

Luther's Theology of the Cross and Missions "Confidence in the Gospel"

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Lutheran Pastor Jon Zehnder collects modern reflections on Luther's Theology of the Cross and applies them to mission.

Introduction

"For I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). For the Apostle Paul, the significance of the cross and the redemption purchased for us there was the fulfilment of God's plan of salvation. In His grace, God would do for us what we could not do for ourselves—cover the debt of our sins. God would reconcile us to Himself by laying our sins on Jesus who knew no sin, so that Jesus might redeem us (2 Cor 5:19, 21). The theology of the cross is simply Justification by Grace through Faith in Jesus! It is the article by which the Church stands or falls (AC, Art IV). Luther's theology of the cross, reflected in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, clearly declares a confidence in the Gospel that impacts the ministry and mission of the Church.

Background

Any examination of Luther's theology of the cross benefits from understanding the Heidelberg Disputation in its historical context and its contribution to the



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development of Reformation theology. Edward Schroeder has done an excellent job setting that context:

Just six months before the Heidelberg meeting of the Augustinian monks, Luther's 95 theses on indulgences—back up in Wittenberg—had been a bombshell. When the German chapter of the Augustinian monks gathered for their annual meeting, they asked Luther: 'What are you doing up there at Wittenberg? What's the fuss all about? What's this business about justification by faith ALONE?' Perhaps the clearest signal of what they were doing in Wittenberg were the 97 Theses on scholastic theology that Luther had published just a few months before his 95 Theses on indulgences. They were dismantling scholastic theology, from A to Z. The indulgence theses applied that critique of scholasticism to a major piece of practical theology in everyday church life.¹

Although the Heidelberg theses were presented originally in April of 1518, Rick Serina notes that little attention seems to have been given to them prior to the twentieth century, the renewed interest driven, he claims,

[I]t was only with the late ELCA theologian Gerhard Forde that its popularity grew among American Lutherans. Forde, without any substantial reference to the history or interpretation of the Heidelberg Theses, laid out the theology of the cross as a method for doing theology, focusing primarily on theses 19-24, where Luther contrasts theologians of the cross with theologians of glory. For Forde, this approach became a new way of making sense of the world through the lens of the cross and suffering rather than, say, science or philosophy or our self-help culture or even dogmatic theology (think Pieper's dogmatics). He used it to show how the cross shook up all of our neat, tidy views of creation and humanity, of life and faith and doctrine.²

Heidelberg Theses

The 28 Heidelberg Theses can be divided into four topical groups: 1–12 Good Works; 13–18 Human Will; 19–24 Contrasting Theologies of Cross and of Glory; 25–28 God's Work in Us—the Righteousness of Faith. For this paper Theses 14–25 are key:

Theses 14–25 (*emphasis mine*) Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity. . . . Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity. . . . *The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.* . . . Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ. . . . That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened (Rom 1:20;

cf. 1 Cor 1:21–25), *he deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. . . . A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. . . . A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. . . . That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened. . . . The law brings the wrath of God (Rom 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ. . . . Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner. . . . He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.*³

“Calling a thing what it actually is”

“Calling a thing what it actually is” would lead one to see that Luther here in the Heidelberg Disputation is arguing against works, human wisdom, reason, and experience in regard to our salvation. Luther’s words above are clear that a person is saved by grace through faith and not by works of the Law. He states emphatically that the theology of the cross declares, “He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.”

Serina notes that the 28 theses at Heidelberg almost exclusively have to do with the way in which the theology of the day had frequently strayed from Christ’s suffering and death as a basis for our salvation.

Luther is targeting the exact same foe he had targeted several years earlier and which would come more sharply into focus in the succeeding years: any attempt to explain our righteousness in terms of moral effort or human ability apart from Christ’s suffering and death. That’s your theology of glory. What Luther articulates is something quite different: the proclamation of righteousness on the basis of Christ’s suffering and death, which offers us salvation from our sin. That’s your theology of the cross.⁴

Theology of the Cross versus Theology of Glory

And there you have it. Herman Sasse, made this observation:

The attempt to perceive God as He is, whether from observing the world, by mystical experience or by philosophic speculation, is the theology of glory. It is the theology of natural man, of the heathen, of the philosophers, and, most unfortunately, also of the professors of theology. Being Christians, they ought to know better. But ‘we theologians,’ so Luther remarks in comment on Psalm 65:17, ‘use the blessed name of God by which we are baptized and at which heaven and earth tremble, in disputations, even in prayer, very irreverently. We exhibit the art of keen and loquacious disputing on divine truths - which we have learned from Aristotle - so that we talk of the blessed Trinity as the shoemaker about his leather’ (WA 3, 382, 7ff). That means that God becomes an object, a thing about which one talks. But whoever talks about a thing has to stand above a thing, has to command it,

and so, in pursuing theology, a Christian is constantly in danger of losing the right relationship towards God. In Thesis 29 of the Heidelberg Disputation Luther says: ‘He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ’ (LW 31:41). Otherwise, he will become a theologian of glory, and that would mean he is no theologian at all. . . .

Luther does not deny that it is possible to perceive the invisible things of God from his works in creation; that is, as he himself defines in the commentary to Thesis 19, to perceive God's power, his wisdom, his righteousness, his goodness, etc. What he denies is that this perception of God is of any use. It makes men neither worthy nor wise. It does not change our relationship to God.... And so ‘God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe’ (I Cor. 1:21). This preaching is the message of the cross (I Cor. 1:18) . . . The cross is the revelation, and the theology of the cross the only one which deserves the name theology.⁵

Theology of the Cross as Personal Suffering

The whole idea of our own suffering should not come as a surprise to anyone. Welcome to the post-Genesis 3 world where sin and the brokenness of sin afflict and affect everyone, as our Lord says in Matthew 5, “For he (our Father in heaven) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

But more than that, for those of us who are believers in, and followers of Jesus, our Lord reminds us that even as the world hated and persecuted Him, they will do the same to us. Scripture is full of those reminders: Phil 1:29; 1 Pt 4:16; Acts 5:41; 2 Tim 1:8; Rom 8:17–18; 2 Cor 1:5; Phil 3:10 etc. In fact, 1 Peter 2:21 declares, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”

But an emphasis on personal suffering is not what the theology of the cross is about and may, in fact, stand in opposition to the theology of the cross. Anything, including suffering or defeat or loss, which makes us think that our pitiful condition makes us more acceptable in God’s sight works against the theology of the cross, which teaches us that our salvation depends on the suffering and death of Christ alone.

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As Edward Schroeder concludes,

Theology of glory is not the opposite of suffering—for Luther or for St. Paul in 1 Corinthians. Instead, it is the antithesis of Justification by Faith Alone! Luther didn’t tell his Augustinian brothers: Hey, we’ve got a new theology of suffering up there at Wittenberg that’s got everybody excited! When Luther uses the term theology of the cross, there is ‘ouch’ involved,

pain and suffering. But the focus of the 'ouch,' the pain, (on GOD'S side) is the cross of Christ. Here the second person of the Trinity accepts the suffering... Only once does the word suffering occur in the 28 Heidelberg Theses. And it's Christ's suffering recommended as the lens for 'comprehending the visible and manifest things of God,' i.e., what God's up to in the world. This double crucifixion (Christ and our sinner self) is needed for Justification by Faith Alone to happen at all. Thus, the theologian of the cross 'tells it like it is' on the primal human agenda, the topic of 'us and our salvation.' The glory theologians have no understanding of this. They are on a completely different page...⁶

The Theology of the Cross—What does this mean?

Rick Serina summarizes,

All that to say this: when we talk about the theology of the cross, and when we refer back to the Heidelberg Theses as basis for that, our knowledge of the argument and scope of the theses is limited to the 28 basic theses we have in print, and those have to do almost exclusively with the way in which the theology of the day had frequently strayed from Christ's suffering and death as a basis for our salvation. Theologians had put increasing emphasis upon the human ability to please God through works, such as obedience to the law, rather than what Christ had done. When we understand Luther's theses in their theological and historical context, it should be clear that he is not advocating a new way of doing theology. Instead, he is targeting the same exact foe he had begun targeting several years earlier and which would come more sharply into focus in the succeeding years: any attempt to explain our righteousness in terms of moral effort or human ability apart from Christ's suffering and death. That's your theology of glory.

It is simply another of talking about justification—justification by grace through faith alone apart from works for Christ's sake, as Augsburg 4 says. That is what we as Lutherans are about. If we have a Lutheran theology of the cross, it isn't some clever way to sanctify someone's suffering or a different method for doing theology. Rather, it is clinging to the cross of Christ, to his suffering, death, and resurrection, as the sole basis and means for our justification. No, that isn't terribly sexy or trendy, it won't make a book cover look better, or the book sell more, and it may seem old hat to Lutherans who have heard about it their entire lives. Yet it is exactly what Lutherans have always taught and believed, what Luther's Smalcald Articles refer to as the "chief article" (*Hauptartikel*) and what Lutherans have since called the "article upon which the church stands or falls" (*Articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). Simply put, if the theology of the cross as expressed in the Heidelberg Theses is of any use to us, it is so simply as another way to talk about the Gospel as Lutherans understand it.⁷

Heino Kadai summarizes the issue,

Luther's theology is—and Lutherans would do well to heed this—Christocentric. Man's relationship to God depends on the saving event of the cross of Christ. Without Incarnation and Atonement, he would be in sin and thus alienated from God. Luther's theology is also revelation oriented. God meets man in the cross of Jesus Christ. Now His gracious revelation continues in the word, the Holy Scriptures. God also offers His gracious forgiveness in the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. Again, Luther's theology is faith centered. It does not seek support in reason, philosophy, or metaphysical speculation. One apprehends salvation, healing, and new life through faith alone.⁸

How Does the Cross Apply to Missions?

The question of mission work is simply this—how does a person come to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:21 there is one way, “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” And then Paul goes on in v. 23, “but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” In other words, it is the proclamation of the message of the crucified Savior, through which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and enlightens.

As Lutherans we understand the power of God's Word—written, spoken, sung, as well as when it is connected to visible elements like water and bread and wine, this is how God effects our salvation. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17). In a nutshell “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:19, 21).

In 1 Corinthians 2:4–5 Paul says, “my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” You see, it is not about being Billy Graham or Oswald Hoffmann, having airtight arguments, or memorized outlines—the message is simple: Jesus died for you! The Holy Spirit works through that simple message to touch and turn hearts and lives. This is the only message we have been armed with, which is a “foolish” one in the world's ears. All we can say is Jesus died for you, so that no one may boast before God. (See 1 Cor 1:29.) No Christian, no missionary, no pastor, teacher, or preacher can ever say, “I am such a great evangelist, I'm so smooth, so practiced in my order of worship, so persuasive that I effect salvation.” When someone is brought to faith, it is not due to our merit, all the praise goes to God! That the Holy Spirit somehow used us—what an unspeakable privilege it is to be able to share just the foolishness that Jesus died for you.

Now, Paul also reminds us in Colossians 2:5–6 to be wise in the way we act toward outsiders, making the most of every opportunity, letting our conversations always be with grace which is balanced with salt so we can make the most of every opportunity and know how to answer everyone. Paul here speaks to the reality that “style” is important because some will be turned off by the messenger and not the message. So,

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Paul says, be careful, let your speech always be seasoned with grace. Our primary attitude needs to be graciousness that is balanced with seasoning, with salt (that good old Law & Gospel) to seek to win the person before trying to win the argument. Paul says we need to know how to respond to each person, our approach should be tailored to the individual, but the message is always the same—Jesus Christ died on the cross for you!

Conclusion – The Theology of The Cross: An Encouraging Word to Those in the Mission Field

The world is a mission field. Every mission plant, every congregation, has a purpose and reason for its existence: to be a life-saving station. The message of the cross IS the message, when we “preach Christ crucified” we are simply proclaiming the truth that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone! Any attempt to claim or proclaim that we are involved by our works in our own justification and salvation denies the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice (which is “calling evil good and good evil”).

Regardless of where you have been called to serve by God, you were sent there “for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14) because God in His wisdom knew your unique personality, gifts, abilities; the unique situation, season, and circumstances of that mission or congregation and the community in which it is blessed to serve. But the confidence you can have in proclaiming the Gospel is because the Holy Spirit will be working through that Word, and it is the Holy Spirit ALONE who touches hearts and changes lives. As a 26-year-old Seminary graduate, I did not know what I did not know, but I did know that I could trust that God did.

Every “field” needs something—some need initial plowing and weeding; some need seed scattered and watered; some, the harvest is incredibly plentiful; and some where the circumstances are such that the field can no longer sustain a harvest (that may be due to the life cycle of that specific congregation and community, and yet that field still needs to be tended with care). To everything there is a season, discern that season and your calling to that particular field. Faithfully use the gifts God gave you in the place He sent you to serve. “If you cannot preach like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus, you can say He died for all...”⁹ (That is the theology of the cross).

Satan loves to twist the report of ministry going on in other places, to whisper, to discourage, and try to lead us into despair. As shepherds we all desire to hear the Great Shepherd say, “Well done good and faithful servant.” But notice our Lord Jesus does not say, “Well done, good and successful servant,” or “good and confessional servant,” or “good and well-loved servant.” So, if we are going to glory or boast, let us glory and boast in Jesus! The Church is His Bride which He loved more than anything else; the mission and ministry we are privileged to serve is one of His gifts.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ed Schroeder, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross is Not a Theology of Suffering.” A Singapore Congregational Presentation, The Crossings Community, October 2006, Blog. Accessed at [Crossings.org/luthers-theology-of-the-cross-is-not-a-theology-of-suffering](https://crossings.org/luthers-theology-of-the-cross-is-not-a-theology-of-suffering). Cf. Gerhard O.

Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation 1518. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

² Rick Serina, NJ District, *Theology of the Cross*. April 14, 2020. Accessed at <https://www.njdistrict.org/in-commemoration-of-the-reformation/theology-of-the-cross>.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, Harold Grimm, ed., (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 49–55.

⁴ Rick Serina.

⁵ Herman Sasse, AJ Koelpin, trans., "Luther's Theology of the Cross" Thesis 6 – "A Theologian of the Cross versus A Theologian of Glory." in *Essays*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (New Ulm, MN: Dr. Martin Luther College, 1981), 5–6. Accessed at [Essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/butstream/handle/123456789/1986/SasseCross.pdf?sequence=1&is_allowed=y.Luther's Theology of the Cross.pdf \(wisluthsem.org\)](https://www.wisluthsem.org:8080/butstream/handle/123456789/1986/SasseCross.pdf?sequence=1&is_allowed=y.Luther's+Theology+of+the+Cross.pdf)

⁶ Ed Schroeder.

⁷ Rick Serina.

⁸Heino O Kadai, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol 63:3 (1999): 34. Accessed at [Ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/kadailutherstheologyofthecross.pdf](https://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/kadailutherstheologyofthecross.pdf)

⁹ David March. "Hark, the Voice of Jesus Crying," *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), # 826, v. 2.