Milkmaids No More: Revisiting Luther's Doctrine of Vocation from the Perspective of a "Gig" Economy

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Looking back over 500 years, Protestants can be grateful that the Reformation reclaimed for the church three essential truths: justification by grace through faith, the authority of scriptures and the doctrine of vocation.[1] The first two have been well-explored by scholars over the centuries, while the doctrine of vocation has gained prominence only in the past few decades. In addition to breaking down any hierarchy between clergy and laity, this focus on vocation has brought dignity to daily employment and encouragement in non-remunerative occupations like motherhood.

Nevertheless, as Dan Doriani noted, "Luther's view of calling better fits a static society. In his day, economies were simpler and work fell into lines that seem to follow a natural or created order, filled with farmers and carpenters.

But these ideas fit less easily in societies with more flux and innovation."[2] In other words, Luther's doctrine of vocation comfortably presupposed each individual occupied a certain position in society with a specific type of job, however, many of these jobs no longer exist. For example, almost three quarters of workers in the heart of Europe at the time of the Reformation were farmers, but fewer than three in 100 worked in agriculture in 2016.[3] Luther declared in his sermons that God milked cows through milkmaids, but it is unclear how this idea might still apply to the two technicians in a computer-mechanized dairy overseeing a machine capable of milking 72 cows simultaneously.[4] Even "tent-making" missionaries rarely make tents as a business anymore. For this reason, the church needs to re-examine the Reformation doctrine of vocation and biblically reevaluate the very essence of a "job" in light of revolutionary changes in the workplace.

This paper will consider some of the jobs used as examples in Luther's development of the doctrine of vocation and compare them to the existing occupations in the post-industrial revolution economy. The goal is to utilize interdisciplinary tools of economics to retain principles that remain useful while making observations (and exhortations) in areas of this doctrine that need further refinement and reformation. The ongoing task of theologians in every generation is to apply eternal biblical truths to an ever-changing cultural situation. The outcome will be to suggest five key areas of the doctrine of vocation that need further development in light of the changing conceptions of a job, especially in the new "gig" economy. In essence, the goal is to understand what Luther would say to Christians through his sermons if his context were the economy of the early 21st century.

Fundamentals of Luther's Doctrine of Vocation

For the sake of brevity, this section can only familiarize the reader with the broad outlines of Luther's understanding of the doctrine of vocation.[5] First, as is widely known, Luther understood that vocation extended to everyone—every Christian has a calling—and this stood in sharp contrast to the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. At that time, *vocatio* was reserved for the calling to the priesthood and was to be singularly preferred to every other walk of life outside of the church. As Max Weber has (somewhat controversially) observed, Luther translated this Latin term as *beruf* in German

which showed that everyone everyday had a calling from God.[6] This calling from God, from Luther's perspective, was relatively easily identified. For example, marriage was a calling from God to everyone who had a spouse, as was fatherhood or motherhood for everyone responsible for children. Similarly, Luther implicitly recognized three stations in the life of Germans of his day including the nobility of lords and ladies, the clergy of priests, monks and nuns, and all the rest of the peasants.[7] An individual's specific station was understood to be given by God with little or no opportunity to change. In this context, Luther's doctrine depended heavily on 1 Corinthians 7:17, "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches." This understanding extended to specific jobs as vocations, such as milking cows, cobbling shoes and serving as a soldier.

Second, Luther viewed vocation as being horizontal in human relationships and functioned as a way of serving others in love. One result of being in a right relationship to God through the gospel and hearing from God through the Scripture, was that people were able to serve each other more effectively. Since vocations were assigned by God, this actually was a description of how God continued to work in the world through his people. Indeed, Luther called individual vocations a "mask" for God as he continued to subdue his creation and care for his people.[8] In describing the namesake task of this paper, Luther said, "God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaids." Similarly, Luther stated, "God gives the wool, but not without our labor. If it is on the sheep, it makes no garment. God gives the wool, but it must be sheared, carded, spun, etc."[9] This understanding extended beyond the bucolic occupations of farming, and in fact reached into every legitimate occupation in society. In Luther's treatise to the Christian Nobility, he said, "If you see there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges … and you find you are qualified, you should offer your services."[10] In his essay on "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved," he pressed this doctrine to its logical (and potentially disturbing conclusion) when he wrote, "The hand that wields the sword and kills with it is not man's hand, but God's; and it is not man, but God, who hangs, tortures, beheads, kills, and fights. All these are God's works and judgements."[11] In summary, Luther contended that every legitimate action that takes place in the economy is God acting through other people to serve others, answer prayers, and continue to subdue creation.

Third, Luther presumed that vocations or specific callings from God to assume a specific role in society were readily identifiable and generally stable. To have a wife was to be called by God to be a husband. To have a son was to be called by God to be a father. To have a father as a cobbler likely indicated a calling to be a cobbler because such specialized tools and training represented a rare opportunity. Similarly having access to land suggested a calling to farm. To cross from being a peasant to being nobility was so far-fetched as to be unthinkable as an option. To join the Roman Catholic clergy or take vows as a monk or nun was no longer necessary. The economy of his day, especially as constrained by the Peasant War was indeed quite static or stable so Paul's admonition to the Corinthians seemed to apply without any apparent need to move onward from 1 Corinthians 7:17 to verses 20 and 21, "Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity)." This is not necessarily to imply that Luther was expressly opposed to mobility, just that it was a rarity in his economic context and does not seem to have been considered as an option.

Fourth, Luther thought that since vocations were assigned by God, individuals should not only remain in them, but also be content no matter how low or mean the task. While Luther earthily addressed changing of diapers in the calling to parenting, he often reached to the lowest of the low to show that every vocation was legitimate and valuable and that every person could be content. Luther professed that for a farmer even lifting a single straw would bring glory to God along with mucking out an entire stable.

What is interesting, however, is that many of the vocations that Luther lifted up in his sermons as examples for contentment no longer are in existence, or at least not in any form that would have been recognizable to Luther. In other words, even if a Christian were content in a vocation, the occupation may no longer be available to provide the contentment. For this reason, Luther's doctrine of vocation needs to be revisited to keep the applicable principles, but to move forward nonetheless in light of an economy replete with Schumpeterian creative destruction.

What is Happening in the 21st century?

At this point, it would be useful to consider a few representative occupations to determine what has irreversibly changed and what fundamentally has stayed the same over the past 500 years. Accordingly, in the economy of the United States, which is representative of more and more countries around the world, the occupation of "milkmaid" has become exceedingly rare or non-existent. Certainly physically milking is no longer recognized as a common occupation in every village with cows and instead has become a boutique industry or even hobby business. Hand milking cows twice a day has been superseded by milking by machines. Even the individual milking machines have been increasingly replaced by the amazing "Milking Merry-go-round."[12]

A modern dairy farm has a carousel capable of holding 72 cows simultaneously for milking and each cow takes a ride of about 10 minutes around the circuit until milking is complete. Cows learn voluntarily to climb onto the machine as a stall becomes available, and a computer chip tagged in one ear identifies the cow and brings up the database of past milking times, average milk production, and other variables that could indicate a sickness or other stressor in a specific cow's life. No pushing or shoving takes place in the loading because the naturally hierarchical nature of cows acknowledge that the dominant alpha cow climbs on first while others wait patiently. All the rest of the cow's day is devoted to eating and drinking in a controlled climate environment with low stress or exertion (though the ethical considerations of this might be the subject of a separate article). Incidentally, the average farm processed 50 tons of manure each day into fertilizer, much of which is used to accelerate the growth of feed for the cows in the future.[13]

For comparison, individual milking machines could milk 750 cows twice a day in 22 hours. The monstrous "Milking Merry-go-round" can milk 1,400 cows three times each day in 15 hours. During this time, only one person per shift needs to enable the operation of the machine by making the connection to the cows's udders. Instead of hundreds of milkmaids, it appears that God now milks the cows for his people through one milker, one machine operator, and a network of engineers and machine design specialists.

Second, economic historians estimate that 75% of the workforce was devoted to non-automated farming during Luther's time.[14] About 70% of the workforce was still devoted to farming about four centuries later, based

on better data from the Census Bureau of the United States in 1900. In 2016, under 2% of the workforce was engaged in farming. Further, it goes without stating that the quality of life of a 2016 farmer with computerized mechanization and diesel-powered equipment are orders of magnitude better than his 16th century counterpart. Over a shorter period, manufacturing jobs constituted 50% of the labor force in the United States in 1940, but dropped to 20% by 2016 and is unlikely ever climb back to the former level. Even so, manufacturing output (measured both in physical quantities of goods and constant-dollar amounts of value) has more than tripled over this 75 year time period. This increasing output and standard of living has lifted millions out of poverty, but to the point of this discussion, has also eliminated almost all the jobs for milkmaids, farmers, and even most of the jobs for craftspeople or manufacturing workers.

Even specialty workers from Luther's day, such as executioners, have disappeared or changed radically in form. For example, what Luther described as a calling to be a hangman was at the time an enduring occupation with a regular stream of executions in addition to the occasional burning of heretical books and related tasks as assigned.[15] In 2018 in the United States, capital punishment has been outlawed in many states and is increasingly rare in others.

To extend this analysis, even jobs (or vocations?) created since the time of Luther likely will not exist much longer. Specifically, though many are enamored of the idea of self-driving cars, artificial intelligence and improving sensor technology likely will first eliminate the occupation of driving trucks. Most trucks trace the same industrial route every day, making the mapping and programming task much easier. Even cross-country trucks which use varying routes feel a greater pressure to replace drivers (who must sleep) with automation (which does not stop). After the legal hurdles are overcome, four million workers are likely to be replaced with machines that will result in lower costs for faster transits and fewer accidents. While society in general will benefit, one must ponder what happens when truck drivers join the milkmaids. What will happen when taxi drivers and Uber/Lyft drivers join the milkmaids? What happens when airports no longer need parking lots for thousands of cars when passengers can simply send them home to wait several days before the return flight, or for auto workers when these airline passengers decide that an individually-owned car is no longer a necessity?

These trends, which reach back to Luther's time but have increased tenfold since the industrial revolution, almost assuredly will extend beyond the manual disciplines through artificial intelligence to radiologists, lawyers, and other service jobs. Granted, there are offsets that slow this trend somewhat. Though retail jobs at malls are declining, jobs at Amazon fulfillment centers and internet distribution warehouses are skyrocketing. In addition, since these newer jobs tend to be more productive because automation augments human skillsets, workers enjoy higher paychecks and consumers appreciate lower prices. Nevertheless, it is far from clear that the net effect of these changes is good for the milkmaids, for all the rest of society, or for any individual local church.

How are People Responding to These Changes (Inside and Outside the Church)?

Though few people take a comprehensive economic, theological, and historical perspective, most are aware of the personal or "pocketbook" effects of these trends. Using broad categories, people tend to react in four different ways: despair, sloth, anxiety, and idolatry.[16]

On the negative side, some people observe the dramatic losses of jobs—more than 90% of farmers, 60% of factory workers, and so forth—and despair of ever finding meaningful employment. This can make choosing a major in college an overwhelming task. A dystopian future comes to mind where people with jobs enjoy increasing luxury produced by robotics while masses of people starve when their jobs are replaced.

Some also drift beyond despair into sloth and laziness. In reality, most people no longer need to work in order to eat (contra 2 Thess 3:10) and can subsist for a long time couch surfing or in the basement of a parent. Epic video games grow in attraction as they often provide the semblance of productivity and meaningful accomplishment. Whatever the cause, the labor force participation rate in the United States has been drifting downward for more than a decade.

On the other hand, some people focus on the new industries that arise to displace the old ways of working and yet are overwhelmed by the mind-boggling potential being unleashed in the world. Such people are often afraid of making decisions that close the door on future options. For undergraduates,

this can feel like the agony of opportunities that have never before been experienced by a single generation, especially for educated young women. In Luther's time, whether one was content or not in an occupation, there was little opportunity to ever expect a change.

Along these lines, such amazing opportunities can tempt people to idolize a job as the most important part of life, often leading to the neglect of other clear parts of their calling from God to be a father or mother, son or daughter, church member and so forth. Labor in the 16th century could be so exhausting and mind-numbingly dull that family and leisure were always a better alternative, even a luxury good. Today many can be consumed even with an otherwise enjoyable job to the extent that it crowds out time for family and rest.

What Should the Church Do?

This article is intended to challenge the church, and theologians particularly, to study anew and advance the doctrine of vocation with the same intensity that has been devoted to the doctrines of the gospel and the Scripture since the Reformation. Specifically, such an investigation would begin with keeping the foundational elements from Luther on vocation that were both biblical and timeless. An appropriate analysis would mean going beyond Luther's doctrine of vocation, not because he was completely wrong or because the Bible can be changed, but because the culture and surround the church has changed by orders of magnitude. Specifically, the church should think biblically along five trajectories as follows.

First, believers must maintain Luther's high view of vocation and a broad perspective of life. A task, job, or occupation is a calling from God, but each individual calling includes much more permanent callings from God to be a spouse, parent, and church member. What one does for money in the marketplace is only a subset of a calling from God. It would be helpful to refine the specific aspects of the changing concept of a "job" (a relatively new idea in history that often includes cubicles, health and retirement benefits, and regular pay in cash rather than goods) to understand the essential elements of a calling. Is it the skill set (i.e., college degree), the opportunity (access and an open door), the specific firm or industry, the type of work (free lancers), a personal passion, a high salary, or another factor that indicates a

calling from God to a particular job. Further, do these change over time as a person ages and the economy matures, or might certain elements stay as constant as the callings of marriage and family?

Second, the church also needs to develop a biblical understanding of leisure, especially updating the writings of the Puritans. The economist Lord Maynard Keynes appears increasingly prescient in his prediction before World War II that in the next century people would only need and choose to work about 15 hours a week to maintain a high standard of living. His prediction seems to be trending toward fulfillment as the average workweek in the United States has decreased to 34 hours, or about four days a week in a trajectory toward Keynes' two days. As Christians are able to enjoy more and more leisure time, the importance of a biblical understanding of rest is multiplied. Further, the church needs to develop a better understanding of the value of avocational time as well as volunteer and other important work without remuneration.[17]

Third, churches need to teach beyond the *instrumental* value of work to better understand the *intrinsic* value of work. During the 16th century, most people labored primarily because the *instrumental* value of work was necessary to earn a living or even survive. The doctrine of vocation of the Reformers highlighted the *intrinsic* value of work related to the image of God in human beings and obedience to the Creation Mandate. In contrast, Aristotle had previously taught that work had no intrinsic value relative to contemplative thought and the pursuits of the mind, and only the instrumental value of work for producing food and goods was needed to be performed by slaves. As current economic trends continue at the outset of the 21st century, the *instrumental* value of work is dwindling such that the *intrinsic* value of "serving one another in love" must grow in importance (Gal 5:13-14). Therefore the church should turn the perspective of Aristotle along with the common understanding of work on his head. God's command to the Israelites was clear: Six days you shall labor and do all of your work and on the seventh day you shall rest (Exod 20:8-10). While many Sabbatarian discussions have explored what work should not be done on the Sabbath, the focus should also be on the broad command of what working means for the other six days. This speaks to people who despair of finding a job because God through his grace will always provide the means to obey his direct commands.

The Bible also speaks to those who despair to the point of abandoning

work and succumbing to laziness. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat" (2 Thess 3:10-12). Paul was able to implicitly rely on the instrumental requirement of work to motivate people, while the church in the future will need to rely more on the motivation of the intrinsic value of work.

Fourth, the church can emphasize Luther's horizontal aspect of vocation; our work is God's way of acting in the world to feed, clothe and serve his people. Indeed, it is appropriate to utilize eyes of faith to see that God indeed gives milk to little children through the vocation of the one milker, the machine designer, and the collection of engineers and support people. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love" (Gal 5:13). To this end, understanding the tools of economics helps people to see and appreciate the network of relationships behind even the simplest of everyday goods. The price signal generated by the forces of supply and demand is increasingly essential as a means to seeing such truth, as for example, lower pay for milkmaids was an indication that the entire occupation was fading in importance over the last century.

Fifth, the church can practically help people in transition through the traditional mercy ministries of the body of Christ. The economic disruption of losing a job was much less when the primary attribute needed for work was a strong back and a willing spirit. When work on the non-automated farm decreased, working to lay railroad tracks was an alternative requiring little retraining, digging and mining were also close substitutes. Unfortunately today, if a truck driver (a skilled and certified occupation) is displaced by artificial intelligence software and advanced sensors, generally the driver cannot immediately take up a position as a software programmer or a sensor design engineer. Even if aptitude would allow, such retraining often takes several years and a concurrent period with limited income. Accordingly, the church can step in with career encouragement and even coaching, as well as financial help for those working toward self-sufficiency in a new occupation and in a more complex economy.

Summary and Conclusions

We can be grateful to Luther for the Reformation's retrieval of the gospel, scripture and vocation. The church needs to take the lead in thinking biblically about vocation utilizing the tools of economics for insights to serve Christians in an exponentially changing economic environment. Through future research, the church needs to biblically define the very concept of a "job" because the ongoing task of theologians in every generation is to apply eternal biblical truths to an ever-changing cultural situation.

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1 For an exposition on vocation that goes beyond the extent of this article, see Gene Edward Veith, "Vocation: The Theology of the Christian Life," *Journal of Markets & Morality*, 14:1 (2011): 119-131.

2 Dan Doriani, "The Power – and Danger – in Luther's Concept of Work", *The Gospel Coalition*, 16 May, 2016, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-power-and-danger-in-luthers-concept-of-work/

3 Roberty C. Allen, "Economic structure and agricultural productivity in Europe, 1300-1800," *European Review of Economic History*, 4:1 (2000): 6-7.

4 For a brief overview of this new dairy technology, see the "Out & About" report from Chuck Rhodes of ABC27 News found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC_FMhLD-io.

5 For a deeper analysis, the reader is directed to the classic work on this topic by Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (trans. Carl C. Rasmussen; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), previously published by Muhlenberg Press, 1957.

6 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings* (trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells; New York: Penguin Group, 2002) 24-25, 67-202, originally published *Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, 1905.

7 Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 2-5.

8 *Exposition of Psalm 147*, quoted in Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation, 138.*

9 Wingren, *Luther on Vocation, 8-9.*

10 Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed*, ISN Primary Resources in International Affairs, 3, http://www.socalsynod.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/606.pdf.

11 Martin Luther, *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved*, trans. Charles M. Jacobs, 3, http://www.rockrohr.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Luther-whether-soldiers-too-can-be-saved.pdf.

12 The data and description in the following paragraphs are based on the author's personal observations at Fair Oakes Farms at 856 N 600 E near Fair Oaks, IN. The website for this dairy farming operation is www.fofarms.com.

13 For the sake of brevity, this interdisciplinary analysis is unable to elaborate on the system that cools the 100 degree milk down to 33 degrees Fahrenheit in under ten minutes to inhibit the growth of microbes and to improve the flavor. In other words, the machine is not only faster than the milkmaids, it produces a higher quality milk that is both safer and tastier to drink.

14 Allen, "Economic structure and agricultural productivity," 6-7.

15 For a deeper look at this vocation in medieval Germany, see Joel F. Harrington *The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

16 For example, these data are based on an observational sample of undergraduate students at a growing Christian university in the Rocky Mountain region.

17 For example, economists are consistently amazed at the enormous (but not academically acceptable) project of assembling the information contained at Wikipedia, which was accomplished primarily through the voluntary efforts of thousands of people.