

Theme Articles

The Contemporary Constructive Task

By Christine Helmer

Abstract: Lutheran theology is noted for its excellent contributions to historical theology. Contemporary times, however, require that Lutheran theologians become attuned to the urgent demands of the present and take up the discipline of constructive theology to address these demands. Taking the lead from contemporary feminist Lutheran theologians, constructive approaches utilizing Lutheran theological resources must articulate vigorous critique of a corrosive neo-liberal culture by articulating divine judgment on human greed as well as witnessing to divine grace that always favors truthful living.

Key Terms: Luther, truth, feminist theology, doctrine, politics

Discerning the Signs of the Times

There are times when it is appropriate and necessary to consolidate knowledge from the past. Theology over the past two decades has been marked by the proliferation of edited collections of essays focused on the great theological figures of the past, on the most important theological movements from the past, and on the classic Christian doctrines. Much scholarly energy has gone into writing for these companions to Aquinas and Ockham, Luther and Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth; and the knowledge gathered in these volumes represents the current state of the field. Interpretive ease, accessibility, and relative freedom from minutiae of footnotes characterize this genre.

Useful in the classroom and handy for research, scholarly companions to particular theologians provide the academic service of gathering up the best scholarly resources about the past between two bookends.

While theological writing always is informed in some way by the past, theologians also are responsible for paying attention to the present. There are times when looking to the past is not enough, and we are in such a time now. The present commands attention; theologians must respond. In such times, not to respond would betray theology's responsibility to witness to divine truth in the world. It would falsify theological commitments to determining what it means to be truly human in view of the divine work of creating and redeeming humans in this world. In these situations, theologians

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must focus their scholarly energies on the present. They must discern the signs of the times and God's presence in those times, and be courageous in articulating responses of responsible witness to truth.

Particular theologians in the past exemplify this mandate. Luther proclaimed Christ's grace apart from human merit at a time when ecclesial corruption falsified Christ's redeeming work. Schleiermacher proposed a new plan for theology's curriculum at a time when the modern research university was created. Barth felt the political necessity of theological protest against Nazism and together with like-minded theologians responded courageously with the Barmen Declaration. These theologians took seriously their vocational and disciplinary responsibilities. They had no clear script or path forward, yet they were guided by their commitment to witness to God, truth, and justice in their contemporary times. Their theology was constructive, creative of new ways of thinking, being, and acting in specific political realities.

Rethinking Luther

The 500th anniversary celebration of the Protestant Reformation in 2017 has given theologians and historians of Christianity the opportunity for a sustained review of the past. Multiple biographies of Luther have been published celebrating Luther's religious, spiritual, and theological approaches to his Reformation ideas about Christ and unmerited grace. Scholars have studied Luther's texts and ideas, contextualizing them in relation to new publishing technologies, to the emergence of new types of economic exchange, and to the political turmoil of late medieval Christendom.

Online discussions have made Luther's contributions immediate in this new medium. The MOOC (massive open online course) I developed at Northwestern University, "Luther and the West," for example, is a free online course outlining the impact of Luther's biblical interpretation and his ideas about freedom and the relation between church and politics on the modern West.²

Recognition of Luther's theological and world-historical impact, however, is not without a critical dimension. Luther's anti-Judaism is becoming a central concern during this Reformation anniversary, both in relation to its appropriation by the Nazis in their violence against Jews and to Christian anti-Semitism in general. Luther's idea of freedom is recognized as central to his Reformation theology, but its impact on the modern West is approached now in view of its twinned and complex relation to slavery of Africans and the oppression of women and people of color. Luther's idea of vocation, made central by Max Weber in his narrative of modern secularization, is rendered more complicated today by alternative accounts of religion in the public sphere. Responsible celebration requires sobriety in reviewing Luther's rich and ambivalent legacy.

The Rise of Populism

The anniversary celebration is, moreover, occurring in a year in which political change in the West has emerged as particularly pressing. The rise of what political scientists have termed "populism" has become a force in many Western countries. Opinions with little bearing on reality, a rhetoric of insensitivity that is both cruel and unjust, and a shunning of measured analysis are eroding the social contract and moral fiber that have sustained Western democracies in the past. The term "post-truth" became the word of the year in 2016.

Recent election campaigns, notably in the United States, were permeable to fake news and foreign manipulation, driven by immediate Twitter outbursts and shunning of traditional credentials. Liberal values in support of modern democracy have been challenged more than ever. Ideals such as truth, freedom, and equality, written into foundational constitutions, have been destabilized. Racism and misogyny that have accompanied Western history have come to the surface in the most violent ways. Moral rectitude has been compromised, especially that of the religiously affiliated who have been seduced by the will to power. So it is that in a year when mainline Protestants are

celebrating their inheritance, the social and political realm founded largely as a result of Protestant legacy is being undermined.

The question for Protestant theologians, particularly those working in relation to the Lutheran tradition, is how to perceive the present time as motivation for constructing theology. Lutheran theologians since at least the early twentieth century have been extraordinarily capable at historical theology. Commitment to doctrine, how its truth can be preserved through time, and the importance of historical formulations for the ongoing task of theology have characterized the Lutheran tradition. Reception has been crucial, not only for the way that theology guides the church's activities but also for the theological study of the history of doctrine.

With the rise of historicism in the nineteenth century, theologians adopted the historical perspective and method as central to their academic work. Doctrine came to be regarded in historical terms as the normative articulations of faith within particular historical churches. As such, doctrines betrayed historical change while also remaining, in some respect, continuous throughout.

Lutheran theologians from the early twentieth century, such as Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg, to the latter part of the twentieth century, such as Wolfhart Pannenberg and Robert Jenson, regarded the historical tracing of doctrines from past to present as a constitutive part of their theological projects. Doctrinal articulation and conceptualization have changed through time, yet fundamental content has remained constant. Thus study of doctrines in the past demonstrates the sophistication of theological traditions in addressing the content of Christian faith, and shows just how rich an intellectual tradition theology has been in the past.

Given this legacy, how can theologians working in relation to the Lutheran tradition orient their preoccupation with history to the challenges of the present? In unprecedented times, theologians must discern the new questions demanded by the social and political circumstances. These questions require inquiry into divine workings that may not have been foreseen by doctrines articulated in the past. It may be that the questions and answers diverge

from religious convictions held dear in their reception and in the church's proclamation. It may be that theology constructed in the present stimulates a moral commitment that had not been as important in past debates. It also may be that wrestling with the present sheds new light onto past insights. Contemporary challenges disturb comfortable reception from the past and impress upon theologians the necessity of producing doctrine for the present.

Constructive Theology

The designation *constructive theology* recently has emerged to identify the productive orientation of this discipline. Such new designations in theology have, in the past, signaled significant methodological changes and innovations. Two hundred years ago, Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed the term *dogmatic theology* to refer to the discipline of constructing normative theological claims about God, self, and world, as such claims had arisen from the particular church for which theology was relevant. The new term contained both a critical and a constructive dimension. Schleiermacher intended to render theology a historical discipline, and for this recommendation he is recognized as the "father of modern theology."

After Schleiermacher, theology was no longer structured as a deductive system of doctrine, as it had been to his predecessors. Rather, theology was now to be considered in view of the historical changes in which church communities found themselves. God was no longer to be considered the necessary cause of the system, but the divine cause of the history of the church in relation to the world. Schleiermacher's term *dogmatic*, which does not carry the pejorative connotations in German that it does in English, signaled a decisive change in the discipline. The historical method is applied to critically negotiate the past in relation to the present, and the present is the effort of constructing doctrine in critical view of the past.

In contemporary North America, the term *constructive theology* has an even more serious critical

connotation. This critical dimension is concerned with the monopolization of theology as a Eurocentric male field with the distinctive aim of building a system representing the totality of reality. God is a necessary part of the system as its cause. Systematic theology has come under fire over the past two decades precisely for this legacy and its implied universalizing imperatives. Comprehensiveness, as the criticism attests, is an important criterion for the system of theology, but as it has been adjudicated in the past, comprehensiveness actually is selective about which areas of experience and history count toward fulfilling this criterion. Universalizing is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion. Erased or missing in hitherto dominant notions of theological universalizing is the experience and history of people who have not enjoyed the educational and political advantages possessed by those theologians producing this theology.

Comprehensiveness thus is to be criticized as both a methodological impossibility and a false universal. The theological system with its pretensions to universalizing claims and comprehensiveness thus has been replaced by theologies expressing distinctive realms of experience and history that explore topics of resistance from areas of oppression. Feminist/womanist/mujerista theologies, queer theologies, African American and Asian American theologies are new ways in which theologians respond to the call to produce theologies that are both critical of empire and evil, and constructive in view of Christ's work of redemption that includes the call to eliminate oppressive systems.

The Role of Feminist Theology

One challenge for theologians working in view of the Lutheran tradition as they appropriate constructive theology for this work has specifically to do with the critical connotation of constructive theology as it is currently being understood. The Lutheran tradition has, at least in the past, represented just the type of elite European male production of a universal system that is the primary object of contemporary critical deconstruction. Lutheran feminist theologians have recognized

this determining aspect of Lutheran theology for a long time. While systems have been constructed, feminist theologians have articulated critical reflections that have gone unacknowledged. American Lutheran feminist theologian Marit Trelstad makes this point:

For example, international Lutheran women scholars have noticed the stunning paucity of reference to their work in much of Lutheran scholarship still today. In addition, women's historical writings in relation to the Lutheran tradition have received little attention in the past and in the present. Within the last years, however, the careful work of Kirsi Stjerna reveals that there is much to discover concerning women's impact on the Reformation. For the most part, however, the birthing and rebirth of Lutheran scholarship oddly seems to have been done entirely without women . . . Lutheran theology has lagged in its genuine integration of feminist and liberation theological insights where other mainline Christian traditions have opened themselves to transformation by these voices.³

Thus for Lutheran theologians, the first task toward a constructive theology requires acknowledging the contributions that already have been made by feminist theologians and theologians working from non-European traditions. This critical task is methodologically necessary; its aim is responsible conversation with theologians who represent different points of view than the usual insular discussion that continues to reproduce itself. While these new discussions will involve the hermeneutical difficulties and emotional struggle associated with meeting new persons, they can intimate new directions for experimenting with both the form and content of constructive theology.

Divine Judgment on Human Greed

The critical task should be directed to a number of issues, not least of which is a misunderstanding that

critique entails radical deconstruction, as the term is sometimes, but not accurately, understood. Deconstruction, when it is understood as demolition, is not a responsible response to critique. This is especially true today, an age that, as theologians Paul Hinlicky and Mattias Martinson agree, is one in which secular and neoliberal hegemony has invaded all dimensions of modern Western life and culture. The vigorous critique of this corrosive culture must be accompanied by the theological construction of new ways of thinking and being that articulate divine judgment on human greed and that witness to the divine grace that always favors truthful living.

As Martinson argues in his article in this issue, the Lutheran tradition significantly contributed to the rise of secular culture, predominantly in northern Europe. Yet even in North America, where pockets of religious resistance to modernity are politically influential, secular capitalism has won the day. Constructive theologians are challenged to carve out spaces within this hegemonic context in order to critique it from within. Their constructive work can remind a culture of its religious and theological foundations, which it has become habituated to forget.

Truth-Telling

Nothing short of a new stance of truth-telling is called for. As Hinlicky argues, analyzing doctrine always has been a strength in the Lutheran tradition because of its commitment to truth. All the same, as Martinson avers, truth cannot remain merely a

condition of doctrine; it must determine the reality of the theologian articulating true doctrine. A new dimension of truth-telling ought to constitute the reality of constructive theologians who aim to stake out spaces on which to stand and speak and write. This idea of truth as praxis, in addition to new critical and constructive recommendations for constructing theology in relation to Lutheran perspectives, characterize the articles published in this special symposium within *Dialog*.

As the 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation is critically evaluated and mined for its potential to speak today, Lutheran theologians, and more broadly Protestant theologians working with Luther, are challenged to think creatively and to dedicate their thought and lives to a deep moral witness to truth. Four of the authors included in this issue, Paul Hinlicky, Matthias Gockel, Mattias Martinson, and Deanna Thompson, demonstrate hopeful commitment to negotiating doctrine in relation to culture, new approaches to theology as truthful resistance, and the cultivation of spiritual and moral truth for constructive theology.

Endnotes

1. See "Luther and the West," online at <https://www.coursera.org/learn/luther-and-the-west> (accessed June 2, 2017).

2. Ibid.

3. Marit Trelstad, "Charity Terror Begins at Home: Luther and the 'Terrifying and Killing' Law," in *Lutherrenaissance: Past and Present*, ed. Christine Helmer and Bo Kristian Holm (Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte 106; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 237.