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The Gospel and Feminism: A Proposal for Lutheran Dogmatics

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IN THE PAST FEW DECADES, THE SOCIAL ROLES OF NORTH AMERICAN WOMEN AND men have undergone massive changes; one example is the large number of women who have entered the work force. For many women, especially those who identify themselves as feminists, a significant aspect of this shift has involved a radical redefinition of self-understanding, which has entailed an increased sense of their self-worth and a spirited critique of any thought pattern or social or political arrangement that suppresses them as women. This, of course, creates dilemmas for Christian feminists since important aspects of the Christian tradition have not only admonished women to be subordinate to men in family and religious life, but have upheld views that perceive God and human beings in primarily male terms. Since the rise of feminist consciousness in the 1960s, many Christian women have grappled with the question of how to relate their new-found self-identity with a theological tradition that, in their view, does not affirm their full humanity as women.

Many feminist theologies have been written in the past thirty years to grapple with this question. It is interesting to note that Lutheran contributions to this work have been minimal and often not written from a distinctively Lutheran stand-

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point.¹ In fact, much of classical Lutheran theology has received sharp criticism from feminists: its dualisms (e.g., flesh/spirit, law/gospel, spiritual kingdom/temporal kingdom), its conception of an “orders in creation” in which women are subordinate, its call to self-negation, and its definition of sin as the pride of self-assertion.² Conversely, some Lutherans are uneasy about feminist theologians, fearing that they propound new forms of gnosticism divorced from the church’s historical witness, or are merely another special interest group pushing its specific agendas (e.g., inclusive language, quotas) onto the broader church.³ Nonetheless, both Lutheran and feminist theologies are reforming movements within the larger church catholic. Are there any points of formal and material correspondence between them?

On one level, this question could be raised as an exercise in intellectual history: How have two reform movements – in response to broader religious, social, and political movements – advocated religious transformation within Christianity while still presuming a Christian identity? But on a deeper level, this question is profoundly theological since, in both the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, the questions being asked by these reform movements have to do with fundamental Christian beliefs about who the God of Jesus Christ really is, and what the salvation is that Jesus brings. Of course, the task of discerning the truth or “spirit” (the “real” meaning or identity) of the forms (“letters”) that give expression to Christianity in light of the issues of one’s day is not unique to either Lutheranism or theological feminism. Even Origen and Augustine grappled with the problem of interpreting aspects of the Hebrew scriptures that did not conform to the ethical sensibilities of their day. But the theological poignancy of this task is intensified in our century by the contemporary focus on the deeply historical nature of all thought and the complex relationships that can be identified between beliefs and uses of power in a society. And, as with the early Lutheran movement, the questions feminists are raising are not merely theoretical; in fact, they are essentially practical since they have to do with the way the Christian heritage (its canon, creeds, and traditions – theological, liturgical, spiritual, and ethical) actually do inform the everyday faith and practice of believing women and men.

The aim of this essay is to identify the theological, and deeply Christian, point of resonance between Lutheran and feminist theologies. It begins with a brief overview of themes in Christian feminist theologies; it then offers rationale and recommendations for why and how Lutheran dogmatics should critically engage

¹I am grateful to Gracia Grindal and Mary Knutsen for reading and commenting on this essay. For Lutheran discussions of feminist theology see, among others, *dialog* 24/1 (1985), with essays by Gracia Grindal, Eric Gritsch, and Mary Pellauer, and *Word & World* 8/4 (1988), with essays by Karen Bloomquist, Marcia Bunge, and Mary Knutsen. Note also Constance Parvey’s pioneering work and the work in feminist Christian ethics by Elizabeth Bettenhausen, Karen Bloomquist, and Mary Pellauer.

²See, e.g., Daphne Hampson’s “Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique,” *Word & World* 8/4 (1988) 334-342.

³See, e.g., essays in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) and Carl Braaten, ed., *Our Naming of God: Problems and Prospects of God-Talk Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

feminist perspectives so that it can better serve the task of assisting Christians in their proclamation of the promise in Jesus' gospel.⁴

I. THEMES IN FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

As surveys of the now abundant literature in feminist theology have frequently emphasized, there is no one definitive feminist theology that informs all others, but rather a diversity of feminisms that differ in a number of ways: how they construe the various sources that inform their theological reflection, how they interrelate these sources, and how they weight their relative influence.⁵ Of course, feminist theologians are not unique in this regard. It is now generally recognized that a theologian's construal of what is at the heart of Christian faith affects how she appropriates the Bible and Christian tradition, how she construes Christian belief and practice, and so on.⁶ What is distinctive about a feminist theological position is the particular perspective or angle of vision that informs its work: the question of how God is active and present in the lives of *female* believers. Thus, the category of "women's experience" is central to feminist theologies. Of course, questions have been raised about the deeply ambiguous character of this category: Does it refer, for example, to bodily or social experience? And, how does it account for the very real differences that exist among women with regard to race, class, ethnicity, and so on? Yet, in spite of its difficulties as a theoretical construct, it does serve as a helpful means for describing the standpoint which informs what feminist theologians construe as normative within Christianity – how they relate some core Christian understanding of God's activity and presence among human beings to a construct of the flourishing and full humanity of women (e.g., the link between the *imago dei* or *imago Christi* and the full humanity of women in Rosemary Radford Ruether's work, or the continuity of the *ekklesia* of women in the past and present in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's).⁷

In spite of their diversity, it is possible to glean shared themes among feminist theologians. Their fundamental critique is (1) that Christianity has pervasively "androcentric" (male-centered) conceptions of God and human beings and (2) that the social arrangements it endorses tend to be either implicitly or explicitly "patriarchal" (male-dominated). Hence, an important part of their work has been to criticize ways of thinking and acting that endorse male privilege within Christian-

⁴See Gerhard Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁵For a survey and analysis of feminist theological method, see Anne Carr, "Method: The New Vision of Feminist Theology," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Laccagna (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993) 5-30.

⁶See, e.g., Werner Jeanrond, "Theological Method," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); David Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School?* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992).

⁷See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983). I am limiting myself here to a discussion of features of Christian feminist theologies; feminist theologies also include, among a range of religious standpoints, post-Christian and Jewish feminist theologies.

ity. This has also entailed the recovery of previously unnoticed or devalued aspects of Christian history in which women functioned as subjects or agents of spiritual leadership. A second task has been the construction of theologies depicting how God is present among human beings in ways that truly affirm God's saving and liberating activity among both women and men. In this reconstruction it is possible to identify shared emphases in feminist theologies: the centrality of "experience," a critique of unjust power relationships and an activist push for transformation, a strongly egalitarian thrust that emphasizes "mutuality" and "reciprocity," and an emphasis on "connectedness" or "relationality," and "embodiment" – with particular attention to both female sexuality and the natural environment.⁸

II. A PROPOSAL FOR LUTHERAN DOGMATICS

We turn now to ask *why* and *how* a Lutheran dogmatics might critically appropriate feminist perspectives. We begin with the rationale. As is well known, the defining feature of Lutheran identity is the dogma of "justification by faith alone."⁹ This dogma is offered to the church catholic by the Lutheran movement as a kind of meta-linguistic rule to guide Christians in determining whether or not their speech about the message of Jesus, in fact, brings the promise of Jesus' gospel to people's lives so that, as Luther insisted, "what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be *effectual* in us."¹⁰

The central thrust of this Lutheran insight into the theme of "justification by faith alone" is that the gift of Jesus' salvation – ultimate liberation from death, sin, all evil powers, and forms of oppression of all sorts – cannot be earned by means of either religious or ethical merit, but can only be received as an unconditional gift from God. The Lutheran insight is precisely that the hidden God, the one ultimate and potentially terrifying divine power of the cosmos, is named in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and that such naming entails the promise that, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, humanity and the whole cosmos itself has been and will be redeemed. And this promise is not merely an otherworldly guarantee but rather the very concrete promise that Christ feeds, frees, and saves believers, sharing in their sin, deaths, and pain, and in its place grants them spiritual "kingship" (with the promise that nothing, no matter how evil or painful, can separate them from the love of God) and "priesthood" (the power "to pray for others and teach one another divine things").¹¹ With this promise is entailed judgment (the "accusatory" or secondary use of the law) of any human attempt at self-deification that would negate or refuse the very gift-like character of the promise. Faith, the

⁸See, e.g., the essays in *Freeing Theology* and Lois Daly, ed., *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville: Westminster, 1994).

⁹See Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: A Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

¹⁰Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 66. My italics.

¹¹Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 64.

response to this gift, is created by the word that retells and proclaims the promise made in the name of Jesus, and it is this word that is tangibly re-enacted in the church's preaching and celebration of the sacraments.

Now it is precisely on this last point that most difficulties arise from a feminist perspective, since God is named in relation to the very humanity of Jesus, which is, of course, a gendered humanity. Furthermore, the church's witness to God's promise in Jesus (a witness codified in the biblical canon, the early creeds, and baptismal and eucharistic rites) is a witness that has been articulated in forms which, from a contemporary feminist standpoint, are deeply androcentric and patriarchal in outlook. Nonetheless, the dogma of justification by faith implies that the legitimation of these witnesses (and the meaning and truth they communicate) resides not in themselves as documents or rites, but in the liberating promise to which they give witness. Hence inherent to the very witness itself, and this is precisely the insight informing the Lutheran reformation, is an ongoing denunciation—a kind of reflexive critique—of any and all ecclesial pretensions that would replace the promise with human-made laws that deify particular human persons or institutions.

Of course, Luther himself did not apply the principle of justification by faith to the situation of women in his time. In fact, many of Luther's statements about women would not meet contemporary standards of gender parity. Nonetheless, if the gospel of Jesus includes liberation from bondage to sin, death, evil, and all forms of oppression, and if the kingdom of God that Jesus preached and the body of Christ into which Christians are baptized (Gal 3:28) entails a new order of human relationships, then, it can be argued that the principle of justification by faith alone entails a critique of all aspects of the Christian tradition that would identify Christian faith with social structures and ways of thinking that sanction male privilege. If this is so, then Lutherans can and should join feminist theologians in (1) criticizing those aspects of the Christian tradition that subordinate women in the name of Jesus and (2) constructing a theology that truly brings Jesus' good news of freedom, healing, and salvation to both women and men.

With this rationale in mind, I submit three areas for critical attention in a Lutheran dogmatics:

(1) Feminist theologies have criticized the predominantly male language and imagery used for naming God in the Christian tradition. Much literature has analyzed how this language legitimates a subordinate status for women within Christianity, and a range of alternative images for naming God has been explored from sources within the biblical tradition and beyond it.¹² I would contend that the thrust of the Lutheran contribution to this discussion should *not* be on whether "Father" language for God is metaphorical or literal (although I would not deny the import of "Father" language as an original witness), but rather on the rich

¹²For a survey of this literature, see Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993). See also Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

insights a theology of the cross has to offer this discussion.¹³ A deeper understanding of how God's presence is truly with us in the cross and resurrection of Jesus might lead this discussion to a more nuanced understanding of how God is both profoundly hidden and yet very concretely and tangibly manifest in the history, story, and sacraments of a crucified and risen Galilean Jew.¹⁴

Two points are especially apposite for the task of rethinking trinitarian doctrine and christology in light of the feminist critique. First, as many have pointed out, the naming of God in relation to the death and resurrection of Jesus entails a devastating critique of all uses of God's name to legitimate the oppression of other human beings.¹⁵ Second, this naming attests that believers have the spiritual authority and freedom to worship God in ways that do truly witness to the fact that God comes to us as salvation—as gospel—in the church's proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments. The debates over the use of inclusive language in worship need to be guided by the criterion of how Christians might best proclaim and hear Jesus' message of salvation so that what is heard is truly liberation and not yet another form of oppression.

(2) Yet another emphasis in feminist theology has been the critique of ways Christian theology has assumed that male experience is paradigmatic of being human. Lutheran and Calvinist theologies in particular have been criticized for understanding sin solely as the pride of self-assertion. The argument is made that for many women—and others who are marginal and subordinate in a society—the call to conversion does not entail repentance from self-assertion but rather from the lack of it, that is, from having a diffuse personal center or a lack of personal agency and responsibility.¹⁶ I would contend that a Lutheran dogmatics needs to recover the depths of the accusatory use of the law—what calls or invokes repentance—so that it includes all that keeps one from claiming the spiritual authority and freedom Christ gives, including, for example, a sense of shame and a lack of self-worth.¹⁷ Luther's concept of the "happy exchange" in which Christ "swallows up" human pain, death, and sin, and in its place offers God's promise of spiritual

¹³Recent contributions by Lutherans to the question of "Father" language for God include, in addition to Gail Ramshaw's *God Beyond Gender*, Gerhard Forde, "Naming the One Who Is Above Us," and Robert Jenson, "The Father, He..." in *Speaking the Christian God*, 110-119 and 95-109. Earlier contributions include Carl Braaten, ed., *Our Naming of God*; Gracia Grindal, "Reflections on God the Father," *Word & World* 4/1 (1984) 78-86, and "Notes Toward a Revision of God the Father," *dialog* 17/? (1978) 308-311; and Martha Stortz, "Language for Those Who Have Ears to Ear," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13/5 (1986) 285-291.

¹⁴See the forthcoming work of Mary Knutsen on a theology of the cross. See also Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

¹⁵See, e.g., Jürgen Moltman, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹⁶See the pioneering essay by Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960) 100-112; see also Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980).

¹⁷For a helpful discussion of the accusatory use of the law, see Herman Stemple, Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

freedom has profound implications in this regard since it attests to the very tangible gift of spiritual power – with its healing, freedom, joy, and responsibility – that is promised to *all* Christians in their baptism.¹⁸

Along these lines, the feminist stress on “women’s experience” – for all the theological and theoretical ambiguities inherent in this concept – perhaps sheds new light on the spiritual authority and priesthood granted to all believers in Jesus’ promise.¹⁹ It is a reminder that the forensic word of Jesus’ forgiveness has profound implications for how God’s acts of liberation in human lives imply a very real dying and being raised to new life, a participation in Christ’s death and resurrection that has radical implications not only for thoughts and words, but wills, actions, desires, and instincts.²⁰ And, the intrinsically relational way that feminists have developed this theme highlights the very “connectedness” and “relationality” that is, in fact, inherent to all Christian response to Jesus’ promise, since it is only in the very human acts of hearing and telling that the promise is made real in human life. Conversely, the Lutheran emphasis on the twofold sense of the hiddenness of God – with regard to both God’s self-revelation in the crucified Jesus and the inscrutability of the divine will outside of this promise – may offer feminist theologies with a resource for rethinking not only theodicy but the radical difference between God and human beings. Both senses of God’s “hiddenness” have profound implications for guarding against any totalizing experience or vision of liberation that negates the very real differences that do, in fact, exist among human beings and among women as well.²¹

(3) Finally, feminist theology has been especially critical of the ways that Christianity, in its biblical texts and theological traditions, has sanctioned male dominance in family and religious life. I would argue that a Lutheran dogmatics should explicitly assert that such hierarchies are not intrinsic to the core of Christian belief and practice. Although the Bible does include the “household codes” and explicit injunctions against women teaching in the church, these need to be

¹⁸Cf. Gerhard Forde’s observation on Luther’s notion of the “happy exchange”: “If one is quite clear that the ‘divine life’ we are participating in is that of the triune God who has gone through death in his Son, and that our participation means going through death, by faith, then one can indeed speak of and celebrate such *theopoiēsis* [being ‘divinized’ or ‘immortalized’ through participation in the life of Christ]. That would be the point and conclusion of Luther’s language of the ‘happy exchange.’ He takes *our* life, our place, in order to give us *his*.” *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 98.

¹⁹See, e.g., Jane Strohl’s insightful analysis in “Suffering as Redemptive: A Comparison of Christian Experience in the Sixteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Revisioning the Past: Prospects of Historical Theology*, ed. Mary Potter Engel and Walter E. Wyman (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 95-112.

²⁰For a discussion of the profound implications of the doctrine of justification for the Christian life, see Gerhard Forde, *Justification: A Matter of Death and Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

²¹Luther’s classic text on the hiddenness of God is “The Bondage of the Will,” *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger, 175-203. For a discussion of the twofold sense of the hiddenness of God, see Brian Gerrish, “‘To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982) 131-50. Some feminist theologians would argue that a “hidden” God is incompatible with feminism. For a discussion of a possible relation between divine transcendence and feminist themes see Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

interpreted against the whole of the Christian message, which Lutherans identify with the promise of the gospel.²² When interpreted against this whole, these hierarchies are not only relativized as relics of another era and place, but can, in fact, be defined as unchristian in essence (as, e.g., the institution of slavery has been defined). It is especially important for Lutheran theologians to take a strong stand on this point given, on the one hand, the association that has been made in recent years between spouse abuse and Christianity's legitimation of female submission in the home and, on the other hand, the appeal such hierarchies will continue to have among Christian believers, especially in a time of rapid social change.²³

Given this explicit rejection of patriarchal orders, Lutherans and feminists may have common ground for engaging in fruitful conversation over the broader public task of re-envisioning healthy patterns of work, family, and community life in view of the changes that are taking place in our collective assumptions about gender relationships and identities.²⁴ A Lutheran understanding of vocation as that which one does (whether in the home, at work, as a public citizen, and so on) for the good of the neighbor to enact God's creative purposes in the world may provide a helpful resource for this task. Not only does it relativize all particular political or family arrangements and visions of human flourishing in light of the final eschaton, but it affirms, in concrete and tangible ways, God's ongoing presence and transforming activity in the very real possibilities and constraints (physical, psychological, cultural, environmental) that are the givens of our human situation.²⁵ Conversely, the feminist focus on human embodiment and its explicit rejection of all dualisms that divorce the human spirit from the flesh of its passions, feelings, and its very embodied nature, can perhaps shed new light on classical understandings of how creatures are endowed with intrinsic worth precisely in their finitude.²⁶ And, feminist interest in ecological concerns provides yet another fertile context for critical and creative reconstructions of classical understandings of creation and the human responsibility to care for it.

In sum, this essay has argued that a Lutheran dogmatics does have theological points of resonance with feminist insights. The feminist critique of Christianity is a profoundly theological one in that it drives at the fundamental question of who the God of Jesus Christ is and what the salvation is that Jesus brings. The question of whether Christianity is inherently patriarchal or androcentric requires a nuanced response, if it is to be an honest one, since Christian faith is intrinsically bound to the historical and linguistic particularities of the range of witnesses that have confessed

²²Contrast, e.g., the "household codes" (Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 3:1-7; and Eph 5:25-6:9) with the baptismal text in Gal 3:28. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*.

²³See, e.g., Wayne Grudem and John Piper, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 1991).

²⁴See Susan Parson?, "The Intersection of Feminism and Theological Ethics: A Philosophical Approach," *Modern Theology* 4/3 (1988) 251-365.

²⁵See, e.g., Gustav? Wingren, *Luther On Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957).

²⁶See William Schweiker's discussion of intrinsic worth in "Radical Interpretation and Moral Responsibility: A Proposal for Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religion* 73/4 (1993) 613-637.

Jesus' gospel. But what the feminist critique reiterates for Christians is the ancient—and perennial—theological issue of whether the gospel of Jesus is finally a message that is restricted to the forms that witness to it or whether it is a reality that, in fact, transforms their very humanity even as it is revealed within them. The wager of the Lutheran movement is precisely that the heart of Jesus' gospel lies in its promise of liberation from oppression of all sorts and that this promise provides the church with a criterion for distinguishing what is Christian from what is not in its beliefs and practices. The accusing critique of feminist theologies and their witness to new ways of understanding Jesus' salvation simply drive the church to even greater clarity on what lies at the heart of Christian identity and hence what the focus of Christian proclamation should be.²⁷ ⊕

²⁷In making this proposal, I am especially grateful to Mary Knutsen, not only for extensive and incisive comments on an earlier draft (and recommendations of additional references), but also for theological conversations that have helped me understand both Lutheranism and theological feminism in much more profound ways.