

Theme Articles

The Contemporary Constructive Task

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Ab rac : 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.

Ke Term : Luther, truth, feminist theology, doctrine, politics

Discerning the Signs of the Times

Useful in the classroom and handy for research,

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.

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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 *Rethinking Luther*

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.

T e R e f F e ? T e g

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 theo-