



**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 Lioy'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, Lioy 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*

Redemption, not Revolution

Human Flourishing through Cross-Shaped Love

Dan Lioy

Key Words

Radical contemporary critical theory (RCCT); politicized anthropological materialism; Lutheran confessional theology; doctrine of the Two Kingdoms; vocation; justification by faith alone; human identity and dignity; power and authority; Law and Gospel dialectic; social structures; proximate justice; eschatological reserve; Romans 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 7:17-24; Matthew 22:15-22; vocational faithfulness; church and culture

Standard Abbreviations for Lutheran Sources used in Essay

AC: Augsburg Confession

AP: Apology of the Augsburg Confession

FC EP: Formula of Concord, Epitome

FC SD: Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration

LC: Large Catechism

LW: Luther's Works

SA: Smalcald Articles

SC: Small Catechism

1.0 Introduction:

Cultural Fragmentation and the Lutheran Theological Vision

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CULTURE IN THE Global North is profoundly fragmented in terms of identity, truth, and shared meaning. Within this fractured landscape, the Church is called not merely to proclaim Christ, but also to discern and resist alternative accounts of reality that attempt to rewrite the history of humanity apart from God. Among these competing narratives, radical contemporary critical theory (RCCT) stands out as particularly influential. More than an analytical

tool, RCCT functions as a comprehensive worldview—a rival gospel—complete with its own understanding of human nature, salvation, and ultimate destiny. The Church’s response, therefore, must be both intellectual and confessional: confronting RCCT’s claims with Scripture’s witness as faithfully preserved in the Lutheran Confessions, which ground Christian teaching in God’s Word rather than shifting human philosophies.¹

1.1 Understanding RCCT and Its Cultural Influence

Radical Contemporary Critical Theory (RCCT) designates a constellation of ideological frameworks that interpret human existence primarily through the dynamics of power. These frameworks frequently reject claims to universal or transcendent truth, privileging instead narratives constructed around group identities and systemic oppression. In this view, social and political liberation becomes the ultimate goal, and reality is framed as a perpetual contest between oppressor and oppressed.

Although RCCT resists precise definition, its most far-reaching and extreme expressions disclose a coherent conceptual orientation. Rather than functioning merely as a limited social critique, RCCT advances an alternative ontology, one that construes human existence chiefly through the prism of power relations. This reorientation has far-reaching consequences. Its soteriological aspect functions as a new law that divides and condemns, sharply contrasting with the Gospel, which presents God’s gift of restoring identity and dignity through justification by faith in Christ alone. In effect, RCCT substitutes divine revelation with human speculation, grounding its anthropology in skepticism toward transcendent truth and reducing epistemology to an expression of power.

This contrast incentivizes the warning articulated in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, which distinguishes between the “righteousness of reason” (human philosophical constructs; AP IV.9) and the “righteousness of faith” (bestowed through God’s Word; AP IV.18). The *Apology* cautions that those who rely on human wisdom in place of divine revelation “obscure the glory and benefits of Christ” (AP IV.3). For this reason, the Church must recognize RCCT as more than a fleeting cultural trend. It functions as a competing belief system and an alternative soteriology, one that promises liberation through political action rather than through the redemptive work of Christ. An adequate theological response, therefore, begins by distinguishing RCCT from related movements and attending carefully to its internal complexity.

1.2 Distinguishing RCCT from Related Movements

RCCT differs significantly from classical critical theory. The Frankfurt School’s early-twentieth-century critical theorists sought to expose social and economic structures perpetuating oppression, aiming for human flourishing through rational

discourse. Despite critiquing modernity's failures, they maintained a belief in reason's capacity to discern universal norms. RCCT, however, typically rejects such universals altogether, viewing truth claims themselves as masks for power. Where classical theorists promoted reasoned dialogue, RCCT employs systematic suspicion, interpreting all social relationships as manifestations of oppression.

This shift in perspective becomes especially evident in RCCT's appropriation of intersectionality. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw originally developed intersectionality to describe how multiple social identities, such as race, gender, and class, can create compounded experiences of discrimination.² Initially a descriptive tool for understanding social complexity, moderate applications of intersectionality remain analytically insightful. Yet RCCT often radicalizes this concept, transforming it into a totalizing worldview where identity categories determine moral authority and political legitimacy. In this revolutionary turn, intersectionality moves from description to prescription, elevating group identity above our common humanity created in God's image.

1.3 Recognizing RCCT's Internal Diversity

RCCT encompasses diverse streams—feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race theories among others—each highlighting different dimensions of power and oppression. Some iterations function chiefly as analytical lenses, while others press toward sweeping ontological and soteriological claims. For this reason, a Lutheran response requires careful, discriminating engagement rather than blanket dismissal. This essay critiques those radical, totalizing forms that reduce truth, identity, and morality to power dynamics, even as it acknowledges genuine insights about injustice that resonate with biblical concern for the vulnerable and oppressed (Isa 1:17; Jer 22:3; Mic 6:8).

Building on this recognition, Lutheran theology affirms that original sin distorts both persons and the structures they inhabit, making institutional injustice a real and persistent problem. The Law's "mirror" exposes not only personal guilt but also social patterns of partiality and harm, while the Gospel alone provides the remedy of forgiveness and new life.³ However, when critical theories claim exclusive interpretive authority, displace God's Word, or cast political liberation as salvation, they cease to be tools and become rival theologies demanding confessional response. Thus, Christians may employ descriptive critiques to identify real wrongs while rejecting RCCT's reductionist anthropology, epistemology, and soteriology.

Accordingly, Lutheran theology can affirm legitimate concerns about injustice without conceding to RCCT's framework by grounding analysis in the Decalogue and the *imago Dei*, which confer inviolable dignity and summon advocacy for the vulnerable (Gen 1:26–27; Prov 31:8–9). Within the left-hand kingdom, Christians pursue proximate justice through ordered means (public reason, due process, and

vocational reform), while safeguarding the Church's spiritual mandate and the freedom of the Gospel (AC XVI.1–2). Repentance, restitution, and diaconal mercy accompany this witness as neighbors are served concretely in family, economy, and state (Matt 5:23–24; Acts 6:1–7). Descriptive analytical tools may be used prudently, but any ideology that reduces truth to power, collapses salvation into politics, or absolutizes identity is rejected (FC SD V.1, 27). In all cases, diagnosis and remedy remain governed by the distinctions of Law and Gospel, the Two Kingdoms, vocation (*vocatio*), and eschatological reserve.

1.4 Core Tenets:

Power, Binaries, and Deconstruction

RCCT operates as a form of politicized anthropological materialism. It reduces social structures—law, family, religion, economy, and language—to instruments of power, creating a pervasive oppressor-oppressed binary that measures personhood by one's position within hierarchies of privilege and marginalization. In contrast, the *Augsburg Confession* presents a different anthropology: all alike are conceived and born in sin (AC II.1–2),⁴ and dignity rests not on social status but on God's creative gift and Christ's redemptive work, received by faith alone (Gen 1:26–27; AC IV.1–3). Thus, identity is bestowed, not constructed by struggle, and it endures even when earthly arrangements are fallen and in need of reform.

A second emphasis within RCCT is epistemic suspicion. Claims to universal or transcendent truth are frequently treated as masks for domination, and knowledge is reduced to the play of power. Lutheran theology answers by locating truth in the external Word and the promise of the Gospel. This is the power of God for salvation, not a perspective to be negotiated (Rom 1:16; AP IV.43). The Law and the Gospel are God's instruments, not human constructs: the Law exposes sin and the Gospel bestows forgiveness and new life (FC SD V.1–2). This anchoring of truth in divine speech preserves both humility before God and courage for neighbor-love.

A third motif is deconstruction. If institutions are presumed intrinsically oppressive, justice is pursued by dismantling them. The Confessions, however, affirm the abiding goodness and permanence of God's Law (FC EP VI.1, 4; FC SD VI.1, 4, 9), and affirm the divine structures of creation and preservation that serve to restrain sin and maintain temporal existence after the Fall (AC XVI.1–2). These orders are not sacralized; they are reformable through repentance, lawful process, and vocational fidelity, even as the Gospel remains distinct from political projects (AC XXVIII.10–13).⁵ The Two Kingdoms framework to be discussed clarifies this distinction, guarding against both quietism and ideological absolutism. Taken together, these RCCT emphases—power-reductionism, binary antagonism, and deconstruction—set the stage for the cultural consequences considered next: fragmentation of identity, breakdown of neighbor-love, and the erosion of truth.

1.5 Cultural Consequences:

Fragmentation, Antagonism, and the Erosion of Truth

When RCCT migrates from theory into culture, it produces predictable and far-reaching consequences. The first and most immediate effect is the fragmentation of identity. Human beings, created in God's image (Gen 1:26–27), are reduced to a collection of group markers, where vocation gives way to categories of victimhood or privilege. In contrast, the *Apology* grounds human dignity not in social status but in Christ's redeeming work: "People receive the forgiveness of sins not on account of their own merits but freely on account of Christ, by faith in Him" (AP IV.1). Thus, identity is restored not through social positioning but through divine grace.

On the basis of RCCT's distorted view of identity, a second consequence emerges: antagonism. When every relationship is framed as a struggle for dominance, dialogue collapses into denunciation, and neighbor-love becomes impossible. Yet, Christ commands us to love our neighbor (Matt 22:39). Similarly, the *Large Catechism* teaches that we honor authorities—and by extension, our neighbors—because they are placed in their station by God, acting in his stead (LC I.141–142). This honor flows from the dignity God bestows upon humanity. RCCT, however, reimagines the neighbor as either an oppressor to resist or an ally to recruit, thereby dismantling the theological foundation for community.⁶

Ultimately, RCCT's antagonistic posture culminates in a deeper crisis: the erosion of truth itself. By portraying claims to objectivity as instruments of domination, RCCT reduces truth to a tool of narrative utility. Yet the *Apology* insists that the Gospel is no mere perspective but God's objective "promise of forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ" (AP IV.43), as affirmed in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." Against relativism, the Confessions anchor truth in the incarnate Word, whose reality is not contingent but transcendent and eternal (John 1:1, 14, 18; 14:6; 1 Cor 1:30).

1.6 Spiritual Implications:

The Loss of Transcendence, Hope, and Dignity

At its deepest level, RCCT effects not simply cultural disruption but spiritual desolation. By collapsing human existence into immanent struggles of power, RCCT forecloses transcendence. Eternal questions about grace, salvation, and the kingdom of God are eclipsed (Eph 3:11; Col 1:13–14; 3:2). The result is a flattened anthropology: humanity as an insatiable will-to-power, devoid of God and devoid of eternity. Against this reduction, in his *Lectures on Galatians* (LW 26:126–27), Luther emphasizes that salvation is not something humans accomplish on their own but a gracious gift from God, whereby those who are lost are justified solely for Christ's sake and received through faith.

RCCT's denial of transcendence does not remain theoretical. It generates existential despair. When the eschatological promise of a new creation is stripped away (Isa 65:17; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15; 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1–5), history shrinks into an arena of endless conflict. In sharp contrast, the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* affirms that Christ's obedience and sacrifice are complete and imputed to believers (FC SD III.4). This aligns with Hebrews 10:14, "By only one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being sanctified." Here the cycle of incessant strife is broken, replaced by the peace found in union with Christ (Isa 9:6–7; John 14:27; 16:33; Gal 5:22–23; Phil 4:6–7; Col 3:15).

Yet the damage does not stop at despair; RCCT also corrodes human dignity. Worth ceases to be the inalienable gift of God and becomes a fragile status conferred by a pagan ideology. In *Career of the Reformer I* (LW 31:371), Luther counters this distortion by urging that we should not harm anyone but instead show unreserved kindness and love to our "neighbor." To substitute this enduring truth with conditional recognition is not merely a social misstep but a theological desecration, that is, a denial of the *imago Dei*.

For this reason, the Church's response cannot remain on the level of critique alone; it must be explicitly theological. Lutheran teaching, with its doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, resists ideological totalization by distinguishing God's preservative rule from his redemptive reign. Within this framework, vocation emerges as God's concrete means of bestowing meaning, restoring community, and sanctifying daily life. Where RCCT corrodes truth, hope, and dignity, the living Word restores them. It grounds human life not in perpetual struggle, but in Christ's finished work and God's abiding order.⁷

2.0 The Two Kingdoms: A Lutheran Framework for Engaging Temporal Reality

THE LUTHERAN DOCTRINE OF THE TWO KINGDOMS provides a profound theological framework for navigating a world fractured by ideologies such as RCCT. Whereas RCCT construes history as a single arena of power struggles requiring revolutionary deconstruction, Lutheran theology sets forth a biblical vision of God's twofold governance of creation. This doctrine affirms God's universal sovereignty while distinguishing his redemptive reign from his preservative governance. By doing so, it resists ideological totalization and sustains Christian hope amid cultural despair.

2.1 Biblical Foundation for Dual Governance

Scripture testifies to the one God who rules through two distinct, divinely instituted realms. First, the right-hand kingdom refers to God's reign of grace, in which he governs through his Word and Spirit by forgiving sins in the Church (AC XXVIII.5,

8–9). This is the kingdom of Christ, which is “not of this world” (John 18:36) and is entered by faith alone. Within this realm, believers serve as “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20), bearing the Gospel and administering the Sacraments that bring salvation.

In contrast, the left-hand kingdom encompasses God’s temporal governance, whereby he orders human life through the law, reason, and civil institutions. As the *Augsburg Confession* explains, God has instituted political authority and the structures of civil life for the sake of good order and the common good (AC XVI.1–2). Scripture affirms that rulers are established by God to bring judgment on those who practice evil and to commend those who practice good (Rom 13:1–4; 1 Pet 2:13–14).

Although distinct, these two realms are not opposed but complementary. They differ in their means (Gospel vs. Law) and ends (redemption vs. preservation), yet both serve God’s unified will. The right-hand kingdom bestows eternal salvation, while the left-hand kingdom preserves temporal welfare. Both must be honored in their distinction, lest the sacred be reduced to politics or the political be sacralized (AC XXVIII.10–13). Lutherans also distinguish the Church considered *qua* assembly around Word and Sacrament (*creatura verbi*) from the Church as a visible institution with property, bylaws, and so on. The former belongs to God’s saving reign; the latter, as a voluntary association in society, operates under civil law (left-hand kingdom), even as its mission remains governed only by the Word.⁸ Having established this biblical distinction of God’s twofold governance, we now turn to its practical outworking in daily life, namely, the doctrine of vocation, through which God sustains creation.

2.2 Vocation’s Role in Temporal Governance

The doctrine of vocation gives concrete form to God’s left-hand rule and directly challenges RCCT’s reduction of social structures to instruments of oppression. Lutheran theology understands vocations as *larvæ Dei*—“masks of God”—through which he works in hidden but real ways to sustain creation. As Luther teaches, “These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things” (*Selected Psalms III*, LW 14:114), working through parents, rulers, farmers, teachers, and all who serve in their stations. Using “orders of creation/preservation” in the Lutheran ethical sense—namely, creational structures upheld by God’s preserving will after the Fall, subject to critique and reform—avoids sacralizing fallen arrangements.⁹ Through such callings God provides justice, nourishment, education, and community. In this way, he curbs sin and upholds order amid a fallen world (AC XVI.1–2; FC SD VI.5).

In light of this, the doctrine of vocation clarifies that these everyday roles—whether a police officer preserving justice, a baker providing daily bread, or a janitor maintaining cleanliness—are instruments of God’s providential care. Yet, vocation

belongs wholly to God's preservative rule and contributes nothing to justification. Good works, though indispensable in serving others, do not secure God's unmerited favor, but unfold as the fruits of faith (AC VI.1–2; XX.27–29). By decoupling temporal duty from salvific merit, Lutheran theology liberates Christians to love their neighbors freely and joyfully, without illusions of worldly redemption. Thus, if vocation displays how God orders temporal life, the Two Kingdoms doctrine simultaneously guards against confusing such temporal service with eternal salvation. This is a safeguard especially crucial when confronting ideologies like RCCT, which collapse redemption into politics.

2.3 Theological Safeguards against Ideological Totalization

The Two Kingdoms framework resists RCCT's tendency to load politics with salvific weight by sharply distinguishing God's redemptive reign from his preservative governance. Justification is a divine gift, granted "out of grace for Christ's sake through faith" (AP IV.1), and cannot be secured by revolution, policy, or cultural programs. This distinction protects the Gospel from being collapsed into social activism and prevents society from being burdened with utopian demands. Yet it also clarifies the ways in which Luther taught Christians should labor for reform, not as would-be redeemers, but as forgiven sinners called to love their neighbors in God's left-hand kingdom (*Career of the Reformer I*, LW 31:367).

Crucial here is the third use of the Law. According to the *Formula of Concord* (FC SD VI.1–3), the Spirit employs God's Law to instruct the regenerate in what is good, especially by shaping their judgments, curbing self-deception, and directing works of love. This does not reintroduce the Law as a means of justification; rather, it supplies moral clarity for reform by unfolding God's will for life in family, economy, and state (Ps 1; Rom 12).¹⁰ In practice, this means Christians examine systems and habits by the light of the commandments, pursue remedies through lawful means (public reason, due process, and institutional responsibility), and carry out their callings as "masks of God" (Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, LW 14:114).

This framework also steers between quietism and iconoclasm. Because authority is divinely instituted for temporal good, Christians render due honor and service to rulers and offices even when they are flawed (Rom 13:1–4; AC XVI.1–2). Because all authority is limited under God, they also recognize moments when fidelity to Christ requires principled noncompliance—"we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)—and they seek reform by lawful, neighbor-serving means rather than by nihilistic dismantling (AC XVI.5–7; XXVIII.10–13). In short, the Gospel grants freedom, the third use of the Law grants guidance, and vocation grants a pathway. Together they equip Christians to resist ideological totalization while laboring for measured, hopeful reform that serves the common good without mistaking it for redemption.

3.0 Romans 12:1–8, Gospel Transformation and Embodied Service

HAVING ESTABLISHED THE LUTHERAN FRAMEWORK of the Two Kingdoms and vocation as God’s means of preservative governance, we now examine the apostolic exhortation that defines the Christian’s life of faith within this biblical framework. Romans 12:1–8 provides the essential bridge between the doctrinal mercies of the Gospel proclaimed in Romans 1–11 and their concrete embodiment in daily life. This passage presents a theologically robust alternative to RCCT, fundamentally reorienting human identity, community, and the exercise of power away from ideological struggle and toward worshipful service grounded in Christ’s atoning work.

3.1 Exegetical Foundation

Romans 12 marks a pivotal shift from *kerygma* (Gospel proclamation) to *paraenesis* (ethical exhortation), firmly anchored in the comprehensive “mercies of God” expounded throughout the preceding eleven chapters. Paul’s transitional “Therefore” (an inferential conjunction; v. 1) signals that the transformed life he describes is the only fitting response to the Gospel of justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law (Rom 3:21–28; Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:437). Importantly, this ethical imperative arises not from legal compulsion but from Gospel freedom, demonstrating that, as the *Augsburg Confession* teaches, believers perform “good works as God has commanded” for the benefit of their neighbors and never to “earn grace before God” (AC VI.1; see Gal 5:1, 6, 13–14).

On this basis, Paul summons believers to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—which is your appropriate worship” (v. 1).¹¹ This call directly challenges any notion of a purely spiritualized or world-denying piety. True spiritual service encompasses not merely cultic observance but the concrete, bodily dedication of one’s entire existence to God (AP XXIV.26). Lutheran theology teaches that every vocation is a sacred calling from God, and that all legitimate work is a holy service commanded by him (AC XX.2, 35). Thus, every station and labor may be regarded as service rendered to God, indeed, as taking on a kind of liturgical character.

Such sacrificial living, however, cannot coexist with conformity to the world’s patterns. Therefore, Paul exhorts believers: “Do not continue to conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2). This renewal, effected by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, empowers Christians to “test and approve what is the will of God—what is good, pleasing, and perfect.” Through this empowerment, they can discern God’s will within the concrete circumstances of their earthly callings (FC SD VI.22–23). In this way, transformation stands in sharp antithesis to any worldly ideological framework, including RCCT,

which subjects the Christian conscience to patterns of perpetual struggle and hermeneutical cynicism.

Flowing from this renewed mind is a posture of humility. Paul urges believers “not to think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think in a way that results in sound judgment, as God distributed a measure of faith to each of you” (Rom 12:3). Here, Christian identity rests not on subjective self-evaluation but on the alien righteousness (*iustitia aliena*) of Christ, imputed to the believer by grace through faith alone (*sola gratia, sola fide*), which is the only sure foundation on which the justified sinner (*simul justus et peccator*) stands before God.

From this foundation flows the distribution of “different gifts, according to the grace God has given us” (v. 6). These diverse abilities—including prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leadership, and showing mercy (vv. 6–8)—exist not for personal glory but for mutual edification within the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:7). This truth aligns with Lutheran teaching that the Holy Spirit works through Word and Sacraments to build up the Church for the benefit of all believers (AC V.1–2). Thus, these gifts foster organic unity within Christ’s body, where members belong to one another and exercise their various callings in complementary service to the whole (Rom 12:4–5).

3.2 Theological Implications for Addressing RCCT

Romans 12:1–8 provides a decisive theological resistance to RCCT’s foundational assumptions, offering a vision of human flourishing anchored in Gospel transformation rather than political revolution. Whereas RCCT fragments persons into competing group identities defined by power relations, Paul grounds the believer’s identity in something far more stable: the reality of being a justified sinner, declared righteous *coram Deo* (“in the presence of God” or “before the face of God”) through faith in Christ’s substitutionary atonement (Rom 3:21–26; 8:1; Luther, *Career of the Reformer IV*, LW 34:337).

Due to this truth, the forensic verdict pronounced *extra nos* (“outside of us”) by God establishes an unshakeable foundation immune to the shifting categories of oppression, privilege, or social positioning that dominate RCCT’s analytical framework. The *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* emphasizes this reality, teaching that our righteousness before God by faith comes solely from his mercy in treating Christ’s righteousness as our own (FC SD III.13–16). Consequently, the “renewal of your mind” (Rom 12:2) reorients self-perception away from the interpretive prism of suspicion and toward the lens of grace. This liberates individuals from both victimhood’s tyranny and guilt’s condemnation, freeing them for genuine love and service.

Based on this renewed identity, Paul offers an alternative vision for social engagement. Whereas RCCT prescribes systemic deconstruction as the pathway

to justice, Romans 12:1–8 charts a completely different course: faithful stewardship of divine gifts within the structures of everyday life. Social transformation, according to Paul, advances not through adversarial dismantling but through the “living sacrifice” (v. 1) of vocational service—parents nurturing children, citizens upholding just laws, workers providing quality goods and services, and all Christians employing their gifts in neighbor-love (Luther, *Career of the Reformer I*, LW 31:367). This approach affirms that God sustains and blesses the world through his created orders by working preservatively. Thus, the Christian’s unique contribution to human flourishing lies not in revolutionary overthrow but in faithfully inhabiting their communities and spheres of influence.

Finally, this vocational vision reframes the very concept of power. In contrast to RCCT, which views power as a finite resource to be seized through competition, Scripture teaches that both spiritual gifts and temporal authority are entrusted to us by God. These are not possessions for personal gain but vocations to be stewarded for the common good. Romans 12:6–8 exemplifies this by listing gifts such as prophecy, service, teaching, and leadership, not as instruments of dominance, but as means of ministry. Paul’s exhortations to give generously, lead diligently, and show mercy cheerfully (vv. 7–8) redefine power as sacrificial enablement for building up the body of Christ and serving our neighbor. Consequently, the Christian model of authority, grounded in the theology of the Cross, rejects two extremes: the oppressive consolidation of power and the revolutionary seizure of power advocated by RCCT. Instead, Scripture offers a third way: authority exercised in humble, cross-shaped love (Gal 5:13–14; Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, Chapters 5–6*, LW 27:49–50). This biblical alternative to the world’s patterns of domination and resistance emphasizes that true strength is perfected in weakness for the sake of others (2 Cor 12:9).

4.0 First Corinthians 7:17–24, Calling Within Created Stations

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS FREQUENTLY MISUNDERSTOOD as a radical flight from worldly entanglements. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, Paul provides a profound corrective: believers are called not to abandon their earthly circumstances but to embrace them as the divinely appointed arena for God’s grace (John 17:15). Far from endorsing a passive, grim resignation, 1 Corinthians 7:17–24 summons a vibrant, faith-driven engagement within one’s station, grounding the believer’s identity not in transient social or economic labels but in the liberating Gospel. This section exegetes the text to extract its foundational principles, then formulates a Lutheran theological response to RCCT frameworks, demonstrating how vocation is the confessional locus of holy living.

4.1 Exegetical Analysis

Paul's emphatic directive—"each person is to live in the situation the Lord assigned to him" (1 Cor. 7:17)—anchors his pericope. The Greek term rendered "situation" denotes one's concrete social and relational position, encompassing ethnic-religious identity (circumcised or uncircumcised; vv. 18–19), socioeconomic status (slave or free; vv. 20–23), and marital state (v. 24). Paul boldly declares that God sovereignly operates within these humanly defined spheres, transforming them from arbitrary constraints into divinely appointed fields for service to one's neighbor (Luther, *1 Corinthians 7*, *1 Corinthians 15*, *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, LW 28:39). This constitutes no license for perpetuating oppression but rather pastoral consolation: union with Christ transcends external circumstances, rendering every context a platform for Gospel witness and obedience (AC XVI.1–2).

With this in view, Paul teaches that the believer's core identity in Christ establishes liberating detachment from bondage to worldly hierarchies. The apostle affirms that the slave is the "Lord's freed person" (v. 22), while the free person becomes "Christ's slave," dismantling any correlation between outward rank and spiritual dignity. This Gospel freedom—forgiveness and reconciliation secured through Christ's atoning work—remains inviolable and impervious to earthly tyranny. Such freedom fosters contentment, empowering faithful service, not as salvific merit but as its grateful overflow. Faith itself constitutes true worship, liberating believers from bondage to human rites and hierarchies. Freed from the need to prove themselves through social status, Christians work faithfully for the Lord in every task, whether they hold authority or live under it (Luther, *Career of the Reformer I*, LW 31:344–345, 365, 371).

This trajectory culminates in Paul's practical charge: "Were you a slave when you were called? Do not let it bother you. But if you are able to become free, take advantage of it" (v. 21). Here, Christian liberty emerges not as passive endurance but as purposeful deployment for kingdom ends. Freedom in Christ liberates not from service but for it, redefining liberty as voluntary, sacrificial love rather than autonomous self-sovereignty. Luther's *Small Catechism* echoes this understanding in its exposition of the Creed: God's providential care obligates us to "thank, praise, serve, and obey him" (SC II.2). Those who are called and freed through faith in union with Christ channel their emancipation into self-giving love. They perceive every situation as a divine summons to be kind and compassionate toward their immediate neighbors with urgency and precision.

4.2 Theological Response to RCCT Frameworks

A Lutheran critique of RCCT begins by affirming the diversity of human stations as intrinsic to God's benevolent creation, not merely a postlapsarian corruption

(namely, the condition of humanity after the Fall into sin, as recounted in Gen 3). The body-of-Christ metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 demonstrates that varied functions, including gifts, roles, and authorities, foster communal flourishing and mission. Lutheran theology applies this principle to societal estates including church, household, and state, by recognizing them as divine institutions for sustaining creation and manifesting faith (Luther, *The Christian in Society I*, LW 44:129–130). RCCT’s wholesale indictment of hierarchies as inherently oppressive overlooks this creational intent: distinctions exist for interdependent service and the common good, not domination. While sin distorts God’s good gifts into self-serving ends, the Law’s abiding purpose is to guide the regenerate in God’s will for the good of the neighbor (Rom 13:8–10; FC SD VI.1, 9, 12).

Grounded in this fact, Lutheran theology insists that redemption does not abolish these structures but transforms them from within. The Gospel redeems creational orders through internal renewal rather than revolutionary dismantling. Paul neither incites slaves to revolt nor mandates masters’ immediate manumission. Instead, the apostle infuses existing relationships with grace: “And masters, do the same for your slaves. Do not threaten them, because you know that the one who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and with him there is no favoritism” (Eph 6:9; see also Col 4:1). The *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* frames this transformation as sanctification’s fruit: through Word and Sacrament, God purifies believers inwardly, enabling holy conduct within vocations (FC SD IV.7, 9). Christians thus inhabit their stations as agents of renewal, instilling justice, fidelity, and charity to reform structures organically, rather than abandoning or demolishing them in pursuit of utopian purity (AP XVI.1, 5, 13).

This vocational vision strikes at the heart of RCCT’s critique by addressing the deeper spiritual malady behind power struggles. At its theological core, Lutheran vocation doctrine counters RCCT by identifying humanity’s quest for dominance as a symptom of alienation from God. While RCCT rightly diagnoses the idolatrous pursuit of status for validation, the Gospel eradicates this impulse at its root through justification by faith alone, through grace alone, apart from works (Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:151–52). This fundamental framework liberates Jesus’ followers from leveraging positions for self-worth. They are freed to serve humbly in any estate by exercising power without abuse and enduring lowliness with equanimity. Identity anchored in Christ transforms labor into pure neighbor-love, rather than frantic self-assertion or compulsive virtue signaling (for example, through elitist symbols, rituals, and vocabulary). Herein lies authentic revolution: not structural upheaval but heart regeneration, yielding joyful obedience within earthly callings that bear eternal significance.

Consequently, Lutheran teaching offers a constructive alternative to both extremes of social engagement. The Lutheran understanding thus provides a third

way between RCCT's revolutionary agenda and complacent traditionalism. By recognizing both the goodness of created orders and their corruption through sin, while affirming the Gospel's power to renew hearts within existing structures, this approach furnishes a robust theological framework for faithful engagement with social realities. Christians are called neither to passively accept unjust systems nor to pursue their violent overthrow, but to faithful service within their vocations that gradually transforms society through the power of the Gospel and Christian love.

5.0 Matthew 22:15–22, Dual Allegiance and Proper Authority

THE PERICOPE CONCERNING THE ROMAN IMPERIAL tax (Matt 22:15–22) constitutes more than an instance of rhetorical escape; it discloses a normative paradigm for negotiating Christian existence within the *saeculum*.¹² Against the hermeneutics of RCCT, Jesus articulates a framework that is both theologically integrative and ethically directive. His response does not abolish power but reconfigures its meaning within the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, which distinguishes yet unites God's temporal and spiritual governance. Within this paradigm, believers inhabit a dual allegiance: they recognize and honor earthly authority as a divine ordinance, even while confessing that final and unconditioned obedience belongs to God alone (Luther, *The Christian in Society II*, 45:111-12). This dialectic not only resists ideological absolutization of power, but also grounds Christian witness amid cultural contestation.

5.1 Exegetical Framework

In Matthew 22:15–22, the Pharisees and Herodians construct their query to entrap Jesus within a lethal disjunction: affirmation of the poll tax would appear as complicity with Rome's occupation, while denial would invite accusations of sedition. This dilemma exemplifies coerced binary logic, a rhetorical trap designed to force the subject into mutually destructive options.

Jesus' response, however, subverts the trap rather than submitting to it. Displaying a denarius bearing Caesar's image, Jesus declares: "give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21). With this gesture, Jesus acknowledges that temporal authority possesses a legitimate, God-ordained sphere. Civil government, which is responsible for coinage, taxation, and order, functions as a divinely instituted mechanism of preservation (Rom 13:6-7; Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:471). To "give to Caesar" (Matt 22:21) is therefore not capitulation to tyranny but recognition that political authority, though penultimate, serves as a mask (*larva Dei*) through which God restrains sin and promotes civic peace, even when mediated through unbelievers (Luther, *Selected Psalms II*, LW 13:45-46).

Yet this concession does not grant Caesar unlimited dominion. By juxtaposing the emperor's image on the coin with the *imago Dei* borne by humanity (Gen 1:26-27),

Jesus relativizes Caesar's prerogatives and asserts that ultimate devotion—heart, soul, mind, and strength—belongs exclusively to the Creator (Deut 4:29; 6:5; 10:12; Josh 22:5; 1 Sam 12:24). Here the boundary of temporal power is sharply drawn: earthly rulers cannot invade the conscience, which is bound solely to God's Word (AC XVI. 6-7). Consequently, civic obedience, rightly ordered, becomes an act of worship when rendered in faith. The ethic that emerges is integrative: Christians embody fidelity to God precisely through faithful participation in the structures of temporal life.

5.2 Theological Implications for Power and Authority

Matthew 22:15–22 yields a distinctly Lutheran ethic of power that resists both RCCT's hermeneutic of suspicion and the perennial temptation toward political absolutism. Three implications are especially salient. First, civic rule is affirmed as divinely instituted. Government is described as "God's servant for your benefit" (Rom 13:4). Far from being reducible to coercion, human authority functions as a providential gift, curbing disorder and enabling human flourishing (Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:468–69). As noted earlier, within Luther's theological grammar, temporal magistrates exemplify what he elsewhere calls *larvæ Dei*, that is, masks under which God preserves creation. The appropriate Christian posture toward power, therefore, is not reflexive resistance but discerning gratitude, even as obedience remains bounded by God's Word.

Given this affirmation, the second implication concerns the limits of such authority. The jurisdiction of earthly power is theologically delimited. Jesus' command to "give to Caesar" (Matt 22:21) concerns external, secular matters, such as justice, taxation, and civic peace, but not the governance of conscience or the dispensation of salvation (FC SD VI.1–2; X.9–10 on *adiaphora*).¹³ This demarcation preserves the freedom of the Gospel, securing the Church's mission from political cooptation. At the same time, it warns against sacralizing the state, guarding the believer's ultimate allegiance for God alone. Accordingly, the Church's authority is spiritual (preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments), while the magistrate's authority is civil; neither may usurp the other (AC XXVIII.10–13).

Finally, this framework introduces a prophetic dimension to Christian obedience. The Two Kingdoms doctrine does not sanction blind submission; rather, it embeds the principle that when rulers transgress a divine mandate, resistance becomes necessary. The apostolic declaration, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29; see also Exod 1:17; Dan 3:16–18), articulates that civil disobedience is obligatory when compliance would entail either idolatry or iniquity. Such resistance, however, is not anarchic revolution but vocational fidelity, seeking the reform of temporal institutions in alignment with God's preserving purposes (AC XVI.5–7). Grounded in eschatological citizenship (Eph 2:19; Phil 3:20; Col 3:1–4), believers engage secular powers neither with utopian delusions nor with nihilistic despair, but with cruciform hope.

6.0 Integrated Lutheran Response to RCCT's Core Elements

ANY LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO RCCT MUST BEGIN with a methodological clarification. The aim is not a piecemeal negation of discrete claims but the articulation of a rival “social imaginary,” to borrow Charles Taylor’s terminology. This refers to a comprehensive vision of how human beings exist before God, in community, and within creation.¹⁴ RCCT functions as a totalizing worldview, offering a politicized anthropology, a theory of power, and even a quasi-soteriology. Lutheran theology does not merely rebut these claims at the level of content; it displaces them at the level of framework by setting forth an alternative grammar of reality. This grammar is ordered around justification, vocation, and the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. Together these emphases form an integrated vision that reframes identity, power, justice, and hope in terms of God’s creative and redemptive action, thereby resisting the totalizing pressures of ideological struggle.

6.1 Human Identity and Dignity

As noted earlier, RCCT constructs identity as a contingent social artifact, reducible to group positionality within structures of oppression. This politicized anthropology fragments the self, leaving dignity hostage to shifting categories of victimhood or privilege. In contrast to this instability, Lutheran theology offers a more enduring ontology. Human identity is constituted not by mutable social scripts but by the forensic event of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), whereby the sinner is declared righteous *coram Deo* on account of Christ (FC SD III.4). This pronouncement yields the paradoxical identity of *simul iustus et peccator*—at once condemned under the Law and absolved by the Gospel yet secure in Christ’s alien righteousness imputed *extra nos* (Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, Chapters 1–4, LW 26:231-236).

Out of this theological foundation flows a distinct understanding of dignity. It is grounded in the *imago Dei* bestowed at creation (Gen 1:26–27), renewed in Christ through the Gospel (Col 3:10), and secured by God’s promise in justification and baptism, rather than by human recognition (Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:312). Consequently, the practical outworking of this identity is vocation, wherein believers serve neighbors not to achieve dignity but because it has already been given. Here, God works in hidden ways through ordinary human vocations to preserve and govern creation (Ps 147:13–14; Col 3:23–24).

6.2 Agency, Power, and Social Change

RCCT interprets agency through a revolutionary horizon, where authentic action means resisting or dismantling structures presumed to be irredeemably oppressive. Within this interpretive construct, power is conceived as inherently coercive and zero-sum, something to be either seized or subverted. In contrast, the Lutheran alternative offers a markedly different vision, grounding agency in the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

This framework distinguishes God's preservative governance from his redemptive reign, affirming that temporal institutions (such as family, state, and economy) are not inherently oppressive but divinely instituted for the ordering of creation and the restraint of sin (Rom 13:1–4; 1 Pet 2:13–14; Luther, *The Catholic Epistles*, 30:73–74).

From this perspective, power is not ontologically corrupt but vocationally oriented toward service. Christian agency, therefore, consists in the faithful exercise of office: rulers judging justly, parents nurturing children, and workers laboring honestly. Rather than revolutionary negation, structural reform emerges through vocational fidelity and evangelical love, which supply the resources for measured critique and constructive participation. The Confessions explicitly reject disorderly upheaval (AC XVI.5–7), while delimiting both ecclesial and civil authority (AC XXVIII.4, 10–13, 18) and safeguarding Christian freedom in *adiaphora* when conscience is threatened (FC SD X.8–9; Acts 5:29).

6.3 Justice and Love

For RCCT, justice is an abstract, systemic ideal achieved by redistributing resources and power, often through antagonistic struggle between groups. Love, if invoked at all, is subordinated to this revolutionary *telos* (namely, the overarching purpose of an insurrectionary movement), functioning primarily as solidarity within the cause.¹⁵ In contrast, Lutheran theology offers a fundamentally different vision, one that steadfastly refuses to separate justice from love or to abstract either from the tangible reality of a neighbor's existence. Christ summarizes the Law in the command to love one's neighbor (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39; Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14; 6:2), and the Confessions insist that faith is never idle but active in love through good works prepared by God (FC EP IV.6, 8; Eph 2:8–10; Jas 2:14–18; 1 John 3:18).

This inseparability of justice and love anchors their expression in ordinary life rather than utopian abstraction. Justice is therefore enacted in the daily fidelity of vocation by raising children, governing justly, working honestly, and caring for the weak. These works, though not meritorious before God (AC VI.1–2), are indispensable for the neighbor and constitute the primary site of divine justice in the temporal realm. Such a framework resists both quietist complacency and revolutionary absolutism, charting a distinct path. Christians labor for justice precisely by inhabiting their callings faithfully, while refusing to conflate temporal equity with eschatological salvation.

6.4 Hope and Eschatology

RCCT advances what may be described as an immanentized eschatology (that is, made worldly or earthly rather than transcendent). It is the belief that history itself, through perpetual critique and systemic transformation, can secure redemption. This vision loads temporal politics with salvific weight and defines opposition to the cause as resistance to history's *telos* (namely, the perceived inevitable or divinely

ordained direction of history). By contrast, Lutheran theology locates ultimate hope elsewhere. Eschatological fulfillment is not realized in historical progress but in the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead (Rom 8:18–25; 1 Cor 15; Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:362-64).

This future-oriented hope, affirmed in the confessions (FC SD I.46; II.87; VI.24; VIII.26), reorients the believer's posture toward the present. It liberates Christians from the idolatrous demand to build heaven on earth, freeing them for faithful yet imperfect service in the meantime. Christian labor for justice and mercy is therefore undertaken as provisional stewardship, dignified but not divinized. Temporal projects are relativized before the eschaton: necessary but penultimate, meaningful yet incomplete.¹⁶ In this way, Lutheran eschatology sustains both realism and hope, enabling vigorous engagement without utopian delusion in a fallen world awaiting its consummation in Christ.¹⁷

7.0 Addressing Legitimate Concerns and Historical Misuse

A LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO RCCT MUST MOVE beyond mere rebuttal to include self-examination under Scripture and the Confessions. Such examination acknowledges past complicities, names confessional safeguards, and locates Christian agency in vocation within God's twofold rule. Crucially, eschatological reserve is not passive acceptance of injustice. It rejects both the paralysis of quietism and the fever of utopianism. Because redemption is Christ's work alone (right-hand kingdom), believers neither divinize political projects nor despair of temporal goods. Because God preserves the world through law and civil office (left-hand kingdom), Christians are obligated to pursue proximate justice here and now.

Accordingly, eschatological reserve means realistic engagement without utopian expectations: seeking measured reform through one's callings; honoring legitimate authority while recognizing principled limits to obedience when it commands what God forbids or forbids what he commands; resisting evil with lawful, neighbor-serving means; and refusing to sacralize any order or to abolish order as such. It treats temporal achievements as penultimate yet meaningful (worthy of labor, sacrifice, and patient hope), while steadfastly refusing to collapse salvation into politics or to confuse political failure with the failure of the Gospel. Thus, Christians work for justice neither as would-be redeemers nor as resigned spectators, but as forgiven sinners set free to love their neighbors within the constraints of a fallen world, awaiting the consummation that only Christ will bring.

7.1 Acknowledging Historical Distortions

The Lutheran tradition itself recognizes that the orders of creation and preservation are not immune to distortion but stand under the ambivalence of sin. Consequently,

the Pauline command of civic obedience (Rom 13:1) has, at times, been pressed into service for tyrannical legitimation. The estates are meant to function as masks of God (*larvae Dei*) through which he sustains the world. However, this concept has been twisted to make oppression appear holy, whether to defend absolute power and slavery, or to turn the idea of vocation into a tool for hierarchical control.

Such distortions, however, do not represent the faithful unfolding of Lutheran theology but rather its betrayal. The Confessions explicitly anticipate this danger. The *Augsburg Confession* condemns the confusion of the Gospel with civil upheaval (AC XVI.4–7) and rebukes coercive spiritual claims that “ensnare consciences” (AC XXVIII.49). At the heart of this corrective lies a crucial doctrinal distinction: the divine institution of office (*Amt*) versus its sinful exercise (*usus*) by fallible humans. While the authority of any office exists for the neighbor’s welfare, the corruption of those who hold office demands prophetic correction. True vocation, therefore, cannot be reduced merely to the possession of authority; it is fundamentally an obligation to serve the neighbor in Christlike love (Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:475).

7.2 Lutheran Confessional Correctives

Three correctives emerge from the confessional tradition that safeguard vocation against distortion. The first corrective underscores that vocation excludes passive acquiescence. The Fourth Commandment binds authority to responsibility: parental, magisterial, and economic offices carry obligations toward nurture, justice, and equity (Luther, *Devotional Writings II*, LW 43:15–16; Jer 22:13; Rom 13:4; Eph 6:4). The neglect or inversion of these obligations is not merely an ethical lapse but a vocational nullification.

Based on this, the second corrective insists that vocation entails limits to obedience. Luther articulates a theology of resistance that is neither anarchic nor individualistic but derivative of the divine mandate (Luther, *The Christian in Society II*, LW 45:125–26). When authority commands *contra Deum*, believers must “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). This is not revolutionary voluntarism but vocational fidelity: the judge must render justice, the citizen must witness to truth, and the pastor must proclaim the Word, precisely in defiance of distorted authority.

Finally, the third corrective holds together stability and reform. Lutheran theology maintains the dialectic of order and renewal: the orders of creation/preservation provide stability for human community, while the Gospel supplies both freedom and obligation for their continual purification. Thus, the *Apology* upholds obedience to lawfully called magistrates (AP XVI.1–3), even as it liberates believers to reform institutions in service of neighbor-love (AP XVI.5–6). This dialectic is governed by eschatological reserve: temporal justice, though real and necessary, remains penultimate, while ultimate redemption is eschatological, secured by Christ alone (AP XVII.1).

7.3 Contemporary Application

This confessional grammar enables engagement with RCCT on both critical and constructive grounds. Lutheran theology concurs with RCCT's identification of entrenched structures of domination as manifestations of systemic sin. At the same time, Lutheran theology resists RCCT's totalizing suspicion of all structures as intrinsically oppressive. For Lutheranism, structures are ambivalent: divinely instituted, fallen in execution, and perpetually in need of reformation.

In light of this understanding, Lutheran theology locates the pursuit of justice within the framework of vocation. Christians engage the world not by abandoning structures but by reforming them from within. The magistrate legislates with equity, the business leader reforms exploitative practices, and the police officer upholds justice with proportionality. These are not concessions to secular realms but enactments of the admonition in Romans 12:1 to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God." In this way, ordinary offices become sacred spaces for divine service (Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:433).

Yet this vocational pursuit is tempered by the theology of eschatological reserve. Because sin persists, the hope of a perfected, utopian order is foreclosed, and the advent of God's eternal kingdom cannot be secured through human projects of self-fashioned immortality. This recognition guards against two extremes: the political absolutism latent in RCCT and the opposite danger of resignation and despair. Within this eschatological tension, vocation expresses a Lutheran theology of proximate justice: the pursuit of temporal goods under the sign of the Cross, animated by the Gospel and oriented toward the neighbor, yet without conflating such provisional efforts with the redemptive finality that belongs to God alone.

Consequently, the doctrine of vocation, refracted through a Lutheran confessional lens, offers a more theologically robust and pastorally realistic response to systemic injustice than either RCCT or its reactionary dismissals. The doctrine of vocation acknowledges structural sin without collapsing into cynicism, affirms institutional stability without sanctioning domination, and enacts reform without mistaking it for redemption. In this way, Lutheran teaching equips the Church for engagement with the world's brokenness through a theology that is at once realistic, critical, and hopeful. It is anchored in the dialectical tension of Law and Gospel and sustained by the eschatological horizon of Christ's everlasting reign.

8.0 Conclusion: Gospel Freedom for Faithful Engagement

THE CHURCH'S CONFRONTATION WITH RCCT is not an abstract academic dispute but a collision of rival eschatologies. RCCT does not merely supply analytic tools; it advances a comprehensive worldview with religious contours. It re-conceives human

identity primarily through categories of power, redefines moral evil as structural inequity, promises liberation through systemic deconstruction, and locates salvation within the unfolding of historical processes. Its politicized anthropology is reductionistic, its soteriology immanent, and its eschatology utopian. By contrast, Lutheran theology confesses a rival social imaginary grounded in the external Word and the concrete mercy of God in Christ. In the place of self-redemption through critique, it proclaims justification through faith alone. Also, in the place of perpetual revolution, Lutheran theology offers the freedom of vocation. Moreover, in the place of utopian expectation, it holds the sure hope of the resurrection.

8.1 Synthesis of the Lutheran Theological Framework

The Lutheran theological response to RCCT unfolds through three interlocking doctrinal premises that together expose RCCT's distortions while offering a constructive alternative.

8.1.1 THE TWO KINGDOMS DOCTRINE: RESISTING SOTERIOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

RCCT collapses eschatology into politics by demanding absolute commitment to projects of systemic liberation. The Lutheran doctrine of the Two Kingdoms dismantles this conflation. In the right-hand kingdom, God rules through his Word and Spirit, granting eternal salvation through Christ alone. In the left-hand kingdom, God rules through law, reason, and civil authority to preserve order in a fallen world. This distinction guards against two errors: it prevents the Gospel from being reduced to a political program, and it resists the idolatry of absolutizing temporal projects. Civil governance serves the temporal good of peace and justice, but true and enduring justification "by faith" (Rom 5:1) comes only through union with Christ. Accordingly, the Lutheran framework rejects RCCT's demand that redemption be achieved through revolutionary social transformation.

8.1.2 THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION: REFRAMING HUMAN IDENTITY AND AGENCY

While RCCT often reduces social structures to mechanisms of oppression, Lutheran theology views them as divinely instituted "masks" through which God sustains his creation. Scripture calls believers to offer their bodies as "living sacrifices" (Rom 12:1), to remain faithful in the vocations God has assigned (1 Cor 7:17–24), and to submit to legitimate authority (Matt 22:21). Through vocations such as parenting, governing, teaching, or laboring, God channels his gifts of justice, provision, and community. Vocation reframes human agency not as self-assertion in power struggles, but as self-giving service, animated by faith operating through love (Gal 5:6). Ordinary work, though humble in appearance, becomes God's chosen means to uphold the world. This perspective challenges RCCT's secular anthropology: human identity is not forged through conflict but received as a gift from God in Christ and lived out in callings marked by love.

8.1.3 CONFESSIONAL WISDOM: CONFRONTING SIN WITHOUT COLLAPSING INTO DESPAIR

RCCT correctly recognizes that oppression and the abuse of power are deeply woven into human history. Yet RCCT ultimately offers no path to genuine reconciliation, instead perpetuating a cycle of conflict and division. In contrast, Lutheran theology, being rooted in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, presents a more comprehensive framework. It acknowledges the reality of systemic sin, evident in the fallen structures of human society, while rejecting the utopian delusion that human effort alone can eradicate it. The Confessions affirm that temporal authorities, though ordained by God, are susceptible to corruption and misuse (Rom 13:1–4). At the same time, the Confessions insist that Christians, liberated by the Gospel, must obey God rather than human authorities when the latter contradict his Word (Acts 5:29).

This theological realism naturally shapes a cruciform posture. Christians recognize sin's persistent grip on the world without succumbing to despair, trusting instead in God's preserving and renewing grace. From this stance flows the pursuit of proximate justice (faithful yet imperfect efforts to reflect God's will in society), while avoiding the error of confusing such work with the ultimate redemption found only in Christ. Here lies a decisive contrast: whereas RCCT fosters an unending cycle of suspicion and cynicism, Lutheran theology proclaims reconciliation through Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, where the dividing wall of hostility is torn down (Eph 2:14). Anchored in this Gospel hope, Christians engage the world with confidence, offering forgiveness, renewal, and the promise of true unity in Christ.

8.2 A Vision for Faithful Christian Living

RCCT frames the Christian with a false binary: either one accepts unjust structures through quiet acquiescence, or one embraces revolutionary struggle as the only path to liberation. Both options rest on a misdiagnosis of the human problem. Lutheran theology cuts through this distortion with the Gospel. Sin is not merely embedded in systems but rooted in the human heart (Jer 17:9–10; Rom 3:23), and liberation is not won by human activism but received as God's gift in Christ (John 8:32; Gal 2:4; 5:1).

With this groundwork laid, Lutheran theology offers a radically different vision of Christian engagement. This doctrinal perspective frees believers from both naïve accommodation and utopian militancy. The justified Christian neither baptizes corrupt structures nor demands their eradication. Rather, faith works through love in the concrete callings God has assigned. In this way, Lutheran theology replaces RCCT's politics of cynicism with a vocation of trust. Christians are freed to serve within their stations, correcting what is unjust, preserving what is good, and bearing suffering when necessary for Christ's sake.

Such a perspective naturally reshapes how transformation is understood. Instead of lionizing dramatic revolutionary acts, as RCCT often does, Lutheran theology emphasizes what might be called the liturgy of daily life. The New Testament locates

true transformation in ordinary, faithful service. The renewal of the mind (Rom 12:2) enables believers to discern their God-given vocations—whether teaching children, governing justly, or crafting goods—as acts of living sacrifice (v. 1). Thus, all divinely ordained institutions and endeavors that align with God’s sovereign will are deemed pleasing in his sight. Culture, then, is not transformed through disruptive upheaval but rather through the quiet, steadfast influence of vocational faithfulness, serving as the “salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13).

Finally, this vocational vision is sustained by a hope that RCCT cannot offer. RCCT’s utopian dream collapses under its own weight, since no human immortality project can deliver the redemption it promises. Christian hope, by contrast, rests entirely on Christ’s finished work and his promised return. This eschatological orientation releases the Church from the impossible burden of constructing heaven on earth. Christians labor for justice, not because success is inevitable, but because the Messiah has already triumphed over Satan, sin, and death. Thus, Gospel hope grounds engagement in joy and perseverance, rather than in the despair that follows RCCT’s cycle of perpetual struggle.

8.3 A Call to Vocational Faithfulness

RCCT insists that identity is determined by intersectional categories and social positioning within power structures. Such a politicized anthropology condemns the self to instability, forever defined by shifting cultural narratives. In contrast, Lutheran theology unmasks this as a counterfeit gospel, offering a radically different foundation for identity. The Christian’s identity is secure *coram Deo*, tethered to the forensic righteousness of Christ received by faith alone. Because the baptized belong to Christ, they are liberated from the compulsion to validate themselves or to construct an identity through struggle. Gospel freedom enables Christians to serve their neighbors not for self-justification, but as a grateful response to mercy already received.

This difference in anthropology naturally leads to divergent visions of transformation. RCCT locates renewal in systemic overthrow, yet it produces only exhaustion and discord. Lutheran theology, by contrast, locates transformation in the faithful fulfillment of vocation. Culture flourishes when magistrates govern with equity, parents raise children in the “training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4), and citizens pursue the common good. The leaven of the Gospel works gradually within these structures, reforming from within rather than coercing from without. True renewal comes not through militant ideological conquest but through ordinary faithfulness, hidden under the scandal of the Cross.

Underlying these competing visions is a deeper disagreement about the nature of power. RCCT presents power as the only currency of human relations, rendering suspicious the permanent posture of society. The Lutheran witness counters with embodied love. The Church’s testimony is not only in proclamation but in the quality

of Christian life: sacrificial service, steadfast integrity, and fidelity to ordinary duties. Such lives disarm suspicion by manifesting the reality of a kingdom not built on domination but on unconditional, sacrificial service (Matt 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45).

Given these contrasts, the Church faces an inflection point. It must refuse two false temptations: ideological accommodation, which baptizes RCCT's categories in the name of relevance, and sectarian retreat, which abandons the world to its own devices. The alternative is cruciform engagement: believers embracing their callings with confidence, knowing that through such ordinary vocations, God continues his preserving and renewing work. In this way, Lutheran vocational theology not only resists RCCT but proclaims a truer vision of human flourishing, one grounded in grace, animated by love, and directed toward the hope of Christ's coming eternal kingdom.

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Notes

1. Here, Scripture is the sole, divinely inspired source of revelation and therefore the ultimate authority—the “norming norm”—by which all doctrine must be tested. The Lutheran Confessions, collected in the *Book of Concord*, do not add to Scripture but faithfully summarize its central teachings, above all the Gospel of justification by grace through faith. As the “normed norm,” they are a subordinate standard that derives its authority from Scripture and remains subject to it. In this role, the Confessions provide a trustworthy interpretive framework, guiding the Church in correctly understanding and applying God's Word while always remaining accountable to its supreme inspiration and authority.
2. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–167, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>, Accessed March 22, 2026.; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299, <https://blogs.law.columbia.edu/critique1313/files/2020/02/1229039.pdf>, Accessed March 22, 2026.; Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later,” *Columbia Law School*, June 8, 2017. <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later>, Accessed March 22, 2026.
3. In *Lectures on Romans*, LW 25:291, 336, Luther explains original sin as the radical corruption of all human powers. In turn, the Law reveals this corruption, driving the lost to Christ. Also, in *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1–4*, LW 26:126, Luther discusses the Law's accusatory function (*lex semper accusat*) of exposing sin and the Gospel as the only source of righteousness and life (Gal 2:16). All references and quotes from Luther are taken from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Min-

- neapolis: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1956-86); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–). Hereafter LW.
4. All quotes from the Lutheran Confessions are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
 5. Admittedly, these orders—good in origin yet now operating within the Fall—are subject to sin’s corruption. They are descriptive, not sacralizing; provisional, accountable to God’s Word, and open to critique, restraint, and reform in service to the neighbor; they never legitimate injustice nor collapse the Gospel into politics.
 6. This antagonistic framework is perhaps most visible in higher education. Here, discourse has shifted from reasoned debate to a moralized binary of oppressor versus oppressed, assigning collective guilt or innocence based on group identity. Within this interpretive grid, denouncing designated oppressor groups becomes not rhetorical excess but an ideological imperative. RCCT expands Marx’s class-based antagonism into intersectional categories (such as race, gender, and sexuality), thereby casting opponents as inherently malevolent and therefore legitimate objects of contempt. Because antagonism functions as the organizing principle of solidarity, appeals to civility or shared humanity are dismissed as complicity with systemic oppression. In the Global North, this campus-driven ethos of suspicion has now permeated broader cultural and political spheres, where denunciation increasingly replaces substantive dialogue, eroding the constructive exchange essential to the common good.
 7. At key points in the discourse that follows, essential terms and central theological concepts are intentionally revisited to foster deeper understanding. This repetition is not incidental but deliberate, for what is at stake is nothing less than the faithful proclamation of the Gospel and the Church’s clear witness to Christ’s mission in a world increasingly shaped by RCCT.
 8. Alongside God’s twofold governance, Scripture speaks of the Devil’s parasitic, rebel dominion (John 12:31; 2 Cor 4:4; Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:13; 1 John 5:19). Satan’s primary objective is corrupting God’s left-hand kingdom and subverting his right-hand kingdom through several key strategies. First, the Devil sows confusion about the proper law-gospel distinction by blurring the boundary between God’s condemning law and his saving gospel (Rom 3:20–22; Gal 2:16). Second, Satan obscures the relationship between the kingdom of law (temporal order) and the kingdom of grace (spiritual realm; Rom 7:12; Eph 2:8–9). Third, the Devil attempts to conflate the common kingdom—including arts, economics, and government—with the redemptive kingdom, leading to false expectations that earthly institutions can provide spiritual salvation (Matt 6:33; Phil 3:20). Fourth, Satan promotes religious fanaticism that infiltrates civil government, using state power to establish theocratic rule through violence (Matt 26:52; John 18:10–11). Fifth, the Devil encourages the state to overstep its bounds by asserting authority over conscience, faith, and salvation, often through ideological movements that use religious language to promote secular absolutism (Dan 3:16–18; Acts 5:29). Through these tactics, Satan attempts to destroy the proper distinction between God’s two kingdoms, ultimately undermining both temporal order and spiritual truth (2 Cor 11:13–15).
 9. See Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5* (LW 1:103–104), where he interprets Genesis 2 as showing that God instituted three divinely ordered “estates” or “orders” in creation: the church (or worship), the household, and government.
 10. Even in believers, the Law never ceases to accuse the old Adam (the sinful nature that remains), including when the Law serves its pedagogical function to guide the new man (the renewed self in Christ). The Law’s accusatory function remains primary and perpet-

ual, continually exposing sin and driving all people—including the regenerate—to Christ for forgiveness and comfort. While the Law’s third use as a guide for Christian living is beneficial for believers, it always remains subordinate to the Gospel and never replaces the Gospel’s central role in the Christian life. The Law cannot produce righteousness or sanctification. Rather, sanctification flows from the Spirit’s work through the Gospel alone, not through human effort or moral achievement (Rom 3:20; Gal 3:24–25).

11. The Greek *logikē latreia* can mean either “spiritual” or “reasonable/appropriate” service. The point stands either way: worship embraces embodied, vocational life under the Gospel.
12. *Saeculum* refers to the secular, temporal world, the sphere of human history, society, and civil authority, which exists in parallel and often in tension with the eternal, sacred realm of God.
13. *Adiaphora* refers to practices or beliefs that Scripture neither commands nor forbids, making them matters of Christian freedom rather than moral or doctrinal necessity. Christians may observe or not observe these practices without sin, as they are considered indifferent to salvation.
14. Charles Taylor’s concept of the “social imaginary” denotes the shared, often implicit understanding that underlies a society’s collective practices. It encompasses how people envision their social existence by shaping norms, expectations, and a sense of legitimacy. Unlike a formal theory, the social imaginary operates as an intuitive framework, communicated through stories, images, and myths. This shared background makes everyday practices, such as voting or participating in markets, feel meaningful and purposeful by providing a common sense of their role in society. Ultimately, the social imaginary forms a deep, pre-theoretical foundation that binds a community together, making its social order appear natural and coherent. For an incisive discussion of these views, see Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 91–124. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-91>. Accessed March 25, 2026. See also, Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC; London, UK: Duke University Press, 2004).
15. *Telos*, from the Greek noun meaning “end” or “goal,” designates the ultimate purpose toward which a process, action, or form of life is ordered. In Aristotelian philosophy, it signifies not merely a terminal point but the intrinsic end that gives coherence and intelligibility to an entity’s development. In broader contexts, *telos* often carries connotations of a higher or even sacred purpose, orienting practices, institutions, and beliefs toward a definitive and transformative fulfillment.
16. Lutheran theology distinguishes between two orders of reality: the “penultimate” and the “ultimate.” The ultimate refers to the eschaton, namely, the final, perfected state of God’s eternal kingdom established at Christ’s return. The penultimate encompasses everything that precedes this, including the temporal, created world and its necessary goods, such as culture, justice, and community. While all that is penultimate possess inherent value, it remains incomplete and finds its full meaning only in light of the ultimate reality to be established at the end of the age.
17. From a Lutheran perspective, attempts to “build heaven on earth” reflect a dangerously over-realized eschatology that collapses the essential biblical tension between the kingdom of God’s present reality and its future consummation. Lutheran theology maintains that because humanity remains fundamentally corrupted by original sin (*peccatum originale*), all human endeavors, however well-intentioned, are tainted by iniquity and cannot achieve the perfect justice, peace, and righteousness that will only be realized through Jesus’ second advent and the establishment of his everlasting reign.

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Alienation, Vocation, and the Ontology of Life

Dennis Bielfeldt

Introduction

FEW TWENTIETH-CENTURY TRADITIONS have analyzed the distortions of modern life more searchingly than the Frankfurt School and its successors. From reification and instrumental reason to communicative action and recognition, critical theory has shown that modern systems do more than organize collective life.¹ They shape desire, form consciousness, and condition how human beings are seen and treated. In this respect, critical theory helps us name how life becomes vulnerable to deformation within modern social orders.²

Yet the force of this diagnosis depends upon a prior question that the tradition does not fully resolve: what is life, such that its distortion can be identified as distortion rather than merely as historical variation? To designate a condition as alienated is not simply to describe a social arrangement. It is to judge that something proper to life has been obscured, violated, or denied. Such a judgment presupposes that life possesses an integrity and significance not reducible to the structures through which it is socially mediated. For if human existence were nothing more than the effect of historically emergent systems of production, communication, and recognition, then no particular configuration could claim normative priority over another except by reference to further historically contingent standards. Under those conditions, alienation would name only a determinate social formation experienced as burdensome, limiting, or unstable. It could mark dissonance within history, but not injury to life as such.³ To speak of injury, however, is already to imply that life is not exhausted by the conditions under which it presently appears, and that the social forms deforming it may therefore be judged by reference to a significance they do not themselves create.⁴

The point becomes especially clear where human beings are construed primarily in functional terms. Consider a worker subjected to degrading labor conditions,

treated as interchangeable, and valued only with respect to productivity. To say that such treatment is unjust is to claim more than that it violates prevailing norms or fails to satisfy the procedural expectations of reciprocal justification. It is to claim that a life has been wronged. The worker's protest—"I am worth more than this"—appeals to a significance neither conferred by the system in which the injury occurs nor nullified by that system's refusal to acknowledge it. Whether the matter is labor, disability, dependence, terminal decline, or organized violence, the underlying question remains the same: what must life be, such that its diminishment may be judged a wrong rather than merely a change in status, capacity, or social valuation? If alienation is to name a genuine wound, then the life that suffers alienation must possess a significance exceeding its functional place within a social order.⁵

This essay argues that critical theory, precisely in exposing alienation, tacitly presupposes an ontology of life that it cannot fully secure on postmetaphysical grounds alone.⁶ Even in its most sophisticated formulations—especially in Jürgen Habermas's account of communicative rationality and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition—the tradition relies upon the claim that human life is normatively significant in a manner not wholly derivable from historical mediation itself. What remains insufficiently clarified is the ontological status of the life whose violation critique seeks to name.⁷

To address this problem, the doctrine of vocation is retrieved not principally as a matter of personal calling or social role, but as an ontological claim about creaturely existence. Human life is neither self-grounding, nor the effect of autonomous self-assertion, nor merely the product of systemic determination. Its creaturely being is constituted by address: life is given before it is chosen and answerable before it is fully understood. To be human is to stand *coram Deo* before one can stand within any social order, and therefore also to live *coram hominibus* in concrete answerability to the neighbor.⁸ Understood in this sense, vocation does not sacralize the institutions and practices within which life unfolds. Rather, it names the prior givenness of life by reference to which those institutions and practices must themselves be judged. Theological language is therefore not an external supplement to critique. It articulates the condition under which critique may speak truthfully of injury, distortion, and alienation as wounds inflicted upon a life whose significance precedes social recognition.

The argument proceeds in five stages. First, the Frankfurt School's diagnosis of alienation and reification is revisited. Second, Habermas's and Honneth's efforts to reconstruct normativity through communication and recognition are examined. Third, these postmetaphysical reconstructions are shown to remain ontologically underdetermined, since they cannot fully account for the significance of the life they seek to defend. Fourth, the doctrine of vocation is retrieved as a theological account of creaturely life constituted by divine address. Finally, grace is shown to secure the intelligibility of critique by grounding life's excess over system.

I. Alienation and the Frankfurt Diagnosis

THE EARLIEST FRANKFURT SCHOOL THEORISTS were not concerned with producing a neutral sociology of modernity. Their work was animated by critique and protest. Horkheimer and Adorno, in particular, argued that modern society had come to be governed by a form of rationality oriented increasingly toward mastery, calculation, and control. Instrumental reason, they maintained, no longer functioned as a subordinate means directed toward substantively intelligible ends; instead, it began to shape the very terms on which social life was organized. Within such a horizon, persons and practices were evaluated less according to their intrinsic significance than according to their utility, exchangeability, and contribution to systemic efficiency. The result was not simply the presence of immoral conduct within an otherwise intelligible order, but a pervasive deformation of life at the level of its social constitution.⁹

The concept of *reification* names this deformation with particular precision. To treat persons as things is not merely to commit a conceptual error; it is to participate in, and thereby reproduce, a world in which the living are rendered functionally equivalent to objects. Persons become bearers of roles, moments within processes of production, and units within an administered totality. The wrong at issue does not consist solely in subjective dissatisfaction. Reification is condemnable because it violates something proper to the one reified. A person ought not to be treated as thing-like; yet this “ought not” cannot be generated from instrumental rationality itself, for instrumental rationality is indifferent to the distinction between creature and commodity. It asks only whether a given entity fulfills its assigned function. The protest against reification therefore already presupposes that human life possesses a dignity not conferred by function.¹⁰

Adorno’s resistance to totality sharpens this point. Negative dialectics refuses the closure of systems that would absorb the particular without remainder. Non-identity is not merely an epistemic caution against conceptual reduction. It also registers a protest against social forms that reduce the singular to what is administratively legible. The false whole is false because it does violence to the irreducibility of what it orders.¹¹ The ontological pressure of this claim is difficult to miss: reality resists total conceptual and social capture because life is not fully commensurable with the structures that mediate it.¹² Yet the ground of this irreducibility remains largely unthematized.¹³

The difficulty becomes especially clear when one returns to the example of the degraded worker. The worker subjected to dehumanizing conditions is not merely unfortunate. The condition is named alienation because the worker is being treated in a manner that falsifies what a human being is. The protest “I am worth more than this” possesses normative force precisely because it appeals beyond the prevailing

logic of the system. Critical theory can illuminate the mechanisms by which labor is dehumanized, the ways instrumental reason reduces the living to functions, and the manner in which social systems train consciousness to regard such reduction as natural. But when it judges such a condition to be dehumanizing, it has already assumed that the human being exceeds his or her socially assigned role.¹⁴

The first generation of Frankfurt theorists therefore secures a decisive insight while leaving a decisive question unresolved. Their critique shows with exceptional force what life is not: it is not merely instrument, resource, commodity, or functional substrate. Yet if this negation is to bear critical weight, a further question becomes unavoidable: what is life, such that its reduction to these forms counts as violence? The critique of alienation does not rest content with the registration of empirical dissatisfaction. It speaks in the stronger register of distortion. To describe a condition as distorted is already to imply that life possesses a proper significance whose denial can intelligibly count as injury. At precisely this point, critique presses beyond social description toward ontology.

II. Habermas and Honneth: The Reconstruction of Normativity

JÜRGEN HABERMAS (B. 1929) MAY BE UNDERSTOOD as undertaking the most ambitious effort within critical theory to secure normativity without returning to the metaphysical foundations the tradition had learned to distrust. For Habermas, the fundamental problem was not rationality as such, but its reduction to strategic success and technical control. Against this constriction, he distinguished communicative action from instrumental action and argued that human interaction is oriented, at least implicitly, toward mutual understanding. The lifeworld, as the shared horizon of meaning within which speakers and hearers interact, preserves resources of solidarity, identity, and normativity that cannot be reduced to system-coordination.¹⁵ Social pathologies may thus be identified as forms of lifeworld colonization rather than merely as regrettable institutional developments.¹⁶

This constitutes a substantial advance beyond the more unresolved moments of early Frankfurt thought. Habermas shows that critique need not ground itself in nostalgia or despair. The very conditions of possible communication contain normative presuppositions—intelligibility, reciprocity, truthfulness, and accountability—that render critique possible from within history rather than from some external Archimedean standpoint. Distortion is not simply whatever offends subjective sensibility. It is that which frustrates the communicative conditions under which persons are able to share a world.

Yet even this reconstruction leaves a further question. Why should undistorted communication count as a proper form of life rather than merely a pragmatically useful one? Why should colonization be judged loss rather than transformation? Habermas

clarifies the normative presuppositions of discourse, but he does not thereby fully explain why the life protected by such discourse possesses a significance irreducible to communicative procedure itself. The achievement is considerable, but it remains internal to the structure of social interaction. It reconstructs normativity immanently; it does not finally ground the worth of the life those norms are meant to protect.

Habermas' student, Axel Honneth (b. 1949), extends and, in some respects, deepens this reconstruction by shifting attention from discourse to recognition. Human beings do not become selves in abstraction; they become selves through socially structured patterns of acknowledgment. Love, legal respect, and social esteem form the matrix within which self-confidence, self-respect, and self-worth emerge. The pathologies of modern life are therefore not only failures of communication but also failures of recognition. Experiences such as humiliation, invisibility, and disrespect wound because they damage the conditions under which individuals are able to realize themselves as selves. The moral grammar of social life is thus not exhausted by formal reciprocity; it also includes the lived practices of acknowledgment through which persons are recognized as who they are.¹⁷

Here again, the advance is genuine. Honneth helps explain why injustice is experienced not merely as procedural disorder but as an injury to lived personhood. The grammar of critique thereby becomes richer. Yet the same question reappears with renewed force. Why does misrecognition wound? If recognition is wholly the product of social relations, its absence may be painful and politically consequential; but why must it also count as unjust in a stronger sense? Why should reciprocal recognition be understood as a proper orientation of life rather than merely one historically contingent mode of social integration? Honneth illuminates the intersubjective constitution of the self. Yet the ultimate source of the self's worth—the ground that would explain why its denial counts as injury—remains underdescribed.¹⁸

This is not to say that Habermas and Honneth fail. On the contrary, their very success discloses the remaining problem. Both resist reductionism. Both preserve life's communicative and relational dimensions. Both show that persons cannot be understood merely as functions of a system. Yet precisely because they preserve this excess of life over system, they intensify the ontological question: what must life be such that distortion, colonization, humiliation, and misrecognition count as injuries rather than merely as rearrangements? While their accounts reconstruct the internal logic of normativity, they do not fully secure its ultimate ground.¹⁹

III. Why Immanent Normativity Remains Insufficient

THE ARGUMENT HERE IS NOT THAT CRITICAL THEORY remains inert until theology appears to complete it. Nor is it that Habermas and Honneth are covert theologians. The claim

is both narrower and stronger. Their work shows that critique necessarily operates with an understanding of life as normatively significant, while also revealing that this significance cannot be fully derived from structures of mediation alone. To judge a communicatively distorted or recognitionally damaged life as wrong is already to presuppose that life possesses a significance prior to—and not exhausted by—the historical forms through which it is mediated.²⁰

The matter may be stated by attending to the “ought not” implicit in the language of alienation. When a worker says, “I am worth more than this,” the claim does not mean merely that a society ought to revise its prevailing patterns of recognition, nor merely that a speech act has failed to receive its proper uptake. It means that the present order fails to honor something real. The protest reaches beyond currently operative norms toward the dignity of the one who speaks. If that dignity is itself wholly constituted by historically contingent practices of recognition or communication, then the protest becomes vulnerable to the same contingency. It may remain rhetorically effective, but its stronger claim to binding force is correspondingly weakened.

Critical theory therefore inhabits a genuine tension. Its resistance to metaphysical grounding is not arbitrary. Appeals to “human nature,” “order,” or “essence” have often functioned ideologically, stabilizing domination under the guise of timeless truth. Yet even in rejecting such appeals, critique continues to rely upon the judgment that life is not reducible to the structures that presently configure it. It condemns reification because persons are not things. It condemns colonization because the lifeworld is not merely a substrate for system. It condemns misrecognition because the subject is worthy of more than contingent affirmation. In each case, it tacitly affirms that life exceeds its mediation. The unresolved question is whether this excess can be sustained without some account of its ground.²¹

It is at this point that theology becomes relevant—not as a decorative supplement, but as a possible articulation of what critique already presupposes. The transition from critique to theology is therefore not arbitrary. It follows from the internal logic of alienation itself. If modern life is indeed pervasively mediated and frequently deformed by structural forces, theology must not evade that diagnosis through pious invocations of order or duty. Yet if such deformation is also judged unjust, theology may properly ask what account of life renders that judgment intelligible. The question is not whether theology can supply one additional perspective among others. It is whether the doctrine of creaturely life can name what critique requires, yet cannot fully state on its own terms.²²

The danger in such a move is evident. Theology may simply reintroduce the very ideological stabilizations that critical theory has learned to suspect. Appeals to order, nature, or calling can function to sanctify historically contingent forms of

domination. Theological language is not exempt from critique merely because it is theological. The question, then, is not whether theology supplies one additional perspective among others. It is whether the doctrine of creaturely life can name the ground of the significance that critique already assumes but cannot fully state on its own terms.²³

IV. Vocation as Ontological Address

THE DOCTRINE OF VOCATION IS FREQUENTLY reduced in modern usage, to profession, task, or socially assigned role. Once reduced in this way, it becomes immediately susceptible to Weberian suspicion. If “calling” means little more than the sacralization of one’s place within a labor system, then vocation can indeed appear as one of the religious forms by which capitalist modernity legitimates discipline and productivity. In that form, vocation would function less as critique than as ideological reinforcement. The suspicion is not without warrant. A theology of vocation inattentive to structural violence readily becomes a sanctification of domination.

Yet such a reduction confuses derivative enactments with primary constitution. In its more fundamental theological sense, vocation does not first name what one does. *Instead it names what one is: a creature called into being, relation, and responsibility.* Human life is neither self-grounding, nor the effect of autonomous self-assertion, nor merely the product of systemic determination. Its creaturely being is constituted by address. To be human is to exist as called. This does not mean that one receives private divine instructions. It means, rather, that life is received rather than self-originated and is therefore intrinsically answerable.

For the present argument, vocation is especially apt among several available theological alternatives. One might appeal to natural law, a general doctrine of creation, participation metaphysics, or the *imago Dei*. Each possesses substantial resources. Vocation, however, uniquely integrates the ontological and historical dimensions at issue in the problem of alienation. It affirms ontological givenness: life is called prior to achievement, productivity, or recognition. It insists upon relational enactment: the self is not constituted in self-possession, nor generated through relation, but enacted in answerability to the neighbor, a distinction already implicit in Luther’s account of the inner and outer human being.²⁴ It preserves historical embeddedness: calling is lived within concrete social forms rather than above them. Finally, it preserves the possibility of critique: because the dignity of life precedes system, systems may be judged. Vocation thus names not merely a task within history, but the ontological form of life as given and sent.

The classical Reformation grammar renders this point with particular precision: life is always lived *coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*—before God and before

others. These are not two separable spaces but two inseparable dimensions of one creaturely reality. Human beings are not first autonomous subjects who subsequently enter into relation. Nor are they first products of social recognition who then project transcendence. They are creatures addressed by God and therefore answerable to others. The ordering is decisive. Only because life is first constituted *coram Deo* can it become responsible *coram hominibus* without collapsing either into self-grounding autonomy or into total dependence upon social validation.

The *coram Deo* dimension names the givenness of life. Prior to social mediation—prior to recognition or misrecognition, prior to participation in discourse, prior to integration into economic and political structures—life stands before God. Its worth is not conferred by system, negotiated through procedure, or bestowed by successful recognition. It is given. Address precedes action; grace precedes achievement. Here one reaches precisely the ontological claim that critical theory cannot itself supply. Alienation wounds because life is not merely system-grounded. Reification is violence because the one reified stands before God as called and known. Misrecognition is injustice because the one denied affirmation bears a dignity not generated by that affirmation.

The *coram hominibus* dimension ensures that this claim does not collapse into inward religiosity. Life before God does not terminate in private consolation; it issues in responsibility. One is called into concrete relations—labor, family, polity, speech, and institutional life. These are not ultimate identities but historical fields within which a prior calling is enacted. The decisive distinction, therefore, is not between a “spiritual” realm and a “social” realm, but between the ground of life and its mediated enactment. Vocation names both. Life is received from God and enacted toward the neighbor.

This distinction addresses the Frankfurt suspicion directly. If vocation were nothing more than identification with one’s station, it would indeed sanctify alienation. But if vocation is first ontological address, then no social structure can exhaust it. While structures mediate vocation, they cannot generate it. They may enable its enactment, but they may also deform it. For that reason, fidelity to calling may require participation, reform, or resistance. One’s calling is never simply identical with one’s assigned function within structures of domination. Properly understood, vocation is not the theological legitimation of social place; it is the theological ground from which the legitimacy of social place may be contested.

V. Freedom, the Word, and the Ontological Priority of Faith

LUTHER’S ACCOUNT OF FREEDOM IN *De libertate christiana* is neither psychological nor merely ethical; it is ontological, grounded in the relation between the divine Word

and the being of the human person. Freedom is not first a capacity of the will, but a consequence of a more fundamental reality: the way in which the human person stands before God in relation to the Word that addresses and constitutes him. Accordingly, Luther's famous paradox—"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all"²⁵—does not describe two competing ethical dispositions, but expresses a single ontological condition viewed under two aspects.

Luther's argument begins not with action but with being. The human person is divided between an *inner* and an *outer* dimension, not as two substances, but as two modes of relation: the inner person (*homo interior*) stands *coram Deo*, while the outer person (*homo exterior*) stands within the world of works and relations (*coram hominibus*).²⁶ What is decisive is that the condition of the inner person determines the entire structure of the self. "One thing, and one thing only, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty," Luther writes, "and that is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ."²⁷

This claim must be read not merely theologically, but metaphysically. The Word is not an external report about divine realities; it is the medium of divine agency itself. It does not stand alongside reality as its description, but stands at the origin of the believer's relation to God as its constitutive ground. The Word effects what it declares. Faith, accordingly, is not primarily a human act directed toward the Word, but the mode in which the human person is taken up into the efficacy of the Word. The Word of God cannot be received and honored by any works, but only by faith.²⁸ Faith names not a contribution to the Word's work, but the form in which that work is received.

The asymmetry between faith and works is therefore not merely moral but causal. Works belong to the outer person and cannot penetrate to the level at which the person is constituted *coram Deo*. "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works."²⁹ The direction of dependence is decisive: being determines action because being is determined by the Word. To invert this order is not simply to err ethically; it is to mislocate the source of the human person's reality before God.

Luther makes this structure explicit through the language of union. "Faith... unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom."³⁰ This union is not metaphorical ornamentation but ontological claim. In it, there is a real *communicatio*: what belongs to Christ becomes the believer's, and what belongs to the believer is taken up into Christ. Such exchange presupposes not mere attribution but participation. The righteousness of Christ is not merely counted as the believer's; it is given in and through the Word as the believer's new mode of being *coram Deo*.

Here the causal structure of Luther's account becomes fully visible. The Word does not merely occasion a change in self-understanding; it brings about a change in the being of the person addressed. Divine agency is not located behind the Word as a hidden cause subsequently inferred; it is present in the Word as its effective power. To say that the believer is justified by faith alone is therefore to say that the human person is constituted in relation to a Word whose efficacy is not dependent upon prior human capacities. Faith is the reception of a causality that does not arise from the human subject, but from the divine address that precedes and grounds it.

From this ontological and causal priority of the Word follows the paradox of freedom. Because the believer's standing before God is wholly determined by the Word and not by works, he is free from all attempts to secure himself through action. No work is required to establish his righteousness *coram Deo*; therefore, no work can bind him. In this sense, the Christian is "lord of all," subject to none. Yet precisely because his being is secured by a causality not his own, he is liberated for action within the world. Works no longer function as attempts to bring about a condition of righteousness; they follow from a righteousness already effected.

The movement toward the neighbor must therefore be understood as the secondary expression of a primary determination. "From faith thus flow a love and joy in the Lord," Luther writes, "and from love a joyful, willing, and free mind that serves one's neighbor willingly."³¹ The sequence is not accidental but necessary: Word → faith → love → service. The outer life of the Christian is thus not the site at which the self is constituted, but the sphere in which a prior constitution is enacted.

Vocation, accordingly, cannot be understood as the ground of the self. It is the ordered field within which the self, already constituted by the Word, is lived. To treat vocation as generative of identity is to displace the Word and to relocate causality within the system of works. Luther's account resists this move at its root. The self is not produced by its roles, nor stabilized by its recognition within them. It is given through a Word whose efficacy precedes and exceeds all social mediation.

In this way, Luther's doctrine of freedom provides a more radical ground for critique than critique can supply on its own terms. If the human person is constituted through a causality that does not arise from social structures, then no structure can claim ultimacy over human life. Institutions may organize, mediate, and even distort creaturely existence, but they do not generate its being. Because life is constituted through divine address, it always exceeds the forms in which it is socially realized. Critique becomes possible precisely because the human person is not exhaustively determined by the systems in which he appears.

VI. The Worker Revisited: A Concrete Test Case

THE PARADOX ARTICULATED ABOVE PROVIDES the decisive interpretive key for the present case. If the human being is at once free before all and bound to all, then neither dimension may be collapsed into the other without distortion. The worker therefore cannot be understood merely as a function within a system, nor as a self-grounding agent defined by autonomous productivity. The worker exists under a prior determination: as one whose life is given and who is therefore answerable. It is precisely this duplex condition that is obscured under conditions of alienation.

The worker is not first a labor-function. To reduce the worker to labor-function is to deny the first half of the paradox: that the human being stands as *dominus*, free before all determination of use or value. But to abstract the worker into a merely inward dignity detached from concrete relations is to deny the second: that the human being is *servus*, bound in responsibility to the neighbor. Alienation thus operates by a double distortion. It denies freedom by collapsing the person into function, and it denies responsibility by rendering relations instrumental rather than responsive. What is lost is not merely proper recognition within a system, but the very structure of creaturely existence.

Nor is the worker's dignity constituted by managerial recognition, legal standing, or discursive inclusion. The worker stands *coram Deo* as called, known, and accorded worth prior to every economic valuation, and therefore cannot be exhaustively defined by any system of valuation. This does not abolish labor; it relativizes the system's claim to define the worker exhaustively through labor. The worker's humanity exceeds employability, efficiency, productivity, and institutional usefulness. Dehumanizing labor conditions are therefore not merely unfortunate arrangements within a defective economy. They are distortions of creaturely life. The person is treated in a manner that contradicts the prior givenness of life as address.

This also clarifies the scope and limit of theological critique. It cannot simply denounce "the system" in abstraction while neglecting the concrete forms through which persons live. Nor can it retreat into a language of inward dignity that leaves institutions untouched. Because vocation is lived *coram hominibus* no less than *coram Deo*, the forms of labor, compensation, recognition, and protection within which the worker exists matter fundamentally. The worker is called not away from the world, but within it. For that reason, theological reflection cannot oppose ontological dignity to social transformation, as though the former rendered the latter unnecessary. On the contrary, because dignity is given, social conditions may be judged more exactly and more severely.

At the same time, vocation resists reducing dignity to historical success. If life were wholly constituted by recognition achieved within struggle, then the oppressed

would possess full dignity only to the extent that emancipation advanced. The doctrine of vocation denies this conclusion. The worth of the humiliated does not await successful recognition in order to become real. It is already secured in divine address. This does not diminish emancipatory struggle. It prevents the dignity of the oppressed from being suspended pending victory. Grace does not replace justice; it prevents justice from becoming the creator of the worth it seeks to defend.

The worker's protest—"I am worth more than this"—may therefore be heard in two registers at once. In one register, it is a claim advanced within moral and political argument. In another, deeper register, it bears witness to a truth about creaturely existence: life is given before it is managed, called before it is assigned, and answerable before it is optimized. It is thus an implicit refusal of the reduction of the person to function and an affirmation that responsibility cannot be reduced to instrumentality. What is at stake is the structure of human existence itself: that the human being is free before all determinations of use and yet bound in responsibility to others.

Critical theory interprets the first register with considerable sophistication. Theology, through the doctrine of vocation, names the second. The two are not competitors. The latter secures the intelligibility of the former's critique.

VII. Grace as the Ontological Ground of Critique

THE CENTRAL CLAIM OF THIS ESSAY MAY NOW be stated with greater precision. Critical theory's protest against alienation presupposes that human life exceeds the systems that organize it. Theology names the source of that excess as grace. Yet grace must here be understood neither as inward religious experience nor as a supplementary theological category appended to an otherwise complete account of social life. It names, rather, the manner in which human existence is constituted through the efficacious Word of God. Grace is not an added quality of life; it is the mode in which life is given at all.³²

Understood in this way, grace is inseparable from divine agency. It does not denote a passive background condition, but the active address by which God brings the human person into being *coram Deo*. The Word that justifies is not descriptive but effective: it establishes the reality it declares. Grace, therefore, is not the recognition that life has value; it is the act by which life is constituted as answerable, dignified, and held in relation to God prior to every human work, achievement, or social validation.³³ What critique requires—that life matters antecedently to its recognition within a system—is here grounded in the efficacy of the Word.

This claim does not weaken critique; it renders it intelligible at a deeper level. If the human person is constituted through a divine address that precedes all social mediation, then no social order can claim ultimacy over that person. Every system is

thereby relativized. Institutions may organize life, distribute recognition, and shape possibilities of action, but they do not generate the being of the persons who inhabit them. For that reason, institutions may be inhabited, reformed, or resisted without being absolutized. Vocation, accordingly, cannot be the ground of the self. It is the historical field in which a self, already constituted through the Word, is enacted.³⁴

Grace also prevents critique from collapsing into immanence. If rational agency were wholly the effect of structural location, protest would risk becoming merely another function of the system it opposes. Its normative force would be reduced to positional expression. But if the human person is constituted through a causality not reducible to social processes, then critique is not merely reactive but answerable to a prior determination. The protest against alienation is not only a strategic response to injustice; it is a witness—however inarticulate—to the fact that human life is not exhausted by what history makes of it.³⁵

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* sharpens this point without reintroducing a metaphysical abstraction detached from history. To bear the divine image is not to possess an isolated essence beneath social existence, but to be constituted for relation through divine address. The human person exists as one who is spoken to and thereby rendered capable of speaking truthfully in turn. In this respect, theology and critical theory converge in rejecting the fiction of a self-grounding subject. Yet they diverge decisively in their account of the ground of relation.

Recognition theory locates the emergence of selfhood within intersubjective affirmation; theology locates its ultimate ground in the Word that calls the person into being and thereby makes such affirmation both possible and necessary.³⁶

The relation between critical theory and theology may therefore be described not as competition but as asymmetrical clarification. Critical theory exposes the ways in which social systems distort, instrumentalize, and occlude human life. It rightly resists any appeal to “order” or “vocation” that reconciles persons to such distortions. Theology, however, articulates the ontological depth that critique presupposes but cannot secure on its own terms. It clarifies why reification is not merely inefficiency but loss, why misrecognition is not merely procedural failure but distortion of reality, and why the reduction of persons to functions is not merely unjust but false. If life is constituted through divine address, then commodification entails not only misuse but misdescription; if life is called, then its reduction to system is not only oppressive but unintelligible.³⁷

Grace thus names the condition under which critique itself becomes possible. It does not replace critique, nor does it soften its edge. It secures the claim that human life is more than the roles it occupies, more than the recognition it receives, and more than the history that shapes it—because it is first the effect of a Word whose efficacy no system can contain.³⁸

VIII. Conclusion

THE FRANKFURT TRADITION AND ITS SUCCESSORS have performed an indispensable service by exposing the ways modern social orders absorb life into structures of instrumentality, administration, and exchange. Their analyses of reification, communicative distortion, and misrecognition remain essential for any theologically responsible account of modern existence. They prevent theology from mistaking historically contingent arrangements for sacred order and compel a reckoning with the forms of domination through which creaturely life is deformed.

Yet the critique of alienation cannot rest with diagnosis alone. To name life as alienated is already to presuppose that life possesses an integrity capable of violation. Habermas and Honneth reconstruct this integrity within the spheres of communication and recognition with remarkable sophistication. What they do not finally explain, however, is why the life protected by such norms bears the significance those accounts require. The unresolved question therefore remains: what must life be such that its deformation counts as injustice rather than mere rearrangement?

The doctrine of vocation provides a theological answer to that question. Human life is not constituted by system, recognition, or communicative performance alone, but by divine address. To be human is to stand *coram Deo* and therefore *coram hominibus*: before God and before others, received and answerable, given and sent. Understood in this way, vocation does not sanctify alienation. It names the prior dignity of life by reference to which alienation can be recognized as distortion. Social systems may therefore be judged because they do not constitute life absolutely. Grace secures what critique presupposes but cannot finally ground on its own: that life matters prior to performance, recognition, or any social determination. It names the givenness of life as called and sustained prior to every achievement.

The relation between critical theory and theology is therefore neither simple opposition nor easy synthesis. Critical theory discloses the deformations that theology must never conceal beneath the language of order, duty, or calling. Theology, in turn, articulates the ontological depth without which critique cannot finally say what its protest already knows: that alienation is not merely dislocation but injury. It can say this because life is not first system but gift, not first function but address, not first achievement but call. And because life is thus given, it may also be judged. Systems may be criticized, institutions reformed, domination resisted, and dignity defended. For life does not receive its worth from the orders that govern it; it receives its worth from the grace that calls it into being before God and before others.

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Notes

1. “Reification” designates the treatment of persons and relations under the logic of thinghood; “instrumental reason,” the reduction of rationality to calculation in the service of control; “communicative action,” interaction ordered toward mutual understanding; and “recognition,” the intersubjective acknowledgment through which personal identity and social standing are constituted and sustained. Together, these terms trace major trajectories within Frankfurt School critical theory from its early diagnosis of domination to its later reconstruction of normativity (see sources in n.2).
2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), and *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, vol. 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
3. “Injury” here does not designate merely experienced harm, social disadvantage, or the frustration of historically contingent expectations. It designates a violation of the integrity proper to life, such that a condition may be judged not only oppressive or disfavored, but as constituting a distortion in a stronger normative sense. For related accounts of moral injury within critical theory, see Axel Honneth, “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 187–201; and J. M. Bernstein, “Suffering Injustice: Misrecognition as Moral Injury in Critical Theory,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005): 303–24.
4. On the problem of normativity and its grounding within critical theory, see especially Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 55–75; Maeve Cooke, “Redeeming Redemption: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Social Theory,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 4 (2004): 413–29; Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 193–220.
5. The term “alienation” has a complex history. In Ludwig Feuerbach, it names the projection of essential human powers onto an objectified divine other, such that humanity becomes estranged from its own species-being (see Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot [New York: Harper & Row, 1957]). In Karl Marx, the term is reconfigured socially and materially to describe conditions under which labor, its products, and the worker’s own activity confront the worker as alien powers (see Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney

Livingstone and Gregor Benton [London: Penguin, 1975]). Within the Frankfurt tradition, the concept is further widened to diagnose forms of reification, domination, and systemic distortion in which human life is reduced to function, exchangeability, or administrative legibility (see Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971]; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). The term is used here in this latter, expanded sense, while retaining the stronger claim that alienation signifies not mere dissatisfaction or dislocation, but a distortion of life that may properly be judged injurious.

6. “Postmetaphysical” designates approaches that seek to account for normativity without appeal to a comprehensive metaphysics of being, nature, or order. In Habermas and Honneth, this entails reconstructing normative validity from historically situated practices of communication and recognition rather than grounding it in a prior ontological or theological account of life (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42; Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*). The claim advanced here is that such reconstructions remain illuminating yet insufficient with respect to the question of why life itself possesses the significance critique presupposes.
7. For representative postmetaphysical reconstructions of normativity, see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42; Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*; and Allen, *End of Progress*. For a critical account of the unresolved grounding problem, see Allen, *End of Progress*, 193–220.
8. *Coram Deo* and *coram hominibus* are classical theological terms meaning, respectively, “before God” and “before human beings.” In Luther’s usage, they identify two inseparable dimensions of human existence: the creature stands before God as recipient and respondent, and before the neighbor in concrete offices, relations, and responsibilities. The distinction is not spatial, nor does it separate “religious” from “worldly” life. Rather, it marks the difference between the divine source and judgment of life and the ordinary social forms in which that life is lived. In the present argument, *coram Deo* names the ontological givenness of life, while *coram hominibus* names its historical enactment toward the neighbor.
9. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1–34; Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243.
10. Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83–222; Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, with commentaries by Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss, and Jonathan Lear (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 17–56.
11. Adorno’s “totality” names the tendency of both philosophical systems and modern institutions to construe reality as a closed, self-explanatory whole. “Negative dialectics” resists such closure by insisting upon *Nichtidentität*, the excess of the object over its conceptual determination. The “false whole” is thus not merely incomplete but violent, securing unity through the suppression of irreducible particularity (see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton [New York: Continuum, 1973], 5–11).
12. The present claim extends Adorno’s negative insight. Where non-identity marks the failure of conceptual capture, the argument here construes this resistance ontologically:

- the excess of life over its mediation reflects not merely epistemic limitation but points toward the irreducibility of the real.
13. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 5–11; Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 50.
 14. See Geuss, *Idea of a Critical Theory*, 55–75; and Allen, *End of Progress*, 193–220, on the unresolved problem of grounding normativity within critical theory.
 15. Habermas distinguishes communicative from instrumental action: the former oriented toward mutual understanding through reasons in principle acceptable to participants in communication, the latter toward success and control (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42). The “lifeworld” names the shared horizon of meaning presupposed in such interaction and threatened by systemic colonization (see Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2:113–197).
 16. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, 1:8–42; 2:113–197, 332–73.
 17. Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, 92–139 (on the spheres of recognition and the formation of selfhood).
 18. Axel Honneth, “Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992): 187–201; J. M. Bernstein, “Suffering Injustice: Misrecognition as Moral Injury in Critical Theory,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 13, no. 3 (2005): 303–24.
 19. Maeve Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 1–25; Rainer Forst, *The Right to Justification: Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice*, trans. Jeffrey Flynn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1–42, for influential attempts to reconstruct normativity within postmetaphysical frameworks.
 20. See Geuss, *Idea of a Critical Theory*, 55–75; Cooke, *Re-Presenting the Good Society*, 1–25; and Allen, *End of Progress*, 193–220, for representative accounts of normativity reconstructed from socially mediated practices.
 21. The issue may be framed in terms of grounding: if judgments of distortion presuppose the normative significance of life, then the question concerns that in virtue of which such significance obtains. For accounts of grounding as a relation of metaphysical dependence, see Jonathan Schaffer, “On What Grounds What,” in *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, eds. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman, 347–83 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Kit Fine, “The Question of Ontology,” in *Metametaphysics*, 157–77.
 22. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 3–46; Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 1–15. The grounding problem may be recast theologically: if judgments of alienation presuppose a normative significance irreducible to social mediation, then that significance requires an account of creaturely life not exhausted by historical form.
 23. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002), 79–125, on the transformation of the concept of calling (*Beruf*) within early modern Protestantism and its relation to the rationalization of social life.
 24. Martin Luther, *De libertate christiana* (1520), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 7:50.5–8, hereafter WA; English

- translation in Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” (1520): vol. 31, pp. 344–45, in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter LW. *Homo enim duplici constat natura, spirituali et corporali: iuxta spiritualem ... vocatur spiritualis, interior; novus homo, iuxta corporalem ... exterior, vetus homo.*
25. WA 7:49.3–5; LW 31:344.
 26. WA 7:49–51; LW 31:344–346.
 27. WA 7:50.33–35; LW 31:345.
 28. WA 7:51.1–3; LW 31:345.
 29. WA 7:61.26–27; LW 31:361.
 30. WA 7:54.31–32; LW 31:351.
 31. WA 7:66.7–10; LW 31:367.
 32. WA 7:50.33–35; LW 31:345. The claim presupposes Luther’s understanding of the Word as *verbum efficax*—not merely descriptive but constitutive of the relation *coram Deo*. On the ontological and linguistic stakes of this claim, see Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther on Language,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 195–213, esp. 196–202.
 33. *Non operibus neque legibus, sed verbo dei (id est promissio ne gratiae) et fide iustificatur et salvatur*; WA 7: 63.3–5; LW 31:362–363. The point is ontological: the Word alone determines the person’s standing *coram Deo*, apart from works, law, or social validation.
 34. *Bona opera non faciunt bonum virum, sed bonus vir facit bona opera... primum personam ipsam hominis esse bonam vel malam, antequam faciat bonum vel malum opus*; WA 7:61.26–37; LW 31:361–62. This remains decisive against any account of vocation that allows enacted role, function, or social mediation to become constitutive of the self, rather than expressions of a person already constituted *coram Deo*.
 35. *Christianum hominem non vivere in seipso, sed in Christo et proximo suo ... in Christo per fidem, in proximo per caritatem*; WA 7:69.12–15; LW 31:371. The order is crucial: relation to the neighbor is real and necessary, but derivative of and grounded in relation to Christ through faith. This prevents both the collapse of the self into social mediation and any appeal to an isolated inward essence, preserving a relational account of life grounded in the prior determination of the person *coram Deo*. On the semantic and ontological stakes of this structure, see Dennis Bielfeldt, “Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language,” *Modern Theology* 6 (1990): 121–35, esp. 122–30.
 36. The *imago Dei* is not programmatically treated in *De libertate christiana*, but its structure is implicit in the distinction between inner and outer person and in the Word’s constitutive efficacy. On divine address as ontologically effective, see Dennis Bielfeldt, “Creatio ex Nihilo in Luther’s Genesis Commentary and the Causal Question,” manuscript posted on academia.edu, August 2012), 17–19, https://www.academia.edu/12405696/Creatio_ex_Nihilo_in_Luthers_Genesis_Commentary_and_the_Causal_Question. Accessed March 29, 2026.
 37. David Tracy’s account of a surplus irreducible to any closed social totality remains suggestive; see *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), esp. 99–153. Yet if such surplus is construed only as analogical disclosure, the normative force of critique remains underdetermined and

thus, at a crucial point, unintelligible. The present argument therefore locates this surplus not in disclosure as such but in the efficacious address of the Word. Theology here does not merely redescribe depth; it grounds critique in divine agency.

38. *Christianus homo omnium dominus est liberrimus, nulli subiectus. Christianus homo omnium servus est officiosissimus, omnibus subiectus.* WA 7:49.21–25; LW 31:344. This paradox is not rhetorical but ontological: the priority of faith establishes a freedom no social order can contain, and precisely thereby grounds the necessary movement of love toward the neighbor.

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Vocational Balance

A Lutheran Vision for Human Flourishing

Eric Brinkert

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 Card⁴ 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 profane²³ 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 re-defined 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 Adam⁴⁷ 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* (Berkeley, 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.
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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.
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38. For a comprehensive investigation of Pannenberg's anthropology, see his *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*.
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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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Calling a Thing What It Is

Disability as Ostrakon and *Schule Christi* in a Lutheran *Theologia Crucis*

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Key Words

Luther; *theologia crucis*; disability theology; *Schule Christi*; ostrakon; ecclesial ethics; anthropology; ableism; *imago Dei*

Introduction: Naming Our Illusions

DISABILITY IS NOT A DEVIATION FROM AUTHENTIC humanity but a privileged arena of divine self-disclosure and ecclesial formation. Under the logic of the *theologia crucis*, human identity is not secured by autonomy, capability, or conformity to an imagined normate ideal; it is bestowed *extra nos* in the crucified and risen Christ. When disability is approached through this cruciform grammar, it becomes a site in which God reveals the truth of creaturely dependence and the givenness of grace, schooling the church in the receptive posture proper to faith. To speak truly—to *call a thing what it is*—requires naming disability not as deficit, tragedy, or anomaly but as a locus of divine pedagogy, a *Schule Christi*, where the Spirit forms Christ's body in patience, vulnerability, and mutual care.

Yet, the modern church persists in ableist illusions that obscure this gifted character of personhood. Two patterns dominate: sentimental pity that casts disabled persons as objects of benevolence and moral indictment that sees impairment as spiritual failure or burden. Both belong to the *theologia gloriae*, measuring persons by proximity to a fictive normalcy and masking the evangelical truth that humanity's dignity is received, not achieved. These illusions do not merely misrecognize disabled Christians; they misname the gospel. By confusing capacity with worth, they silence the witness of those whom God has placed within the church as teachers—*theologians of the cross* whose lives unveil the dependence and promise that constitute the body of Christ.

This article offers a constructive Lutheran proposal for rethinking disability through the cruciform grammar of promise, cross, and community. Methodologically, it engages Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, catechetical writings, and homiletical corpus to articulate a theological account of affliction as divine pedagogy. It then enters critical dialogue with major disability theologians—Nancy Eiesland, Amos Yong, and Thomas Reynolds—affirming their central insights while identifying the subtle ways liberationist frameworks can reinscribe normative metrics. Finally, it draws on select philosophical voices—Elizabeth Barnes, Alasdair MacIntyre, Eva Feder Kittay, and Martha Nussbaum—to clarify conceptual commitments around difference, dependence, and capabilities that support an ecclesial ethic rooted in the *theologia crucis*.

The argument unfolds in four movements. Section I develops the Lutheran *theologia crucis* and its implications for understanding disability as *Schule Christi*, reconfiguring anthropology around gift, passivity, and divine promise. Section II critically engages contemporary disability theology, receiving its liberative impulses while relocating them within a cruciform grammar that avoids the reappearance of ableist norms. Section III draws on philosophical accounts of difference, dependence, and justice to sharpen the church's conceptual tools while subordinating these frameworks to the sovereignty of gift. Section IV articulates an ecclesial ethic that dismantles the moral imagination of normalcy by reforming liturgy, catechesis, pastoral care, governance, and public witness around the crucified Christ. The conclusion gathers these threads into a vision of disabled Christians as indispensable guides for a church learning to live by grace rather than glory.

Archaeology bequeaths to us the *ostrakon*—a potsherd, not a prize. Once whole, then fired, used, and shattered, it is precisely as a fragment that it becomes useful: a flat, humble surface for lists, prayers, and records. Meaning is entrusted not to the intact jar but to the broken piece. In this fragment we discover a parable for Christian existence under the cross. The theologian of glory seeks God in wholeness and polish; the theologian of the cross finds Him where Christ has pledged Himself – in suffering, smallness, and dependence. The believer's life, like an *ostrakon*, becomes receptive through fracture; the church's life becomes legible in its scars.

To speak truly—*res dicere*, calling a thing what it is—we must name disability neither as tragedy to be pitied nor as anomaly to be normalized, but as a privileged arena of divine pedagogy wherein the Spirit writes promise upon the church. That confession dethrones the normative imagination and enthrones gift: identity bestowed *extra nos* in Christ rather than secured by autonomy, capacity, or conformity to a fiction of “the unbroken.”

I. The *Theologia Crucis* and the Cruciform School (*Schule Christi*)

1. *Res dicere*: Calling a Thing What It Is

MARTIN LUTHER'S *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS* EXPOSES the human will's compulsive drive to secure righteousness by performance and re-educates the church to speak truthfully about God and the self. In the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Luther insists that "the law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done," thereby collapsing every project of self-justification and pressing the sinner into a posture of receptivity to the divine gift.¹ The result is not mere moral pessimism but evangelical truth-telling—*res dicere*, calling a thing what it is. To speak truly of the human condition is to confess incapacity before God; to speak truly of God is to confess the paradox of the crucified Christ as the locus of divine wisdom and power.²

This cruciform epistemology does more than rearrange propositions; it reconfigures how the church recognizes persons. The *theologia crucis* judges as illusions those metrics that evaluate worth by autonomy, utility, or proximity to a fictional "normal."³ In their place, it enthrones promise over performance: the truth about the person is bestowed *extra nos* by the Word, not achieved *intra nos* by capacities. Within such a grammar, disability cannot be narrated as deficit without falsifying both anthropology and Christology; it must be spoken as difference that discloses the divine condescension and the creature's dependence.⁴

2. Formation through Affliction: *Schule Christi* as Divine Pedagogy

Because God is known "in suffering and the cross," affliction becomes a school—*Schule Christi*—wherein the human is formed to faith's receptive habit.⁵ Luther's catechetical and homiletical writings repeatedly portray the Christian life as one of being driven to the promises by trials (*Anfechtungen*), so that the believer learns the art of receiving rather than achieving.⁶ The pedagogy is not punitive but medicinal: it wounds *self-trust* to heal with *Christ-trust*. Affliction thus participates in God's fatherly care, relocating agency from the self's competencies to the Spirit's giving, and relocating identity from functional status to baptismal gift.

In this school, disabled suffering acquires a specific theological contour. Placed beneath the cross, it neither legitimates sentimental pity nor licenses moral indictment; both are variants of the *theologia gloriae* that misrecognize the person by measuring him or her against an imagined norm. Instead, disabled suffering tutors the church in passivity before grace—a disciplined receptivity that contradicts every ecclesial habit of ranking persons by ability.⁷ The point is not to romanticize pain but to re-situate it within Christ's pedagogy, where weakness is neither a moral stain nor an obstacle to communion, but an instrument by which God conforms the body of Christ to its Head.

The *ostrakon* is chosen after it breaks; its fracture makes a surface for inscription. Likewise, affliction does not ennoble by itself, but beneath the cross it becomes *Schule Christi*—the Spirit’s school that dislodges *self-trust* and enthrones *Christ-trust*. Disability thus refuses the abstraction of human need and makes our shared dependence visible and concrete. In a culture that worships autonomy, the disabled Christian’s life becomes a catechesis in receptivity—God’s Word written on a shard.

3. Anthropology Reconfigured: Gift, Passivity, and Personhood

From this cruciform school follows anthropological reconfiguration. The human person is not the sovereign curator of capacities but the recipient of a name and a future in Christ. Luther’s distinction between human righteousness (which never achieves its aim) and Christ’s alien righteousness (bestowed freely upon the ungodly) undercuts the ableist moral imagination at its root.⁸ Autonomy may serve prudential goods, but it cannot ground personhood; capacity may be stewarded, but it cannot secure identity. In the church, therefore, disability is not a deviation from authentic humanity. It is a privileged arena where the givenness of grace is unveiled—where dependence appears not as lack to be overcome but as the truth of creatureliness embraced by God in the Crucified.⁹

Accordingly, the theologian of the cross does not ask how disabled persons might be “made normal,” but how congregations might learn from disabled Christians how to receive life as gift. Disabled believers become teachers of *passivity in faith*, catechists of the promise, and visible sacraments of our shared brokenness turned toward Christ. Their presence is thus not an exception to ministry but a measure of ministry’s conversion to the gospel.

4. Brokenness as Surface for Inscription—and the Shard That Bears Christ

An *ostrakon* never writes itself; its value is received from the hand that inscribes. So, the believer is not the tablet presented to God, but the shard upon which God writes His promises. In this way, the disabled theologian—public or hidden—bears witness simply by living under the cross. The life “inscribed” by Christ becomes a durable text, often outlasting vessels prized for wholeness. God wastes nothing: not wounds, not weariness, not the jagged edges of a life that feels fractured. In His hands the broken piece bears the Word.

II. Critical Dialogue with Contemporary Disability Theology

1. Nancy Eiesland’s “Disabled God”: Iconic Protest and Its Limits

NANCY EIESLAND’S *THE DISABLED GOD* OFFERED a groundbreaking theological icon: the risen Christ who still bears disabled wounds, re-symbolizing divine life in a body

marked by impairment and thereby confronting ecclesial ableism.¹⁰ Her constructive move places disability at the center of Christian imagination, rejecting the trope of disabled people as objects of pity or charity and asserting their agency and full ecclesial belonging.¹¹ The strength of Eiesland's proposal is its iconoclastic protest against images of divine perfection that erase disabled bodies; it reorients worship, ethics, and pastoral care toward presence rather than cure.

Yet precisely as protest, the icon risks leaving normate metrics subtly intact. When divine identification is framed primarily in terms of empowering agency—a necessary and salutary corrector to passivity—ecclesial reception may default to performance-based inclusion (what disabled persons *can do*) rather than promise-grounded belonging (who disabled persons are in Christ). Moreover, the image of the “disabled God” can be recruited into romanticization or voluntarist triumphalism, where impairment is valorized as a unique spiritual capital rather than located beneath the cross as the arena of divine condescension and creaturely dependence.¹² A Lutheran *theologia crucis* affirms Eiesland's disruption of ableist imaginaries while relocating the meaning of disability from empowerment alone to gift received under promise—the identity bestowed *extra nos* by the Crucified, which neither demands performance nor sanctifies suffering in itself.

2. Amos Yong's Pneumatological Inclusion: Gifts, Capacities, and the Grammar of Promise

Amos Yong's work—across *Theology and Down Syndrome* and *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*—develops a rich pneumatology that discerns the Spirit's presence and gifting in disabled communities, pressing churches toward inclusive practices, mutual discernment, and the recognition of diverse charisms.¹³ Yong's account corrects ecclesial habits of exclusion by refusing the conflation of disability with sin or tragedy and by narrating the church as a communion animated by the Spirit who distributes gifts “as he wills.”¹⁴

The tension, however, lies in the register of gifts and capacities. Pneumatological inclusion often proceeds by showing that disabled persons *have* Spirit-given capacities the church needs—a powerful and necessary apologetic within ableist contexts. Yet without a corresponding grammar of promise, inclusion can drift back to capability-metrics (welcomed because useful) rather than baptismal belonging (welcomed because given). The Lutheran *theologia crucis* insists that identity precedes utility; we do not belong because we can perform Spirit-gifts for communal benefit, but because God in Christ names us and joins us to his body. Yong's vision is thus best received within a cruciform economy where gifts confirm belonging rather than constitute it.

3. Thomas E. Reynolds' *Vulnerable Communion: Hospitality under the Cross*

Thomas E. Reynolds reframes ecclesial life as “vulnerable communion,” replacing paternalistic charity with mutual hospitality and calling the church to receive disabled persons as indispensable members whose presence discloses the fragility common to all.¹⁵ He rightly diagnoses how ecclesial practices can normalize independence, productivity, and control, thereby marginalizing those whose bodies defy such expectations.

A Lutheran *Schule Christi* deepens Reynolds's insight by placing vulnerability under the cross. There, vulnerability is neither sentimentalized (as a spiritual aesthetic) nor instrumentalized (as a means to moral improvement) but acknowledged as the truthful condition of creaturely life that God assumes and redeems in Christ. Hospitality becomes evangelically ordered: we welcome not to repair difference but to confess that difference belongs within the body gathered by promise. Disabled Christians are thus not guests to be integrated; they are teachers whose embodied limits catechize congregations in receptive grace.

4. An Ostrakon Critique: Fracture, Inscription, and the Temptation to Smooth the Shard

The *ostrakon* offers more than an image; it is hermeneutic. The church's life, like a shard chosen after breaking, becomes useful precisely as a surface for divine inscription—not as a restored museum piece. This vantage reframes three influential projects in disability theology.

A. EIESLAND'S ICON AND THE PRESSURE TO POLISH

Eiesland's “disabled God” is an essential iconoclastic strike against ecclesial imaginaries that erase disabled bodies from the scene of divine life. Yet without a cruciform grammar of fracture-as-election, the icon can slide toward an aesthetic of polished visibility: disability becomes an emblem displayed for empowerment rather than a shard on which God actually writes the promise. The *ostrakon* insists that the scandal is not merely that God can be depicted as disabled, but that He chooses the broken surface as His preferred place of address; the point is not the spectacle of the wound but the Word that is inscribed there. Where the icon is received without this pedagogy, communities may adopt the image while keeping the vessel intact—admiring scars without relinquishing the metrics of normalcy that demand smoothness. The theologian of the cross calls that move what it is: a subtle return to *theologia gloriae* under the sign of inclusion.

B. YONG'S PNEUMATOLOGY AND THE METRIC OF USEFULNESS

Yong's discernment of the Spirit's gifts in disabled communities corrects paternalism and expands ecclesial imagination. But the *ostrakon* exposes a persistent danger: when gifts function primarily as justifications for belonging, the shard is valued because it happens to serve as a convenient writing tablet—useful as long as it remains flat enough to write on. The Lutheran grammar insists that inscription precedes instrumentality, baptismal naming grounds identity before and beyond demonstrable capacity. Otherwise, pneumatological inclusion risks translating disabled presence into a ledger of charisms—belonging codified by utility, a refined capability-metric in ecclesial dress. The shard does not belong because it holds many words; it belongs because the Author chose it in its brokenness.

C. REYNOLDS' VULNERABLE COMMUNION AND THE SENTIMENTAL SMOOTHING OF EDGES

Reynolds reorders hospitality around mutual vulnerability, a necessary unlearning of paternalistic charity. The *ostrakon* deepens this by refusing to file down the shard's edges for communal comfort. Vulnerability, when sentimentalized, can become a spiritual aesthetic—soft light on cruciform themes—where communities admire fragility without letting it cut their habits of efficiency, platforming, and control. The broken piece, however, has edges that snag: it slows the liturgy's tempo, redistributes leadership, and changes the budget. If vulnerability is received apart from this concrete pedagogy, “welcome” becomes an ambiance rather than a school. Under the cross, the church lets the shard remain a shard, learning to be addressed by the very contours that inconvenience it.

From Shard to School

The *ostrakon* thus furnishes three guardrails: (1) Inscription over icon—the meaning of disability under the cross is what God writes upon it, not the spectacle it can furnish; (2) Election over utility—belonging flows from promise, not from a tally of gifts; (3) Edges over ambiance—vulnerability must retain its inconvenient contours lest it be absorbed into the church's existing aesthetics. These guardrails do not reject Eiesland, Yong, or Reynolds; they convert their best impulses to cruciform use, keeping the church from polishing the shard it is given to read.

5. Constructive Pivot: A Lutheran Grammar of Promise–Cross–Community

The prior dialogue suggested that contemporary disability theology's strongest impulses—iconic protest (Eiesland), pneumatological inclusion (Yong), and vulnerable communion (Reynolds)—require a grammar that prevents normate metrics from returning under new guises. The *theologia crucis* supplies that grammar, and the *ostrakon* clarifies its texture.

PROMISE (IDENTITY BESTOWED → INSCRIPTION, NOT PROJECTION)

Baptismal naming precedes capability, agency, and usefulness; identity is bestowed *extra nos* in the Crucified and Risen One. The *ostrakon* adds: promise arrives as inscription upon a broken surface. The church does not project meaning onto disability as a convenient icon; it receives the Word that God writes upon the shard. This conversion reframes Eiesland's gift: the disabled wounds of the Risen One are not merely an emblem to display, but the very grammar by which God addresses His people—truth spoken on scarred flesh, not polished symbol. In congregational life, that means visibility serves reception of promise, not the curation of images.

CROSS (MEANING INTERPRETED → BREAKAGE AS ELECTION, NOT ELIMINATION)

Affliction is *Schule Christi*: it dislodges self-trust and enthrones Christ-trust. The *ostrakon* clarifies that breakage is not a prelude to disposal but to choosing; the shard becomes the page. Against the utilitarian drift that can haunt pneumatological inclusion, the cross declares that God elects the broken as His medium prior to any demonstration of usefulness. Thus Yong's emphasis on gifts is best received when gifts confirm, rather than constitute, belonging—the writing recognizes the shard; it does not justify it. Practically, churches order roles and rhythms so that pace, pitch, and posture are set by those whose edges teach the community to be addressed, not by those most conveniently accommodated.

COMMUNITY (LIFE REORDERED → EDGES KEPT, NOT SANDED)

Belonging comes before contribution; hospitality sheds the asymmetry of “helpers/helped” and embraces mutual dependence. The *ostrakon* adds a concrete caution: do not sand the edges. Vulnerable communion must retain the snagging contours that actually reorder budgets, schedules, and authority. Reynolds' vision is thus secured under the cross when communities let the shard change the hand that holds it: liturgy slows, governance redistributes, and pastoral care is co-authored with disabled members. The test of communion is not how gently we display the shard, but how readily we are re-inscribed by it.

III. Philosophical Bridges: Dependence, Difference, and Capabilities

1. Elizabeth Barnes: Value-Neutral Difference and the Undoing of Deficit Narratives

ELIZABETH BARNES ARGUES THAT DISABILITY IS, in most cases, a value-neutral difference rather than an inherent harm, challenging the pervasive *deficit model* that reads impairment as diminishment of personhood or well-being.¹⁶ Barnes distinguishes

between local harms (contextual injustices, inaccessible environments, ableist stigma) and intrinsic harms (supposedly baked into impairment itself), contending that much of what we treat as disability’s “badness” is socially produced rather than metaphysically necessary.¹⁷ This distinction proves indispensable for a Lutheran *theologia crucis*: if the church narrates disability as intrinsic deficit, it commits a form of false speech—*res non dicere*—that misnames persons contrary to Christ’s promise. Barnes’s analysis thus buttresses cruciform truth-telling, allowing congregations to repent of deficit imaginaries while acknowledging the real suffering that contexts can impose.

Yet Barnes’s value-neutral thesis must be theologically located. For Lutherans, difference finds its final meaning not in metaphysical neutrality but in gift and promise. The point is not to deny difficulty or pain; it is to prevent the moralization of difference. Under the cross, the church confesses that God meets creaturely limits with mercy, and that any “badness” attached to disability is more truthfully diagnosed in the world’s disordered loves and arrangements than in the disabled body per se.¹⁸ Thus, Barnes supplies a conceptual lens that disrupts deficit narratives and synchronizes with cruciform epistemology: we call disability what it *is*—difference intertwined with contextual hardship—rather than what illusion presumes—deviation from authentic humanity.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre and Eva Feder Kittay: Dependence as the Texture of Human Flourishing

Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Dependent Rational Animals* contends that human flourishing is essentially dependent, woven through networks of care, vulnerability, and the cultivation of virtues suited to our animal condition.¹⁹ It should be noted that MacIntyre maintains that the *common good* that he asserts as the end of dependent rationality is rooted purely in the human’s animality and the result of evolutionary processes and nurturing that is natural to the human animal. This view stands in opposition to any understanding of *the good* or *the common good* that depends upon any transcendent authority and is therefore fundamentally relativistic—just as able to rationally justify the elimination of the vulnerable and dependent for the sake of *a common good*. Furthermore, MacIntyre’s assertion that human flourishing is the goal and end of dependent rationality, itself, stands in stark contrast to the *theologia crucis*. For, to care for the dependent with an expectation of some good the dependent may contribute or some broader flourishing that may result—rather than caring for the dependent simply because they are dependent as we all are equally dependent upon Christ who died for us²⁰—is itself a move to *theologia gloriae*. Despite this, MacIntyre maintains that far from compromising dignity, dependence illuminates the practices (e.g., attention, just generosity, truthful speech) by which communities sustain persons whose capacities vary across the life course.

Eva Feder Kittay complements this thesis, in her work *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependence*, by refusing the invisibilization of care labor and the moral marginalization of those who require or provide intensive care.²¹ Her work exposes the false autonomy cherished by liberal imaginaries and argues that equality must be reframed around nested dependencies and relational justice. However, her arguments on behalf of the *dependent* are undermined by the primary agenda of her argument. Kittay's argument is not primarily on behalf of the disabled—or as she describes them—the *dependent*. Rather, her primary agenda is for social justice on behalf of women, who she describes that those to whom society relegates the care of the dependent (as she terms it, *Dependency Work*). As the dependent are disenfranchised in society due to their dependency, so the women in whose *charge* these dependent are placed, are by extension are also disenfranchised. Her argument is for increased visibility in society for the dependency worker as a necessary element of the relational justice of the dependent. Unfortunately, Kittay's argument undermines her own premise by making the infant/child, disabled, and elderly a means by which to elevate the position of women in society. This argument—as with MacIntyre's—is itself a move to *theologia gloriae*. Rather, the true expression of *theologia crucis* is to be found in the very circumstances that Kittay seeks to reject.

The point of the dependency critique is to show that, as long as the bounds of justice are drawn within reciprocal relations among free and equal persons, dependents will continue to remain disenfranchised, and dependency workers who are otherwise fully capable and cooperating members of society will continue to share varying degrees of the dependents' disenfranchisement.²²

Kittay rightly identifies the invisibilization of care labor and the moral marginalization of those who require or provide intensive care. However, the answer for the Body of Christ is not to raise up the disabled and those who care for them to glory. Rather, it is to gladly become invisible themselves for the sake of those who are themselves invisible, as Christ made himself nothing for us.²³

In spite of their limitations, these accounts resonate with the Lutheran *Schule Christi*. The cross breaks the enchantment of self-sufficiency and educates the church to receive dependence as truth, not failure. This does not romanticize dependence; it normalizes it. Congregations who learn from disabled Christians discover that the “ordinary means” of grace—preaching, sacraments, prayer—are already structured to sustain the dependent through promise, while declaring the basic dependence of us all. MacIntyre's virtues of acknowledged dependence and Kittay's ethics of care therefore function as philosophical allies to ecclesial formation: they commend practices that a cruciform people will recognize as evangelical habits—patience, fidelity, truthful speech, shared burdens—ordered not to autonomy but to communion.²⁴

3. Martha C. Nussbaum: Capabilities Under the Sovereignty of Gift

Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach seeks to secure political arrangements that enable persons to pursue central human functions—life, bodily health, practical reason, affiliation—challenging structures that truncate real opportunity.²⁵ In disability contexts, the approach provides a policy grammar for accessibility, education, employment, and civic participation. It is therefore a vital tool for congregations advocating just infrastructures in the wider polis.

Yet capabilities must be subordinated to the Lutheran grammar of gift. When capabilities become the primary measure of personhood, ecclesial reception risks re-inscribing the ableist imagination: we welcome because someone meets thresholds of capacity or contributes functionally to communal goods. A cruciform church welcomes because Christ has welcomed; capabilities are pursued as neighbor-serving goods, not identity-granting metrics.²⁶ Reordered this way, Nussbaum's approach functions instrumentally: congregations advocate for capabilities for the sake of the neighbor, while confessing that belonging rests in promise, not performance.²⁷ In practice, this means churches can argue for ramps, interpreters, assistive technology, and inclusive employment policies using capabilities language in public environments, even as they catechize internally that no capability—present or absent—confers personhood.

4. An Ostrakon Appraisal: Difference Named, Dependence Kept, Capabilities Subordinated

The *ostrakon* is more than a metaphor; it is cruciform hermeneutic. The shard, chosen after breaking, becomes a surface for inscription, not an object for museum restoration. This vantage both honors and corrects our four philosophical interlocutors: it receives their clarifications while refusing any move that polishes the shard back into a manageable vessel.

A. ELIZABETH BARNES: VALUING DIFFERENCE WITHOUT FLATTENING INSCRIPTION

Barnes's insistence that disability is (in many cases) a value-neutral difference untethers personhood from deficit narratives and disarms the reflex that equates impairment with diminished humanity. This is a salutary clearing of the stage. Yet neutrality, left to itself, can become a kind of antiseptic smoothness—difference acknowledged but the shard's inscribed significance left unread. The *ostrakon* presses further: disability is not only “not less,” it is a *place where* God writes the promise; its meaning is cruciformly *received*, not metaphysically neutral. To say merely “difference” risks neglecting the election of the broken surface as God's preferred medium of address. Under the cross, we do not hover above impairment with neutral metaphysics; we kneel to read the Word written on scarred flesh.

B. ALASDAIR MACINTYRE: ACKNOWLEDGED DEPENDENCE
WITHOUT EUDAIMONIST CAPTURE

MacIntyre's portrait of "dependent rational animals" rehabilitates the virtues that sustain lives laced with vulnerability—attention, just generosity, truthful speech—thereby puncturing the myth of sovereign autonomy. Yet his teleology can tilt dependence toward functional flourishing—care justified by the common good to which it contributes—making dependence instrumentally tolerable rather than truthfully constitutive. The *ostrakon* refuses this capture. The shard's edges do not earn their keep by smoothing communal performance; they *reform* it. Breakage is not an obstacle to be overcome by virtuous technique; it is a site of election, where the community's tempo, budget, and authority are re-inscribed by the Crucified. In other words, the shard is not valuable because it still "serves the project of flourishing," but because the Divine Author has chosen to write there.

C. EVA FEDER KITTAY: VISIBILITY OF CARE
WITHOUT INSTRUMENTALIZING THE DEPENDENT

Kittay's exposure of the invisibilized labor of care and the moral marginalization of those who require it is indispensable for any truthful account of communal life. But when the argument's center of gravity shifts toward elevating the *status* of caregivers, the dependent can become the means by which recognition is secured—the shard pressed into service for someone else's advancement. The *ostrakon* won't permit that exchange. The broken surface is not a prop for vindicating the carer; it is the locus of divine inscription that commands the church's reorderings—liturgical, pastoral, and economic—*for the sake of the one on whom the Word has been written*. To call things what they are is to say that care is not a ladder up the social order but a school of cruciform passivity wherein the body of Christ learns to receive from the least.

D. MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM:
PUBLIC REASON WITHOUT ECCLESIAL METRIC

Nussbaum's capabilities approach is a faithful tool for public advocacy—ramps, interpreters, transportation, employment, education—goods a just polis should secure. But capabilities must remain index, not identity. When imported uncritically into the church, they can become threshold metrics by which belonging is tacitly assessed and pace is silently set. The *ostrakon* protects against this colonization: the church is not assembled by capability thresholds but by baptismal inscription on broken lives. Capabilities thus become diaconal instruments the church seeks *for the neighbor in the world*, even as the congregation confesses *within its worship* that the shard belongs before any proof of usefulness and that the shard's edges—its inconvenient tempos and geometries—are part of the community's conversion to promise.

Interim Summary (Ostrakon Guardrails for Philosophy)

- Inscription over Neutrality (Barnes): difference is not only “not bad”; it is a site of divine address.
- Election over Eudaimonism (MacIntyre): dependence is not justified by its contribution to flourishing; it is embraced as truth under the cross.
- Person over Platform (Kittay): care does not instrumentalize the dependent for caregiver recognition; it centers the one upon whom God writes.
- Promise over Threshold (Nussbaum): capabilities serve the neighbor; they do not adjudicate ecclesial belonging.

Each guardrail preserves what is most helpful while disallowing the subtle sanding of the shard’s edges.

5. Synthesis: Philosophical Clarifications Serving a Cruciform Ecclesiology

The philosophers help the church unlearn the moral imagination of normalcy—*if* their insights are received under the grammar of the cross and the hermeneutic of the shard.

A. DECENTER CAPACITY AS THE GROUND OF IDENTITY—NOW NAMED AS INSCRIPTION

Barnes resists deficit and thereby clears room for truthful speech, but the church must not stop at neutrality; it must confess inscription—that God writes promise on disabled bodies and lives. Thus, congregational practices (catechesis, preaching, pastoral care) do more than avoid harm; they teach the assembly to read what God has written on the shard, receiving disabled Christians as theologians of the cross rather than as neutral variants of humanity.

B. HONOR DEPENDENCE AS ORDINARY—NOW PROTECTED FROM EUDAIMONIST CAPTURE

MacIntyre’s virtues of acknowledged dependence are catechetically useful, but the telos is not communal efficiency; it is conformity to Christ under the cross. Therefore, the “edges” of the shard—slower liturgies, redistributed leadership, budgetary reallocation—are not tolerated for the sake of a future payoff; they are embraced as the present shape of fidelity to the Crucified.

C. RENDER CARE VISIBLE—NOW WITHOUT INSTRUMENTALIZING THE DEPENDENT

Kittay helps communities name the labor and justice of care. Yet in the church, the person upon whom God has written remains at the center. Recognition is not purchased by showcasing care; recognition is bestowed by promise. Therefore, care plans are co-authored, testimony is led by disabled members, and governance seats are re-served—not to stage care, but to confess who the church is when it receives its teachers.

D. USE CAPABILITIES PUBLICLY—NOW SUBORDINATED TO PROMISE ECCLESIAALLY

Nussbaum gives congregations a public language for accessibility and justice; keep it in the polis. Inside the assembly, promise outranks threshold. Capabilities are pursued as diaconal goods for neighbors; they do not adjudicate who belongs or how the body gathers. The practical test is whether capabilities talk *changes the church's pace* or whether the shard's edges still do. The latter is the cruciform sign that the community has not been re-captured by performance metrics.

These four, held within the established Lutheran grammar of Promise–Cross–Community, prevent philosophy from becoming a new law while allowing it to serve the gospel's own pedagogy: the Spirit schooling the church on a broken surface upon which God Himself has chosen to write.

IV. Ecclesial Ethic: Dismantling the Moral Imagination of “Normalcy”

THE *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS* RENDERS THE CHURCH a people gathered by promise, not curated by capacity. If Sections I–III established the theological grammar (promise), pedagogical location (cross), and clarifying concepts (difference, dependence, capabilities), this section specifies practices by which congregations unlearn ableist habits and embody cruciform hospitality. The aim is not a program layered atop existing ministries but an evangelical reordering—liturgy, catechesis, care, governance, and public witness reshaped by Christ's welcome. In other words, the congregation learns to live as a field of shard—*ostraca* chosen after breaking—upon which God Himself inscribes the Word that gathers and sends.

1. Liturgical Reordering: Belonging Before Contribution

A. ORDINARY RITES AS SITES OF ACCESS

Worship services should presume disability as part of the congregation's ordinary life. Architectural access (ramps, seating, clear aisles), auditory/visual supports (hearing loops, Communication Access Real-Time Translation or American Sign Language, large-print or braille resources), and Sensory-friendly spaces designed to accommodate individuals with sensory processing challenges are not adjunct “accommodations,” but liturgical instruments that confess belonging prior to contribution.²⁸ In a cruciform register, these are not favors to the few; they are diaconal enactments of baptismal equality. They are also the scribe's desk and good ink for the church-as-ostrakon: practical means by which the Author's inscription can be seen and heard on broken surfaces without forcing those surfaces to be remade into pristine vessels.

B. ROLES THAT CATECHIZE RECEPTION

Disabled members should visibly serve—as lectors, assisting ministers, cantors, ushers, catechists, and yes as pastors—so the congregation learns to receive the gospel from broken voices and bodies.²⁹ When mobility or speech limits shape how a role is exercised, the congregation adjusts the form without questioning the person’s call. Such visibility undermines the subtle metric that equates leadership with normative bodies. It also teaches the assembly how to “read the shard”: the reading may follow a slower line, the chant may break and resume, the procession may bend around an edge—yet the inscription is clearer for having honored the surface upon which God chose to write.

C. THE PRAYERS AND THE TABLE

Intercessions must name disabled persons not as objects of cure alone but as teachers and co-bearers of Christ’s body. Eucharistic practice should normalize variable pacing and positioning (e.g., distributing from multiple levels, bringing the sacrament to those who cannot approach easily). What is at stake is not mere inclusion but the sacramental confession that Christ’s body is given for you—addressed to bodies that differ.³⁰ The table therefore becomes the place where the church dares to handle the shard without sanding its edges: the fraction rite does not conceal but proclaims that grace is distributed along the contours of our shared, fractured humanity.

Liturgical reordering embodies the *res dicere* of Section I: the congregation calls things what they are—creatures dependent upon a crucified Giver—so that architecture and ritual form agree with the gospel.³¹ And because the gospel is God’s writing upon broken clay, liturgy that tells the truth is liturgy that lets the shard remain a shard, even as it bears Christ.

2. Catechesis and Formation: Learning Passivity and Promise

A. BAPTISMAL ANTHROPOLOGY

A sustained catechesis should teach that identity is bestowed *extra nos* in baptism, not achieved by autonomy or capacity. The catechism’s Creedal pedagogy—“I believe that God has made me ... and all that exists ... and daily provides...”—renders dependence a gift rather than a failure.³² Baptism is, in this sense, the first inscription: the Triune Name written upon a life whose worth is not the intactness of the vessel but the faithfulness of the Author.

B. ANFECHTUNG AS PEDAGOGY

Schedule regular opportunities for testimony in which disabled members interpret their lives beneath the cross—neither romanticizing pain nor receiving pity, but

narrating how promise holds amid affliction.³³ This practice resists both sentimentalization and moralization by letting the community learn the grammar of grace from those schooled in it. These testimonies are not exhibitions but readings—public acts of “tracing the letters” God has set upon a shard, so the assembly learns to discern inscription rather than to demand smoothness.

C. TEACHING THE VIRTUES OF ACKNOWLEDGED DEPENDENCE

Adult forums and youth catechesis should engage the virtues MacIntyre describes (just generosity, misericordia, truthful speech) and Kittay’s ethics of care, explicitly connecting them to the church’s diaconal life.³⁴ The point is to render care that is neither heroism nor afterthought, but ordinary discipleship. Practically, these virtues are the community’s trained hands: they hold the shard carefully, they refuse to file its edges for convenience, and they read slowly enough that nothing God has written is lost to haste.

3. Pastoral Care and Mutuality: Ministry *with*, not *to*

A. REFUSAL OF ASYMMETRY

Pastoral care must dismantle the “helper/helped” binary. Care plans should be co-authored with disabled members, starting from their articulated desires and boundaries, not from an assumed agenda of normalization or cure.³⁵ Co-authorship recognizes that the shard already bears writing; the task is not to overwrite the surface with our plans, but to attend to the words the Author has placed there and to act accordingly.

B. MUTUAL AID TEAMS

Establish small “care commons” in which disabled members, caregivers, and non-disabled members practice shared burdens: transportation, meals, respite, accompaniment to medical visits, and prayer. Rotate facilitation to avoid paternalism. Mutual aid converts charity into communion.³⁶ In ostrakon terms, mutual aid redistributes the weight so no shard must carry stress at its most fragile edge; the community adjusts its grip rather than demanding the fragment become a jar again.

C. CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

Create space in pastoral offices and congregational liturgies for explicit confession of ableist sins—eye-rolling at slow speech, avoiding awkward bodies, prioritizing efficiency over persons—and announce absolution that sends the congregation back to neighbors with reformed habits.³⁷ We confess not only our contempt but our constant urge to polish; in absolution, Christ re-inscribes us, teaching us to prefer truth on a broken surface to beauty on a counterfeit one.

4. Governance and Accountability: Structures That Tell the Truth

A. ACCESSIBILITY AUDIT AND BUDGET

Adopt an annual audit (physical, liturgical, digital) co-led by disabled members. Publish results and budget to address gaps—ramps, doors, restrooms, lighting, sound, website accessibility, document formats.³⁸ Treat line items not as optional enhancements but as truthful spending consistent with baptismal promise. Think of the audit as an examination of the shard's contours: budgets purchase not prestige but legibility, ensuring that what God writes on broken lives can be publicly read in this place.

B. POLICY CONVERSION

Draft a congregational statement naming disability within your doctrine of creation, sin, redemption, and church, repudiating deficit language and committing to reception under the cross. Include grievance pathways and timelines for response so that “belonging” is legally and pastorally actionable.³⁹ Policies, then, become a canonical register for inscriptions—procedural ways of saying that the shard will not be shelved, that when the writing is obscured, the community has a practiced path to bring it back to the scribe's light.

C. LEADERSHIP REPRESENTATION

Reserve seats for disabled members on council/vestry and key committees (worship, property, education). Representation changes deliberation: budgets, timelines, and priorities begin to mirror the real body gathered by Christ. Put simply: place the shard at the table. Let its edges touch the agenda until the agenda acquires the shape of the body God has actually assembled here.

5. Public Witness: Capabilities for the Neighbor, Promise for the Church

A. ADVOCATE CAPABILITIES; CONFESS PROMISE

In civic life, congregations should argue for policies that expand capabilities—transportation, education, housing, employment protections—using public reasons intelligible to all.⁴⁰ Inside the church, preach and teach that belonging rests not on those capabilities but on God's promise in Christ. This twofold posture prevents ecclesial identity from being colonized by performance metrics while mobilizing the church as the Body of Christ for all in the community. Capabilities here are lamps and ramps to the scribe's desk; promise is the inscription itself. We seek the former for our neighbors; we confess the latter as our life.

B. PARTNERSHIPS BEYOND THE PARISH

Collaborate with local disability organizations, schools, and care networks without outsourcing your vocation. Partnerships extend practical competence; the church's

distinct gift is to name persons according to the gospel and to sustain them with Word and Sacrament.⁴¹ Borrow tools, not the pen: the Author of our life writes with Word and water and bread and wine, and this inscription is the singular gift the church brings to every partnership.

C. PROPHETIC SIGN AND SACRAMENTAL VISIBILITY

Ordinary practices—an ASL interpreter at the font, a wheelchair at the lectern, a stutter from the pulpit—become public signs that contradict the fiction of an unfractured *imago Dei*. The church's visibility is its argument: a people gathered not by sameness or strength, but by the Crucified.⁴² These are not stage props but readable texts—shards held up to the light so that the world may see that God's mercy prefers broken surfaces to polished idols.

6. Guardrails: What This Ethic Does Not Do

- It does not romanticize suffering. The cross interprets affliction; it does not sanctify pain per se.⁴³ Fracture is neither fetish nor fate; its significance is that God elects the broken as His medium, not that brokenness is good in itself.
- It does not deny medical care or therapeutic supports. It refuses only the conversion of cure into a moral necessity for belonging. Healing may smooth certain edges; belonging does not await the sanding.
- It does not reduce disabled Christians to “illustrations.” Visibility serves catechesis and truth, not spectacle. We read inscriptions; we do not exhibit artifacts.
- It does not replace the gospel with activism. Public advocacy flows from promise; it cannot establish it. Activism furnishes better lighting; the gospel is the writing.

7. Practicum: A One-Year Parish Rule of Life (Illustrative)

QUARTER 1: Conduct the accessibility audit; budget quick wins (ushers trained in sighted-guide, print alternatives; website alt-text). Begin a sermon series on baptismal identity and dependence (i.e., Lk 14; 1 Cor 12). Name this quarter “Setting the Scribe’s Desk”: learn the contours of the shard and ensure the community can actually read what God writes.

QUARTER 2: Install assistive listening; pilot sensory-friendly seating; schedule two worship-testimony events. Launch two mutual-aid teams. Call this “Learning the Lines”: adjust pace and posture to the inscription’s flow, and let testimonies teach the congregation to trace the letters of grace.

QUARTER 3: Revise volunteer/leadership policies; add a disabled seat to the worship committee; craft congregational disability statement. This is “Putting the Shard at the Table”: governance adopts the geometry of the body it serves.

QUARTER 4: Host a public forum with local partners on transportation and employment; write letters supporting city accessibility initiatives; embed an annual confession of ableist sins into All Saints or Christ the King liturgies. Think of this as “Holding the Shard to the Light”: witness in the *polis* and repentance in the sanctuary so that what God has written remains legible within and beyond the parish.

Each step is small, concrete, and evangelical: the congregation does what it says about promise, cross, and community—and does it on the broken surface God has chosen for His inscription.

Conclusion: Theologians of the Cross for the Sake of the Church

DISABILITY, SITUATED BENEATH THE CROSS, becomes *Schule Christi*—a school of formation and proclamation wherein the Spirit trains the church to receive life as gift rather than achievement. In this cruciform pedagogy, disabled Christians are not marginal participants in ecclesial life but indispensable witnesses whose lives expose the truth of creaturely dependence and unveil the mercy by which God meets human frailty. Read through the ostrakon: the church learns that God elects the broken surface as His page; the shard, chosen after breaking, becomes the very site of inscription where promise is legible to the whole assembly. Their presence resists the moral imagination of normalcy and calls the church to inhabit its own baptismal identity: a people shaped not by prowess or performance, but by the promise spoken from the Crucified—a people who do not discard the fragment but treasure it as the medium of divine writing.

Such formation requires *res dicere*, truthful speech that unmasks the illusions by which congregations have long measured worth. The church’s willingness to call a thing what it is—to recognize ableism as a theological error rather than merely a social injustice—marks its conversion from a *theologia gloriae* to a *theologia crucis*. Truthful speech here is not an abstract correction but a practiced reading of the shard: refusing to sand its edges for liturgical convenience or polish its surface for ecclesial aesthetics, the church learns to sound out the letters of grace exactly where the Author has set them. In this truthful speech, gift is enthroned over capacity, and belonging is confessed as bestowed rather than earned. By learning to speak thus, the church is drawn ever deeper into the economy of grace, where persons are not curated according to their competencies but welcomed according to Christ’s embrace—the Word inscribed upon broken clay for our salvation.

This article has traced the outlines of such a cruciform vision, integrating Luther's grammar of promise, contemporary disability theology, and philosophical accounts of difference and dependence. Yet much work remains. Future research must include empirical case studies of congregations undergoing this cruciform reorientation—parish-level narratives that illuminate how liturgical access, pastoral care practices, governance structures, and communal life are transformed when disability is received as *Schule Christi*. These studies should ask not only *what changed* but *what became legible*: where, in the parish's life, did the shard's inscription reshape the pace of worship, the distribution of authority, or the lines of the budget? Homiletical resources are likewise needed to guide preachers in proclaiming the gospel without reinscribing deficit imaginaries, crafting sermons that invite the whole assembly to confess the truth of dependence under the cross—sermons that teach the church how to “read the shard” rather than to repair it. Finally, liturgical revision—architectural, textual, and ritual—must continue to develop in ways consistent with this anthropology, forming communities whose practices embody belonging before contribution—or, to keep the image, communities that provide the scribe's desk, the clear light, and the patient tempo by which God's inscription on broken lives can be publicly read. If the church is to be a people gathered by promise, not performance, then disabled Christians will continue to stand at its center as theologians of the cross—teaching the body of Christ how to live by grace, speak truthfully, and welcome one another as those whose lives are hidden with Christ in God.

“Disability,” in its earliest sense, did not speak of bodies or minds at all. The word simply meant a *lack*—a limitation of capacity in some general or legal sense. When English speakers in the mid-1500s combined *dis-* (“not, without”) with *ability* (“capacity, aptitude”), they were naming a condition common to every human being: the reality that no one can do all things in all circumstances. The term carried no inherent moral judgment, no implication of defect, and none of the cultural baggage that later centuries would load upon it.

The tragic stigmas that cling to the word today—ideas of curse, sinfulness, burden, or deficiency—long predate the term itself. These were never part of the word's original fabric; they were cultural assumptions woven in afterward, as societies began applying the term to real human lives and bodies. Ancient and medieval imaginations often linked bodily impairment with divine punishment or moral failing, but that was the culture speaking, not the language. Linguistically, disability was simply one more way of saying that humans have limits.

It is only in the 19th and 20th centuries, as the term narrowed to refer more explicitly to physical and mental impairments, that “disability” became entangled with the prejudices already present in the social imagination. But those associations are

later additions. They are not native to the word. At its root, disability is a reminder of something universally true: each of us stands “unable” in one way or another, depending on the circumstance. No body—quite literally—can do everything. Disability is not an anomaly; it is a dimension of our shared humanity. And when we place this reality beneath the cross, the picture sharpens. The *ostrakon* in the church’s hand—the broken shard—bears witness not only to the wounded individual but to the condition of us all. Within the Body of Christ, the disabled Christian becomes a living testimony to the truth we would rather avoid; not one of us is the unbroken *Imago Dei*. Only Christ is whole in the way we are not.

We are not broken alike, but we are all, every one of us, alike broken. And in those fractures—precisely there—the living God inscribes His grace.

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Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), esp. Theses 18–21: Vol. 31, pp. 39–41, in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg Press/Fortress Press, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 39–41, hereafter LW.
2. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 19–21; see also the contrast of *theologia gloriae* and *theologia crucis* in Thesis 21.
3. For the critique of moralism and performative righteousness in Luther, see *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 1–6, 25.
4. On narrating disability as difference rather than deficit, this article engages the Lutheran grammar first, then converses with Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
5. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 20: “He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.”
6. See Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, “The Creed,” in LW, vol. 51, *Sermons I*, and his sermons on *Anfechtungen* (e.g., LW 42–46).
7. Cf. Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008), for an ecclesial turn to vulnerability; here re-situated explicitly under the cruciform pedagogy.

8. Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 25–26; and *Two Kinds of Righteousness* (1519), in LW 31, 297–306.
9. On dependence as intrinsic to human flourishing, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago/La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1999); Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
10. Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).
11. *Ibid.*; see also the pastoral and liturgical implications Eiesland draws for ecclesial participation and leadership.
12. For cautions about romanticizing impairment and the need to avoid voluntarist triumphalism, see the critique developed here in conversation with the Lutheran *theologia crucis* (cf. Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 21).
13. Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007); Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011).
14. Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, esp. chs. 2–3 (on gifts and inclusion).
15. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*.
16. Barnes, *The Minority Body*.
17. *Ibid.*, esp. chs. 1–2 (on value-neutrality) and ch.6 (social construction of disability's perceived badness).
18. The theological relocation of "badness" aligns with the Lutheran diagnosis of the world's disordered loves under the cross; cf. Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 21 (LW 31).
19. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.
20. Matthew 25:40
21. Kittay, *Love's Labor*.
22. *Ibid.*, 85
23. Philippians 2:1-10.
24. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, esp. chs. 7–10; Kittay, *Love's Labor*, esp. chs. 1–3.
25. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA/London, UK: The Belknap Press, 2006), esp. chs. 1–2.
26. 1 John 4:7-21.
27. Nussbaum.; read through the Lutheran distinction of promise and performance to guard against capabilities becoming identity metrics.
28. Treat access as integral to worship, not add-on: this flows from baptismal belonging and the cruciform priority of the least; cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 180–202; Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 96–120.

29. Visibility forms desire and doctrine; see Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 152–79; Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 91–114.
30. On Eucharistic participation as belonging enacted, see Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 115–36; and the *theologia crucis* grounding in Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), in LW 31, Theses 20–21.
31. Luther’s contrast between theologies of glory and cross clarifies why liturgical form must agree with the gospel’s address; *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 19–21.
32. Luther, *Large Catechism*, “The Creed,” in LW, passim; the anthropology of givenness complements Elizabeth Barnes’s critique of deficit narratives in *The Minority Body*, chs. 1–2.
33. Testimony as anti-sentimental catechesis: Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 205–12; Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 69–90.
34. MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, chs. 7–10; Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, chs. 1–3.
35. Care plans and refusal of asymmetry: Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, 29–54; Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 137–51.
36. Mutual aid as communion: MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, 127–42; Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 180–202.
37. Confession/absolution applied to ableism aligns with cruciform truth-telling (*res dicere*): Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 1–6, 25; cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 210–12.
38. Accessibility audits operationalize Nussbaum’s civic goods while locating belonging in promise: Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 96–160; Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 131–58.
39. Policy conversion ensures practices match doctrine; cf. Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 137–58; Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 193–202.
40. Capabilities as public grammar, promise as ecclesial ground: Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 70–120; Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Theses 25–26.
41. Partnership without outsourcing vocation: Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church*, 159–78; Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 203–12.
42. Public signs contradict the fiction of an unfractured *imago Dei*: Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 1–24; Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 20.
43. Guarding against romanticization: Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 159–86; Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, Thesis 21.

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When Reasons No Longer Persuade

Dennis Bielfeldt

Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, MANY HAVE NOTICED a striking feature of our public life. People speak with great conviction. They march, protest, organize, and demand change. Yet in many cases, they do not seem interested in offering reasons in the way we have traditionally expected. Positions are asserted, not argued; claims are advanced, not defended. This is not simply a matter of rhetorical style or a failure of education. Something deeper appears to be at work. The familiar expectation that disagreements should be settled, or at least clarified, through the exchange of reasons no longer holds with the same force it once did.¹

Following this shift in our public life, one may consider a familiar scene. People watch protests unfold on television or through live streams: groups moving through streets, shouting slogans, occupying spaces, sometimes disrupting the ordinary rhythms of civic life. What is striking, however, is not simply the activity itself, but what is often absent from it. Rarely do we encounter careful, sustained efforts on the part of participants to state their demands in a clear, rational, and unambiguous way, accompanied by reasons offered in their defense.

This absence is not compensated for by those reporting on these events. The national media, often sympathetic to many of the stated concerns, seldom press for a more rigorous articulation of the claims being made or the grounds upon which they rest. The result is what might be called an epistemic pass: positions are advanced without a corresponding expectation that they be justified within a shared space of reasons.² One is presented not with arguments but with lists of concerns, as though merely naming an issue sufficed to establish its urgency and truth.

Ordinarily, public reasoning proceeds differently. One identifies a problem, shows that it in fact obtains, and then offers a proposal for addressing it. For example, claims about injustice would typically be supported by evidence drawn from broader patterns rather than isolated instances, and proposed remedies would be weighed against alternatives with attention to their likely consequences. The burden

of argument lies with those who seek to change the existing order: they must show not only that a problem exists, but also that their proposed solution is both coherent and preferable.

Yet increasingly, this pattern appears to be bypassed. The issues in question are treated as though they were self-evident—visible to anyone not blinded by their own position within the social order. Those who do not see what is claimed are not so much refuted as diagnosed: their inability to recognize the problem is taken as evidence of their complicity in it. The failure is not one of reasoning, but of perception. One does not disagree; one does not yet see.

At this point, the phenomenon becomes clearer. What appears, from within the traditional framework, as a failure to give reasons may instead reflect a deeper conviction: that the very demand for reasons already belongs to a way of thinking that must be overcome.³ If what one believes is determined by one's place within a broader social structure, then the task is not to justify one's claims within that structure, but to disclose what that structure conceals. The aim shifts from argument to revelation, from persuasion to manifestation.

To understand this shift, it is helpful to employ a distinction introduced by the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars between what he called the *manifest image* and the *scientific image* of the world.⁴ The manifest image is the world as we ordinarily encounter it. It is a world populated by persons—agents who act, deliberate, and take responsibility for what they do. In this world, actions are explained by reasons. I went to the airport because I believed that someone was arriving and because I desired to meet him. Such explanations are not peripheral to our experience; they are constitutive of it. The manifest image is thus deeply teleological: a world structured by purpose, intention, and meaning.

This is the world in which we immediately dwell, a world that phenomenologists such as Martin Heidegger have explored with particular care. It is the world of lived experience, of everyday understanding—of what things mean before we step back to theorize about them.⁵ In this world, the giving and asking for reasons is not an optional practice. It is the way in which human life is ordinarily rendered intelligible.

Alongside this stands the scientific image. Here, the aim is not to describe how the world appears, but to uncover the underlying structures that explain why it appears as it does. Colors become wavelengths, intentions become neural processes, and behavior becomes the outcome of causal interactions among more basic elements. The scientific image seeks the ultimate “stuff” of reality and the laws governing its behavior. It moves from meaning to mechanism, from purpose to cause.

There is no necessary contradiction between these images. However, there is a tension. The manifest image explains action by appeal to reasons; the scientific image explains it by appeal to causes. The former presupposes agents who can justify

what they do; the latter treats behavior as the outcome of underlying processes that do not themselves stand in need of justification.⁶ This tension becomes especially significant when extended to the social world. If human thought and action are ultimately determined by underlying structures—whether biological, economic, or cultural—then what appears in the manifest image as rational deliberation may, at a deeper level, be understood as the effect of forces that operate independently of reasons. The language of “levels” is often used to capture this relation: higher-level phenomena, such as beliefs and decisions, are said to depend on lower-level structures in such a way that no difference at the higher level occurs without a corresponding difference at the lower.⁷

In this way of thinking, the distribution of beliefs in a society is not primarily the result of individuals weighing reasons but of the underlying conditions that shape those individuals. What people take to be justified may itself be a function of deeper causal determinants. The space of reasons, so central to the manifest image, is thus reinterpreted within a framework that ultimately explains it in non-rational terms.⁸

At this point, the implications begin to emerge. If what we take to be reasons are themselves products of underlying structures, then their authority is no longer straightforward. They may still function within the manifest image, but their ultimate explanation lies elsewhere. And if that is so, then the role of reason in human life is no longer what it once appeared to be.

1. Belief as Expression

ONE WAY TO UNDERSTAND THIS SHIFT is to consider an alternative picture of how beliefs arise. On the traditional view, a person comes to hold a belief because he or she has reasons for it. The belief is, at least in principle, responsive to evidence and open to revision in light of better arguments. But there is another way to think about belief, one that has become increasingly influential in contemporary thought. On this view, what a person believes is not primarily the result of weighing reasons but of occupying a particular social position.⁹ One’s class, race, gender, economic standing, and cultural location do not merely influence one’s thinking; they help determine it. Beliefs are thus less like conclusions reached and more like expressions of a standpoint.

If this is so, then the role of reason changes fundamentally. To ask someone to give reasons for a belief presupposes that the belief stands in need of justification and that such justification can, in principle, be recognized across different perspectives. But if beliefs are understood as products of social location, then the demand for reasons begins to look misplaced. One does not justify one’s position so much as articulate it. The point is not to persuade others by offering arguments

they could, in principle, accept, but to make visible what one's position discloses.¹⁰ What appears, from within the traditional framework, as a refusal to argue may instead reflect a deeper conviction: that argument itself no longer occupies the central place it once did.

When this scientific image is extended to the social world, its implications become far-reaching. Marxist-inspired social theory assumes that the beliefs, values, and actions of human beings are not primarily the result of rational deliberation but are instead determined by underlying material conditions.¹¹ What appears, within the manifest image, as reasoning and justification is, at a deeper level, the expression of forces that operate independently of reason itself.

For Karl Marx, these determining forces were economic. The distribution of wealth, the structure of production, and the movement of capital shape not only what people do, but also what they think and value. Human consciousness does not stand over against these conditions as an independent tribunal; it arises from them. What one takes to be justified is itself a function of one's position within the economic order. Beliefs are thus not simply held—they are produced.¹² This insight did not disappear with the nineteenth century. It was refined and extended by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, including figures such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Recognizing that economic determinism alone could not explain the persistence of modern capitalist societies, they turned to culture, consciousness, and social formation more broadly. Yet the basic structure remained. What people take to be rational, just, or true is shaped by deeper conditions that they themselves do not control.¹³

These thinkers were not naïve. They sought not only to understand society but also to transform it. They argued that modern social life contains structures of domination that generate suffering and that human beings can, at least in principle, be emancipated from these structures.¹⁴ But this introduces a difficulty. If thought itself is conditioned by the very structures one seeks to overcome, then the claim to have attained a clearer or truer understanding of those structures becomes philosophically unstable.

The problem can be stated simply. If beliefs are determined by underlying conditions, then the belief that one has correctly identified those conditions must itself be so determined. The claim to insight becomes one more expression of the very system it seeks to critique.¹⁵ Yet critical theory cannot abandon the claim to insight, for without it there is no basis for critique or transformation.

At this point, the pressure intensifies. In order to transform society, one must assume that some forms of consciousness are, in fact, more adequate than others—that they see more truly. But in order to maintain the explanatory framework, one must also hold that all consciousness is conditioned. The result is a tension that

cannot easily be resolved: a theory that seeks both to explain belief as determined and to privilege certain beliefs as revealing.

It is precisely here that the space of reasons begins to erode. If what one believes is determined by one's position, then argument cannot function as justification in the traditional sense. It becomes instead a form of expression—a manifestation of the standpoint from which it arises. The appeal to reasons does not ground the claim; it displays it.

2. The Paradox of Critical Consciousness

THE DIFFICULTY EMERGES WHEN THIS ACCOUNT of belief is joined to a further claim, often made explicitly or implicitly, within contemporary critical discourse: that some have attained a clearer or more truthful grasp of social reality than others. The language of “awakening,” “consciousness,” or “seeing what others cannot see,” suggests that certain perspectives disclose what is in fact the case, while others remain bound by illusion or ideology.¹⁶ The contrast is not merely descriptive but evaluative. Some stand within distortion; others have, at least in part, escaped it.

Yet this introduces a tension. If all beliefs are products of social location, then the beliefs of those who claim such critical insight must themselves arise from a particular location and the conditions that structure it. Their judgments, no less than those they criticize, would seem to be expressions of a standpoint rather than conclusions warranted independently of it. The claim to see through ideology would itself be ideologically conditioned. The assertion of privilege in insight sits uneasily with the insistence that all insight is conditioned.

This tension becomes most apparent when one attempts to move from expression to justification. The one who claims a critical consciousness cannot enter the shared space of reasons without, at that very moment, loosening the claim that his or her position is wholly determined by social location. To offer reasons is, in principle, to invite others to see what one sees and to assent on the basis of considerations that transcend any single standpoint. But if such transcendence is denied—if all belief is fixed by location—then the act of giving reasons no longer functions as justification. It becomes, at best, another expression of position.

Accordingly, a peculiar situation arises. The critically awakened may speak forcefully and with deep conviction, but the traditional practice of arguing for one's claims becomes unstable. To justify is already to step into a space that the underlying theory calls into question. The result is not silence in the literal sense, but a shift in the function of speech itself. Words are no longer offered primarily as reasons meant to persuade; they are offered as manifestations meant to disclose. One shows one's position more than one argues for it.

This helps explain why disagreements in our public life so often seem resistant to resolution. It is not simply that people disagree about facts or values. It is that they no longer share, in the same way, a commitment to the practice of giving and asking for reasons as the means by which such disagreements might be addressed. Where that commitment weakens, persuasion gives way to expression, and argument yields to the presentation of standpoint.

3. When Argument Breaks Down

IF THIS ANALYSIS IS CORRECT, THEN many features of our contemporary public life become more intelligible. One frequently encounters situations in which one party offers data, draws distinctions, and attempts to build a case, while another responds not by contesting the argument on its own terms, but by locating the speaker within a social framework said to explain the argument itself. What is offered as a reason is received as a symptom. The exchange does not quite fail; it simply operates on different levels. One side continues to inhabit the space of reasons, while the other has shifted to an analysis of the conditions under which such reasons arise.

In such a setting, disagreement is no longer primarily about the truth of a claim but about the standpoint from which the claim is made. To question an argument is to question the position of the one making it. This helps explain why appeals to evidence so often seem to have little effect. Evidence, after all, functions within a framework in which claims are evaluated for their truth. But if claims are understood instead as expressions of social location, then the introduction of further evidence does not address the deeper issue. It may even reinforce suspicion, appearing as yet another instance of a standpoint attempting to universalize itself.

The result is a growing asymmetry in public discourse. Those who continue to rely on argument often assume that more careful reasoning, clearer distinctions, or better evidence will eventually carry the day. Those who operate with a more critical understanding of belief may see such efforts as beside the point. The aim is not to persuade within a shared framework but to expose the framework itself as conditioned and, in some sense, distorting. What one side experiences as a breakdown in rational exchange, the other may experience as a necessary refusal to participate in a practice that conceals more than it reveals.

This does not mean that speech ceases or that conviction weakens. On the contrary, expression can become more intense as the expectation of persuasion diminishes. But the character of speech changes. It becomes less oriented toward the mutual recognition of reasons and more toward the articulation of identity, experience, and standpoint. Where argument once aimed at agreement, expression aims at disclosure. And where the space of reasons recedes, the possibility of being

persuaded—of genuinely changing one’s mind in response to what another says—becomes increasingly fragile.

4. Speaking Again

AT THE LIMIT, THE DIFFICULTY BECOMES CLEAR. A position that understands itself as wholly conditioned by a particular standpoint cannot easily be justified in a way that transcends that standpoint. To offer such a justification would already be to step beyond the very framework that gives the position its meaning. What results is a shift in the function of speech itself. One does not so much argue for one’s position as exhibit it. One shows it rather than says it in a way that could claim universal validity.

This distinction recalls, in a different register, a theme explored by Søren Kierkegaard in his discussion of Abraham. Abraham cannot justify his action within the ordinary space of ethical reasoning without rendering himself unintelligible. What he does can only be shown, not made comprehensible through reasons available to all.¹⁷ Whatever one makes of Kierkegaard’s analysis, it illustrates a crucial point: there are forms of commitment that resist translation into the shared language of justification.

Something analogous appears in contemporary discourse. Where belief is understood as the expression of a standpoint rather than the outcome of reasoning, the attempt to justify that belief within a common framework risks undermining it. The more one argues, the more one seems to concede that one’s position stands in need of justification in a space that the underlying theory calls into question. Speech becomes strained—not because conviction is weak, but because the conditions for justification are no longer shared.

For Christian theology, this situation presses an unavoidable question: Can speech still bear truth in a way that is not reducible to the standpoint from which it arises? The proclamation of the gospel assumes that it can—that what is said can be heard as true, not merely as the expression of a position. It assumes, in other words, that there remains a space in which words can do more than display where we stand. They can address us, call us, and, in some measure, persuade us. If that space is lost, then persuasion gives way to expression, and argument yields to manifestation. If it is preserved, however tenuously, then speech remains possible in a deeper sense. The task, then, is not simply to speak, but to speak in confidence that what is said may yet be heard—not as the echo of a standpoint, but as bearing truth.

What is finally at stake here is not only the fate of public argument but also the intelligibility of life itself. Human life can be publicly honored and protected only where it is understood to possess a significance not reducible to the interests, location, or interpretive framework of those who speak about it. Once the space

of reasons is eclipsed by the language of standpoint, the human being no longer appears with the same ontological weight. Life is redescribed through categories of social function, power, embodiment, and liberation, and the question of what a human being is begins to yield to the question of how that being is situated within structures of meaning and conflict.

The result is not merely theoretical confusion. It is a weakening of the cultural conditions under which life can appear as inviolable. Where ontology gives way to critique and truth to manifestation, life itself becomes increasingly vulnerable to redescription. And what can first be redescribed can later be denied.

Conclusion

WE BEGAN WITH A SIMPLE OBSERVATION: in many areas of contemporary life, reasons no longer seem to persuade as they once did. What initially appears as a failure of argument or a breakdown in civility may, on closer inspection, reflect a deeper shift in how belief itself is understood. If beliefs are taken to be products of social location rather than conclusions reached through the weighing of reasons, then the practice of justification is inevitably weakened. What can be expressed need not be defended; what is disclosed need not be argued for.

This shift helps explain both the intensity and the intractability of many present disagreements. Participants in public discourse often no longer share the same assumptions about what it means to offer a reason or to be persuaded by one. Where that shared commitment erodes, argument gives way to expression, and the hope for resolution diminishes. The issue is not simply that we disagree, but that we increasingly lack a common understanding of how disagreement might be addressed.

To recognize this is not yet to resolve the problem, but to name it more precisely. In naming it, one also sees more clearly what is at stake. The erosion of the space of reasons is not merely a procedural loss within public discourse. It bears directly upon the question of life. *For where speech can no longer bear truth in a way meant to bind us all, human life itself becomes harder to name as possessing an intrinsic worth that claims protection.* It is then interpreted less as a reality to be acknowledged than as a phenomenon to be situated within competing social narratives. If the space of reasons is lost, the ontology of life is weakened with it. If it is preserved, however tenuously, then life may yet appear again not merely as material to be interpreted, but as a reality bearing its own claim upon us. Without that confidence, persuasion fades, and with it the public intelligibility of life itself. With it, even fragile words may still defend what otherwise slips from view.

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Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 8–42.
2. Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), §§36–38.
3. For influential formulations of this shift in terms of standpoint and social location, see Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1936); and, for more recent developments in standpoint epistemology, Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
4. Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 1–40.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), §§12–18.
6. Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” 5–10
7. Jaegwon Kim, “Supervenience and Mind,” in *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 53–78.
8. For a classic articulation of the “space of reasons,” see Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” §§ 36–38; see also Robert B. Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 5–15.
9. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 55–87.
10. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, 119–37; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 251–71.
11. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 20–21.
12. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, trans. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 47–52.
13. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1–34.
14. Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243.

15. For this reflexivity problem, see Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 75–90; cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 308–17.
16. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 64–66; cf. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 149–222.
17. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 54–70.

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Book Review

Alisa Childers & Tim Barnett, *The Deconstruction of Christianity: What It Is, Why It's Destructive, and How to Respond*, Forward by Carl R. Trueman (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2023), xv + 277 pp. \$17.99.

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

IN THE SEARCH FOR MEANING UNDERTAKEN by every person concerned with the course of his life, certain questions arise, such as ‘Who am I?’ ‘What should I do?’ ‘Where should I go?’ and ‘What should I believe?’ For those raised in a religious environment, apprehension about faith, worship, rituals, and foundational tenets inevitably arises. In past decades and centuries, the structures of Western towns and cities were built on Christian texts and ethical directives. Members of such societies, even those with doubts, ingrained themselves in social norms for the betterment of themselves and their fellow citizens by creating strong communities connected through relationships with God, family, and neighbors. However, the twentieth century saw a surge of ideas opposing traditional morality, knowledge, and societal institutions, especially the church. The Christian church in particular rose to a prominent position as the primary target of disillusioned and hostile individuals insistent on reassessing notions of fairness, justice, education, and social interactions—all in the pursuit of self-righteous truth-seeking, or so it seemed and still seems for those pursuing a fractured view of equity that, in appearance and language, is disguised as equality.

Specifically as concerns Christianity, such apostasy has infiltrated America’s youth, fueling a movement called “deconstruction.” Alisa Childers and Tim Barnett focus on this damaging practice in their text *The Deconstruction of Christianity: What It Is, Why It's Destructive, and How to Respond*. Essentially, deconstruction involves the reevaluation of one’s faith, often leading to a departure from the church and its traditions, and sometimes a shift toward self-autonomy, in which personal truth trumps objective truth. However, even with an understanding of the individual components of deconstruction, the authors clearly point out three major issues that must be addressed before identifying specific problems. The core issues consist of a lack of a desire to “achieve correct theology” (24), an absence of a clear “end goal...to the process” (25), and the lack of an “external authority” that provides a plan for what the ultimate goal entails (26). When combining the three elements, it becomes clear that deconstruction appears to be missing the pursuit of objective truth,

a defined process, and a specific goal, all of which conflict with proper reasoning and the Christian faith. Sadly, though, this appears to align with the deconstructionist mission statement, one relying on deceptive language, unfounded, harmful allegations, and deliberate targeting of impressionable, easily persuaded young minds.

One can realistically assume that young people who attend church become easy targets for deconstructionists due to expectations to uphold high personal moral standards, strict adherence to divine principles and rules, and a persistent sense of God's presence. In the digital age, with its inherent dangers of pornography and political agitation, maintaining personal accountability and self-control seems perhaps more challenging than ever before. With social media influencers promoting material indulgence and pleasure over other values, teens and young adults who spend several hours daily consuming such content may be more easily swayed away from the faith. Childers and Barnett also point out that deconstructionists aiming to justify apostasy often present extremist views of Christianity, claiming that the Christian faith actually promotes "white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and" the glorification of "Western civilization in general" (32), all of which are seen as harmful both to individuals and their roles as productive citizens. Furthermore, when connected to the idea of a literal reading of the Bible that seeks to prioritize a patriarchal system (which is supposedly demeaning to women through the concept of their submission to men), to denigrate one's sexual preference if it deviates from heterosexuality, to highlight America's values as the most desirable over those of any other culture, and to push a politically conservative agenda—often regarded as regressive and ultimately hateful—deconstructionists have compiled a long list of unfounded criticisms meant to discourage thoughtful consideration of Christianity's true positive qualities.

Childers and Barnett point out that the originator of deconstruction appears in Genesis: the serpent, a character whom the authors state represents Satan. Satan works toward deconstruction in three ways: questioning God, denying the word of God, and ultimately fully deconstructing who God is by discrediting His love, His truth, and His sufficiency. Through such methods, Satan, unfortunately, finds some success, especially when fusing his process with cultural and community norms and desires. As a culture expands, especially its population, various perspectives that are not aligned with God's laws begin to emerge. When this happens, conflict is often inevitable. Attempts to soothe citizens' fears and complaints—including claims of being denied happiness due to supposed oppressions that, unsurprisingly, run counter to God's demands and expectations—lead community leaders to adjust the perception of who God is to suit cultural wishes. The authors give specific examples, such as the widespread acceptance of same-sex marriages, the so-called preachers of the "prosperity gospel" who link financial success with one's faith, and the acceptance of other faiths as reasonable variations of Christianity. Ultimately,

emphasis on “personal preferences” becomes a comparison with God’s Word; if the latter conflicts with the former, then preferences—those views that ease daily life—are chosen, and the Logos becomes an afterthought. Essentially, by making such choices, individuals create their own idols, their own religion: a faith rooted in subjectivity and personal truth above all else.

Three common elements make up most deconstruction stories: “a process of deconstruction,” “a belief being deconstructed,” and “a person deconstructing” (77). Furthermore, Childers and Barnett explain that personal crisis often plays a role in deconstruction. These crises typically involve some form of suffering, doubt, political distress, sexual curiosity or deviance, biblical questioning, moral or theological doubts, abuse, or questioning the validity/truth of the religion and its practices. However, these questions and failings—the normal stumbling and falling as part of growing up—are not the problem. Instead, Childers and Barnett clearly state that everyone faces decisions, and choosing to keep faith or turn away from God depends entirely on the individual, though eternal influences may be present. Personal preference or one’s subjective truth certainly impacts the decision, but recognizing the absolute truth of God’s Word also plays a powerful role. Truth, then, emerges as a concept to be clearly defined, with the latter being God’s Word, which ultimately holds great authority due to historical consistency, the overwhelming wisdom of Jesus’s teachings, and centuries of testimonial evidence. However, pursuing a subjective course leads to the outcome described by the authors when they state that “if we don’t let the words of Christ inform what we believe about the mind of Christ, we will effectively be... putting [Christ] in the realm of ‘my truth.’ The end result will probably be a Christ that reflects *our* minds rather than *His*” (117).

Childers and Barnett clearly outline a step-by-step process of the path to deconstruction that appears quite repeatable. The first step is identifying a supposed societal problem that is seen as under-addressed, such as the history of slavery. The second step implicates the Church or the faith, suggesting it endorses or passively neglects the societal issue, even in its past history. The final step recommends revising the belief system to correct past wrongs, which could mean complete dismantling. However, the authors emphasize that “the gospel isn’t socially constructed; it’s divinely revealed” (156). Therefore, acknowledging human error in societal development can be accepted as fact without implying that the Word of God is complicit in damaging practices. Through genuine faith and God’s redemptive grace, followers of Christ can make mistakes and yet still be forgiven.

Formation or reformation, for those seeking to return to Christ or to begin anew, is seen as an important way to reject deconstruction according to Childers and Barnett. Utilizing apologetics to answer questions and deepen understanding becomes a valuable practice. For the authors, proclaiming that Jesus taught followers the Bible is the Word of God remains the primary apologetical standard. They

provide three premises and additional scriptural support to strengthen this claim: first, Jesus is God; second, God proves Jesus's claim by raising Him from the dead; and third, Jesus affirms the truth of the Old Testament through the inspired writings of the New Testament.

In the most critical fashion, deconstruction results from a fracture of one's faith and a distorted view of sin. Childers and Barnett state that deconstruction arises as a reaction to sin, motivated by sin, in the form of sin where people seek a subjective truth rather than the objective and divine truth of God, from a cynical perspective of the faith, or as an act of pure rebellion against the church. Ultimately, however, the authors straightforwardly assert that all of us will eventually bow to God "as creatures," as moral beings who sin, and to the knowledge of God's truth.

Given the threats to faith many believers face, they may ask what they can do to strengthen it. Childers and Barnett offer several answers. First, they should ask questions and seek biblical answers. They should consistently pray and reflect upon the Word. They should stay calm and trust in God and His Word as proper guidance. They should finally continue to love God and participate in life in the ways He deems proper and fruitful. Christ noted that following Him is the most difficult decision and course of action one will undertake. As Christians face pressure to abandon their beliefs—to deconstruct, in contemporary terms—as has been the case for centuries, maintaining faith, love, and trust in God will ultimately prove the most fulfilling way of life.

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Book Review

Helen Pluckrose & James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 352 pp. \$27.95

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

THE POST-ENLIGHTENMENT EMPHASIS ON THE scientific method in academia deeply infiltrated universities and scholastic institutions, ultimately proving very valuable in accelerating intellectual breakthroughs across various fields, including medicine, physics, anthropology, and philosophy. Especially over the past couple of centuries, these institutions have also aimed to create optimal conditions to inspire their great minds to pursue their curiosity in productive and creative ways. As a result, a collection of methods known as liberal practices became significant for making discoveries. The subsequent decades proved incredibly progressive in terms of new ideas and innovation, and this fruitful period serves as the precursor to Pluckrose and Lindsay's text.

Unfortunately, once the 1960s arrived in the West, especially in the United States, France, and Germany, the term “liberalism” veered off its original path and into a usage that persists today. As Pluckrose and Lindsay note, liberalism's “main tenets” originally included “political democracy, limitations on the powers of government, the development of universal human rights, legal equality for all adult citizens, freedom of expression, respect for the value” of “honest debate, respect for evidence and reason,” and “freedom of religion” (11). While these principles are valuable for encouraging the informed perspectives of all people—long-standing exceptional and beneficial values that existed for many years in both theory and practice—today's academic leaders and instructors often seek to manipulate and distort these tenets for their own ends, often aligning with a postmodern ideology focused on social justice through the “woke” mindset. This distortion of meaningful liberal principles gained momentum by convincing students and self-identified social rejects that supposed oppressive cultural tactics aim to keep the young, the minorities, women, and the outcasts forever away from achieving the success they believe they deserve.

With the obsession of the “woke” socially-minded on “power, language, knowledge, and the relationships between them” as well as their interpretation of “the world through a lens” of “power dynamics,” they have centralized “social and

cultural grievances and aim to make everything into a zero-sum political struggle revolving around identity markers” (15). The results of social equity practices have thus proven to be quite harmful to freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and engagement in critical thinking. Specifically, the authors directly state that postmodernists rejected “Christianity...science, reason, and the pillars of post-Enlightenment Western Democracy,” often proclaiming each of these cornerstones of European and American progress as racist, sexist, and classist “meta-narratives” meant to maintain the authority and social standing of white, male rulers (17).

In the chapters following their introduction, Pluckrose and Lindsay outline the theories of postmodernists who have infiltrated academic institutions, thereby spreading their damaging theories that influence the brightest students in the country. Additionally, the authors describe the theories, such as Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Gender Studies, illustrating the troubling directions the new “intellectuals” promote as the only path to truly creating an equal and just society, as well as their particular views on scholarship and its application in society and institutions nationwide.

The rise of Postmodernism most prominently occurred through several French theorists, such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard. These theorists and their followers radically opposed the so-called modern era and modernists with their “desire for authenticity, unifying narratives, universalism, and progress, achieved mainly through scientific knowledge and technology” (22). Framing success as a power struggle rather than a meritocracy, postmodernists pushed to reshape the minds of impressionable youth, constructing a framework based on four main pillars. First, they sought to eliminate traditional notions of identity and instead emphasized culture as creating identity through superficial means. Second, they aimed to demonstrate that morality results solely from social constructs rather than from culture and religion. Third, they wished to strongly incorporate the idea of deconstruction, or the dismantling of art, literature, and canonical texts across the disciplinary spectrum in order to critique them using their own criteria derived from various critical theories. Finally, they concluded that globalization will be the most liberating path for the world; in doing so, imaginary and arbitrary borders will be eliminated along with the assumptions held by those from such regions. Above all, the pillars emphasize the subjective individual over the objective universal, with the goal of critiquing not “*what* we believe but *how* we believe” (30), thus making it easier to judge the individual—especially if that individual avoids conforming to politically correct sensitivities.

In discussing postmodernism and its application to society, Pluckrose and Lindsay note that the ideology compares quite closely to a virus, but one that works so brutally that it destroys its host before replicating. As such, the spread of this “disease” needed to be closely monitored. Through “Social Justice Scholarship,”

postmodern professors and writers successfully developed a methodology that allowed for a simmering effect, in which slow progress occurred in schools, workplaces, and the home. By focusing on “systems of power and privilege” (47) and constructing “New Theories” of “race, gender, and sexuality,” they were able to argue that “knowledge is a construct of power” and that “the categories into which we organize people and phenomena were falsely contrived in the service of that power...[and] that” because “language is inherently dangerous and unreliable” (49), it is used by those in power to continue suppressing those without an equal voice. Ironically, by using this very notion, social justice seekers sought to “revise and rewrite history” (52) to present a narrative more aligned with their goals. Unfortunately, they succeeded, and the last two decades deviate substantially from the prior decades and centuries. Specifically, “we hear laments about cultural appropriation” and simultaneous complaints about a “lack of cultural representation.... We hear that only white people can be racist and that they always are so, by default.... Companies flaunt their respect for ‘diversity,’ while making it clear that they are only interested in a superficial diversity of identity” (65) rather than perspectives. The fear tactics employed and accepted by universities and companies have, therefore, promoted such faulty views and further rely on socially degrading those unwilling to comply.

After presenting the synopsis of postmodernist goals and methods, the authors provide similar summaries of the leading postmodern theories currently affecting proper intellectual progress. While they provide overviews of several “woke” theories, perhaps the two most influential and divisive are Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory. Queer Theory, which promotes the mindset that traditional perspectives of gender and sex are “oppressive” and even “violent,” all while rejecting “biology nearly completely” (89), is discussed first. Notably, Queer Theory aims to demonstrate that sex and gender are fundamentally separate, with sex being biologically determined and gender being purely constructed through cultural norms and expectations. Theories about sexual practices and desires get investigated, with the eventual already decided outcome being that essentially very little should be considered off-limits regarding sexual practices, and citizens should, in turn, treat everyone as equal regardless of sexual orientation or even psychological dysfunction (such as severe body dysmorphia). Michel Foucault played a decisive role in shaping queer theory, as his power theories arose quite conspicuously within that circle of defenders. His argument centered on “a deep suspicion of science as an oppressive exercise of power rather than a knowledge producer” and “a skepticism of categories that describe gender and sexuality” (98). Judith Butler also became a leading voice, arguing “extensively that gender and sex are distinct and that there is no necessary correlation between the two” (101). Clearly, this viewpoint appears scientifically and reasonably flawed, and the authors state that ignoring biological facts reflects a lack of insight and a rejection of proven evidence.

Critical Race Theory follows the example of Queer Theory, with supporters describing race as “a social construct that was created to maintain white privilege and white supremacy” (111). Of course, much like Queer Theory and other similar theories, a strong political agenda is evident. Pluckrose and Lindsay list a series of beliefs of Critical Race advocates, including “racism is embedded in culture” and “we can’t escape it,” “white people are inherently racist,” “only white people can be racist,” “only people of color can talk about racism” and “white people need to just listen,” and to “ignore the pervasive racism that dominates society...perpetuates white privilege” (121). Such statements are made or written when efforts to manipulate individuals are used for social, financial, or political gain, and often the targeted individuals of these baseless views—which are themselves undeniably racist and intended to harm—are prevented from arguing to the contrary. If they do, they show the true ignorance of their own racism. The authors highlight this clearly, especially when discussing contemporary workplace “workshops,” where white workers are made to endure embarrassing exercises accusing others of being racist and are expected to admit to their own racist tendencies they do not even know exist, perhaps because they actually do not exist at all. Pluckrose and Lindsay conclude their chapter by stating, “Critical Race Theory threatens to undo the social taboo against evaluating people by their race. Such an obsessive focus on race, combined with a critique of liberal universalism and individuality...is not likely to end well” (134) for anyone.

As social theories developed within universities and colleges, unfounded and often unverifiable beliefs became reified as facts, which dilutes the academic process of critical thinking. Further, “it exhibits a deep cultural relativism, focuses on marginalized groups, and has little time for universal principles or individual intellectual diversity” (183). All of these points add up to a heavy investment “in identity,” which is used to create new, real truths and initiate the changes they desire (186). Reason and science continue to be dismissed, and any disagreement with “woke” policies and directives is met with social devastation or being canceled. However, a new type of truthing has supposedly emerged: the “reliable knowledge...obtained by listening to the ‘lived experience’ of members of marginalized groups—or to what is really more accurate, to marginalized people’s interpretations of their own lived experience” (209), after, of course, they have participated in a proper education of social theory indoctrination. The trajectory social theories have taken—from university classrooms into society at large—has been advanced by students from academic institutions, although the number of students engaging in this remains a small proportion of the total population. Nonetheless, the intensity and volume of shouting by those seeking “justice” create enough noise to be heard and amplified across social media and the news, making their voices so loud enough to reach everyone paying even minimal attention.

Fortunately, enough truth-seekers exist who uncover facts and offer truthful commentaries that contradict the false claims of Social Justice supporters. Books discussing the victimhood mentality and the coddling of youth who persistently support the narrative of social constructs as the enemy are multiplying. Pluckrose and Lindsay, beyond this text, have been arguing against postmodern principles and even going so far as to write fake academic papers (along with philosopher Peter Boghossian) to prove that postmodern “academic” journals and experts lack true intellectual principles and scholastic ethics. The three composed 20 articles in approximately a single year that relied on postmodern tropes, and seven of the articles were either published or in the preparation phase of publication. The experiment proved that any potential justification for the academic authority of such papers and journals should lose substantial footing. “Social Justice approaches that focus *solely* on group identity and neglect individuality and universality are doomed to fail for the simple reason that people are individuals and share a common human nature” (257). Perhaps the biggest issue with Social Justice Theories, among an enormous list of problems and detrimental practices, is simply the idea that advocates of such theories dismiss the potential of humans to make rational, informed decisions about themselves, their families, and their neighbors. By making baseless accusations, expecting people today to apologize for past wrongs, and falsifying the academic process, Social Justice practitioners create a dynamic of distrust, thereby erecting walls to true positive social interactions and improved intellectual enhancement.

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Book Review

Joe Dallas, *Christians in a Cancel Culture: Speaking with Truth and Grace in a Hostile World* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2021), 208 pp. \$15.99 Perfectbound

Reviewed by Nils I. Borquist

THE UNITED STATES OF 2026 APPEARS TO BE a country overwhelmingly focused on absolute conformity in political perspectives. From the perspective of those leading major state institutions, including universities and governmental offices, perspectives on abortion, affirmative action, or border policies must align with the dominant liberal stance. In this environment, the Christian perspective has been substantially silenced with the apparent ultimate goal of outright cancellation. Joe Dallas, in *Christians in a Cancel Culture*, attempts to outline a Christian response to such restrictions, as well as the potential repercussions should Christians allow themselves to be excluded from political and social dynamics.

The push to silence the Christian voice from involvement in prominent social and political issues has grown markedly over the past two decades. As such, Christians who may be inclined to comply with this demand may be unaware of the potential losses in their American way of life, most notably, as Dallas points out, the forgoing of free speech as well as the inclusion of protestation against violations thereof. Additionally, if large enough groups of Christians stay silent, and thus refuse to project their voices and protect their rights, they inadvertently participate in accelerating anti-Christian rhetoric and even direct discrimination. Dallas proposes that Christians, in contesting the Cancel Culture driven by the cynical woke crowd, individually and collectively decide to increase the public display of their faith, thereby promoting the views of millions who desire to follow Christ's lead in cultivating a community of trust, truth, and biblical authority via the Word of the Lord because "it is alive," "it is relevant," and "it is potent" in the pursuit of one nation under God (17).

Two of the most prominent industries presently clamping down on the voices of Christians are media groups, including social media sites, and higher education institutions. Media bias away from Christianity has existed for several decades but has gained momentum recently with the decidedly prevalent rise in "wokism" and a "far-left" mentality within media commentators and broadcasters. Not only does the majority of the media silence and/or denounce Christian views, but it often belittles

the Christian perspective and proclaims the backwardness or harmful effects of believing in God and biblical teachings. Dallas notes that a common media narrative portrays the Christian view as not only wrong and idiotic but also “dangerous and repugnant,” and therefore worthy of punishment, silencing, and cancellation (21). The hesitation Christians feel about speaking out, though, appears warranted due to concerns over “the wrath of man” or “the fear of man” (23). In either case, the Christian is intimidated into staying quiet, to avoid any public confrontation or offending others with his views. Similarly, the Christian college student or faculty member accepts the reality that his beliefs are better kept locked away, since admitting faith in God or defending the Word may mean being targeted for ridicule or even shunning. While this trepidation stems from legitimate concerns about one’s well-being and status, Dallas recommends that the Christian exercise the rights of free speech and self-defense. Specifically, he directs the Christian to be nice but also to stand his ground so he does not get run over. One may present perspectives respectfully and even kindly while retaining strength, truth, and goodness; in fact, Dallas writes that such presentations are “biblical” and display a “human” aspect that shows consideration for the other (27). Above all else, the Christian should pursue the truth that is God’s Word and be willing to share it.

When considering the progression of the Cancel Culture protestations, especially as they relate to Christianity, Dallas discusses the movement’s early stages, showing that the original iteration began as a search for greater tolerance for people and their beliefs or attributes that varied from the societal norm. However, the present version has shifted “pleas of tolerance” to “demands for uniformity,” resulting in “celebrations of diversity” that “have become declarations of war against anything deemed bigoted or hateful,” including Christianity and the biblical history and teachings (35). In a sense, a revolutionary way of thinking has erupted, as Dallas states, yet he further declares that rather than the movement mimicking the usual aspects of a politically necessary resistance, which “usually have centralized leadership and definable goals,” Cancel Culture activities more mirror the effects of a virus with their spreading and infectious nature (37). The year 2020, in particular, witnessed tremendous growth amid the George Floyd events and the COVID-19 pandemic. As national fear and suspicion rose, the push for absolute conformity, including adopting the ideas that racial cohesiveness is deteriorating, that trans ideology be accepted, and that anti-Semitic perspectives are reasonable, grew in turn, bringing with it anarchistic riots, an upheaval in social media biases, and the censoring of anyone turning to God for relief and answers. Dallas quite accurately describing the frightening overarching perspective, writes, “a running theme you’ll hear from universities, activist groups such as Antifa and Black Lives Matter, and folks who are ‘woke,’ is that there’s no room for ‘agreeing to disagree’ over the views they’ve decided are unacceptable. The new views are the only legitimate ones” (44-45).

Fortunately, there is a way for Christians to continue standing up to the accusations of thought crimes and free speech infringements: do not cave to the threats, and, instead, lean on the Word of God for the strength to stand up for what is right.

An atrocious side effect of Cancel Culture's attack on Christians appears as what Dallas refers to as "starring," or "a derivative of the 'misrepresent, then mistreat' tactic" used to harm the reputation of Jesus two millennia ago and reproduced to damage contemporary Christians' lives as well (51). Today's accusations against Christians often center on claims of hatred toward transsexual individuals and of defending racist undertakings, such as slavery. What has emerged echoes centuries of persecution that began with the Hebrews and continues to the present. Amid misrepresentations or outright lies, hurled by people participating as woke vigilantes at Christians, a surge in labeling Christians as evil and selfish reprobates becomes acceptable and normal. What often follows verbal attacks, is a rise in physical attacks and threats. As Dallas declares, "Convince the public someone is evil, and the public will offer little resistance when you malign, then limit, then assault that someone" (54). To counter such methods, Christians must remember to bear the delusional reproaches coming from others in this world because of the rewards that shall come in the next. Dallas reminds Christians to trust in God, study and learn the words of the Bible, and prepare themselves for spiritual and verbal warfare against heretics.

The following five chapters provide explicit examples of the hostility directed toward Christians, with Dallas presenting three specific elements that fully contribute to the power of Cancel Culture: "convenience, conscience, and conviction" (62). Convenience refers to avoiding the truth and instead relying on the repeated perpetuation of damaging lies intended to defame. Conscience pertains to actually disengaging from the guilt that comes with participating in harmful hate speech aimed at Christians who profess only to caring for neighbors and desiring the pursuit of truth and goodness. Conviction applies to the woke who double down on the premise that Christians solely aim to assume power and spread their own false versions of reality to the more educated masses. From these three aspects, contemporary society must contend with perspectives that wholly defend abortion, homosexual relationships, accusations of innate racism in white people only, and the rights of transsexuals. Such a turn in moral and even ethical norms has prompted an urgency in the need for salvation and a call to mindfully avoid the so-called progressive Christianity that assists woke movements in infiltrating the minds and hearts of young adults and children.

Using the words of Elie Wiesel, who said, "we must always take sides" because "neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim," Dallas ultimately proclaims that choosing a side and taking a stand is the only way to defend the Christian way of life. By standing on the sidelines and refusing to play in this most serious of games,

Christians essentially condone the harmful tactics of Cancel Culture. Rather than avoiding the confrontation that has become, quite simply, unavoidable, Christians must rely on the truth and live it at all times in order to reform the church and bring it back to the position that guides society's moral standards. By taking a stand for God and His Word, Christians give themselves the best opportunity to enlighten those in darkness, to revive the church's faltering perceptions, and to reconnect citizens around a common goal of loving the neighbor and pursuing the truth that is God's promise of glory.

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