

Introduction

Mary J. Streufert

THE WITNESS OF THE women at the tomb in Luke was first heard as “an idle tale,” so unbelievable that it could surely only be the drama of gossip. Yet as followers of Jesus came to realize the radical message that Jesus Christ was raised, the witness of the women came to stand as one of the central features of Christian evangelism throughout history. As feminist biblical scholars have long pointed out, despite the marginalization of women from the ongoing formation of the theological tradition, women have always had a role in the lifeblood of Christianity. Women today have no less a role in contributing to the ongoing transformation of the Christian tradition.

Beginnings: No Idle Talk

The contributors of this volume of feminist, womanist, and mujerista Lutheran theologies are witnesses, too. We offer “no idle talk”¹ for the transformation of the church and the field of academic theology. In this book is some of the most exciting work across various loci of systematic theology from Lutheran perspectives. Each section of the book is organized under a major locus of systematic theology, such as the doctrine of God, christology, or eschatology. We seek to be faithful to the witness of the Christian tradition and the central wager of the Protestant Reformation—justification by grace through faith—while at the same time raising the critical and constructive wager that all humans, no matter our class, skin color, biology, ability, or sexuality, are equally created, broken, and redeemed. Taking this equality fully to heart changes how theology is done and what theology says.

Although many people have long desired a volume of Lutheran feminist theology, this book finally arose from a conference sponsored by the Justice for Women program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in Chicago in January, 2009. Six months after the conference, fifteen of us gathered in a large, sunny room usually occupied by radical Roman Catholic nuns to discuss our ideas and challenge each other on identities, theological authority, method, and methodology. Weeks after our summer meeting, we continued our theological discussion online. Part of our online discussion is now available at www.elca.org/justiceforwomen in the form of "table talks" on various subjects. This volume is truly a communal and collaborative work. What we seek is a reformation of the church and the world, not by nailing theses to a cathedral door, but by giving voice to new perspectives in theology that continue to transform the church and the world.

Our beginning, however, was not in our ideas but in the Eucharist, one of the two sacraments Lutherans profess are God's acts that bind us together in Christ, no matter our differences. Grounded in the sacrament of the Eucharist, we turned to the work of this volume, to offer new theology that is engaging systematic theology from feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, Asian, and queer Lutheran perspectives. We are a small community of Lutheran women that embraces the Lutheran theological tradition in diverse ways, yet we began in a common place in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Many of us grew up in the Lutheran tradition, some of us connected to family trees with multiple theologians, pastors, and other church workers. Others of us came to the Lutheran tradition as adults. What we find interesting is that our questions about our places in the Lutheran faith as theologians are two sides of a coin. On the one hand, those of us who grew up Lutheran often ask ourselves, "What keeps me here?" Those of us who became Lutherans as adults often ask ourselves, "Do I belong?" What we so clearly see from the results of this collaborative project is that we all have reason to be here because the Lutheran tradition in the twenty-first century is vibrant and multifaceted.

Transformation through Paradigm Shifts: No Idol Talk

When Martin Luther argued with church leaders and theologians about the central biblical promise of justification by grace and the primary theological and ecclesiological place it must hold, he assisted in forming a movement that transformed the church and the world. The transformation that the Protestant Reformation wrought was a "paradigm shift"² in theology and thus in the church and the world.

During the Reformation, a number of shifts contributed to many people participating in the transformation of the way God and the world were

understood. From a Lutheran historical perspective, there are a number of notable challenges and changes that contributed to a major alteration in theology. Here are a few examples: Martin Luther participated in a formal Augustinian disputation in 1518 and confessed his understanding of a theology of the cross that emphasized grace over works; ordinary people started to read Luther's tracts, which were small theological teaching tools; Luther protested that the church was not the intercessor between believers in Christ and God; reformers challenged the authority of the pope as the correct interpreter of scripture, often using vitriolic and debasing cartoons of the pope to emphasize their distrust and despise.

Such sweeping theological changes were in large part wrought by Luther's call for more Christians to have access to scripture. The shift of focus from church tradition to scripture and from works to grace allowed paradigm shifts in practice as well, such as the moves from priests reading scripture in Latin to citizens reading scripture in German and from Latin liturgy to German hymns set to beer hall tunes. Christian theology has not been the same since the Protestant Reformation and its herald calls to shift church authority, the understanding of grace in salvation, and theological engagement that included more and more Christians.

Christian theology continues to be transformed.³ Recently, a shift in theological paradigm has occurred through the growth of liberation theologies. This paradigm shift in theology that all liberation theologies have wrought characterizes the lifeblood of change in theology. Feminist, womanist, mujerista, Latina, Asian, Native American and queer theologies are all forms of liberation theology, among which we also find Latin American and black liberation theologies. Although every form of liberation theology is different in its specific characteristics, a central feature of each is its press for liberation from all forms of oppression, given the grace-filled message of the gospel.

Like the Reformation, another recognizable paradigm shift in Christian theology began when women gained greater access to theological education in the twentieth century.⁴ Although the nascence of feminist theology in the United States can arguably be located in the religious questions with which such notable feminist figures as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Anna Howard Shaw wrestled,⁵ it was not until scores of women attained formal theological training beginning in the 1970s that the discipline of theology itself began to reveal a fuller vision of God, self, creation, and God's relationship with creation. In other words, more of humanity was involved in theological speaking. Indeed, this was a paradigm shift. Such a paradigm shift has also been the case in the Lutheran tradition; women who served as teachers and deaconesses began feminist theological reflection in the Lutheran tradition, and as Lutheran women began not only to be ordained, but also to earn advanced degrees in

biblical studies, theology, and ethics, the nature and scope of Lutheran theology itself experienced a paradigm shift.

In this paradigm shift, it is not only who is speaking that is expanded, but also what is being asked and what the answers look like. Just as “the priesthood of all believers” in the Protestant Reformation began to read scripture for themselves and to think theologically, women started to read for themselves and to think theologically. As a theologian, Luther began to ask questions through the radical wager of justification by grace through faith. In a similar fashion, feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians ask questions through the radical wager that women and girls in all their multiplicity are fully human—equally created, equally sinful, and equally redeemed.

As theologians and ethicists, we see ourselves connected to the Lutheran tradition and the discipline of Christian theology that always presses to express God’s grace in new contexts. And as women with particular experiences, we are searching for more from the Lutheran theological tradition. We all feel urgency for new models because some of the old ones have broken down. What each of us offers is easily characterized by Swiss theologian Hans Küng’s description of theological paradigm changes: all changes include “a fundamental reorganization” of and “a fundamental continuity” with Christian theology up to that point.⁶ In other words, there is both connection and transformation in the theology we offer. From various places in the Lutheran family, we challenge selected nodes in the normative Lutheran theological tradition and in the greater feminist theological discourse in order to reconstruct and refine central theological claims—seeking to remain faithful to the reality of God’s grace and the flourishing of all creation.

As with all shifts in theological paradigms, new ideas evoke different responses, sometimes fear and doubt, and sometimes joy and relief. For example, in the last century, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years by political opponents to black liberation for his theology that black people are created equally to white people and therefore have political and social rights in South Africa. At the same time, however, Mandela’s liberating theology meant joy and relief to scores of people worldwide who struggled to overcome a colonial theology of white superiority.

Difference and Unity

As the subtitle of this volume makes clear, we speak as women with various theological identities: *mujerista*, womanist, and feminist—but also Asian, Latina, queer, African American, and Euro-American. We are different. As several contributors readily note in their chapters, feminist theology itself has been challenged to be plural, to avoid universalizing definitions of being a woman or of

women's experiences.⁷ In fact, notes British feminist theologian Ursula King, theology that arises from reflection on women's lives and experiences by "particular women in particular communities and churches means that [feminist theology] can only occur in contexts of radical plurality. There is no one single, universal feminist theology; there are only feminist theologies in the plural. Their plurality represents a celebration of diversity and differences."⁸ Neither is this volume a univocal treatise. Some of us disagree with each other. Some of our ideas are in creative tension with each other. Such are the signs of the multi-vocality that stretches theological imagination into meaningful new paradigms.

Our theological differences surface in a variety of places, but perhaps never so clearly as in our self-identities and in the ways we understand ourselves as unified. Historical review shows the slow and sometimes halting way in which Lutheran women have been active in shaping theology, leadership, and polity. That so many Lutheran women are now pastors and theologians is cause for celebration because we are veritably in the midst of living the vision that Luther's theology held fast to but could seldom find expression in life. Women are also shaping the life and thought of the church in the world. After centuries of the radical realization of the Reformation, who we are as the body of Christ has finally begun to shift significantly. However, the struggle to listen to and be changed by diverse voices and bodies remains. Of particular challenge for this book are numbers and words.

There is the ever-present challenge that there is a white, Euro-American feminist majority of writers in this book. Such a majority can influence group identity in dangerous ways, for a majority can unintentionally and intentionally universalize the group's identity. Given the reality of the number of Lutheran women theologians from multiple ethnic communities, we have labored, sometimes at odds, to resolve how we could even begin to name ourselves as a group. Do we risk this volume being "just feminist" with a few "guests"? Does a majority totalize our identity as a group? In actuality, because not all of us identify ourselves as feminist, this book is not "just feminist." In one sense, every writer in this book is convinced that the minds, bodies, and lives of women and girls are no less valuable than those of men and boys. At root, the word *feminist* can refer to this commitment, yet because the word *feminist* has been used to colonize the perspectives of *all* women, we continue to have a challenge of language and meaning always with us. Neither Beverly Wallace nor Alicia Vargas identifies herself as feminist; hence, the title of the book includes their self-identifications as womanist and *mujerista* theologians.⁹ However, Mary (Joy) Philip claims no exclusively woman-identified moniker, nor does Mary Lowe centrally claim a feminist identity, preferring, rather, to be identified as a queer theologian. Problematically, their particular self-identities do not show up in the title of this book, which itself decrees a kind of group identity. The tension has not been resolved.

As theologians, we invite readers into these tensions, into the places from which the texts speak and the spaces in between the texts that have yet to be formed by language. Mary (Joy) Philip offers a strong challenge to voice, marginality, and individual and church identities through the metaphors of hybrids and estuaries. Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan describes the social and theological location of many Asian theologians in North America as an “in-between” place, truly a place of hybrid identities, whose gift is to “disrupt homogeneous national tales.”¹⁰ In other words, Kwok describes the place that Asians in North America occupy as hybrid places, which, due to their in-between status between cultures, are able to wake up the predominant cultural understandings from its singular identity slumber. Several chapters in this volume claim a similar place, not only for Lutheran theology in general, but also for this volume itself. Many voices are under the broad Lutheran theological canopy, a chorus that this volume demonstrates is at times dissonant. Such difference is vital.

Perhaps there is another way to think about unity and identity in the midst of difference. To be in one volume, to be in theological dialogue with each other, and to be Lutheran together—to be in unity—requires neither flattening our differences and universalizing our ideas, nor homogenizing our individual identities. Rather, being clothed with Christ, as Paul described in Galatians, is our unity. As biblical scholar Brigitte Kahl notes, the unity in difference of which the entire Galatians text speaks is quite instructive, not only when considering the wealth of distinctly different womanist, *mujerista*, queer, Asian, and feminist theologians, but also when thinking about the unity in difference within the entire realm of Christian theology, including the tension between what is perceived to be “traditional” Lutheran theology and the theologies of this volume.

In an astute interpretation of the way in which Paul treated difference in Galatians, Kahl leads us to see that what the apostle urged upon new converts was central to being clothed with Christ. First, being clothed with Christ means *difference is not privileged*. One identity is not better than the other.¹¹ Second, being unified in the body of Christ means “a new way of co-existence, mutuality and community that *both changes and preserves* the old identities and distinctions.”¹² Being unified means that one identity does not erase the other; rather, there is a new identity, a third way, when the differences are held collectively and allowed to exist together.

Methodology and Method

Our differences mean that in this volume we have used various methods that stand within a larger framework of feminist theological methodology, generally described as critique, retrieval, and construction. The chapters in this book weave among these three movements. Feminist theologian Anne E. Carr aptly

describes the work of feminist theology to “protest and critique” the theological tradition as a naturally occurring practice of theology. What makes feminist theology distinctive from other shifts in theology is the focus on the effects of patriarchy and sexism in the Christian tradition, thus the *critique* and protest. What feminists *retrieve* not only are women’s voices, presence, and silent spaces, but also the treasures of the tradition hitherto forgotten, disregarded, or simply ignored.

Over the last forty years, a preponderance of feminist theological writing has centered in critique and revision. This has been important and necessary work.¹³ Feminist theological *construction*, present from the beginning of such work, only recently has become more comprehensively constructive and turned more consistently to an engagement with systematic theological loci. As a descendant of liberal theology, in many avenues feminist theology developed in such a critical fashion that systematic categories were dismissed along with creeds. However, many feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologians have been hard-pressed to leave their faith traditions.

Over the past two decades, increasing numbers of women theologians, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, have constructively engaged traditional theological themes. As feminist theologian Joy Ann McDougall notes, “Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, many feminist theologians are ‘taking back’ their confessional traditions, refusing to let them go until they wrestle a feminist blessing from them.”¹⁴ Throughout this volume you will find a number of central Lutheran theological bases for empowering a critique, retrieval, and reconstruction of this tradition. From the outset the argument is that contemporary Lutheran theology finds a rich partner with the intersectional methodology of third-wave feminism. This means that analyses of racism, classism, and heterosexism clearly intersect with the womanist, mujerista, and feminist commitments of the authors through the theology we offer. Positively, our differences and our attempts to be faithful to analyses of systems of oppression lead to a kaleidoscopic view of theological method.¹⁵ To write without such a multifaceted methodology would be an ecclesiological problem, for we would not hear and see the constellation that the body of Christ truly is.¹⁶ As feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether points out, reconstruction means changes in the symbolic system.¹⁷ What we hope is that our initial work in this volume provides even more space for Lutheran theological reconstruction, something for which many marginalized voices have argued for many years.¹⁸

For the last several hundred years, since roughly the 1700s, theologians have argued over the most appropriate method for theology but generally agree upon four sources in method: (1) scripture, (2) tradition, (3) reason, and (4) experience.

Generally speaking, Lutheran theologians begin with *scripture*. In the contemporary culture in the United States, there is a tendency to view Christian scripture

as a corpus of writing that can be taken at face value; that is, we have a cultural proclivity to take the Bible literally. In the stretch of the Christian tradition, this has not always been so; one could, in fact, make the statement that to understand the Bible literally is not traditional.¹⁹ Although Luther is often quoted for the saying *sola scriptura*, meaning "scripture alone," like Augustine before him, Luther thought that scripture needs careful and thoughtful attention because some of it speaks more clearly the promise of Christ for us. Luther's call to "return" to scripture in part meant that he wanted to see Christians and Christian theology to be guided primarily by the proclamation of God's grace for us through Jesus Christ that scripture holds. Although many of us quote scripture directly, what is more important for theological method from a Lutheran perspective is that it is clear that the promise of God's grace is central to our collective theological works.

Tradition refers to the theological history of the Christian church. The church's teachings began to develop early in Christian history as the first generations of Christians worked to explain themselves to the cultures in which they lived and to explain to each other the best ways to understand God, the significance of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, creation, and humanity. Some teachings in Christianity stand out more authoritatively than others. For example, the creeds that the Christian councils of bishops hammered out between 325 C.E. and 451 C.E. continue to serve as touchstones in a great deal of Christian theology, yet the entire scope of the theological tradition represents the ongoing conversation that the church has as it works to refine what it professes and teaches. Different communities take up different conversation partners, and the Lutheran tradition is no different, for Lutherans continue to see Luther's theology and the Augsburg Confession as sources.

To use *reason* as a theological source means to think carefully and critically about the ways in which what one is saying fits together and is not self-contradictory. Unlike the wave of rationalism that swept intellectual pursuits after the Enlightenment, the theology in this volume does not disregard what is not provable by human reason. Rather, we seek to be reasonable, insofar as humans can be reasonable about divine mystery.

Experience is perhaps the area in theological method that is the most ambiguous and misunderstood. An absolutely necessary corrective that feminists first brought to theology was the argument that women's experience matters in theological and biblical interpretation. The particular experiences upon which theologians draw as a source for theology are the religious and social experiences of females, individually and collectively. Making this claim highlighted the striking realization that scripture and theology were focused on the male experience as a universal norm. Theologians have become more articulate in the specificities of identities as related to experience.²⁰ For example, the three types of theologies named in the subtitle of this volume are each linked to specific experiences

and identities. Mujerista theologians evoke central theological themes through thick, contextualized, and personal narratives, most often with little conceptual narrative; instead, the telling, the acts of breaking silence, are part of the theological content of mujerista theology. Likewise, womanist theologians begin and end with the livelihood of the community under God's care; African American women who identify themselves as womanists contribute critical and constructive voices to the white ideology of the United States and its churches. Euro-American feminist theologians often spend great effort to address the Christian tradition from within itself by writing conceptually; although as yet imperfect, we (I among them) are growing in our abilities and commitments to theologize in ways that do not speak for all women at every moment and may speak for all women some times.²¹ Other means of addressing experience that theologians use, including in this volume, are post-structuralism, process metaphysics, and sociocultural studies. The latter includes what have been described as thick, local descriptions of experience and analysis of the interactive relationship between beliefs and practices.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that experience alone drives the cart of theology. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience must come together in each age. This is the task of the community—to keep these together. Many years of theological development have brought contemporary Lutheran theologians to the point of stressing the interdependence of these sources.²²

Luther and Lutheran Identity

Assuredly, the backbone of this volume's specifically *Lutheran* method and methodology is justification by grace through faith—the gospel, the central promise of scripture. We *are* speaking of God's grace for us through Christ.²³ This is the Lutheran core on which we stand. Because of and out of this assurance that we are redeemed for Christ's sake, we ask deeper questions about the means and nature of justification and what it means to live the radical freedom of the Christian to which justification leads. From anthropology to ethics to eschatology are constructively addressed here under this twofold condition—justified and free. Lutheran, yes.

As Lutheran systematic theologian Carl E. Braaten argues, both content (the gospel) and context are relevant to theological reflection.²⁴ According to Braaten, "Every generation of theologians is doing a new thing in conformity to criteria of adequacy and rationality. . . . Our aim is to make new theological statements that make sense under the modern conditions of experience and knowledge."²⁵ Our context, as Brazilian Lutheran feminist theologian Wanda Deifelt so readily points out, is that women have learned "how to read and write theology," an act that brings "a new dimension in research" because women

are assigning theological meaning.²⁶ Although not every author in this volume directly addresses either scripture or the Augsburg Confession, every author does speak *to* the promise of the gospel, that for Christ's sake, we are redeemed. As Lutheran theologians across a wide spectrum make clear, the confessions point to scripture, which holds the gospel. The creeds point to scripture, which holds the gospel. The gospel is precisely the reason for practicing theology that places the equally redeemed full co-humanity of all front and center. In other words, these transformative perspectives in Lutheran theology *are* reformation theology, not simply for the sake of reformation, but because of the heart of Luther's theological rediscovery: we are made right with God for the sake of Christ by God's grace alone. Every argument we offer is implicitly linked to this central Lutheran claim.²⁷

As we reflected together on our sense of belonging to the Lutheran theological tradition, one common task became amply evident: faithful criticism. Although we come from different perspectives within the Lutheran tradition, we share a common commitment to Lutheran theology as a continual process of reform. Sharing our stories surfaced a common value we hold in learning as a liberative process; in other words, education emboldens our commitments to the transformative work that faith *is* for the world. We see our critical faithfulness in this volume as one expression of the many theological works that seek to build up others in critical and constructive learning.

Central to our shared understanding of faithful criticism is what might be classified as our Lutheran identity. Our Lutheran identity does not come from using Luther as an authoritative source. Although Luther is directly engaged in many of the chapters that follow, his voice is not here because he settles a debate; rather, Luther is an ever-present conversation partner because of his theological insights and his commitment to faithful criticism, which we seek to continue. What makes this volume Lutheran is the focus on central themes he addressed, which are understood to represent the logic and dynamic of what makes something Lutheran.

Two important themes that serve as the axes of this volume, whether directly addressed or implicitly assumed, are justification by grace through faith and a theology of the cross. These are theological models that continue to prove rich resources, even in the midst of faithful criticism. Most of the chapters in this volume address God's radical grace through Jesus Christ. Additionally, some make further connections to the related themes of a Lutheran understanding of sin—that the human is simultaneously justified (or saved) and guilty—and the freedom all Christians share to serve each other because of Christ's love for us. This focus on justification by grace through faith is certainly our "confessional lens," meaning that this Lutheran wager grounds and guides our work; yet how

this tenet is expressed is invariably differently, given the many different contexts in which even North American Lutheranism is vibrant.

A second central theme is Luther's theology of the cross. As numerous contributions to this book make clear, Luther's theology of the cross keeps cadence with the world across time, from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first century. As feminist Lutheran theologians Mary Solberg²⁸ and Deanna Thompson²⁹ point out, a theology of the cross means that the God hidden in our world not only disrupts the very expectations we humans have of God, but also changes the way we create and live theology. What we expected God to be is not how God shows up. Yet Luther's theology of the cross is also a source of hope in the midst of the difficulties of discipleship. A theology of the cross holds that God does work in and through the world, not above it. This means that God's solidarity with us is reason to hope. God does not negate the world, which is confirmed through the incarnation and the cross, but works to transform it. Thus there is reason to rejoice over the transformative nature of a theology of the cross! Here is the heart of what we see as the ecclesiological function of this volume. We offer it for the transformation of the church and academic theology.

A Third Way in the Third Wave

As British feminist theologian Linda Woodhead explains, moving more fully into conversation with the theological tradition and other disciplines depends upon the diversity of feminist theology itself.³⁰ It is the contention of the authors herein that as Lutheran theologians, we are meeting the challenge Woodhead addresses by offering a third way within the field of theology. Not a final say on any one theological locus, this volume represents many options for "a third way" in the third wave of feminism that takes analyses of systems of oppression seriously. Neither rejecting our tradition and its figures, nor refusing to sublimate our commitments to the flourishing of the female subject—real women and girls—we take up our paradoxical identities and intentionally address systematic theological loci to offer a third way to see.³¹ As only sixteen of the many theologians committed both to their traditions and to the flourishing of all creation, we realize our small yet constructive roles in the ongoing quest for truth that all theology is.

My gratitude reaches to two communities of people who have made this book possible. I thank the women who have contributed to this work, whose kindness and scholarship inspire me, and I thank my spouse, Douglas Wold, whose humor and generosity keep me steady in the twin vocations of feminist theologian and feminist parenting to our three sons, Jules, Evan, and Mattias, who learn the meaning of grace together with us daily.