
Resistance and the Freedom to Live Authentically: Queering Martin Luther's View of Vocation

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On October 31, 1517, a German Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed *The Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, kicking off the Protestant Reformation. This paper examines how living queer lives authentically in a heteronormative society is a form of resistance and connects to Luther's understanding of Christian vocation. In the first section of this paper, I examine Luther's understanding of vocation, which can be summarized as "service to neighbor." I then examine the queer theological notion that living authentically is an act of resistance and suggest that this authentic living is a form of vocation. I end the paper by suggesting that this understanding of authentic living connects with Luther's understanding that a Christian must be freed in order to serve their neighbor.

Luther on vocation and freedom

Since Luther is such a popular figure, particularly in Protestant imagining, as is the case with many popular figures, it is important to begin a conversation on Christian vocation by clarifying what Luther did *not* say about Christian vocation. He supposedly writes: "The Christian shoemaker does his Christian duty not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because God is interested in good craftsmanship." This quote seems to surface in everything from social media memes to academic discussions of Luther, but this quote is found nowhere in Luther. Which makes sense, because the capitalist work ethic this quote seems to exhibit stands in contrast to what Luther actually *did* say about vocation. He writes:

The prince should think: Christ has served me and made everything to follow him; therefore, I should also serve my neighbor, protect [them] and everything that belongs to [them]. That is why God has given me this office, and I have it that I might serve him. That would be a good prince and ruler. When a prince sees his neighbor oppressed, he should think: That concerns me! I must protect and shield my neighbor.... The same is true for shoemaker, tailor, scribe, or reader. If [one] is a Christian tailor, [they] will say: I make these clothes because God has bidden me do so, so that I can earn a living, so that I can help and serve my neighbor. When a Christian

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does not serve the other, God is not present; that is not Christian living.¹

One can see a stark difference between the alleged Luther quote and what he actually said. In the first, the shoemaker making the best shoe he can seems to instill a capitalist moral lesson about labor and productivity. The second, Luther's actual words, is the opposite: one works in order to serve their neighbor. In other words, for Luther, it seems, Christian vocation is all about serving one's neighbor.

This service, this vocation, is a public vocation:

The life of the home, the relation between parents and children, is vocation, even as is life in the field of labor, the relation between employer and employee. In anything that involves action, anything that concerns the world or my relationship with my neighbor, there is nothing, Luther holds, that falls in a private sphere lying outside of station, office, or vocation. It is only before God, i.e., in heaven, that the individual stands alone. In the earthly realm [humankind] always stands *in relatione*, always bound to another.²

It is in *Freedom of a Christian* that Luther connects vocation both to freedom and justification, when he uses his famous, seemingly contradictory phrase: "The Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian individual is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all."³ By this, Luther means that "through faith every Christian is exalted

1. Frederick J. Gaiser, quoting Luther's "Sermon in the Castle Church at Weimar," "What Luther Didn't Say About Vocation" in *Work and Witness*, Vol. 25, N. 4, 2005.

2. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 5.

3. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *The Annotated Luther* (TAL), vol. 1, trans. Mark Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015-2017), 488.

over all things and, by virtue of spiritual power, is absolutely lord of all things. Consequently, nothing at all can ever harm such a one to whom, indeed, all things are subject and forced to serve for salvation."⁴ In other words, Christians are justified through faith alone and are therefore free from having to do works under the law: it is through a Christian's faith that she or he "are once again put back in paradise and recreated from scratch. They would not do works to become or to be righteous."⁵ Luther then writes that once a Christian is made righteous through faith, she or he then is free to do works "only to please God" (as opposed to earn God's favor).⁶ As Luther further writes, "we do not reject good works. On the contrary, we highly cherish and teach them."⁷ Additionally, the freedom from works is a freedom to serve the neighbor, as Luther writes:

[A] human being does not live in this mortal body solely for himself or herself and work only on it but lives together with all other human beings on earth. Indeed, more to the point, each person lives only for others and not for himself or herself. The purpose of putting the body in subjection is so that it can serve others more genuinely and more freely. As Paul says in Rom 14[:7-8], "We do not live to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord." Thus it can never happen that in this life a person is idle and without works toward one's neighbors. For it is necessary to speak, act, and live with other human beings, just as Christ was "made in human likeness and found in human form" [Phil 2] and "lived with humankind," as Bar 3[:37] says.⁸

This is where the servant piece of Luther's contradictory statement comes in. Christians are set free from the need to earn salvation and from the fear of not being good enough or earning God's favor—all that has been taken care of in the work of Christ on the cross. But, now that the freedom has occurred, a Christian is then to serve their neighbor. Luther is quick to remind us that "no one *needs* even one of these works to attain righteousness and salvation."⁹ However, freedom from the *need* to do good works allows one the freedom to *do* good works "to serve and benefit others in everything that may be done, having nothing else in view except the need and advantage of the neighbor."¹⁰ In other words, Luther makes the claim that one cannot truly serve one's neighbor if one is caught up in a system of doing good works to advance their own salvation—in that system, one is truly only serving themselves, even if they give to the poor or those in need, because their works are meant to earn God's favor. For Luther,

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no one can ever truly be free to serve their neighbor if they are required to do it!

Additionally, Luther is addressing a common fear in his context which led to the effectiveness of indulgences in sixteenth century Germany in the first place—the fear that one is not *doing enough* to get into heaven. It is perhaps then a pastoral response when Luther assures Christians that it is not what we *do* to get into heaven, it is rather what Christ *has done*. As Luther points out many times in the treatise, while good works are not then required for salvation, they are encouraged, and one could almost say required, to live a Christian vocation in *this* life.

Resistance as queer vocation

When I attended seminary with the intention of becoming an ordained Lutheran pastor, a frequent question that was asked of me by faculty, classmates, laity, and the candidacy committee was "describe your call story." Many call stories, mine included, tell of a gradual unfolding and deepening within one's sense of vocation, of a life "set apart" for ministry. A murky calling of the Spirit that becomes clearer as one learns to listen, a seeing only in part that becomes a sharper image over time. My story began with a stable notion of my identity only to realize that I am not who I think I am. Telling my call story for what felt like the one thousandth time, I suddenly made a realization: the story of my call mirrored my story of self-discovery as a queer person. Indeed, both began with feeling different, a sense of unease and restlessness that only deepened the more I reflected on those feelings. My sense of call and my sense of gender identity and sexual orientation

4. Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 504.

5. Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," 513.

6. I here quote from LW, Vol. 31, page 371, translated W. A. Lambert and Harold J. Grimm. The translation in TAL reads "done only in consideration of divine favor."

7. TAL, Vol. 1, 518.

8. TAL, 519-520.

9. TAL, 520. Emphasis mine.

10. TAL, 520.

had an uncannily similar narrative arc: difference (différance)¹¹, exploration, deeper understanding of self.

Does that mean my queerness is a vocation? Is one's sexuality, gender identity, and expression a calling? This is not a new claim. In fact, queerness has often been described as a deconstructive act in and of itself—a way of destabilizing a heteronormative metanarrative in which we are all caught. Some signposts along the way:

Judith Butler, in her groundbreaking *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argues that gender is performance.¹² For her, gender is nothing more than a social construct, and it is a parodic repetition of this construct that brings gender into existence. In other words, we are not who we think we are. Our stable identities are not stable at all, the wool has been pulled over our eyes. This socially constructed gender identity flows from a forced heterosexual Grand Narrative.¹³ Through this Grand Narrative, heterosexuality and stable, binary genders are normalized, and anything that deviates from this heteronormative narrative is deemed abnormal, a flawed copy, queer. Thus, just by virtue of our performance of gender—whether intentionally performed or not—we participate in the deconstruction of gender.

Marcella Althaus-Reid provides another example in her book *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*, when she references the lemon vendors in Buenos Aires who sell lemons while not wearing underwear. As she writes,

Those lemon vendors can tell you a few things about postmodernism, for instance. Perhaps they have not heard of Liberation Theology but they know about the end of the Grand Meta-narrative, and not from reading Lyotard. You have just seen the lemon vendors in the streets of Constitucion or San Telmo. You have seen the witnesses, moreover, the subjects of one of the most important postmodern phenomena of fragmentation and dissolution which happened 500 years ago in Latin America.¹⁴

The lemon vendors in living their authentic lives show the cracks in Christianity, colonialism, and the Grand Meta-narrative that both have spun. As Althaus-Reid says, they may not have heard of Liberation Theology or read Lyotard, but their lives nonetheless are deconstructing the narrative. For Althaus-Reid, living authentically—whether by coming out, performing gender in deconstructive ways, selling lemons without underwear in the streets of Constitucion, or leading an “indecent” sex life—is an act of resistance, a refusal to conform to vanilla theology and a heteronormative Grand Narrative.

11. Différance is a term from philosopher Jacques Derrida, referring to the relationship between difference and deferred meaning. For more information, see Derrida, “Différance” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982).

12. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1990).

13. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, ix.

14. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

Embodying one's gender identity is a way of responding to the divine. Or to put it another way, living authentically is a response to God's call.

And this line of thought does not end there—Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore edited a collection of essays called *Why Are Faggots So Afraid of Faggots? Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform*, which, as the subtitle promises, shows the resistance inherent in queer identities—resistance which is made more profound through intersections with religion, gender, class, and, especially in the gay community's “No Fats no Fems” hook-up culture, race, “effeminacy,” weight, able-bodiedness, and fitness. In her introduction, Sycamore calls on the queer community to live into their desire—which is both at once authentic and subversive—through which liberation might be achieved.

So, we have established that living authentically is a form of resistance. But can this resistance be understood as vocation?

Justin Tanis, a pastor, scholar, and queer activist, describes being transgender as a calling: “Calling is a way of being—a calling to awaken to, realize, and manifest who we are. For trans people, our calling is to a way of embodying the self that transcends the limitations placed up on [sic] us.”¹⁵ In other words, Tanis writes that embodying one's gender identity is a way of responding to the divine. Or to put it another way, living *authentically* is a response to God's call.

Tanis goes on to say that in responding to the call to live authentically, one is able to “find clarity about other vocations, as well,” referencing an interview with trans priest Patrick Califia who said that taking T (testosterone) increased his “ability to empathize with or serve the spiritual needs of others.”¹⁶ In other words, one could almost say living authentically, which for Patrick involved taking T, allowed him the *freedom* to serve the spiritual needs of others.

This relates to my introduction to this section, how my call story followed the same narrative arc of my coming-out story, my self-realization of being queer. Living authentically is a resurrection, an embrace of life, a reclamation of desire, as shown above. And, as Tanis writes, this authentic living involves freedom, a freedom that can help one serve their neighbor.

Putting the two together

So, how can we combine the two? Martin Luther's freedom from sin and self-doubt in order to serve one's neighbor and a queer

15. Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018).

16. Tanis, *Trans-Gender*.

understanding of resistance and authentic living as vocation?

Those familiar with Luther's life know of the *anfechtung* he often suffered, especially early on in his career, the overwhelming spiritual terror and despair—the crisis that was at the heart of his yearning for a theology of freedom.¹⁷ It was his *anfechtung*, his belief that God had abandoned and forsaken him, that the freedom in *Freedom of a Christian* addresses, the freedom to leave behind those feelings of doubt and despair.

Likewise, the freedom from having to conform to a heteronormative gender and sexual identity, the freedom from a gender binary, the freedom from having to fit into a narrowly defined script of how to act and present in society, of who one can have sex with or love, that freedom can be life-saving, let alone life-affirming. We return to Luther: “The Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none.” The queer Christian individual is free from the chains of heteronormativity, free to love and fuck whomever they desire—that is the freedom promised to them. Why? Because as both Luther implied and Justin Tanis said above, one cannot serve one's neighbor if one is shackled to unrealistic and oppressive expectations.

Luther again, “The Christian individual is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Only by being freed from the heteronormative expectations from the church and a heteronormative society are we freed to truly serve and love our neighbor.

Thus, we return to authentic living. Freedom to live authentically therefore becomes the heart of Luther's theology of vocation. Luther, too, seemed to suggest authentic living is *good* living, famously showing the example of a father washing his child's diapers, declaring that he (the father) should not be regarded as an “effeminate fool,” but rather “is acting in the spirit just described and in Christian faith. . . . God with all his angels and creatures, is smiling—not because that father is washing diapers, but because he is doing so in Christian faith.”¹⁸ This supposedly menial and “effeminate” task of changing the diaper of an infant child shows that God is smiling with all their angels when a queer person, living authentically, allows them to serve their neighbor.

In other words, the father, by changing the diaper, is serving the child. Add a layer of queer theory on top, and we can see that the father is, by changing the diaper, deconstructing gender norms. And the best part—at least, I think it's the best part—is that Luther says God and God's angels are smiling at this gender-bending father! How neat is that?

Indeed, Luther's own life was marked as a life of resistance. While his real-life story may not have the defiant “Here I Stand!” moment, his response at the Diet of Worms, putting his very life at risk, was an act of resistance. His response at the Diet of Worms:

17. *Anfechtung* is a German word used by Luther, often translated as affliction, trials, or temptation. It refers to a period specifically to Luther's own despair early in his career, and more broadly, to the trials and tribulations faced by all Christians.

18. Martin Luther, “On the Estate of Marriage,” in TAL, Vol. 5, trans. Marjorie Elizabeth Plummer, 69. LW, Vol. 45.

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“If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God's word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience.” It cannot be safe or honest—or, to say it another way, one must be true to themselves.

I began this paper by referencing *The Ninety-Five Theses*. Let us return to them briefly. In that same spirit, I propose two of my own theses:

1. Queer Christians are to be taught that living authentic lives true to their own identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation enables them the freedom to serve others.
2. This authentic living is itself an act of resistance and reformation in an unjust, heteronormative society that teaches gender and sexual conformity.