From Luther, Lutherans have a doctrine on vocation. Remember the point about any job, every occupation being equal and precious in God’s sight, no matter how unglamorous or menial it may be? The assembly-line welder’s job or the custodian’s work are just as valuable and important as the pastor’s counseling session or the U.S. President’s daily schedule. From Luther’s Babylonian Captivity:

Therefore I advise no one to enter any religious order or the priesthood, indeed, I advise everyone against it—unless he is forearmed with this knowledge and understands that the works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic laborer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks, but that all works are measured before God by faith alone.

Vocation—is this really a doctrine? The Trinity, predestination, and the real presence of the entire Christ in the Lord’s Supper are doctrines, but “vocation”? That is what the standard book on Luther’s thought in this matter calls it: Luthers Lära om Kalelsen. It was written by the great Swedish theologian Gustav Wingren in 1942 and has been translated into many languages. The English translator of Wingren’s book rendered the Swedish title without referring to doctrine: The Christian’s Calling: Luther on Vocation. As George Lindbeck reminds us, however, “doctrine” is a linguistic phenomenon, a web of language which functions dynamically to express and develop the faith and self-understanding of the community in which it is operative by setting the parameters of acceptable speech for its members. So, perhaps Wingren’s Lära (doctrine) may have a point. As Wingren says himself, he set out to describe “vocation” in the context of Luther’s total theology; everything hangs together there. And this, of course, does have to do with a web of doctrine.

This essay presents Luther’s teaching on vocation in four steps: To begin with, we will examine the word and its meaning; we will
then, more briefly, look at its importance for the self-understanding of every Christian, the self-understanding of the pastor and minister, and finally the self-understanding of a seminary.

Vocatio

"Vocation" is a Latin word, vocatio, derived from the verb, vocare, to call. The English equivalent would be the noun "call" or more precisely, "calling." If you look at a dictionary for equivalents, you find terms such as "occupation, profession, trade, work," perhaps even "job." What the meaning is, seems therefore clear and unambiguous. Without being misunderstood, one could ask on a personnel questionnaire for a person's family name, and a person's occupation or trade. Could you ask for a person's name and "calling"? It would not sound right. If you think of it, it sounds religious. The English word, "calling," despite its clear secular meaning, has a definitely religious flavor! If I am describing my work or occupation as a "calling," then someone must have "called" me. But who? An inner voice? Perhaps God?

It is instructive to compare this odd situation with German, Luther's language. "Vocation" in German is Beruf—today a totally neutral word. There is no sense of religious overtones when it appears on a questionnaire: Name, Vorname, Beruf. It is the technical term for one's regular work or occupation, nothing more. Strangely enough, that this is so has to do especially with Martin Luther. Linguists agree that it was Luther who created this meaning of the term through his bold theological move of equalizing the value of all work before God: works have nothing to do with salvation. They belong to our human existence in this world, a world where neighbors need our works, not in the world beyond. Luther prepared the way for the total secularization of the term which is simply a fact today.

When he used the word with this new meaning, Luther thought he was translating a biblical term: klesis (Greek), from kaleo, to call. It occurs eleven times in the New Testament, almost exclusively in Paul and the Pastoral Epistles. "Consider your klesis, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards . . ."
(1 Cor. 1:26); or: "the gifts and the klesis of God are irrevocable ..." (Rom. 11:29). The meaning is quite clear: "Klesis," "calling," refers to the call from God which has made a person a child of God, a Christian. Paul connects it with God's election and the spiritual gifts, the charismata; klesis has to do with conversion and the transition from a false to the true, saving religion. The most interesting case is 1 Corinthians 7:20. In this chapter, Paul gives advice on questions of Christian living which were posed to him by the Corinthians. He does so in an eschatological framework, that is, under the expectation that Christ will return soon: "Let everyone remain in the klesis in which he or she was called." Paul gives this advice with an eye on several concrete issues: should one seek, or try to undo, circumcision now? should a slave seek freedom now? should a person marry now? Unfortunately, the sentence is ambiguous. One could read: "Let everyone remain in the calling (of God) by which he/she was called;" or "Let everyone remain in the calling (meaning the external condition) in which he/she was called." Luther translated klesis here, and only here, as Beruf; he read it in the second sense, understanding it as an external condition, and this is quite clear from his rendering of a parallel which he found in Sirach 11:20-21. He translates: "Remain in God's Word and stay in your Beruf ... Trust in God and stay in your Beruf," where the Greek has ergon (work) and ponos (toil). Luther may have pressed Paul too far, making 1 Cor. 7:20 a witness to klesis as Beruf; that is, as an external condition. But his term was a polemical one, coined with a contemporary edge to protest against the concept of higher and lower callings in the Roman church, the presupposition of all forms of monasticism. Luther's "doctrine" of vocation, if it was one, belonged in the context of his rejection of monasticism.

To help us situate Luther's teaching on vocation within the context of his critique of monasticism, a little history is in order. "Vocation" (vocatio) was the Latin equivalent for Paul's klesis, God's calling of people to become Christians. After Constantine, by the end of the fourth century, everyone was (or was supposed to be) a Christian by imperial decree and was baptized as an infant. How do you become a Christian when you and everyone else around you already is one—never mind that most people's Christianity did
not go very deep when it was just the civil religion of the realm? It is no wonder that the fourth century saw not only the conversion of the Roman Empire but also the first flowering of monasticism, the movement of people who wanted to be serious Christians at a time of lowered standards. Their argument was clear: Christ challenged his disciples to be "perfect." He gave general commands for every Christian such as "love God and neighbor," but he also gave special "counsels" to those who wanted more: The counsel of absolute poverty ("Go sell what you own" Matt 19:21); the counsel of total renunciation of marriage ("there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" Matt 19:12); the counsel of obedience—obedience to the Sermon on the Mount which Christians understood as the marching orders of the true militia Christi. Now, this was the foundation of monasticism. Poverty, chastity, and obedience became the basic vows of monks and nuns upon entering the monastery. Monks and nuns followed a higher calling. They opted for a Christian way apart from and above the crowd.

Under these circumstances, basic terms which applied to all Christians originally underwent a decisive narrowing of their meaning. After the fourth century, "to convert" meant to leave the world and embrace the monastic "vocation;" the term "vocation" itself now referred exclusively to the divine call to the monastic "profession," and "profession" was now the word for the solemn act of taking the monastic vows. Most tellingly, "religion" no longer meant the totality of the Christian faith or other faiths but served simply as the technical term for monasticism. Hard to believe? When I was visiting St. John's Abbey at Collegeville, Minnesota, a couple of years ago, the abbot reported that they had "a slight rise of vocations recently"; he meant candidates for the community. And when you don't want to say that an acquaintance is a "monk" or "nun," what do you say? You say: "He or she is a religious." Monasticism is religion.

This is what Luther reacted against. He rejected the idea of a better, holier, more God-pleasing way of salvation than that which applied to all. He rejected the double standard of commands and counsels. He himself had opted for the harder, "higher" way, but
in pushing its promise to the limit, had learned not only that it did not deliver on the promise, but that it was a wrong idea. His insight into justification by faith alone taught him that there are not two levels of salvation or two classes of Christians.

The final clarification of his thought on monastic vocations came with his treatise, *On Monastic Vows* of October 1521. Luther wrote it during his time out at the Wartburg Castle when word reached him that colleagues at Wittenberg were getting married and conferees were leaving his monastery. The pastoral intention of instructing and strengthening the consciences of people like this appears in the title already. At issue was not the monastic lifestyle. Luther himself did not leave the monastery—quite literally. He continued to live in the Augustinian Friary on the east side of Wittenberg to the end of his life; his prince gave him the building as a gift after he got married. The Christian, he explained, justified and sinner at the same time, was perfectly free to choose a life in community, even a life of poverty and celibacy. The problem was the vows. Luther states the problem this way:

No one can deny that the command to offer vows was instituted by divine authority. Scripture says, 'Make your vows and keep them' [Ps 76:11], so there is no point in disputing whether a vow may be offered. What we are trying to show is how to distinguish one vow from another and recognize which vows are godly, good, and pleasing to God. Only these must be considered as vows. They are named and demanded in Scripture. Further, we are trying to show how we may distinguish which vows are ungodly, evil, and displeasing to God, vows which would not otherwise be regarded as vows.

Thus, the problem was not even "vows" as such—if vows are made before God, they must be kept. But they must be true vows, vows according to the will of God. Monastic vows, his own included, were not. They contradicted everything we know about God's will: the universality of God's promise of salvation, salvation by faith alone, Christian freedom, reason (monastic vows demanded what no young person could reasonably promise), and finally the ten commandments, especially the fourth: "Honor your father and mother." Luther dedicated the treatise to his father Hans Luther, who had strongly opposed young Martin's decision to be-
come a monk; in the dedication letter he asked his father's forgiveness for his, the son's, willful violation of the commandment.

It was in the sermons of this period that Luther spelled out his new notion of *Beruf*. One's *Beruf* was not something special, but something down-to-earth, something exercised right *in* the world of everyday work and toil. It was the word for the Christian's calling, wherever exercised, as an act of faith active in the love of God and neighbor. In a Christmas sermon, he reflected on the shepherds:

Christian liberty is not tied to any specific work. On the contrary, all works are the same to a Christian, no matter what they are. These shepherds do not run away into the desert, they do not don monk's garb, they do not shave their heads, neither do they change their clothing, schedule, food, drink, nor any external work. They return to their place in the fields to serve God there.4

He made the same point in his interpretation of Jesus' curt answer to Peter's question about the Beloved Disciple after the Resurrection (John 21:21f.). Peter had asked: "Lord, what about him?", and Jesus answered: "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?" Luther paraphrased:

Do you think, Peter, that I want the same from you as I want from him? No, it is not this way. You keep to your own task and wait for what I tell you. He will find out about his task as well. I desire many different servants, and they will not all have the same work to do.5

*The Vocation of Every Christian*

It is easy to see how strongly this exegesis is influenced by Luther's conviction about the priesthood of all believers, or of all the baptized, as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America prefers to say these days. With this, we are in the middle of point two already: the importance of vocation for the self-understanding of every Christian. Luther regarded the priesthood of all the baptized as a thoroughly biblical doctrine, taught in the New Testament as well as in the Old: "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices
acceptable to God through Jesus Christ," as the baptismal homily in 1 Peter 2:5 puts it. With his new definition of "vocation," Luther calls us back behind a two-tiered Christianity of monastics and non-monastics, perfect and less perfect, spiritual and secular Christians, and back to the early Christian klesis, the understanding that all have a calling from God, regardless of their station and condition in society. The distinction of a higher, spiritual sphere from a secular was the first wall of Romanism which had to be torn down according to his Appeal to the Ruling Class of German Nationality, one of the three great Reformation tracts of 1520. Grounding his argument in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Luther writes:

It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in I Corinthians 12 [:12–13] that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.6

But note well: In tearing down this wall, Luther did not eliminate priests or do away with the priesthood. Instead he eliminated the laity! All are holy, all are spiritual and have a special call from God to faith and witness, the call to do whatever they do in church and society as priests of the Most High:

Therefore, just as those who are now called "spiritual," that is, priests, bishops, or popes, are neither different from other Christians not superior to them, except that they are charged with the administration of the word of God and the sacraments, which is their work and office, so it is with the temporal authorities. They bear the sword and rod in their hand to punish the wicked and protect the good. A cobbler, a smith, a peasant—each has the work and office of his trade, and yet they are all alike consecrated priests and bishops. Further, everyone must benefit and serve every other by means of his own work or office so that in this way many kinds of work may be done for the bodily and spiritual welfare of the community, just as all the members of the body serve one another [I Cor. 12:14–26].7

However, Luther fought on two fronts. Many people took his message of Christian freedom under God's call to radical conse-
quences in political and societal life, to which he reacted with fear and apprehension. He called them Schwärmer, Enthusiasts, and de
developed against them his doctrine of the Zwei Reiche, the two king­

doms or realms, one of the most embattled pieces of the Lutheran heritage. Yes, there is one God, Lord and Ruler of all, but in this world, where saints are still sinners, the divine rule is not experi­
enced in one way only. For humans, God’s wrath is as real as God’s mercy. God rules differently as creator and redeemer; he governs people in two ways—his “proper” way of giving freely, and his “strange” way of demanding sternly: gospel and law, distinct but never separated. Apply this tension to our self-understanding of being called by God regardless of our station or occupation, and the importance of “vocation” becomes clear: The “two kingdoms or realms” cut right through every Christian’s heart and experience. As sinners, we experience our secular occupations negatively as a self-inflicted discipline (Luther calls it “mortification”), a bur­den that must be endured. As justified children of God, we ex­
perience them as transformed into divine vocations in the service of neighbor. And this existential dialectic is a reality, not a choice.

The Vocation of the Pastor

This brings us to our third point, the importance of “vocation” for the pastor and minister. Pastors would not blink at the ques­tionnaire asking for their “name, given name, and calling.” Yes, they have a calling in the true sense of the English word. Theirs is not just an “occupation, trade, or profession.” They are not in it for worldly gain: not for money (have you looked at salary scales recently?); not for status (the clergy sign behind your windshield will hardly spare you that parking ticket); and certainly not for power (has your clergy association’s protest had much effect?). Rather, they know that God has called them in one way or another. Many pastors and probably many who are seeking ordination have a vivid sense of your personal call to this ministry which you tend to compare to the biblical call of prophets and disciples. God told you: This is what I want you to do, and you are doing it. I think
this personal conviction is a precious gift, not only to yourself, but to the church, and must not be taken lightly.

Luther understood the pastoral ministry as the ministry of Word and sacrament, God's *external* means of grace. As such, they are not at our personal disposal. From this angle, he had a natural distrust of claims that a person had God's immediate call to this vocation. He always exhorted future pastors to test their calling. This may still be a good idea in our time. Luther would suggest to start where he started: with the troubled conscience. Do you know this phenomenon? Have you ever asked the question whether you really should inflict yourself with all your foibles and wrinkles on an unsuspecting congregation? If this is a serious question for you, there is only one solution apart from sustained prayer: stop applying just your own discernment process. Ask others. Seek out the discernment of your brothers and sisters in the smaller and larger context of your church.

This side of the test is stressed by the Augsburg Confession. Article 5 does not speak of pastors being personally called by God to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. Without any reference to persons, it speaks of God having "instituted the office of Ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments." And when Article 14 finally does come around to mentioning the persons in this ministry, it insists only that "nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he or she is regularly called." "Called" here does not mean "called by God" but by human authority, and "regularly" means that certain set procedures of communal discernment apply. For the Augsburg Confession as for Luther, the "vocation" of pastors like any *Beruf* is first of all work in this world for others, and in this case on behalf of others who also are called to be priests in their various occupations and, because they cannot hold two *Berufe*, must call a suitable person to do this central work of God for and among them and so that it may be done for all people everywhere. What Luther says of every Christian applies quite poignantly to the pastor:

*We have a double vocation, a spiritual and an external. The spiritual vocation is that we have all been called through the Gospel to baptism and the Christian*
faith... this calling is common and similar for all... The other contains a differentiation: It is earthly, though also divine.

The Vocation of a Seminary

There is not much time left to address the fourth point at any length: The importance of vocation for the self-understanding of the seminary. Seminaries are a peculiarly American phenomenon. Under the circumstances of life in the colonies and the early years of the United States, seminaries were founded by churches for the purpose of training the much needed pastors and ministers for pastoral vocations in the new congregations. In this sense, seminaries are clearly “vocational schools.” We do not like this label. In today’s hierarchy of educational institutions, vocational schools do not rank high. They are the places where one learns the practical skills necessary to ply a trade or engage in a specific occupation, and learning in such institutions is largely by doing. A student once reported a remark which a simple soul in his hometown made to him only half-jokingly. It illustrates this kind of perception with regard to seminaries: “Oh, you are attending seminary! Isn’t that the place where you compose and memorize the five hundred sermons you will have to preach?”

Seminaries are surely more than that. Many seminaries like to think of themselves as “professional” schools. During the late 1960s there was much discussion in the American Association of Theological Schools of a proposed “Curriculum for the Seventies.” Those were the heydays of the “Pastoral Theology Movement,” and the curriculum was designed to transform theological education into professional education like medicine and law, complete with hands-on training and a D.Min. as the first professional degree. After all, ministry is a “helping profession,” is it not? The initiative failed, fortunately. It built on the sheer hope of change in practice at the expense of solid heritage in theology.

I think it is time that seminaries, especially in the Lutheran orbit, reaffirm their identity as vocational schools in the proper sense. There will have to be training in practical skills for the Beruf of a
pastor. Much of this is already in place as a result of the experiments in the 1970s. But since, in Luther's understanding, vocation involves God's call in every work we do, this training must involve an "academic" component, the concern for "God-speech," theology, the study and the science of God. In the Middle Ages, theology was launched as an intellectual discipline in and with the "academy," the world of new schools and universities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Its booster rocket was the Bible as the foundational document of the Christian faith and the questions this motley collection of writings was bound to raise in curious, and even not so curious, minds. Enthusiasm for a theology nourished by the Bible as an integral part of all vocational training of pastors and ministers never diminished after those beginnings, from the efforts of Dominican and Franciscan teachers instructing Friar Preachers in their study halls to the apprenticeships of pastoral candidates in the parsonages of colonial New England, and the makeshift training schools of pastors in the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. Where ministry is ministry of the Word, its biblical basis requires theological learning. Seminaries must be centers of such learning.

This necessary emphasis on theology and learning, including the study of biblical languages, the details of history, and the material of the doctrinal heritage is an important asset for another task of seminaries as vocational schools: helping future pastors and ministers to test their vocation. By seriously tackling these routines, students will find out whether they are really up to the kinds of demands which will be imposed on them by the calling which they have perceived. If they realize that these exercises are not for them, there is nothing wrong with leaving seminary. In his critique of monasticism, Luther fought for the freedom to leave, not the freedom to enter the monastery. The concept of vocation as an expression of the priesthood of all the baptized allows anyone to serve God's call with his or her specific charism elsewhere in a full-time ministry of the church or even in a different kind of occupation.

Finally, seminaries in the Lutheran orbit have an inherent obligation to invite all members of the universal priesthood into their
preoccupation with *theo-*logy which is part of any Christian’s work considered as vocation. Different from Luther’s time, one of the greatest problems of the pastoral vocation today is the immense overload of expectation. The pastor of a congregation is supposed to be an expert in too many things; the job description requires too many different activities, and the list is still growing. Our church has tried to deal with this problem by redefining ministry more broadly and getting the tasks shared more widely. We have now multiple rostered ministries which can indeed relieve the burden placed on what should be the one ministry of Word and sacrament. For the seminaries this cannot mean that they multiply professional tracks *ad infinitum* and only dissipate their energies. Clustering may be one of the ways to cope. But seminaries will have to strengthen even more their theological involvement because under these circumstances *theo-*logy will have to be offered to so many more participants in church work as members of the shared priesthood of the baptized. Without this indispensable “academic” element in which every Christian has a right and duty to be vocationally trained, a Christian’s work would cease to be “vocation,” “calling,” and revert to what the dictionary calls an “occupation,” a “trade,” a “job”—nothing more.

Like other Lutheran churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has wrestled and continues to wrestle with these issues. The 1993 Churchwide Assembly adopted a substantial document on ministry, “Together for Ministry,” which had been several years in the making. Its most conspicuous feature was the establishment of a diaconal ministry which is now in place. But this was only part of the content of a rich harvest of serious discussion. It seems regrettable to me to observe how fast the fruits of such intense and valid labors are forgotten. “Together for Ministry” did not give a central place to the topic of vocation. It focused on mission and service. There is, however, a section in which “vocation” plays a role. It occurs in the section on the pastoral call and ordination where the wider context is sketched out:

God calls all Christians to a life of vocation. To have a vocation means to live out one’s call. For Christians that call is answered in the structures of daily life—
family, work, state, service to neighbor, care of creation—as the setting in which to live out their identity in the Gospel.\textsuperscript{9}

These are clear and good words. They do not formulate a doctrine of vocation, but they reformulate in contemporary language a venerable tradition of Lutheran thinking about vocation, beginning with Luther on vocation.

NOTES

3. LW 44:252.
4. LW 52:37.
6. LW 44:127.
7. LW 44:130.
8. WA 34 II:300, 306.
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