



**A Serious Christian Journal of Life
and its Significance**

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Verba Vitae
**A Serious Christian Journal of Life
and its Significance**

Verba Vitae is committed to bringing the classical Christian tradition into conversation with life issues now confronting us. Modeling the reasoned *logos* of the theological tradition, *Verba Vitae* explores the truth-claims made by thinkers and examines the grounds upon which these assertions are made.

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Welcome to the Spring 2026 Issue

THE ESSAYS GATHERED HERE TAKE UP a question that has become newly unavoidable for pastors, teachers, scholars, and thoughtful Christians generally: What kind of moral and intellectual formation can sustain humane life amid the centrifugal pressures of late-modern critique? Our theme—“Christian Vocation as an Antidote to Radical Contemporary Critical Theory”—does not ask readers to deny the reality of social injury, nor does it counsel retreat into private piety. It asks, rather, whether the Christian doctrine of vocation might offer a deeper grammar for truth-telling, public responsibility, neighbor-love, and the preservation of human life within the concrete relations in which God has placed us.

By “radical contemporary critical theory,” several contributors to this issue name a broad family of approaches that interpret human life primarily through the lens of power. Within such approaches, identities are often parsed into rival collectivities, institutions are treated as inherently oppressive, and truth claims are recast as strategies of domination. The attraction of such accounts is not difficult to understand. They can illuminate real patterns of exclusion, distortion, and misrecognition. They can expose the ways supposedly neutral norms are often sustained by social interests. Yet the essays in this volume press a deeper question: What must be true about human life if our language of alienation, injustice, domination, and liberation is to have genuine moral force? If critique is severed from any thicker account of creation, moral order, divine address, and human responsibility, it risks becoming self-consuming. It may still denounce injustice, but it struggles to say why injustice is truly unjust rather than merely an unwanted arrangement of forces. It may expose power, but it has difficulty explaining why power should be ordered toward truth, mercy, and the neighbor’s good.

Against this backdrop, vocation emerges not as a slogan for “finding one’s purpose,” nor merely as the religious sanctification of ordinary work. It is, more profoundly, a theological account of what human life is: life received from God, addressed by God, and given for the neighbor within concrete forms of creaturely

existence. These forms include household, church, and political community; office and station; the duties that come with finitude; and the freedom that comes with the Gospel. Vocation resists the flattening of persons into autonomous self-creators on the one hand or politicized instances of group identity on the other. It is also, crucially, a doctrine of limits. It distinguishes God's saving work from our temporal tasks, and thus it provides an eschatological reserve that refuses both utopian revolution and cynical resignation.

Dan Liroy's opening essay, "Redemption, not Revolution: Human Flourishing through Cross-Shaped Love," establishes a confessional frame by retrieving the Lutheran doctrines of the Two Kingdoms and *vocatio* as an antidote to contemporary critical theory's tendency toward totalizing power-analysis. Through sustained engagement with Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 7, and Matthew 22, Liroy argues that vocation names divinely ordered arenas of stewardship rather than intrinsically corrupt structures to be perpetually deconstructed. Justification by faith alone secures human identity apart from ideological performance; vocation then directs that freed life outward in embodied service to the neighbor.

Dennis Bielfeldt's "Alienation, Vocation, and the Ontology of Life" meets critical theory on its own terrain and presses a fundamental question: What must be true about human life for the language of alienation, reification, and misrecognition to carry genuine moral force? The essay argues that even the Frankfurt tradition's powerful diagnoses tacitly rely upon an integrity of life that postmetaphysical critique cannot finally underwrite. Vocation is retrieved here as an ontological claim: human life is constituted by divine address and givenness. Grace, therefore, does not mute critique. It makes critique's deepest seriousness possible by grounding the life whose distortion critique seeks to name.

Eric Brinkert's "Vocational Balance: A Lutheran Vision for Human Flourishing" turns to the pastoral and cultural consequences of contemporary individualism. If utilitarian and expressive accounts of the self increasingly fail to secure human well-being, especially among the young, Brinkert argues that a Lutheran doctrine of vocation—shaped by Luther's teaching on the Three Estates—offers a more credible account of flourishing. By emphasizing givenness and giftedness, and by proposing "vocational balance" across the stages and callings of life, the essay commends a practical wisdom that resists the idolization of professional achievement without retreating from responsibility.

David Patterson's "Calling a Thing What It Is: Disability as Ostracism and *Schule Christi* in a Lutheran *Theologia Crucis*" addresses a domain in which liberationist critique has often done important work, yet can still remain captive to what it opposes. Patterson argues that protest alone may remain dependent upon a "normate" imagination that treats disability primarily as deficit. Against this, the *theologia*

crucis teaches the church to speak truthfully—to “call a thing what it is”—and to receive disability as a cruciform pedagogy, a *Schule Christi* that trains the community in dependence, patience, mutual care, and truthful love. The image of the ostrakon—the broken shard that becomes the surface for inscription—becomes an invitation to recognize how God writes the Gospel upon creaturely fracture.

Finally, Bielfeldt’s “When Reasons No Longer Persuade” examines a marked shift in public life: the erosion of shared practices of giving and asking for reasons. Engaging Wilfrid Sellars alongside Marx, Mannheim, the Frankfurt School, and standpoint epistemologies, the essay traces how beliefs are increasingly construed less as conclusions responsive to reasons and more as manifestations of social location. The implications are profound. When argument gives way to disclosure, and persuasion to the presentation of standpoint, the “space of reasons” that makes intelligible disagreement possible begins to collapse. In such a world, theological speech is endangered as well, for theology depends upon the possibility that claims may be made, tested, clarified, and judged according to reasons rather than merely located within competing regimes of power.

Taken together, these essays do not offer a single program, nor do they treat critical theory as a monolith. They share, however, a common conviction: the church’s most faithful response to contemporary critique is neither anxious accommodation nor reactionary dismissal, but renewed confidence in the Gospel’s freedom and in the realism of vocation. Vocation is an antidote not because it silences grievance, excuses injustice, or baptizes the status quo, but because it names the form of a human life that is first received from God and then given for the neighbor. It reminds us that truth is not reducible to power, that persons are not exhausted by social position, and that love is not an abstraction but a concrete practice enacted within the ordinary places where God has bound us to one another.

We invite our readers, therefore, to engage these essays carefully, to test their claims, and to consider anew how the doctrine of vocation might restore moral seriousness, public intelligibility, and Christian hope in an age increasingly tempted to construe life itself through suspicion alone.

Dennis Bielfeldt
General Editor, *Verba Vitae*



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