

# Reflections on *The Purpose Driven Life* in Light of the Doctrine of Vocation

John T. Pless

Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions  
And Director of Field Education

In a time of moral decadence and cultural chaos, two temptations confront Christian churches. There is tendency to move either in the direction of compromise and conformity as is witnessed by the antinomian impulses that would set aside biblical teaching regarding homosexuality, for example. Evil is called good. Churchly affirmation of homosexual unions is said to be part of the "new thing" that the Spirit is doing in the world. On the other hand, there are those who would seek security in discipline and obedience. It is this second tendency that has given rise to the popularity of the best-selling book by Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

No doubt that current enthusiasm for *The Purpose Driven Life* and the line of supporting products developed by Rick Warren and his associates will soon go the way of Promise Keepers, WWJD bracelets, and the Prayer of Jabez. Nevertheless, for the moment at least, *The Purpose Driven Life* has caught the imagination and pocketbooks of Lutheran pastors and laity. Last week I addressed an LCMS pastoral conference on the theology of the cross. In preparation for the conference, the participants had been asked to read Gerhard Forde's little classic, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. It didn't take long until the discussion turned to *The Purpose Driven Life*. Such a turn was inevitable in light of Luther's initial assertion that the law does not advance human beings in the way of righteousness, but in fact, impedes such a movement. The conversation that followed convinced me that Lutherans need to ask themselves why it is that a book such as *The Purpose Driven Life* would become so popular with our people, why it is that "the forty days of purpose" would come to overshadow or maybe even displace Lent? Could it be that many Lutherans, both clergy and laity, have forgotten or never known the richness of Luther's understanding of vocation? As for a couple of generations now, instruction in the Small Catechism has given way to other texts and programs, could it be that Lutheran pastors are just plain ignorant of the way that this little book orients the purpose of the life of faith?

Some well-meaning pastors have tried to Lutheranize *The Purpose Driven Life* by providing theological errata sheets that commend the book while noting Warren's problems with baptism, faith/works, the pastoral office, and so forth. One such remodeling job pointed out five major doctrinal flaws in the book yet suggested that if a person would make allowance for these missteps, the book could be used profitably for spiritual growth. That seems to me like taking an engine out of a car and expecting it to run. The overall orientation of *The Purpose Driven Life* is geared toward human performance. Lutherans would begin with God's undeserved smile at sinners in Jesus Christ. His grace and favor are the cause not the goal of the Christian life. Warren sees God's smile as the result of the Christian's obedience (see Day 9, "What Makes God Smile" *The Purpose Driven Life*, 69ff).

Rather than attempt a repair job on *The Purpose Driven Life*, I would suggest that Lutherans take another look at the Small Catechism as a handbook for the Christian vocation. In doing so, Lutherans might rediscover (or discover for the first time) the resources that are available in our own tradition for speaking concretely about God's purposes for Christian life. The Lutheran teaching of the doctrine of vocation is embodied in the Small Catechism and it gives a completely different focus to the Christian life than does *The Purpose Driven Life*.

Simply put, the Small Catechism sees the Christian life as having a dual focus. It is the life that is lived, as Luther would say elsewhere, outside of the self in faith toward Christ and love for the neighbor. Faith not love is foundational for the Christian life. The first commandment is fulfilled by faith alone. Such faith bears fruit in love that seeks to aid and assist the neighbor in his/her need. We "thank, praise, serve, and obey" God not in order to gain His approval but because He created us "without any merit or worthiness of mine." Luther's explanation of the first article comes to culmination in the daily prayers and table of duties appended to the six chief parts but often overlooked in contemporary catechesis. God is thanked and praised in the prayers that punctuate the daily life (morning, evening, mealtime) and He is served and obeyed as Christians live out their various callings in congregation, family, and community (table of duties).

Perhaps the popularity of The Purpose Driven Life and its attendant programs in our churches is a signal that we have forgotten the "extraordinary ordinariness" of the Lutheran understanding of life (to borrow a phrase from Mark Noll) that lies behind the Lutheran doctrine of vocation. Gustaf Wingren's classic treatment, *Luther on Vocation* is thankfully back in print again. Two new books designed for lay study, Gene Edward Veith's *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Crossway Books) and Marc Kolden's *The Christian's Calling in the World* (Centered Life Series-Luther Seminary) are fine alternatives to *The Purpose Driven Life*.

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