
Westhelle and Vocation: Set Free to Cooperate in God's Liberating Labor

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*God lifts burdens up and removes hearts of stone. God loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive together with Christ. **By grace you are saved and set free to cooperate in God's liberating labor.** In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith.*

In the fall of 2017, I collaborated with a team of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) community members to plan a chapel service. Both Vitor Westhelle and I made changes in the familiar text for absolution from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.¹ I was struck with the simple but potent force of Westhelle's sentence highlighted above. What does this mean? The sentence crystallized what I realized I was learning specifically from his example, but also from my entire lived experience at LSTC. The question that I brought to seminary was, in short, how to relate together in a convincing way a Lutheran commitment to justification by grace through faith on the one hand, and working for a more just and equitable society with energy and passion on the other. If who I am before God is a justified sinner, who is saved by nothing at all that I can do but by the radical grace received through the power of the Holy Spirit and hearing God's Word, then how does that theological framework relate to intervening in situations of injustice in a community around me? Does a pure receptivity apart from any works, the death of all striving, mean I carry over into the rest of my life habits of mind and heart that are similarly, passive, acquiescent? Is this the life of "grace alone," a constant return to the place of pure reception, and a withdrawal from tension and struggle and effort?

By grace you have been saved and set free to co-operate in God's liberating labor. In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.

1. Original text: "God, who is rich in mercy, loved us even when we were dead in sin, and made us alive with Christ. By grace you have been saved. In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Almighty God strengthen you with power through the Holy Spirit, that Christ may live in your hearts through faith." *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 96.

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Here then was Westhelle, without hesitation, identifying grace through faith in the name of Jesus *and* struggle and labor, in one single line. What I saw as an amorphous fog, where I got lost in myself before I even began, Westhelle found with simplicity a way through. From justification, to seeking justice. From Luther, to liberation. How to follow on this way?

By grace: liberation for troubled consciences and troubled social bodies

If I could attempt to paraphrase what occurred once in the classroom: someone asked, "but Vitor, what do we do with Luther's 'negative anthropology?' You know that we are miserable sinners, truly nothing and beggars, that we bring nothing to God but only receive, etc." Vitor could barely contain his impatience. Stepping away from the podium, one hand outstretched, fixing a direct gaze at us he responded, "What do we DO? Feed the hungry. Set the captives free. Proclaim the good news! Forgive sinners! Fight for the poor. Speak up for the neighbors in need. We abound, build, make, preach, change! We abound in all kinds of good works with the lives that we have from God. That's what we do. This is the second half of Luther's *The Freedom of the Christian!* Read it! We don't sit around by ourselves thinking thoughts about 'negative anthropology.'" My laughter at this most welcome outburst welled up from deep within me. From the same place where before I felt the deep frustration with myself and my lack of initiative, the

lack of abundance I felt in my life, and how I had sought answers elsewhere. Blaming it upon a dysfunction of grace, and not of my own self-limiting behavior that had nothing to do with Christ's abounding.

I was yet curious and pressed to know more. At his office, I had a chance to ask further questions: "But, professor, isn't it still true that Luther's basic question was 'how can I find a gracious God?' He was pastorally concerned about the tortured consciences of sinners. He was concerned about something like 'negative anthropology,' that we are nothing but sinners before God." Westhelle shook his head, answering along these lines: "Tortured conscience, negative anthropology, yes, yes, all that is there. *But* we get this *so* wrong when we don't grasp that Luther's pastoral concern in addressing all those issues was for *liberation*, for freedom, *for* the masses of people whom he saw as held captive under the power that the church had over them. The questions for Luther have a much greater scope than simply individual sin in the privacy of a conscience before God. That is what a lot of those in the West, especially since the Enlightenment, have *not* seen in Luther." The trouble of the conscience is simultaneously the trouble of a social body.

Reading the third chapter of *The Scandalous God* illuminated for me much more about what Westhelle meant; specifically, about Luther and the social dimensions of the tormented conscience. It is true that the gracious gift of Christ's death for the sinner is a gift that can only be received passively, consistent with a familiar understanding of grace for *you* the individual sinner. How Westhelle magnifies the scope of this saving gift is in examining the way that Christ's death for *us*, though received by us in utter passivity, yet actively intervenes in all the basic assumptions of how the world works—cutting through, bursting open, tearing from the old social fabric something new (Mark 2:21-22).

What was the old fabric of Luther's time? Anselm, among other medieval theologians, understood Christ's death as a sacrifice according to a logic of exchange. Christ's death paid the debt we owed to God for our sin, but that we could never pay. The death of Christ made sense for the medieval church according to the logic of "giving to others what is due to them." More tangibly, in the social fabric, the medieval peasant must give taxes to the feudal lord, in exchange for protection, or else suffer wrath and the lord's weapons. The power of the church to threaten hell, or to absolve and to forgive, contingent upon penance and indulgence and discipline—this was the oppressing power of the church over an entire social body, not only the individual conscience.

Luther understood Christ's death as a radical tearing away from those assumptions. Where for Anselm the death of Christ made sense according to logic, Luther understood the cross as a "scandalous subversion" of every economic principle of exchange: God freely gives God's very self through Christ, precisely what we do not deserve. A gift which we as sinners neither deserve, nor we could *ever* repay in kind in any equivalence, but yet we happily receive! To receive that new wine is to live outward in a freedom that courses forward and tears away from the old wineskin that

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was bound together tightly within the logic of exchange. What follows then on the other side of receiving this gift is that we too become gracious gifts to our neighbor, instruments of intervention in a social fabric, and burst wineskins around us through living by grace.²

You have been saved: Christ's labor and the new birth

Yet more needs to be said about how the difference that grace makes is specifically of God, and not only from our own awakening consciousness of our freedom or subjectivity. Grace is not simply an awakening to our ability to act and intervene or step outside the social fabric of rules and expectations. Rather, the specificity of the difference that God's grace through Christ makes is a divine, *miraculous* intervention of life over death. That miracle becomes experienced in us through the creation of faith. To illustrate, I return to the issue in Luther's time, of the power of the principle of "to each one what is their due." What shapes the formation of the rules that order the social fabric are first human desires and interests. These desires border upon a dimension that cannot be accessed or understood simply as a matter of human possibilities of feeling, action, or reason. This mysterious dimension, in which all of us are complicit, the biblical tradition calls sin.

Westhelle in his lectures would often point to how Hebrew tradition had multiple accounts for the origin of sin. Beyond the most familiar scene in Eden, where Adam and Eve are individuals who trespass in their sin, Genesis provides other stories. Before the medieval lords, before any Pharaoh or Caesar, or any class divisions appear in the social fabric of biblical history, the brief and strange story of the Nephilim prefigure their arrival. Here, the "sons of God" see and take human women, and through them produce a progeny of giants, figures of might and tyranny. The "seeing" and violent "taking," the victimization that occurs here,

2. Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 35-58.

repeats throughout the Hebrew scriptures. The eyes of David toward Bathsheba. The eyes of Ahab and Jezebel toward Naboth's vineyard. The Egyptian elites' dreams of monumental projects, and the seizing of the bodies of the Hebrew slaves. It is not that desire in itself is evil, for it is part of God's good creation. Rather through our desires we experience a pull toward the infinite, and yielding to its lure is sin. Sin is manifest when the desire for accumulation transgresses any limit, human or natural (cf. Jere 5:28). Suffering and death ensue, though often masked under the orderly weave of a troubled social body.³

With the joy of a teacher about to issue the students into a new discovery, Westhelle then directed us to turn in our Bibles to Luke 2. What do we find here? In the story of the annunciation and the Virgin Birth, we have the mystery of the undoing of the evil brought into the world with the Nephilim. A new initiative of God is born, displacing the power of tyrants and their endless thirst for more, coming through a human daughter and the Holy Spirit, hidden in the lowliness of this babe Messiah Jesus, who takes the place of tyrants as our Lord. In the creative miracles of Jesus' ministry, the cries of desire for the healing of the body are heard and acted upon. For the hungry poor, there is bread enough and all are satisfied. Jesus teaches the prayer "give us this day our daily bread" and in the same breath "forgive us our debts," the satisfaction of today's hunger and the loosing of bonds of obligation and repayment. Returning to scenes of past wounds with openness and vulnerability and courage for the possibility of a new life through forgiveness and shared bread that ceases the old hungers for vengeance.

At the last words on the cross in John's Gospel, "It is finished," the desire to avoid or to extinguish death is instead undone. From the place of greatest fear and need, to the emptiness of the empty tomb, the old is ending and new is coming. God is about to usher into the world the resurrected Christ and the gift of the Spirit's peace for all who are born anew in Christ. In baptism we are born anew in Christ, to live from the promises of God where we have enough with who we are for today and simultaneously an abundance from God into which we can grow and share. The way of the baptized is also the way of the cross: for Luther, the scandal of the cross extinguishes the desire for ever more glory, the thirst for endless power. The power of the cross relinquishes the grip of idols by which we would secure our protection from death. The cross of Christ, the happy exchange, gives us the truth of our death already with him. In exchange: the beginning of the life of faith. That faith prays "thy kingdom come," while still feeling the pangs of temptation and the pull of evil. Faith experiences in times of temptation the intercession of the Holy Spirit, whose gracious power is the groaning birth pangs of new life (Rom 8:26).⁴

3. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 366-367.

4. Vitor Westhelle, "Justification as Death and Gift," *Lutheran Quarterly*, 24, no 3 (2010): 257-260.

Labor, conceived as this metabolic relation, is a theological matter of creation: it can even be said that God's ongoing creation is happening in and through us. ... Yet the passivity of grace alone, of faith alone, of salvation as a gift from God that we can only receive, is a grace for us *as* created human beings: beings who live and labor and struggle.

Discernment: to co-operate in God's liberating labor

To turn attention now explicitly to "liberating labor," all that has preceded serves as preparation, to understand what comes next in biblical and theological terms. In his early essay "Labor: A Suggestion for Rethinking the Way of the Christian," Westhelle draws on modern economic theory to describe the ruling principles shaping the social fabric of our times.⁵ Labor is a matter of the body and its needs and desires, its production and consumption. Labor is also a matter of the social body, its divisions and oppressions. The topic of labor crosses through fields of experience, drawing together mind and material, emotions and struggle. With Marx, Westhelle identifies labor as a metabolic process. As the body ingests and incorporates into its life processes the basic necessities it draws from the earth, so the process of labor is the mutual transformation both of the laboring self and of the material and social environment. In the Bible, this connection is found in the wordplay connecting the word for Adam and that of soil (Gen 2:15, *adam/adamah* or human/humus). The insight is rich and deeply nuanced. Even amid toil, when one's labor is one's own metabolic connection, one receives joy in fulfilling one's potential. Yet more, the bonds and attachment to specific places, people, and tasks are bodily and emotionally felt through metabolic labor. Westhelle elsewhere employs the metabolic metaphor to describe a congregation's relationship to the spaces in which it gathers and from which it draws its identity, but which it also actively shapes.

5. Vitor Westhelle, "Labor: A Suggestion for Rethinking the Way of the Christian" *Word and World* 4, no 2 (1986): 194-206. Discussion of the metabolic space of the congregation: Westhelle, *The Church Event* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 147-153. For a non-western presentation of metabolic labor that does not need Marx, I recommend: Kenneth Mtata, "An African Theology of Work: A Lutheran Perspective" in Mtata, ed. *LWF Documentation 56. The Dignity of Work: Theological and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2011), 35-49.

Labor, conceived as this metabolic relation, is a theological matter of creation: it can even be said that God's ongoing creation is happening in and through us. It is so helpful to realize that there is this dimension of creation that Lutheran theology affirms. Yes, we are saved by grace, as the preceding study explored. Yet the passivity of grace alone, of faith alone, of salvation as a gift from God that we can only receive, is a grace for us *as* created human beings: beings who live and labor and struggle. There is a theological place for passion, for energy, for striving and for "works" in the life of faith, lived for the good of the neighbor and care of one's own vocation. Westhelle quotes the Swedish theologian Wingren: "Vocation belongs to this world, not to heaven; it is directed toward one's neighbor, not toward God." Or again: "Care for one's office is, in its very frame of reference on earth, participation in God's own care for human beings."⁶ Thus the cooperating with God of Westhelle's absolution that opened this essay, is in fact that God is at work through us. This occurs through ongoing creation in the way our metabolic labor brings into the world goodness that is shared.

The insight was striking and unfamiliar to me when I first came across it from Westhelle, yet it is striking also in Luther's Catechisms: "In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children . . . with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life."⁷ The labor that makes the shoes and raises the children, the labor of the children learning and growing, all these are means through which God also is still creating. The questions, then, for ethical discernment and struggle are about how I live my vocation, where and how I labor with others. Is my place of labor curved outward in its organization and its practices? Is it structured in its leadership patterns and its policies to respect the bodies and lives of those who labor with me? Does my workplace and my calling and the good I make and do serve the need and well-being of the neighbor?

Wingren demonstrates how Luther believed God was also at work through changes and renewal occurring in the structures of the vocations of his time: freeing monks and nuns from the closed community of the monastery and its vows to live the life of prayer among their neighbors; opening education and literacy from closed monastic circles toward all the children of the laity. This belief was likewise present in Luther's struggle against usury, where the one who lends money at interest seeks security and advantage, without performing labor and at the expense of the neighbor's risk (35). If both usury and clerical orders suggest closed communities or closed systems, the evangelical renewal of vocation and labor was to open communities to others, to ask if the practices were serving the need of the neighbor. Love of neighbor through vocation questions the boundaries of closed communities, just as grace through

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faith transgressed the logic of "give to others what is their due."

Westhelle draws from Marx the distinction between use value and exchange value, yet this more modern formulation already has been anticipated in the previous discussion. In any product of labor or in any service, the result will create utility: "However, this utility can be a use-value with open social destination, or it can be used as an exchange good with the purpose of multiplying capital." Westhelle continues with a simple but blunt example: "A neighborhood renewal program can be an ideological euphemism for the removal of lower-class dwellers in order to increase the rent."⁸ Distinguishing between the utility of a house for the good of a neighbor, or the use of a house to multiply capital, is a critical work of ethical discernment. The rules and principles shaping the social and economic fabric of our lives in North America are predominantly oriented toward the multiplying of capital, affecting everything from access to housing to health-insurance and education.

The critical work of the renewal of vocations in Luther's time, the "open social destination" of the monastery's education, for example, are urgent in our ever more unequal world. Westhelle contrasts the *metabolic* work of labor, as in working for the good of the neighbor, with the *dia-bolic* massive divisions and destruction wrought through accumulating capital. The Brazilian situation Westhelle saw was the mass evictions of peasant farmers for the construction of gigantic soybean estates, stripping the displaced from metabolic connection with the land. And for us in North America? Do we discern the diabolical in oil companies that seize the lands of Indigenous people who already have suffered the generational trauma of displacement and genocide? Do we realize the diabolic work occurring between the use of our smart phones

6. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, Carl Rasmussen, tr. (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 9-10.

7. "Large Catechism" in *Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Kolb and Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 432.

8. Westhelle, "Labor," 205.

and the misery of mass homelessness in the coastal cities where the tech giants accumulate their profits? It may be that the diabolic effect of our consumption of media and the divisive national narratives and our endless desire for them prevents us from receiving the meta-bolic opportunities closer at hand. Desire to endlessly perform a media-shaped narrative can even prevent even siblings from caring together for elderly parents: they would sooner win a fight on social media than join together in basic care for the needy. For us in our congregations, the work of discernment of what we can do and where to begin may start with open conversation among our own members about the pains and longings that they have for change; with co-creating spaces for lament and of vulnerable prayer. From there, it proceeds with connecting and discerning the resources available to us in our neighborhood or community through which we can focus our efforts to advocate and to serve. Practices of discernment, accountability, challenge, are vital for serving in vocations, whether in our congregations, workplaces or through organized movements and labor unions.

Summary and concluding reflections for ministry

I return now to the liturgical absolution where I began: *By grace you are saved and set free to cooperate in God's liberating labor*. I hope all the ground now covered can help illuminate this powerful formulation. Yes, grace is received in passivity, in receiving the words of Christ for us, and in the ending of limitless desire that forgiveness of sins and satisfaction in faith brings. Yet grace also flows freely through us and intervenes in the rules that bind together our lives and our world: the theological, economic, and political rules of the social fabric. By grace that is from God, the power of the old captivity, its wrath and fear, and even deeper, the desire that would consume us and the world without limit: this is in us through Christ actively overcome. To be "set free" is to stand in Christ *brought out* from the dominant logic of the politics and economy of our times, its weapons and its instruments, and its consuming desires.

Free then we are, to give ourselves freely, to flow forward with our calling and to the good of our neighbor in need. To speak truth, take risks, make interventions, and leave the familiar whose spell had kept us captive. For in faith our life flows out from God, rather than bound within the former rules that would have captivated us, not bound to the desires for security that only God in the end can fulfill. For Westhelle's understanding of Luther, this freedom was always a collective and communal experience of "cooperation," felt and discerned together. Our labor, likewise, is from the freedom that Christ creates to actively live out our callings, together and individually, in likewise making interventions in the world. We ourselves become instruments of the new self-giving logic of God (Rom 6:13), capable of an active and creative renewing of the practices and structures around us.⁹

9. For Pauline "instrument" language and vocation: Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from a Latin American*

We can recover the pathway that connects the ongoing journey of our lives and the new beginning of grace ... in speaking and lamenting together and alone.

Between the troubled individual conscience and the agitated or troubled social fabric, between the encounter with one's own personal sin and the needs and pains and sin affecting a community, between our liturgies of confession and forgiveness and our practices of accountability and difficult conversation in our congregations and communities, we can recover the pathway that connects the ongoing journey of our lives and the new beginning of grace. This pathway is not found through private introspection alone, but in speaking and lamenting together and alone. Practically speaking, could our congregations help make this connection between what we do in worship and the accountability and repentance we seek in our communal lives? Would that look like inviting lay leaders of the congregation, ones who are showing a direction for learning and service around social issues, to craft with and for us liturgies of confession and welcome their leadership in the liturgical assembly?

While serving as a pastoral intern at Augsburg University, I had a role with colleague Lonna Field to co-ordinate a short-term service-learning experience. We led a group of students from Minneapolis by bus to Birmingham, Alabama, over spring break to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity and to visit historic sites connected with the civil rights movement. The purpose of the trip, educationally, was explicitly themed around vocation: to create a community of students intentionally reflecting on our experiences and discerning together what we learned about ourselves and our sense of callings. It was an incredibly diverse group of students, ranging from Black Americans who had grown up on the South Side of Chicago, to Somali Americans from Minneapolis, to Latinx Catholics, and white Lutherans from rural Minnesota. Our first stop was at a slave plantation, Belle Meade, outside of Nashville. Our reflection that night was somber. This was the house that was built. This was the diabolic work that, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, speaking for himself and his people, "took from us, and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold." One of the students looked around the room at who was gathered and voiced the truth that we had an opportunity together to be different, to build and to become a different house. The need for us all in the United States to labor for another social fabric could not be clearer.¹⁰

Perspective, Sharon Ringe, tr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 86-87, 110.

10. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: One World, 2015), 71.