

Gustaf Wingren's *Luther On Vocation: Creation and Cross*
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In the later part of the twentieth century and continuing to the present day, there has been a resurgence of interest in the doctrine of vocation. Nearly all of these studies to a greater or lesser degree have been influenced by Gustaf Wingren (1910-2000) 1942 dissertation, *Luther on Vocation* with little dissent.¹ Mary Elizabeth Anderson cites this book “as a case-study of the Luther research of the third generation”² in the Swedish Luther Renaissance. Themes present in *Luther on Vocation* would be elucidated, focused and modified throughout Wingren’s long literary career as a professor of systematic theology at the University of Lund. In his development of his theology of creation, he would find inspiration from the writings of N.F.S. Grundtvig, especially his hymns and his work on Irenaeus as a remedy for what he perceived as the anti-creational thought of Kierkegaard.³ On going theological debates particularly with Anders Nygren and Karl Barth would sharpen Wingren’s arguments as would the influence of Gustaf Aulen, Herbert Olsson, Regin Prenter and Knud Løgstrup.⁴

¹ For example, see Marc Kolden, “Earthly Vocation as a Corollary of Justification by Faith” in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*. Edited by Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) who states “In addition to drawing on Luther’s own writings in describing his concept of vocation, I am influenced by Gustaf Wingren’s *Luther on vocation*” (278). Eric Gritsch describes Wingren’s work as “a convincing analysis of Luther’s views in the context of his theology” –Eric Gritsch, “Vocation” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* – Vol. 4. Edited by Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 246. Karl Froelich, “Luther on Vocation” in *Harvesting Martin Luther’s Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*. Edited by Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) calls it “the standard work on Luther’s thought in this matter” (121). For recent popular treatments that make extensive use of Wingren, see D. Michael Bennethum, *Listen! God is Calling! Luther Speaks of Vocation, Faith and Work* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); Marc Kolden, *Christian’s Calling in the World* (St. Paul: Centered Life Press, 2002); and Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossways Books, 2002). For a dissenting voice, see Kenneth Hagen, “A Critique of Wingren on Luther on Vocation” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 2002), 249-274.

² Mary Elizabeth Anderson, *Gustaf Wingren and the Swedish Luther Renaissance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 1.

³ Here see Gustaf Wingren, *Credo: The Christian View of Faith and Life*. Trans Edgar M. Carlson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 163-165 and his “The Doctrine of Creation: Not an Appendix but the First Article” *Word & World* 6 (Fall, 1984), 369-370.

⁴ Wingren’s disagreement with Barth reflected the confessional differences between Lutheran and Reformed understandings of law and gospel and the two realms. While Wingren does not directly engage Barth in *Luther on Vocation*, his discussion of the two realms articulates the Lutheran position which Barth denies. Wingren spend a term in 1947 lecturing as a substitute for Barth, an invitation that came by way of Regin Prenter, see Anderson, 86-88. Wingren’s explicit challenges to Barth and Barthianism are found in “Creation: A Critique of Barthianism” in “*The Living Word in the Preaching and Mission of the Church*.” Trans. Victor C. Pogue (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 89-93; *Creation and Law*. Trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961); “The Concept of Vocation – Its Basis and Its Problems” *Lutheran World* 15 (1968), 87-95 and *The Flight From Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971) among other places. For a helpful treatment of confessional differences between Barthians and Lutherans in the middle of the twentieth century see Lowell C. Green, *Lutherans Against Hitler: The Untold Story* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 177-190. On the influence of

Luther on Vocation was Wingren's first major theological work. It was written as an historical study of Luther's view of vocation over and against the earlier work by the Swedish bishop, Einar Billing (1871-1939)⁵. Wingren draws primarily on Luther's writings from 1521 onward most notably his "Judgment on Monastic Vows" (1521), "Christmas Postil" (1522), "The Bondage of the Will" (1525), "The Sermon on the Sermon on the Mount" (1532), and "Lectures on Galatians" (1535)⁶

Wingren challenges the central assertion of Billing that the calling is a matter of Gospel, not law: "Even though Billing did not offer his concept of vocation as Luther's view, but as something of a dissent from him, his concept has nevertheless often been construed as Luther's. As a result Luther's own view has been brushed aside, and only Billing's attractive but vulnerable view of vocation has been heard"⁷ While Wingren gives Billing only scant attention in three places (LOV 69, 74-75, 141) in *Luther on Vocation*, it is clear that he is reaction against what he sees as a misreading of Luther. Wingren's fundamental disagreements with Billing are given further clarity in his later writings, particularly his article written in 1944 and published in translation in *Lutheran Quarterly* in 1950 under the title "The Theology of Einar Billing"⁸ and *An Exodus Theology: Einar Billing and the Development of Modern Swedish Theology*⁹ written in 1969.

Wingren suggests that Wellhausen's source theory of the Pentateuch narrowed Billing's appreciation for creation. Rather than beginning salvation in history in the narrative of Genesis 1-2, Billing begins with the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in Exodus, subordinating the doctrine of creation to the God who acts in history. This starting point determines the trajectory of Billing's approach. The cross and the resurrection are the extension of the Old Testament paradigm for Billing. Ultimately, Wingren argues, Billing collapses Luther's two realms into a single kingdom of the forgiveness of sins. Hence the calling has nothing to do with life in the earthly sphere; it is the gift of a life organized around the forgiveness of sins.

In contrast to Billing, Wingren begins his treatment of vocation with a discussion of the distinction between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms. Wingren comes at this distinction by way of his treatment of the variety of meanings carried by the word *vocatio*. There is the proclamation of the Gospel by which human beings are called into the heavenly kingdom by the forgiveness of sins. The word also refers to the work that each person

Nygren, Prenter, Løgstrup, see Anderson, 49-68 and 79-88. For Wingren's setting in the larger context of twentieth century Swedish theology, see Nels F. S. Ferré, *Swedish Contributions to Modern Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 270-283 and Arne Rasmusson, "A Century of Swedish Theology" *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (Summer 2007), 125-162.

⁵ See Einar Billing's *Our Calling*. Trans. Conrad Bergendorff (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964).

⁶ Hence the criticism of Kenneth Hagen that Wingren's approach is inadequate to do full justice to Luther's theology of vocation. See Kenneth Hagen, "A Critique of Wingren on Luther on Vocation" *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 2002), 249-274.

⁷ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*. Trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenburg Press, 1957), 75. Hereafter cited as LOV in body of the paper).

⁸ Gustaf Wingren, "The Theology of Einar Billing" *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (1950), 396-414.

⁹ Gustaf Wingren, *An Exodus Theology: Einar Billing and the Development of Modern Swedish Theology*. Trans Eric Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

does in a particular occupation. Finally there is the churchly use of the *vocatio* in reference to the calling into the preaching office. Largely dependent on the work of Karl Holl's work on *Beruf*,¹⁰ Wingren notes that "as far as we can determine Luther does not use *Beruf* or *vocatio* in reference to the work of a non-Christian. All have stations (*Stand*) and office, but *Beruf* is the Christian's earthly or spiritual work. Here we are inquiring only into Luther's conception of earthly work, not vocation in any other sense (LOV, 2). This definition resurfaces throughout Wingren's book as he asserts that "apart from relation with God, man has an office, established by God, but not a vocation" (LOV, 91).

Wingren sees the distinction between the two kinds of righteousness as a way that Luther articulates the difference between heaven and earth: "On earth we receive from God gifts which are transitory, but in the heavenly kingdom we receive God himself, who never passes away" (LOV, 19)¹¹. The Christian lives in heaven by faith yet lives bodily on earth. The life of faith is characterized by freedom while the bodily life is bound to obedience. "The work of Christ is victory over the law in any form: good works lead to salvation by neither one route or the other. The conscience alone, through faith in the work of Christ, is freed from a false faith. Christ frees neither the hand from its work nor the body from its office. The hand, the body, and their vocation belong to earth. There is no redemption in that, but that is not the idea. The purpose is that one's neighbor be served. Conscience rests in faith in God, and does nothing that contributes to salvation; but the hands serve in the vocation which is God's downward -reaching work, for the well-being of men. From the viewpoint of faith, vocation has no relevance" (LOV,11).

The Christian is not bound to a particular station in life for salvation but for the sake of the neighbor lives within an earthly calling. The equality of faith that believers have *coram deo* does not translate into worldly equality: "Faith's kingdom is a realm in which all are alike, but vocation in the world is full of grades and differences...What makes the difference on earth is the structure of many offices, with their respective works. But in heaven all are alike. There all simply receive, and receive alike, the grace of God. Thus equality in the heavenly kingdom depends only on the fact that it is the kingdom of Christ, ruled by a divine gift, the gospel, not the law" (LOV, 13).

For Wingren, "vocation falls within the kingdom of the law" (LOV, 26) for it has to do with life in creation. Recognizing that the Christian simultaneously lives his life "with the Spirit in the paradise of grace and peace, and with the flesh in the world of toil and cross" (LOV, 26), Wingren cites Luther's Galatians commentary: "So as the law holds sway in the flesh, the promise rules most graciously in the conscience. When you have thus recognized the proper sphere of each, you walk most securely with the promise in heaven and the law on earth, with the Spirit of grace and peace in Paradise and in the body of works and the cross on earth" (LOV,26). Here Wingren isolates two themes that will become dominant in the remainder of his book: the distinction between the life of the body and that of the conscience and vocation as the place of the cross.

¹⁰ See Karl Holl, "Die Geschichte des Wortes Beruf" in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* 3 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1928), 189-219.

¹¹ On the place of the two kinds of righteousness in Luther's theology, see Robert Kolb, "Luther on Two Kinds of Righteousness" in Wengert, 38-55.

Closely tied to Wingren's understanding of conscience is the cosmic struggle between God and the devil and the necessity of the distinction of the law from the Gospel. For Wingren, Luther's theology cannot be grasped without reference to his belief in the reality of the devil.¹² The conscience is contested territory. Claimed by Christ in the Gospel, it is also under attack by the evil one as he presses it with the accusation of the law. "God wishes man to be saved from the power of sin, and the devil wants man kept in it. Out of that invisible combat, which goes on even when man does not think of it, comes all the agony and anxiety that enter into human life. A creature must know suffering when two powers lay hold of it, struggling to 'win and possess it'" (LOV, 80).

Vocation becomes the battlefield as the devil wages war against both realms of God, the earthly and the heavenly. Offices are of God, they are instituted by Him for the wellbeing of creation. But the persons who occupy these offices are contested: "The combat between God and Satan is fought over persons. Offices are on God's side, but persons who occupy offices can belong to God or the devil, which makes an enormous difference in the way the duties of the office are met" (LOV, 85)

The devil's tactics are temptations to disbelief and mistrust of God so that the person is ensnared "to misuse a good and divine office, to mismanage one's vocation" (LOV, 87). The devil seeks to overthrow vocation, inciting anarchy and tyranny in the earthly realm. In the heavenly realm he takes aim at the conscience, seeking to dethrone Christ and the Gospel so that the Christian comes under the possession of an alien lord and thus loses his freedom by submitting to the bondage of self-identified works. Echoing Luther, Wingren observes that Satan's most pernicious attack is on faithful preachers: "The devil makes especially severe attacks on him who fills the office of the ministry according to God's Word. For through correct preaching the devil is unmasked, so that people understand that what is called holy is the work of the devil, and what is called earthly is God's work by which evil is checked. Therefore he who preaches God's Word faithfully threatens to bring to naught the very center of the devil's activity, religious works" (LOV,91).

Satan seeks to dislodge Christ from the conscience and bind it by the law; he also aims to free the body from the law so that the earthly realm is dissolved in chaos through idleness or anarchy: "Misled by this perverted religion, man turns freedom and bondage upside down. He thinks himself bound where he is free, and considers himself free where he is bound" (LOV, 100). God's governments are mingled when the law is shifted from earth to heaven and the Gospel from heaven to earth. Vocation is to be kept on earth: "When man believes, there is no law in the conscience but Christ. Therefore works to do aim at supporting faith or the religious life. Faith is already complete and needs no support from

¹² On the significance of the devil for Luther's theology, see Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*. Trans Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New York: Doubleday 1992) and Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*. Trans Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 253-256. The role of the devil continues to be a significant aspect in Wingren's theology. See Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word in the Preaching and Mission of the Church*, 164-175 and *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*. Trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 39-49

any Christian living, for Christ is perfect. Works have an utterly different significance. One's neighbor does not possess all he needs; he is in need of one thing and another, of counsel and strength. There is a task for good works, a reaching down to the earthly situation" (LOV, 109). To fail to distinguish between body and conscience, earth and heaven is to confuse the law and the Gospel: "Faith, or the conscience, is in heaven; and since not law but gospel rules in heaven, no sin is there. There is sin only where there is law. On earth law and worldly government rule; and there too is the body of man which must be crucified with its sinful lusts" (LOV, 51).

As vocation is earthly, it is the location of cross and suffering. Crosses are not to be sought after; they are inevitably present: "In one's vocation there is a cross—for prince, husband, father, daughter, for everyone – and on this cross the old human nature is to be crucified" (LOV, 29). The cross has a twofold purpose. It is God's instrumentality for putting the old Adam to death and it provides occasion for service to the neighbor. What Wingren describes as "hard, legalistic character of vocation" (LOV, 66) is the cross which puts to death the sinner with his notions of autonomy and self-sufficiency. In this sense, the cross drives to despair. "Vocation is the place where God himself lets the cross take form" (LOV, 54). Here the old Adam is put to death and a new man is raised up by the absolution to live before God in righteousness. The new creature is not extracted from creation; he or she continues to live on earth in anticipation of the resurrection. The new life remains hidden under the cross and suffering as it is active in love to the neighbor. Luther's understanding of the hidden nature of the Christian's life guards against a triumphalistic notion of sanctification. In this way, Wingren sees creation and eschatology held together in Luther's doctrine of vocation.

Vocation, located on earth and not in heaven, has to do with the masks of God (*larvae dei*) as God works through means. God is the source and author of life but creates through the bodies of a man and a woman. God guards and protects through magistrates and soldiers. "God himself will milk the cows through him whose vocation that is. He who engages in the lowliness of his work performs God's work, be he lad or king. To give one's office proper care is not selfishness. Devotion to office is devotion to love, because it is by God's own ordering that the work of the office is always dedicated to the well-being of one's neighbor. Care for one's office is, in its very frame of reference on earth, participation in God's own care for human beings" (LOV, 9). Unbelievers and believers alike are God's masks in creation as they perform the functions of their stations in life. This is so much the case that Wingren says "Where works and external behavior are concerned it is not merely difficult to make a sharp demarcation between Christians and non-Christians, it is erroneous" (LOV, 151). Faith alone perceives this as a divine work. "One who does not have the gospel cannot differentiate between God and his mask" (LOV, 140).

Located as it is on earth, vocation is within space and time. For Wingren this means that human beings are bound to the earth by God's law, living as creatures between life and death¹³ Much of the remainder of Wingren's career was spent in drawing out the

¹³ See Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law* Trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), 45-82.

implications of the doctrine of creation or “creation faith”¹⁴ for Christian theology. We may observe the roots of his later work in *Luther on Vocation*. Given a place in creation, human beings are given life in and through the stations they occupy. It is also through these temporal stations that human beings are daily bread to one another to paraphrase Luther for these stations are so ordered that the neighbor is served: “It is only before God, i.e, in heaven, that the individual stands alone. In the earthly realm man always stands *in relatione*, always bound to another” (LOV, 5). Thus vocation is a place of tension for Wingren. It is the tension between time and eternity, earth and heaven. According to Wingren this tension evokes prayer which is an expression of the First Commandment in the midst of vocation (LOV, 192). This tension may not be resolved in seeking a model to emulate even in Christ. “Christ is not to be imitated by us, but rather to be accepted in faith, because Christ also had his special office for the salvation of man, an office which no one else has” (LOV, 172).

Instead the Christian is directed to the office that he or she has in space and time for the good of the neighbor. We have observed that for Wingren, vocation does have a hard and legalistic character given its nomological setting. However that does not mean that vocation can be reduced to a legalism of principles for behavior. Wingren writes “The sign of a right ethics is not found in a certain fixed outward behavior, but in the ability to meet, in calmness and faith, whatever may come”(LOV, 181). Wingren is explicit in his renunciation of legalism as he writes “Legalism is a continual flight from God’s command. Faith is a way toward understanding God’s command” (LOV, 200). Such faith gives birth to love which is open to the need of the neighbor: “What love of my neighbor will ask of me next year, I cannot know this year....Precisely for the neighbor’s sake, one ought to be free to what becomes necessary, free from the vows (the law), to obey the command” (LOV, 201).

The tensions implicit in vocation will not be resolved until the resurrection. Vocation finds its consummation eschatologically. Then the earthly realm and the sway of the law will be forever past. Until then "The old man must bear vocation's cross as long as life on earth lasts and the battle against the devil continues. As long as he continues in his earthly vocation, there can be no end to the struggle. After death comes a new kingdom free from the cross; heaven has taken the place of earth, God has conquered the devil, and man has been raised from the dead. Then man's struggle is at an end" (LOV, 250-251). In the meantime, the law and the Gospel remain: "The gospel acts in man's conscience, and extinguishes sin; wherefore the new man has no sin. The law acts in the body, and there it does not at once efface sin, but drives sin out slowly. The old man thus retains his sin till the death of the body, and in the meantime he is disciplined by the law, cross, and suffering. Law and gospel both come from God, and for God the two are one, a single reality. For man, however, the two cannot even appear to be in harmony until the old man is annihilated, that is, not at any time in this life, but only after the death of the body" (LOV, 239). Hidden under the cross of vocation, the life of believer is lived by faith in Christ’s promises and in the hope that anticipates the new heaven and earth.

¹⁴ See Gustaf Wingren, *Credo: The Christian View of Faith and Life*. Trans. Edgar M. Carlson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 37-57; *The Flight From Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971).

Concluding Observations

The basic shape of Wingren's 1942 exposition of vocation seems to remain intact in his later writings.¹⁵ In a 1968 essay entitled "The Concept of Vocation – Its Basis and Its Problems,"¹⁶ Wingren largely condenses his earlier arguments although he does deal with some contemporary issues such as the modern tendency to justify the work of the church on the basis of its achievement of social results and the obvious differences between the sixteenth century and the twentieth in regard to political systems. Wingren also here takes up briefly the influence of Lutheran orthodoxy, Pietism, the Enlightenment and the theology of Karl Barth on Luther's doctrine of vocation. Wingren's ongoing work on creation also needs to be thoroughly examined for points of continuity and change in light of his work on Luther.

Kenneth Hagen has raised several critical issues with Wingren's treatment of Luther's doctrine of vocation. Hagen overstates his case in claiming that "Wingren has voided the very goal and direction of vocation in Luther."¹⁷ Repeatedly Wingren makes the case that good works belong on earth with the body and the neighbor, not in with the conscience or in heaven. Nevertheless, there is a pronounced tendency in Wingren, in reaction to Billing, no doubt, to radically separate rather than distinguish between the two realms. Perhaps here the work of Oswald Bayer on the significance of the three estates in light of the *promissio*¹⁸ or Marc's Kolden description the "eschatological overlap"¹⁹ of the new age over the old would be helpful correctives. Vítor Westhelle works with Gustaf Törnvall's appeal for a functional understanding of Luther's "two kingdoms" as a "kingdom of listening" and a "kingdom of seeing"²⁰ in his revisiting of the masks of God and the two kingdoms. Likewise Leif Grane's observation that vocation is the place where the two kingdoms are held together²¹ seems to give a more accurate picture of Luther's position. These would be topics of fruitful investigation in an appraisal of the usefulness of Wingren's work for a contemporary Lutheran articulation of the doctrine of vocation.

¹⁵ Here see Gustaf Wingren, "The Church and Christian Vocation" in *This is the Christian Church: Basic Studies in the Nature of the Church*. Edited by Anders Nygren (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1952), 281-293.

¹⁶ "The Concept of Vocation – Its Basis and Its Problems", 87-95.

¹⁷ Hagen, 267

¹⁸ See especially Oswald Bayer, "Luther's Ethics as Pastoral Care" *Lutheran Quarterly* 4 (Summer 1990), 125-142 and "Nature and Institution: Luther's Doctrine of the Three Orders" *Lutheran Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1998), 125-159. Also see Knut Alfsvåg, "Christians in Society: Luther's Teaching on the Two Kingdoms and the Three Estates" *Logia* 14 (Reformation 2005), 15-20 and Hans Schaeffer, *Createdness and Ethics: The Doctrine of Creation and Theological Ethics in the Theology of Colin E. Gunton and Oswald Bayer* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 101-189.

¹⁹ Marc Kolden. "Earthly Vocation as a Corollary of Justification by Faith," 274-275.

²⁰ Vítor Westhelle, "The Word and the Masks: Revisiting Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine" in *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*. Edited by Niels Henrik Gregersen et al (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 173.

²¹ Lief Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary*. Trans JohnH. Rasmussen Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 174.

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