Vocational Balance

A Lutheran Vision for Human Flourishing

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Introduction

It appears that every generation is ultimately driven to articulate a vision for human flourishing. In other words, what is our purpose, and how do we meaningfully fulfill it? In their 1985 book *Habits of the Heart*.[1] Robert Bellah and others explored the key forces shaping this vision in American life. They identified two major drivers: utilitarian individualism, with a primary focus on individual success, and expressive individualism, with a focus on the exploration and expression of the authentic self.[2] Through extensive research, Bellah's team argued that these two forms of individualism largely shaped the American vision of human flourishing in the late 20th century. More than 20 years later, Kelly Besecke observed in her 2007 article "Not Just Individualism: Studying American Culture and Religion after *Habits of the Heart*" that sociologists continued to wrestle with the role of individualism in forming the American vision of human flourishing.[3] Now, nearly 20 years after Besecke's article and over 40 years since *Habits of the Heart* was published, a new generation is grappling with its own vision for human flourishing.

As Bellah anticipated, individualism appears to be failing to provide a vision that leads to flourishing. By looking at recent reports on happiness in America, it's clear that individualism is not effectively promoting flourishing. For example, The Common Good organization's America's Report Card[4] grades the United States a D+ in happiness. Another example is the World Happiness Report,[5] which lists the US among societies with the highest rates of declining happiness. While happiness isn't the only measure of human flourishing, these studies reveal troubling trends indicating that whatever is informing our current vision of human flourishing is not working. The impact on young people is especially concerning. One key finding in America's Report Card report states that "A historic generational happiness gap exists [where] Americans over 60 are among the happiest in the world, while those

under 30 rank 62nd globally, reporting declining life satisfaction, purpose, and social support." This observation is supported by Dartmouth Economics professor David Blanchflower, who has studied happiness for decades and argues that "We're faced with a situation globally where there's been a collapse in the well-being of young people."[6] He also notes that this is a relatively recent development, mostly beginning around 2013, when young people were previously consistently among the happiest individuals.[7]

This all seems to call for a reexamination of our understanding of human flourishing. Individualism has failed us, and we can clearly see how it is failing our young people. Individualism has faltered in two significant and related ways. First, it fails to provide or cultivate a true sense of vocation. This results in the second factor, which is that, without a true sense of vocation, we experience vocational imbalance—meaning our priorities are out of sync with what it truly means to be human. Individualism may be highly effective at filling our cups, but as Robert Benne notes in *Ordinary Saints*, "The filled cup is meant to be spilled, or its contents become stagnant."[8] Instead of leading to human flourishing, individualism has caused human stagnation. What we need is a new (old) vision of human flourishing—one rooted in Christian ethics and based on the Christian concept of vocation, as understood through Martin Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates.

What is Vocation?

The Lutheran understanding of vocation is formed by Martin Luther's Doctrines of the Three Estates. Unfortunately, Luther did not fully articulate this doctrine, but he left us enough nuggets for later scholars to form a coherent doctrine that emanates from Luther's doctrine of creation. As a leading Lutheran theologian, Robert Kolb highlights, "Fundamental to Luther's understanding of the Biblical teaching of creation was his conviction that God had made human beings in and for community with one another."[9] There are several ideas to unpack here regarding vocation and human flourishing. First, the idea that the human being is a creature of God. This may seem obvious to the Christian reader, but it needs to be explicitly stated. Second, God created the human being for a purpose. And finally, that purpose involves humans being in supportive relationships with one another. In this way, vocation offers a clear understanding of anthropology (what it means to be human), ontology (the nature of being), and teleology (our purpose), all of which come together to shape a view of human flourishing. And that vision comes to fruition in our vocations, which we live out, as Kolb says, "in and for community with one another."[10]

What does it mean then, to be in and for community? Luther identifies three ways of understanding community and our relationship with it. He calls these different *estates* (*Stände*, which can also mean orders or institutions). In

each of these *estates*, we all have different *callings* (*Beruf*) or *offices* (*Ämter*), or *responsibilities*. Luther begins to outline these three estates in his *Lectures on Genesis*, where he describes the two orders of creation—the *Ecclesia*, or church and the *Oeconomia*, or family—and the order of preservation—the *Politia*, or government.[11] In each of these *estates*, everyone holds multiple callings, or responsibilities. These responsibilities are our vocations.

The ordering of these estates is important for understanding the vision for creation presented in Genesis, as well as vision of human flourishing. The *Ecclesia*, or church, was created first, even before the creation of Eve. This emphasizes that the fundamental human relationship is between man and God. Luther bases this on Genesis 2:15-17, which reads:

> The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

While this might *not* appear or feel like church as we understand it, Luther identifies this as the creation of the church by observing that "Here the Lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him."[12] If we are to understand church as being wherever the word is preached and the sacraments are administered, which is where God gives himself to his people, then it becomes clear how Luther interprets this interaction between Adam and God in Eden as church. The *Ecclesia* is thus established here as the first and highest order.

The highest order for human relationships follows shortly thereafter in the creation narrative. With the creation of Eve, God ordains the estate of the *Oeconomia*, the household or family (Gen. 2:18-24). This was to illustrate that the fundamental relationship between humans is centered in the home and between husband and wife.[13] This essay will refer to these first two estates as the orders of creation. This is because in the primeval history recorded in Genesis 1-11, these two estates were ordained by God before the fall. In other words, they were part of God's original acts of creation and his vision for his ongoing acts of creation. In God's charge to man to "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:18), one sees how God, in the original created order before the fall, chose to include his human creations in the co-creative act of bearing and raising children. In these first two estates, as understood in the creation narrative of Genesis 1-2, we are presented with an image of how God created the world and intends to sustain that creation through his human creatures.

It is notable that, according to Luther's interpretation of primeval history, the third estate, the *Politia* or government, is not part of the original creation narrative, but is ordained only after the flood. Luther derives this from Genesis 9 (verse 6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed") in God's new

covenant with Noah. Prior to this, God had reserved the administration of justice for human affairs to himself.[14] Recall from the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 that God forbade any human from exacting justice on Cain for killing his brother. But now, in Genesis 9, God shares his authority to administer justice with his creation. For Luther, this marks the establishment of the estate of the *Politia*. In the ordination of the *Politia*, two things need to be highlighted. First, as in the *Oeconomia*, where God chooses to work with his human creations as co-creators of human life, in the *Politia*, God also chooses to share his authority with his human creations in governing his creation. Second, in the ordination of the *Politia*, God is not resetting the orders but placing the *Politia* below the *Oeconomia* in the ordering of the estates as God affirms his charge to the family to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 9:7). Therefore, the *Politia* is understood not as superseding the *Oeconomia* but as extending from the authority of the family, which will be discussed in more detail later.

The ordination of the *Politia* marks the delineation between the prelapsarian (before original sin) and postlapsarian (after original sin) understanding of the Three Estates. The two orders of creation—the *Ecclesia* and the *Oeconomia*—present a vision of human flourishing before sin entered the world. However, after the fall—that is, after Adam and Eve sinned and introduced sin into the world—the *Ecclesia* and the *Oeconomia* remain, but in a fallen state. They continue to serve the function God intended, but they are marred by sin and the failings of human beings. In this fallen world, the *Ecclesia* and the *Oeconomia* are institutions composed of sinful people who may or may not be dutifully fulfilling their responsibilities within those institutions. Similarly, the *Politia* is also an institution composed of sinful people. God retains these estates as his instruments, and within these fallen institutions, he works his will through his people in their offices, callings, or responsibilities.

In their postlapsarian state, these estates, as institutions, are now centered in the *Oeconomia* and emanate from the *Oeconomia*. This is not to reorder the relational priorities established in creation. The relationship between the human being and God remains paramount, followed by the relationship between husband and wife. However, after the fall, where God works through these estates as human institutions, all these institutions derive their authority from the *Oeconomia*, or household. As Kolb notes, both the church and the state become the congregation of families united for a common purpose. In the *Ecclesia*, this purpose is to "join in faith for public worship and praise, for mutual edification and support."[15] And in the *Politia*, "families are united for the common good"[16] to provide mutual defense, administer justice, promote public welfare, etcetera. In the *Ecclesia*, the head of the household partners with and empowers the church to fulfill their responsibilities, like raising children to know God and sharing the promises of God with the world. Similarly, in the *Politia*, the head of the household partners with and empowers the state in fulfilling some of their responsibilities, such as educating children, providing secu-

rity, and administering justice. This illustrates how these estates originate from the *Oeconomia*, how they overlap, and how the offices/callings/responsibilities each person holds also overlap.

The Language of Vocation

It is important now to examine some of the specific language Luther uses regarding vocation, as it sheds light on his thinking, and also sounds unfamiliar to modern ears, especially in North America. First, we have estates, orders, or institutions. To avoid confusion in the rest of this article, the term *estate* will be used consistently when referring to the *Ecclesia*, the *Oeconomia*, and the *Politia*. The English term estate is derived from the German *Dreiständelehr*, which Luther used to denote his doctrine of the three estates. The root word here is the German *Stände*, meaning *station*, *order*, or *institution*.[17] During Luther's time, *Stände* carried an implied rigidity tied to the social hierarchy, in which distinct, intractable social classes and orders existed. For the individual, *Stände* implies a fixed position, implying that one's place in society is determined by birth, rather than merit.

People might chafe at the notion of *Stände* today, and as Luther scholar Oswald Bayer points out, the use of *Stände* in this sense has largely been excised from contemporary German.[18] However, understanding Luther's original use of the term can be quite instructive for thinking about vocation. As David W. Loy highlights in his article "Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance," "The medieval European social order was characterized by relationships that integrated nearly everyone into a coherent, meaningful whole in which each could understand him—or herself to play an important role…."[19] This is a good way to describe a Lutheran view of vocation within the Doctrine of the Three Estates. The *Ecclesia*, the *Oeconomia*, and the *Politia* are intractable orders of society (because they are created by God) in which every person has a meaningful role—or vocation—that defines their relationships within and for the community. In contrast, in contemporary society, there is the sense that a person can ascend or descend the social order based on his or her merits. *Stände*, however, implies that, although vocations might be dynamic, they all operate within God's created order through the institutions of the church, the family, and the state.

This leads to the specific vocabulary used to discuss these roles—or vocations—that each individual has within these estates. For vocation, Luther employs both the German words *Beruf/Berufen* and *Amt/Ämter*. *Beruf/Berufen* can be understood as profession or calling.[20] *Amt/Ämter* can be understood as office or responsibility.[21] Both of these German words carry significant implications for understanding the concept of vocation.

It is from *Beruf/Berufen* that the common understanding of vocation as profession is derived, or as the German theologian and translator Karlfried Froehlich would call it, a person's "regular work or occupation."[22] Understanding *Beruf/Berufen* this way helps to draw the distinction between the profane [23] and the sacred. *Beruf/Berufen* refers to each person's everyday work in the world. As Froehlich describes it, "One's *Beruf* was not something special, but something down-to-earth, something exercised right in the world of everyday work and toil."[24] The distinction between the profane and the sacred here is important because it shows that people's vocations do not justify them in the sight of God. That is, no one earns salvation through their work of vocation. Rather, through this profane work, each person serves their neighbors. Human flourishing is not the way to heaven; it is only the way of service.

Beruf/Berufen, understood as calling, gains an additional layer of meaning. Calling recasts *Beruf/Berufen* from mere toil to service. A calling is the call to service through one's work. As Froehlich notes, *Beruf/Berufen* "was the word for the Christian's calling, wherever exercised, as an act of faith active in the love of God and neighbor,"[25] and he adds that "any *Beruf* is first of all work in this world for others."[26] This sense of "faith active in the love of God and neighbor" is what sets vocation apart from mere work for Christians. Vocation is loving service to one's community inspired by a love of God.

Amt/Ämter adds even more layers of meaning to the understanding of vocation. As Robert Kolb notes, "Within each of these estates or situations Luther taught that God assigns His people "offices" (*Amt/Ämter*) or responsibilities."[27] To think of vocation as an office is to view it as a position held in trust—roles into which each person is placed, that are not theirs to keep, nor to earn. Instead, it is a trust each individual is called upon to administer for a time. As a trust, there comes a responsibility to one's vocation that transcends the mere toil being performed in these roles. For example, a husband is called upon to fulfill the responsibilities of that office for his wife, but at the same time, he is also called to model what a Christian husband should be, so others will assume that same role. In this sense, vocation is an office into which God places each individual. Each of these offices, in which one is placed, however, carries certain responsibilities. That is the second meaning of *Amt/Ämter*, responsibilities. As stated above, within the office of husband within the *Oeconomia* there are certain responsibilities to his wife. Similarly, in the office of citizen within the estate of the *Politia*, comes certain responsibilities to the *polis*—be it local, state, or national government—such as serving on a jury. Furthermore, as Kolb points out, these offices and responsibilities, these *Amt/Ämter*, are assigned to each person by God. This again highlights the givenness of vocations just as *Stände* implies the givenness of the three estates themselves. Thus, Robert Benne uses the term "places of responsibility"[28] in discussing vocation in a contemporary, English-language context. Places of responsibility encapsulates the dynamic meanings of *Amt/Ämter*

and *Beruf/Berufen*, reminding each individual that he or she is placed in different positions, each with its own set of responsibilities.

The Three Estates—the *Ecclesia*, the *Oeconomia*, and the *Politia*—are the three institutions, or places, in which the human being performs his or her given roles in service within and to the community. These given roles—*Beruf/Berufen* or *Amt/Ämter*—are each person's vocations, the various responsibilities everyone fulfills within these estates. It is important to note that one's vocation, which is made up of given roles, is plural. A person does not have just one vocation, but many. Within the *Ecclesia*, there are clergy and lay, and within each of those roles, there may be numerous other responsibilities that one fills. In the *Oeconomia*, each person will have many vocations, such as husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister, worker or employer, among others. In the *Politia*, a person may be citizen or ruler, and in either role, there are also many responsibilities. Additionally, there is often overlap between these various vocations. For example, the vocation of a police officer is a vocation within the *Politia*, serving through the estate of the government, and is a vocation within the *Oeconomia*, as a worker supporting his or her family.

In considering work in this context, one point may be noted: in this extended conversation on vocation, relatively little attention has been given to work, or, more precisely, work for pay.[29] This omission reflects the fact that Luther's construct of the Three Estates places what would now be understood as work for pay squarely within the estate of the *Oeconomia*, or household. This estate has been referred to above as family, but household is perhaps a better understanding. Within the responsibilities of the family is providing for its material well-being, such as food, clothing, and shelter. Within those responsibilities, economic activity takes place. Reflecting the realities of the modern economy, thinkers, such as Robert Benne,[30] separate work for pay from marriage and family life. This separation is understandable given that in a post-industrial economy, work has largely left the home. When work is discussed today, the reference is often to direct employment. Direct employment is a far more common form of economic activity today than the family farms and trades that would have been common in Luther's day. As a result, work is easily understood as a distinct sphere of responsibility in relation to family life, church, and the state.

Although separating work from family in a discussion of vocation is understandable, such a separation may be mistaken and may risk contributing to vocational imbalance. When work is treated as separate from the activities of the household, additional opportunities for imbalance are introduced. Work may be construed as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end—namely, supporting the household and the community. This dynamic is often evident when work is prioritized over family, thereby contributing to vocational imbalance.

Vocational imbalance occurs when activities fail to align with God-given responsibilities within the estates of family, the church, and the state. Individualism

clearly contributes to such an imbalance by reorienting the focus of all activity inward toward the self. Individualism belies the very nature of vocation: vocation orients a person outward toward the community, whereas individualism orients a person inward and away from the community. In this way, the "cup" of individualism becomes stagnant, providing no avenue for meaningfully pouring out in service to others. By contrast, vocation entails the pouring out of the cup in service to others. When activities are aligned with vocation, the image is one in which, as the cup is poured out, others are also pouring into it, in a constant ebb and flow of receiving and giving. This dynamic illustrates vocational balance. Such a balance may be understood as a definition of human flourishing: life lived in service to others, according to the purposes for which human beings have been made by their creator. The questions of how vocational balance is achieved, and what it looks like, therefore require further attention.

The Givenness of Vocation

Individualism presents a vision of human flourishing in which a person can either be or do anything desired. Utilitarian individualism claims that a person can *do* anything desired. Expressive individualism claims that a person can *be* whatever they desire. But utilitarian and expressive individualism are fallacies. Individualism belies both the givenness of one's being, and the giftedness of one's being. Vocational balance, as a model for human flourishing, requires recognition of both the givenness and the giftedness of being. Without recognition of the truth of one's being, flourishing is forestalled and stagnation results. If the "cup" is to be poured out through vocations, what is being poured into the cup must first be recognized. In other words, the givenness and giftedness of identity, nature, and the unique places of responsibility that have been given must be acknowledged, along with the gifts given for those responsibilities.

Both ontological and theological arguments can be made for the givenness of vocation. Ontologically, the nature of one's being is that it is given. Humans are not self-created beings. Theologically, what is given—one's being—is given by the Creator, God; this is the giftedness of each person's being. This giftedness, or givenness, limits and directs life's activities, or vocations. This discussion begins by exploring an ontological argument, broadly based on Martin Heidegger's *in-der-Welt-sein* (*being-in-the-world*) in his magnum opus, *Being and Time*.[31] Humans are beings in context; that is, each human being is inherently limited by the context in which he or she exists, or more precisely, is limited by the givenness of circumstances. The ontological argument for the givenness of every person's being is based on four premises.

First, neither the time nor the location of birth can be controlled; the circumstances under which a person's being comes into existence are given. This immediately places limitations on a person's being. One cannot choose to have been born in a different era and thereby make it so. If a person is born in the early twentieth century, late twentieth century, or twenty-first century, that person's being and vocations are inherently narrowed by the time in which the person exists. Likewise, the birth location cannot be controlled. If someone was born in the United States, that person can no more choose to be someone born in Africa than he or she could choose to be someone born in a different time. Even when someone relocates, the givenness of the original context remains part of their history and formation.

Second, the culture into which a person is born cannot be controlled; a person's cultural conditioning is given. This further narrows one's being and vocations. Cultural context inevitably conditions a worldview. For example, if a person is born into late-twentieth-century American culture, the cultural influences that shape thinking and the opportunities available within that culture are not self-selected. A person may move across the world, be exposed to different cultures, and explore diverse philosophies; nevertheless, a person remains a product of the culture into which that person's being came into existence. In addition, cultural participation is limited to what is available in one's own time: one may study and immerse oneself in the culture of eighteenth-century Vienna, but one will never be part of the Habsburg culture.

Third, neither the particular family into which a person is born nor the specific parents to whom a person is born can be controlled. Although some aspects of family life may be chosen—such as a spouse and, indirectly, an extended family through marriage—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, and, of course, cousins cannot be chosen. Nor can the culture of one's family be controlled: whether family members are loving or cruel, active or sedentary, or ambitious or relaxed, for example. Finally, the socioeconomic condition of one's family is not self-determined at birth—whether the family is rich or poor, high- or lower-class, or influential or unknown. A person may influence some of these factors over time—by leaving a family of origin, establishing a new family, accumulating wealth, or relinquishing it—but the family of origin and its circumstances remain given.

Fourth, biology cannot be controlled: innate talents and abilities are given. Talents can be developed over time, and abilities can be cultivated and stewarded, sometimes yielding achievements beyond what others anticipate. Nevertheless, the substance from which a person is made (one's biology) and the limitations and advantages it confers are given rather than chosen.

This final premise may be among the most controversial and difficult to accept, but it remains pertinent. Despite the best efforts of researchers and physicians, the ability to modify human biology remains limited. Although appearance and per-

formance can be altered to some degree through training, discipline, and various technologies, the scope of such alteration is constrained. People born with white skin can make their bodies look darker, but they will never have black skin. People born skinny and short can work as hard as they want, spend as much time in the gym as they want, and even become great athletes, but they will never dunk a basketball like LeBron James. While certain medical technologies now manipulate genetic material to fight disease and may even introduce changes to babies in utero, these developments do not amount to a radical capacity to redesign human physiology at will.

Taken together, these ontological truths unmask the fallacies of individualism. Individualism claims that what a person is does not constrain what that person can become, and that who a person is does not constrain who that person can become. However, such claims do not withstand scrutiny. Human beings are gifted with many skills and abilities, and with many options for employing them, yet human existence is inherently limited; there is a givenness to the status of a person's being that cannot be changed at will. When persons fixate on trying to be who and what they are not, they risk missing out on being what and who they are. This observation leads to the theological argument: the givenness of one's being is given by a Creator, God, and is a gift of God.

Each individual is a unique creation of God. Each individual is created with certain gifts – biological traits as well as innate abilities—that are gifted by God. This theme runs throughout Scripture, but it is presented with particular force in Psalm 139: "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb" (v.13). Now, anyone who is a knitter or who is around a knitter can tell you just how singular each knitted garment is and how painstakingly crafted. The image of God knitting each person individually is the image of each person as "fearfully and wonderfully made."

Christians confess the givenness of their being when they confess the First Article of the Creed. As Martin Luther writes in his Large Catechism:

> What is meant by these words, "I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker," etc.? Answer: I hold and believe that *I am a creature of God*; that is, that *he has given* and constantly sustains *my body, soul, and life, my members great and small, all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding*, and so forth… Thus we learn from this article that none of us has his life of himself, or anything else that has been mentioned here or can be mentioned, nor can he by himself preserve any of them, however small and unimportant.[32]

Three key features may be highlighted in Luther's explanation of the First Article. First, the Creed confesses that "I am a creature of God," thereby confessing the givenness of each person's being: Humans are not self-created, but created by an-

other, by God, and shaped according to God's will. Second, the Christian confesses here, to paraphrase Luther, "God has given my body and all my members." This affirms the givenness of the substance of the Christian's being. As in the fourth premise of the ontological argument above, biology is given rather than chosen. God forms each person into what they are from the substance he created. Third, the confession, again paraphrasing Luther, "God has given all the faculties of my mind, my reason and understanding," affirms that God has created me with all my innate abilities and talents. Body and faculties are gifts given to a created being and are to be employed in the service of his creation through a person's various vocations. These gifts of body and faculties are uniquely suited for some vocations—those to which each individual is called—and not for others, so there is therefore a givenness to each individual's vocations.

This givenness of vocation is also evident in the creation account, the same source from which we receive the Doctrine of the Three Estates. Genesis 2:15 states: "And so the Lord God took man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it." In lectures on this section of Genesis, Martin Luther notes the following:

> After God had equipped the entire world in various ways, He also made ready the Garden of Eden, which He intended to be the dwelling place and royal headquarters of man, to whom He had *assigned* the rule over all the beasts. Now He *places* man into that garden as into a castle and temple…. Moreover, God *assigns* to Adam a twofold duty, namely, to work or cultivate this garden and, furthermore, to watch and guard it. Some traces of this assignment remain in the wretched remnants we possess. Today, too, these two things must be done together; that is, the land is not only tilled, but what has been tilled is also guarded.[33]

Two important verbs occur here that Luther revisits multiple times throughout this commentary, referencing the passage in Genesis: *assigns* and *places*. The Genesis text indicates that God both places Adam into a specific place of responsibility and then assigns specific responsibilities—to tend and to guard. This forms part of the created order: humans are given places of responsibility, as Adam was. Furthermore, Luther notes that human beings continue to be called by God to tend and guard his creation, and each is individually equipped by God for this purpose. God gave Adam his life, body, and faculties to be employed in tending and guarding creation; likewise, God gives each of his creatures life, body, and faculties to be employed in tending and guarding creation in their own places of responsibility.

Just as Adam was tempted in the garden to be something other than he was created to be, human beings also face the temptation to be something—or someone—other than what they were made to be. When this occurs, responsibility is

abdicated and sin is committed against God and neighbor. In rejecting the givenness of one's callings, a person, like Adam, rejects the givenness of their own being. In doing so, like Adam, one commits sin against the First, Ninth, and Tenth Commandments (and potentially others). The First Commandment is violated by rejecting God as one's God and Creator. The Ninth and Tenth Commandments are violated by coveting what was not given. Human life can be dissipated in sin by striving to be something other than what one is created to be, thereby missing the giftedness of what one is created to be and called to do in the mundane places of everyday life—places in which life, body, and faculties have been given and gifted by God.

This is why the process of Christian discernment is so important, though not necessarily in the way it is sometimes construed. Discernment is not about identifying a single calling that must be fulfilled, on pain of life's failure: such a vision of discernment leads to vocational imbalance. Rather, the Christian is equipped with what Robert Benne, in his book *Ordinary Saints*, calls the "focus of faith," which enables vocations to be seen as the godly callings they are, even in the mundane places of life. Through the focus of faith, "The Spirit moves our faithfulness toward a heightened personal intentionality within the context of family, work, and public life…. We discern our earthly destinies. Put another way, we discern a call or a series of calls."[34] These callings—the Godly work given—occur within family, work, and public life. As with Adam, to whom responsibilities were given, human beings are given various vocations, fulfilled through the life, bodies, and faculties God has gifted. Through the Holy Spirit, discernment attends to these gifts and to the ways they may be employed in various vocations. This process of discernment, through the power of the Holy Spirit, aids Christians in seeking to be who and what they are created to be and in avoiding the temptation to be who and what they are not created to be.

This process of discernment is important. As Benne notes, "missing one's [calling] is a serious matter,"[35] yet Benne also emphasizes that one characteristic of places of responsibility is ambiguity.[36] In other words, specific callings and the manner in which they are fulfilled are not always clear. At times, callings may be obvious; at other times, opportunities may be missed, and God's use of human action may be difficult to perceive. Not everyone is given a prominent vocation—roles that are often treated as paradigmatic callings, such as being a Supreme Court Justice or an athletic superstar—yet each person is given to Godly work. Accordingly, Benne notes that the Christian also has "hope in the Sovereignty of God," meaning hope that a person's "actions can and will be used as the Lord sees fit."[37] In this sense of hope, one also recognizes that God is at work through human beings in their vocations. What may feel ambiguous or seem unimportant may nonetheless be used by God for his purposes according to his will.

Paul's description of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 provides a helpful analogy. Paul writes: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (v. 12). Later, Paul adds: "But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose" (v. 18). Parallels may be drawn to how God works in his creation through his creatures: He creates each person, gives purpose, and provides gifts to be employed in service to creation through vocations, even when that purpose is not fully seen, understood, or appreciated. As the body requires balance, with each part fulfilling its function, so each person's life and vocations require balance. As Paul writes, "For the body does not consist of one member but of many" (v. 14); likewise, each life does not consist of one vocation but of many. Because vocations are given and gifted to us by God, they require tending and guarding. Just as the body cannot reject one part, so each person should be on guard against rejecting *any* vocations gifted to them. Vocations require balance.

Vocational Balance

Within a theological account of human flourishing, the human is the given, and flourishing is the product of what is given. The fallacy of individualism is treating flourishing as the given rather than humanity. Individualism asks what it means to flourish and seeks to alter a vision of humanity to accommodate one's individual sense of flourishing. A theological account of human flourishing instead begins with an anthropological question: what does it mean to be human? Within the answer to that question—in the fullness of humanity—an account of flourishing comes into view.

This essay's discussion draws on Wolfhart Pannenberg's anthropology, particularly as developed in his *Jesus—God and Man*.[38] In this work, Pannenberg writes that "Openness to God is the real meaning of the fundamental structure of being human, which is designated as openness to the world in contemporary anthropology … man's question about his destiny expresses itself in this openness."[39] Later in the same work, he adds that "openness to God is the radical meaning of that human 'openness in relation to the world.'"[40] Two key characteristics in Pannenberg's anthropology for understanding what it means to be human are openness to God and openness to the world (creation). Pannenberg emphasizes that the ultimate example of human flourishing—the one man who fully realized the fullness of humanity—was Jesus of Nazareth, writing that "In his personal unity with God, Jesus is then the fulfillment of the human destiny, the true man."[41] This anthropological vision of human flourishing—openness to God and openness to the world—also appears in the creation account, upon which Martin Luther's Doctrine of the Three Estates is established.

In the primeval history of Genesis, Pannenberg's understanding of openness to God and openness to the world is evident. Consider the creation of the *Ecclesia*, the church, in Genesis 2:15-17:

> The Lord God *took* the man and *put* him in the garden of Eden *to work* it and *keep it*. And the Lord God commanded the man, *saying*, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."[42]

Luther cites this passage as the establishment of the *Ecclesia*, claiming that "Here the Lord is preaching to Adam and setting the Word before him."[43] This scene illustrates Pannenberg's first criterion for the fullness of humanity: openness to God. God speaks directly with Adam, indicating that human beings are created to live in relationship with God—open to God, interacting with and receiving God's good gifts. This episode occurs prior to the introduction of sin into the world, indicating that openness to God is integral to God's intended created order for humanity. Further, God not only speaks to Adam but also gifts Adam with responsibilities in the world. "The Lord God *took* the man and *put* him in the garden of Eden *to work* it and *keep it*" (Gen. 2:17, emphasis added). These were true callings—to work and keep the garden—given directly by God, and Adam was tasked accordingly, according to the gifts with which God had endowed him in his creatureliness.

Genesis 2:15-17 introduces the *Ecclesia* and offers a glimpse of the coming *Oeconomia*, within which Adam's vocations (callings) expand when God gifts Adam his bride in the creation of Eve. Genesis 2:18-24 presents what essentially amounts to the first wedding: Adam takes Eve as his wife and thereby receives a new vocation, that of husband. In this second chapter of Genesis—prior to man's fall into sin—humanity is portrayed in its fullness: to paraphrase Pannenberg, openness to God and openness to the world. This twofold nature of humanity is also expressed in Genesis 1, where God gives his creation mandate in verse 27: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Here again, man is open to God (God speaks to man) and open to the world (God assigns a set of responsibilities: to be fruitful, multiply, subdue, and have dominion—that is, to tend and guard creation). Genesis' creation account aligns closely with Pannenberg's anthropology: the nature of what it is to be human. Accordingly, human flourishing is found in creatures existing in openness to God and openness to the world.

The creation account in Genesis, read alongside Pannenberg's anthropology, presents a vision of human flourishing rooted in the created order: openness to God (the *Ecclesia*) and openness to the world (the *Oeconomia*). It also clarifies how vocations are formed within this created order. Adam is placed in the Garden, receives the word of God directly, is instructed to tend and guard the Garden, and is gifted his

wife. Two important lessons about vocation emerge from this narrative and inform the relationship between vocational balance and human flourishing. First, vocation is plural: persons bear numerous vocations, or callings, or places of responsibility, not merely one. Second, vocation is dynamic: vocations change over time, and both the vocations given and the manner of fulfilling them shift and change throughout the course of life. The following sections develop vocation as plural and vocation as dynamic in greater detail.

Vocation as Plural

ADAM PROVIDES A USEFUL EXAMPLE for understanding vocation as both plural and dynamic. In the creation narrative, Adam begins as a single man and is given a vocation in the *Ecclesia*: to assemble and receive God's word. He is also given vocations that belong to the *Oeconomia*: working and keeping the garden, or, as Luther says, working the garden and guarding it.[44] Although Scripture does not specify what Adam is to guard the garden against, Adam nevertheless receives two callings to two distinct stations in the garden. After the Fall, Adam no longer works the garden in Eden, yet he continues to have the vocation of tending the soil, now under the curse; labor becomes difficult, and the ground is uncooperative, but the vocation of tending creation remains. In Genesis 2, Adam is gifted the vocation of husband when God presents Eve as his bride. In Genesis 4, Cain and Abel(and eventually Seth) are born, and Adam is gifted the vocation of father. Genesis 5 indicates that Adam was gifted the vocation of grandfather and great-grandfather. In these familial roles, Adam, by implication, is also gifted the vocation of priest in the *Ecclesia*, tasked with bringing the word of God to his wife and children. Even within these early chapters of Genesis, Adam is entrusted with numerous vocations—no fewer than seven—and these are only those recorded in Scripture. (A similar analysis could be undertaken with Eve as well.) After Adam's death, but still within the primeval history, an additional layer of vocation emerges with the establishment of the *Politia* in Genesis 9:6 ("Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed"). At least two more vocations are thereby introduced: citizen and ruler, alongside other government functions that emerge over time.

The plurality of vocations evident even in the creation narrative—prior to the complexities of modern life are factored in—should dispel the fallacy that a single vocation constitutes an individual's unique destiny, achieved through one singular vocation (almost always professional) station. Rather, in God's created order, within the Three Estates, persons are gifted numerous vocations. This remains true today as it was in the time of Adam and of Martin Luther. The vocations gifted to Adam, and later to Noah after the flood (Genesis 9 and the establishment of the *Politia*), correspond to the vocations individuals are called to fill today. Not every person

occupies every vocation, and complex societies introduce many permutations, but the fundamental point remains: vocation is, and has always been, plural.

A contemporary illustration, similar to Adam's situation in the creation narrative, may clarify this plurality. Consider a young man today. He is born into a family and is gifted the vocation of son. Later, he may be gifted with the vocation of brother. As he gets older, he may wed and be gifted the vocation of husband, followed by the vocation of father. Along the way, he will fill other vocations, such as student and worker. He may later start a business and become an employer. He takes his family to church, where he is gifted the vocation of priest to his family, and he may also serve, for example, as a trustee on his church council. He votes regularly and serves on juries in accordance with his vocation of citizen, and he may be elected to serve on the Board of his public utility, fulfilling a vocational station as ruler—in a limited manner—within the *Politia*. Such an example parallels the plurality of vocations seen in Adam's life and illustrates the plurality of vocations in contemporary life.

Vocation as Dynamic

A CHALLENGE FACED IN CONTEMPORARY LIFE—unlike Adam's experience in the creation narrative—is that vocations are often marked by ambiguity. People must discern all their various callings and how to apply their unique gifts in fulfilling these vocations. That issue is addressed below; first, however, it is necessary to discuss the related issue of vocation as dynamic. As the foregoing illustration indicates, vocations change over time. Both the unique stations an individual is called to fill and the nature of these stations change over time. Both the stations a person occupies and the character of those stations shift across the life course. This dynamic is evident both in the contemporary illustration and in the example of Adam: as individuals age, the vocations they fill change (for example, a son becomes also a father) and the nature of those vocations changes (for example, the father of a young child becomes the father of a grown man).

The concept of vocation as dynamic is developed by Robert Benne in *Ordinary Saints*. Benne writes: "We are thus caught up in persisting change. This means a constant redefinition of our roles and our places of responsibility. Even when we resist change we redefine ourselves in relation to an environment that is changing."[45] Two points warrant emphasis. First, places of responsibility are inherently subject to "constant redefinition": vocations and how we fulfill them are not static but continually change. For example, Adam begins as a young, single man; upon being wed to Eve, he assumes the new vocation of husband, and his other vocations change as he reprioritizes his life to accommodate this new calling. When Adam and Eve become parents, the nature of their vocations as husband and wife—as any parent can attest—changes to adapt to their new vocations of father and mother.

After Abel's death and Cain's exile, the way they fulfill their vocations as husband and wife changes again; they now need to support each other in their grief. With the birth of Seth, the vocation of parenting a young child returns, though now as older adults with different abilities. This leads to the second point to be drawn from Benne's quote.

Second, although people may resist change, the environmental factors that affect vocations are not fully controllable. People cannot control the changes in their environment that impact their vocations. Returning to Adam and Eve, the environment in which they were to fulfill their vocations of husband and wife changed dramatically with the death Able and the exile of Cain. They could resist that change, but change would be inevitable. A modest contemporary example may clarify the point: over recent decades, many households have experienced rapid technological shifts—from limited or no home internet access to widespread broadband connectivity. Parents may choose how to respond to these developments, but they cannot prevent broader environmental changes that reshape the context of parenting. Likewise, as children mature, the vocation of parent remains, but its responsibilities change markedly; parenting an adolescent differs from parenting an adult child. Such developments illustrate that vocations persist amid dynamic change while continually being redefined in relation to changing contexts.

A further implication of vocation as dynamic is that, while people are gifted new vocations across their life course, responsibilities within their vocations can also be discharged. This is evident in the modern economy with respect to work for pay. When people are young, they must work to support themselves and their families as part of their responsibilities in and to the *Oeconomia*. At some point, however, work typically ceases—whether due to retirement, financial security, or physical limitation. When work for pay is discharged as a responsibility, the responsibility for financially supporting a family then falls on others according to their vocations. This could be due to one's children growing up and taking on employment to support themselves and their families, but it might also be due to those very children supporting their parents as their parents age and can no longer support themselves.

This point, regarding the loss and transition of vocations and responsibilities, returns attention to another aspect of Benne's account of vocation as dynamic. Benne writes in *Ordinary Saints*: "Being caught up in dynamic change also teaches us about our finitude. The large societal changes affect us in our places of responsibility."[46] This observation underscores the givenness and giftedness of vocations and human nature. Human beings have limited control over their gifts or the places where they will be called to employ those gifts. Even this finitude can be seen as a gift. All people are uniquely gifted in their own unique way to fulfill their unique vocation. Such giftedness also entails limitation, a finitude, regarding what and who one can be. This returns to the central concern of vocational balance, for it is precisely when

people reject this finitude that they experience vocational imbalance and move further from the fullness of humanity and human flourishing. This occurs when people are tempted to be what or who they have not been created to be.

The story of Adam in primeval history offers a further illustration. For a time, Adam lived in perfect vocational balance. In the garden, before the Fall, Adam experienced both the plurality and the dynamism of vocation. He fulfilled his vocations according to the gifts he had been given by his Creator. For a time, Adam experienced the true essence of human flourishing. But then Adam is tempted. He is tempted to be what and who he was not created to be, and he sins in two meaningful ways. First, in Genesis 3:5, the devil tempts Adam[47] with the claim, "you will be like God." Adam eats and thus falls prey to the temptation to be like God. He was, to reiterate, tempted to be what he was not created to be. He was created to be man, yet he rejected that gift and sought to redefine what it means to flourish at the expense of what it means to be human. Second, Adam abdicates responsibility in his vocation of husband. He is present with Eve as she is tempted, recognizes the danger of her actions—actions that would lead to her death—yet, as her husband, he does not intervene. He fails her as a husband. In that moment, it could be said that he is not a husband to her. As a result of these two sins, the perfect vocational balance that Adam experienced, the essence of human flourishing he enjoyed, is lost.

Like Adam, all human beings try to be who and what they are not, rejecting who and what they are created to be. People reject the gifts they have been given and covet the gifts they have not been given. Vocational imbalance is therefore a common feature of human life. It can occur when some callings are given more significance than they warrant at a certain stage of life, while other vocations are undervalued. This temptation is reinforced in cultural contexts that prioritize professional success and the acquisition of material wealth as paramount achievements, particularly for men. Illustrative examples appear in popular media depictions of mid-twentieth-century family life, where the father returns home from work to ignore his family, while the mother shoos the children away, telling them not to bother their father after he has spent all day working to put food on the table. In such a scenario, the father may partially fulfill the vocation of work for pay, yet that vocation does not excuse him from his other vocational responsibilities. At home, he is still called to be father to his children and husband to his wife.

Some of the most illustrative contemporary examples arise in pastoral ministry. Accounts from clergy—especially those later in their careers—often describe long hours devoted to congregational care and a commitment to attending church members' events, sometimes at the expense of attention to one's household. Although the vocation of Pastor is a unique calling, it should not be pursued at the expense of all other vocations, particularly the central vocations of the *Oeconomia*, namely, husband and father.

This returns attention to the topic of discernment. Vocational balance and human flourishing require discernment on at least three levels. First, the numerous vocations in which a person has been placed must be identified. Second, the unique skills and abilities God has gifted for fulfilling those numerous vocations must be recognized. Third, and often most challenging, discernment must attend to the balancing of these vocations—how vocations should be weighted according to their demands across different stages of life. For example, a man will need to devote more of his attention to being a father when his children are young than when they are grown. It would be inappropriate for the father to treat his adult children the same way he treated them as infants or adolescents. Vocational balance then shifts as one experiences the dynamism of one's vocations.

Vocation's dynamism is not the only feature that demands balance; vocations also entail levels of priority. In the two Orders of Creation in the Three Estates—the *Ecclesia* and the *Oeconomia*—God establishes a prioritization of relationships within creation. First, the primary relationship is between God and man. This is the fundamental relationship of humanity. But within creation, the primary relationship ordained by God is between husband and wife. It is from these two primary relationships that all of a person's vocations are formed. Any vocations—including work for pay or professional achievement—that supplant the priority of these two fundamental relationships inevitably lead to vocational imbalance.

When vocational balance is present, life is lived in a way that is congruent with what and who God created human beings to be. Such a balance will never be realized perfectly; nevertheless, with a theological understanding of vocation and vocational balance, a person comes closer to human flourishing. In living out vocations in accordance with how God calls everyone to live, an individual comes closer to fulfilling what it is to be human. He or she comes closer to experiencing the openness to God and to the world, which was the criterion for Pannenberg's anthropology of what it means to be human. In Pannenberg's account, Jesus is the only true man, the only one who ever experienced a life of being fully open to God. Only by being made part of the body of Christ will anyone ever know the fullness of humanity as God intends it. At best, vocations will only ever be a secondary good. Yet Christians, like Adam, are still called by God to participate with God in tending and guarding creation. Human flourishing is pursued by being open to God and to the world. As this openness is lived out, human flourishing is experienced not in individualism but in vocational balance—being who and what one is created to be in service to the given community.

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Notes

1. Robert Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press).
2. As described in Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).
3. Kelly Besecke, "Not Just Individualism: Studying American Culture and Religion after *Habits of the Heart*," *Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 2 (2007): 195–200. https://doi-org.ilt.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/socrel/68.2.195.
4. https://www.thecommongoodus.org/americas-report-card-happiness#:~:text=Key%20findings%20include:,%2C%20purpose%2C%20and%20social%20support.
5. https://files.worldhappiness.report/WHR25.pdf
6. https://home.dartmouth.edu/news/2025/01/expert-happiness-uncovers-worrying-trend
7. And should anyone think this is just a result of the first year of the second Trump administration, these reports are following data and trends that largely predate his inauguration in 2025.
8. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 47.
9. Robert Kolb, "God Calling, 'Take Care of My People': Luther's Concept of Vocation in the Augsburg Confession and Its Apology," *Concordia Journal* 8, no. 1 (1982): 6.
10. Ibid.
11. This is an intentional mixing of the terms "orders of creation" and "orders of preservation." I am using the term "orders of creation" to refer to the two prelapsarian orders—the church and the family—through which God does his ongoing work of creation, and the term "order of preservation" to refer to the postlapsarian order—the government—through which God preserves and governs his creation.
12. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1-5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 1, 105, in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia, PA/Minneapolis, MN: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–). Hereafter, LW.
13. LW 1, 103–104.
14. LW 2, 140.
15. Kolb, "God Calling," 5-6.
16. Kolb, "God Calling," 5-6.

17. Oswald Bayer, "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders," *Lutheran Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1998): 125-126.
18. Bayer, "Nature and Institution," 125.
19. David W. Loy, "Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance," *Lutheran Quarterly* 35 (2021): 51.
20. Bayer, "Nature and Institution," 137, 155ff., 71.
21. Kolb, "God Calling," 6.
22. Karlfried Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1999):196.
23. I am using the word *profane* here in the theological sense, to mean secular, or that which is not sacred, not as it would be understood in common usage to mean vulgar or disrespectful.
24. Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," 200.
25. Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," 200.
26. Froehlich, "Luther on Vocation," 203.
27. Kolb, "God Calling," 6.
28. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 63.
29. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 163.
30. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 129
31. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford/New York: Blackwell/Harper & Row, 1962), 99-119.
32. Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press, 1959), 412 [emphasis added].
33. LW 1, 101-102 [emphasis added].
34. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 103.
35. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 104.
36. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 74-78.
37. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 121-122.
38. For a comprehensive investigation of Pannenberg's anthropology, see his *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*.
39. Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Jesus–God and Man*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 193.
40. Pannenberg, *Jesus–God and Man*, 344.
41. Pannenberg, *Jesus–God and Man*, 344.
42. Emphasis added.
43. LW 1, 105.
44. LW 1, 101-102.
45. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 72.
46. Benne, *Ordinary Saints*, 73.
47. In the Scripture narrative it says that the serpent spoke to Eve, but the text also clearly shows that Adam was there as well, so we can safely assume that Adam was equally tempted by the serpent as was Eve.

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