The Significance of a Theology of Personalism for Contemporary Confessional Lutheranism

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Although a Google search will result in many hits for the word “personalism,” very few of them are connected in any way with Lutheran theology, especially confessional Lutheran theology. Since the specific term itself has only been in circulation for the past two centuries, it of course does not appear in Luther’s writings or the Lutheran Confessions, and is not used by the dogmaticians of the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy. In addition, no single definition of personalism is sufficient, since many different versions of personalism exist.

Nevertheless, the underlying principles of personalism follow a course of development that begins with ancient Greek philosophy, is given theological grounding in the New Testament, and continues to be refined throughout the history of the Christian Church to the present. In Western Christianity, personalism affirms that human dignity is based on relationship, the relationship of the person with God, and based on that relationship, of the person with other persons. Because of this, an encounter of contemporary confessional Lutheranism with the theology of personalism is essential. Moreover, some educators are convinced that the teaching of critical theory, which is entirely secular, has begun to permeate even confessional Lutheran schools. What is more, critical theory has permeated the media, politics, and the notion of “corporate social responsibility.” To meet this challenge, a theology of personalism can provide answers from a thoroughly biblical perspective to the concerns that gave rise to the varieties of critical theory.

Origin and Development of Personalism

Both Plato and Aristotle dealt with the question of what it means to be human; that is, how human persons are unique in the order of nature. For Plato, human identity was entirely defined by the human soul, which was in a sense imprisoned in a human body. Aristotle, on the other hand, emphasized the unity of body and soul, with the soul being the formal principle of the body. This view is known as *hylomorphism*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Platonic view rules out human individuality, because the soul, which lives eternally, can be united with another concrete body to constitute another individual. The Aristotelian view is also problematic, because a human being is an individual only until death, the dissolution of body and soul.[[2]](#footnote-2) It is worth adding that until the rise of the Enlightenment, hardly a trace can be found of the purely materialist view, that a human being is merely a complex amalgam of biology and chemistry whose every thought and act can be explained by scientific principles.

While early Christian theologians were fully aware that the one God identified himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as exemplified in the baptismal formula given by Christ himself—and that Jesus Christ was a human being who identified himself as also being God, these early theologians struggled with finding an appropriate vocabulary with which clearly to express these truths. Ultimately, they “baptized” terminology from Greek philosophy. While the Council of Nicaea applied the terms *ousia* (essence, nature) and *hypostasis* (substance, person) to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, the terms were not yet clearly distinguished. Further refinement occurred with the theological reflection of the three Cappadocians and later ecumenical councils. In dealing with the correct understanding of Christology, the Council of Chalcedon affirmed that Christ united two natures in one *hypostasis*, or person.

The concept of “person” was communicated to the West by Boethius, who defined “person” as, “…an individual substance of a rational nature.” In other words, the birch tree outside my house is a substance; it is unique, only that *that* birch tree. But it has a vegetative nature, not a rational nature. Similarly, my dog, Freddy, is a substance, only *that* dog, but with a sentient nature, not a rational nature. Only God, the angels (and demons), and human beings can be persons who are individual substances with rational natures. This definition was formative for theologians of the Middle Ages, preeminent among whom was Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas deals at length with the ramifications of the human person being a *rational animal*, a composite of body and soul, and the significance of that composite nature. He also introduces the concept of *human flourishing*, the fulfillment of our human nature as living, sentient, social, and rational animals by actualizing these capacities to become the most complete human persons we can be.[[3]](#footnote-3) For Aquinas, rationality includes autonomous volition. This raises the issue of how the understanding “person” in the context of the Holy Trinity is related to the first human “persons” being created in the image of God.

The opening chapters of Genesis clearly present God’s act of creation as a free act of his will; there can be no necessity in God. Similarly, when God created the first two human persons, he created them with free will; they were not automatons, but could choose to eat the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil—or not. God said—he spoke the Word (John 1:1)—and the Spirit of God hovered over the waters; God is not a single unmoved mover, but exists in a community of three persons, further reflected by his words, “Let *us* make….” “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Just as God himself existed in relationship, he created human persons to exist in relationship with him and with one another.

Then God blessed them. “God is love” (1 John 4:8). According to Kallistos Ware, “Developing the idea of divine *koinonia* or communion, the three persons indwell one another through a movement of reciprocal love. Each is totally open and transparent to the other two and totally interpenetrated by them in a union without confusion.”[[4]](#footnote-4) In addition, Maximus the confessor writes, “Therefore the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one God…for none of the hypostases or persons either exists or is intelligible without the others.”[[5]](#footnote-5) God, in his very existence, is not static, but an eternal outpouring of love among three persons. The Greek term for this is *perichoresis*, and the Latin is *circumincessio*, both of which imply interchange, sharing, reciprocity. By blessing Adam and Eve, God established that he intended human persons to share in this loving relationship. Furthermore, by instituting holy matrimony as the first human estate, he indicated that as human persons were created to share in his divine love, they were also privileged to manifest that love in their relationship with other human persons.

John Zizioulas explains how this was manifest in the foundation of the church at Pentecost:

Thus the mystery of the Church has its birth in the entire economy of the Trinity and in a pneumatologically constituted Christology. The Spirit as “power” or “giver of life” opens up our existence to become relational, so that he may at the same time be “communion” (*koinonia*, cf. 2 Cor 13:13). For this reason the mystery of the Church is essentially none other than that of the “One” who is simultaneously “many”—not “One” who exists first of all as “One” and *then* as “many,” but “One” and “many” at the same time….[in] the pentecostal event in Acts 2…. Christ’s existence is applied to our historical existence not *in abstracto* or individualistically, but in and through a *community.*[[6]](#footnote-6)

[NI]Kallistos Ware elaborates on this theme:

Only within an interpersonal communion can the triune image be properly realized. It is a relational image, reflected in the shared life of man and woman, in the primordial social bond of marriage that is the foundation of all other forms of community…. Belief in a God who is three-in-one, whose characteristics are sharing and solidarity, has direct and practical consequences for our Christian attitude toward politics, economics and social action, and it is our task to work out these consequences in full detail. Every form of community—the family, the school, the workplace…the city, the nation—has as its vocation to become, each according to its own modality, a living icon of the Holy Trinity.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Of course, none of this is possible for human persons by nature since the fall into sin, which is why Zizioulas frames his comments in the context of Pentecost, and Ware is clearly addressing those who believe in a God who is three-in-one. That any theological discussion of human persons must take into account the loss of human dignity in the fall and the restoration of that dignity in the work of Christ is accentuated by Rémi Brague:

…the idea of an intrinsic and inalienable human dignity clearly appeared first in Christianity, which placed the accent on the liberty of the person…. Dignity had been lost by the sin of Adam, then recovered by the sacrifice of Jesus. Thus it is the result of divine grace and the economy of salvation, which works itself out in history…. For human nature, the incarnation of the Word was the cause of an undreamed-of promotion.[[8]](#footnote-8)

[NI]This same thought is beautifully expressed by the liturgy of the church in a Collect for Christmas day that dates back to sixth or seventh century:

*Deus, qui humanae substantiae dignitatem et mirabiliter condidisti, et mirabilius reformasti, da, quaesumus, nobis eius divinitatis esse consortates, qui humanitatis nostrae fieri dignatus est particeps.* [O God, who has both wondrously created the dignity of human nature and more wondrously restored it, grant us, we beseech you, to be sharers of the divinity of him who deigned to become a partaker of our humanity.][[9]](#footnote-9)

These themes were incorporated into the work of later personalists, contextualized, and elaborated on. As was mentioned earlier, there is not a single “school” of personalism. The term itself was coined by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who applied it in part to his understanding of the philosophy of Kant. In philosophical circles, it was then taken up by various streams of Romantics and transcendentalists.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Roman Catholic theologians and philosophers such as Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, and Hans Urs von Balthasar contributed to the study of the theme of personalism in the twentieth century. Especially with a political context in mind, Maritain characterized personalism as a reaction against the two opposite errors of dictatorship and anarchy, and credited a Thomistic understanding of personalism with avoiding both excesses. This is because “…each one of us is still subordinated to the good of persons, to the person life of *others* and, at the same time, to the interior dignity of one’s own person.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Mounier echoes this idea:

The nature of the person now discloses its fundamental tension. It is constituted by a double movement, contradictory in appearance but in fact dialectical, on the one hand towards the affirmation of personal absolutes that resist any limitation, and on the other towards the creation of a universal union of the world of persons….The conception of a human race with a collective history and destiny, from which no individual destiny can be separated, is one of the sovereign ideas of the Fathers of the Church.[[12]](#footnote-12)

[NI]Hans Urs von Balthasar, building on a quotation from Denis de Rougemont, adds the idea of vocation (which he calls “mission”) to the concept of person as individual and as community, “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you,’ Christ says. Here we can presuppose, with St. Thomas, that in a trinitarian sense *missio* is the economic form of the eternal *processio* that constitutes the persons of the Son and the Spirit in God.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Most recently, Pope John Paul II was most instrumental in further developing a theology of personalism. His personalism was a synthesis of Thomistic metaphysics and the insights of phenomenology. It was also influenced by his experience of, and counter-reaction to, Hegelian totalitarianisms, in both their Nietzschean (National Socialism) and Marxist-Leninist (Communism) manifestations.[[14]](#footnote-14) He defines personalism as “…not primarily a theory or theoretical science of the person. Its meaning is largely practical and ethical: it is concerned with the person as a subject and an object of activity, as a subject of rights, etc.”[[15]](#footnote-15) He affirms the importance of the human person consisting of both body and soul. The “inner life” of the soul, grounded in love (as created in the image of God, since God is love), necessarily manifests itself in the acts of the body, since the body is the means for the person’s expression of himself.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Love, acting through the body, will then result in works of mercy, which John Paul II refers to as the “service of charity.” This is not new with John Paul II; it is of course scriptural, and was also a concern of Thomas Aquinas. But it is thoroughly developed and emphasized in the personalism of John Paul II.[[17]](#footnote-17) This is summarized in an excerpt from the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*:

In our service charity, we must be inspired and distinguished by a specific attitude: we must care for the other as a person for whom God has made us responsible. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to become neighbours to everyone (cf. Lk 10:290-37), and to show special favour to those who are poorest, most alone and most in need. In helping the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned—as well as the child in the womb and the old person who is suffering or near death—we have the opportunity to serve Jesus. He himself said: “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40).[[18]](#footnote-18)

Pope Benedict XVI built upon the personalist foundation established by his predecessor. However, where John Paul II’s personalism was in part a reaction to, and corrective for his experience with National Socialism and Communism, Benedict XVI (who of course also lived through the Nazi regime) “…began to work out what this more personalist emphasis would mean for the way Christianity understands itself in the heart of the secular world.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This is especially significant in the context of contemporary human rights discourse, for which secular society offers only an agnostic and relativistic justification. Walsh argues, based on Benedict’s theology, “Human rights cry out for a transcendent basis, for they express the unconditional right of every human being in the world. If everything in existence has only a finite value, how can human beings turn out to be of infinite worth?”[[20]](#footnote-20)

Benedict answers this masterfully, based on the economy of the Holy Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity are not individual substances that stand alone next to each other, but are in their very nature relational. Relation is, in fact, the person itself, in an act of self-donation, which is love. Since human persons are created in the image of God, their vocation, by grace, is to be in relationship with other persons, especially in loving self-giving. In other words, human rights, understood from this perspective, are the rights to receive God’s gift of love through the persons he has united to himself in love. Benedict writes:

“The Son can do nothing of himself” (John 5:19). However, the same Christ who says this says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). This means, precisely because he has nothing of himself alone, because he does not place himself as a delimited substance next to the Father, but exists *in* total relativity toward him, and constitutes nothing but relativity toward him that does not delimit a precinct of what is merely and properly its own—precisely because of this they are one. This structure is in turn transferred—and here we have the transition to anthropology—to the disciples when Christ says, “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). At the same time he prays “that they may be one as we are one” (John17:11). It is thus part of the existence even of the disciples that man does not posit the reservation of what is merely and properly his own, does not strive to form the substance of the closed self, but enters into pure relativity toward the other and toward God. It is in this way that he truly comes to himself and into the fullness of his own, because he enters into unity with the one to whom he is related.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Personalism in Confessional Lutheranism

It was mentioned previously that the term “personalism” is not found in Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, or Lutheran dogmaticians of the age of Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it will prove fruitful to look for some of the emphases of personalist theology in these sources. In doing so, it becomes apparent that although these sources dealt at some length with the meaning of the human person being created in the image of God, because of the Reformation and post-Reformation historical context, the emphasis was placed on original righteousness, the loss of original righteousness, and the necessity of justification. Because of this, it is necessary to patch together excerpts from these sources to discover points of contact with a theology of personalism.

In his “Disputation Concerning Man” (*LW*34, 137-40), Martin Luther, reflecting Boethius, Aquinas, and others, affirms that reason is the best possession of man and something divine (4), and that it is the essential difference by which man is distinguished from the animals and other things (6). But reason alone is not sufficient, because man cannot truly know what he is until he sees himself in his origin, which is God (17). Man is a creature of God consisting of body and a living soul, made in the beginning after the image of God, without sin, so that he should procreate and rule over the created things, and never die (21).

Up to this point, Luther is writing from an ontological perspective as to the human person as originally created by God. But since the entry of sin, the human person can no longer be described in those terms. After dealing with the fall into sin, the remedy for this in the work of Christ, and the fact that the sinful nature remains even after redemption, Luther adds an eschatological component to the meaning of human persons.[[22]](#footnote-22) In a sense, the goal and purpose for man in this life is simply the life of the world to come: “Just as the whole creation which is now subject to vanity [Rom, 8:20] is for God the material for its future glorious form (36). And as earth and heaven were in the beginning for the form completed after six days, that is, its material (37), So is man in this life for his future form, when the image of God has been remolded and perfected” (38) .

The eschatological perspective introduces an “already but not yet” element to the condition of the human person. In other words, the image of God in man has been shattered, but not irredeemably. Restoration of that image begins already in this life, to be completed in heaven. Luther certainly emphasizes an “*extra nos*” understanding of how the righteousness of Christ applies to the believer, so that he takes our sin and corruption on himself, and covers us with his righteousness. But that results in an interior transformation as well. As he writes in his commentary on Galatians:

…he says: “Not I, but Christ lives in me.” Christ is my “form,” which adorns my faith as color or light adorns a wall. (This fact has to be expounded in this crude way, for there is no spiritual way for us to grasp the idea that Christ clings and dwells in us as closely and intimately as light or whiteness clings to a wall.) “Christ,” he says, “is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me. The life that I now live, He lives in me. Indeed, Christ himself is the life that I now live. In this way, therefore, Christ and I are one (*LW* 26, 167).

He uses even stronger language to emphasize the union between Christ and the believer in his treatise “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods”:

Christ with all saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form [Phil. 2:7], fights with us against sin, death, and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life, and blessedness. And through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. O this is a great sacrament, says St. Paul, that Christ and the church are one flesh and bone…. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love. Without love there can be no such change.

[NI]He uses similar—perhaps even stronger—language to express the union between Christ and the believer in “Eine schöne Predigt von Empfahnung des heiligen Sakraments” (SL XI, 609-21). At three points (§16, 18, 21) he uses the term “ein Kuchen” (one cake) to refer to the union of Christ with the believer, and of all believers with one another because of their union with Christ.

Christians who have been united with Christ and have experienced the eternal and infinite outflowing of love of Christ, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, will not limit their sharing of that love to fellow believers. After all, God so loved *the world* (John 3:16). For one who knows that love, it is only appropriate that one manifests it by love for one’s neighbor. And as Christ taught in the parable of the good Samaritan, love for one’s neighbor is not limited in any way. In his treatise “The Freedom of a Christian” Luther writes, “Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs to one another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us” (*LW* 31, 368). He later adds:

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor. Yet he always remains in God and in his love…. (*LW* 31, 371).

The Lutheran Confessions were written in a context of controversy, first with the Roman Catholic Church, and later with controversies within Lutheranism. They answer those controversies, and do not address the issue of personalism directly. Nevertheless, they affirm some of the basic principles of personalism. Human beings were created by God with original righteousness, perfect in body and soul, in the image of God, and “What else is this than that a wisdom and righteousness was implanted in man that would grasp God and reflect him, that is, that man received gifts like the knowledge of God, fear of God, and trust in God” (Ap II, 17-18)? The fall into sin corrupted human nature, but original sin is an accident, not the substance of human nature, so human persons remain human even after the fall (SD I, 38; I, 55). This means that one’s neighbor, even if not a believer, is still a person, and the Eighth Commandment clarifies that “…everyone should help his neighbor retain his rights” (LC VIII, 260). Finally, the eschatological dimension of personhood is addressed in a discussion of the doctrine of election in the Formula of Concord:

Again, Paul presents this in a most comforting manner when he points out that before the world began God ordained his counsel through which specific cross and affliction he would conform each of his elect to “the image of his Son,” and that in each case the afflictions should and must “work together for good” since they are “called according to his purpose.” From this Paul draws the certain and indubitable conclusion that neither “tribulation nor anguish, neither death nor life, etc. can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (SD XI, 49).

It will not surprise Lutheran readers that the personalist themes affirmed by Luther and the Lutheran Confessions were reaffirmed by Lutheran dogmaticians in the age of Orthodoxy.[[23]](#footnote-23) This is also true of more recent Lutheran theologians who authored standard texts on Lutheran doctrine, such as Franz Pieper, who affirmed that the seat of the image of God is in the soul, but is “…manifested also in the body, since the body is the organ of the soul and an essential part of man.”[[24]](#footnote-24) More striking is Adolf Hoenecke’s use of the term “person”:

Der Mensch besteht aus seiner vernünftigen Seele und einem orgnischen Körper und ist nach Leib und Seele ein Geschöpf Gottes, geschaffen zur Ehre Gottes und zu seiner eigenen Seligkeit…. Der Mensch is ein vernünftiges, also persönliches Wesen; genau definiert: persönlich geist-leibliches Wesen. [Man is composed of his rational soul and an organic body, and is a creation of God according to body and soul, created for the glory of God and for his own beatitude…. Man is a rational, therefore a personal being; precisely defined: a personal soul-and-body being.][[25]](#footnote-25)

It is worth adding that the rich tradition of both orthodox doctrine and deep spirituality in confessional Lutheranism is often expressed not only in its formal theology, but also in its hymnody. The sixth stanza of Nicholaus Herman’s Christmas hymn, “Lobt Gott, ihr Christen alle gleich” (1560) is one example that also affirms the Christian person’s union with Christ:

Er wechselt mit uns wunderlich:

Fleisch und Blut nimmt er an

und gibt uns in seins Vaters Reich

die klare Gottheit dran.[[26]](#footnote-26)

An Encounter between Personalism and Critical Theory

In his preface to “Why God Became Man,” Anselm of Canterbury explains his motivation for writing this treatise. Although the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ is based on sound biblical principles, unbelievers have scoffed at it because they have found it contrary to reason. His intent is to provide necessary reasons for the incarnation, to prove that in order for human persons to enjoy the blessed immortality in body and soul for which they were created, what is taught concerning the incarnation had necessarily to take place.[[27]](#footnote-27) In other words, this is a work of apologetics. It is not a work of polemics, which is clear from his comment, “…while the investigation seems difficult, the explanation is intelligible to all, and is appealing because of the usefulness and beauty of the reasoning.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Anselm offers an important reminder that when Christians present the truths of the faith to unbelievers, they often will have to break down barriers to the faith by presenting persuasive logical argumentation, and should do so winsomely. At times they will be arguing from a non-faith perspective, and must do so convincingly.

Confessional Lutherans will carefully assess the extent to which it is appropriate to use arguments based on human reason when they confront proponents of critical theory.

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay clearly present their arguments against critical theory from a non-faith perspective. In *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity—and Why This Harms Everyone*, they support liberalism in the way it was originally understood, contrast it with postmodernism and the rise of critical theory, and explain how this has influenced the social justice movement. In the introduction to the book, they refer to scholar-activists who “…interpret the world through a lens that detects power dynamics in every interaction, utterance, and cultural artifact—even when they aren’t obvious *or real*.”[[29]](#footnote-29) As a result, “In the face of this, it grows increasingly difficult and even dangerous to argue that people should be treated as individuals or to urge recognition of our shared humanity in the face of divisive and constraining identity politics.”[[30]](#footnote-30) These two principles, power dynamics and failure to recognize individuals as human persons, are core elements of critical theory, along with the subjectivity of postmodernism.

The authors examine and evaluate in turn various manifestation of critical theory, namely, postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical race theory and intersectionality, feminisms and gender studies, disability and fat studies, and how these relate to the theme of social justice. The primary sources they cite are valuable if one is to make an informed critique of critical theory. This is important, because too often those who rightly reject critical theory are uninformed as to its basic premises. Many of these critics are unaware that the varieties of theory listed above even exist; they often focus on only one of the varieties, so that critical theory and critical race theory become synonymous.

The solutions Pluckrose and Lindsay propose are based on post-Enlightenment principles of liberalism, but are helpful. First, it is important to realize that the postmodern principles upon which critical theory is based are (ironically) overwhelmingly prescriptive rather than descriptive; in social justice scholarship, “Declarations of *ought* have replaced the search for what *is*.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Following this, they supply a list of aspects of critical theory with which they agree, what they reject in critical theory, and what they contend for as corrections of critical theory.[[32]](#footnote-32) This is a valuable reminder that “…not everything that critical theory affirms is false.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Christians can be equipped to analyze and argue against critical theory effectively when dealing with those who would immediately reject any reference to God, Holy Scripture, or even transcendent values.

Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose of engaging in such discussions is not to achieve a victory of logical coherence, but to communicate the gospel. “Not everything that critical theory affirms is false,” and this is supported by Holy Scripture. Power dynamics were certainly at play when One who was despised and rejected was unjustly condemned to death by the ruling elite in both the religious and the civil realm. The reversal of this situation in God’s plan was celebrated by our Lord’s mother and sung by the church at Vespers, “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (Luke 1:52).

Scripture abounds with examples of honoring women and respecting their dignity (Phil 4:3). The poor, the widows, and the fatherless are to be treated justly (Isa 10:2). Aliens and strangers are to be treated as fellow citizens (Lev 19:34). Christ repeatedly had compassion on those who were disabled and suffering (Matt 14:14).

Somewhat more problematic is the issue of gender. It is clear from the first chapter of Genesis that when God created human beings in his image, he created them male and female (Gen 1:27). He then established holy matrimony, the union of one man and one woman, as the first, and foundation, of all social relationships (Gen 2:23-24). However, since the fall, “…there are some (although few) exceptions whom God has especially exempted—some who are unsuited for married life….” (LC VI, 211). Moreover, there are some who “…either indulge in open and shameless fornication or secretly do even worse—things too evil to mention, as unfortunately has been only too well proved” (LC VI, 214). Luther of course would not have specifically used a word for homosexuality, but would certainly have known about it (Rom 1:26-27).

Gender reassignment surgery was of course unknown to Luther.[[34]](#footnote-34) That some individuals are confronted with problematic issues is, however, clear from Scripture. As part of a discourse on marriage and divorce, Christ says, “ For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let the one who is able to receive this receive it” (Matt 19:12). Although it is statistically rare, a child is born with no discernible sexual identity. The other two cases to which Christ refers are those who were victims of the practice of emasculation, and those who chose to remain celibate. The first case is the most problematic, and has been used by proponents of gender reassignment surgery as confirming the right of any individual confused as to his or her sexual identity to change, to the extent possible, that identity.

That some individuals are confused about their sexual identity is simply true, as is the case of those who are born neither male nor female—or a bit of both. In “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” Flannery O’Connor describes a circus sideshow where men and women spectators are separated by a curtain. A “freak” who is “a man and a woman both” first reveals his/her body to the men, and then to the women. The freak says, “God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputin’ His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

In the Lutheran tradition, this is a theology of the cross (Luke 9:23). Christians can expect that this sinful world will be full of hardships and trials, and especially rejection of those who remain faithful to Christ. But the cross is accompanied by the gospel promise that God will give his people strength to bear the cross (1 Cor 10:13). In addition, Christians are called to assist each other in bearing their crosses (Gal 6:2). O’Connor illustrates this by the interchange between the freak and the audience:

“God done this to me and I praise Him.”

“Amen. Amen.”

“He could strike you thisaway.”

“Amen. Amen.”

“But He has not.”

“Amen.”

“Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God’s temple, don’t you know? Don’t you know? God’s Spirit has a dwelling in you, don’t you know…. I am a temple of the Holy Ghost.”

“Amen.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

A freak who is neither male nor female reminds Christians that they will certainly come into contact with trans-gender individuals. When faced with this, and other issues raised by critical theory, a theology of personalism is indispensable. God has not called us to identify people on the basis of class, gender, or ethnicity, and certainly not to ignore his clear revelation in Scripture in order to appeal to their social identity. The identity of each of them is a person lovingly created in God’s image, created to be in union and communion with the Holy Trinity and in relationship with all other persons. Since sin entered the world, this image has been shattered, and at times Christians will be hard pressed to relate to those who have turned their backs on their Creator and despise him and his followers.

But as those who have recognized their own corruption and know the unconditional love of God that has been poured out on them despite that corruption, the only possible response to any other person is: love. We may have misgivings as to the response we will receive, but “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). After all, like the freak and his audience, we are temples of the Holy Spirit:

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:13-16).

1. Jason T. Eberl, *The Nature of Human Persons* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eberl, 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kallistos Ware, “The Trinity: Heart of Our Life,” *Reclaiming the Great Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997), 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Maximus the Confessor, “Two Hundred Texts on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God” II. 1. https://orthodoxchurchfathers.com/fathers/philokalia/maximus-the-confessor-two-hundred-texts-on-theology-and-the-incarnate-dispensati.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Zizioulas, 112-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ware, 141-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rémi Brague, *The Kingdom of Man*, trans. Paul Seaton (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lauren Pristas, *Collects of the Roman Missal: A Comparative Study of the Sundays in Proper Seasons before and after the Second Vatican Council* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David Walsh, *The Priority of the Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 12-13, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Emmanuel Mounier, *Personalism*, trans. Philip Mairet (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “On the Concept of Person,” *Communio* 13 (Spring, 1966), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mary Christine Ugobi-Onyemere, “John Paul II in the Light of Thomas Aquinas: Personalism, Mercy, and the Quest for Holistic Existence,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 29, no.1-2 (2017): 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Karol Wojtyla, *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, trans. Sr. Theresa Sandock, OSM (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Adrian J. Reimers, “The Christian Personalism of John Paul II,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 29, no. 1-2 (2017): 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ugobi-Onyemere, 39-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Walsh, 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Walsh, 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Concerning the Notion of Person in Theology,” *Communio* 17 (Fall, 1990): 445. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Some of the other theologians previously mentioned also dealt with this to various degrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For example, see Roland F. Ziegler, “Defining Humanity in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78: no. 1-2 (January/April 2014): 107-27); also Bengt Hägglund, “Polemics and Dialogue in John Gerhard’s *Confessio catholica*,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XVI (2000): 159-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, vol. 1* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 521. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik, vol. 2* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1909), 304. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “He makes a marvelous exchange with us: he takes on flesh and blood, and in his Father’s kingdom he gives us (his) bright deity.” *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1986), no.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Anselm of Canterbuury, “Why God Became Man,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany*, ed. And trans. Eugene Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956),100. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Anselm, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity—and Why This Harms Everyone* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Pluckrose and Lindsay, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Pluckrose and Lindsay, 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Pluckrose and Lindsay, 266-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer, “The Incompatibility of Critical Theory andChristianity.” https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. It is important to note that although proponents of critical theory distinguish gender from sex, Scripture and the Christian tradition make no such distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Flannery O’Connor, “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O,Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 245). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. O’Connor, 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)