

# The Relationship between *Tentatio/Anfechtung*, the *Vita Passiva*, and the *Missio Dei* in Luther's Theology of the Cross

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*Abstract:* *Tentatio* (Latin)/*Anfechtung* (German) “agonizing struggle” has been identified as a major aspect of Luther’s theology of the cross. Luther’s views on *tentatio/Anfechtung*/ “agonizing struggle” stood at odds with many in his own day and stand at odds with many in Western culture. A pattern emerges in the theology of the cross that moves from agonizing struggle to the receiving of comfort in the gospel (*vita passiva*), and to sharing the comfort of the gospel (*missio Dei*). The article proposes that “agonizing struggle” is the catalyst for the *vita passiva* (the receptive life) and the *vita passiva* spurs mission. These characteristics of the theology of the cross are examined in light of Luther’s own thought and the Scriptures.

In 2015, Disney Pixar released *Inside Out*. The clever, animated story personifies a handful of emotions to give audiences a glimpse of what happens inside the mind of the characters. The plot involves a dad, mom, and daughter who move from Minnesota to San Francisco, California. The daughter, a young girl named Riley, tries to adjust to her new home but struggles because nothing is quite the same as it was. Meanwhile, Joy is at the headquarters in Riley’s brain steadfastly endeavoring to ensure that Riley is always happy. But Joy’s efforts do not quite match reality, and they flounder. Meanwhile, Sadness keeps touching things, risking Riley’s perpetual happiness. The climax of the movie hinges upon Riley deciding to run away and then with the help of Sadness returning to her parents. Through a series of wild twists and turns inside of Riley’s brain, Joy has an epiphany: Sadness is the catalyst for Riley to receive comfort and, in turn, joy. It is only when Sadness takes the controls that Riley receives that comfort from her parents.

Most people try to avoid suffering. And if they do find themselves experiencing what Luther called *tentatio* or *Anfechtung*, understood as “agonizing struggle,”<sup>1</sup> they routinely seek to escape such things as quickly as possible. In other words, most people are a lot like Joy in *Inside Out* before her grand epiphany. Human creatures generally prefer happiness and joy to anything resembling agonizing struggle. This is why Luther’s thoughts on being a theologian of the cross sound so strange. His words run contrary to the way one ordinarily thinks about an agonizing struggle. Luther argues



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in the Heidelberg Disputation, “This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore, he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. ... God can only be known in suffering and the cross”<sup>2</sup> That Luther speaks positively about suffering should catch one’s attention. And Luther’s claim that “This is clear” may not be obvious to many.

So why does Luther speak positively about agonizing struggle? For Luther *tentatio/Anfechtung* was not an end in and of itself. One’s agonizing struggles are important because it is in the midst of such struggles that God reveals and offers comfort in His Word and promises, in Christ. This is something that Luther experienced personally in his own agonizing struggles. Robert Kolb argues that Luther’s theology of the cross arose from distress that human creatures do not have and cannot do what God in His justice demands.<sup>3</sup> But Luther came to understand that God uses suffering to draw us to Himself, to get our attention as it were, to listen to his Word.<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis summarized this phenomenon well, “God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>5</sup> This realization helps us understand why a theologian of the cross should not immediately seek to avoid or escape agonizing struggles (or, as often is the case, ignore them, or keep them to oneself) since it is in the midst of them that he *receives* God’s comfort, in Jesus. Since it is in the midst of suffering, cross, weakness, folly, and evil that he receives such comfort; he is content with these things and seeks to patiently endure them. In this sense, Luther is like Joy after she had her epiphany. He perceives that *tentatio/Anfechtung* is the catalyst for comfort.

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Lutherans have recognized the receptive nature of faith, forgiveness, and righteousness in the life of the believer since their beginning.<sup>6</sup> Luther even coined a phrase for this receptive quality of the Christian life and faith: the *vita passiva* or the receptive life.<sup>7</sup> In the later years of the Lutheran Reformation, university students who studied theology were routinely instructed to pay close attention to their own agonizing struggles. Attention was called to these agonizing struggles not for the sake of the struggle itself, rather because of the importance of knowing how and where one received comfort in the midst of such difficulties.<sup>8</sup>

Luther himself describes the importance of this as he explains the third component of his formula for the making a theologian (*oratio, meditatio, and tentatio*), “Thirdly, there is *tentatio, Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.”<sup>9</sup> The experience of these agonizing struggles and God’s deliverance from them, were according to Ronald K. Rittgers, “the sine qua non of theological study”<sup>10</sup> and “the touchstone for authentic pastoral care.”<sup>11</sup> Oswald Bayer agrees when he writes, “Agonizing struggle is not the touchstone that validates the authenticity of faith, as if

to demonstrate the veracity and the credibility of the believing person. Instead, agonizing struggle is the touchstone that shows the Word of God itself to be credible and mighty within such struggle and when opposing it.”<sup>12</sup>

One important aspect of the *vita passiva* has to do with the content of the message of the gospel. It is no mistake that Luther, Rittgers, and Bayer use the word “touchstone” in conjunction with *tentatio/Anfechtung*. It essentially provides the test for whether or not the comfort received is trustworthy and true. This is not to say that the test is subjective based upon the individual’s interpretation, instead, it reveals there is only one message that is up to the task of true comfort in the midst of *tentatio/Anfechtung*.

The theology of the cross is not only a revealing of God’s proper work of comfort, consolation, forgiveness, and life in Christ, it is also a revealing of humanity’s utter helplessness apart from Jesus.<sup>13</sup> If what is received in the midst of agonizing struggle requires a person to do something (works) then what is received is not the genuine comfort Luther and the Scriptures describe. Instead, what is offered as comfort is received as law, that is, “do something.” Luther addressed this problem in the Heidelberg Disputation as well, “The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15],”<sup>14</sup> and “The law

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says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace says, ‘believe in this,’ and everything is done already.”<sup>15</sup> In the midst of *tentatio/Anfechtung* anything less than the genuine kerygma will not do. Without the gospel, the comfort one receives is a sham. It might sound enticing and good, but such comfort misses the mark. It fails the touchstone test.

For example, our daughter, who has profound disabilities, recently endured a very dangerous and risky 12-hour surgery. As her parents, my wife and I were experiencing some “agonizing struggles.” More than one person attempted to give us the assurance of a positive outcome. We heard things like “Think positively,” or “Don’t worry. Everything will be okay.” Such assurances were well-intentioned, and the promised conclusion was certainly desirable. But those assurances did not provide actual comfort. Why? The surgeon made it very clear that everything would probably not be okay. We had also previously experienced risky surgeries that did not turn out okay.

Assurances are only as good as their grounds. And unless the person offering this kind of assurance has special knowledge, they have no real basis for offering it. Worse, perhaps, is the secondary assumption that the giving of assurance is an end in and of itself, thinking “as long as I attempt to make a suffering person feel better, I’ve done my job.” But what has actually been accomplished? People in our situation often feel uneasy and confused when they hear such assurances. We look for comfort but are told to *do* something like “think positively” or to *believe* “everything will be okay” even though such a belief has nothing to do with Jesus. It is as if by the sheer power

of the will we can guarantee the desired outcome. This kind of assurance fails the touchstone test because it is law, not gospel.

Importantly, the Scriptures direct us in the same way as Luther. David confesses, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I keep your word” (Ps. 119:67) and “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes” (Ps. 119:71). For David, affliction was the catalyst for directing him to God’s word and promises. In a similar line of thought Paul and Barnabas strengthen and encourage the saints at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, saying that it is “through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22b). Paul again speaks similarly in his letter to the church at Rome, “...we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3–4). Here the apostle emphasizes that suffering is the catalyst for (eschatological) hope.<sup>16</sup> Paul’s expansion of this truth in 2 Corinthians 1 is worth of quoting in full:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

For we do not want you to be unaware brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.  
(2 Cor 1:3–9)

The affliction Paul and Timothy endured in Asia taught them that relying on their own strength was hopeless, in order that they might instead rely on God who raises the dead. Here again, affliction is the catalyst for comfort. But we also see an added dimension to the importance of both *tentatio/Anfechtung* and the *vita passiva* for Christians. Not only do Paul and Timothy receive comfort in their affliction and sufferings, but they also have an eye toward sharing the same comfort with others. That is to say, the theology of the cross informs the message and in turn impacts pastoral care and the *missio Dei*.

That Paul uses “comfort and salvation” as a hendiadys<sup>17</sup> confirms what has been argued above, namely, that comfort is nothing less than full salvation rooted in the word of the cross which Paul has been preaching to the Corinthians from the beginning to the end of the Corinthian corpus.<sup>18</sup> His preaching passes the touchstone test. The message of the cross then is both what is to be received as comfort and what is to be proclaimed to the lost and erring. Robert Scudieri agrees as he contends that “mission

flows from the cross, then back to the cross.<sup>19</sup> The *vita passiva*, the receiving of the comfort of the gospel, should then spur a desire to share the same message with others.

Luther put his theology into practice, for example, among the saints at Miltenberg in 1524. Notably Luther uses Paul's words in 2 Cor 1 as he seeks to comfort the congregation at Miltenberg after their pastor was excommunicated due to a conflict with local Roman Catholic priests.<sup>20</sup> Not only does Luther seek to comfort the them with the gospel in their agonizing struggles, he also reminds them that prayer and God's Word are the only means to attack false teachings and to spread the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

In the midst of ministry in the church, God's people are sure to experience *tentatio/Anfechtung*. Such experiences, as mentioned above, should be the catalyst for comfort. They should open our ears and hearts once again to the gospel and to know and believe the message is for me. Paying attention to successes and failures and discussing what contributed to them is worthwhile, beneficial, and wise. But we should not get too down on ourselves in failures, nor should we become puffed up in outward success. In successes and failures, Luther directs us once again to Christ and His cross,

...he who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God.

He, however, who has been emptied [Cf, Phil 2:7] through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him. For this reason, whether man does works or not, it is all the same to him. He neither boasts if he does good works, nor is he disturbed if God does not do good works through him. He knows that it is sufficient if he suffers and is brought low by the cross in order to be annihilated all the more.<sup>22</sup>

Luther's words suggest strongly that in success as in failure, we would do well to be content and mindful that God is God, and we are not. Success or failure is God's prerogative. We can simply be content as Paul and Timothy were in knowing that if we fail, it is for the comfort and salvation of others; and if we succeed, it is still for the comfort of others (2 Cor. 1:6). Likewise, God's people do not make a competition out of suffering as if one who has suffered much is somehow better than someone who has suffered less. Nor should we view a growing ministry with suspicion or assume the opposite with one that lags. Presumption and despair are not the results of receiving the sweet comfort of God's word but of sin.<sup>23</sup>

We have come full circle from *tentatio/Anfechtung* to the *vita passiva* to the *missio Dei* and back again to *tentatio*. This is the pattern for a theologian of the cross. As he pays close attention to this pattern of agonizing struggle and receiving God's Word of comfort, he aims to speak the word of the cross to others that they might receive the same comfort in Christ Jesus—the only true comfort that is the power of God for salvation,<sup>24</sup> and the only comfort that passes the touchstone test.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this article *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*, and agonizing struggle are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther. *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955–1986), 31:53. Hereafter referred to as LW.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Much could be said concerning Satan's role in *tentatio/Anfechtung* that is beyond the scope of this brief article. Briefly, I would argue that in the midst of agonizing struggle which is given only by God, that God and Satan have different aims. God desires to draw people closer to him and refine them. Satan attempts to use the same agonizing struggle to pull us farther away from our Lord to despair, presumption, or unbelief. Job is the primary Scriptural example of this phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 91.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, AC IV.

<sup>7</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Late Modern Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 228. His evidence for this claim is based upon David Chytraeus' *Discourse on How to Begin the Study of Theology Correctly* (1560) which Rittgers argues was among the most widely used works for students studying theology in order to become pastors in the late Reformation.

<sup>9</sup> LW 34:286–287. Italics are original. Cf. Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering*, 228.

<sup>11</sup> Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering*, 228.

<sup>12</sup> Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 36–37.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Kolb's discussion on *homo absconditus* and *homo revelatus* is especially helpful in "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," 51–56.

<sup>14</sup> LW 31:54.

<sup>15</sup> LW 31:56.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 1 Pet. 1:3–9; James 1:2–4, 12.

<sup>17</sup> See Mark A. Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar NT Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 27.

<sup>18</sup> See 1 Cor. 1:18, 2:2–5; 2 Cor. 12:9–10.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Scudieri, "A Missiology of the Cross," in *The Theology of the Cross for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*, eds. Alberto L. García and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), 65.

<sup>20</sup> LW 43:99–102.

<sup>21</sup> LW 43:103–112.

<sup>22</sup> LW 31:55.

<sup>23</sup> Luther calls this sin. "Sin carries us down to despair or up to presumption. In either case the sin is not repented of, for sin is either exaggerated or not acknowledged at all." LW 54:37 no. 273.

<sup>24</sup> Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18.