

Outline of “Luther and Our Vocation as Citizens,” by Darrell Jodock, 9/9/2020.

Part I: Martin Luther’s Vocation as a Citizen

In addition to his vocation as a “teacher of the church,” and his vocation as a spouse and parent, he had a vocation, a calling, to serve the larger community. He also exercised “vocational leadership” where he identified a problem, proposed a plan to address it, enlisted the help/cooperation of others, and did whatever else was needed to move the project forward. Here are some examples of how he carried out this part of his vocation:

1. He posted his 95 theses not only for theological reasons but also out of concern for the poor who were being manipulated into buying them.
2. He wrote an open letter to city councils, urging them to establish schools for all young men and young women to provide access for those who were not wealthy. This would level the playing field, equip all to read the Bible, and enhance their wisdom so they could lead their household and community well.
3. From 1522 and on, he changed teaching on begging & sought to end it by working with civic leaders to create community chests. The money from gifts, church lands, and some taxes went in. A group of respected citizens authorized gifts to whomever was in need (and small business loans at low interest).
4. In 1525 he responded to the peasants who were struggling with finding the money to pay rents. He said their 12 proposals for change were just and that they should negotiate with the princes. He strongly urged princes to negotiate, but they didn’t. When rebellion broke out, they sent troops and killed about 100,000 peasants. His attempt to help the peasants was in this case unsuccessful.
5. Instead of urging negotiation, he started to volunteer to do the negotiating. Example—settling labor dispute between mine workers and their prince in Mansfeld. (Last thing before he died.)
6. Other examples include writing over 1500 letters to political authorities and preaching about economics.

In every case, Luther was responding to some group in need and showed a robust sense of vocation and vocational leadership.

Part II: Theological principles that informed and supported Luther’s vocation as a citizen:

1. The generosity of God. Implication: an antidote to fear.
2. The centrality of vocation in the Christian life. Implication: a primary question to ask when making a decision regarding public policy: who will benefit? Who will be harmed? In today’s polarized society a “tribal” sense of party or ideology can distract our attention from those who will benefit or be harmed. Also, blaming the poor gets us off the hook for them and crediting the well-off undermines gratitude.
3. Humans are created and designed to be part of a community. Implication: resist individualism and seek the common good. What benefits the community benefits all. This includes things such as trust.
4. God is active in the world—behind the scenes, channeling love through humans and other creatures. Implication: God’s goal is whole, healthy relations among humans, between humans and the rest of creation, and between God and humans. This also the goal of our vocational activities. (Our finitude and self-interest keeps us from knowing the specifics of what God is doing.)
5. God interacts with humans in two ways, both motivated by love: God shows mercy, heals relationships, etc. and God works through authorities to set limits on our behavior—in order that humans not harm other humans and in order for a society to function. Implication: Luther’s purpose was to encourage Christians to be involved in public life and to limit the authority of governments over individual religious beliefs. Unfortunately this distinction has too often been misunderstood as a separation—paralyzing the church in Nazi Germany and leading many other Lutherans to practice “quietism.”
6. Humans are complex and quite fallible. Implication: resist the tendency to expect too much from public figures (that they will solve every problem) or too little (excusing misbehavior). Need to work to increase the number who have a sense of vocation and are dedicated to the wellbeing of our communities.

These six principles supported Luther’s conviction that Christians have a vocation in public life.

To carry out this vocation, we need to listen to others, learn what they need, and then use our imagination, freedom, and wisdom to support those proposals that will benefit the poor, the marginalized, and those experiencing injustice.