

Symposium

on Gordon Jensen's

*The Call to Discipleship:
Baptism, Vocation, and the Community**

Maria Toomey, Kyle K. Schiefelbein,

Mark D. Tranvik, Allen G. Jorgenson

In its Symposium feature, *Promissio* inculcates appreciative and critical discussion of the theological themes of a significant book worth knowing and discussing. Gordon Jensen's new book on baptism as also the calling to discipleship reflects the narrative of the baptism of Jesus in the Gospels wherein immersion under John the Baptist in the waters of repentance is immediately connected with the descent of the sanctifying Spirit who sends Jesus into battle against Satan and his legion forces. Into this Christological reality and Pneumatological empowerment Christians are baptized, hence called to discipleship.

Maria Toomey carefully exposits Jensen's thesis that baptism is not only the initiating act of the sinner's forensic justification but simultaneously the sanctifying Spirit's effective calling to discipleship. On this exegetical foundation, she works out discipleship as a life lived in following the crucified and risen Lord Jesus into *empathetic encounters*, a notion she richly unpacks with help from Edith Stein. **Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero** similarly brings *Martin Luther's theology of consolation* into conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's account of Christian community in order to identify mutual consolation as a concrete form of discipleship. Mutual consolation is the neighborly form assumed by justification when Christ places the external Word concerning Himself as the one who is radically for us into the mouths of Christians to speak for one another. Luther's accounts of alien and proper righteousness, confession, absolution, suffering, and pastoral care establish the Christological and theological foundations of this ministry of disciples. Bonhoeffer clarifies its communal form through the practices of listening, speaking, forgiving, admonishing, bearing, and serving. Mutual consolation communicates Christ's promise without reducing consolation to therapeutic relief even as it locates

* *Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology* series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2026), 213 pp. \$31.00

pastoral ministry within the common priesthood of the baptized. **Mark D. Tranvik** lauds *Jensen's work for braiding together baptism, vocation, and community* in a way that strengthens each concept. Indeed, he argues, they must be held together because when considered separately, they tend to wobble off course in the many distortions *Jensen's book* describes. Resourcing these comments with a rich exploration of Luther's catechetical teachings, however, Tranvik challenges *Jensen's* attempt to assimilate the Lutheran-Roman Catholic convergence in the Joint Declaration on Justification to the important notion (also for *Jensen*!) of *simultaneity* in Luther's account of the sanctified life of the justified sinner whose holiness consists in lived faith, not meritorious works; he raises the question whether the crucial if neuralgic notion of the creature's bound will has been suppressed. **Allen G. Jorgenson** explores the idea that *creation, too, has a vocation that impacts ours*. Jorgenson follows Niels Henrik Gregersen's proposal that creation is also called, albeit in a manner *sui generis* to it, to argue that we are well served by that calling and perform ours well when we do so in harmony with the cosmos' call. With Luther, Jorgenson points to creation's capacity to instruct us in the high calling we share with the whole cosmos in the practice of praise as indispensable in the life of discipleship.

Recently incapacitated and recovering from a serious illness, **Gordon Jensen** will respond to these interlocutors in a future issue of *Promissio*. —PRH

Empathetic Encounters in the Call to Discipleship

Maria Toomey

The paradox of the baptismal event is that it is “both a one-time event and an ongoing way of life.”¹ Stated another way, “baptism, teaching, and experiencing the faith happen at the same time, throughout a person’s lifetime. As a result, baptism is no longer a ‘one-time’ event—rather, it is an ongoing way of living in Christ, while being taught at the same time.”² The Lutheran Church does not need to embrace a Pelagian or semi-Pelagian righteousness works style of methodological morality nor does the Church need to see baptism as a one-time initiation event on the long road of faith development in order to joyfully grasp the paradox of Christians justified and sent into the world to grow in knowledge and faith and to proclaim the love of Christ.³ Refusing to collapse the paradox of passively-justified Christians actively and imperfectly proclaiming the gospel by loving God and serving others, Jensen provides a springboard for such revitalization.

In his *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and Community*, Professor Jensen focuses on the paradoxical nature of discipleship. That discipleship is lived out in the outward-facing vocation of the baptized. If the paradoxical power of and responsibility to the call one received in her baptism is communicated clearly to parents and sponsors of the baptized and to the baptized herself throughout life, this could reinvigorate the Lutheran Church worldwide. It is vital to give pastors language to use in sharing the gospel through teaching, admonishing, and encouraging the baptized, thus enabling parents to better understand the mantle of paradoxical freedom and responsibility they are witnessing God place on their children as He claims them and conforms them to Himself while inspiring individuals to reconsider their own baptismal call to discipleship. This paradox is lived out by the baptized in relation to God’s creation through empathic encounters between created subjects; these empathic encounters allow for both proclamation of the light of the gospel into the darkness of the world and, simultaneously, the shaping and growth of the baptized in their walk as disciples of the triune God.

There is value in Jensen’s treatise concerning baptismal orientation practices and ongoing discipleship education in the Church as theological leaders embrace the paradox that is discipleship, the embodied living of the baptismal promise given by Christ

1. Gordon Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026), 44.

2. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 20.

3. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 17, 25, 172-174.

and received by the baptized who are sent out by the Spirit to encounter creation. The work also emphasizes the importance of understanding this discipleship-learning as that which God intends to be enacted through empathic encounters as the baptized go forth to love Him and serve others, concurrently aware of the sanctifying and shaping power of the Holy Spirit in their inner lives while also holding tightly to their identities in passively-received justification by God and ongoing conformation that Christ has freed them for active, outward-facing empathic encounters of love and service. This conclusion can be examined in relation to empathic encounters as defined by Edith Stein in her doctoral dissertation, "The Problem of Empathy."

Parents or sponsors presenting children or adults preparing for baptism must be taught that baptism is ultimately not a rite of passage or initiation event into a club but is the act of God claiming and recreating His child and enlisting that child into the battle against the foes of Heaven who seek to spread despair and death.⁴ Lutherans usually present infants to receive the baptismal promise and calling; this presentation, prior to the appearance of the fruit of justification and conformity to Christ in their lives, highlights the passivity with which the baptized encounter the promises of God.⁵ In baptismal waters, God not only claims His child, justifying her and continually conforming her to Him, but also sends His child into His world to begin serving the community of others around them.⁶ This service begins immediately and continues to grow and develop throughout the life of the baptized.⁷ Contrary to an understanding of baptism as a response chosen by the baptized when the fruits of faith are sufficiently shown through the agency of the baptized, infant baptism particularly makes clear that any fruit of faith shown comes through the agency of the Holy Spirit working through the baptized members of the Body of Christ. Perhaps it is easier to see service to the community by the aid of organizations that bring food to the grieving and distressed or by volunteers uniting to build houses for those in need instead of seeing the service to the community offered by an infant. However, the service provided by an infant to a community should not be discounted. "God's actions, hidden behind human masks and everyday actions of nurture and support for the neighbor, are important public, visible, proclamations of prophets."⁸ The baptized of all ages and capabilities live out their vocations in these everyday proclamations. With Isaac Watts, we can recognize that "infant voices shall proclaim their early blessings on His name."⁹

Infants' first teachers, their parents or caregivers, deserve a sound foundation from which to instruct and appreciate these tiny humans and their myriad needs

4. Jensen, *Discipleship*, xxii, 5, 57, 59, 122, 146, 157.

5. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 16, 168.

6. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 18, 49.

7. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 181.

8. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 124-125.

9. Isaac Watts, "Jesus Shall Reign," no. 530 in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978).

as well as a framework to see these small charges as fellow servants of the Living God. The Church is uniquely positioned to support, educate, and encourage parents in this. Parents hear voices shouting varieties of parental advice, some even advocating corporal punishment of eight-month-old infants.¹⁰ The Church has a different foundation for relationships, however, in those of service and love through empathic encounters with others, flowing from the baptismal call to live as disciples of Christ proclaiming the gospel.

This is a life-changing foundation, not only for relationships between individuals, families, and couples within and without the Church body but also for internal family relationships between caregivers and children. As children of God walking together in love and service, weary caregivers can be encouraged and freed to reframe their children's 2 a.m. feeding cries as opportunities to serve a fellow Christian enlisted in service to God. Perhaps the contented snuffle-and-sigh of an infant with a full belly becomes that child's service to their caregiver's nervous system.¹¹ The 4 a.m. call to reassure a child waking in terror from a nightmare becomes an opportunity to uplift one's fellow servant, saying, with Luther, "Devil, now I have to sleep, for this is God's command: working by day and sleeping by night."¹² In His design of directing the parent to comfort the fearful child, God effectively reminds both parties of His baptismal promises. Conversations with teens who are insecure and discouraged about their bodies, their grades, their friends, or their futures become opportunities to speak life into these dark places of doubt, to "draw open the curtains that have shut out the revealing light."¹³ However, as the caregiver confidently speaks words to remind the child of her identity as a beloved child of God, God reminds the caregiver that the Devil seeks to lie.¹⁴ These are but a few examples of how the Holy Spirit, though "hidden behind human masks and everyday actions of nurture,"¹⁵ flows through the baptized to proclaim the love of Christ.

The occasions for children and caregivers to love and serve the world together and be served and loved by one another abound; the Church, comprised of individuals, families, and a worldwide community of the Body of Christ, could be reinvigorated for service and life if Professor Jensen's clear encouragement to hold tightly the paradoxical call to the baptized is communicated widely. This can be accomplished while yet continuing to recognize the dependence of revitalization on

10. Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 1995), 103, 152.

11. S. Yoshida et al., "Infants Show Physiological Responses Specific to Parental Hugs," *iScience*. 2020 Apr 24;23(4):100996. doi: 10.1016/j.isci.2020.100996. Epub 2020 Apr 6. PMID: 32259479; PMCID: PMC7360522.

12. Martin Luther, "D. Martin Luthers Werke" in *Face to Face*, Robert Kolb (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2024), 81.

13. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 163.

14. Martin Luther, "Against Hanswurst," in *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry III*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1966), 186.

15. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 124-125.

the active work of the justifying Holy Spirit's imputing righteousness to the passive, receiving, baptized members of the Body of Christ.

The services offered by caregivers and children to each other and the world are foundationally outward focused and reliant on empathic encounters between created subjects. Therefore, the bedrock of these encounters must be freedom from humanity's curving-inward nature, freedom gifted by God to His children in the waters of baptism. Edith Stein phenomenologically tackled the "problem of empathy" in her 1917 doctoral dissertation. Stein's theory of empathy emerges an important lens through which to view the encounters and experiences to which the baptized are called and through which they are formed in the process of their lifelong discipleship and vocational service. Phenomenologically, empathy is one subject "I" experiencing the experience of a consciousness that is having an experience, the act of the first subject "I" comprehending that other's experience.¹⁶ Empathy can be further understood as involving other-directed intentionality or as intentional experience directed upon the mental or experiential life of the other.¹⁷ This is only possible, though, when one is continually pulled from being curved-in to being outward-facing in the ongoing process of discipleship.¹⁸ Empathic encounters enrich one through the process of going out of oneself and becoming relationally involved with others.¹⁹ Unfortunately, humanity's bondage to sin works to keep people curving inward, resisting the empathic, outward encounters that would be opportunities for selfless service to, love of, and reciprocal love by the other. God provides the remedy to this inward curving and opens the door to empathically encountering others in outward-focused, empathic events via His baptismal promise.²⁰

Stein offers an outline of the basics of these intersubjective encounters. At any age, the living body's "I" is always that which faces the world and communicates with others.²¹ Stein understands that the "I" should necessarily exist pointing toward an external world of "thous."²² The baptismal waters are God's solution to reform

16. Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, 3rd ed., trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 6.

17. Magdalene Thomasson, "Beyond Empathy: Love, Person, and Otherness in the Thought of Edith Stein," *Religions*, 15, no. 1117, (2024), 2.; Thomas Szanto and Dermot Moran, "Empathy and Collective Intentionality—The Social Philosophy of Edith Stein," *Introduction to Phenomenology of Sociality: Discovering the We* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 450.

18. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 60, 101, 182.

19. Haddy Bello, "Freedom, Intentionality, and Trinitarian Love in Edith Stein's Thought—The Need for a Phenomenology-Theology Dialogue to Have a Deeper Understanding of It," *Religions*, 14, no.1377, (2023), 6.; Minna-Kerttu Kekki, "The Perceived Object in Media-Based Empathy: Applying Edith Stein's Concept of *Wortlieb*," *Continental Philosophy Review*, 57, (2024), 165.

20. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 175, 182.

21. Stein, *Empathy*, 5.

22. Daniel Zollinger, "Prayer as Locus and Mode of Being with Edith Stein," *Carmelus*, 68, no. 2 (2021), 440.

the baptized from the curving-inward pull of original sin to a focus on the external world.²³ The baptized are then free to perceive and interpret others' experiences and to be shaped by those experiences.²⁴

Stein does not conceptualize this in a Lutheran way wherein this unity with God takes place in baptism when one is completely and fully justified, claimed, called, and re-created in the baptismal waters prior to any effort or good works on the part of the baptized; rather, she holds to a Scholastic understanding that, although God's role is paramount, "we may be confident that he will not fail to give grace if we faithfully do the little we can do."²⁵ As Professor Jensen points out, "The paradox of God alone working to bring about both justification and sanctification is lost whenever sanctification is seen as a human work that contributes to salvation."²⁶ However, Stein's work can still offer a starting point from which to move to and more fully understand the Lutheran view that one cannot fully be present to the world of other "thous," fully present in outward-facing encounters with the community until one has been gifted the grace of God which recreates the baptized person's image of God, thereby setting her free to serve the world not out of fear of punishment nor desire of reward but in thanksgiving and with gladness. This gifting of grace and call to serve both come in the paradoxical call received in the waters of baptism that free the baptized from the *incurvatus in se* and allows her to look toward and then empathically encounter the outward community.²⁷ With this Lutheran understanding, service to one's neighbor or empathic encountering of the other subject does not end up being "corrupted" with the neighbor becoming an object used in the baptized person's search to please God.²⁸ Instead, the neighbor remains an "other" subject able to be empathically encountered, loved, and served in the name of Christ.

Uniting with God, which Jensen rightly maintains occurs when God claims His children in baptism, does not annihilate the individual. Instead, communion with God allows the baptized to fully be their respective "beings," fulfilling their potentialities to the highest degree possible.²⁹ Professor Jensen explains, "The gift of unmerited salvation re-creates a person to serve the neighbor."³⁰ Personhood becomes most lively, most obtained-in-the-world, when the baptized are claimed

23. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 60.

24. Stein, *Empathy*, 11.

25. Edith Stein, *Self Portrait in Letters*, trans. Josephine Koeppel (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1993), 144-146, quoted in Antony Kavunguvalappil, *Theology of Suffering and Cross in the Life and Works of Blessed Edith Stein*, European University Studies (New York: Lang, 1998), 65.

26. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 34.

27. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 9, 65.

28. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 29, 88.

29. Bello, "Freedom," 11.

30. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 49.

and recreated by the triune God and are then called to interact interpersonally with others. "The incarnation helps people discover their own full humanity, rather than providing an escape from humanity."³¹ According to Stein, when unity with God is present within an individual being, the being can be manifested most fully. In Stein's theological phenomenology, it is through unity with the triune God that the essential potentiality of each human unfolds because that unity with God is what leads the "I" to interpersonal relationships with others.³² Humans are most fully human when justified and continually conformed to Christ in the waters of baptism, an event and an ongoing process taking place within oneself within one's community. Jensen states that "a person's vocation is lived out simultaneously as an individual and as an organic part of a community."³³ God reveals Himself to the baptized as a gift, and the response to this is the fullest unfolding of our personhood.³⁴ This unfolding can and must happen as the baptized love and serve God and His creation. A human being with the image of the trinitarian, loving God restored in her baptism "is a spiritual entity that is cognitively open to itself and others, and that can shape itself and others freely and actively."³⁵

With a phenomenological understanding of empathic encounters, consciousness becomes considered as openness to the world of "thous" around the baptized, the possibility of perceiving and then acting relationally and lovingly.³⁶ The baptized now have the potential for and call to relational experiences of divine love, though this contribution asserts this is never in order for the baptized to attempt to add to their justification but rather for them to express it in the world. It is in these relational, empathic encounters, these genuinely *good* works, where the gospel can be proclaimed and the baptized can learn to, albeit always imperfectly and never to earn grace or merit, share their gifts through the transformative work of the in-breaking, re-creating, renewing Kingdom of God.³⁷ "Death is defeated when the Spirit of God breathes into people."³⁸ This freedom from the crushing power of death leads the baptized to share that same liberating Spirit as they "are called to live for the neighbor in their own home and neighborhood in such a way that society and all creation can learn and experience the gospel of Jesus the Christ."³⁹

31. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 163.

32. Eric McClellan, "Edith Stein: Her Empathic Theology of the Human Person," *Pacifica*, 30, no.1 (2017), 26.

33. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 111.

34. Thomassen, "Beyond Empathy," 6.

35. Bello, "Freedom," 4.

36. Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to the Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 505.

37. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 121.

38. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 3.

39. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 4.

Stein believed the interpersonal relationship of the immanent Trinity demonstrates how love flows out, in, and among members of a relationship while the relationship simultaneously allows for self-expression of the members as each person obtains existence in the world as the person they are gifted to be.⁴⁰ Though it is not for humans to probe too deeply into the mysteries of the immanent Trinity, the revelation of the economic Trinity in the gospel points to the immanent Trinity as the “God who from eternity to eternity is the love of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.”⁴¹ Each of the three persons of the Trinity “exist in relation to the others by virtue of a distinct role in the divine life-process.”⁴² Perhaps this can cautiously be seen as a model of what Stein meant—intersubjective, empathic encounters in which the baptized freely and lovingly serve and seek to understand one another and the world in ways suited to their own individual personhoods. This view could yield the relational exemplar Stein purported while continuing to respect the mystery of immanent trinitarian personhood and to resist the desire to earn the favor of God. If so, the baptized would benefit from regular reminders that God, in the waters of baptism, justified them and called them to openly and empathically relate to others through the Holy Spirit in ways that bring the gospel to those starving for hope and light and to do so for the community in the particular ways most suited to their very own, individual persons.⁴³ “Discipleship is about living out one’s baptismal vocation in daily life in a way that helps others—specifically neighbors—and sees the unlimited possibilities of God’s inbreaking reign in their own contexts.”⁴⁴ Though Luther’s understanding of vocation within the feudal system could be seen as trapping the baptized in one static context of life, the fluidity available to individuals today means that this service can be repeatedly recontextualized throughout one’s life.⁴⁵ This encouragement and freedom to live out discipleship in one’s own, particular, open-ended context needs to be taught not only to sponsors presenting individuals for baptism but also to the baptized throughout their lives.

The Church, naturally multigenerational, is uniquely positioned to spread this encouragement and freedom for both outward service mediated by Spirit-led, empathic encountering of others and also ongoing internal growth stemming from being incorporated into the Body of Christ and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. Luther expounded on something similar to what Stein would come to call empathic encounters, describing the encouragement and growth the baptized can expect to receive from empathically relating to one another,

40. Bello, “Freedom,” 4.

41. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 165.

42. Hinlicky, *Complexity*, 213.

43. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 67.

44. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 2.

45. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 137.

Therefore, when I suffer, I suffer not alone, but Christ and all Christians suffer with me.... Even so others bear my burden, and their strength becomes my own. The Church's faith supports my fearfulness, the chastity of others bears the temptations of my flesh, the fastings of others are my gain, the prayer of another pleads for me. In short, such care have the members one for another, that the comely parts cover, serve, and honor the uncomely.... And so I can truly glory in the blessings of others as though they were my own; and they are truly my own when I find joy and pleasure therein.⁴⁶

Although not all will be interested in detailed, phenomenological work on empathic encounters, it is important for preachers and teachers in the Church to understand the process and value of empathy. If they are to teach the paradox of ongoing, active discipleship in light of the justification by and conformity to Christ received passively in the waters of baptism, it could be helpful for pastoral leaders and teachers to have a solid grasp of what is transpiring as the baptized live in community and why these empathetic encounters within community are so valuable. This contribution argues that God works through these empathic encounters as vehicles for His baptized children to grow both internally in love and obedience to Him and outwardly in service to and love for His creation. Properly understood, vocation flowing from the baptismal promises and call received by the baptized allows them to "experience what it means to be fully human."⁴⁷ This experience of full humanity can flourish in the youngest as well as the oldest members of the Body of Christ.

Professor Jensen's *The Call to Discipleship* provides a much-needed service to the Lutheran Church, offering language useful for explaining the paradoxical call the baptized receive in the sacraments, educating the baptized on both their freedom and responsibility as justified and called members of the Body of Christ living and growing in the world, and encouraging the baptized to understand the baptismal call on even the youngest members of this Body. Perhaps seeing the vocational engagement in the world for which the baptized are freed and called to serve and grow as the empathic encountering of each baptized "I" with other "thous" can be helpful for those directly involved in teaching and encouraging the baptized. "True humanity, as defined and modeled by Christ, is a humanity that is totally open to God and totally open to the neighbor. It is a gift from God."⁴⁸ May the Body of Christ hear Professor Jensen's words and respond in deep, joyful, fully-human, Spirit-led, intentional, empathic encounters.

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46. Martin Luther, "The Fourteen of Consolation: For Such as Labor and Are Heavy Laden," in *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. I (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1943), 165.

47. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 187.

48. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 188.

Mutual Consolation as Answering the Call

Discipleship and Neighbourly Theology
in Luther and Bonhoeffer

Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero

Called to Mutual Consolation

Christian discipleship is frequently separated from the doctrines of justification, baptism, and Christology, or those doctrines that give discipleship theological form. Gordon Jensen's *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* challenges this separation by locating Christian action within baptismal vocation, worship, and service to the world. His account provides a constructive framework for examining mutual consolation as a practice through which justification assumes a concrete, neighborly form.

This essay expands the argument first presented in “Consolation in Luther’s Neighbourly Theology” at the International Congress for Luther Research in Aarhus, Denmark. It brings Luther’s account of consolation into conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together*, a reflection on intentional Christian community at Finkenwalde that presents theological formation as an embodied and communal practice.

As Jensen notes, the professionalization of the clergy has created a two-tiered system that has often robbed the laity of the opportunity to live out their calls in ministry.¹ Engaging Bonhoeffer’s *Life Together* is intentional as it reminds readers that communal theological education is for all Christians, not just the professionals (ordained or academically-trained theologians). One way in which Christians can “connect doctrine, piety, and one’s sense of calling, with service to the world—and thus, service to God”² is through the ministry of mutual consolation.

Reading Luther alongside Bonhoeffer, this essay argues that mutual consolation is the neighbourly form assumed by justification when Christ places the external Word into the mouths of Christians for one another. As a gospeling, ecclesial, cross-shaped,

1. Gordon A. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology series (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2026), 130. This outcome has led to recent critiques of theological education in general; see Ted A. Smith, *The End of Theological Education*, Theological Education between the Times Series (Eerdmans, 2023).

2. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 15.

and embodied practice, mutual consolation enables ordinary Christians to answer the call of discipleship through listening, speaking, forgiving, bearing, and serving.

Neighbourliness and Mutuality

I describe the recurring emphasis in my reading of Luther as “neighbourly theology.”³ This echoes Luther’s description of the Christian life: “Because true Christians live and labor on earth not for themselves alone but for their neighbors, they do by the very nature of their spirit even what they themselves have no need of but is needful and useful to their neighbors.”⁴

Using “neighbourly” as the adjective shifts the emphasis from the one who receives to the one who bestows, which is how Jesus answered the lawyer in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. From a theological perspective, it speaks to the role of the faithful, both individually and communally, who have received the good things of God through Christ. The neighbourly adjective also helps Christians navigate what Jensen describes as the “challenge to keep discipleship and justification together in a paradoxical tension.”⁵ The parable is a reminder that God’s free gift of justifying grace is not at odds with being freed to serve the neighbour fully. Thus, “the gift of unmerited salvation re-creates a person to serve the neighbor.”⁶

The problem with freedom is that it can be misunderstood. Luther’s movement from alien to proper righteousness describes doctrinally what Jensen’s two freedoms of baptism describe vocationally—grace received becomes freedom exercised for the neighbour. In his Exhortation to Confession in the Large Catechism, Luther describes the problem thusly: people did “whatever they please and [taking] advantage of their freedom” did not avail themselves of confession.⁷ In essence, people had treated gospel freedom as release from obligation rather than liberation for

3. “Neighbourly” with the Canadian spelling that includes a “u” is intentional. The earliest Canadian joke I recall hearing was while on a family road trip across northern Montana. We occupied our time by listening to the CBC, which had the strongest radio signal. The scenario described on the show was of an American moving to Canada to play hockey, and the American was learning about Canadian spelling:

American player: “Why is there a ‘u’ in ‘neighbourhood?’”

Canadian friend: “Because we want ‘you’ in our neighbourhood!”

While most people today would groan at that attempt at humor, it has stuck with me for over 30 years and now factors into my theology.

4. Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should be Obeyed, 1523,” ed. James M. Estes, in *The Annotated Luther*, 6 vols. Eds. H.J. Hillerbrand, K.I. Stjerna, and T.J. Wengert (Fortress, 2015-17) 5:97-98. (Hereafter cited as TAL.)

5. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 48.

6. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 49.

7. Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” ed. T.J. Wengert, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Eds. R. Kolb and T.J. Wengert (Fortress, 2000) 476.

the neighbour or, to use the language of Luther's earlier writings, had disconnected alien and proper righteousness, becoming a free lord without being a dutiful servant. When gospel freedom is construed solely as release from obligation, its relation to the Body of Christ is obscured. In Jensen's parlance, they focus solely on the "first freedom of baptism [called] justification" and neglect the "second gift of freedom given in baptism," to be "free *for* being people of God in the world" that bears "witness to God's inbreaking reign" in the world by living for the neighbour.⁸

For Luther and subsequently for Bonhoeffer and Jensen, freedom cannot lead the individual into isolation by focusing solely on spiritual practices of holiness that masquerade as discipleship. Lutheran Christology, grounded in Luther's "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness" and "The Freedom of a Christian," requires discipleship that is both personal and communal.⁹ If justification frees the Christian for the neighbour, the resulting question concerns how Christ becomes concretely present in that neighborly relation. Luther's answer is the external Word spoken by one Christian to another.

The Christological Center of Neighbourly Consolation

Neighbourliness belongs at the heart of Luther's theology as the ethical implication of his Christology—the movement from alien to proper righteousness (1519) or from freedom to service (1520). In the "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness," Luther insists that "through faith in Christ, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness" and that this alien righteousness is "the basis, the cause, the source" of the Christian's proper righteousness.¹⁰ That proper righteousness "consists in love of our neighbors" so that the soul "no longer seeks to be righteous in and for itself, but it has Christ as its righteousness and therefore seeks only the welfare of others."¹¹ In the practice of confession, this theological movement becomes audible. The troubled Christian takes "a friend aside," seeks "a word of comfort," and receives it "as if hearing it directly from God."¹² Consolation is therefore not the opposite of discomfort nor merely the easing of distress. It is the neighbourly bestowal of Christ's own Word spoken through human mouths by which burdened consciences are returned to the gospel.

Bonhoeffer's reception of this Reformation logic helps identify its ecclesiological implications. In *Life Together*, he argues that God has placed the saving Word "into the mouth of human beings so that it may be passed on to others," and, therefore,

8. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 3-4 (emphasis in original).

9. See Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 100-101.

10. Martin Luther, "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness, 1519," ed. E.M. Wiberg Pedersen, in TAL 2:14-15.

11. Luther, "Sermon on Two Kinds of Righteousness," TAL 2:16-17.

12. Martin Luther, "The *Invocavit* Sermons, 1522," ed. M.J. Lohrmann, in TAL 4:44.

“Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them,” especially when they become “uncertain and disheartened.” His striking conclusion is that “the Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians.” Mutual consolation is not simply one beneficial activity undertaken within an already constituted church. The church becomes recognizable as Christian precisely where persons encounter one another “as bringers of the message of salvation.”¹³

Christology cannot remain an abstraction but must take form in the congregation’s practices. “A sensibility where we regard and experience Christology as a *practice* in which our Christological conceptions are ritually and sacramentally enacted would not be tied to the past—not to *remembering* and *being reminded*—but to *participating in the present*.”¹⁴ Pietsch notes that Luther’s theology is grounded in bringing the “comfort of the gospel to the troubled and fearful heart and conscience.”¹⁵ Mutual consolation is not simply an implication drawn from Christological doctrine but is one of the concrete practices in which the congregation participates in Christ’s present action.

This particular understanding of the Incarnation in Lutheran Christology means that Christian theology must be attentive to the physical human condition. This consolation is not meant to be abstract or relegated to verbal exchange; instead, it can include the physical world, including the scientific expressions of modern medicine. The externality of consolation is not only verbal. Because the one who consoles and the one who suffers are embodied creatures, the Christological logic of consolation must include material forms of care. Lutheran Christology has the *communicatio idiomatum* (“communication of attributes”) as its “axle and motor.”¹⁶ This means that whatever can be said of the divine nature of Christ must be said of the human nature and vice versa, as the two natures communicate with one another and cannot be separated. When Christian consolation includes the responsible use of medicine, such material care need not be regarded as external to Christ’s ministry through the neighbour.¹⁷

The External Word and the Mutuality of Consolation

Luther’s own troubled experience of faith shaped his understanding of theology as care for afflicted consciences. “His desire to find peace and consolation for his own

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English 5 (Fortress, 1996), 32.

14. Michael B. Aune, “Practicing a Theopaschite Christology with St. Cyril of Alexandria,” *Lutheran Forum* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 31 (emphasis in original).

15. Stephen Pietsch, “Luther and the Cure of Souls,” *Logia* 30, no. 2 (Eastertide 2021): 37.

16. Johann Anselm Steiger, “The *communicatio idiomatum* as the Axle and Motor of Luther’s Theology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 127.

17. Kyle K. Schiefelbein-Guerrero, “Consolation and Medicine in Luther’s ‘Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague,’” *Dialog* 61, no. 2 (June 2022): 116.

troubled conscience provided the impetus for Luther's initial wrestling with the *cura animarum* [care of souls] of his day."¹⁸ His *Anfechtung* ("spiritual trial or affliction") within the late-medieval penitential system supplied an important occasion for his early critique of indulgences and for the pastoral concerns expressed in his 1519 sermons, especially the sermon on penance.¹⁹

To make the "precious and comforting treasure that the gospel offers" ever-present to people, Luther reminds pastors always to preach, focusing on the verbs exhort, encourage, and persuade.²⁰ This is seen most directly a decade later when Luther compiled his sermons and other texts into his two catechisms. While the Large Catechism is directed at pastors, Luther's exhortation has lay recipients in mind, those to whom the pastors preach. Before describing the theological and ritual revisions to what had been sacramental penance, Luther describes practices that center the neighbourly role in consolation.

Luther distinguishes two neighbourly forms of confession. The first is the mutual confession associated with the Lord's Prayer: "we are to confess our guilt before one another and forgive one another before we come to God and ask for forgiveness."²¹ Luther envisions this being done in public (and probably daily) without fear, acknowledging that no one has behaved the way he ought. This mutuality connects absolution and reconciliation. The second is private confession sought when a particular matter attacks the conscience, especially "when some particular issue weighs on us or attacks us, eating away at us until we can have no peace to find ourselves sufficiently strong in faith."²² While absolution is ultimately the outcome of this practice, it also provides an opportunity to seek "advice, comfort, and strength."

The ministry of consolation cannot be reduced to a one-way transmission from speaker to hearer, from provider to receiver, or from assured to distressed. This ministry is multifaceted—scripture supplies the external promise, the troubled conscience receives that promise, and the neighbour gives it an audible and interpersonal form.²³ Comfort understood solely as the removal of distress may follow a means-end logic. Christian consolation, by contrast, returns the afflicted conscience to God's promise, whether or not the distress is immediately removed.

These neighbourly practices of consolation and absolution are effective because "Christ himself has placed absolution on the mouths of his Christian community."²⁴

18. Ronald K. Rittgers, "How Luther's Engagement with Pastoral Care Shaped His Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. R. Kolb et al. (Oxford University Press, 2014), 463.

19. See Dirk Lange's introduction to "Sermon on the Sacrament of Penance, 1519," in TAL 1:182.

20. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.7.

21. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.10.

22. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.13.

23. See Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism, 1529," ed. T.J. Wengert, in TAL 4:234.

24. Luther, "The Large Catechism," 477.14.

The language used here is reminiscent of the core of Luther's neighbourly theology with the believer's mouth having an exchange with Christ's. Luther establishes a direct link between the believer's mouth and the divine Word, which is then communicated to the neighbour. The "exchanges" that take place operate on two levels of "word," the incarnate Word (Jesus) and the spoken word (consolation). Elsewhere, in his commentary on Psalm 110, Luther emphasizes the efficacy of the Word: "Things move along and are accomplished because He Himself preaches and promotes preaching, and also because He Himself does and produces what He preaches."²⁵

Christian neighbourliness is always mediated neighbourliness. "I am a brother or sister to another person through what Jesus Christ has done for me and to me," Bonhoeffer writes, while the other becomes a brother or sister "through what Jesus Christ has done for them and to them." Thus, "we have one another only through Christ."²⁶ The neighbour does not become the source of consolation but rather the concrete location at which Christ's external Word may be heard.

If consolation is an act of the living Word, then it includes both giving and receiving. When describing receiving as listening, Bonhoeffer notes that it is "the first service one owes to others in the community" and argues that "the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them." Listening participates in God's own action because God "not only gives us God's Word, but also lends us God's ear."²⁷ Thus, mutual consolation should not be reduced to the correct performance of an externally valid formula. Its concrete form ordinarily includes listening closely enough that the consoling Word addresses the neighbour's actual affliction rather than the speaker's prior interpretation of it. "We should listen with the ears of God, so that we can speak the Word of God."²⁸

Cross-Shaped Consolation and the Refusal of Therapeutic Ease

Luther's overall theology of suffering means that consolation and comfort do not necessarily have the same outcomes. Because suffering is an ever-present reality, Christians may be called to be disciples in uncomfortable places. Jensen notes that this is so that people in civil society, the church, and the home (the three estates) "can see God's inbreaking realm happening in their own contexts and situations of life."²⁹ One primary component of the theology of the cross is that God shows up where one might not expect a god to be; here, God is present in suffering wherever the person may be.

25. Martin Luther, "Psalm 110," trans. H.R. Klann, in *Luther's Works*, volume 13: *Selected Psalms II*. Ed. J.J. Pelikan (Concordia, 1956) 270. See also Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 115.

26. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 34.

27. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 98.

28. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 99.

29. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 53.

A challenging feature of Luther's account is his claim that *Anfechtungen* can serve a constructive purpose in faith. "Trial and temptation thus serve to bring one closer to God, to establish one firmly in faith, to empty one of all self-righteousness so that one may be filled with the righteousness of Christ and rest wholly in His Word."³⁰ This assertion challenges a theology of glory that identifies divine favor with relief, success, or visible improvement and therefore distances God from suffering. Such a theology of glory is a reality in which divine consolation cannot exist, as distancing God from suffering would mean God is inherently absent.³¹

Mutual consolation addresses the afflicted conscience by giving assurance through the externally spoken promise, which is a byproduct of the promise that is conveyed through the living Word. Bonhoeffer's account helps specify why such assurance is genuinely *extra nos* ("outside ourselves"). The disciple's own heart cannot certify the promise without becoming caught in self-examination. The other believer "breaks the circle of self-deception," and the promise becomes certain when "spoken by another believer as God's command and in God's name."³² The mutuality of consolation, therefore, does not make assurance less divine or less certain. It names the creaturely form in which God chooses to place the promise outside the self and give it back to the self through the neighbour.

This assurance does not mean certainty without doubt, as the word often connotes today. Rather, its certainty lies not in knowing what God will do, but in trusting that God hears, remains present, and acts according to the promise. This can be seen in Luther's consolation addressed to women facing the dangers of childbirth, where he notes that whatever Christians sincerely pray "becomes a great, unbearable cry in God's ears. God must listen." Later he adds, "Know that your prayer is pleasing to God and that God will do everything much better than you can comprehend or desire."³³ The certainty is framed as the conviction that God does not ignore those who cry out and that God will respond as God does. This approach to promise-based certainty permeates Luther's letters of pastoral care. For example: "[Jesus Christ] is so wholeheartedly faithful and good that he cannot forsake us, nor would he wish to do so; only that we desire his help without doubting his promise."³⁴ Luther then points to the Psalms as biblical evidence that God's promises are certain.

Genuine consolation neither excuses sin nor leaves the troubled conscience in despair. In Bonhoeffer's interpretation of Luther's *pecca fortiter* ("sin boldly"),

30. Jane E. Strohl, "Luther and the Word of Consolation," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 27.

31. See Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 165.

32. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 113.

33. Martin Luther, "Consolation for Women Whose Pregnancies Have Not Gone Well, 1542," ed. K.E. Kvam, in TAL 4:424, 427.

34. Martin Luther, "Selected Letters of Pastoral and Spiritual Counsel," ed. J.A. Maxfield, in TAL 4:453.

it is “comfort in a time of despair and a call to discipleship,” a grace that “really forgives sins and liberates the sinner.”³⁵ Bonhoeffer characterizes cheap grace as “cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament” and depicts the resulting Christian as “comforted and secure” precisely because no following of Christ is required. “Cheap grace,” he concludes, “is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”³⁶ Bonhoeffer thus provides a theological criterion for distinguishing consolation from therapeutic ease—consolation is “gospelling” only when it communicates forgiveness in a form that restores the hearer to Christ and Christ’s call.

Mutual consolation is the costly communication of the promise to one who cannot generate faith or assurance from within. Christians are to be assured of Christ’s true presence amid suffering. Although the claim that “Christ is present” can become a pastoral platitude when offered abstractly, here it arises from the *communicatio idiomatum* rather than from generic reassurance. “Through full participation in Christ’s two natures can one have the certainty that Christ is present in all emergencies.”³⁷ Such an affirmation redirects consolation away from speculation about God as the cause of suffering and toward confidence in Christ’s presence amid it.

Mutual Consolation as Everyday Neighbourliness

Rittgers states that Luther’s pastoral writings “were intended to help pastors minister to the needs of their flocks,” but “in many cases these works were directed to the laity, both to console and exhort them in the Christian life and also to mobilize them for ministry to one another.”³⁸ The everyday character of consolation appears in how these pastoral resources move beyond ordained ministry and mobilize Christians to minister to one another.

A few years after preaching the sacramental sermons of 1519, and upon returning from protective exile in the Wartburg Castle, Luther again speaks of the mutuality of consolation. “For there are many doubtful matters that we cannot resolve or find the answer to by ourselves, and so we take a friend aside and tell them our trouble. What harm is there if we humble ourselves a little before a neighbor,

35. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English 4 (Fortress, 2001), 52-53.

36. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43-44.

37. Sabine Holtz, *Theologie und Alltag: Lehre und Leben in den Predigten der Tübinger Theologen 1550-1750* (Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 115. See also Steiger, “Axle and Motor of Luther’s Theology,” 132.

38. Ronald K. Rittgers, “Martin Luther’s Pastoral Writings,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. John Barton, online edition (Oxford Academic, 2017).

put ourselves to shame, look for a word of comfort, accept it and believe it, as if hearing it directly from God?”³⁹ This focus on mutuality, and thus neighbourliness, was necessary because of the circumstances in Wittenberg that led to his return. Whatever judgment one makes concerning Luther’s relation to Karlstadt, the *Invocavit* sermons situate mutual consolation within the task of restoring a community unsettled by contested reforms.⁴⁰

Because Luther understands ministry as the responsibility of all the baptized, pastoral care belongs to the whole community, even when particular persons are set apart to lead its public ministry. In an Easter sermon, Luther interprets Christ’s encounter with the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus as a model for how the church is to continue Christ’s work into the future:

It is, therefore, his purpose to teach us by this narrative, given for our instruction and consolation, how his work is to be done in the Christian church after his resurrection, namely, that he will not reject nor cast out those who are weak in their faith, yea, not even those who are held in error or ignorance, or who are otherwise weak, fearful, and despairing. They are rather the very persons in whom he will exercise and manifest the power of his resurrection, not only by inviting them to come to him, but also by coming to them, and treating them in the gentlest and kindest way, talking with them, teaching and instructing them, yea, even eating with them, until at length they grow strong and secure in their faith; while their hearts, so sad and sorrowful for a time, are again filled with joy.⁴¹

Just as Christ provides instruction and consolation to the two disciples, so too is the church to continue that in its ministry, including the relational practices of invitation and hospitality. Thus, all Christians share this “duty of comfort” (*Trostamt*).⁴²

Bonhoeffer develops the same conjunction of consolation and instruction by refusing to separate comfort from admonition. The interpersonal ministry of the Word bears witness “regarding all the comfort, the admonition, the kindness, and the firmness of God.” Christians speak as persons who share the same need: “We talk to one another about the help we both need. We admonish one another to go the way Christ bids us to go.”⁴³ Consolation is mutual not only because Christians exchange the roles of speaker and hearer but because neither approaches the other from a position above the common need for grace.

39. Luther, “*Invocavit* Sermons,” TAL 4:44.

40. See Martin Lohrmann’s introduction to the *Invocavit* sermons about the varying interpretations of Luther’s response to Karlstadt’s reforms while he was at the Wartburg; TAL 4:8-9.

41. Martin Luther, “Second Sermon for Easter Monday (Luke 24:13-35),” in *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. Ed. and trans. J.N. Lenker (Luther in All Lands, 1904-09) 2:245.

42. Pietsch, “Luther and the Cure of Souls,” 39.

43. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 103-104.

Living out Luther's neighbourly theology through consolation is also a call to resist the mindset of scarcity, both in our understanding of God and in our relationships with our neighbours. Luther's reforms make the promise accessible by denying that only the ordained possess the capacity to mediate consolation. "For our God, the God we have, is not so stingy to have left us with only one comfort or strength for our conscience, or only one absolution, but we have many absolutions in the gospel and are richly showered with many absolutions."⁴⁴ The abundance of absolution dismantles a spiritual economy built on scarcity.

The mutuality of this consolation lies in the fact that it is not dependent on the worthiness or status of either the speaker/giver or the hearer/receiver. This is because mutual consolation occurs through alien righteousness. In essence, the believer is the medium through which Christ's consolation is made known. "For, as has been said, love of neighbor is not concerned about its own; it considers not how great or humble, but how useful and needful the works are for neighbor or community."⁴⁵

Thus, everyday consolation takes concrete ecclesial forms: speaking the Word, confessing, absolving, praying, receiving the sacraments, and bearing one another in service. "Those who bear with others know that they themselves are being borne. Only in this strength can they themselves bear with others."⁴⁶ Because suffering can coexist with consolation, Luther's understanding of comfort cannot be reduced to the removal of distress. Consolation addresses *Anfechtung* by returning the afflicted conscience to God's promise, even when suffering persists. As Jensen notes, "The incarnation leads to the cross. Likewise, only when the church is willing to enter into solidarity with those who are suffering—to become incarnate with the people whom Jesus became incarnate among—can it discover its true identity."⁴⁷

Those who suffer are consoled to console others. For Luther, this was one of the duties of the Christian. As he writes in connection to extreme cases, "Now if a deadly epidemic strikes, we should stay where we are, make our preparations, and take courage in the fact that we are mutually bound together ... so that we cannot desert one another or flee from one another."⁴⁸ Here, consolation takes bodily form in remaining, preparing, caring, and refusing abandonment. Thus, just as Christians are called to offer mutual absolution in times of affliction caused by sin, so too are Christians called to offer mutual consolation in times of distress. They are called to *Trost* ("consolation") and to proclaim *Trost*.

Bonhoeffer's constructive reception of this Lutheran tradition clarifies that mutual consolation is at once gospelling, ecclesial, cross-shaped, and embodied. It

44. Luther, "Invocavit Sermons," TAL 4:44.

45. Luther, "On Secular Authority," TAL 5:106-107.

46. Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 103.

47. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 159.

48. Martin Luther, "Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague, 1527," ed. A.M. Johnson, in TAL 4:398.

is gospeling because its content is Christ's promise and assurance of the liberating gospel. It is ecclesial because Christ places that promise into the mouths of Christians for one another, with the Body of Christ acting in an interconnected fashion. It is cross-shaped because it does not necessarily remove suffering but bears suffering and sin through forgiveness under Christ's cross. It is embodied because it involves people inhabiting their entire personhood in concrete enactment. Mutual consolation is, therefore, not simply one pastoral application of justification but is the neighbourly form assumed by justification when alien righteousness creates a people who receive Christ from outside themselves and who then become bearers of Christ's Word to one another.

What Is Jesus Doing?

Near the end of *The Call to Discipleship*, Jensen offers some alternative questions to the traditional "What would Jesus do?" Here are two of those questions:

- Where is the gospel in every situation in which a disciple finds himself as he lives out his vocation, where he works and plays and worships?
- What can the disciple of the living God proclaim and do that will address broken communities with his broken relationships we well as bring about reconciliation and healing?⁴⁹

Mutual consolation answers Jensen's questions by locating discipleship in the ordinary practices through which the baptized speak and embody Christ's promise for one another. It resists cheap grace by joining forgiveness to Christ's call, and it resists clerical exclusivity by returning this ministry to the common priesthood.

Mutual consolation is thus not an optional pastoral application added to justification after the fact. It is the neighbourly form justification assumes when Christ's alien righteousness frees Christians from themselves, gives them to one another, and places the life-giving Word in their mouths. In listening, forgiving, admonishing, bearing, and serving, ordinary Christians receive Christ from outside themselves and become bearers of Christ for the neighbour. Mutual consolation is one concrete answer to the call of discipleship: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

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49. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship*, 186.

Love's Austere and Lonely Offices

Mark D. Tranvik

Gordon Jensen's excellent book, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation and the Community*, is a much-needed tonic for the church today. It draws deeply on Scripture and the theologies of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Mining these sources and others, Jensen injects new life into traditional theological categories, particularly the understanding of discipleship.

In his introduction, Jensen notes the poor English translation of Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge* as *The Cost of Discipleship*. What Bonhoeffer was really getting at was the "call" to discipleship. Modifying the title in this way opens the door for associations with baptism and vocation. While "cost" often gets defined morally and tends to make faith into a weary drudge of obedience, being "called" to discipleship moves Christians into a world where Word and sacrament animate a wholly new way of life that includes a fresh way of seeing creation and the neighbor.¹ Perhaps we should be more precise here and say the Word and baptism as the latter receive much attention in the book. Rejecting the idea that baptism is only an "initiation rite," Jensen stresses the link with vocation and the notion that a believer is continually dying and rising in Christ.

Throughout his book, Jensen also stresses that Jesus is not one-dimensional. Indeed, he underlines that the Christian life often involves paradox and overlap. Lutherans of course know this most famously through the phrase *simul iustus et peccator*—at the same time righteous and sinner. However, Jensen helpfully extends the *simul* to other categories as well. I love the creative way he paired a number of concepts and held them together to make them richer and more meaningful. The instances I found particularly appealing were *simul eventus et modus vivendi* (one-time event and way of life), *simul reflexivus et activus* (at the same time reflective and active), and *simul iustificatus et vocatus* (at the same time justified and called).²

Emphasis on simultaneity is such an important insight. I cannot count the number of times I have been frustrated by discussions of Lutheran theology that get bogged down regarding the proper relationship between justification and sanctification. This often leads to another dark alley involving the third use of the law. So many of these discussions suffer from the categorical error of adopting a theological anthropology that simply refuses to bend to the tensions and paradoxes

1. Gordon A. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation and the Community* (Cascade Books, 2026), xxi-xxiii.

2. *Ibid.*, 211. See Jensen's index for the various ways he employs the *simul*.

embedded in the Lutheran confessional way of seeing the world. Once we move sequentially and see ourselves “en route” from one spiritual station to another, the entire structure begins to wobble and fall apart. When we eliminate simultaneity, the power of the gospel is enervated, stripped of all its vitality.

This also points to one place where Jensen might provide readers with a little more clarity, in his discussion of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ).³ He appears to applaud the document and suggests it maintains the simultaneity of justification and sanctification, with each side emphasizing its traditional concerns—Lutherans with forensic justification and Catholics with the fruits of being justified. This seems, though, a bit evasive. The issue hovering in the background is the bound will. Lutherans affirm it while Catholics do not. This causes the latter to inevitably invite some level of human participation (however qualified by grace) in what becomes a “process” of salvation and a denial or at least muting of the *sola fide*. It seems conceptually difficult to affirm both a simultaneity and a free will. Movement initiated in the self is the enemy of Jensen’s *simul*. As such, I think it would be helpful if he could have provided more clarity on this issue. In fact, discussion of the bound will is missing in general, which is curious as this would seem to complement the book’s emphasis on the *simul*.

As already noted, *The Call to Discipleship* is an appeal to the church to recover a robust understanding of vocation. Rooted in baptism and animated by the gospel, Jensen seeks to enliven the way Christians think about faith without falling into the traps of moralism, experientialism, or quietism. For Luther, the problem was the monastery. What had begun centuries before as a protest against a worldly Christianity had in many places in the West degenerated into something that its founders would have scarcely recognized. Baptism was diminished as monastic vows were given sacramental value.⁴ The ideals of poverty, chastity, and obedience were observed more in the breach than in practice. Moreover, the idea that monks and nuns occupied a higher station in life and were the ones who possessed true vocations was a denial of justification by grace through faith and the priesthood of all believers.

Jensen does a nice job of showing how Luther reoriented “holy orders” in the direction of activity in daily life.⁵ Meriting salvation by entering a monastery or cloister runs contrary to a theology that sees God in Christ *giving* us salvation precisely because God wants it that way. Holy orders still exist, but now they are found in our “stations” in life. In Luther’s time, these stations were the ecclesiastical, domestic and civil realms. This formal terminology is meant to convey that all of life is the arena of vocation. Now, all Christians are called and they are called all

3. Ibid., 35-41.

4. See article XXVII in the Augsburg Confession in *The Book of Concord*, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Fortress, 2000), 82, note 186, hereafter cited as BC.

5. Jensen, *Discipleship*, 81-86.

the time. Movement in the world does not earn favor with God but rather seeks to discern the best way of loving and serving the neighbor.

I would like to focus moving forward on an aspect of vocation that is often misunderstood or ignored, the daily or even mundane dimension of living out a called life. Jensen is certainly not at fault here. In fact, his book invites readers to reflect on multiple ways that faith intersects with life.⁶ I am simply drilling down a little deeper because our preaching and teaching is sorely missing this crucial part of our faith.

Perhaps the best place to start is with Max Weber's idea of disenchantment. In a world dominated by science and technique, mystery gets moved to the margins or eliminated altogether. Gods and spirits and magic are for religious eccentrics or maybe the "little people" who lack education and, therefore, are unable to see things "as they really are." The ultimate effect on human beings results in what Charles Taylor calls the "buffered self." In other words, we are autonomous and self-enclosed, cut off from external forces.⁷ While we might not have to contend with a realm of fairies and evil spirits seeking to influence and even harm us, this also makes us responsible for our condition. That can be a lonely and arduous task, particularly if we are in the grip of depression or despair. For evidence, consider the number of therapists making a fine living in Manhattan. Though much more could be said about this, the reader gets the general idea. Weber, Taylor, and others have documented the paradigm shift in the way many Western people see themselves and the world. Science and the nexus of cause and effect have become our window unto reality.

Martin Luther's concept of vocation, drenched in the Biblical narrative, is grounded in life as a creation in the hands of benevolent albeit mysterious Creator. Moreover, the God of Israel is deeply involved in creation. He "knows our words before we say them" (Psalm 139:4). He is as close as "the shade at our right hand" (Psalm 121:3). He enters deep into human flesh (Colossians 1:19) and has even numbered the hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30). Luther ate, drank, and slept this story, and that meant for him that the world was anything but disenchanted. Instead, it hums with mystery. It puzzles and confounds as well as awes and overjoys. As the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins says in "God's Grandeur," it is a world "charged with the grandeur of God" where "there lives a dearest freshness deep down things."⁸ Lutherans have expressed this Christologically as *finitum capax infiniti*, or the finite is capable of the infinite.⁹

6. Ibid., 66-75, 142-154.

7. As Taylor makes clear, this is a complicated and multi-layered story that is only hinted at in this paragraph. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 25-41.

8. Gerald Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford University Press, 1986), 128.

9. Most notably, this idea is emphasized by Luther in his debate with Ulrich Zwingli at Marburg in 1529 about the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The actual Latin phrase comes from later in the Lutheran tradition.

As Luther interpreted this world for his people in his catechisms and sermons, he continually underlines the way God is present in daily, ordinary life. As it is sometimes said, he understood how “God is in the details.” Two places in the Small Catechism highlight this teaching. In his explanation to the first article of the creed (Jensen also documents this in the *Haustafel* or Table of Duties), Luther lists approximately seventeen different ways in which the Creator graciously preserves and protects our lives.¹⁰ The level of detail is almost humorous (eyes and ears and shoes) but has a purpose: physical, earthly life is a remarkable gift that, when considered, ushers in a deep sense of gratitude.

Luther is hardly done there, though. He swims against the tide of a catechetical tradition that saw the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“Give us this day our daily bread”) as primarily a reference to the eucharist. Instead, the Small Catechism says the prayer for daily bread refers to the necessities of earthly life. Once again, we get a long list, this time some 21 items in total. There is much overlap in the two lists, though the one in the Lord’s Prayer includes money, honor, friendship, and good weather as gifts to be thankful for.¹¹ Luther envisioned the catechism as a teaching tool for his new conception of “holy orders.” He knew how easy it was for Christians to take earthly blessings for granted and to sever them from their source, the gracious Creator. The significant level of detail in these two lists impresses upon both teacher and learner that the world is “charged with grandeur of God.”

All of this flows directly into vocation when we look at the catechism’s Table of Duties, or *Haustafel*. Therein, this gracious God of detail intersects with human callings in a profound way. All three of the stations are represented in the Table of Duties: the civil, ecclesiastical, and domestic. Unsurprisingly, since the catechism is intended for use in the home, the domestic realm gets more attention, but there are at least ten different callings mentioned in the Table: bishops, pastors, government officials, spouses, parents, children, servants, those in charge of servants, widows and young persons.¹²

In our time, the Table of Duties is often ignored because there are understandable objections to it being sexist, hierarchical, and authoritarian. However, this is frustrating. We should not be surprised that Luther’s list and descriptions reflect life in sixteenth century Germany. Surely we have the creative chops to peel away the objectionable overlay and reveal the underlying point: God is the force in, with, and under our various callings. Most importantly, God is in the mundane details of everyday life. As Luther says in one of his early sermons:

How is it possible that you are not called? You are always in some sort of position. You have always been a husband or a wife or a son or a daughter or a servant. Imagine the lowest position—as a husband do you not have enough to do to watch over your spouse, children, workers and property

10. “The Small Catechism” in BC, 354.

11. *Ibid.*, 357.

12. *Ibid.*, 365-367.

so that all might be obedient to God and no harm comes to any of them? Indeed, even if you had four heads and ten hands, you would scarcely have the energy for such a task. And I guarantee you would not be thinking about making a pilgrimage or doing some so-called “saintly” work.¹³

The mundane and everyday are where most of us live most of the time. As Jerry Sittser points out, “God must value routine because much of our life consists of little more.” In a statement close to the spirit of Luther’s catechetical lists, Sittser goes on to note how much of our time is taken up in the tasks of daily life. He says that someone who lives to the age of eighty will spend about 2,000 hours brushing his teeth, 204,000 hours sleeping, and almost 44,000 hours eating.¹⁴

This then raises a larger issue. Why does so much preaching and teaching in mainline churches largely ignore the mundane and everyday aspects of vocation? Evangelicals seem to understand this. Peruse the educational offerings or sermon themes of many mega-churches (assuming here that most are evangelical or neo-Baptist) and you will find classes on marriage, parenting, grandparenting, and the use of money. Admittedly, many of these programs fall into the “third use of the law” category or the belief that Christians have some sort of special insight into how to manage the affairs of the home and the state. There is no question that our Christian tradition can shape how we think about matters, be they domestic or civil, but the idea that this makes us *better* at daily life and therefore enhances our standing with God violates the *simul* highlighted so well by Jensen: we are justified and sinful at the same time. Our living of a Christian life also means we will always recognize our need for forgiveness. In other words, Christians have no monopoly on virtue. We don’t live out the truth better than anyone else. What we can do is point to the one who makes this insight possible and gives us the power to start anew, Jesus.

In coming back to our question, we may ask why the absence of the mundane is in the mainline. Why the continual drumbeat of social justice and the constant call to demonstrate, march, and fill city halls with signs of protest? Why is preaching and teaching so lopsidedly oriented toward redressing ills in the civic realm? Part of it may be the way the current administration in the United States has colonized our minds. There are awful things being done in the areas of immigration and the minimization of poverty, among many other things. We should call attention to these issues and do it with the confidence that comes from proclaiming that Jesus alone is the Lord of life rather than money, our national stature, or the “purity” of our citizenry.¹⁵ The mainline *cognoscenti* (bishops and pastors) need to know that these

13. Martin Luther, “Sermon on John 21:19-24” (1522), in *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Schriften), 10 (I): 308, hereafter cited as WA. Translation mine.

14. Jerry Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life* (Zondervan, 2004), 87-93.

15. At the risk of being awkward, I will offer my own bona fides here. During the recent “invasion” (yes, that is the right word) of Minnesota by immigration authorities, I protested the incursion and drove vulnerable people to work and school. I want to stress that is only one small part of my callings as a Christian.

problems do not occupy the attention of most of our people most of the time. Indeed, most congregants are struggling with forgiving a spouse, worrying about the choices of their teenagers, or are anxious about paying medical bills. Again, most of life is lived in the mundane. Pews will continue to empty if we don't widen the scope of what it means to be claimed and sent by Jesus.

What are some other reasons, besides the concern that we might leave unjust systems intact, that drive this neglect of vocation in the details? Some get back to Jensen's laudable emphasis on the *simul*. The idea that we are truly sinners and not just "good" people who make occasional mistakes has not sunk in. We prefer binaries and this particularly shows up in our politics. In the name of justice and righteousness, we demonize the other side. Of course, the MAGA-right in the U.S. is guilty of this. Even so, at least they are being true to what is in actuality a superficial theology. Those who claim a heritage in the Reformation should know better, particularly those who trace their theology back to Luther and the Lutheran confessions. When we betray the *simul*, the temptation to focus on the political becomes too strong, and then the callings of everyday life get minimized or even lost.

To conclude my call to honor the mundane as part of lifting up Jensen's work, I will return again to the world of poetry. The first African-American poet laureate in the United States, Robert Hayden, wrote a poem that captures this mundane understanding of vocation. It is called "Those Winter Sundays."¹⁶

Sundays too my father got up early
 and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
 then with cracked hands that ached
 from labor in the weekday weather made
 banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
 When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
 and slowly I would rise and dress,
 fearing the chronic angers of that house.

Speaking indifferently to him,
 who had driven out the cold
 and polished my good shoes as well.
 What did I know, what did I know
 of love's austere and lonely offices?

As his son reflects on it later, the life of his father is not easy. He is a common laborer who works outdoors, but he is deeply devoted to his family, though the house is full of "chronic angers." Rising early and warming the rooms in a cold house, he polishes shoes and then wakes his somewhat thankless son for church. There is

16. Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays," in *Collected Poems: Robert Hayden*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (Norton Publishing, 1985), 41.

nothing very glamorous in any of this. The father is just doing what needed to be done—yet another of “love’s austere and lonely offices.”

Gordon Jensen’s *The Call to Discipleship* is a rich text that gives its readers much to ponder. He has braided together baptism, vocation, and community in a way that strengthens each concept. Indeed, they *must* be held together because when considered separately, they tend to wobble off course. The text is informed by a deep reading of the Christian tradition with a special indebtedness to the theologies of Luther and Bonhoeffer. Indeed, it is nothing less than a call to “re-enchant” the world in a way that honors creation and serves the neighbor. We can only hope it sparks new conversations in Christian communities about the meaning of the call to be a baptized apostle of Jesus.

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Creation's Vocation, and Ours

Allen G. Jorgenson

Gordon Jensen's *The Call to Discipleship* is located at the intersection of the motifs of discipleship, vocation, and baptism. Jensen has masterfully related these in a volume both scholarly and pastoral with a prophetic edge that serves well the mandate of the *Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology* series.

In responding to Jensen's important work, I want to follow the vocational trail most specifically, although recognizing that themes of discipleship and baptism will surface from time to time in relationship to justification. In a way, this seems especially fitting and perhaps a bit predictable because, as Jensen notes, justification "by its very nature, drives the Christian into a vocation of service."¹ Perhaps a little bit less predictable, however, will be the attempt I make in imagining that creation also has a vocation, a claim that I imagine to be paradoxically both common-sensical and curious. Jensen's work is Christologically rich in thinking through discipleship, vocation, and baptism. I see him as an especially apt interlocutor for my venture in that he endeavors to undermine any transactional understanding of vocation.² Key to my work will be Jensen's assertion that "discipleship is the calling of both the baptized individual and of the community—simultaneously an individual and a community (*simul singularitas et communitate*) vocation."³

In what follows, I first consider the third article of the creed and the work of the Spirit in sanctification, a point of considerable import in Jensen's work before considering creation as per the work of *Spiritus Creator*. In a manner analogous to Niels Henrik Gregersen's move in mapping the forensic/effective distinction of justification onto creation, I do the same with sanctification.

In the next section, I make some suggestions regarding how our understanding of vocation might be informed by the suggestion that creation is called, albeit in a manner *sui generis* to it. I want to argue with Jensen for a broader, communal understanding of vocation and also beyond Jensen in imagining that creation, too, is called to serve God, and we are well served by that calling and perform ours well when we do so in harmony with the cosmos's call.

In the final section of the paper, I ponder how creation might impact disciples in its vocation. Here, I point, with Luther, to creation's capacity to instruct us in the high calling we share with the whole cosmos of the practice of praise.

1. Gordon A. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, Reconstructions in Lutheran Doctrinal Theology, ed. Paul R. Hinlicky (Cascade Books, 2026).

2. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, xxi.

3. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 103.

Vocation and Sanctification

Disciples are, of course, called. The call, however, is specific to a community shaped by the Spirit. As Luther notes in the *Small Catechism*, this Spirit calls, enlightens, makes holy, and preserves us.⁴ Jensen notes that “an integral component of vocation is the process of sanctification.”⁵ Consequently, he expends important efforts in working through the nature of sanctification and its relationship to justification. The term *kairos* and its distinction from *chronos* carries significant weight in his exploration. Jensen uses this in a way that correlates with Luther’s distinction between God’s *favor*, or the forensic dimension of justification, from God’s *donum*, the effective dimension. In thinking these through the event of our salvation with students, I have sometimes begun by noting the way in which we find the Greek verb for “save” (*sōzō*) in Pauline literature.

Ephesians 2:4-6: “But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

I Corinthians 1:18: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

Romans 5:10: “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.”

Tellingly, Paul expresses the event of our salvation in past, present, and future tenses. After having my students sit with this curiosity for a bit, I explain to them that as the verb has God as its Subject, it has an eternal origin. Consequently, the event of our salvation is primordially an eternal event that then takes temporal form across time. When eternity touches time, time is touched in its totality rather than in discrete isolated instances even while it also takes on a chronological aspect as the bearer of its eternal character. As such, it makes sense to follow the confessors in separating sanctification as a chronological event from justification in its treatment since sanctification results from justification (SD III.28)⁶ even while recognizing that the work of Spirit is also an eternal event in which justification and sanctification are *simul*. It strikes me that justification and sanctification, as well as creation, have both eternal and chronological expressions relating respectively to *kairos* and *chronos*. Of course, just as justification and sanctification are simultaneously eternal and temporal, so is creation.

4. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 2000), 355.

5. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 65.

6. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 566.

This eternal and temporal character maps onto Luther's distinction between the forensic and effective understanding of justification as *favor* and *donum*, related in turn to grace and faith. Luther writes:

... for peace and the remission of sins are properly attributed to the grace of God, while healing from corruption is ascribed to faith. Faith is the gift and inward good which purges the sin to which it is opposed....The grace of God, on the other hand, is an outward good, God's favor, the opposite of wrath.⁷

In the same way that justification names an eternal event that is located in time, so too does sanctification such that the "discipleship of the baptized encompasses both kinds of holiness, passive and active."⁸

God looks upon the actions resulting from the Spirit's activity with *favor* as well as ensuring that the *donum* of the Spirit enables growth in discipleship such that "day by day the substance [of sin] is removed so that it may be utterly destroyed."⁹ Egil Grislis notes, however, that

... according to Luther, although faith and justification can be recognized, sanctification remains hidden. This effectively prevents pride from nurturing hypocrisy. Yet for those truly worried about their condition vis-a-vis God, Luther offers a paradoxically profound assurance. "Grace can never forsake him who despairs of himself. (LW 51, 43)."¹⁰

Grislis describes sanctification as a "distinctive dimension experienced in the very midst of justification."¹¹ Jensen notes that Christ holds together the one time and on-going nature of baptism such that the baptized recognize that are able to respond to God's call because they have been freed by the Spirit, so they necessarily respond in humility because their confidence is Christ.¹²

What does this mean for vocation? Jensen notes that "an integral component of vocation is the process of sanctification."¹³ Sanctification as both *favor et donum* means that our calls are circumscribed by confidence and humility. The confidence comes *extra nos* in Christ, so knowing this to be the case renders us humble. Our humility is freeing because it is funded by the realization that our

7. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works – American Edition*, 55 vols. (Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955). Volume 32, 227. Hereafter (LW).

8. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 43. Cf. also "Whatever a godly man does, he does rightly, even if he makes a mistake; for he has a heart that is right, and God looks mainly at this." LW 4, 85.

9. LW 32, 208.

10. Egil Grislis, "Luther on Sanctification: Humility and Courage," *Consensus* 10, no. 1 (1984): 13–14.

11. Grislis, "Luther on Sanctification: Humility and Courage," 3.

12. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 46.

13. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community* 65.

agency is truly a *donum* that is Spirited, and our confidence is grounded in Christ who has rendered us patient on the *favor* of God. Jensen suggests, in an intriguing move, that the law has a vocation, which is our sanctification, that renders us agents who love the neighbor.¹⁴ We might ask, though, to quote an interlocutor of Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” To answer that, I turn to a motif from the first article of the Creed—creation.

Vocation and Creation

As noted at the beginning of this essay, I want to argue that creation has a vocation, realizing that this claim is at the same time both commonsensical and curious. It is commonsensical in that creation is called to render glory to God, as evidenced in Psalm 148.

- ¹ Praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights!
- ² Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his host!
- ³ Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars!
- ⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!

The verb “praise” is used here in the imperative mood, so creation is given a command or a task, as it were. Of course, humans are also created, so we share in this call to praise God as mammals but also as nitrogen, iron, water, oxygen, and potassium. We are both creation and created as humans.

Gregersen claims that the first article of the creed is patterned after the second, so insights germane to Christology hold analogues in the doctrine of creation so that grace is present in creation, albeit in a hidden modality.¹⁵ Consequently, the *favor* and *donum* distinction discussed in Christ’s work applies also to creation such that the Father’s love for the cosmos accords to God’s *favor* and the Father’s presence in the cosmos accords to God’s *donum*. The Father is both *pro nobis* and *in nobis*.¹⁶ Gregersen asserts that, in a way analogous to the hypostatic union, the Father is present to the materiality of creation in a fashion akin to the presence of the Word to humanity in flesh. He notes, “For the blessings of God the Father do not only take place in human sensation and rationality, nor only in the good social government. God’s blessings also pervade the world of physical matter

14. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 64.

15. Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no. 1 (2005): 20.

16. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 20.

and biological existence.”¹⁷ He references God’s self-giving presence in Luther’s *Confession*,¹⁸ a point also found in the Large Catechism’s treatment of the First Article: “For here we see how the Father has given to us himself with all creation and has abundantly provided for us in this life, apart from the fact that he has also showered us with inexpressible eternal blessings through his Son and the Holy Spirit, as we shall hear.”¹⁹

Gregersen notes that the proximity of the divine to the everyday constitutes the mystery of this.²⁰ However, to faith, this mystery is revealed in a fashion: “what is revealed to faith is the ‘that’ of creation, but the ‘how’ of divine creativity remains a mystery, not only to human rationality but also to the believer.”²¹ This affirmation of creation is also operative in Luther’s treatment of vocation in his comments on 1 Corinthians 7 wherein he critiques the so-called vocation of monastics. He sees in their understanding the danger of excessive spirituality.²² In his treatment of marriage, he makes a strong claim for the earthly.

But since that is also termed religious (*heist geistlig*) which happens outwardly (*auswendig*) to the body through the spirit of faith (*den geist des glaubens*), let us be very just and precise in our differentiation and understand that the state of marriage (*ehestand*) in all fairness should be termed religious (*geistlich*) and the religious orders secular (*weltig*).²³

Marriage is *geistlig*, as are all vocations in service of God, but they are also bodily, so humankind shares in the materiality of the cosmos. In fact, it is constitutive of our existence, and collectively we are called to praise God in our materiality. Still, the curious nature of the claim that creation has a vocation arises as we recall that Luther’s understanding of vocation is found in a concrete call to a social location. This is noted by Jensen in his critique of those common articulations of vocation, following Frederick Buechner who asserts that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”²⁴ Jensen deftly outlines the danger of this understanding of vocation, which too easily renders it individualistic and subject to the whims of one’s passions and interests.²⁵ He notes that a “vocation always take place in the community and for the sake of a society

17. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 22.

18. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 22.

19. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 433.

20. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 23.

21. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 23.

22. LW 28, 15.

23. LW 28, 17. Cf. Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols., (H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), Band 12, 105, 28–31. Hereafter WA.

24. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

25. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 144.

that God is shaping and guiding.”²⁶ Loy, too, notes the tendency today to link vocation to subjective feelings of fulfillment in service of a sense of significance.²⁷ He states that many today have replaced the Reformation doctrine of vocation with a subjective attention to significance by way of the needs of others such that needs and fulfillment become contemporary markers of a vocation of significance.²⁸ This seems far removed from Luther’s exposition of vocation wherein he notes the need to “differentiate between the freedom existing in your relation to God and the freedom existing in your relation to your neighbor.”²⁹ We are not free in things that are our neighbors. Instead, love attends to “the desire and need of the neighbor.”³⁰ Jensen writes that “vocation always take place in the community and for the sake of a society that God is shaping and guiding.”³¹

All of the above presumes a social context facilitating relationships with neighbors. We might query whether this obtains for creation, too. I will explore the common assertion of some Lutheran eco-theologians who make a case for understanding trees, valleys, and cardinals as our neighbors. I think this in part quells some of the possible outrage at the claim that creation has a vocation. To this, I add the simple observation that there is a *sui generis* character of the created order that is constitutive of its vocation, which differs in a fashion from that vocation nested in the Spirit’s recreative activity of sanctification. That *sui generis* sense of vocation is located in the Spirit’s creative act of creation that we share in. Here, we discover that our vocation is not circumscribed by faith borne love that acts for the neighbor. In creation’s vocation, we are called to be words of God. Consider Luther’s comments on Genesis.

[God] does not speak grammatical words; He speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God. Thus sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc.—we are all words of God, in fact only one single syllable or letter by comparison with the entire creation.³²

That we are simply being, then, is attested to at the beginning of this section in Psalm 148 wherein we heard the call to be what we are, witnesses to the glory of God. We share this vocation with all of creation *as creatures*. In our vocations *as human beings*, we do so in a social location for the good of all. Gregersen plays this a bit differently in his assertion that because of faith, we can now see the cosmos

26. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 113.

27. David W. Loy, “Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2021): 50.

28. Loy, “Luther, Vocation, and the Search for Significance,” 53.

29. LW 28, 46.

30. LW 28, 42.

31. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 113.

32. LW 1, 21.

as sermon.³³ He notes, along with other proponents of Scandinavian Creation Theology, that creation must not thereby be seen romantically or nostalgically.³⁴ The word of God that is the hawk is a hard word to the word of God that is the mouse, yet still we sing “This is my Father’s world.”

At the close of this section, I ask the question “what difference does it make to see creation as having a vocation, and what might we learn from creation’s vocation as we ponder ours?”

Learning from Creation’s Vocation

Lutheran eco-theologians commonly include the created order in identifying neighbors. Heidarzadegan notes that the vocation of loving the neighbor includes the “river, forest, future generation, and endangered species.”³⁵ Simons also notes that the neighbor includes non-humans.³⁶ Further, following what he perceives an important insight from the mystics, he enjoins the faithful to look at the world differently so that “all of creation, and not just the human, must be viewed as embodying the ongoing dynamic spirit of God, helping to challenge the anthropocentrism that has justified wanton abuse and destruction of the creation for human purposes alone.”³⁷ Further, following Bonhoeffer’s lead of expanding the three estates into four mandates, Kiara Jorgenson adds creation as a fifth mandate.³⁸ Jensen notes that for Luther, all three estates involve vocations, a point that Jorgenson concurs with and expands to the end that our relationship to creation is understood vocationally.³⁹ Jorgenson, consequently, notes that the cosmos must be seen as neighbor.⁴⁰

Jensen makes a similar move without using neighbor language when he notes that baptism “also engages the baptized person in the gospel life for the sake of all creation, and not just for the sake of their neighbor.”⁴¹ I am grateful for this move but also want to identify that the cosmos is our neighbor with whom we have relations. The practice of loving the neighbor precludes paternalistic care insofar as

33. Gregersen, “Grace in Nature and History: Luther’s Doctrine of Creation Revisited,” 28.

34. Cf. for instance, Knud E. Løgstrup, *Metaphysics Volume I*, trans. Russel L. Dees (Marquette University Press, 1995), 36.

35. Nazila Heidarzadegan, “Lutheran Ecotheology and the Anthropocene: Posthumanism, Apocalypse, and Hope,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 64, no. 4 (2025): 214.

36. Ernest L. Simons, “Vocation for Planetary Citizenship: Lutheran Liberal Arts Education in the Anthropocene,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 57, no. 2 (2018): 99.

37. Simons, “Vocation for Planetary Citizenship: Lutheran Liberal Arts Education in the Anthropocene,” 102.

38. Kiara Jorgenson, “The Option for Life,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (2015): 201.

39. Jorgenson, “The Option for Life,” 201–202.

40. Jorgenson, “The Option for Life,” 202.

41. Jensen, *The Call to Discipleship: Baptism, Vocation, and the Community*, 54.

love is predicated on some notion of reciprocity, even in the mode of disappointment. To love someone is to anticipate with this love the birth of a relationship that will become me serving my neighbor who serves me. Furthermore, when creation is my neighbor, not only do I love creation but creation loves me, albeit in a way fitting for the being that is not human being. Of course, we know that humans do not have the corner marketed on love because human love is divine love formed in humanity, so there is no reason not to think that it can be angelic or cosmic in form. The point, finally, is that if the cosmos is my neighbor, I live with it in a relationship of respect, care, and anticipation. Luther fittingly points to this in his comments on 1 Corinthians 15 when he opines about the way that nature illustrates resurrection and shares a fit response by a Christian.

“...This is surely done for our sakes, that we might thereby learn to know Him. He places His work before our eyes to illustrate what he purposes to do with us, for whose sake He created all of this. For since He produces such beautiful new vegetation year after year from a dead kernel and seed, He is much more disposed to do the same with us when we similarly lie buried under the ground and the time comes for an eternal summer to dawn. Then we will come forth far more beautiful and glorious.” Thus Christians hold converse with trees and all else that grows on earth, and the latter, in turn, with them.⁴²

The kind of agency that Luther accords “trees and all else that grows on earth” parallels in some ways an Indigenous imaginary. A phrase commonly used among people Indigenous to North America is translated from various languages into English as “all my relations.” It points to the interrelated nature of all beings and is used ceremonially in some communities. Further

“All my relations” also acknowledges measures of agency in all created things, and to recognize the power and life in all created things is an important aspect of the ongoing recognition of our interrelationship. Some Indigenous peoples will speak about the spirit of a created thing, whether a bird, a tree, or a rock. This is recognition of creatureliness, of our interrelatedness, and of animacy.⁴³

A kind of symmetry can be seen in Luther’s “convers[ation] with the trees” even while Luther’s understanding of humans as the pinnacle of creation is radically different from an Indigenous perspective.

A common theme among Indigenous stories from across Turtle Island [North America] is just how needy human beings are in comparison to the rest of creation. In many of these stories ... it is humans who rely on

42. LW 28, 180 and WA 36 646, 16 “reden die Christen mit beumen und allem, was aus erden wechst und sie widder mit inen.”

43. T. Christopher Hoklotubbe and Danny Zacharias, *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island: An Invitation to North American Indigenous Interpretation* (IVP Academic, 2025), 31.

the help and mercy of animals and plants to survive. Such stories stress the importance of humans treating animals and plants with respect, appreciation, and reciprocity.⁴⁴

Luther's worldview is different in that humans are the pinnacle of creation. I do note, however, that in setting Luther and this Indigenous worldview in proximity, his assertion that the marvel of creation's renewal "is surely done for our sakes, *that we might thereby learn to know Him*" (emphasis added) comes to the fore. This learning from creation accords with Luther's very Augustinian note that this life is to be engaged in a way "that [Christians] do not sink too deeply into it either with love and desire or suffering and boredom, but should rather behave like guests on earth, *using everything for a short time because of need and not for pleasure.*"⁴⁵ The Augustinian distinction between *uti* (use) and *frui* (pleasure) is the subtext here, with the latter reserved for God alone.⁴⁶ With the former, Luther does not have some kind of objectification in mind but rather a use that accords with the purpose of a thing. Part of the that purpose is to make God known in praise. Of course, the condition for the possibility of this is faith, whereby to "a Christian, therefore, the entire world is holiness, purity, utility, and piety."⁴⁷ Creation's vocation, then, in addition to praising the divine is as a pedagogue to humanity.

Of course, all of the above, within a Christian imaginary, presumes eyes, ears, and indeed all senses shaped by faith, which is the presence of Christ animated by the Spirit. When we visit the first article of the Creed under the tutelage of the second and third, we rediscover in creation the Creator who calls all creation into vocations of praise and loving the neighbor that fit their way of being in the world. Perhaps this, then, is the most pressing lesson gifted Christians reading the three articles in concert: "faith is precisely that which makes you a chick, and Christ a hen."⁴⁸ We find ourselves in a nest under the wings of love.

Conclusion

Marit Trelstad has noted that an epistemological conversion shapes our way of being: new knowledge of God leads to new actions.⁴⁹ When our understanding of vocation, most often read in the arena of the second article of the Creed with its fitting call to see vocation under the tutelage of the cross, moves into the third, we see it shaped by sanctification with the fitting reminder that ours is not an un-

44. Hoklotubbe and Zacharias, *Reading the Bible on Turtle Island*, 32.

45. LW 28, 52 emphasis added

46. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Roberson, Jr. (Prentice Hall, 1958), 18.

47. LW 28, 35.

48. LW 32 236.

49. Marit Trelstad, "The Way of Salvation in Luther's Theology: A Feminist Evaluation," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 45, no. 3 (2006): 244.

bridled freedom but is shaped by the Spirit so that “in everyday life human beings cooperate with God.”⁵⁰ Pöder fittingly notes that this freedom “that is bestowed upon Christians is both sweet and delightful and a tribulation.”⁵¹ The *donum* of our vocation allows us to be both humble and curious as we engage a Spirited freedom under the *favor* of God. As we think vocation through the first article of the creed, we imagine that the community of vocation is cosmic in nature. To be human is to be on a journey in knowing God, facilitated in part by creation that both praises and unveils the Creator to faith. This allows us to see the once familiar world anew and as mysterious as the One who made it and the humans who behold it.

Finally, I note that Kolb observed that although Luther’s treatment of vocation emerged within a worldview with three estates that were rather static, this reframing of vocation admits a contemporary applicability because of the shared phenomena (family, work, etc.) that govern human life.⁵² This observation is helpful because in staying with Luther’s revisioned vocation in the context of the Creed’s three articles, vocation “ceases to be a matter of private calling and becomes the shared work of reshaping institutions, economies, and imaginaries for the flourishing of all creation.”⁵³

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50. Karin Kallas-Pöder, “Freedom as a Matter of Perspective and Perception in Martin Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 27, no. 1 (2025): 13.

51. Kallas-Pöder, “Freedom as a Matter of Perspective and Perception in Martin Luther’s *De Servo Arbitrio*,” 30.

52. Robert Kolb, “Called to Milk Cows and Govern Kingdoms: Martin Luther’s Teaching on Christian Vocations,” *Concordia Journal* 39 (Spring 2013): 139.

53. Heidarzadegan, “Lutheran Ecotheology and the Anthropocene: Posthumanism, Apocalypse, and Hope,” 216.

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