civil authority was taken up by the Calvinists and the later Puritan tradition. From there it was taken up in America by John Adams, among others.<sup>13</sup> The critical difference between Lutheranism as it continued to develop under European monarchies and the experience of Lutheranism in America is the necessary background for considering the early history of the Missouri Synod and other confessional Lutheran bodies in the United States that were free from state control. Consider, for example, the title of Walther's important work in congregational polity: *The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State*.<sup>14</sup>

In the Apology, Melancthon notes that the Roman Catholic opponents had approved this article in the Augsburg Confession "without exception" (Ap XVI, 1). Nevertheless the Apology article features an extensive treatment of the distinction between Christ's kingdom and the political kingdom, and condemns as erroneous views regarding Christian perfection that stem from the traditional distinction of classes among Christians, for example, holding clergy and monastics to a higher view of Christian perfection based on the so-called evangelical counsels outlined by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Ap XVI,

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12. Oliver K. Olson, "Gnesio-Lutheran Influence on the American Revolution," in *The American Book of Concord: A Sesquicentennial Celebration*, ed. John A. Maxfield, The Pieper Lectures, vol. 6 (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute and The Luther Academy, 2003), 1–15. See also Oliver K. Olson, "Theology of Revolution: Magdeburg, 1550–1551," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 3, no. 1 (April 1972): 56–79; David M. Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001); and idem, "Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis," *Church History* 73 (2004): 41–62.
  13. See Olson, "Gnesio-Lutheran Influence," 10–13, where Olson summarizes the arguments of Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance*; and David M. Whitford, "John Adams, John Ponet, and a Lutheran Influence on the American Revolution," *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 143.
  14. C. F. W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, Presented and Published by Resolution of the Ev. Luth. Pastoral Conference of St. Louis, MO, Second unchanged edition, St. Louis, Mo., 1864, trans. John Theodore Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963; reprinted in the Concordia Heritage Series, 1987). The full title as given in the translator's preface (p. v) is *The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State: A Compilation of Witnesses from the Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Private Writings of Its Orthodox Teachers*. Under Thesis 2, Walther notes that the government (or members of the government) of a country in which the orthodox church dwells "should belong to the church, and this may be beneficial for the church." He then adds, "Nevertheless, the church's independence of the state is not a defect or an abnormal condition, but the right and natural relation which ought always to obtain between church and state" (ibid., 5–6).

6–13). Such “evangelical counsels” included holding property in common and denying to these “perfect” Christians the right of public redress through appeal to the civil government. As this article concludes, Melancthon notes that monastic theories

put a hypocritical poverty and humility far above the state and the family, even though these have God’s command while the Platonic commune does not have God’s command (Ap xvi, 13).

This rejection of monasticism and other related ancient and medieval Catholic conceptions of Christian righteousness likewise comes to the fore in Article xx of the Augsburg Confession on faith and good works. The confessors held up their teaching concerning “true Christian estates and works” in sharp contrast to the traditional emphasis on “childish and useless works like rosaries, the cult of saints, monasticism, pilgrimages, appointed fasts, holy days, brotherhoods, etc.” (AC xx, 2). In Article xxvii the confessors criticize monastic vows as idolatrous because of the many abuses that had developed within monastic institutions since their initial founding as voluntary communities where Scripture was studied and taught, and pastors and bishops were educated (AC xxvii, 15–16). Such abuses include the vow itself, which was made equal to baptism; the teaching “that more merit could be obtained through the monastic life than by all other states of life instituted by God”; and the teaching that men are justified by the monastic life (AC xxvii, 2, 11, 13, 44, etc.). In sharp contrast is the Lutheran teaching regarding Christian perfection:

. . . that we fear God honestly with our whole hearts, and yet have sincere confidence, faith, and trust that for Christ’s sake we have a gracious, merciful God; that we may and should ask and pray God for those things of which we have need, and confidently expect help from him in every affliction connected with our particular calling and station in life; and that meanwhile we do good works for others and diligently attend to our calling. (AC xxvii, 49)

One can see from these texts that Luther’s doctrine of vocation and its relationship to Christian righteousness is thoroughly imbedded in the Augsburg Confession, especially in its teaching about faith and good works. The Apology deals with these same issues in even more detail. At the heart of this understanding of faith and good works is that Christian righteousness is a gift received by faith alone and is exercised in good works. But not just any good works. Following Luther, the Confessions condemn traditional religious practices such as pilgrimages and the Roman Catholic emphasis on religious ceremonies, replacing these humanly invented traditions with the scriptural teaching that good works are offered to the neighbor within daily life, within the orders created by God for life in this world.

Thus far this teaching of the Augsburg Confession has been concerned with vocations in the civil realm and the household (*politia* and *oeconomia*). Another article in which the Augsburg

Confession and its Apology confess Luther’s doctrine of vocation is Article xxviii, which deals with the power of bishops and therefore the estate of the church (*ecclesia*). Here the chief abuse that the confessors condemn is the confusion of the two realms, where the power of bishops is confused with the power of civil governance, or the “temporal sword” (AC xxviii, 1). After condemning this confusion within the Roman Church, the confessors at Augsburg declared:

Thus our teachers distinguish the two authorities and the function of the two powers, directing that both be held in honor as the highest gifts of God on earth.

In cases where bishops possess temporal authority and the sword, they possess it not as bishops by divine right, but by human, imperial right, bestowed by Roman emperors and kings for the temporal administration of their lands. Such authority has nothing at all to do with the office of the Gospel.

According to divine right, therefore, it is the office of the bishop to preach the Gospel, forgive sins, judge doctrine and condemn false doctrine that is contrary to the Gospel, and exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose wicked conduct is manifest. All this is to be done not by human power but by God’s word alone. On this account parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, “He who hears you hears me.” On the other hand, if they teach, introduce, or institute anything contrary to the Gospel, we have God’s command not to be obedient in such cases, for Christ says in Matt. 7:15, “Beware of false prophets.” (AC xxviii, 18–23)

Here the confessors show the proper function of the two governments God has instituted in the world, that of the church and that of the civil realm. The authority of both these powers is established and limited by the word of God. Bishops have the power of the word and only the word.<sup>15</sup> They have no power to command new doctrines or to institute ceremonies; they are to be obeyed when they teach the word and disobeyed “if they teach, introduce, or institute anything contrary to the Gospel.” Much in this article treats the abuse of bishops requiring obedience to traditions not established by the Scripture. For example:

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15. Here it is helpful to recall the theme and content of C. F. W. Walther’s presidential address to the 1848 convention of the Missouri Synod, where he focused on “the thought that, according to the constitution under which our synodical union exists, we have merely the power to *advise* one another, that we have only the *power of the Word*, and of *convincing*.” The address is translated in Carl S. Meyer, ed., *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 170–77. Of course it is important to note that Walther is speaking here of the authority of the synod and not of the pastors of the congregations. Yet, as a reading of the address makes clear, Walther applies to all ministers of the word the principle that the word alone holds power in the church.

If, then, bishops have the power to burden the churches with countless requirements and thus ensnare consciences, why does the divine Scripture so frequently forbid the making and keeping of human regulations? Why does it call them doctrines of the devil? (para. 49).

The chief abuse is when ceremonies are introduced as “necessary to propitiate God and merit grace” (para. 50). In the context of the Reformation, another major issue regarded the requirement of traditional practices that oppose the gospel, such as the administration of the sacrament in one kind only. But even in the case of other ceremonies that do not contradict the gospel, the confessors appealed for lenience and to the principle of Christian liberty (para. 61–75).<sup>16</sup> According to the Lutherans, even the ancient and universal practice of observing Sunday as the day of worship is not a necessity but only an example of a human regulation instituted for the sake of good order in the church (para. 53–64), and therefore something that can be changed.

What does all this have to do with the doctrine of vocation? Just this: not even the preaching office has the authority to destroy Christian liberty. All Christians have a vocation in the church to uphold the word of God and to oppose the destruction of Christian liberty through the requirement of human traditions. In the Reformation this vocation was chiefly in the hands of local pastors, but the princes and the local governments who were responsible for endowing and caring for the churches also had the vocation of upholding the gospel in church practice. In 1520 Luther had appealed to the Christian nobility of the German nation to attend to the reform of Christendom, in the face of the papal magisterium’s rejection and condemnation of Luther’s reform.<sup>17</sup> In our context today, this responsibility for the governance of the church is shared by voting members in a congregation, and by both lay and pastoral delegates in district and synod assemblies. The point is that not just pastors but every Christian by virtue of Holy Baptism has a vocation within the *ecclesia*, to uphold the word of God and to defend the liberty of Christians where ecclesiastical officials, including local pastors, abuse their office by forbidding or requiring certain practices without or beyond the teaching of Holy Scripture.

This same principle that every Christian has a vocation within the *ecclesia* is also at work in the Lutheran teaching of the priesthood of all believers. Although this phrase is not used in the Lutheran Confessions, the principle is at work in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope where 1 Peter 2:9 (“You are a royal priesthood”) is applied to the “true church.” The true church “alone possesses the priesthood” and therefore “certainly has the right of electing and ordaining ministers,” while ordination by a bishop is simply the ratification of this election by the people of the church (Tr 69–71).

The point of this section in the Treatise is that the office of bishop, or even that of the local pastor or presbyter, is not an estate over the church but is a ministry to serve the church. Therefore, when such officials use their office not to serve the church but to withhold ordination from candidates elected by the church, the Treatise declares that “the churches retain the right to ordain for themselves. For wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists” (Tr 66–67). All Christians, in other words, have a vocation to uphold the ministry of the word of God in the church. Both in Luther’s writings and later in the history of the Missouri Synod and other synods of the Synodical Conference, this principle was central to the conviction that the congregation has the right to choose its pastor through the extension of the divine call, and that laymen of the church also have a voice in judging the doctrine of their pastors on the basis of Holy Scripture. This is part of their vocation as Christians.

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***Even the practice of observing  
Sunday as the day of worship  
is not a necessity.***

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Skipping over the Smalcald Articles and the catechisms of Luther, which convey in many ways the Reformer’s teaching I have outlined from his 1528 *Confession*, the final document in the Lutheran Confessions is the Formula of Concord, which deals primarily with issues of controversy that had developed within Lutheranism in Germany in the years following Luther’s death. But Article XII deals specifically with the errors among “factions and sects which have not committed themselves to the Augsburg Confession.” First to be treated are the many factions of the Anabaptists, who in general

profess doctrines of a kind that cannot be tolerated either in the church, or in the body politic and secular administration, or in domestic society (FC Ep XII, 2).

Recognizable by now in this description should be the three orders God has created in the world—*ecclesia*, *politia*, and *oeconomia*—and these are indeed the very terms taken up by the Formula of Concord in this introductory paragraph and in the three sections that follow, each identifying the errors that cannot be tolerated within these three orders of God’s creation. Among the errors having to do with life in the church, Luther’s doctrine of Christian righteousness and its connection to the Christian’s vocation comes to the fore as the following error of the Anabaptists is rejected:

That our righteousness before God does not consist wholly in the unique merit of Christ, but in renewal and in our

16. Note, for example, AC xxviii, 61–64.

17. Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate* (1520), in *LW* 44:123–217.

own pious behavior. For the most part this piety is built on one's own individual self-chosen spirituality, which in fact is nothing else but a new kind of monkery. (FC Ep XII, 5)

Here the Formula rejects the false understanding of Christian righteousness that was being promoted among the Anabaptists. But not only is this false, humanly devised righteousness of works for life in the *ecclesia* condemned; also rejected are the views that “no Christian may serve or function in any civic office with a good and clear conscience”—obviously the error of denying Christian vocations within the *politia*—and “that a Christian cannot with a good conscience hold or possess private property but is in conscience bound to put it into a common treasury,” an error that undermines the divine order of *oeconomia*. In short, Luther's understanding of vocation within the three orders established by God in the world is at the heart of the Formula of Concord's articulation and condemnation of the Anabaptist error.

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***We might say that Christian vocation was what the Reformation was all about.***

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What this brief summary of the confessional teaching regarding Christian vocation shows is that the Lutheran Confessions thoroughly appropriated Luther's doctrine. The vocation of Christians is not simply a teaching about ethics in the left-hand realm, that is, in the realm of human righteousness, but is also an expression of Christian righteousness. Indeed, Christian righteousness or perfection is a life to be pursued not by abandoning the world but by living in the world, demonstrating Christian love in the three orders God has instituted in the world. Every Christian has responsibilities in all three of these orders of creation. The subject would require another paper, but I should at least mention that not only in its written Confessions but also in its actual practice, the Lutheran Reformation integrated this concern for the holy orders of God's world in its reform activities. Monasteries and religious foundations were transformed into schools for the education of pastors and civil servants, and even young girls were to be educated so that they could serve the household well.<sup>18</sup> University reforms

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18. As Luther noted in the Smalcald Articles, “The chapters and monasteries which in former times had been founded with good intentions for the education of learned men and decent women should be restored to such purposes in order that we may have

were conducted so that the agendas of Christian and civic humanism—that is, the application of education to the reform of life in church and society—were thoroughly integrated into the curriculum. Civil law was reformed so that marriage and the household were upheld by the abolition of canon law and the creation of new laws regarding impediments to marriage, grounds for divorce, and settlement of disputes among Christians.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the whole Reformation era, in all its diversity, has been interpreted by Scott Hendrix in his book *Recultivating the Vineyard* as a period of intense Christianization of a medieval Christendom that was viewed by Luther and others as something quite less than Christian.<sup>20</sup> We might say that Christian vocation was what the Reformation was all about: cultivating the Christian faith that had failed to take root in medieval Christendom and applying it to all the baptized people of God, in every aspect of their daily life.

### CONCLUSION

Luther and the Reformation he led had at their center the gospel of the justification of the sinner before God by faith in Christ alone. Christian righteousness consists in this faith alone, a faith that works itself out in Christian love for the neighbor. The vocation of Christians is to live out this faith through love, in the orders that God has created for the preservation of his creation. All Christians have a vocation to serve God in the church, whether or not they are called to full-time service in any of the churchly vocations that include the pastoral ministry but are not limited to it. All Christians likewise have a vocation to serve God in their household and in the economic sphere of society. All Christians have a vocation to serve God in the civil realm—and in a free and democratic society with a republican form of government, that vocation is one not only of service and obedience but also of holding civic leaders accountable to their office as instituted by God. Each of these orders is the holy work of God, through which the Christian lives out the righteousness of Christ that is given by God as a free gift of grace, a gift received by faith alone. **LOGIA**

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pastors, preachers, and other ministers in the church, others who are necessary for secular government in cities and states, and also well trained girls to become mothers, housekeepers, etc.

“If they are unwilling to serve this purpose, it would be better to abandon them or tear them down rather than preserve them with their blasphemous services, invented by men, which claim to be superior to the ordinary Christian life and to the offices and callings established by God. All this, too, is in conflict with the first, fundamental article concerning redemption in Jesus Christ” (SA II, III, 1–2).

19. A helpful analysis is given in chapters three (“From Propaganda to Law: The Reformation Enacted”) and four (“From Law to Life: The Reformation Embraced”) in Steven Ozment, *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

20. Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).





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