

The Significance of Luther's Ideas for the Churches of the 21st Century

A Feminist Perspective by Kristen E. Kvam

I Introduction

In 1517, when sending a copy of his »Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences «or, in popular parlance the »Ninety-five Theses«, to a friend, Martin Luther penned his name as »Eleutherius«.¹ In subsequent years, he continued to make occasional use of this pen-name. From one perspective this self-reference shows the influence of the Humanist practice of using sound similarities to transpose surnames into Greek and Latin. Thus the German »Luther« became the Greek »Eleutherius«. Yet assonance was not the sole factor prompting Luther to adopt this particular pen-name. After all, an important connection resides between this Greek term signifying freedom and Luther's understanding of himself as a Christian liberated from bondage by the gospel of God's unmerited grace. From this perspective a particular congruence appears between Luther's witness to the liberating grace of God and his use of a self-reference that employs a Greek term signifying freedom and liberation.

While Luther's central theological witness concerns the gracious character and activity of God, embedded on the edges of many of his theological considerations are his understandings of the significance of gender as well as his views about the particular identity of women. From these edges questions arise. Do the writings of Eleutherius convey views that could be significant for feminist theologians? Do Luther's views support Christianity's liberation from a »captivity« to gender hierarchies that assign greater value and authority – as well as a wider range of activities – to men than to women? In other words: Do Luther's views contain resources for twenty-first century efforts to formulate theological anthropologies that endorse equality between women and men?

In my remarks this morning I want to explore two specific resources Luther offers to contemporary conversation partners – be they in Lutheran churches or in the church catholic – as they work to counter beliefs and practices that

1 WA Br I, 122, 56 (52).

endorse the inferiority and subordination of women. The first resource is Luther's own attentiveness to the Woman Question – the constellation of issues that are drawn together because, by asking about the nature and activity that is proper to women, they inquire about the meaning of womanhood.² Luther's criticisms of ideas and practices that devalue women offer a kind of kinship to the fundamental project of contemporary feminism. This shared perspective then provides a vantage point for looking at one specific way Luther's understanding of Eve offers a theological position that counters predominant ways of describing woman. In keeping with this Congress's attention to the older Luther, his Great Lectures on Genesis provide the basis for my considerations. In this section, we will explore Luther's distinctive emphasis on the original equality of Eve with Adam.

II Luther and the Woman Question

The Woman Question often is regarded as a distinctly modern issue. In the United States, we frequently date critical reflection on the nature of woman to the so-called »first wave of feminism« in the early 19th century or – at the earliest – the late 18th century. Historical studies, however, demonstrate that questions about the identity and status of women were matters of great dispute during Luther's life.³ For example, Ruth Kelso asserts that »it took the middle ages to produce the phenomenon called the war of the sexes« which was »at its height in the sixteenth century.«⁴ Also, Conor Fahy's work on Renaissance treatises documents over forty treatises on the »equality or superiority of women written or published in Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.«⁵

Much closer to Luther's own geographic setting are Maria Grossman's descriptions of discussions about womanhood in Wittenberg.⁶ Grossman documents the contempt shown toward women by leading humanist scholars at

2 While »womanhood« as a term is not commonly used in contemporary English, I use it because it directs attention to the conditions and characteristics of women as a particular collective and not simply as discrete and unique individuals.

3 See Joan KELLY: Early feminist theory and the »Querelle des femmes«, *Signs* 8 (Chicago, IL 1982), 4-28. Also the brief discussion Roland BAINTON: *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy*. MP 1971, 11 f.

4 Ruth KELSO: *Doctrine for the lady of the Renaissance*. Urbana, IL 1956), 6.

5 Conor FAHY: *Three Italian early Renaissance treatises on women*. *Italian studies* 11 (Cambridge 1956), 30-55.

the University of Wittenberg around the time that Luther came there to teach. In 1508, Andreas Meinhardi († 1525) published a document that promoted the University of Wittenberg as a center for humanism; his treatise concluded with a discussion of the character of women and a warning neither to trust women nor to make friends with them.⁷ Around the same time, Christoph Scheurl (1481-1542) gave a public oration that similarly concluded with a discussion of woman. According to Grossman, Scheurl's speech not only ridiculed women; it also declared women to be worthless.⁸ In Grossman's estimation: »Wittenberg scholars thought it to be in good humanistic taste to show contempt for women.«⁹

Placing Luther into this historical context highlights the ways he contended against anthropologies that portrayed relationships with women as exceedingly dangerous to the well-being of men. From this point of view, Luther is seen as intentionally offering an alternative vision to the then-dominant anthropology. Over and against anthropologies that stressed opposition between men and women or emphasized the negative traits of women, Luther stressed mutual respect as a key aspect of God's intention for relationships between men and women. This emphasis can be seen in his treatise »The estate of marriage« when he contends:

God wills to have his excellent handiwork honored as his divine creation, and not despised. The man is not to despise or scoff at the woman or her body, nor the woman the man. But each should honor the other's image and body as a divine and good creation that is well-pleasing unto God himself.¹⁰

Luther's contrast between »despising or scoffing« and »honoring as a divine and good creation« indicates his concern for emphasizing mutual honor and respect as God's will for how men and women should perceive and interact with one another.

6 Maria GROSSMANN: Humanism in Wittenberg: 1485-1517. Nieukoop 1975, 59.

7 Grossmann: Humanism in Wittenberg, 59; THE DIALOGUS OF ANDREAS MEINHARDI: a utopian description of Wittenberg and its university, 1508/ ed. and transl. into English with introduction by Edgar C. Reinke. Ann Arbor 1976. The »Dialogus illustrat ac augustissime urbis Albiorenae vulgo Vittenberg dicte ...« was written by Andreas Meinhardi who became 1508 Wittenberg's city scribe.

8 Grossmann: Humanism in Wittenberg, 59. 70.

9 Grossmann: Humanism in Wittenberg, 59.

10 WA 10 II, 276, 1-8 ≙ Am 45, 17 f, The estate of marriage, 1522.

Dissatisfied with then-current understandings of womanhood, Luther was unwilling to repeat everything that Christian tradition and popular wisdom said about women. Rather, he frequently criticized negative assessments and countered them with more positive theological appraisals. This intention to reform Christian understandings of womanhood is one way Luther's ideas remain significant for Christian theologians. His attention to the importance – even the gravity – of gender relations is significant.

And yet to contend that Luther strove to reframe Christian teachings about the significance of gender and the nature of women barely scratches the surface of the significance of his ideas for feminist theology. To move to a deeper level, it becomes important not just to discuss his intentions but to observe ways that Luther accomplished his intentions as well as ways in which he fell short of his own goal.

III Luther and the Original Equality of Adam and Eve

Luther's lectures on the opening chapters of Genesis provide a significant point of departure for discerning Luther's distinctive response to the Woman Question. In Luther's descriptions of Eve, we see Luther discuss such topics as God's purpose in creating woman and God's designs for the relationship between woman and man. Also, this text's background as academic lectures mean that the length and depth of Luther's discussions provide a sharp contrast to the occasional character of his »Table talk« remarks, which often are used to demonstrate Luther's understandings of women.

Moreover, Eve's influence on Christian thinking about womanhood far exceeds the frequency of her appearance in Christian scripture. (Indeed many Christians would be surprised to realize that Eve's name appears only four times in the Christian canon).¹¹ Eve exerts this powerful influence because as the first woman, she is perceived not simply as an individual woman but as representing womanhood in general. Christians frequently posit analogies – if not continuities – between the character and role of Eve and the character and role of the women who come after her. Thus notions of God's will for Eve and her relationship with Adam often are correlated with understandings of God's intention for Eve's daughters and their relations to the sons of Adam.

¹¹ Eve's name appears first in Gn 3, 20 when Adam gives this name to the first woman. Additional passages using her name are: Gn 4, 1; 2 Cor 11, 3; and 1 T 2, 13. Other biblical texts speak of Eve without citing her name.

We have observed that disparaging women formed the predominant character of responses to the Woman Question in Luther's historical context. Views accenting the inferiority and danger of women surround Luther both through his colleagues in Wittenberg and through the dominant Christian assessment of woman. An anthropological paradigm that I call »perpetual hierarchy« undergirds these negative views. This phrase points to ways that Christianity's dominant tradition presents a hierarchy of men over women as God's original – and perpetual – design for relations between men and women.¹² The perpetual hierarchy paradigm asserts that woman, in accord with God's will and intention from the beginning of her creation, is essentially inferior and inherently subordinate to man.

Luther's Genesis lectures indicate ways he continues to think of women in terms of this perpetual hierarchy. For example, his description of Eve as a »moon« in contrast to the »sun« that is Adam clearly presents woman, as Luther himself states, as »inferior to the male sex«.¹³ Further his assertion that if Adam had been approached first by the serpent, Adam would have been the victor also shows that Luther thinks of Eve as originally created inferior to Adam.

Luther's Genesis lectures, however, also present a different picture. They indicate how frequently Luther transcends the traditional position of perpetual hierarchy to make astonishing – and even radical – claims for an original equality between Eve and Adam. He often emphasizes that God created Eve as equal to Adam. For example, after contending that Adam and Eve were »outstanding philosophers« while they were free from sin, Luther tells his students:

»Eve had these mental gifts in the same degree as Adam [in Heua aeque atque in Adamo], as Eve's utterance shows when she answered the serpent concerning the tree in the middle of Paradise. There it becomes clear enough that she knew to what end she had been created and pointed to the source from which she had this knowledge; for she said (Gn 3, 3): 'The Lord said.' Thus she not only heard this from Adam but her very nature was pure and full [ipsa natura adeo fuit pura et plena] of the knowledge of God to such a degree that by herself – »per se« – she knew the Word of God and understood it.«¹⁴

¹² Examples of this tradition can be found in Kristen E. KVAM; Linda S. SCHEARING; Valarie H. ZIEGLER: *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readings on Genesis and gender*. Bloomington, Indianapolis, IN 1999.

¹³ WA 10 II, 52, 18-21 ≙ Am I, 69.

¹⁴ WA 42, 50, 6f ≙ Am I, 66f. Luther's point here coheres with and expands upon the notes he made about Eve's knowledge of God in his outline for the Genesis lectures; see WA 42, xxi, 29-32.

In this portrayal, there is no hint that Eve possessed a weaker intellect or piety than Adam. Rather Luther underscores Eve's perfect knowledge of God. He thereby counters an exegetical tradition that endorsed Adam's superiority by stressing Eve learned about God's will only because Adam instructed her concerning it. Luther's stress that Eve »by herself knew the Word of God and understood it« offers a remarkable depiction of equality between Eve and Adam.

It would be inappropriate to overlook ways that Luther wavers between views of woman's inherent inferiority and positive assertions of her original equality. Ironically, these waverings help in viewing the contradictions as originating with Luther rather than a later editor.¹⁵ Some might worry that the text of the Genesis lectures available to us has been too heavily redacted to be of much use in arriving at what Luther himself thought or said. Any appeal to a later redactor to explain Luther's contradictions on woman's original inferiority or equality, however, would need to explain what prompted an editor to add one of them without erasing assertions to the contrary. It appears more probable to locate the source of wavering in Luther himself.

IV Conclusion

While it is inappropriate to deny Luther's wavering, it also is wrong to discard his legacy on the Woman Question simply because of its internal ambivalence. Indeed his vacillations strengthen rather than negate his contributions to theological anthropologies that promote equality as God's will for male and female relations. Although on one side of the contradiction Luther preserves dominant assumptions about woman's inferiority, on the other side of the contradiction, he assails notions of perpetual hierarchy by insisting that Eve was created by God to be fully equal to Adam.¹⁶

Of course, the creation of Adam and Eve is only the first scene in the human story. Their tale – and ours – takes a significant turn with their temptation and fall and their subsequent expulsion from Eden. Luther's lectures on

¹⁵ Here I am thinking about the research of Peter MEINHOLD: *Die Genesisvorlesung Luthers und ihre Herausgeber*. S 1936; see also Jaroslav PELIKAN's discussion in his »Introduction« to Am I, x-xxi.

¹⁶ Moreover, because on this egalitarian side, Luther contends for the fullness of Eve's equality both in terms of her being as well as her doing, he makes a considerable advance over anthropologies that would restrict woman's equality to a particular facet of her being.

these episodes in the primordial narrative also present an ambivalent legacy. He clearly rejoins hands with hierarchy by insisting that God intends for men to rule over women after the Fall. And yet, Luther's portrayals of Eve outside of Eden are striking. They present her as a saint – a justified sinner – rather than as a temptress. Maintaining that Eve interprets all of her life in light of God's promises, Luther presents her as a model of evangelical insight and courage.

Luther's ideas – and Luther research – can offer significant resources to churches in the twenty-first century as Christians respond to the ways the Woman Question is asked in their own contexts. This question continues to be disputed within our societies and cultures as well as within our churches. At times the focus is on woman's roles in household or society. At other times, the debates center on ordaining women to the public ministry of Word and Sacrament. And Christians – from local study groups to denominational offices to worldwide communions – are examining what scripture and tradition say about woman. Luther's attention to the Woman Question and his assertions for the original equality of woman and man are rich and fruitful aspects of his legacy. Through these remarkable assertions, he refutes a central tenet of the dominant tradition of Christian anthropology, namely, its conviction that a perpetual hierarchy of men being above and over women was God's original and abiding intention for gender relations. Luther thereby makes important contributions to the work of constructing anthropologies that present mutuality and equality as paradigmatic for what it means to be created human, male and female.