

Vocation and Abortion

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IN COMMON USAGE, the word “vocation” means “job,” “occupation,” or “profession.” It is, however, a theological term that derives from the Latin word for “calling.” The idea is that God *calls* us to different tasks, offices, and relationships. Thus St. Paul says,

Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. (1 Corinthians 7:17)

Hence, God calls each person to a “life” that He has assigned. That calling is the person’s “vocation.” Though many theological discussions of vocation focus on the different ways Christians make a living and how they can express their faith in their work, the concept is clearly much more extensive than that. It comprehends “the life” of a Christian. The immediate context of the 1 Corinthians passage concerns marriage and singleness.

For Luther, the great theologian of vocation, the doctrine speaks to how God governs His creation, how He works through human beings, and how human beings are to love and serve their neighbors. As such, looking at issues through the lens of vocation can help us to understand them from a different perspective.

We will here briefly explain Luther’s doctrine of vocation, then consider abortion in light of the four kinds of vocations to which Christians are called and non-Christians are appointed: in the family, the economy, the church, and the state.

Luther’s Doctrine of Vocation

LUTHER TAUGHT THAT GOD has ordained three “estates” for human life: the household, the church, and the state. We have multiple vocations within them all.¹

The “household” refers, above all, to the family. Some people are called to marriage so that being a husband and being a wife are vocations. A married couple might also be called to parenthood, to the vocations of father and mother. Being a son or daughter is also a vocation, as are the other ties of kinship.

The “household” also includes how the family makes a living. In Luther’s day, most livelihoods were closely tied to the family. Whether you were a peasant farmer, a craftsman, or a king, your whole family was involved, though some people had special professions in the church or the state. With the Industrial Revolution and urbanization, work moved outside the home. So, for our purposes, we can split “household” into “family vocations” and “economic vocations.”²

In the estate of the church, all Christians are called by God’s Word, beginning with their baptism. As the *Small Catechism* says, “the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel.”³ In addition, some are “called” into the Holy Ministry and other church offices.

The estate of the “state,” can be thought of both as a formal political authority and as the broader community in which we find ourselves. We all have the vocation of “citizenship” where we live. In addition, some have vocations of rulers, magistrates, soldiers, etc.

Luther believed that God works through all of the estates to govern and preserve the human race. This means that He works through human beings, in their various vocations, to give His gifts. Thus He gives daily bread through the vocation of farmers, bakers, and everyone else through whom “He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.”⁴ He protects us by means of the lawful magistrates. He gives His Word and Sacraments by means of pastors, whom He has “called and ordained.” He heals by means of physicians. And He creates new life by means of mothers and fathers.

The purpose of all of our vocations is to love and serve our neighbors. Each vocation has its unique neighbors to love and serve. In the state, citizens are to love and serve each other, and rulers are to love and serve their subjects. In the church, pastors love and serve their congregations, and congregations love and serve their pastor and each other. In the economic vocations, our neighbors are colleagues and customers. In marriage, the husband’s neighbor is his wife, and the wife’s neighbor is her husband. In parenthood, the neighbor whom fathers and mothers are to love and serve is their child.

When we love and serve our neighbors, we become “channels” for the love of God. As Luther says in the *Large Catechism*, “Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings.”⁵ Thereby we become co-workers with God.

Luther opposed every kind of synergism when it comes to our salvation. There we do not co-operate with God. He accomplishes everything for us in Christ. But then He calls His redeemed children into the world, where in the struggles of life they grow in their faith, are sanctified, and do co-operate with

God, though they often resist Him. The Swedish theologian Gustaf Wingren explains it this way:

Co-operation takes place in vocation, which belongs on earth, not heaven; it is pointed toward one's neighbor, not toward God. Man's deeds and work have a real function to fill in civil and social relationships, despite the fact that works done by man cannot lift from man the condemnation that rests on him before God.⁶

But we can also refuse to co-operate with God. Instead of serving, we want to be served. Instead of loving our neighbor, we can use our vocations to harm our neighbor, as in abusive relationships, dishonest business dealings, and toxic leadership. Wingren summarizes the problem:

Wanting to be exalted instead of serving, regarding office as a possibility for selfish power instead of for service, is offense against vocation. Through this offense man falls away from co-operation with God, and comes, on the contrary, to work against God. Then one becomes a hindrance and an enemy in the path of the Creator's self-giving love.⁷

Abortion in the Family Vocations

ABORTION IS A REPUDIATION of the vocation of parenthood. The woman rejects the calling of motherhood, given to her when she conceives, and instead of loving and serving her neighbor—the developing child in her womb—she has the child killed and removed. Fathers too are often complicit in abortion, pressuring the woman to abort their child and with false generosity offering to pay for the procedure to “get rid of the problem.” Fathers are to love and serve their children by providing for them and protecting them, not by arranging to have them killed.

This “offense against vocation” is obvious, but it also reveals more about the nature of vocation. A woman desiring an abortion may say that she did not *choose* to be a mother. Indeed, advocates of abortion call themselves “pro-choice.” In post-modern ethics, what determines right and wrong is the *will*. If a woman *chooses* to have the baby, that is right for her, but if she *chooses* not to have the baby, that too is right for her. But Christianity teaches that in our fallen condition, our will is often in conflict with the will of God. That we insist on our will and defy God's will is the definition of sin.

Strictly speaking, our vocations are not something we choose.⁸ Rather, we are called to them from outside ourselves. We did not choose what family to be born in. We did not choose the society or the era in which we were born. While we make a host of decisions about what to major in, what job offer to

take, whether to get married, and the like, when we look back upon our lives—including our own interests and talents, the doors that open and the doors that slam shut, the people that God brings into our lives—we can see God’s hand guiding us at every step.

You didn’t choose to be a parent? Well, some couples do choose with all their hearts, and yet they cannot conceive. Some couples do not make such a choice—indeed, they choose *not* to have children—and yet they do. And usually when the baby comes, though against their will, they are glad. This is the human condition.

The choice to have an abortion is generally related to the great hardship the parents think a baby would cause. This is not the right time. This interferes with my career. We can’t afford the expense. Having a baby would ruin my life.

But just as vocation is not self-chosen, it does not exist for the self, but for the neighbor. Though there is indeed nearly always a great sense of fulfillment and many great joys in carrying out one’s vocations, fulfillment and joy do not determine the vocation, and their lack does not invalidate the calling.

Indeed, Luther stresses that vocation is where we bear our cross. Says Wingren, summarizing Luther:

To understand what is meant by the cross of vocation, we need only remember that vocation is ordained by God to benefit, not him who fulfills the vocation, but the neighbor who, standing alongside, bears his own cross for the sake of others. Under this cross are included even the most trivial of difficulties, such as: in marriage, the care of babes, which interferes with sleep and enjoyment; in government, unruly subjects and promoters of revolt; in the ministry, the whole resistance to reformation; in heavy labor, shabbiness, uncleanness, and the contempt of the proud. All this is bracketed with the high and holy cross of Christ; but then that too was deep in humiliation when it was erected.⁹

Bearing such crosses drives us to prayer, as well as greater dependence on the cross of Christ. And so we grow in our faith and our sanctification.

Because vocation is a “given,” it exists in the here and now. A college student, for example, may be preparing for a particular vocation. But he also has vocations now—as a member of his family, as a citizen and member of the college community, in any part-time work he is doing to pay his way through school, in his church, and—crucially—as a student.

Vocations can certainly change over time—a child grows into adulthood, marries, becomes a parent; a worker takes any number of jobs—but some vocations are

permanent. A married man cannot suddenly decide he isn't called to the married life and thus conclude that his marriage isn't valid so he can abandon his family. No. If you are married, that is your vocation. Luther says,

If anyone lives in marriage, in a certain way of life, he has his vocation. When this is interfered with—by Satan, or neighbors, or family, or even by one's own weakness of mind—it ought not to yield or be broken in spirit. Rather, if any difficulty impedes, let one call on the Lord, and let both me and David be proved liars, if God in his own time does not bring help. For it is sure that here, in fidelity to vocation, God has insisted on hope and trust in his help.¹⁰

What Luther says about marriage would hold true for parenthood. Those who conceive a child have their vocation. But God will help them fulfill their vocation, which He himself shares with them.

Luther's reference to "David" is to the author of Psalm 127. The Psalm begins, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1), and it moves to a promise for parenthood: "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb, a reward" (Psalm 127:3). Vocation may have its crosses, but it remains God's gracious gift.

Abortion in the Economic Vocations

NOT ALL WAYS OF MAKING a living are callings from God. Crime is not a vocation because stealing, extortion, fraud, drug dealing, and other illegal means of making money do not serve but rather *harm* one's neighbor. The same can be said of some legal ventures, such as those that manipulate or exploit the neighbor. Some occupations harm the neighbors by leading them to sin. God calls no one to be a pornographer, for instance. And He calls no one to be an abortionist.

The abortionist takes the life of the neighbor who defines the occupation: the developing child. The abortionist breaks God's commandment against murder and does so for profit. The abortion provider also sins against the mother by enabling her sin.

Abortion providers are also sinning against the vocation that they do have. Nearly all of them have medical vocations. They are physicians, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care professionals. God has given them special talents, education, and gifts. God works through those who have medical vocations as channels to heal the sick. They are to love and serve their patients by healing them. Instead, those who perform abortions use the gifts of their vocation against the purpose of their vocation: not to heal but to kill.

Abortion in the Church Vocations

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES WITH ANY COMMITMENT to historical orthodoxy and a high view of Scripture teach against abortion. Some churches, though, are silent, and some even support abortion, not only as a right, but as a positive good. Some feminist theologians have even blasphemously called it a “sacrament” of female empowerment. Such inversions recall the condemnations of the Prophet Isaiah:

Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness. (Isaiah 5:20)

The ministers, teachers, theologians, and officials of these churches are serving the Spirit of the World instead of the Holy Spirit, and so are violating their vocations (1 Corinthians 2:12).

But even progressive Christianity is corrupted by abortion. Modernist theology seeks to go beyond traditional theology with a social gospel that champions the poor, the weak, and the marginalized, opposing the powers that oppress them and working for justice and inclusion.

And yet, in their support of abortion, they neglect the poorest, weakest, and most marginalized of all—the child in the womb. Who is more vulnerable to those who hold power over them? Who is in more need of justice? Why is the child in the womb the great exception to inclusion?

Pro-abortion Christians who speak eloquently against oppression suddenly change their tune and sound like right-wing libertarians when they defend abortion. This inconsistency discredits their whole message.

A different kind of hypocrisy can be seen in members of pro-life churches who defy their own confessional commitment by supporting abortion, even as they still claim allegiance to their church. This is especially apparent in politicians who publicly make much of their identity as Catholics, Baptists, Pentecostals, or confessional Lutherans. And yet they embrace abortion as part of their party’s platform.

Even worse, some of these Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, or Lutheran politicians were once, in accord with their professed beliefs, pro-life. But they became pro-abortion when the political winds changed.

Abortion in the State Vocations

HUMAN BEINGS WERE NOT CREATED to be alone. Not only did God establish families, He also established communities. These in turn have governments, which are in-

tended to curb external sin so as to make societies possible. The proper work of “governors,” according to St. Peter, is “to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good” (1 Peter 2:14). They do so by enforcing the civil laws against criminal behavior, thereby protecting the innocent and providing a climate in which positive behavior can flourish.

Romans 13 is an important text for the doctrine of vocation. It explicitly states that God works through and by means of the governing authorities:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13:1-4)

In the verses immediately preceding this chapter, St. Paul forbids personal revenge: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Romans 12:19). But immediately afterwards, St. Paul states that the one who is in authority is “an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (13:4). The Lord will repay, at least in part, by means of the lawful authorities, whom St. Paul twice describes as God’s “servant,” indeed as “God’s servant for your good.”

This text, in the context of Roman rule, also makes clear that God works through non-believers, as well as Christians. We might reserve the word “vocation” for those who know God’s *calling* through His Word, using other terms such as “stations” or “office” for the roles God gives to those who do not know Him. Non-Christians as well as Christians can hold public office and be citizens; the labors of both can contribute to the “daily bread” that God gives to both the just and the unjust; and both Christians and non-Christians can marry, forming new families, and be parents, bringing new life into the world. In God’s governance of His temporal kingdom, even at its most “secular,” He gives His gifts through the instrumentality of human beings.

Lawful authorities also “bear the sword.” As Luther develops at length in his treatise *Whether Soldiers Too Can Be Saved*, private individuals may not take another person’s life. But God can. And He can do so through “his servant,” the lawful authority. Luther says that soldiers can indeed be saved, though they slay their enemies on the battlefield. As individual Christians, they should still love their enemies, but in their offices in the state, they are loving and serving their neighbors by defending them against those who would do them harm, even when that means taking lives. This would apply also to other

civil vocations, such as police officers, judges who may have to hand down a death penalty, executioners (Luther’s “hangman”), and others who lawfully “bear the sword.”

But authorities who bear the sword against someone who is no evildoer, who has committed no crime and has done no wrong, are clearly violating their vocations. God has not called them to do that. On the contrary, those who are innocent are precisely the ones that the governing vocations are called to protect.

To be sure, our governors are not currently mandating abortions—as the rulers of the People’s Republic of China have done—but to pass civil laws allowing such violence on those who have violated no laws is outside of God’s bounds for government.

A democratic republic such as ours brings with it another application of Romans 13. In our system of government, sovereignty is invested in “the People.” Thus, our governors and lawmakers themselves come under the authority of the citizens who elect them. That means that in the United States and similar democracies, the individual citizen is not only a subject but also a ruler. An American citizen as a voter is obliged to form opinions about the issues the nation faces and about those who serve or want to serve in public office.

Thus, those who have a vocation as citizens of America must also be engaged in making sure their government is protecting the innocent, as opposed to allowing their destruction.

This means that the vocation of American citizen includes the proper work of political activity and voting. The church, as such, must not become involved in ruling over earthly realms—that would be a confusion of vocations and of the Two Kingdoms—but Christians are citizens of both Kingdoms and so they have duties to love and serve their neighbors in their civil callings. This would seem to preclude voting in such a way as to enable or facilitate abortion.

Abortion is not always a partisan issue. Progressives in thrall to a radical feminist ideology do support abortion, but it is hard to see what is so “liberal” about it. Again, progressives’ claims to fight for the “little guy” ring hollow when they exclude babies in the womb. But many conservatives also support abortion—as shown in the “red states” that pass pro-abortion referenda—motivated largely by their libertarian ideology, which makes their claim to be for “conserving traditional values” ring hollow.

Abortion and the Gospel

THUS, THE ACCEPTABILITY OF ABORTION is a sign of the doctrine of vocation gone horribly wrong—ignored, repudiated, turned inside out—and the violation corrupts the whole range of our callings: in the family, the workplace, the church, and the state.

But this is not the whole story. Though, as Wingren says, when we resist the love of God operative in our vocations we become His enemy, it is also true that

“while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.” And “now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (Romans 5:10).

Jesus fit the profile of the unwanted child. And His mother—young, pregnant, and unmarried—fit the profile of a candidate for abortion (even more so, since having been betrothed, she also risked the death penalty for adultery).

But Mary responded in faith to the angel’s promise and embraced her calling: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Soon after, she visited her relative Elizabeth, also miraculously pregnant, who told her, “behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Luke 1:44). The baby John, who would be called the Baptist, responded to the baby Jesus, both of whom were in the womb, thus proving the personhood of unborn children.

Whereupon Mary exults, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47). Scattering the proud and exalting the lowly, God saves by the strength of His arm and by His mercy.

Her child would survive a slaughter of infants (Matthew 2:16-18) and would grow up to atone “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). This is because “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24). St. Paul puts it even more strongly: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus bore the sin of all the abortions ever committed and He died for the forgiveness of everyone who committed that sin.

If our sins are largely failures of vocation, as Luther suggests, our forgiveness for those sins also can be found through vocation. In the *Small Catechism*, in the explanation of “Confession,” Luther responds to the question, “which sins should I confess?” by urging penitents to apply the Ten Commandments to their “place in life”; that is, to their vocations:

Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?¹¹

After the penitent confesses the sins of vocation, the confessor asks, “Do you believe that my forgiveness is God’s forgiveness?”

The right answer is “yes.” In the words of Luther’s explanation of the Office of the Keys,

I believe that when the *called* ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and

want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.¹²

Because he is a “called minister,” the pastor is a channel through whom Christ works, bringing the forgiveness of sins that He has won through His death and resurrection. Therefore, the pastor can say, in the words of the liturgy,

Upon this your confession, I, *by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word*, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.¹³

In all of our vocations, we should oppose abortion and work for the cause of life. But we are also called to love and serve our neighbor who has had an abortion, or who has purchased an abortion for someone he has gotten pregnant, or who works in an abortion center, or who agitates to make abortion more available. We can channel God’s love for them not by pretending that there is nothing wrong in what they do, but by leading them to repentance and bringing them to the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

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Notes

1. For Luther’s doctrine of vocation, see Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Evansville: Ballast Press, 1994). See also my book *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).
2. The word “economy” derives from two Greek words meaning “house” and “managing.” See *Online Etymological Dictionary*: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/economy>.
3. “The Third Article of the Creed,” *Luther’s Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 17.
4. The First Article of the Creed,” *Small Catechism*, 16.
5. “First Commandment,” *Large Catechism* in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), para. 26, p. 389.
6. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 124. See his full treatment of the subject on pp. 123-143.
7. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 128.
8. See my discussion of this point in *God at Work*, 50-57.
9. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 29.
10. Exposition of Psalm 127. Quoted in Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 195.
11. “Confession,” *Small Catechism*, 25.
12. “Office of the Keys,” *Small Catechism*, 27.
13. Divine Service, Setting Three, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 185.