Incarnational Friendship: A Feminist- and Womanist-Inspired Revision of Luther’s “Happy Exchange” Theory of Atonement

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St. Luke tells us that the women who followed Jesus to the cross “were beating their breasts and wailing for him” (Luke 23:27 NRSV). Some feminist and womanist theologians still wail at the sight of the cross—they reject traditional theories of atonement that regard the torture and death of an innocent man as a good intended by God. Many feminists and womanists find God’s saving activity hidden beneath this senseless and tragic brutality. Our goal in the present article is to analyze what feminist and womanist theologians have to say about the cross of Jesus, and from this, to examine our understanding of God’s saving activity in light of their helpful critique.

To begin, we will listen to feminist and womanist theologians who preclude any salvific efficacy of the cross whatsoever. Their voices are not necessarily representative of feminist and womanist theology as a whole; other feminist and womanist theologians embrace the cross as redemptive. But it is worth hearing critiques of atonement in their most radical form. When feminists and womanists do develop theories of the cross, they do so in various ways, of course, but around consistent themes, which we will consider in the second part of the essay. Then finally, we will re-examine Martin Luther’s “happy exchange” theory of atonement to see whether it can address both the feminist and womanist critiques and account for the gravity of sin and the salvific efficacy of the cross. That is, we will ask whether Luther can provide a resource for feminist and womanist theology, only after allowing feminist and womanist concerns to apply Luther’s doctrine in ways Luther himself would never have considered.

Rejecting Atonement

In their now famous essay, “For God So Loved the World?” Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker contend that connecting the crucifixion of Jesus in any way with human salvation makes God “a divine sadist and a divine child abuser,” whose “abuse is paraded as salvific and the child who suffers ‘without even raising a voice’ is lauded as the hope of the world.” They argue further that atonement theology perpetuates continued abuse and victimization. Picking up on this argument, Rita Nakashima Brock notes atonement theory’s dependence on patriarchal images: “The shadow of the punitive father must always lurk behind atonement. He haunts images of forgiving grace.”

Delores Williams levels a similar critique, drawing on black women’s unique experience of surrogacy. Williams resonates with the biblical story of Hagar, who, when her slave holders Abram and Sarai could not produce a child of their own, was forced to bear Abram’s child in Sarai’s place (Gen 16). Later, when Sarai (now Sarah) was miraculously able to conceive, Hagar and her son were cast out of the home. “Because she was a slave,” Williams writes in Sisters in the Wilderness, “[Hagar’s] body, like her labor, could be exploited in any way her owners desired. Her reproduction capacities belonged to her slave holders.”

Surrogacy, like that forced upon Hagar, has been a feature of African American women’s experience as well, in different capacities throughout American history. In the antebellum period black female slaves were often coerced to act as surrogates for their slave-owners’ wives: ignoring their own children to nurture hers, filling in for her in governing the household, even acting as the slave-owner’s lover, freeing the slave-owner’s wife to live up to the sexless ideal for women of that period. After emancipation, when such coerced surrogacy was no longer upheld by laws protecting slave-owners’ rights to their property, social pressures continued to influence black women to fulfill “voluntary” surrogacy roles.

Attending to black women’s historic experience of surrogacy raises questions about how we understand the significance of Jesus’s cross. If “Jesus died on the cross in place of humans, thereby taking human sin upon himself,” Williams writes, then “Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure; he stands in the place of someone else: sinful humankind.” So part of Williams’s aim in Sisters in the Wilderness is to raise the question “whether the image of a surrogate-God has salvific power for black women, or whether this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied their experience with surrogacy.”

For Williams the answer is clearly the latter. For one, “there is the issue of the part God the Father played in determining the surrogate role filled by Jesus, the Son.” If Jesus is a surrogate, is God a white slave-owner? Black women simply cannot worship that kind of a God. Neither do they want anything to do with salvation that relies on someone’s having to act as a surrogate: “Salvation does not depend upon any form of surrogate made sacred by traditional and orthodox understanding of Jesus’ life and death.” Further, this theology of the cross assumes that Jesus died for the sake of sinners, but, as JoAnne Marie Terrell, commenting on Williams’s argument, points out, “the slaves would have no need for justification of this kind, in light of their innocence and the empirical evidence of their oppression by whites.” How then, in the cross, can we find good news for those who have been sinned against? This is an important question to which we will return at the end of the essay.

Moreover, for Williams and for Brown and Parker, our theories of atonement glorify the cruel and unjust suffering of Jesus, held up as an example to be imitated. Speaking in the context of sexual and domestic violence, Brown and Parker believe this type of oppression has been sustained by the fact that many women have been convinced their suffering is justified. And it is “this fundamental tenet of Christianity” that Christ suffered and died for us that “upholds actions and attitudes that accept, glorify, and even encourage suffering.” If Jesus is said to have given his life for us, then, Brown and Parker say, it seems clear “we should likewise sacrifice ourselves. Any sense that we have a right to care for our own needs is in conflict with being a follower of Jesus. Our suffering for others will save the world.”
The woman who internalizes this theology can get trapped in a cycle of abuse: When redemptive suffering is held before her in the image of Jesus on the cross, she feels herself urged to suffer for the sake of others. She willingly endures abuse and pain, believing it will bring about the salvation of others. She sees it as her role “to suffer in the place of others, as Jesus suffered for us all.”

Pushed to its most twisted extreme, this theology incites battered women “to be more concerned about their victimizer than about themselves.”

If the image of Jesus on a cross perpetuates violence against women, the image of a “loving father” carrying out the suffering and death of “his” own son sustains a different kind of abuse. “When parents have an image of a God righteously demanding the total obedience of ‘his’ son—even obedience to death—what will prevent the parent from engaging in divinely sanctioned child abuse?” Further, this image has left us with little resources for victims of abuse. What could a theology that identifies love with suffering possibly say to a child having to navigate the inner conflict between a parent’s professed love and the suffering that same parent forces upon her?

Similarly, Williams argues that “surrogacy, attached to this divine personage, thus takes on the aura of the sacred.” If black women accept the idea that the world is redeemed by Jesus’s acting as a surrogate, she asks, “can they not also passively accept the exploitation that surrogacy brings?” Instead, she says, womanist theologians must reject a theology of the cross if they are to show black women “that God did not intend the surrogacy roles they have been forced to perform. God did not intend the defilement of their bodies as white men put them in the place of white women to provide sexual pleasure for white men during the slavocracy.”

The highly controversial “Re-imagining” conference, held in November 1993 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was part of the World Council of Churches’ “Decade of Solidarity with Women.” After the conference, critics released to congregations of denominations supporting the conference a document listing what they took to be highly provocative statements by the conference speakers. Among these was Williams’s reply to a direct question about her theory of atonement: “I don’t think we need an atonement theory at all . . . I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.” In *Sisters in the Wilderness* she states even more directly: “There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross.”

In place of atonement, Williams advocates what she calls the “ministerial vision” of Jesus. “Jesus did not come to redeem humans by showing them God’s love manifested in the death of God’s innocent child on a cross.” Rather “Jesus came to show life—to show redemption through a perfect ministerial vision of righting relations between body (individual and community), mind (of humans and of tradition) and spirit.” Redemption, for Williams, is an invitation “to participate in this ministerial vision of righting relations.” That is to say, redemption is “not something one has to die to reach.” Redemption comes through the “ethical thought and practice upon which to build positive, productive quality of life . . . as prescribed in the sermon on the mount, in the golden rule and in the commandment to show love above all else.” For Williams the cross is not properly a part of redemption. Rather, the cross represents “the evil of humankind trying to kill the ministerial vision of life in relation that Jesus brought humanity.”

Brown and Parker likewise conclude, “no one was saved by the death of Jesus.” Christians have so extensively theorized about the salvific efficacy of the cross, they say, because “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering.” Therefore, “if Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from theology. We must do away with the atonement.”

But Brown and Parker ask—rightly, I think—“If we throw out the atonement is Christianity left? Can we call our new creation Christianity even with an asterisk?”

Re-envisioning Atonement

Other feminist and womanist theologians, however, emphasize the saving significance of the cross in other ways. Elizabeth Johnson, for instance, says what is revealed in the cross “is not Jesus’ necessary passive victimization divinely decreed as a penalty for sin, but rather a dialectic of disaster and powerful human love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost.” It is “the paradigmatic locus of divine involvement in the pain of the world.” Not only does God participate in the suffering of the world through the cross, but for Johnson, God “overcomes, inconceivably, from within through the power of love.”

We will have more to say about this theme of solidarity later; for now it is sufficient to point out that what is at stake for Johnson in this image is that it challenges the hegemony of patriarchal rule: “The crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful man,” and thus exemplifies “the kenosis of patriarchy,” the self-emptying of male dominating power in favor of the new humanity of compassionate service and mutual empowerment. In this model of divine solidarity, redemption is accomplished through the cross “in a way different from the techniques of dominating violence. The victory of shalom is won not by the sword of the warrior god but by the awesome power of compassionate love, in and through solidarity with those who suffer.” Thus, while Johnson rejects the cross as an image of the passive victimization of Jesus on behalf of others, she re-appropriates the cross as an image of “heartbreaking empowerment.”

Likewise, JoAnne Terrell says that while she is “aware of the problematical nature of the language of sacrifice, the potential and actual abuses thereof” she does “not think the problem is with the imagery per se.” Rather, she wants “to posit a transformed, sacramental notion of sacrifice that has saving significance for the African American community and for black women in particular.”

When they theorize about the saving significance of the cross, however, feminist and womanist theologians do not leave behind the radical critique of classic theories of atonement such as we saw in Williams and in Brown and Parker. Rather, they re-envision atonement in light of this critique. Perhaps we can call it atonement with an asterisk. We will examine two themes around which some feminist and womanist theologians re-organize the doctrine of atonement: First, the cross was not intended by God; it was an historical consequence of the life of Jesus in the context in which he lived it. Second, we cannot infer from the cross that God ever intends the suffering of others. Rather, on the cross God suffers in loving solidarity with all who suffer.
Feminist and womanist theologians understand the cross as an historical consequence in two senses: First, the cross is what Kelly Brown Douglas calls "a fait accompli of his ministry." That is, anyone who lived the life Jesus lived, challenging the hegemonic power-structures he challenged, in the context in which he challenged them, would inevitably have suffered a similar fate. Thus Jesus's life, Johnson says, "bore the signature of his death." Secondly, feminist and womanist theologians like Johnson and Douglass assert that the violent and oppressive men who crucified Jesus alone bear the responsibility for his death. These emphases counteract any sense that God willed or sanctioned or was in any way party to the crucifixion of Jesus, and thus exonerate God of any culpability for the act. The proof of this, Douglas says, is "the fact that God responded to the crucifixion not with approval of this evil attack on the human body, but with the resurrection, a body-affirming act."

It is for this reason, Terrell says, that "the cross became the central motif in the liturgies, hymnody and confessional utterances of African Americans": because the unjust suffering of Jesus provides "tangible parallels to the historical suffering of the community." Terrell's sacramental notion of sacrifice does not view Jesus as a victim who passively consents to the evil done to him; nor does it view sacrifice as the direct objective of the cross. Rather, it views Jesus's sacrifice, like that of the martyrs, from a position of great power, "as the surrender or destruction of something prized or desirable for the sake of something with higher claim." That this image "got lost in the rhetorical impetus of the language of surrogacy," Terrell argues, is an historical accident that does not account for the scandal of the cross: "that something, anything, good could come out of such an event." This historical consequence view of the cross, however, is not without criticism from feminist and womanist theologians. For Brock, a focus on the historical reasons for the cross only delays the question of God's innocence.

In Christology's most benignly paternalistic forms, the father, who loves all creation, does not desire to punish us. Instead, the father allows the son to suffer the consequences of the evil created by his wayward creation. The father stands by in passive anguish as his most beloved son is killed because the father refuses to interfere, even though he has the latent power to do so.

Brown and Parker also critique this understanding of the cross as a kind of victim blaming. To place the reason for the cross upon the kind of life Jesus lived is like saying "Jesus is responsible for his death on the cross," in the same way some say "a woman who walks alone at night on a deserted street is to blame when she is raped."

In principle, Brown and Parker certainly would rather understand the death of Jesus as a consequence of history than the intention of God, but instead of Jesus's choice to endure or accept this suffering, they want to reframe the discussion around what he refused to relinquish:

Redemption happens when people refuse to relinquish respect and concern for others, when people refuse to relinquish fullness of feeling, when people refuse to give up seeing, experiencing, and being connected and affected by all of life. Lust for life—the insistent zest for experiencing and responding—is what has the power to create community and sustain justice.

The Suffering of God

The second theme around which feminist and womanist theologians develop a vision of the cross is the notion that on the cross God suffers in loving solidarity with all who suffer. Protesting the tendency of a few womanist theologians (I suspect she is thinking particularly of Williams here) to belittle any theology of the cross, Terrell writes: "I believe that Christians need to ponder the implications of Christ's death continuously, because the drama testifies to the exceedingly great lengths to which God goes to advise the extent of human estrangement. It is no slight on the intelligence of black women when they confess this." This theme of entering into human estrangement becomes important for feminist and womanist understandings of the cross.

Johnson sagely notes how strange it is that the Christian tradition has remained tethered to the Greek philosophical (read patriarchal) conception of an impassible, apathetic God, despite our confession that, in Jesus Christ, God suffered a brutal execution at the hands of violent men. How could so powerful an image, rather than actually influencing our perception of God, instead give rise to such unsatisfactory formulations as: Jesus suffers only in his finite human nature, but suffering cannot be predicated of the divine? For Johnson, this is a testimony to the pervasiveness of patriarchal power. For Johnson, as for many other feminist and womanist theologians, there is no question: the cross "is the parable that enacts Sophia-God's participation in the suffering of the world."

Johnson is somewhat wary of extending the image of the suffering God too far. There is a growing trend among modern theologians to find God's glory in humiliation, God's power in impotence, to the extent that God is essentially weak. Johnson commends this image "intended by some theologians," she supposes, "to challenge the abuse of power within patriarchy so marked by the domination of those in charge." Nevertheless, she warns that the image can be dangerous, particularly when spoken to women. Recalling that all systems of oppression inculcate into the oppressed a feeling of hopelessness, which diminishes the drive to resistance, Johnson argues that divine powerlessness does not liberate the oppressed, but serves only to maintain this sense of despair. She writes, "the ideal of the helpless divine victim serves only to strengthen women's dependency and potential for victimization, and to subvert initiatives for freedom, when what is needed is growth in relational autonomy and self-affirmation."

"The antidote" to the macho-man God of classical theism, then, is not "the reverse image of a victimized, helpless one." Instead, Johnson says, we must "step decisively out of the androcentric system of power-over versus victimization" altogether, and re-imagine the categories of power, pain and human experience.

A deeper criticism of suffering God theology is found, once again, in Brown and Parker. The modern emergence of suffering God theology is, they admit, "theological progress," but, they argue, it does not liberate those who suffer because it remains hampered by the problem of emulation: It "still produces the
same answers to the question. How shall I interpret and respond to the suffering that occurs in my life?" The answer is that I am to "patiently endure; suffering will lead to greater life."

More pointedly, Brown and Parker call into question the connection between solidarity and redemption. Just like, as Johnson says above, divine solidarity softens the blow of God's existence in the face of evil but does not provide a theoretical answer to the theodicy question; so also, Brown and Parker say, the notion that God bears the burden of suffering with us may perhaps make suffering more bearable, but "bearing the burden . . . does not take the burden away." Pushing a little further still, Brown and Parker ask: "Do we need the death of God incarnate to show us that God is with us in our sufferings? . . . Was God not with us in our suffering before the death of Jesus? Did the death really initiate something that did not exist before?"

The Incarnational Friendship Model

Brown and Parker's criticism brings to light a limitation in suffering God theology and in many feminist and womanist constructions of atonement more generally: Feminist and womanist atonement theories have important insight into the nature of God, how God acts (and does not act) in the cross. They are, however, sometimes reticent to say what is effected by the cross, if they do not reject its efficacy outright. As a result, their positive formulations of the cross sometimes fail to match the vigor of their doctrine of sin—a doctrine with a shift in focus, no doubt, from the traditional forgiveness of the sinner to liberation of the one sinned against, but a vigorous doctrine of sin nonetheless. Could it be that an atonement theory that does not account for the salvific efficacy of the cross cannot deal sufficiently with the gravity of sin? By way of conclusion, then, I would like to re-examine an old theory of atonement, but one that is often left out of the textbook summaries—namely Luther's happy exchange theory. Historians of atonement theory have given precious little attention to Luther, folding him into the tradition of atonement theories focusing on the satisfaction of God's wrath, which stem from the eleventh-century Benedictine theologian Anselm.

I submit that atonement theology generally, and perhaps Protestant versions in particular, need the feminist and womanist critique of atonement. And I submit that feminist and womanist theologians could critically engage an atonement theory like Luther's—which, as I will argue, can hold the weight of the saving communication of idioms that the incarnation brings about.

I draw heavily here from Kathryn Tanner and Dianna Thompson, two feminist theologians who, in very different ways, have examined the happy exchange view. Tanner actually argues for an "incarnational model," but she says that the incarnation is the basic mechanism of atonement in the happy exchange model. She argues that adopting the incarnational model would enable us "to revise traditional descriptions and explanations of the saving significance of the cross so as to do justice to all the criticisms that white feminist and womanist theologians level against classical atonement theories." And it would "supplement feminist and womanist theologies," by "deflecting criticism" that they have rejected the cross altogether.

Luther's happy exchange model, as laid out in his brief 1519 homily "Two Kinds of Righteousness" and elsewhere, is simply that Christ Jesus himself is present in the act of faith, just as St. Paul prays for the Ephesians "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (Eph 3:17). "Through faith in Christ," Luther says, Christ himself "becomes ours." And when Christ becomes ours through faith, "everything which Christ has is ours" as well. When the believer is united to Christ through faith, whatever grace, righteousness, life and peace are in Christ become hers; and whatever sin, evil and suffering are in her become Christ's. Yet, the happy exchange model of the atonement is just a case of the saving communication of idioms that the incarnation brings about. Understood with reference to the incarnation, she says, atonement "can no longer be limited to the cross. Humanity is at one with the divine in Jesus—on the cross as everywhere else in Jesus' life." Still, "the saving effects of the incarnation . . . are felt . . . no more so than on the cross, where those life-giving powers of the divine nature of Christ are so much needed—remedying the loss of the humanity of Christ's own powers of life as they ebb away in full physical and spiritual torment."

A self-described "Lutheran feminist," Thompson is all too aware of the deep linguistic chasm between feminism and Luther's theology of the cross. Most glaringly, even the moniker "happy exchange" seems flippant in light of what we have seen feminist and womanist theologians say about Jesus's death as an evil act, the unintended consequence of his life and ministry, inflicted upon him by violent and oppressive men. Thompson says, "a feminist theologian of the cross must employ an image that better captures the horror of the historical reality of Christ's crucifixion." An even deeper problem is Luther's favored metaphor to describe the happy exchange, that of "Christ as a bridegroom who marries a 'poor wicked harlot' and takes on all her grievous sins, thus saving her from rightful damnation.

Still, Thompson has hope that "Luther's vision for life with the cross at the center and feminist visions for Christian repentance and healing can be brought together in ways that preserve the integrity of both sides." In service of this hope, she re-imagines the metaphor: "Rather than a joyous exchange between Christ and the wicked harlot," she proposes "the model of friendship: God's atoning work for us on the cross is done through Jesus's befriending humanity." She recognizes that "Luther likely utilized the metaphor of marriage for the self-giving love that ideally exists between spouses," but notes also that in the Gospel of John, "the image of friendship explains the meaning of Jesus's life and, specifically, his death on the cross." Of course, Thompson's friendship metaphor retains, from Luther's less tasteful image of marriage, the notion that the relationship is established through faith.

So what happens when we employ the happy exchange model of atonement as rooted in the doctrine of incarnation and reorganized around the controlling metaphor of friendship? We can call this new model "incarnational friendship," and I believe we will find that it addresses feminist and womanist concerns that God caused the suffering of Jesus on the cross and that
suffering as such is to be glorified and even prescribed to Jesus’s followers, while at the same time it sufficiently accounts for the gravity of sin and the salvific efficacy of the cross.

We have noted that, despite their robust doctrine of sin, some feminist and womanist theologians reject the salvific efficacy of the cross, in part because they do not want to identify the brutal suffering and death of Jesus as good, and in part because they repudiate the depiction of God as a harsh and demanding Father central to the most readily available model. In the incarnational friendship model, by contrast, the cross is salvific and sin is objectively dealt with, not because on the cross an infuriated Father got the pound of flesh he demanded, but because in the “happy exchange” of the incarnation the sin of humanity is assumed into the Godhead, just as the righteousness of Christ is received by the faithful. That the cross may be seen as salvific does not mean that God wills or is party to the crucifixion, because the soteriological mechanism of the cross is the Word’s assumption of the same sinful humanity that resulted in Jesus’s death—not in the sense that Jesus committed sin, but that he really assumes our sin. What is saving about the cross is not the suffering or the victimization that feminist and womanist theologians are so concerned to identify as evil. The cruelty and pain of the cross are marks of the sinfulness of humanity that must be assumed by the Word. The incarnational friendship model “does not mitigate the horrors of the cross, but highlights them as what gives salvation by way of incarnation its urgency.”

Further, the incarnational friendship model brings Jesus’s death on the cross into continuity with his public ministry and affirms the salvific efficacy of that ministry in its own right, seeing the cross as its paradigmatic locus. “One must not understand the saving consequences of the incarnation to be immediate,” Tanner says. “Instead, one must say that humanity suffering from the effects of sin is being reworked for its salvation over time, from Jesus’ birth up to and through his death.” In other words, Christ’s saving work is not limited to the cross, or to any other particular point in his life; rather it is extended over the whole of the incarnation. We are not saved from the pain of rejection until Jesus is dishonored in his hometown; from the agony of betrayal until Judas kisses his cheek. Recent tragedies in, for example, Baltimore, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina; and Ferguson, Missouri, are not redeemed until Jesus is wrongfully arrested and mercilessly beaten. And we are not saved from death until he dies. Only then are those aspects of humanity assumed from us by the Word and replaced with the Word’s own acceptance and life.

Neither does an incarnational friendship model glorify suffering. Tanner keenly notes that in the satisfaction models, criticized so vehemently by feminist and womanist theologians, there is an “externalization” between the suffering of Jesus and God’s saving action. In this view, God saves as a result of Jesus’s death, “the way a reward follows the doing of good works.” On the incarnational friendship model, by contrast, “what happens on the cross does not evoke what God does to save, in any strong sense.” Instead, the assumption of evil and death into Godself is God’s saving act.

Moreover, because in the act of incarnation the Word assumes what is properly human, Thompson says, “we are not to imitate Christ’s suffering.” Rather, Christ’s suffering is necessarily a unique salvific action. Thompson points to Luther’s exposition of the biblical story of the woman caught in adultery, John 8:3–11:

Luther focused on Jesus’ reaction, noting that he did not demand suffering, payment, or sacrifice. Rather, Jesus tells her, “Go and sin no more.” Luther described this pronouncement of Jesus as “laying her on the cross.” To live faithfully under the reality of the cross is to live as one who has been justified by God and opened to the brokenness and needs of the world in which one lives.

Because of this “once for all nature of Christ’s death,” Terrell writes, the cross “is not sanction for anyone’s or any group’s victimization,” regardless of “the church’s historical attempts to impose the hermeneutics of sacrifice on any people whom it . . . would subjugate.” Thompson says the uniqueness of Jesus suffering in the incarnational friendship model is the “death knell” to any attempt to prescribe suffering as a measurement of self-worth.

Notes

1. Borrowing a term from Alice Walker’s collection of essays, In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: A Womanist Prose (Orlando: Hardcourt, 1995; 1983), womanist theology is the re-examination of Christian scriptures, traditions, and practices in light of African American women’s experience, with the aim of contributing to their survival and wholeness. In Walker’s own words: “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.”

2. The designation “happy exchange” or “blessed exchange” became a technical label for Luther’s doctrine only in later expositions of Luther’s writings. The closest equivalent in Luther is fröhlicher wechsel, found in his “Freiheit eines Christenmenschen” (“The Freedom of a Christian”).

3. I cannot be sure whether this essay participates in the dynamics of power and privilege in which white men like me have routinely ignored, maligned, and misunderstood feminist and womanist theologies. When men have engaged women’s voices, it has all too often served as a sort of authorization of opinions that would otherwise have remained unheard for no other reason than that they are “women’s concerns,” and often without redirecting readers back to the original sources. I am attempting to play the role of host here: inviting readers from various walks of life into conversation with one another.


8. Williams, Sisters, 143.

9. Williams, Sisters, 143.

10. Williams, Sisters, 143.

11. Williams, Sisters, 145.


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Wipf & Stock, 1931], 125). On those occasions when Luther takes care to
contexts” (Aulén, [Eugene: Main Types of the Idea of Atonement,
5. Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist
Sisters, 146.
24. Williams, Sisters, 148.
25. Williams, Sisters, 146–47.
26. Williams, Sisters, 146.
28. Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist
Theological Discourse, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1992,
2002), 159.
29. Johnson, She Who Is, 265.
30. Johnson, She Who Is, 265.
32. Johnson, She Who Is, 159.
33. Terrell, Power in the Blood?, 139.
35. Terrell, Power in the Blood?, 139.
37. Johnson, She Who Is, 158.
38. See Johnson, She Who Is, 158; Douglas, What’s Faith Got to Do with It?, 100.
46. Johnson, She Who Is, 248.
47. Johnson, She Who Is, 159.
49. Johnson, She Who Is, 253–54. Re-imagining the categories of
power and pain is precisely what Johnson does, rather eloquently, in
the concluding chapter of She Who Is. Unfortunately space does not
permit a full discussion of those re-imagined categories here.
53. Lacking space to engage the relevant texts here, I simply note,
as Gustaf Aulén observed some eighty years ago, that many historians
of doctrine missed, and continue to miss, the fact that, though Luther
occasionally employed terminology proper to the satisfaction theory,
he gave “the terms in question new meaning and placed them in new
contexts” (Aulén, Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three
Main Types of the Idea of Atonement, trans. A. G. Hebert [Eugene:
Wipf & Stock, 1931], 125). On those occasions when Luther takes care to
express himself with the greatest possible exactness, he always employs
a strictly incarnational perspective. It should come as no surprise,
however, that an atonement theory rooted in the practice of penance,
and dependent upon the notion that law and order are the typical
expression of God’s relation to humanity, does not fit organically
into Luther’s corpus. Nevertheless, for many years the only known
alternative to Anselm’s satisfaction theory was some version of the
moral exemplar theory, “the so-called subjective view, and the evident
fact that Luther’s teaching on the Atonement was fully ‘objective’ . . .
seemed sufficient proof that it was to be ranged with that of Anselm”
(Aulén, Christus Victor, 120).

54. Kathryn Tanner, “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-
57. Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in Martin Luther’s
Basic Theological Writings, 2nd ed., ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis:
61. Deanna Thompson, Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and
the Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004). 135.
62. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, 136.
63. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, xi.
64. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, 136.
65. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, 136. While I appreciate
Thompson’s critique of the misogynistic language inherent in Luther’s
metaphor, I am not convinced friendship can cover all the ground the
matrimonial image does, given that part of the power of the metaphor
is the legal mechanism whereby one acquires what properly belongs to
one’s spouse.

66. Indeed, Tanner argues that an incarnational model of atonement
will require a radical—and potentially problematic—alteration of
classical Christology. “To see the connection [between the incarnation
and] the cross one must also not think of the humanity which the
Word assumes, as anything other than fallen humanity adversely
affected by the consequences of sin. One must not identify it, say, with
the pure, prelapsarian humanity favored in medieval accounts of
the incarnation. If the humanity assumed by the Word were already
in such great shape, then it would have no need of becoming the Word’s
own in order to be any different.” Tanner, “Incarnation,” 45–46. Luther
similarly understands the incarnation to mean that Christ assumed,
not a neutral or idealized human nature, but a concrete and actual
human nature, in which he really bears the sins of all human beings.
In his 1535 “Lectures on Galatians,” he writes: “Christ was to become
the greatest thief, murderer, adulterer, robber, desecrator, blasphemer,
etc., there has ever been anywhere in the world. . . . He is a sinner, who
. . . has and bears the sins of all [people] in his body—not in the sense
that he has committed them but in the sense that he took these sins,
committed by us, upon his own body, in order to make satisfaction
for them with his own blood.” Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians,

70. Tanner, “Incarnation,” 43.
71. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, 132.
72. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, 134.
74. Thompson, Crossing the Divide, 134.

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