

Theme Articles

The Contemporary Constructive Task

B. Ch i , i e Helme

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.

Christine Helmer is Professor of German and Religious Studies and current holder of the Arthur E. Andersen Teaching and Research Professorship at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Her book, *The Trinity and Martin Luther*, will be issued as a reprint by Lexham Press in 2017, and her massive open online course (MOOC), "Luther and the West," is available on demand and for free at coursera.org.¹

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.

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-