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Paradox and Vocation

CLIFFORD BARBARICK

It wasn't really a storm. In fact, it was only a ride in the car. But I can identify with Luther's "conversion" on the way to Erfurt.

It was on a Wednesday night when my family and I were returning from church, driving over the rolling plains of northeast Colorado Springs, the moon coolly illuminating the grain that whisked by outside my window. I cannot tell you what we were talking about. But I certainly remember the result.

Most likely, it started with a question like, "What did you kids learn in Bible class tonight?" My younger sister, Carah, probably gave a long-winded answer about her fourth-grade class—some crafts, a Bible story, and (if she was lucky) some candy. Something in the junior high class, however, had touched me deeply. Something had been awakened.

The conviction overwhelmed me. If this all was true—if the stories they told and the ethics they taught were more than a ruse—if Jesus truly lived and died and rose again, then I could not go on living in any "normal" way.

How could I follow the expected path—go to school, get a job, start a family, support a family, retire—if Jesus called me to radically follow him? How could I perform any act or work in any vocation that did not completely serve Christ and his cause? Anything less would be holding back. Anything less would be stealing from Jesus what he purchased on the cross. It was then I decided to be a minister. If there had been a monastery within 50 miles, I might have run there that night.

I tried to explain my conviction to my family, but they didn't understand. Of course, they said they did. They nodded appropriately and tried to calm me down. But how could they understand, I thought. Already, they were too far along a different path to turn around. My father owned a successful asphalt-paving business, and my mother was a sought-after interior decorator.

If they understood, it would turn their world upside down. Their jobs and family acted like fetters tying them to this world, preventing them from responding to the radical call. I hoped that I could remain free.

Like Luther on that long trip to Erfurt, I came to some drastic conclusions. My limited sense of vocation left me with only one option: become a minister. I could see no other way to faithfully follow Jesus.

For a time, I became even more extreme—the life of the hermit appealed to me. Alone, in the mountains, I could think and pray and write and commune with God without the myriad of worldly distractions that usually clogged my day. I wanted full separation.



I imagine similar emotions drove Luther to the monastery. But he did not stay there. In fact, by the end of his life, he condemned monks for hiding from the world and abandoning those in need of service. What changed his mind? What brought him back to the world?

Some scholars argue that Luther began to change when he confronted the biblical text. But serious Bible study sometimes complicates “black and white” distinctions. In his book, *On the Sword*, Luther’s Anabaptist contemporary, Bathasar Hubmaier, uses three pages to list a few of the contradictions he found.

For example, Matthew 19 recommends both chastity and marriage. In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches not to do good works before others, but in chapter 6 he says that we should do good works that others may see them. In Romans, Abraham is justified by faith, in James by works. Christ’s yoke is easy, yet impossible (Matt 11:20; 19:26).¹ And even if one can harmonize these specific texts, the character of God at times appears contradictory. Psalm 103 pictures a God unable to keep his anger forever, yet Matt 25:46 acknowledges the condemned will go to the everlasting fire. Good exegesis cannot solve all of these discrepancies. The serious biblical student is left with irreconcilable truths.

Second, our own experience often confuses clear distinctions. Ethical dilemmas continually confront the Christian in the world. Does a mother die from complications during childbirth or undergo an abortion to save her own life? In the spiritual life, conflicts between the spirit and flesh never abate. Why, if I want to do good, do I still do evil? How is one clothed in Christ and still a sinner?

The most simple and profound explanation comes from Luther himself: “*simul justus et peccator*.” Christians, by nature, are both saved and sinners, pure and impure, separate from the world and involved in it. A radical conviction led Luther to the monastery, but he was to make an even more radical move. He defied the rigid structures of the scholastic theologians and embraced a theology of paradox.

A friend of mine once compared the Christian faith to a tent. The two of us have always enjoyed hiking and climbing mountains together, and it was during one such expedition that he made this profound connection. Stakes surrounding the tent provide the tent’s structure by pulling in opposite directions. This force stretches the material taut and gives the tent strength to withstand gusting winds and several feet of heavy snow. In a similar way, the apparently opposed tenets of the Christian faith provide its strength. God is both merciful and just. We are both justified and sinful. Remove one of these stakes, and the structure of the faith collapses. Harmonize these truths, and the faith goes flat. My friend understood the meaning of paradox.

I, too, have learned to appreciate the profound truths of paradox. An entry point into this understanding has been the music of Ben Harper. His music discovered me the summer following my freshman year of college. I purchased the CD having heard only one song, but I have been blessed by the risk I took.

The CD did not leave my radio for the rest of the summer. I would try to listen to other things, but his music haunted me. The lyrics and message cut deeply into my mind. I found in this secular musician a window to honest truth.

After taking a course on the Reformation and studying Luther’s theology, I realize what attracts me to Ben Harper—he understands paradox, and he sings about it unapologetically. An excerpt from “Roses From My Friends” provides an example of his insight:

Sometimes I feel I know strangers
better than I know my friends
why must a beginning
be the means to an end

How could I follow the expected path—go to school, get a job, start a family, support a family, retire—if Jesus called me to radically follow him?

The stones from my enemies
 these wounds will mend
 but I cannot survive
 roses from my friends²

The words are counterintuitive. Shouldn't one know friends better than strangers? How can beginning and end be so closely tied? Why are roses from friends more damaging than stones from enemies?

Behind the initial nonsense, however, truth hides. Sometimes the more you know someone, the more confused you become about what drives them. Strangers are easier to stereotype. In this finite world, what begins will always end. And the cloaked insult from a friend always hurts more than a clear blow from an expected source.

Paradox also characterizes the life Ben Harper leads. I mentioned that he is a secular artist. His lyrics, however, defy such simple classifications. His album *Fight for Your Mind* throws a wrench in any stereotyping machine. "Burn One Down" fulfills one's expectations of a worldly album:

Let us burn one
 from end to end
 and pass it over
 to me my friend
 burn it long, we'll burn it slow
 to light me up before I go

if you don't like my fire
 then don't come around
 cause I'm gonna burn one down
 yes I'm gonna burn one down³

However, he follows this blatant praise of drug use with "Power of the Gospel":

It will make a weak man mighty
 it will make a mighty man fall
 it will fill your heart and hands
 or leave you with nothing at all

it's the eyes for the blind
 and legs for the lame
 it is love for hate
 and pride for shame

that's the power of the gospel⁴

Ben Harper shocks me. In one breath he encourages his listeners to try marijuana, in the next he gives a powerful restatement of the *Magnificat*. And while I would never recommend that a Christian live a life like that of Ben Harper, his exemplification of paradox opened my mind to new possibilities in vocation. If a secular songwriter could convict me about the gospel's power, then surely I could serve Christ in ways other than being a minister.

It is precisely here that I have found Luther especially meaningful, for Luther offers a healthy, Christian understanding of vocation. Luther held that Christians participate in the world through their vocation. He also believed that the Christian has two callings: (1) a spiritual calling to salvation and (2) a temporal calling in which he has a duty to serve the neighbor. In *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, Luther explores the meaning of vocation. In the context of discussing the proper use of the sword, he writes,

You ask, Why did not Christ and the apostles bear the sword? Tell me, Why did he not also take a wife, or become a cobbler or a tailor? If an occupation or office is not good because Christ Himself did not occupy it, what would become of all occupations and offices, with the exception of the ministry which alone He exercised? Christ fulfilled his own office and vocation, but thereby did not reject any other. ... For every one must attend to his own calling and work.⁵

Luther's thought is paradoxical. A Christian, who lives as a citizen of God's kingdom, carries out his life in a worldly vocation. We each have our own calling, and it may not be the same calling of our example, Jesus Christ. Clarence Bauman explains that though the Christian is "free in faith,"

he is bound both by necessity (his own and his neighbor's) and by the love of Christ to return to the prison of his brothers. ... The world (not heaven) and not the cloister is the place where the believer is to work out his sanctification.⁶

This stance clearly departs from the motivations that drove Luther to the Augustinian order. The mature Luther no longer desired to separate himself for God. Instead, he wanted to give himself to his neighbor. Actually, it can more properly be stated that he wanted to do both. Armed with a profound understanding of paradox, he did not need to choose between the two.

Luther's understanding of paradox and vocation has assisted me in my career goals. I still want to be a minister but not because that is the only option for a Christian. I believe God has called me to that vocation. I also believe that he has called me to serve those around me. The life of the hermit opposes the call of Christ. Jesus did not separate himself from the world in order to seek God. He sat and ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. He touched the unclean and healed the outcasts. He instructed the uneducated along with the Pharisees.

Christ's example shows me that I do not have to choose. I am not required to decide between coming into God's throne room to worship him and going into the city to walk with a needy drunk. Instead, I can live in the context of the paradox of the Christian gospel and do both.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Balthasar Hubmaier, *On the Sword*, in Balthasar Hubmaier: *The Leader of the Anabaptists* by Henry C. Vedder, (New York: AMS, 1971), 298-9.
- 2 Ben Harper, "Roses From My Friends," *The Will to Live* (Virgin Records, 1997).
- 3 Harper, "Burn One Down," *Fight for Your Mind*, (Virgin Records, 1997).
- 4 Harper, "Power of the Gospel," *Fight for Your Mind*, (Virgin Records, 1997).
- 5 Martin Luther, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenger (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 378-9.
- 6 Clarence Bauman, "The Theology of the 'Two Kingdoms': A Comparison of Luther and the Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38 (January 1964): 43.