

Intimations of the Apocalypse

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The idea of apocalypse, like that of predestination, is subject to frequent misunderstanding. While the word is often associated in popular consciousness with catastrophe or the end of history, apocalypse comes from Greek roots *apoka* meaning from and *lypsis* meaning uncovering. Hence when we speak of an apocalypse we are talking about a disclosure or revelation, often a revelation of how earthly affairs appear from a higher or even heavenly perspective. Classic texts from the Greek tragedies to the novels of Leo Tolstoy often function in precisely this fashion, showing us what human life looks like from a god's-eye point of view. In my experience, such an apocalypse is nowhere more needed in contemporary life than with respect to our understanding of work, and the relationship between our daily work and the venerable concept of vocation. You might think of what follows as a vocational apocalypse.

There are many different ways to understand our work. One is as a job – a way of earning money to keep a roof overhead and food on the table – the doing of which implies no particular dedication to the work itself, but simply a mercenary desire for a means of sustenance. Another sees work in terms of a career – clergy, law, medicine, teaching, and so on – in which we invest many years and even decades of our lives. Still another is that of profession – as professionals, we declare our allegiance to aspirations that extend beyond our own enrichment and posit the good of parishioners, clients, patients, students, and so on as the foremost good. Finally, there is vocation – the notion that we are called to the service of something beyond self, and that our work tending to souls, communities, bodies, and students fits into some larger scheme of wholeness and goodness. In this last sense, thinking about vocation is an apocalyptic exercise.

It is in this last sense – work as calling – that I would like to address our work today. To do so, we can call on few better resources than one of the most important figures in Western history, a man whose life and work helped to signal the transition from the medieval to the modern epochs of human history. And 2017 is an especially auspicious time to invoke both his memory and his teachings, in part because it was exactly 500 years ago that he took the first major step on a path toward reshaping our most fundamental understanding of the nature of calling, who is called, and what we are called to. He did so, most famously, when nailed his so-called “95 theses” to the door of the All-Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany in the year 1517. That man, of course, is Martin Luther, and before turning to Luther's insights on vocation, we should first get to know a bit more about both the man and his theological perspective.

To begin with, it is important to say that one need not be a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew, a Muslim, or even a person of faith to grasp or gain from Luther's discussion of calling. To be sure, Luther was speaking to people he believed were either Christians or should become Christians, but his insights shed light on vocation far beyond the bounds of any particular faith tradition. In discussing vocation, Luther believed that he was writing about one of the most fundamental features of human nature, one

that many thoughtful observers of human experience have noticed across numerous different places, peoples, and times. Simply put, human beings experience a deep need for purpose in life, and many conclude that such a purpose must come not from within human beings but from somewhere else, through alignment or harmony with some larger reality of which human beings are a part. To Luther, that reality was God, the source and purpose of all creation, whose will could only be apprehended through divine revelation. Others have sought for and claimed to find such purposes elsewhere.

Luther

Luther ranks 30th on MIT's list¹ and 25th on author Michael Hart's list² of the 100 most influential people in human history. Born in Germany in 1483, the son of a mine owner, Luther initially studied law but then switched to theology, becoming an Augustinian friar and later priest and doctor of theology.³ He then joined the faculty of the University of Wittenberg. Luther was disturbed by the church's practice of selling indulgences, which purported to reduce the amount of time the dead would spend in purgatory before ascending to heaven. He argued that the church, which was rich, should use its own wealth to build its cathedrals, rather than asking the poor to do so. Luther's growing dissatisfaction with the hierarchy of the church helped to create a division in Christianity between Catholicism and Protestantism. Today these two branches of Christianity have each grown to claim about 1.1 billion nominal adherents worldwide, accounting for just under a third of the world's population.

Luther famously argued for what came to be called "the priesthood of all believers," the notion that popes, bishops, and priests occupy a station no closer to God than ordinary people, and that every person is equally fit to interpret the scriptures for himself or herself. Luther did not object to the practice of enabling some people to develop special expertise in matters theological, and in fact he believed that priests and ministers have an important role to play in human communities. However, he argued that such arrangements are manmade and do not reflect any divinely ordained difference in kind between human beings. He writes:

If a little group of pious Christian laymen were taken captive and set down in a wilderness, and had among them no priest consecrated by a bishop, and if there in the wilderness they were to agree in choosing one of themselves and were to charge him with the office of baptizing, saying mass, absolving and preaching, such a man would be as truly a priest as though all bishops and popes had consecrated him.⁴

This perspective profoundly shapes Luther's view of vocation. While different people hold different jobs, pursue different careers, and even dedicate themselves to different professions, from an apocalyptic perspective all human beings share a common calling to follow God's will and do God's work in the world.

Vocation

In thinking about vocation, Luther frequently draws on the metaphor of the human body. The eye does the work of seeing, the ears of hearing, the hands of grasping and manipulating, the feet of standing and walking, and so on. If the eyes were to attempt to do the work of the hands, or the hands

to do the work of the eyes, the entire body would be lost. Yet so long as each part plays its distinctive role appropriately, the whole is able to survive and even thrive. To Luther, the work of each part of a human body can be likened to the various occupations that human beings pursue in a community – butcher, baker, candlestick maker, as well as priest, lawyer, physician, and teacher. In a thriving human community, each occupation differs from the others, but by doing its part it contributes to the welfare of the whole. Luther argues that there is dignity in each of these contributions, but that from an apocalyptic perspective all of them share a common overarching call, which is to serve God. Thus a job, a career, and a profession provide distinct ways of answering a calling, but none holds a monopoly on the fundamental and universal human vocation.

From Luther's point of view, it would be a mistake to suppose that people who sense a calling should abandon their earthly roles and immerse themselves completely in heavenly pursuits. He gives the example of the shepherds who, in the Gospel of Luke account,⁵ learn of the birth of the baby Jesus and go to visit him. Yet when their visit ends, they return to their flocks. Writes Luther:

They return to their place in the field to serve God there! For being a Christian does not consist in external conduct, neither does it change anyone according to his external position; rather it changes him according to the inner disposition, that is to say, it provides a different heart, a different disposition, will, and mind which do the works which another person does with such a disposition and will. For the Christian knows that it all depends upon faith. . . .⁶

For most and perhaps all human beings, to have a vocation is not to be summoned away from an earthly craft, but to be drawn more deeply into it, and to find within it not just a means of making a living or meeting quotidian human needs, but realizing larger possibilities for those one works with and serves. When a job becomes a calling, a person wakes up with a certain eagerness to get to work, for it is in large part through work – whether paid or not – that we come to life.

Luther has no objection to receiving wages for work, though he is keenly interested in how and why they are earned. From his point of view, the real purpose of work is not to make a living, but to make and serve lives. Whenever the question of compensation takes precedence over the opportunity to serve, a deeply dangerous inversion takes place. Writes Luther:

Your selling [of your labor] ought not to be an act that is entirely within your own power and discretion, without law or limit, as though you were a god and beholden to no one. Because your selling is an act performed toward your neighbor, it should rather be do governed by law and conscience that you do it without harm and injury to him, your concern being directed more toward doing him no injury than toward gaining profit for yourself.

From Luther's point of view, everyone should aspire to work that they find sufficiently fulfilling that they would choose to do it for nothing, if they did not also need it as a means of supporting themselves and their families. To think first of wealth is to put money before people and self before others, both of which, Luther would say, represent a kind of idolatry. There is a limit to how much we should think about money, beyond which justifiable self-interest becomes mere greed.

When we value work, we can do so based on the need of the purchaser, which in some cases can rise even to the level of desperation. This can tempt some professionals to take advantage of such needs by charging exorbitant prices. From Luther's point of view, this represents an abandonment of calling and a descent into mere commerce. By contrast, work can also be valued in terms of the effort the seller has invested in it, including long years of education, training, and practice. On these grounds, there is nothing wrong with compensating professionals well, at least when those to whom services are provided have the ability to pay. But the opportunity to serve those in need is, from Luther's perspective, first and foremost an opportunity to serve a higher purpose and should never be undermined by greed. Perhaps more so in the professions than some other walks of life, work should be performed primarily for the benefit of the person in need, not the professional.

Implicit in this understanding of calling is the notion that work can be good or bad in two different ways – either with respect to the nature of the work being done or the person doing it. For example, a physician could botch an operation, which would be unfortunate, or a physician could perform an operation in a technically competent fashion in a patient who doesn't really need it, which could be even worse. Conversely, a physician could perform an operation with the utmost technical virtuosity and also do so for the right reason, for the good of the patient, both of which would be to the good. In some cases, good medicine may even necessitate taking a step that from some points of view could appear harmful, such as amputating a limb. Writes Luther:

Looking at it from the point of view of the organ that he amputates, the doctor appears to be a cruel and merciless man; but looking at it from the point of view of the body, which the doctor wants to save, he is a fine and true man and does a good and Christian work, as far as the work itself is concerned.⁷

So long as the physician performs the amputation to secure the overall health of the patient, even harming a part can be justified. A vocational perspective focuses on this larger whole.

Conclusion

Luther's approach has important implications for the contemporary understanding of professions as callings. In performing a task, a worker can exhibit technical proficiency. But in answering a call, a professional is summoned to do more – to do the work well but also to exemplify a dedication to a larger purpose, including the well-being of persons, professions, and communities. When a calling is pursued well, it not only meets immediate human needs but also serves to enrich ultimate human ends. At the very least, we enjoy an opportunity to see what work looks like when performed for the sake of some higher purpose, which in ways both subtle and not so subtle can transform the whole demeanor of the people involved. From Luther's point of view, this transformation can be traced to divine grace. Even for non-believers, it affords an opportunity to behold work at its best, when it is shaped and inspired by a deep and noble sense of purpose. When we view work apocalyptically, workers can labor not begrudgingly but eagerly and even gratefully.

Once we complete our education, we spend on average half our waking hours at work. What this work means and how it contributes to our own lives and the lives of others is a matter of

considerable consequence. Are we merely earning money? Are we attempting to realize a return on our educational investments? Are we professing a good beyond self? Or are we also answering some higher call, seeing our work in a context of meaning that encompasses and perhaps even transcends humanity? Luther's writings on vocation suggest that a sufficient answer must ultimately exhibit an apocalyptic character. It must reflect a higher, more comprehensive, and deeper view of the purpose of both our work and our life, revealing a meaning that we are incapable of discerning by our own lights. When it comes to calling, it is not our capacity to figure things out or reason things through but above all our capacity to listen, to watch, and to open up our minds and hearts that offers hope of the profoundest vocational insights.

References

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⁵ Luke 2:15-20.

⁶ Luther M. The Gospel for early Christmas service, trans. Kunstmann JG. In *Luther's works*, vol 52. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974, p. 36.

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