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Gary M. Simpson

Luther Seminary, gsimpson@luthersem.edu

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Recommended Citation

Simpson, Gary M., "Thinking with Luther About Jesus (aka SweetLips)" (2012). *Faculty Publications*. 202.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/202

Published Citation

Simpson, Gary M. "Thinking with Luther about Jesus (Aka SweetLips)." *Word & World* 32, no. 4 (September 2012): 364–72.

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Thinking with Luther about Jesus (aka SweetLips)

GARY M. SIMPSON

Eleanor Rigby started haunting my world within months of her arrival in the late summer of 1966. The Beatles were already at the height of their cultural influence when they sprung “Eleanor Rigby” on the rock-and-roll scene and on me. I’ve not been the same since.¹ Perhaps Jesus hasn’t been either.

Martin Luther seems to have understood Eleanor’s worlds, profoundly and personally. That sensitivity to “all the lonely people,” as the Beatles would put it, made a difference in his convictions regarding Jesus. We can see this poignantly in his *Commentary on Psalm 45*.² There he makes much of the peculiar lyrical beauty of the nuptial Jesus, aka “SweetLips,”³ and the love affair that Jesus carries on with the likes of Eleanor.

In this essay we will, first, enter briefly into “Eleanor Rigby,” both the song itself and the worlds that this lyrical cultural icon opens up. Second, we will explore Luther’s christological interpretation of Psalm 45 and the kind of living Word em-

¹For more on the Beatles, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beatles> (accessed August 1, 2012).

²Martin Luther, *Commentary on Psalm 45* (1532), in *Luther’s Works* (hereafter *LW*), ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman, 55 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955–1986) 12:197–300. Hereafter page numbers from Luther’s *Commentary on Psalm 45* will be cited in parentheses in the text.

³My use of “SweetLips” as a name or sobriquet for Jesus is based on Luther’s reference to the “sweet lips” of Jesus in his Ps 45 commentary, a term used by Luther to describe how Jesus’ words “overflow with grace” (212).

In Luther’s commentary on Ps 45, Jesus can properly be understood as “Sweet-Lips” because of Luther’s bold nuptial rhetoric describing the beauty of Christ the Bridegroom. Jesus’ lips overflow with grace and are, therefore, pure sugar and honey.

bodied by aka SweetLips as he endearingly indwells Eleanor's worlds in nuptial joy. Third, we will briefly consider certain implications of aka SweetLips for contemporary proclaimers of the gospel promise.

“AH, LOOK AT ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE”

Eleanor's worlds

In 1966 Paul McCartney, with a little help from a few of his friends, wrote the lyrics for “Eleanor Rigby” in his concise but vivid fashion.⁴ Typical of his storylines, Paul introduces two initially unrelated characters, each having a verse, and then, in a third verse, he brings their stories together. Prior to the appearance of either character, the lyrics open abruptly with a chorus voicing a universal summons—“Ah, look at all the lonely people”—that listeners can hardly ignore. A minor key Dorian mode delivers the haunting, ascending-then-descending melodic summons to look, to notice, and to ponder “all the lonely people.”

A dominant eight-string ensemble plays the minor key melody with an allegro tempo and a syncopated, staccato beat, yet in a bluesy fashion. These contrasts temper the otherwise spirited summons by creating “a gesture resembling an anxious sigh,” as musicologist Alan Pollack puts it. This anxious sigh is “like a sharp, sudden intake of breath expelled in enervating slow motion.” The anxious gesture enfolds the song in its entirety.⁵ Could any other melody have conveyed the song's summons so exquisitely and with such dispatch to a rock-and-roll world that, until 1965, had not yet really bothered itself with something like Eleanor's world, with the undersides of life?

“Ah, look at . . .”: this melodically tempered, yet edgy and quite serious summons to “pay attention” draws listeners irrevocably to their appointed province: “all the lonely people.”⁶ From that province, “Eleanor Rigby” denies any departure. Indeed, in almost whimsical fashion—“wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door” and “darning his socks in the night when there's nobody there”—the verses both intensify and particularize the province of countless human beings, precisely by naming two. Eleanor Rigby and Father McKenzie are each named and narrated in their stark loneliness, and then brought together in a manner that

⁴I have found three commentators on the Beatles especially helpful and have borrowed descriptors from them quite freely: (1) musicologist Alan Pollack, “Notes On . . . Series,” who has written musical commentary on all of the Beatles' musical repertoire at: <http://www.icce.rug.nl/~soundscapes/DATABASES/AWP/er.shtml> (accessed August 1, 2012); (2) Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties*, 3rd ed. (London: Vintage, 2008); and (3) Jonathan Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (New York: Random, 2007). Also, for a good introduction, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleanor_Rigby (accessed August 1, 2012).

⁵Pollack, *op. cit.* As he did on many of the Beatles' recordings, Sir George Martin provided the musical arrangement and was influenced by Bernard Herman's music in both *Fahrenheit 451* and *Psycho*; also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Martin (accessed August 1, 2012).

⁶“Eleanor Rigby's” opening “pay attention” type of summons resonates with Linda Loman's famous exhortation regarding her husband, Willy, in Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Death of a Salesman*: “So attention must be paid” (Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* [New York: Viking Press, 1949] 56). On a sociopolitical scale it also finds a kindred spirit in Robert Bellah's statement “democracy means paying attention” (Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* [New York: Vintage, 1992] 254–286).

makes their loneliness even more wretched, more desolate, more forsaken: “Nobody came.... No one was saved.”⁷

In the final stanza McCartney brings together contrapuntally the chorus’s summons with the refrain’s agonized questions: “Where do they all come from?... Where do they all belong?” Jonathan Gould notes, “The questions the song poses aren’t rhetorical; they’re unanswerable.”

They’re the sort of questions people ask when they don’t know what else to say, and by raising them as he does, Paul calls attention to the inadequacy of his own response.... The effect is truly provocative...the song leaves off with a concise and starkly honest statement about the limits of empathy.⁸

Not only is “Eleanor Rigby” one of the most serious pieces in the entire Beatles canon, but it also “straight-facedly vaporized several commonly supposed limitations of what the two-minute AM-radio pop/rock musical genre might be capable of including within its purview and power of expression.”⁹ George Melly, British jazz and blues singer and art critic for the British newspaper *The Observer*, stated that with “Eleanor Rigby” “pop had come of age.”¹⁰ This accounts for the song’s position of 138 on *Rolling Stone*’s 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.¹¹ But the significance of “Eleanor Rigby” goes beyond its status as a single record. As the second song on the Beatles’ *Revolver* album, it sets much of the tone for that entire album. Some commentators actually argue that the remainder of the album is antidotal attempts, perhaps quite feeble ones at that, to vanquish Eleanor’s world or perhaps to prevent it.¹²

Eleanor’s worlds and feminist theology

The transformational significance of “Eleanor Rigby” for the cultural field of rock and roll finds a certain parallel within the cultural field of theological reflection and church life. I am referring to how feminist theology in significant ways has helped twentieth- and twenty-first-century theology “come of age” as well. Here, all too briefly, we will concentrate on theological anthropology, focusing on the doctrine of sin, because feminist theological critique and construction bears directly on Eleanor’s worlds, worlds to which Luther likewise paid attention because of Jesus, aka SweetLips.

⁷For the full lyrics to “Eleanor Rigby,” see <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beatles/eleanorrigby.html> (accessed August 9, 2012).

⁸Gould, *Can’t Buy Me Love*, 352.

⁹Pollack, op. cit.

¹⁰Gould, *Can’t Buy Me Love*, 351; also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Melly (accessed August 1, 2012).

¹¹See <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/the-500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-20110407/the-beatles-eleanor-rigby-19691231> (accessed August 1, 2012).

¹²*Revolver* is number 3 on *Rolling Stone*’s 500 Greatest Albums of All Time! See <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/500-greatest-albums-of-all-time-20120531/the-beatles-revolver-19691231> (accessed August 1, 2012); also see <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/lists/100-greatest-beatles-songs-20110919/eleanor-rigby-19691231> (accessed August 1, 2012).

In 1960, Valerie Saiving Goldstein¹³ first put a finger on the basic problem. She focused on Anders Nygren and Reinhold Niebuhr, but knew their description of the human predicament as rising from separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it and their identification of sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness was a “widespread tendency in contemporary theology.”¹⁴ Because most Western theologians were male, they had tended to think sin through the male experiential prism of pride and the like. Goldstein, speaking out of her own “feminine experience,” as she called it then, offered a different account of the human condition of sin: one that focuses more on despair.¹⁵

Because most Western theologians were male, they had tended to think sin through the male experiential prism of pride and the like. Goldstein, speaking out of her own “feminine experience,” as she called it then, offered a different account of the human condition of sin: one that focuses more on despair.

Sin as pride, as an overextending self, works diagnostically when the situation involves and focuses upon those who are relatively powerful (who are predominately males within Western cultures). But when the situation involves the relatively less powerful and the vulnerable (at the time, predominately women, but also many others within less powerful cultural, social, economic, and political groups), then not only does sin focused as pride miss the mark, but sin as pride can also be—and has been—used dangerously against the less powerful and the vulnerable.

Pounding on sin as pride in the case of women, just to stick with the original critique, serves only to keep women within the passive, submissive, and deferential patterns prescribed by the dominant Western normative and formative ideals of the “second” and “weaker” sex. This basic critique pertains to Eleanor’s world, the worlds of all the lonely people where sin as despair is the fundamental condition; where docility, complaisance, and compliance to unjust suffering becomes the norm; where complicity, acquiescence, and resignation to being systematically or

¹³The author’s name appears both as Valerie Saiving and Valerie Saiving Goldstein (her married name).

¹⁴Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960) 100. Goldstein acknowledged that certain deep common experiences shape both men and women. Moreover, she recognized that, given the tremendous plasticity of humankind, both women and men are formed by both “feminine” and “masculine” experience across a continuum. Yet, in 1960 and before, masculine experience had predominantly shaped men and feminine experience had predominantly shaped women. Further, these traditional predominances showed up conspicuously in theological claims.

¹⁵Augustine had described sin as pride and despair and had influenced most of the Christian West along these lines, including Luther (Augustine, *The Trinity*, book 4.1.2, *Fathers of the Church*, vol. 45 [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963] 131). Luther, unlike Augustine who generally neglected to develop a phenomenology of sin as despair, attended intently to despair, which you can see in both his Small and Large Catechisms (*The Book of Concord* [hereafter *BC*], ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000] 358.17–20, 454.104–105). As we will see below, Luther highlights both in his exposition of Ps 45. There, he dubs despair the “weakness” to resist and tags pride the “evil will” of “the obstinate and proud” without overlooking of course “other vices that cling to us” (*LW* 12:207, 212).

randomly sinned against become the pattern; where sin as the despair of an overwhelmed self is the predictable state of affairs.¹⁶ Luther, of course, could not have formulated the situation in precisely the ways developed by contemporary feminist theology. Still, as Luther does note, the specifics of a situation make a difference to the Holy Spirit for how law and promise are brought to bear.

“CHRIST IS SUPERABUNDANT IN HIS LIPS”

Luther “got” Eleanor’s worlds, so to speak, and set about addressing them through his christological exposition of Ps 45. Luther considered lecturing once again on the Psalter in 1531, but by 1532 he had decided to offer instead an extended treatment of only three psalms (Psalms 2, 51, and 45, in that order), “because of the state of my health and activities” (197).

Of the trilogy, Ps 45 has unfortunately received the least attention over the years. Though, as Luther notes, Ps 45 and Ps 51 deal with “the same thing—namely, faith and the doctrine of justification,” in Ps 45 we see “how fluent a speaker the Holy Spirit is, who is able to express and picture one and the selfsame thing in various ways.” Here, the Spirit illustrates the teachings “now with one and then with another ornament and dress” (197). The Holy Spirit has a twofold reason for this variety: first, “to rouse us against the satiety from which we otherwise suffer”—that is, our becoming foolishly sated even with “the doctrine of eternal salvation,” once we have heard it; second, to address the massive multiplicity of human circumstances, so that “whether we come in or go out, we may find most joyful pastures by which [the Holy Spirit] refreshes us and encourages us against the many dangers and misfortunes with which we are oppressed on all sides” (197–198). Because the Holy Spirit speaks ever so specifically to each situation, not one of Eleanor’s kith and kin ought lack attention, go unnoticed, or be irrelevant.

In stark contrast to Ps 51’s palpable penitential timbre, Ps 45 is “a love song,” “a nuptial song,” “a delightful and joyous wedding lyric” (200–201); it is “uncommonly delightful and full of the most joyous allegories of bridegroom and bride” (198). Indeed, the psalmist “calls this wedding lyric a rose”; in doing so, “he is speaking of the church and of future roses. . . . In fact, he is speaking of all the tribes of the earth and of the church planted throughout the world, and of Christ the Bridegroom” (201–202). Luther postulates that the psalmist has “about ten main points” (206). Here, we will explore only three of Luther’s own main points: beauty, eloquence, and wisdom.

In commenting on verse two, “Thou art fair beyond the sons of men [*sic*],”¹⁷ Luther notes the utterly uncommon “spiritual beauty” of Jesus (206). “He is simply the fairest in form. . . . so that finally He alone is finely formed and beautiful”

¹⁶Rebekah Miles offers a thorough and helpful summary of the literature and issues involved. Her critical appropriation of Reinhold Niebuhr and of many of the key feminist critics is spot on. See Rebekah K. Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 34–36.

¹⁷I will use the translations of Ps 45 as they appear in *Luther’s Works*.

(207). In this so-called royal psalm (one of ten), it is Jesus' matchless beauty as "true God and true man" that makes him our "first gift," "a king worthy of reigning" (206). Here, Luther concentrates on two elements that constitute his spiritual beauty: eloquence and wisdom.

Verse one—"My tongue is like the pen of a scribe that writes swiftly"—already tips us off to the significance of eloquence, and verse two's second half corroborates the clue: "Grace is overflowing upon Thy lips." Luther can hardly contain himself when it comes to these verses. His rhetorical nuptial eloquence knows no bounds. Jesus has "sweet lips" (212), "pleasant lips," "the sweetest and loveliest lips, which attract the hearts of the weak," "the loveliest mouth," lips that are "pure honey and sugar" (211). His are "sweet lips that overflow with grace, which no one knows unless he is saddened and vexed in conscience and has learned to comfort himself with these promises" (212).

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True to his beloved Cicero, Luther commends eloquence when it is inextricably bound with wisdom.¹⁸ So, in Ps 45, it is "the wisdom of grace poured upon His lips" (210). Conclusion: Jesus, aka SweetLips, is "superabundant in His lips":

From His mouth, as from some overflowing fountain, the richest promises and teachings stem, and with these He strengthens and comforts souls. . . . Grace is on the lips of this King, and not only that, it overflows, so that you may understand how abundantly this fountain of grace flows and gushes forth. . . . Our King has. . . the sweetest and loveliest wisdom; He helps the penitent, comforts the afflicted, recalls the despairing, raises up the fallen and humiliated, justifies sinners, gives life to the dying. And whatever else there is in addition to this, that the Word of salvation accomplishes, that He does in rich abundance. (211)

Aka SweetLips speaks so sweetly, so abundantly, so endearingly because he "bears an injured sheep" (like Eleanor and her many worlds); "in fact, He even dies" with and for these worlds. Yes, aka SweetLips is "worthy of such high praise" (212)!¹⁹

And yet, because Jesus' beauty, eloquence, and wisdom lie "hidden under the opposite" (208), "by the external form of the cross" (209), and as if Ps 45's "loveli-

¹⁸Luther is indebted to Cicero for discovering the bond of eloquence and wisdom. For this discovery he pronounced Cicero the world's "wisest man," and he saw the bond of eloquence and wisdom epitomized in Jesus himself. This Ciceronian impulse is a neglected theme in Luther's overall theology of the word. See Gary M. Simpson, "Putting on the Neighbor: The Ciceronian Impulse in Luther's Christian Approach to Practical Reason," in *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011) 31–38, 210–212; also see Gary M. Simpson, *When Reason Is Not the Devil's Whore: Martin Luther and the Ciceronian Impulse in His Natural Law Approach to Moral Reason* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, forthcoming).

¹⁹Already in 1519 Luther had foregrounded the deep communion in Christ's bodily bearing of sufferers and sinners and the accompanying ecclesial communion of the saints in his *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*, in LW 35:49–73.

est poetry” (211) were not enough, Luther carries on his encomium dialectically by comparing Jesus’ lips with those of Moses, just to make sure this “greatest sweetness” is not spoiled—wittingly or not! With biblical precedent, “Moses,” in Luther’s commentary, stands for God’s law, especially in its office to convict the world of sin.²⁰ In this office, “the lips of Moses” are “sharp, harsh, and terrifying” (212), full of “terrors, threatenings, and displays of wrath” (207), especially because they “address the obstinate and proud” (212). Lips sharp, harsh, and terrifying are the proper work of Moses in his office of promulgating the law’s accusation. Luther suggests, only half-jesting, that perhaps this is why Moses “confesses that he was ‘slow to speech’ (Ex. 4:10)” (205). Unlike aka SweetLips, “Moses was not eloquent; he had a heavy tongue” (205), “lips, but thick, ineloquent, heavy, wrathful ones,” well-formed but only to address the obstinate, the presumptuous, the proud (210).

“And mark this well,” notes Luther, “The tongue of Christ is not the kind that terrifies or hurts”—but then he adds, “except when He speaks to the proud and obstinate.” And of course this exception clause does come into play. When it does, however, “He [Christ] carries on His alien work, as Isaiah says (Is. 28:21)” (212). Because accusation is Moses’ proper office, it can only be Jesus’ alien work, on loan so to speak, to be used only under the exception clause.

Aka SweetLips by contrast possesses “a will full of virtues and a mind full of wisdom, with glowing love toward all miserable, damned, and sorrowful sinners” (207). Jesus, therefore,

keep[s] company...with the despicable and miserable sinners, with those ruined by misfortune, with men [*sic*] weighed down by painful and incurable diseases; these He healed, comforted, raised up, helped. And at last He even died for sinners. He did not frighten, and He did not kill, as Moses did, but He drew, gladdened, comforted, cured, and aided all who came to Him. (208)

Finally, Luther issues a warning to proclaimers, to promisors:

Whoever depicts His mouth otherwise errs.... This must be noted carefully. For Christ should not make hearts sad with His words, He ought not to terrify. Whoever terrifies and vexes consciences in Christ’s name is not a messenger of Christ but of the devil, for Christ’s name is: “A bruised reed He will not break, and a dimly burning wick He will not quench.” (211)

“See to it, therefore,” as he famously said on a previous occasion, “that you do not make a Moses out of Christ.”²¹ To do so would be slander, defamation of character—yes, blasphemy itself—that violation of the highest sort, of the Second Commandment, and, as such, a violation also of Eleanor’s many worlds.

²⁰Luther focuses here on Moses as the symbol, or better yet, as the synecdoche of the second use, purpose, or function of God’s law, which he also calls the theological, spiritual, or chief use (see Martin Luther, *The Smalcald Articles*, in *BC*, 311–312). For Moses and the first use of the law, see Martin Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525), in *LW* 35:161–174.

²¹Martin Luther, *Preface to the New Testament* (1546, 1522), in *LW* 35:360.

To speak with “sweet lips” is Jesus’ only “proper office and work” (212). We might say, therefore, that Jesus’ “sort of wisdom” (210) is threefold: it bears Eleanor’s worlds bodily and unconditionally; it never breaks a bruised reed or quenches a dimly burning wick; and it always indulges in divine nuptial love, life, and joy, unreservedly.

“WE ARE CHRISTS—WITH AND WITHOUT THE APOSTROPHE”²²

We proclaimers, promisors of aka SweetLips, are indeed Christ’s, with the apostrophe. Baptismally we “belong” nuptially to this Bridegroom with the sweet lips. And according to Luther’s favorite scriptural passage along these lines—“I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine” (Song 6:3 and 2:16)—aka SweetLips belongs to us as well. “But the principal thing is that the church has everything that is Christ’s and that two bodies have become one, so that what belongs to the church is Christ’s and in the same way what belongs to Christ is the church’s” (260).

“All the lonely people... Where do they all come from? All the lonely people... Where do they all belong?” We may of course have many hunches about where “they” all come from. About where “they” all belong we have a much surer confidence.

“All the lonely people... Where do they all come from? All the lonely people... Where do they all belong?” We may of course have many hunches about where “they” all come from. About where “they” all belong we have a much surer confidence. Like ones betrothed, they all belong to aka SweetLips, and thus to us who belong to our Beloved. Yes, “we” are Christs, without the apostrophe, betrothed now also to Eleanor and her many and varied worlds. In this promise we also trust. Yes, we are Christs, without the apostrophe, when as proclaimers we promise aka SweetLips to Eleanor and her countless worlds. Yes, we are Christs, without the apostrophe, when we bodily “put on” Eleanor and her worlds just as aka SweetLips has bodily “put on” us and our worlds, wherever and whatever they may be.²³ While McCartney’s troubling closing questions point to the limits of empathy, aka SweetLips shares with us his expansive empathy.

In great love affairs, the “we,” “they,” “us,” and “them” of typical in-group/out-group dynamics get all roiled around and everyone seems to get changed in the process. Indeed, it happened with aka SweetLips, with the incarna-

²²Martin Luther, in his July 5, 1537, letter to John Bugenhagen, cited in the Introduction to Volume 22, in LW 22:x.

²³For Luther’s provocative reciprocal use of Paul’s garment metaphor, see Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in LW 31:371.

tion, with the crucifixion, with the resurrection, and with the ascension. By bearing, he has “become” us sufferers and sinners, as Paul and Luther have noted; he has “become” Eleanor. Because of aka SweetLips, have we not likewise “become” Eleanor? Are we not then also Eleanors—without and with the apostrophe? ⊕

GARY M. SIMPSON is professor of systematic theology at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota.