
Applying a Theology of Vocation to Economic Justice in Rural America

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Defining the crisis

For those who are rostered and lay leaders in rural contexts, it is easy to come up with a list of the economic and societal issues facing their people. Aging and declining populations of town(s), lack of access to medical and educational resources, and fewer employment opportunities are some of the concerns facing those who live and work in rural America. These derive from outside forces, namely globalization, vertical integration, increased mechanization, stereotypes of rural people and rural life, lack of gainful employment, and lack of mental health resources.

Globalization involves corporations operating or having influence on an international level. Vertical integration involves corporations owning two or more stages of the production of a commodity. Increased mechanization involves the process whereby machines do jobs that humans once did. It is important to note that these are not inherently immoral. Globalization allows for greater sharing of resources; vertical integration can allow for a process of higher quality control; and increased mechanization has helped to eradicate subsistence farming. However, they are not universally positive, and each still presents challenges to people in rural America. Globalization and vertical integration often keep prices for commodities low, while ensuring that shareholders of transnational agriculture companies have a positive return on their investments. On the costs side, increased mechanization continues to raise the prices for equipment needed. Taken together, globalization, vertical integration, and increased mechanization fundamentally affect rural America in a detrimental manner by financially favoring large transnational corporations over those who produce food and over the environment.

Two of the stereotypes that affect rural America are the rural mystique, which suggests rural America is completely idyllic; and parochialism, which suggests rural America is regressive and unwilling to change. Both stereotypes are harmful, either placing the blame for rural issues on the people who live there or erasing the issues that exist. The economic concerns generated by globalization, vertical integration, and increased mechanization have made it challenging to have opportunities for gainful employment, leading people to need to leave rural places. Finally, all the economic and societal pressures, as well as lack of access

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to mental health resources, have led to an increase in attempted and completed suicides by people who live in rural America. This deeply affects a community's identity and energy, which can lead to a feeling of hopelessness.

The current economic and societal realities facing rural America deserve more attention than what they have been given by state and federal governments. They prevent people in rural areas from being able to live out all the vocations to which God has called them. While one's vocation to earn a living is not their only vocation, it is certainly an important one. When people are unable to carry out their vocations because of various injustices, the church has a call to participate in liberating people to be able to serve God's world and their neighbors in the ways that God has called and equipped them. There is a pressing need for the church to address the realities happening in rural America.

When a person is baptized, one of the fruits of their baptism is that they will "proclaim Christ in word and deed."¹ This is vocation. In baptism, God calls people to particular vocations to love and serve their neighbors for Jesus' sake. The realities of individual sin in this world prevent humans from perfectly living out their vocations. There is also the reality of systemic sin in our world, which is a powerful obstacle to people living into the vocations to which God has called them.

The current American economic system is failing small-town and rural places and has impacts on the societal realities of rural

1. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. Pew ed. (Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 228.

America. This is a product of systemic sin and cannot be blamed on any individual. As a result of this, members of the body of Christ are deeply suffering, and the church is called to care for those who have been left behind by society.

Economic justice

I will be using the definition of economic justice from The Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ):

Economic justice, which touches the individual person as well as the social order, encompasses the moral principles which guide us in designing our economic institutions. These institutions determine how each person earns a living, enters into contracts, exchanges goods and services with others and otherwise produces an independent material foundation for his or her economic sustenance. The ultimate purpose of economic justice is to free each person to engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and the spirit.²

This definition recognizes several realities: (1) economics is part of a system, and that system determines realities for individuals, (2) ethics and morals should play a part in how societies construct economic systems, (3) economic justice is for the benefit of all people, and (4) the purpose and value of human life is not solely found in one's ability to earn a living.

While this is a strong definition of economic justice, as Christians who understand and practice the Christian faith through a Lutheran-Confessional lens, the CESJ definition needs to be refined. First, it lacks a communal understanding of the need for economic justice, its concern is with individuals being able to “engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and spirit.”³ Furthermore, it places a value-based binary on what a person does to make a living by favoring the work of mind and spirit: “the ultimate purpose of economic justice is to free each person to engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and the spirit.”⁴ More than being sustainable, our understanding of economic justice must be considered from a holistic vantage point that includes all of society. The CESJ definition focuses on freeing “each person,” not the collective or the whole of society, but individuals.

We need to understand how the economic system in America negatively affects many people, and not just people in rural America. Kathryn Tanner, in *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, offers an examination of the current American economic system (which she calls “finance-dominated capitalism”), economic justice, and what Christianity has to say about it. She concludes that “[economic justice] operates not at a remove from finance-dominated capitalism but by hitting across it, traversing

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it to disruptive effect.”⁵ Recall our definition from CESJ and the goal of economic justice “to free each person to engage creatively in the unlimited work beyond economics, that of the mind and the spirit.”⁶ As Christians, we understand this as our participation in the work of the Triune God, whose justice—economic and otherwise—regularly looks different from what humans expect it to be. The Christian person's justification before God in Christ frees the Christian to participate in the disruption needed for economic justice in every place, including rural America.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has written on the topic of economic justice in its social statement, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*. The statement presents how humanity's participatory role in economic justice must begin with repentance from the sins, individual and systemic, that are committed during our participation in economic life. In the forgiveness of this sin, given to us by God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, we are freed to turn toward seeking economic justice as God's call to love and serve our neighbors for Jesus' sake. Where economic injustice is occurring, as in the case of rural America, the question for the Christian is “how” they should participate. This social statement emphasizes four characteristics: (1) God's concern of justice for all, (2) the means of livelihood by which one's life is sustained, (3) emphasis on sufficiency for what is needed, and (4) the long-term perspective of sustainability. From each of these we learn that Christian participation in economic justice is part of the vocational identity God calls them to as citizens of a country. This refines the definition of economic justice from the CESJ by emphasizing the collective over the individual, and valuing what people do in a holistic manner. This is crucial as we turn to an exploration of a theology of vocation.

Vocation

Often, vocation is assumed to be what a Christian does through their local church. This is a limited understanding of vocation:

2. Center for Economic and Social Justice (CESJ). *Defining Economic and Social Justice*. Accessed October 11, 2022. <https://www.cesj.org/learn/definitions/defining-economic-justice-and-social-justice/>

3. CESJ. *Defining Economic and Social Justice*.

4. CESJ. *Defining Economic and Social Justice*.

5. Kathryn Tanner. *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism*. (Yale University Press, 2019), 219.

6. CESJ. *Defining Economic and Social Justice*.

first, by its emphasis on what humans do, and second by its restriction to the church one attends. To the first, vocation must be centered on God and not centered on humans. To the second, vocation encompasses all aspects of one's life and cannot be confined to what one does through one's local congregation.

In *Luther on Vocation*, Gustaf Wingren summarizes Luther's definition of vocation: "a vocation is a 'station' which is by nature helpful to others if it be followed."⁷ All humans occupy various stations, or roles, in their lives. There are many roles a person can occupy—family member, friend, employee, student, citizen, and so forth—each of which stations are meant to be helpful. For the baptized, each of these stations is given to them by God through baptism for God's purposes. Vocation, then, is not for the person who occupies the station, but it is for those whom they will serve as they occupy this station. This is true of all the stations they occupy, have occupied, and will occupy in life. Vocations are a gift from God for God's people; a gift both for the one who occupies the station and the one who is served.

Numerous times Scripture names that it is God who equips people with gifts and calls them to their vocations. One such passage is Romans 12:4-8:

For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

These gifts are given by God to the baptized for the sake of one's neighbors. God calls the baptized both to discern what gifts God has given them and to trust that God will unite these gifts in the body of Christ and use them for the sake of the gospel. Since God is the one who unites all the baptized and vocations in the body of Christ, there is no room for comparison or jealousy between members of the body. There can be no distinction between what is considered a good or an honorable vocation and what is an unworthy or dishonorable vocation. The value judgments put on different vocations by the world are non-existent to God.

Vocation is counter-cultural because it involves what Lutherans understand as the daily dying and rising of the baptized. Each day the baptized human being dies to the old, sinful self and rises as the new person they are in baptism before God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The counter-cultural aspect of vocation is constantly turning the baptized toward God, through their daily dying to sin, which then turns them toward their neighbor, their daily rising. Vocation is grounded in baptism, which involves trusting God and therefore proclaiming Christ, caring for all, and working for justice and peace.

7. Gustaf Wingren. *Luther on Vocation*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 4.

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Vocation is what God calls each of the baptized to do in love for the neighbor. Vocation does not save or justify a person before God; vocation is our baptismal response to God's saving and justifying act in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Vocation then is discerned through the Holy Spirit every second of every day. While members of the body of Christ may have different vocations, they are all made one in the community of the body of Christ and have real effects on each other.

One of the vocations that God has given to all people can be found in the creation stories, where the first words God speaks to the humans is the call to care for the land and creatures. God has not rescinded this vocation from humanity. Seeking economic justice in rural America is a means by which all people can strive to live out this first vocation.

Applying a theology of vocation to economic justice in rural America

We now apply a theology of vocation to economic justice and what it means for rural America. The theology of vocation reframes economic justice in three ways: (1) a theology of vocation means that humans cannot compartmentalize their lives into that which is and that which is not their vocation; (2) a theology of vocation recognizes the ways people make their livings are vocations to which God calls them, breaking down the human barriers of what is considered good or bad, important or unimportant, work; (3) a theology of vocation calls the baptized through the message of the gospel to Christian freedom, so that the baptized are freed to be more just in their economic lives and with their economic lives being a reflection of their vocation.

The way a theology of vocation reframes economic justice operates in a continuous loop. First, economic justice is understood as a vocation for all the baptized. We cannot compartmentalize our lives. Next, the vocation of economic justice sees all livelihoods as vocations and recognizes the need for all livelihoods to be sufficient and sustainable. This deconstructs our system that values some livelihoods more than others. Finally, economic justice through

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the lens of vocation equally values all vocations. Economic justice through the lens of vocation unmasks how our culture overemphasizes individuals, their careers, and material success and offers another way focused on the community of the body of Christ. This means our vocations are more than our economic lives and our economic lives are to reflect our vocation. Because sin is a reality in this world, there will always be a need for economic justice to varying degrees. Thus, the loop begins again. When economic justice is viewed through the lens of vocation, economic justice is no longer solely about participating in bringing about God's justice to "the least of these." Rather through our vocational callings, our work in economic justice is transformed into enabling all people to live into becoming the ones whom God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit created and called them to be in all their vocations.

What do these three ways of reframing economic justice mean in the case of rural America? They are grounded in three assertions. First, when someone is unable to sustainably live out their vocation, justification before God in Christ through the Holy Spirit turns the Christian outward toward seeking economic sufficiency and sustainability for those who cannot sustainably live out their vocations. Second, the first call of all Christians is to tend to the land. Finally, on the way to economic justice in rural America some things will die or change.

A theology of vocation reframes economic justice by doing away with compartmentalizing one's life. Christians have freedom in the gospel to act when people are unable to live out their vocations sustainably. All the baptized have a first vocation to tend the land. Current economic realities in rural America have forced people who grow and produce food into ways of doing things that are highly destructive to creation. Removing the threat of economic demise is a way for the baptized to live out their vocation to tend the land. Breaking down compartmentalizing helps us to understand how economic justice and tending the land are vocations that work together. Finally, a theology of vocation breaks down compartmentalization in rural America by acknowledging that, for the sake of all, there will be things that will die and change. Those changes will be sad, but they are also held and redeemed by God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Second, deconstructing hierarchies in the realm of work belongs to the response of the baptized in exercising their freedom in the gospel to act in Christian love when neighbors are unable

to live out their vocations sustainably. These hierarchies are calling "less than" what God has called "good." All the baptized are called to tend and care for creation, and tending to those who produce what is needed for daily sustenance is a part of living out one's first vocation. To break down hierarchies requires change and the death of former ways of understanding the world. However, we trust this is for the love and benefit of the neighbor and the kingdom of God.

Finally, a theology of vocation reframes economic justice, so that the baptized are freed to be more than their economic lives and that their economic lives reflect their vocation. The gospel calls people to action when people are unable to live out all their vocations sustainably. There are many people who cannot live out their several vocations sustainably in rural America, because of the economic demands on their lives. Opportunity to live out more than one's economic life in rural America—economic life also being a vocation— means recalling how all the baptized are called to tend the land. For people who live and work in rural America, this means returning to the understanding that tending creation is a gift from God, not a burden. For the baptized who do not live and work in rural America, this involves tending to the land by tending to those who care for the land. Shifting from a total focus on one's economic life will cause some things to change and perhaps die. It would be a momentous cultural shift to be free not to have one's economic vocation be the top priority of one's life. In the transition, however, we hold on to the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ.

The gospel comforts all the baptized amid this daunting reality and need for change. While we strive for economic justice in rural America, we recognize that even our best iterations of economic justice will be tainted by sin. The good news is that our vocation of economic justice does not save and justify us before God. The good news is that God has accomplished our justification in Christ. In his death, Jesus Christ took to the cross all the sin of the world, including the sin that is present in our economic systems. He took it upon himself, and it died with him. In Christ's rising, God has redeemed and freed the baptized from this sin. This freedom does not mean the baptized are to let things continue as they are. But it remains our cornerstone as the baptized work and view economic justice in rural America through the lens of vocation.

What is the church called to do?

In conclusion, I offer a few concrete suggestions for how the body of Christ can live into their vocation of economic justice. This can be a starting point that should be expanded to meet the needs of each person, community, and the changes of time. It is my hope that local congregations can be the locus for communal conversation and a gospel response to the need for economic justice in rural America done through the lens of vocation.

First, I commend all people to study together the various ELCA Social Statements. I especially encourage exploration of the social statement, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*. I also commend the statements on *Caring for Creation: Vision,*

Hope, and Justice and *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective*. These social statements offer a framework for discussing the topics explored in this article. They provide excellent biblical, theological, and practical grounding for conversation as one begins the work of economic justice through the lens of vocation.

Next, as best they can, people should purchase their raw materials locally. While this is primarily thought of as foodstuffs, it should also include items made from other raw materials, as well as buying from local businesses. There is a certain amount of privilege in being able to do this, and it speaks to the need for economic justice for all people. There is no solution that is not tainted with the realities of sin. However, those who can purchase locally should participate in their vocation of economic justice for rural America in this practical way.

Another part of one's vocation in economic justice has to do with reaching out to elected officials and voting for people who will make this a priority. Current laws surrounding agriculture and rural America are wildly inadequate and require a lot of restructuring. Furthermore, laws that allow and encourage vertical and horizontal integration, which privileges those at the top at the expense of those on the bottom, must be done away with.

Fourth, we must encourage the baptized in all their vocations. The proposed theology of vocation reframes economic justice by breaking down the barriers of what is considered valuable work. Breaking down these barriers is not just about rethinking how we value one's vocation in economic livelihood, but how we value vocations that are beyond economic livelihood. Talking about all vocations as important gifts from God can be a significant step in reshaping and revaluing people and their vocations.

Finally, all communities need to acknowledge the interdependence of all people and communities. God has given us the gift of relationship. Currently there is much polarization in this

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country that seeks to pit people against each other. The church should be the place where we can see each other as members of the body of Christ and as people for whom Christ died. When we see each other as siblings in Christ, we care deeply about each other's well-being and desire to care for those who are being mistreated, knowing that the well-being of others affects our own well-being.

For those who live and work in rural America, breaking down the narrative of extreme independence and self-sufficiency is of the utmost importance. Rural communities are best equipped to name the solutions they need for their own survival, with an emphasis on the word "community." The narrative of self-sufficiency will only lead to death. We need space and time to grieve what has been lost. Making that space is of the utmost importance, so that healing and transformation can begin.

The church is called to this work. I believe the church should be the starting place for living into economic justice through the lens of vocation in rural America and in all places. We are called to share the gospel in all we do and to be stewards of God's creation and mysteries. May this inform every aspect of our lives, as we are guided by the Holy Spirit, trusting in the promises of Jesus Christ!⁸

8. I would like to give special thanks to God for the Rev. Dr. Ann Fritschel and the late Rev. Dr. Gwen Sayler for their commitments and contributions to rural ministry, loving the people and the place God has called one to, and for their work of education and advocacy surrounding small-town and rural places. Without them, the notion to combine the topics explored in this article would not be so.