



# Luther's Elevation of the Ordinary Life

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Luther's Lasting Impact

**INTERACTIVE FAITH**

AN ONLINE BIBLE STUDY SERIES



## **Introduction**

How would you define something as “ordinary”? What makes something “extraordinary”?

## **The Medieval Church’s Concept of the “Religious” Life**

Monasticism and church work

The theology of the medieval church encouraged the concept of the “religious” life

Luther had a tender conscience. He struggled to be right with God. The path the medieval church laid out for those who wanted to really be right with God was to live a “religious” life. So Luther became a monk. Why do you think he continued to struggle with his conscience?

## **Luther Reorders His Thinking**

Luther had not even been a monk for five years when he was thrust into a teaching position, teaching Scripture and theology at the University of Wittenberg. Within a short time, preaching in the town church was added to his list of duties. These new activities encouraged Luther to reorder his thinking.

Two doctrines especially influenced Luther to reject the concept of a “religious” life and instead elevate the “ordinary” life. Describe how these two doctrines might have led Luther to reorder his thinking on the Christian life.

- ◆ Justification by faith alone
  
- ◆ Scripture alone

List some Scripture passages which help reorder our thinking about our Christian living.

### **Elevating the “Ordinary” Life**

Luther followed the medieval way of dividing up the “estates” of society: church, government, and household. In his writings, he would often divide “household” into two spheres: family relationships and economic relationships. One of the words he used to describe a person’s place in these various “estates” was “calling.” How many examples of different “callings” can you think of in these various areas of life? Consider what “callings” you have in each of these areas.

- ◆ Church
  
- ◆ Government
  
- ◆ Family
  
- ◆ Economy

How do these various portions of Luther’s *Small Catechism* demonstrate an elevation of the ordinary life?

*“I believe that God will preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, property and home, spouse and children, land, cattle, and all I own, and all I need to keep my body and life.” (First Article)*

*“Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, employer, or employee? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you hurt anyone by word or deed? Have you been dishonest, careless, wasteful, or done other wrong?” (Confession: Third)*

*“Daily bread includes everything we need for our bodily welfare, such as food and drink, clothing and shoes, house and home, land and cattle, money and goods, a godly spouse, godly children, godly workers, godly and faithful leaders, good government, good weather, peace and order, health, a good name, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” (Fourth Petition)*

Luther emphasized three key concepts that led him to the elevation of the ordinary life. First, one’s various “callings” or “vocations” were simply ways to keep the Ten Commandments, especially the overarching commandment to “love your neighbor.” Second, God uses our service in our various vocations to care for his creatures and his creation. We are his “hands” or his “feet.” Third, there is no distinction between “religious” or “secular” callings. Consider the following quotes in light of these key concepts.

*“The angels like nothing more than to watch us deal with the Word of God; with such people, they enjoy dwelling. Therefore, leave the angels up there in heaven undisturbed. Look for them here on earth below, in your neighbor, father and mother, children, and others. Do for these what God has commanded, and the angels will never be far away from you.”*

“The Sermon on the Mount”  
Luther’s Works 21:36

*“God’s people please God even in the least and most trifling matters. For He will be working all things through you; He will milk the cow through you and perform the most servile duties through you, and all the greatest and least duties alike will be pleasing to Him.”*

“Lectures on Genesis”  
Luther’s Works 6:10

*“[Christian faith] opens its eyes, looks upon all these insignificant, distasteful, and despised duties in the Spirit, and is aware that they are all adorned with divine approval as with the costliest gold and jewels. It says, ‘O God, because I am certain that thou hast created me as a man and hast from my body begotten this child, I also know for a certainty that it meets with thy perfect pleasure. I confess to thee that I am not worthy to rock the little babe or wash its diapers, or to be entrusted with the care of the child and its mother. How is it that I, without any merit, have come to this distinction of being certain that I am serving thy creature and thy most precious will? O how gladly will I do so, though the duties should be even more insignificant and despised. Neither frost nor heat, neither drudgery nor labor, will distress or dissuade me, for I am certain that it is thus pleasing in thy sight.’”*

“The Estate of Marriage”  
Luther’s Works 45:39-40

## The Lasting Impact of Luther's Elevation of the Ordinary Life

The dangers of a "Lutheran monasticism" creeping into our thinking

Living according to God's plan in our various vocations is never easy. Luther often referred to these as "crosses" that we bear when we strive to do God's will in our lives. How do the following statements of Luther express the reality of crosses in our lives and God's purposes behind them? What concrete examples of crosses can you think of in your vocations? How can thinking of these difficult realities as "crosses" help you to deal with them and find contentment in your vocations?

*"Every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit'... The purpose of this saying is to comfort and strengthen people who are in the stations that conflict with the feelings and attitudes of reason—stations which have many annoyances and evil incidents in them so that people are taken aback and regard them as dangerous and as unsuitable for the service of God... But why look for it far away? Here it is stated admirably and briefly: Nothing but good fruit can come from the station that God has created and ordained, and from the man who works and lives in this station on the basis of the Word of God. With this you can now comfort your heart against thoughts like these: 'Oh, it was this person or that who got me into this station. It causes me nothing but disgust and trouble.'"*

"Sermon on the Mount"  
Luther's Works 21:265

*"Therefore simply begin to be a Christian, and you will soon find out what it means to mourn and be sorrowful. If you can do nothing else, then get married, settle down, and make a living in faith. Love the Word of God, and do what is required of you in your station. Then you will experience, both from your neighbors and in your own household, that things will not go as you might wish. You will be hindered and hemmed in on every side, so that you will suffer enough and see enough to make your heart sad."*

"Sermon on the Mount"  
Luther's Works 21:20

*"The greatest temptation in the world is that nobody fulfils his calling faithfully but everybody wishes to indulge in idleness."*

"Table Talks" (11 April 1538)  
Luther's Works 54:281

In what ways can Luther's elevation of the ordinary life help you see the "extraordinary" in your "ordinary" life? What makes this such a comforting and encouraging teaching?