

Women's work: Feminist theology for a new generation

by [Joy Ann McDougal](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

Ten years ago Rebecca Chopp described how women's voices and feminist practices were transforming theological education and the church. Women, she said, were "doing saving work." Doing saving work signified something more than redressing gender injustices or adding women's stories to the church's story. It pointed to the distinctive practices that women were undertaking, practices that offered a fresh reading of Christianity.

At a time in which the diversity of feminist theology defies tidy definitions and agreed-upon agendas, "doing saving work" suggests what's afoot in feminist theology today—namely, bold reinterpretations of Christianity that seek to renew the life of the church and its witness to the world. The saving work of contemporary feminists includes three features in particular.

First, feminist theologians are drawing on women's everyday lives and especially the dynamics of God's grace working in and through them as sources for theological reflection. Appeals to women's experience are hardly new to feminist theology. But unlike earlier waves of feminist theology, in which appeals to women's experience were a wake-up call about women's marginalization, today feminist theologians turn to women's narratives as a source of embodied knowledge. Women's stories serve not only as the testing ground for new theological proposals, but also as material for building new theological traditions that revitalize the entire community of faith.

Second, an increasing number of feminist theologians are directing their energies toward the church's central doctrines and practices—justification by faith, the incarnation, baptism and the Eucharist. They are cutting new paths through these well-worn landscapes, exposing the negative effects of tradition and also its life-giving possibilities. Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, many feminist theologians are "taking back" their confessional traditions, refusing to let them go until they wrestle a feminist blessing from them.

Third, many women theologians are using insights and practices from feminist theology in order to address broader social and ethical questions confronting the church, such as globalization, care of the earth, and the shifting patterns of work and family. These feminist projects aim at something more than creating a women's-only discourse. They signal a mainstreaming of feminist discourse so that it might transform the practices of Christian communities and contribute to the flourishing of all of God's creation.

Some examples of the kind of saving work I have in mind are Serene Jones's *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace*; Mary Grey's *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture*; Sarah Coakley's *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*; Elisabeth Johnson's *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*; Stephanie Paulsell's *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* and Deanna Thompson's *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism and the Cross*.

By refracting their ecclesial traditions through the prism of feminist theories as well as the fabric of women's lives, all of these theologians offer fresh interpretations of the Christian faith. Some of their interpretations are unsettling. In keeping with earlier generations of feminist theology, these authors pose uncomfortable questions about the church's past and confront it with painful truths about the present. And yet these theologians' ultimate aim is not to deconstruct the Christian faith, but to strengthen its foundations and witness. Thus the most recent wave of Christian feminist proposals is best read as edifying discourse.

We can take Jones's and Grey's books as two indications of the kind of sophisticated saving work under way in feminist theology. Jones unabashedly puts secular feminist theory to "church work," using it to remap the core Reformed doctrines of justification and sanctification, sin and ecclesiology. She uses feminist theory not to deconstruct Reformed faith, but to create a new road map "to help one travel the terrain [of faith] in new ways."

For Jones, doctrines are not a set of rules or propositions that mark the boundaries of orthodoxy. Rather, doctrines are "imaginative scripts" and "life-shaping dramas" that persons of faith "inhabit" and "perform" in unique ways. This does not mean that doctrines are not normative or do not make truth claims, for they surely do. But doctrines also possess a certain fluidity that allows them to stretch across diverse lives and historical contexts and be embodied in culturally specific ways.

Throughout her book, Jones tests how well the central Reformed doctrines work when performed in women's lives. She calls together a community of women witnesses, her local church's Tuesday-night women's group, who try on and try out these Reformed doctrinal scripts and serve as their "contextual judge." Pairing feminist theory with women's local wisdom, Jones exposes not only the potential pitfalls of classical doctrines, but also how, with some skillful feminist remapping, doctrines prove capacious enough for new generations of women to inhabit in grace-filled ways.

In exploring justification and sanctification, Jones first takes the reader to Luther's courtroom and recounts his familiar drama of justification. Here the prideful sinner bent on earning his own salvation meets his undoing—the crucifying wrath of God which reveals both the sinner's impotence and his guilt before God. Instead of receiving his due punishment, the helpless sinner receives the unexpected and undeserved verdict of divine forgiveness. Through the proclamation of the gospel, the sinner is released from the bondage of his sin and comes to faith—saved by grace and not by his own righteousness.

To this classic Reformed drama, Jones poses a simple question: What happens when a woman performs Luther's dramatic script? With the help of feminist theory, she demonstrates how this drama of justification all too often "misses the mark" of women's lives—lives that are very often marked not by boastful arrogance but rather by an inadequate sense of personal agency. Women who already suffer from a lack of self-definition, and whose existence has already been undone by unjust relations of power, find themselves undone once again by the crucifying wrath of God. Rather than releasing a woman from her bondage to sin, Luther's courtroom drama recapitulates the very dynamics of her oppression—the "shattering she knows all too well."

Given the doctrine's potentially debilitating effects, Jones proposes a deft response: Why not reverse the plot-line of the Reformed narrative, offering women the story of sanctification first, followed by that of justification? In this way, women would first be given an empowering script about divine grace that secures their personal identity, affirms the goodness of their embodiment and sends them forth into the world with renewed agency and purpose. Clothed in sanctifying grace, a woman is no longer "a dispersed and fragmented identity" determined by gender roles not of her own choosing. She is held together within "the envelope of God's grace" and therein gains the freedom to "write new scripts of faithful living."

Once women inhabit this life-giving space of sanctification, justification returns to Jones's salvation drama, but within a revised script. Justification is a release not primarily from the sin of one's self-righteousness, but from the prison of gender constructions that bind women and men alike. It frees women and men from replaying inherited patterns of gender identity and social order.

At the same time, the drama of justification prevents women from blithely assuming the role of passive victims—those who are sinned against. Jones reminds women that theirs is always an “implicated resistance” to all gender constructions, and warns about the “arrogant triumphalism” of declaring oneself innocent of projecting false identity-constructions upon others.

Jones's most remarkable feat is her wresting of a feminist blessing from Calvin's doctrine of sin. As the symbolic daughters of Eve, women often bear a disproportionate burden of guilt and responsibility for sin's presence in the world—a guilt that can paralyze their agency and play into the hands of others' exploitation. And yet, as Jones points out, no aspect of Christian theology has a deeper resonance with feminist analyses of oppression than the doctrine of sin. Feminist theologians are wise to call upon this doctrine to denounce the structures of domination and injustice that human beings perpetrate against one another. The doctrine of sin enables feminists to denounce gender oppression as more than a social phenomenon; it is a violation of God's eschatological promise of the full flourishing of all human beings.

The most innovative gesture in Jones's feminist remapping of sin is her linking sin to the eschatologically oriented doctrines of sanctification and justification rather than to creation, as many of her feminist predecessors have done. Following Calvin and Barth, Jones insists that sin can be seen only with the eyes of faith, that is to say, within an economy of divine grace. By taking this eschatological turn Jones sidesteps the sticky feminist problem of hypothesizing about woman's essential nature or else about an original gender harmony from which humanity once fell. Instead, she speaks of sin from the eschatological perspective of God's desiring the full flourishing of all persons, and of women who know themselves to be justified and sanctified in faith. In this future-oriented framework, sin becomes at once a more fluid category—open to ongoing revision as it manifests itself in different historical and cultural circumstances. Even more, sin becomes “a grace-dependent concept,” which only appears “with a simultaneous affirmation of the promised grace that contradicts it.”

Once set within this grace-filled frame, feminist speech about sin (like all rightful sin-talk) is rhetorically pitched as edifying discourse. Sin-talk proves to be enabling rather than debilitating discourse; it invokes a “powerful sense of hope” that animates women’s agency in the world.

With these ground rules about sin-talk in place, Jones tests different aspects of Calvin’s doctrine of sin. What imaginative scripts does Calvin offer women about sin? Can they reveal the painful truths and deceptions about women’s lives or do they collude in women’s effacement? Once again Jones’s Tuesday-night women’s group takes center stage in her deliberations. They travel with her in the landscape of Calvin’s doctrine and assess whether his dramatic account can make sense of their specific experiences of gender oppression and also convey an empowering grace that heals their brokenness.

Three features of Calvin’s doctrine prove salutary to Jones’s feminist cartography. First, she upholds the Reformer’s root metaphor for sin as “unfaithfulness” or the opposite of “living according to God’s purposes by accepting God’s grace.” This category proves flexible enough to include the diversity of women’s experiences of oppression, and yet sufficiently normative to address the theological root of women’s oppression. Beneath this overarching theological rubric, Calvin reminds us that sin is chameleon-like; it assumes ever new forms, wears multiple guises and bears different fruits in each person’s life. Jones makes use of the Reformer’s insight into the pluriform and contextual nature of sin as her license to inscribe the diverse faces of women’s oppression, from wage exploitation to bodily harm, into Calvin’s landscape of sin. At the same time she questions Calvin’s individualized notion of unfaithfulness, insisting that feminists must speak out equally against “unfaithful cultures”—those institutional structures and cultural forces that perpetuate the gendered bondage to sin.

Second, Jones adopts Calvin’s insight into the imputed nature of original sin as a most compelling account of how men and women are born into and perform gender constructs not of their own choosing. Such gender constructs are hardly natural or “inherent” in the human condition, but they become inescapable or “inherited” dimensions of our human existence. Even as we contest these false gender scripts, the scripts have a total hold over our existence, shaping our language, our values and the social structures that we all participate in.

Third and perhaps most surprising, Jones subscribes to Calvin's account of the human condition as one of total depravity. What captures Jones's theological imagination is Calvin's riveting descriptions of sin's power to assault a human being "from the outside in," co-opting the self's resources and eventually destroying the self's integrity. Jones creatively links Calvin's descriptions to that of feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, who speaks of "the dissolving woman," ravaged and undone by demeaning relations with others and structures of domination that surround her. Through the personal stories of those gathered in her church group, Jones gives concrete expression to sin's insidious and pervasive power—for example, the economic exploitation that destroys the material basis of women's lives, the marginalization that aging, disabled or unemployed women experience as they lose their "use-value" to others, or else the sexual violence that dominates, violates and occupies the site of the self.

In the end, Jones offers Calvin's doctrine of sin a warm feminist welcome, though not an uncritical one. Certain of Calvin's tropes for sin, most notably his descriptions of the defiling and polluting power of sin, feed gender stereotypes about sexual purity that unfairly blame and shame women's bodies as the source of sin. No strategy of reinterpretation can redeem these scripts about sin. It is best to strip them from a contemporary Reformed theology.

Similarly, Calvin's harsh rhetoric about "the bondage of the will" and the lack of human freedom also need to be tempered in light of women's often fragile sense of agency. Invoking Calvin's insight that sin-talk should be "rhetorically scaled" in order to address different audiences, Jones proposes that feminist theology of sin would do well to amplify Calvin's countervailing rhetoric of responsibility over and against that of bondage of the will so as to affirm women's agency instead of reinforcing the dynamics of their oppression.

Roman Catholic theologian Mary Grey is less concerned with reforming a particular confessional tradition than with addressing a broader cultural crisis—that of global capitalism. Grey's is a profoundly spiritual quest. She first excavates the roots of "our corporate heartlessness" in our culture's disordered desires—what she describes as our culture's "addiction to consumerism," its "idolatry of money" and its "massive failure of compassion" for other creatures and the earth. Second, she proposes an alternative spiritual vision, a different language of desire that would return dignity to the least among us and a sense of shared responsibility for the collective flourishing of the earth and all of God's creatures.

What makes Grey's theological project feminist? For one, she focuses on the lot of poor women and the disproportionate burden that capitalist economic structures places on their lives. Grey exposes the gendered costs of globalization, inviting readers into the midst of the desert women of Rajasthan, one of the poorest rural areas in India, which has been hard hit by droughts in recent years.

Along with her husband, Grey has been deeply involved in a water irrigation project in this region and has gained firsthand knowledge of these women's daily struggles for survival. Through Grey's eyes, we accompany these women as they trudge day and night through the desert in search of water for drinking and washing. We become witnesses to the extremity of their daily suffering—the repeated cycles of malnutrition, rampant disease due to poor hygienic conditions, and lower survival rates due to female infanticide, anemia and maternal mortality. As Grey points out, the pressures of globalization have exacerbated the marginality of these women's existence. A combination of climate change (which has significantly shortened the cycles of drought), massive migration to the cities and market pressures to grow cash crops that require huge amounts of water have depleted India's already taxed water supply for rural areas.

Longstanding patriarchal attitudes and customs only heighten the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism on these women. The birth of a girl child in Rajasthan is perceived as "a burden from the start"; she will most likely be given less food and medical care than her brothers and has little chance of an education that could offer a way out of the cycle of rural poverty. Together globalization and patriarchal structures colonize women's bodies through ceaseless work and crush their spirits through the loss of hope.

Grey also uses her feminist angle of vision to expose how global capitalism destroys the "economy of care" between mother and child. Globalization wreaks havoc on this primary life-giving relation, for example, by separating women from their children across enormous geographical distances as they seek to secure the welfare of their families. There is a deep irony in the "global care chains" that capitalism constructs: poor women migrate to wealthy countries in order to provide care for other people's families, and then they send their wages home to ensure the survival of their own loved ones.

Grey's way out of the stranglehold of global capitalism is an unusual one, especially within feminist circles. She proposes a kenotic spirituality as an antidote to "the

overindulgence of consumerist society.” Christianity’s witness to a self-emptying, vulnerable God confronts the ethics of self-interest and unchecked consumption that prevails in global capitalism. Such a God reeducates our disordered desires and calls our heartless society back to the spiritual practices of compassion, solidarity and justice-building with the marginalized and the humiliated in our midst.

Grey is well aware that she has high feminist hurdles to overcome in advocating a kenotic spirituality. Feminist theologians have been wary of adopting this aspect of Christian tradition because the language of self-emptying, vulnerability and suffering sacrifice has proved all too often to be pernicious for women. A spirituality of self-renunciation can be quickly distorted into a glorification of suffering for suffering’s sake. Or else the notion of kenosis can become so spiritualized that actual suffering bodies are unattended to. In either case, a kenotic spirituality can end up “crucifying again” the most vulnerable of the earth. It can cement women into situations of suffering, rather than releasing them from the bondage of social and economic oppression.

Grey is quite cognizant of these dangers. Divine kenosis, she insists, does not mean that divine power is sacrificed but rather that it is relocated in a “relational love” that brings about forgiveness and awakens an ethic of care and compassion for others. God’s power remains steadfast in its embrace of the suffering and the vulnerable. Moreover, Grey insists that a contemporary kenotic spirituality be based on a radically reconstructed notion of human personhood, in which “compassion, empathy and solidarity” become the marks of perfection for all persons.

Here she guards against any single gender being unfairly assigned the burden of care for society. Both men and women need to develop “joint models of caring and mutuality” that challenge those structures of power and religious traditions that sanction the humiliation of others. Finally, Grey warns that the call to self-emptying praxis must never become an end in itself. A person’s voluntary encounter with human suffering should always be viewed as a cry of protest and a testimony of hope against the overwhelming evil that one experiences.

Like Jones, Grey appeals to the testimony of women’s lives to support her case. For example, she recounts the story of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman who was deported and eventually died in Auschwitz, to demonstrate the potency of a kenotic spirituality. In the face of the growing desperation of her Jewish community in Amsterdam, Hillesum found increasing personal freedom through such an interior

spiritual journey. The vulnerability of her social circumstances drew her closer to the vulnerability at the heart of God, and paradoxically to a deepened sense of personal responsibility for contesting the hatred and despair in her midst. Awareness of God's powerlessness awakened in Hillesum the desire and agency to become "the praying heart of the concentration camp." In the midst of her personal suffering, she lost neither her love for life nor her delight in "bringing divine presence into humanity's life." Her empathy for others and her response to suffering became acts of creative resistance against a life-denying political order.

Grey's focus on women in poverty and the prophetic possibilities of a kenotic praxis represent only half of the feminist theological agenda in her book. The other half is directed at global capitalism's destructive attitudes toward creation. Here she draws support from ecofeminist philosophy, which has exposed the longstanding links between the exploitation of nature and that of women. Nature has been dressed up with many of the same gender assumptions that have been applied to women: it has either been romanticized as the source of endless nourishment or been declared an irrational chaos, a wilderness that needs to be subdued and ordered by civilizing humankind.

Such exploitative attitudes toward nature have worsened with the rise of global capitalism. Now nature is "packaged and commodified" for Westerners who rush to buy aromatherapy oils for relaxation, as well as CDs that bring the sounds of waterfalls and rainforests into the comfort of our living rooms. We cultivate relationships with this "pseudo-nature," while we deplete our natural environments to satisfy our consumptive lifestyles.

Grey terms this global "turn from the earth" a fall into sin. By systematically destroying our connections with nature and refusing our responsibility of care for the nonhuman aspects of creation, humans deny their status as God's creatures. In the process we drain the world of God's real presence, treating it instead as a resource for our greedy consumption and selfish delight.

Grey's response to our ecocidal culture is deeply theological. We need to resacramentalize the world—that is, to imbue nature once again with a vibrant sense of God's intimate and loving presence. This does not mean idealizing nature as a place of romantic escape or embracing an uncritical pantheism that identifies God and nature. Rather, Grey invites us to transform our ordinary perception of nature so that we might see God's spirit of life coursing through it. Appealing to

mystics, poets and activists, she points to a different epistemology from that of modernity, a “connected knowing” that recognizes our intrinsic interconnection with all living things and awakens a reverence for life. Such empathetic knowing requires humility in accepting one’s place in the midst of creation and courage in taking on responsibility for sustaining life.

What is most striking about Grey’s feminist work is the faith she places in Christianity’s core symbols. While many other ecofeminists are deeply skeptical about the environmental fallout from the Christian economy of creation and salvation, Grey sees in that economy the prophetic challenge and the inspiration to remedy the ecological crisis. She finds in Jesus’ ministry and message support for her ecofeminist agenda. I don’t mean by this that she projects onto Jesus a modern ecological conscience—not in the least. She does, however, invite readers to consider the intrinsic role that nature plays in Jesus’ parables. Be it the lilies of the field, the mustard seed or the vineyard, nature often provides the field of metaphors with which Jesus describes the life of discipleship and God’s providence.

Similarly, Grey emphasizes the embodied character of Jesus’ ministry. For Jesus, human healing is never spiritualized; he attends to the bodily needs of those around him through table fellowship as well as miracles.

Finally, Grey does not hesitate to anchor her ecofeminist spirituality in the mystery of cross and resurrection. She notes that nature itself was caught up in grief at the death of Christ; so, too, according to Paul, the whole of creation is filled with longing and in travail awaiting the completion of redemption. While such clues in the New Testament witness hardly amount to a full-blown ecological program, they point Christians today toward an ethics of caring for the body of Christ that should include the cosmos, in which we live, move and have our being.