

Introduction

When Philip Watson produced a study of Luther's theology titled *Let God Be God*, many applauded this succinct rendering of Luther's prophetic theological vision.¹ In the post–World War II context of an overconfident culture driven by the desire for conquest and personal achievement, Luther's attack on human arrogance appeared to have found its mark. But this assault on pride has been reassessed in recent years, with growing skepticism. Focusing on the reluctance among women to assume their God-given responsibilities, feminist theologians have challenged the traditional view of human nature and original sin that underscores Reformation thought, arguing that for many women sin takes a different form. Daphne Hampson, for example, tracing the Reformation doctrines of sin and grace back to Luther, argues that the central convictions of feminism, including the cultivation of self-empowerment,² must be recognized as incommensurate with Luther's theocentric emphasis. Pointing to the need for "women to come into their own,"³ Hampson argues that Luther's rejection of self-love only exacerbates the problems many women face. When the issue is not self-assertive pride but rather passive self-abnegation, she continues, "To advocate, as does the Lutheran tradition, that the self should be broken . . . [is a practice that] must be judged highly detrimental."⁴ Thus, by recontextualizing the Reformation attack on pride and self-righteousness within a larger frame—one that includes the experience of both women and men—feminist theologians have added a new dimension to an old debate about Luther's anthropology. Hampson's challenge, along with the growing body of literature

1. Philip Saville Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1948).

2. The self is of central importance in this study. As Daphne Hampson points out, "Luther would not have used the term 'self' and lacked a post-Enlightenment conception of the self, but this is the best word to use when translating his insight into a modern idiom" ("Luther on the Self: A Feminist Critique," *Word and World* 8, no. 4 [1988]: 334–42 [334]). Judith Plaskow provides us with a pertinent quotation from Paul Tillich: "It is time to end the bad theological usage of jumping with moral indignation on every word in which the syllable 'self' appears. Even moral indignation would not exist without a centered self and ontological self-affirmation" (Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980], 112. Cited from Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* [London and Glasgow: Collins, 1952], 90).

3. Hampson, "Luther on the Self," 340.

4. *Ibid.*, 339.

that expresses similar concerns, raises important questions about the status and role of human agency in Luther's theology.

Valerie Saiving is usually credited with the initial insight that the Christian (and especially Reformation) doctrines of sin and grace are gender-specific. In her article "The Human Situation: A Feminine View,"⁵ Saiving correlates the traditional Reformation understanding of sin with underlying psychological structures⁶ peculiar to males, which culminate in the manifestation of pride and/or self-assertion. This form of sin, she explains, fails to take the experience of many women into account, and has been viewed as "the [universally present] imperialistic drive to close the gap between the individual separate self and others by reducing those others to the status of mere objects which can then be treated as appendages of the self and manipulated accordingly."⁷ Saiving concedes that those who experience sin in this way are effectively judged under the influence of Reformation doctrine. Redemption, in this case, is expressed in a newly created vulnerability—a softening of those boundaries by which the survival of identity was previously maintained. And in this situation, she suggests, the goal of a self-annihilating Christlike love is not inappropriate.⁸ But Saiving is interested in female development; and girls, she argues, have a potentially equal and opposite problem from their brothers. Rather than building up self-protective boundaries, separating themselves from their neighbors, women frequently suffer from inadequate personal boundaries, leaving them instead without a secure self-identity. Such an individual, according to Saiving, is therefore vulnerable to a loss of self in relationships with others—she is too easily absorbed into the neighbor, whom she serves and from whom she is apt to seek an identity that is never her own. Thus, Saiving writes,

5. Valerie C. Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 25–42.

6. "The process of self-differentiation," Saiving contends, "plays a stronger and more anxiety-provoking role in the boy's maturation than is normally the case for the girl." Unlike their brothers, girls have a psychologically easier task in accomplishing the work of sexual maturation, Saiving argues. Girls "passively" develop the sexual identity that they observe in their mothers, with whom they have already bonded as infants. The ease of this task, so the theory goes, frees females from the arduous task of sexual differentiation, thereby leaving them psychologically free to risk the vulnerability of other-identification (*ibid.*, 38). This naturally grounded psychological freedom allows females to become the nurturing, self-giving mothers their infant children will require in order to survive and mature into healthy adults (*ibid.*, 36–37).

7. *Ibid.*, 33.

8. *Ibid.*, 33.

the temptations of women as women are not the same as the temptations of man as man, and the specifically feminine forms of sin—“feminine” not because they are confined to women or because women are incapable of sinning in other ways but because they are outgrowths of the basic feminine character structures—have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as “pride” and “will-to-power.” They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.⁹

In this “underdevelopment,” persons fall away from their God-given freedom and responsibility, becoming instead “chameleon-like”¹⁰ creatures, dependent upon others for affirmation and identity.

Judith Plaskow, in a dissertation published in 1980,¹¹ enlarges on Saiving’s initial insight. Given the wider range of human experience made visible by the inclusion of women’s voices in the theological conversation, Plaskow agrees that the Reformation tradition in particular addresses matters of sin and grace too narrowly—a conviction that by 1980 was shared by many. Summing up twenty intervening years of theological work, Plaskow notes that “in all this material, the inadequacy of understanding sin solely as pride has become almost a commonplace.”¹² Following her conviction that such differences are not inherent, but socially constructed, Plaskow takes up Saiving’s insight and carries it forward with a careful analysis of women’s experience.

The key issue for Plaskow is the social construction of the “feminine” and the effects this has on women’s self-identity.¹³ The locus of sin, she argues, is (for women) primarily outside of the self,¹⁴ though Plaskow is also interested in what she sees as the subjective collusion of women in the distortion of identity, which is deeply influenced by social formation.¹⁵ In attempting to

9. Ibid. “They become aware of the deep need of almost every woman, regardless of her personal history and achievements or her belief in her own individual value, to surrender her self-identity and be included in another’s ‘power of being’” (ibid., 43).

10. Ibid., 47.

11. Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*.

12. Ibid., 2.

13. Ibid., 14–15, 31–32.

14. Ibid., 9.

15. Ibid. 170.

address both aspects of the situation, Plaskow defines women's experience "as the interrelation between cultural expectations and their internalization."¹⁶ Taking the work of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*¹⁷ as instructive, Plaskow tests the argument that "the central dilemma of women's lives . . . is that women do not shape their own experience, but allow their life choices to be made for them by others."¹⁸ Plaskow finds confirmation of this theory, first, through an examination of empirical evidence, both psychological and anthropological, and again, by way of literary confirmation, in her presentation of Doris Lessing's fictional character Martha Quest.¹⁹ "Martha's problem," Plaskow writes, "is that there is no one she can commit herself to be."²⁰ Martha is a character who "drifts into and out of relationships and obligations by way of other people's choices. Against her better judgment, Martha is swept along into marriage. She is caught [up] in current[s] which she cannot resist. There is no Martha Quest as a responsible, willing being."²¹

Martha's lack of agency—her refusal to accept the responsibility for autonomous personhood—is her besetting sin. "We might say," Plaskow suggests, "that women's traditional tasks and characteristics are not problematical *per se* but become so when they are not chosen."²² Martha manifests what Plaskow takes to be the common feminine experience of passive acceptance—an inability to initiate choice and action out of one's own identity. "All the while [that Martha is married], she feels that someday something will change, must change, but she cannot plan to change things, cannot see herself as the agent of action."²³ With Saiving, Plaskow concludes that Reformation doctrines of sin and grace, which describe a self-assertive pride redeemed and re-created into self-sacrificial *agape*, do not address the feminine situation. "[Women's] sin cannot be seen as the product of over-glorification of the self, for the problem is precisely that she has no self; she has not yet become a self and will not take the responsibility for becoming one. Her form of sin must be comprehended on its own terms, and that means it must be seen to have its roots in human nature, independent of pride."²⁴

16. *Ibid.*, 167–68.

17. *Ibid.*, 31.

18. *Ibid.*, 32.

19. *Ibid.*, 34.

20. *Ibid.*, 37.

21. *Ibid.*, 36.

22. *Ibid.*, 41.

23. *Ibid.*, 65.

24. *Ibid.*, 66–67.

Both Saiving and Plaskow describe the “feminine sin”²⁵ in the context of the larger feminist argument—that is, they claim that women’s experiences have been traditionally overlooked. As in the case of Saiving, Plaskow’s central point is that Reformation teachings on sin and grace do not address those who find themselves in bondage to passivity rather than to self-assertive pride.²⁶ Plaskow’s project builds on Saiving’s insight by analyzing the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.²⁷ Plaskow concludes her examination of these two theologians with the following remarks: “The question remains . . . as to whether the Protestant doctrine of justification *per se* is a response to the sin of pride and therefore more relevant to men’s than to women’s experience. Where sin is perverse inaction rather than self-assertion does the message that the self is forgiven despite persistence in sin foster a passivity which is women’s real problem?”²⁸ Perhaps, Plaskow suggests, “one could formulate a doctrine of justification which would judge the failure to become a self and open up into a process of self-actualization.”²⁹ If self-assertion is a sin that invites judgment and transformation, she suggests, might not the failure to become a self be similarly displeasing to God, and likewise open to regeneration?

The question of what is pleasing and displeasing to God is an important one, particularly in light of the Kantian influences in Western culture that calls individuals to their duty as autonomous human beings. As we have seen so far, the experience of women, as it is manifested in a self-abnegating passivity, has itself been taken to justify the claim of divine condemnation. Plaskow’s confidence in divine judgment, however, is problematic, resting as it does on the assumption that nonflourishing is epistemologically sufficient to warrant the claim. Is her argument from nonflourishing really grounded in our created human nature? Or is it, like the socially constructed view of the feminine that Plaskow deplores, the reflection of (possibly sinful) cultural expectations?³⁰

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen raises this epistemological problem directly.³¹ “What does the [biblical] creation account tell us about gender relations?” she asks.³² “The Bible,” she suggests, “tells us not about natural or social history so much as about ‘metahistory’; that is, it deals with universal truths about God, human beings, and their interaction throughout time. . . . So the distinction between natural and social accounts of gender on the one hand and the supernatural, biblical account on the other is the first thing we need to

25. Saiving, “Human Situation,” 2.

26. Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 4.

27. *Ibid.*, 3.

28. *Ibid.*, 157.

29. *Ibid.*

recover.”³³ She notes that among “evangelical biblical scholars, well-trained in Hebrew exegesis,” there is wide agreement on the interpretation of the Genesis creation accounts, despite differing church affiliation.³⁴ All of them, she argues, “affirm that God called both sexes, without favor, to exercise accountable dominion over the creation. . . . Men and women were meant from the beginning to be ‘joint heirs’ of creation, just as they are joint heirs of salvation in the third act of the biblical drama.”³⁵ Pointing to a study by Gilbert Bilezikian, Van Leeuwen interprets the text from Gen. 3:16 (“your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you”) as the source of that gendered distinction in sin identified by Hampson, Saiving, and Plaskow. The verse, explains Van Leeuwen, is really “talking about an unreciprocated longing for intimacy.”³⁶

[The woman’s] desire will be for her husband, so as to perpetuate the intimacy that had characterized their relationship in paradise lost. But her nostalgia for the relation of love and mutuality that existed between them before the fall, when they both desired each other, will not be reciprocated by her husband. Instead of meeting her desire . . . [h]e will rule over her. . . . [T]he woman wants a mate, and she gets a master; she wants a lover and she gets a lord; she wants a husband and she gets a hierarch.³⁷

30. *Ibid.*, 29–30. Plaskow asks, “From what standpoint can [the] illegitimacy [of traditional descriptions of theological anthropology] be demonstrated?” She goes on to examine empirical, anthropological, and literary data for confirmation that her description of women’s experience is justified—providing evidence to support an argument from natural law. That is, if some cultural construction promotes nonflourishing across a broad spectrum of human experience, such a construction appears to work contrary to the goal of nature and is therefore (presumably) condemned by God, who calls for creation to flourish (as Adam and Eve are called to be “fruitful”). But this assumes human beings have the capacity to accurately assess what counts as flourishing. (Given the central role sin plays in distorting human reason in Luther’s thinking, the point needs to be considered.) Plaskow reveals an underlying commitment to some form of essentialism (even if human nature can only be approximately known by way of particular experience) when, in her final reflections, she writes: “If it is inadequate to view pride as the human sin, then, in the light of women’s experience, the sin of failing fully to realize one’s freedom, failing fully to become a self, must be seen as equally firmly rooted in human nature” (*Ibid.*, 175).

31. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, “The Christian Mind and the Challenge of Gender Relations,” in *Reformed Journal* 37, no. 9: 17–23.

32. *Ibid.*, 18.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 20.

Van Leeuwen suggests that “as a result of the fall there will be a propensity in man to let dominion run wild—to impose it in cavalier and illegitimate ways not only upon the earth and upon other men, but also upon the person who is ‘bone of [his] bones and flesh of [his] flesh.’” The corollary is “the particularly female sin,” whereby women will seek to preserve relationships in their quest for intimacy “as an excuse not to exercise accountable dominion in the first place.”³⁸ “If women insist on peace at any price—if they settle for an abnormal quietism as a way of avoiding the risk and potential isolation that may come from opposing evil—then they are not exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit; they are sinning just as surely as the man who rides roughshod over relationships in order to assert his individual freedom.”³⁹ In support of Bilezikian’s claim, Van Leeuwen compares the well-known story of King David’s rape of Bathsheba on the one hand (an example of male sin) with the story of Queen Esther’s courageous defense of her people on the other (an example of women’s sin narrowly avoided). Queen Esther, Van Leeuwen explains, offers a parallel “paradigm of the female evasion of responsibility, which needs just as much to be renounced.”⁴⁰ After Mordecai’s prophetic rebuke, and Esther’s turn from fearful passivity to faithful courage, “the Jews are again spared to continue as God’s carriers of the Messianic promise, in part because a young queen overcame the negative legacy of Genesis 3:16.”⁴¹

Thus Van Leeuwen turns to Scripture for epistemic confirmation that the nonflourishing so widely experienced by women reflects, not cultural presuppositions alone, but the failure to meet God’s call to faithful and decisive action in the world. Queen Esther’s courageous response to Mordecai’s

37. Ibid. Van Leeuwen is quoting Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 55, 229.

38. Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 20–21.

39. Ibid., 21.

40. Ibid., 20, 21. By way of explanation Van Leeuwen offers the following: “Esther, after all, was the darling of King Ahasuerus’s harem. She seemed quite happy to keep her Jewish identity a secret, and even when her uncle Mordecai asked her to intercede with Ahasuerus to rescue the Jews from Haman’s genocidal plot, she answered, in effect, that she would rather not take the risk. But then comes Mordecai’s rebuke, as telling as the prophet Nathan’s judgment of David: ‘Think not that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?’ (Esther 4:13–14) Esther, like David, is turned around by this prophetic rebuke, and after asking the Jews to fast and pray for her (thus manifesting the *right* sort of communal solidarity), she finally says, ‘I will go to the king, although it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish’” (ibid.).

41. Ibid., 21.

prophetic judgment provides us with an example of human responsibility faithfully, and courageously, enacted—an example women (and men) are called to emulate.⁴²

As with Plaskow, Van Leeuwen buttresses her argument with a story. A young woman named Kari Malcolm, raised by missionary parents in China, and a survivor of three years in a Japanese internment camp during World War II, wrote of her dismay “when one of her most vibrant friends decided against medical school and the mission field.”⁴³ In an act, which seemed to Malcolm a faithless failure of nerve, her friend let “the dreams and aspirations of many years . . . die”⁴⁴ when she became engaged to marry. “I could not see why marriage and medical school had to be an either/or proposition,”⁴⁵ Malcolm writes. “For many women marriage was such a top priority that careers, as well as love for Jesus, had to be relegated to second place.”⁴⁶ Reflecting on Malcolm’s experience, Van Leeuwen writes, “Malcolm is well aware of the psychological and sociological forces that contribute to women’s desire to evade risk and responsibility by attaching themselves to other people.⁴⁷ But as a biblically literate Christian, she realizes this is not the whole story. Underneath these mechanisms lies the fear of losing security, family, and even one’s femininity—a fear that can be cast out only by the redemptive love of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸ Van Leeuwen too notes the dual nature of sin so widely affirmed elsewhere. “One of the tragic things about our fallenness, as expressed in Genesis 3:16,” she writes, “is that it seems to be so horribly complementary in its effects on the sexes: the male propensity to abuse dominion seems compulsively matched by the female propensity towards the securing of relationships, even unhealthy ones, no matter what the cost.”⁴⁹ Reflecting the same insight, Daphne Hampson explains, “The reality of women’s lives has been that they had to circle round other people. What plans they might have had gave way to what others determined should be, resulting in a sense of powerlessness, of lacking control even in their own lives. Meaning had to be found through the lives of others. Typically, the ‘problems’ that women have manifested have been those resulting from the lack of a sense of self-worth, leading to depression, anorexia, or suicidal

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid. See Kari T. Malcolm, *Women at the Crossroads: A Path Beyond Feminism and Traditionalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 22.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

tendencies. . . . Feminism has [therefore] stood for empowerment.”⁵⁰ Arguing that there is simply no way to square one of the central aims of feminism—the empowerment of the self—with the theology central to Luther’s understanding of the God-human relationship, Hampson concludes, “The whole dynamic of being a self is very different from what Lutheranism has proposed. Thus its prescription must appear irrelevant, indeed, counter-productive.”⁵¹

Central to Hampson’s objection is her reading of Luther’s anthropology, which she believes presents insurmountable difficulties for the necessary incremental building up of the self. “Luther’s achievement lay in his reconceptualization of the human relation to God,” Hampson notes.⁵² Yet, she continues, it is precisely this reconceptualization, with its emphasis on a relational ontology, that presents problems for the feminine quest toward self-transformation and empowerment. Unlike Roman Catholicism, where one may “speak of the person as existing through creation and then as having the capacity to choose to relate to God,”⁵³ Luther’s God (in Hampson’s view) “is conceived to be fundamental to the very constitution of the self in each moment. . . . Luther contends that each moment I must anew base myself on God and so be the creature I was intended to be. To think that I could in some sense first possess myself, then relate to God as to another, would be to have an idol—one with whom I think I can deal.”⁵⁴

“It is not natural,” Hampson claims, “for humans so to base themselves on God.”⁵⁵ Noting Luther’s remark that “progress is nothing other than constantly beginning,”⁵⁶ Hampson concludes that “it follows from this that there is no history of the development of the self; no movement within ourselves from being a sinner to being righteous.”⁵⁷ Not only, in Hampson’s view, has Luther

50. Hampson, “Luther on the Self,” 339.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*, 334

53. *Ibid.*, 336. Notably, this kind of fundamental unity of God and self is not, for Hampson, problematic. She writes, “I believe that Luther’s understanding that, if one is to speak of God, one must say that the self cannot be itself except as God is fundamental to the constitution of that self, must be retained within theology, and indeed can appropriately be developed by feminists” (“Luther on the Self,” 334). It is the otherness of God—that God stands outside the self (according to Hampson’s reading of Luther)—that Hampson finds irreconcilable with feminist commitments. Notably, she adds, “It becomes all the more imperative to develop Luther’s insight that God must be seen as one who is fundamental to our being ourselves, not as some exterior other with whom we inter-relate. In that respect his thought surely needs to be taken up” (“Luther on the Self,” 341). This is one of the primary goals of my discussion of the *theonomous self* in ch. 4.

54. *Ibid.*, 336–37.

55. *Ibid.*, 335.

failed to provide an ontology that supports continuity of the self through time, but he has also sought to do so precisely because he has no interest in spiritual transformation. “He has,” she suggests with some irony, “got away from any such self-preoccupation.”⁵⁸

Emphasizing Luther’s doctrine of justification so much that it obscures his robust (if relatively unknown) teaching on regeneration in the Spirit, Hampson naturally sees it as unresponsive to the feminine form of sin. Unfortunately, this understanding of Luther’s anthropology is widespread—the result of an influential group of theologians, frequently read and taught in the United States, who have energetically imitated Luther’s early prophetic denunciation of human agency. Luther scholars such as Helmut Thielicke, Gustav Wingren, and Anders Nygren have assiduously worked to undermine the self-righteous pietism that both Luther and Paul viewed as dangerous to faith. Given their historical context, this emphasis is not surprising. Following World War II, they gained a new recognition of sin that had been largely absent earlier in the century. So that, just as Luther had to struggle against the semi-Pelagianism of his own age, Lutheran theologians felt likewise compelled to undermine the overweening confidence that had been blind to the demonic tendencies within. But Luther moved on after 1521 to develop an anthropology that opened toward an active, cooperating agency with the indwelling Spirit—a move these theologians have refused to make. Reluctant to engage in any discussion of the volitional work of the faithful in the incremental growth of righteousness and faith (which Luther takes to be a key feature of the Christian life), they instead take every opportunity to present precisely the sort of Lutheran anthropology Hampson dismisses as “incommensurate” with feminism. We find Thielicke, for example, focusing on Luther’s early description of those good works that spring forth “spontaneously” from faith.⁵⁹ “We lay particular emphasis on the term *sponte*,” Thielicke writes, “because it describes most felicitously the directness of the relationship between justification and works. . . . The new obedience is ‘automatic’ in the sense that it cannot be otherwise.”⁶⁰ Gustav Wingren, echoing this denial of human efficacy, locates agency in the external vocational

56. Ibid. Hampson quotes from Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 162. Notably, these references are from Luther’s early lectures on the Psalms (1513–1515) and Romans (1515–1516). These represent the teachings of the early Luther, prior to the full development of his doctrine of God’s twofold reign—a development that had important consequences for his anthropology.

57. Hampson, *Luther on the Self*, 335.

58. Ibid.

59. One of many examples from “The Freedom of a Christian” (1520): “He does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God.” *LW* 31:359.

call as it applies to relationships within the family. “At work in marriage,” he writes, “is a power which *compels* self-giving to spouse and children. So it is the ‘station’ itself which is the ethical agent, for it is God who is active through the law on earth.”⁶¹ And again, he argues, “That which the office does is not part of man’s account, but of God’s.”⁶² Indeed, Wingren is so eager to discourage any exploration of the process by and through which human agency engages the Spirit volitionally that he soundly rejects two earlier attempts to explore this process. Responding to works by Karl Eger (1900) and Paul Heinz Schifferdecker (1932),⁶³ both of whom tried to establish a systematic relationship between faith and action, Wingren writes, “If Luther had shown by logical principles how faith must express itself in love, as Eger and Schifferdecker desire, he would not have developed his view more systematically. Rather, he would have replaced the reality of God with an intellectual construction and denied the miraculous character of something which is a miracle. Luther knew very well what he was doing when he merely asserted the relationship between faith and love without proving it.” “Why is it,” Wingren asks, “that faith does not stop [with the believer], but becomes love which is concerned about a neighbor? *Faith is God, and God is like that.*”⁶⁴ One cannot help noticing that by the time Wingren reaches his conclusion here, the *person* of faith has dropped out of the picture altogether.

What women need,” writes Hampson, is to “come to themselves . . . to come to have an adequate sense of self,”⁶⁵ so that salvation is “a healing,”⁶⁶ or “a coming into their own,”⁶⁷ rather than an ontology that makes self-existence, or selfhood, dependent on a God who is other.⁶⁸ Recalling Plaskow’s

60. Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William Henry Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 63.

61. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 6.

62. *Ibid.*, 8.

63. Each sought to make sense of volition under the impact of faith; each determined in the end that Luther had failed to provide a coherent motivational explanation. Eger, in his 1900 *Die Anschauungen Luthers vom Beruf*, concludes that “serious consequences followed from [Luther’s] theoretical lack of a systematic relationship between justifying faith and the fulfillment of vocation in the service of love” (Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 40). Schifferdecker, in his 1932 *Der Berufsgedanke bei Luther*, argues that “the necessary inner unity between faith and the power proceeding therefrom for action in vocation Luther has not been able to establish” (Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 41).

64. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 41 (emphasis added).

65. Daphne Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 3 (April 1988): 234–50 (241).

66. *Ibid.*, 242; see also 248.

67. *Ibid.*, 248.

68. Hampson, “Luther on the Self,” 336–37. See also Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” 248.

argument that “salvation” or “redemption” comes not from “dying and rising” daily in Christ, but rather from communities of women who listen and speak one another into being, Hampson notes that “the feminist response of recent years has been ‘consciousness-raising’ groups, in which women were enabled to find voice, therapy that allowed a feminist analysis of the situation in which a woman was placed, and assertiveness training in which women learnt to hold their own.”⁶⁹ But, according to Wingren, Thielicke, and Hampson, “there is no self [in Luther’s anthropology] which is indeed a self.”⁷⁰

This rendering of Luther’s anthropology, however, leaves too much out. In time, Luther modified his early focus on justification, which initially colored all other aspects of his thought, by expanding his interest in the temporal realm and developing an anthropology associated with it. There is much in Luther’s writing, especially after 1522, that reveals quite a different view of human agency than is visible in the accounts offered by Thielicke, Wingren, and Hampson. In fact, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that Luther shared the conventional assumptions about the ontic structures and capacities that support life and personhood; and there is no doubt that he expected the same zealous disciplining of “worldly lusts” under the guidance of the Spirit as did his scholastic colleagues.

While Luther’s anthropology has been problematic in light of feminist commitments to self-development, Hampson, Saiving, and Plaskow raise another distinct but related issue. This is Luther’s focus on self-sacrificial love, or *agape*, understood as the shape that Christian love must take. Whether any theology that teaches the faithful to assume the cross of Christ in self-sacrificial love could be commensurate with the kinds of concerns raised by these women appears doubtful. “A sacrifice of self, leading to the nurture of others,” writes Hampson, is a paradigm that “feminist women seemingly reject . . . with unanimity.”⁷¹ Saiving agrees that for women who too easily “surrender [their] individual concerns in order to serve the immediate needs of others,”⁷² a theology of self-sacrificial neighbor-love appears to be highly problematic. This “religion of self-sacrifice,” Hampson suggests, is dangerous because it may so easily become “the opium of women, reinforcing the position to which a woman has already assigned herself, compounding her belief that ‘one should not put oneself forward.’”⁷³ Such a view of *agape*, says Saiving,

69. Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” 242.

70. Hampson, “Luther on the Self,” 336.

71. Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” 239.

72. Saiving, “Human Situation,” 44.

73. Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” 239.

encourages a woman to abandon becoming “an individual in her own right.”⁷⁴ Given the opportunity, she will believe, for example, “That having chosen marriage and children and thus being face to face with the needs of her family for love, refreshment, and forgiveness, she has no right to ask anything for herself but must submit without qualification to the strictly feminine role.”⁷⁵ “The Gospel of [a self-sacrificial] powerlessness,” concludes Hampson, “has been appropriated by those to whom it should never have been directed.”⁷⁶ Given Luther’s remark that “self-love is something wicked by which I love myself in opposition to God,”⁷⁷ and Nygren’s claim that, for Luther, self-love is “wholly under the dominion of sin”⁷⁸ (a view of self-love Gene Outka calls “wholly nefarious”),⁷⁹ it is hardly surprising that those who already attribute a problematic deficit of self-regard to women would spurn Luther’s analysis.

Without doubt, a good deal of Luther’s early work, as well as his ongoing rejection of “free will,”⁸⁰ could be said to justify Hampson’s concerns. The theocentric vision undergirding Luther’s thought informed both his theology and his use of language as he battered away at what seemed to him a naive and dangerous confidence in human beings. Not surprisingly, Luther’s theology offended many in his own day, including those who had little interest in gender-related issues. Erasmus of Rotterdam, for example, the most celebrated humanist of Luther’s time, challenged Luther publicly over Luther’s surprising and dangerous repudiation of free will. “Was it necessary,” Erasmus argues in his response to Luther’s teaching, that “in avoiding the Scylla of arrogance, you should be wrecked on the Charybdis of despair or indolence?”⁸¹ Luther’s prophetic denunciation of human efficacy before the grandeur of God is indisputably a key element of Luther’s early theology. But the crux of the

74. Saiving, “Human Situation,” 45.

75. *Ibid.*

76. Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” 239.

77. *LW* 26:297.

78. Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 23.

79. Gene H. Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 56–63.

Notably, Outka adds, “Certain strains in Luther himself resist assimilation into Nygren’s program. . . . One finds in some of Luther’s writings a view close to [one in which] . . . the agent’s own interests serve as the paradigm of all others, and may be taken as the standard for treating others in the sense of the golden rule” (*ibid.*, 62).

80. While Luther rejects this terminology, it is by no means clear that he rejects the content, when understood according to the Catholic tradition as a freedom of choice within the bounds of God’s providence. See ch. 4.

81. E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

argument here is derived from Luther's work during the years that followed. The Luther we will observe in the pages ahead reveals important theological developments that began to emerge after 1522, when he returned to Wittenberg and assumed new vocational responsibilities as a civic leader. His refocusing on the social and political situation resulted in a correlative opening up of his theology to include the temporal realm. As a thinker who constantly theologized at the intersection of experience and Scripture (with the important additional influence of the church fathers), it is no surprise that Luther's marriage in 1525 also spawned important theological developments. In chapter 3, for example, I track Luther's growing confidence in God's reliable creational gifts, his discovery of joy in this world, and his deepening embrace of a friendlier God.

But in all of this, it is important to view Luther against the backdrop of his early work. In order to tell the later story, we need to understand his earlier thinking, including the situation out of which Luther's prophetic rejection of the world in general, and scholastic optimism in particular, sprang; for Luther's prophetic calling continued to shape his thinking in the years that followed. If no longer exclusively, it nonetheless remained an important component of his thinking, though in time it became but one element among others, embedded in a considerably larger theological vision.

Chapter 1, then, opens with the story of Luther's early years and continues through his theological discovery up to his excommunication from the Roman Church in early 1521. This first chapter illuminates some of the causes behind Luther's early and vehement rejection of human efficacy and self-love. We begin with Luther's passion for security in an insecure world. Exacerbated by lifelong bouts of intense anxiety, Luther's tenacity in maintaining the theological presuppositions entailed by his solution should not surprise us, given the real existential repercussions for him personally. A second element at work derives from his theological training. The semi-Pelagian scholasticism Luther was taught encumbered the young monk with an untenable approach to salvation—one that nearly drove him to despair and the devil; it was, therefore, a theology he considered extremely dangerous to the salvation of others, who like himself might flounder under the uncertainty of God's predestining will. But we must also take into account Luther's discovery of the German mystics, with their fusion of opposites, such that death implies life and suffering promises hope. Luther embraced these oppositions in his "theology of the cross,"⁸² allowing him to reinterpret his bouts of anxiety as signs of God's love rather than God's wrath. While this fusion of opposites made sense of his own experience, it also resulted in the absolute condemnation of self and world—a

dimension of Luther's early theology we find difficult to grasp today. Another factor responsible for Luther's most radical denunciations was his conviction that God's saving Word comes to condemned sinners through the words of Scripture. Given his vocational responsibility as a teacher of the Bible and his conviction that God had delegated to him the protection and deliverance of this liberating Word of salvation, Luther's pugnacious response to Rome can be better understood in light of papal claims to exclusive interpretive control of the text. Luther's devotion to his pastoral calling also played a significant role, since (he believed) nothing less than eternal salvation was at stake for all those souls that had been given into his keeping, souls for whom he was responsible before God. Thus Luther was prepared to say and do whatever was necessary to cultivate a saving faith, thereby fulfilling the duty God had thrust upon him. Finally, and probably most important of all, was Luther's unusual sensitivity to the power and presence of the living God. This prophetic sensibility provided the frame for everything else, causing Luther to view temporal reality as the stage upon which God and Satan played out their roles in a cosmic drama. And it was into this same drama that Luther understood himself to be drawn—prepared by God to lead the multitude of souls into battle against the devil. Only when we appreciate the enormity of Luther's vision can we grasp the correlative radicalism of his theology. In chapter 1, then, we observe the Luther who turned away from everything temporal in service to that which is infinite, understanding this as an either/or proposition.

If chapter 1 explores Luther's monastic departure from this world and the controversy that thrust him back out and onto the world's stage, then chapter 2 tracks that development. In meeting the new social and political demands of the day, Luther's theology underwent important changes. It was in addressing these changes that his still-developing two-kingdom thinking, which had previously focused almost exclusively on spiritual concerns, expanded to meet the political exigencies requiring Luther's attention and leadership.

Luther expanded his two-kingdom thinking by adapting his earlier dualistic view of the self into a considerably more complex configuration that was correlated with God's two metaphorical "hands." Through these, God is always busily at work in the world, on the "left hand" in the civil or temporal realm, and on the "right" through a spiritual realm in which Christ brings people to faith. Luther's adaptation of Paul's eschatological framework, based

82. See Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 20: "He deserves to be called a theologian . . . who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross" (*LW* 31:40). See also thesis 21: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (*Ibid.*).

on Paul's notion of an "old" and a "new" Adam, provided this wider frame that could now accommodate both an inner and outer self. In its final form, Luther's mature model of the two realms became his primary vehicle for working out responses to various social challenges as these arose. Most interesting to us, however, is the revised anthropology that Luther's new model generated. His early, dualistic view of the self, understood as wholly sinful or righteous before God (*coram Deo*), remains, but in this new configuration is designated as the inner self. Given Paul's understanding of persisting sin (and Luther's experience of it), Luther posits an outer self, which continues in this present age to fight in the Spirit against the residual "substance of sin." Thus there is one person, wholly sinful or righteous before God while at the same time partly righteous and partly sinful before the world. This is the self in transition under the cooperating agency of the Holy Spirit. Though persisting sin is not counted as sin on account of Christ, it is nevertheless still very real.

In light of this remaining need for reform, we take up Hampson's concerns about Luther's anthropology, paying particular attention to his presuppositions regarding the reliability of persisting ontic structures that undergird the potential for incremental growth. Luther's expectation of an outworking of faith through works of love directed toward the neighbor is thus coupled in midcareer with a sanctifying discipline that focuses on the self.

Parallel to this new model, we find in Luther's work a revised eucharistic understanding of Christ's body and blood fully present in the bread and wine, which nevertheless remains wholly bread and wine. Reflecting the "totally human, totally divine" description of Christ in the church's historic creeds, Luther's understanding of the Eucharist does not allow for the transubstantiation of the temporal bread and wine into the similarly fully present body and blood of Christ. Not only does this affirm the full value of the created order (and the outer self), but it also works to sacramentalize the entire created order. God is ubiquitous in Luther's theology, everywhere at once, not only in, with, and under the bread and wine, but also in, with, and under the whole creation.

This understanding of God's near presence is also worked out in Luther's new understanding of vocation, which emerges alongside his developing two-kingdoms model. Under Luther's novel use of the word *vocation*, every ordinary task of this world becomes a holy calling for those who can discern God's work in and under their own. The priesthood of all believers is expected to "preach" in word and deed, so that worldly occupations become an important delivery system by way of which Christ's presence and work breaks into this world, creating a new sacramental secularity. This work on vocation develops

in the context of Luther's attack on monasticism, as he relocates God's activity in Christ throughout the whole created order rather than under the sacramental control of Rome alone.

Chapter 3 addresses Luther's infamous rejection of self-love. While in chapters 1 and 2 we observe his prophetic renunciation of the self, this chapter addresses his growing acknowledgment of a legitimate and godly concern for one's own well-being. Beginning with Luther's return to Wittenberg in 1522, and influenced by the great joy he discovered in his marriage to Katie in 1525, Luther largely reversed his earlier condemnation of self-care. In time, and especially in the context of plague-ridden Wittenberg, Luther found self-love both reasonable and prudent—indeed, an obligation. Not only is the mandatory care for oneself derived from an obligation to protect others from contagion, but Luther also very clearly affirmed a desire to protect oneself as a natural good, woven into the fabric of creation, and an attitude pleasing to God. Surprisingly, he supported the relocation of the university to Jena while the plague ravaged Wittenberg; the lives of his students and colleagues were of such value that their worth overrode an imprudent self-sacrificial stance that Luther now described as “tempting God.” Here we see quite a different appreciation and valuation of the self from that of the young Luther, who “tempted God” with excessive fasting and other self-destructive activities—the very behavior he now publicly repudiated. Luther's marriage, which he entered into in order to “spite the devil,”⁸³ provides further evidence of his growing affirmation of worldly joys, as he discovered the unexpected pleasure of fatherhood and the deepening friendship and love he shared with Katie.⁸⁴ When his teenaged daughter died, Luther's grief reveals to us the depth of his natural love,⁸⁵ making it clear that his theology no longer envisioned earthly life and eternal life as opposites. Rather, God's gifts are present in both realms. No longer hidden under the form of its opposite, joy is both natural and God-pleasing. As Luther's confidence in God's redemptive love grew ever stronger, his earlier terror of God's judgment was reconfigured within the larger frame of God's mercy.

Chapter 4 addresses the question of agency in light of the free-will debate. Beginning with the difficult issues raised by Luther's infrequent, but nonetheless unsettling, rants against free will (given the necessitarian logic these display),⁸⁶ this chapter argues that Luther's pastoral concerns and theological

83. *LW* 49:111. See also Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 280.

84. William Lazareth, *Luther on the Christian Home: An Application of the Social Ethics of the Reformation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960) 31–32.

85. *Ibid.*, 32.

battles allow us to interpret these texts in light of his far more usual Augustinian approach to human freedom. If his remarks fail to honor the careful scholastic distinctions normally employed, Luther is not engaging in sloppy thinking so much as intentionally refusing to collude with an impious use of language. Luther's extraordinary understanding of the power of language to construct reality becomes clear as we see him manipulating conventional theological constructs in new, and purposefully unsettling, ways.⁸⁷

Despite Luther's apparent disregard for human freedom, he did not fail to hold human beings responsible for their failure to honor God. Not only does he explicitly affirm this, but it is also visible in his frequent and passionate exhortation, as he attempted to move people to choose for rather than against God. In both his pastoral letters of consolation to those on the brink of despair and his frequent exhortations to the baptized via sermons and lectures, Luther consistently called upon the baptized to cooperate with the indwelling Spirit, both in their service toward the neighbor as well as in their discipline of "worldly lusts." Luther's theology of vocation conflates these two aims in the notion of vocation as a "school for character." Of note (particularly in light of Hampson's critique) are Luther's warnings that to fail in this—to passively ignore the Spirit's calling into the work of reforming old habits and assuming new challenges—is to turn one's back on God faithlessly, thereby relinquishing all the promises of the gospel. Though his constant urging of this warning upon those who would ignore it, this presupposition presents a curious tension. On the one hand, persons are told that they can do nothing at all in relation to faith, which clearly includes for Luther the active outworking of faith in love. On the other hand, Luther frequently suggests that persons do in fact have the capacity to choose to work with the Spirit; further, that these decisions have eternal consequences suggests that, whatever Luther preaches about free will, his presuppositions on the ground suggest a considerably more optimistic view than his theology of passive righteousness suggests.

Luther's oddly illogical juxtaposition of an attack on free will with a simultaneous call to battle against the flesh might be interpreted as Luther's enactment *in time* of the scholastic *consequentiae/consequentis* distinction that he

86. Rupp and Watson, *Luther and Erasmus*, 140, 180. See ch. 4.

87. See *LW* 32:94: "I would wish that the words, 'free will' had never been invented." And also *LW* 25:372: "What else does the expression 'to be contingent' mean than to be a creature and not God?" Luther is taking the word *contingent* (used to describe human free will) and reapplying it to the radical dependency of human beings on God's free will. Human beings *are* contingent (dependent), but are not able to make choices contingently (freely) in light of God's predestining will (see ch. 4). Note also Luther's reapplication of the concept of holy *vocation* to ordinary work.

so energetically rejected.⁸⁸ That is to say, from within the temporal context, one's choice for or against God is always open (or free) and the possibility of salvation is thus always available. Yet, simultaneously, from the perspective of eternity, and *without the opening that time provides*, God's providential predestining foreknowledge is absolute. The mystery of human responsibility in the face of God's predestination is thereby maintained by way of created temporality. Luther intentionally left the logical disjunction unexplained, but nonetheless present, in his description of God rendered as both *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. Luther appears to be preserving the mystery of God's providence and human responsibility beyond our ability to logically package it. Thus Luther never stopped exhorting people to cling to the *Deus revelatus* in the face of the *Deus absconditus*—at least as long as they are capable of conscious choice,⁸⁹ and he normally paired this exhortation with teaching about the integral part each choice plays in the cosmic battle between God and the devil. Thus the work of choosing (to opt, for example, for passive neglect rather than dangerous engagement) in the presence of the indwelling Spirit is more than a personal choice. Every opportunity to choose (as possibilities are presented by the Spirit) becomes an opportunity to grasp the promise or to ignore it, to struggle on behalf of God against Satan, or to succumb. The work of resisting temporal temptation thus becomes part of something larger—something infinitely important in ways that exceed individual gain. Christian life consists in this ongoing struggle to choose well in cooperation with the in-forming and empowering Spirit. Christian life, in other words, involves a clear call to active engagement rather than passivity.

Chapter 4 closes with a modest phenomenological exploration of how such a struggle in the Spirit might be experienced and actively engaged.

The conclusion expands on this program. After a brief summary of key points in the overall argument of the book—that is, for an interpretation of Luther's theology which is more conducive to addressing feminist concerns—we turn, once again, to address the inner movement that allows

88. See n87. Luther rejects a scholastic distinction between *necessitas consequentis* (the necessity of occurrences based on God's choice and foreknowledge) and *necessitas consequentiae* (the free choice by human beings according to their given capacities). The distinction protects human responsibility on one side and God's overarching providence on the other. It remains a mystery as to how both God and human beings can be genuinely free to choose different ends while at the same time affirming that God's will is absolute. Hence Luther rejects calling free a choice that cannot, ultimately, change God's predestining will with regard to salvation.

89. During the plague, Luther refused to make pastoral calls to those already so close to death that they were no longer consciously able to hear and receive the gospel's promise. See ch. 3.

one to break free. As a model reflecting the feminine situation, we return to the story of Queen Esther, who was quite happy to passively keep her Jewish identity a secret when to reveal it would put her life in danger. “Even when her uncle Mordecai asked her to intercede with Ahasuerus to rescue the Jews from Haman’s genocidal plot,” writes Van Leeuwen, “she answered, in effect, that she would rather not take the risk.”⁹⁰

But then comes Mordecai’s rebuke, as telling as the prophet Nathan’s judgment of David: “Think not that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:13–14).⁹¹

Van Leeuwen’s description of faithful action seems to be precisely that ongoing engagement with the Spirit that Luther sees as central to the life of faith. “Esther, like David, is turned around by this prophetic rebuke,” writes Van Leeuwen, “and after asking the Jews to fast and pray for her (thus manifesting the right sort of communal solidarity), she finally says, ‘I will go to the king, although it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.’”⁹²

In the opening paragraph of his book *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther describes the experience of faith as something that cannot be understood until one has “tasted the great strength” faith offers in dangerous situations. “It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man [or woman!] when trials oppress him. But he who has had even a faint taste of it can never write, speak, meditate, or hear enough concerning it.”⁹³

This is the courage of faith—a critical contribution of Luther’s theology to the plight of those in bondage to passivity; persons, that is, like Queen Esther, who preferred to hide out from the responsible, and dangerous, engagement with the world into which she was called. The courageous agency that faith inspires is demonstrated both in the way Luther lived his life and in the theology of sanctification that he developed midcareer. Faith is subjectively active in the

90. Van Leeuwen, “Christian Mind,” 21.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. Luther, *Career of the Reformer I*, 343.

process of choosing freely from within the limited options of choosing with, or in defiance of, God through a multitude of everyday decisions that matter infinitely.

When Luther convinced the laity that their ordinary jobs were holy vocations, no less significant than the work of the priest who stands at the altar consecrating the bread and wine, he ignited a powerful response from those whose lives had seemed to themselves insignificant. In the same way, Luther's view of the Christian life, understood as an ongoing series of decisions, drawing one into a cosmic drama of infinite importance, moves persons, not toward an "oh, so what—" shrug-of-the-shoulders passivity, but toward a new understanding of the self *and the choices one makes* as valuable in an ultimate sense. For those whose temptation is to see themselves as beings of no real significance, this is an invitation to accept what Luther takes to be already true. There is no neutral ground; and so each choice is another skirmish between God and Satan—a battle subjectively engaged from below through the consciences and the choices of individual human beings. Heiko Oberman names and describes this drama in his book *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*. But Luther did not consider this his private story; it is rather the story of every person. And such an understanding of the Christian life, viewed from the subjective perspective of the actors, has the power to ignite action and to transform lives. The new doctrine of justification that Plaskow longs for, "which would judge the failure to become a self and open up into a process of self-actualization,"⁹⁴ is Luther's doctrine of justification, embedded in a later and larger theology that includes human choice and action. As always, the gold in Luther's theology is God's gospel promise, which remains an opening—an authentic freedom to embrace new possibilities—offered to all, even as it is also the ground of that courage one needs in order to take the risk. Hampson's objections to *Lutheranism* are not misplaced, given the systematic refusal of Luther scholars to protect against the dangers of self-righteous striving by presenting Luther's theology as one devoted to the obliteration of the self. It is my hope, on the brink of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation—a Reformation ignited by Luther's theology and his personal courage—that this book may help to fan the dying embers, unleashing some hint of the warmth that Luther's fire generated half a millennium ago.

94. Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace*, 157.