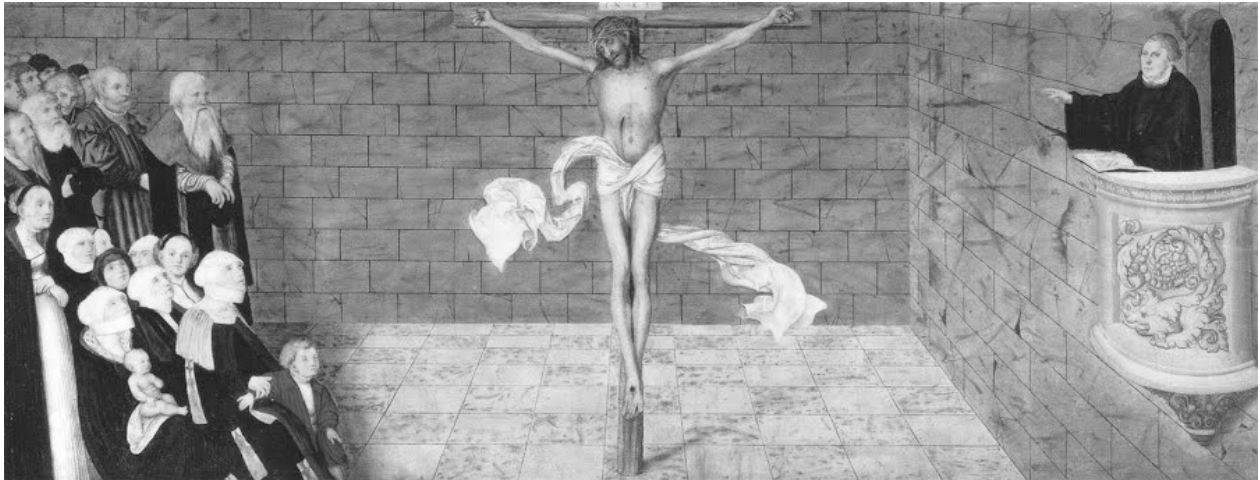


The crux of the matter
Thoughts on the Theology of the Cross
on the 500th Anniversary of the Heidelberg Disputation

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✠ *In the name of Jesus.* ✠

On¹ April 26, 1518, Martin Luther presented a series of theses for debate at a meeting of the Augustinian Order at Heidelberg. Those theses included his now famous phrase about a “theologian of the cross,” from which we get the phrase “the theology of the cross” (*theologia crucis*). Books have been written about these theses and that phrase. It is, arguably, one of the most famous phrases or terms coined by or associated with Luther.

Ironically, we know next to nothing about the debate in which he presented these theses. We know a little bit about his journey to the debate. We know a little bit about why he was asked to present. We know some of the outcomes. How the discussion itself went, we have no real idea.

Further, despite the popularity of this phrase and its ubiquity among Lutherans today, it

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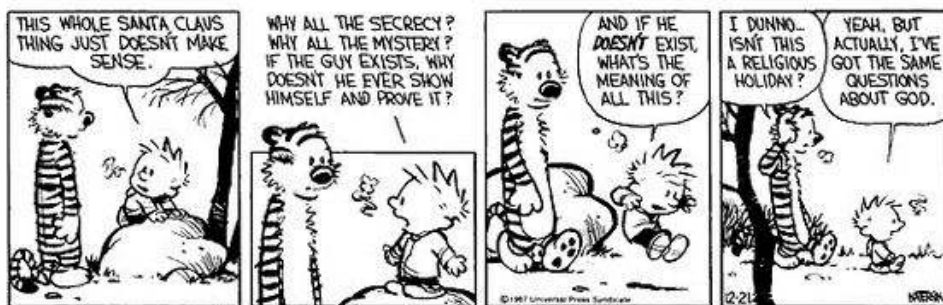
nearly disappears from Luther’s writings in the years afterward. The Lutheran Confessions make little to no use of it (cf. *Apology* VII/VIII:17-19). The next generations of Lutherans do not glam onto this term and hoist it as a banner. Even today, those who use it do not necessarily agree on its meaning (Loewenich, footnote 2).

For all that, the theology of the cross remains a flashpoint in theological conversations. The term itself fell out of use, but the concept behind it, it turns out, stood at the very center of Luther’s theological enterprise. And, he would argue, it stands at the center of the Scriptures and defines the primary task of the biblical theologian.

The theology of the cross is the crux of the matter. It is crucial to our understanding of Luther and of the Scriptures. I chose those words deliberately, “crux” and “crucial,” because they expose the heart and core of our discussion today: the cross. “Crux” comes from the Latin root *cruc-*, as in “cross” or “crucify.” The crux is a puzzling or difficult problem or the essential point requiring resolution, or the main

and central feature. "Crucial," from the same root, is a word that signals importance or significance. It identifies that which brings resolution to a doubtful issue or outcome. The cross, Luther determined, stands at the center of all things. We can only understand Scripture, we can only understand God, we can only understand our theological task, we can only understand ourselves through the lens of the cross and the crucified God upon it.

For that reason, the phrase "theology of the cross" dare not become a slogan. Though it so easily can. It can be – and is – hoisted as one of those markers of purity, like the word "confessional" or even "Lutheran." If we just utter the word "the cross" or "theology of the cross" or *theologia crucis* then we have assured our listeners or readers of purity.



No. The theology of the cross is no slogan to be bandied about as a party identifier. Nor is it just one category or *loci* in a theological system. Some, for example, have identified it as that place where we talk about human suffering. While a discussion of human suffering certainly finds its way into the theology of the cross, it is not merely that. The theology of the cross is a method, a current, a principle, a kind of theology, a hermeneutic. It is a way to read and see the Scriptures. More than that, it is the way to see and know God. The cross, one theologian said, is a form of epistemology (Kedai, 177). The theology of the cross teaches me about God. It reveals God. It makes me know God. It does it by making me understand how little I actually know. Commenting on Psalm 32:8, Luther puts these words into God's mouth, "Submerge yourself in a lack of understanding, and I will

give you my understanding" (LW 14:152). The theology of the cross explains all the things we do not know.

This does not mean that by means of the theology of the cross God fully discloses himself. "Truly you are a God who hides himself," the prophet says (Is 45:15). "The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut 29:29). It is true, as John Schaller pointed out, that no matter how much God tells us about anything, he still has not told us all of anything (Schaller, 173). Timothy Wengert makes an interesting distinction. He points out that the theology of the cross is news. Good news, great news, the most spectacular news, but news nonetheless, not solutions to all of life's little problems (Wengert, 205). Hence, Walther von Loewenich says, "Prayer is not a little garden of Paradise,

where the one who is weary of the Word of the cross might take a little rest, but prayer is just the battleground where the sign of the cross has been raised" (143). In this way we understand Romans 5, where Paul talks about

rejoicing in suffering. This is not making the Christian someone who brings suffering onto himself, much as St. Ignatius clutched the lions to his breast. Rather, in the midst of suffering, in the midst of earthly life, while it happens to us we can rejoice. Notice Paul's language: *καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν, εἰδότες ὅτι...* ("We rejoice in the troubles, because we know that..."). Why do we rejoice? We rejoice in the midst of suffering, while it happens, not because it is good, but because we know God is good.

That means a proper definition of terms is vital. That was the very exercise Luther carried out in his disputation at Heidelberg. The most famous definition of terms came in theses 19-24.² There

² The theological theses are included at the end of the essay.

Luther introduces to the world the distinction between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross. It is not the only definition Luther offered. He discussed the meaning of the words law and mortal sin (Theses 1-12), free will (Theses 13-18), theologian of the cross (Theses 19-24), and grace (Theses 25-28). His discussion of these words rocked the world. Even though his 95 *Theses* are more famous, it can be argued that these theses are more important. The well-known Luther biographer, Martin Brecht, argues, "Never more than here did Luther radically destroy man's possibility of achievement in regard to his salvation" (232).

Those are some big words, no? Law. Mortal sin. Free will. Grace. We could hardly find any more key words in all of Scripture. These are the words that force mankind to see everything differently. This is what the Scriptures do. Consider Isaiah, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags" (64:6). Or Paul, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature" (Ro 7:18a). And then, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

We need to pause on those big words for a moment. They too are a part of the irony of the Heidelberg Disputation. You can think of this disputation as the equivalent of an essay like this. The Augustinians met every third year and someone led a theological discussion. We do essays; they did theses and disputations. Knowing your Reformation history, you know that April 1518 puts us in the middle of the indulgence controversy. Luther is a known – and marked – man. Pope Leo X would like nothing better than if he were silenced. Certainly others in Germany agreed. Luther's dear friend and spiritual father, John Staupitz, wanted people to hear about what was happening at Wittenberg. He wanted to expose them to the new theology. He wanted them to see that it was about more than indulgences. So he assigns Luther the task

of preparing the theses for debate at the meeting of the order in Heidelberg. Staupitz makes one request: "Be non-controversial. Talk about some less dangerous topics like the law, free will, mortal sin, the cross and grace." Non-controversial?!?!?

For Luther, this must have been like Paul's meeting with "those reputed to be pillars." "All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do" (Gal 2:10). You can imagine the conversation.

Staupitz: "So, Brother Martin, could you please not discuss indulgences at Heidelberg?"

Luther: "Nothing would make me happier than to talk about anything other than indulgences."

Luther prepares the theses. He spends two weeks traveling to Heidelberg. It is not quite the triumphal procession that the trip to Worms was three years later, but he is taken care of all along the way and travels under a safe-conduct from Elector Frederick. That is about all we know. The meeting happened. It carried out its business. By May 15 Luther's back in Wittenberg and, among other things, putting some finishing touches on his explanations to his 95 *Theses*. In which, by the way, he discusses the theology of the cross and just throws out the term as if it needs no explanation (cf. especially Thesis 58).

But, of course, it does. The shorthand explanation Luther provides in the opening words of his disputation. "Distrusting completely our own wisdom" (*LW* 31:59). And then he calls his theses "theological paradoxes" (*LW* 31:59). The theology of the cross, which is, as the theses make clear, simply the theology of the Scriptures, is one that forces us to step back from our own wisdom. It forces us to step back from all the things we think we know or want to know. In the words of Daniel Deutschlander,

“God is everything; we are nothing” (*The Theology of the Cross*, 126).

On the spectrum of Luther’s theological journey, Alister McGrath sees this not as one breakthrough among many, but rather that all his other breakthroughs led to this (cf. also Walther von Loewenich and Berndt Hamm who draw similar conclusions). In other words, Luther’s discovery of justification by faith, the so-called tower experience (the dating of which is hotly debated among scholars) brings to us the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls. There was also Luther’s skepticism about indulgences and papal authority as well as his burgeoning understanding of the sacramental system. But the theology of the cross, his view of God, is really a part of that. It is not a separate discovery; it is, as mentioned above, the hermeneutic beneath all of them. It is the natural conclusion of his biblical exploration. “Of course, God crucified for me!” Like Paul, “It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption” (1 Cor 1:30). This *theologia crucis* causes us to go back through the Scriptures – and our lives – just as the discovery of a righteousness from God caused Luther to go back over every single text of Scripture that he knew. At the center of it all the Christian finds the crucified God and the cross of Christ.

Taking the disputation’s four divisions as our guide, we shall take a look at four real problems revealed or exposed at Heidelberg with which we deal as we endeavor to be theologians of the cross. Those four problems are

- Wicked Speculation
- Trying to Tip the Scales
- Eyes on the Wrong Prize
- Failing to Let God Create

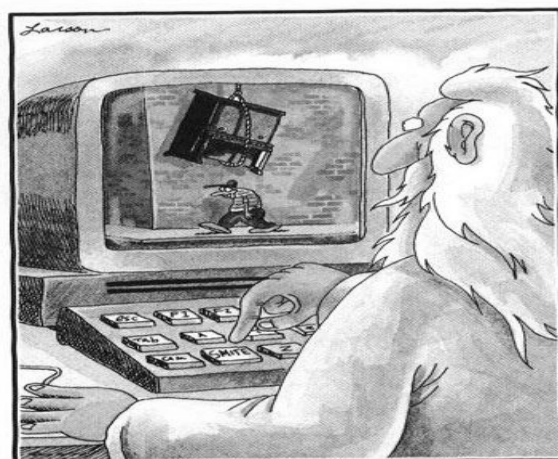


If we wished to pick one predominant idea that drives the theology of the cross, it is the condemnation of speculation. Alister McGrath

says that when one gives in to speculation he is no longer a theologian (149). By speculation in this instance we are talking about what we think we know about God and ourselves and the

universe and everything.

Here we can find no better biblical example than Job. Job suffers. He wondered whether God had hit the “smite” key on his heavenly keyboard. His friends were convinced of it.



God at His computer

This is the conclusion to be drawn from suffering. “I must have displeased a punishing God.” This is based on a false view of the law. Luther began his theses dismantling that false view: “The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him” (Thesis 1).

With that false view of the law in mind, Job’s friends come to offer some pastoral care. It turns out that they stink at it. For thirty-plus chapters Job and his friends go back and forth,

around and around. Job's friends blame Job, "Clearly you sinned! Clearly you did not keep God's law perfectly!" Job defended himself, but then succumbed and blamed God too. "Oh, that I weren't born! Everything I'm doing kills me! Your law is the worst!" But when you read those chapters carefully, you will find that the entire conversation was off base. For those thirty-plus chapters Job and his friends talked about God and what he was doing and what they were doing or not doing. As if God were behind it all or their obedience to the law was the issue. But, as we learn in Job 1 and 2, all of this was from the devil. It turns out that neither Job nor his friends had any idea about what was going on. They were talking about God when they actually knew nothing. God says to all of them, Job

suffering was" (Job 2:13). Sometimes the best pastoral care we can give is no words at all since we do not know all the causes and cures of the problems we are dealing with. More, we do not know the inner workings of God.

But we refuse to keep our mouths shut. Consider Asaph in Psalm 73. He looks around and sees the world winning. Those who follow the flesh succeed and move upward and onward. Meanwhile, the good get stomped on. This is a far cry from the words of Psalm 37:25 ("I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.") or Psalm 91:10 ("no disaster will come near your tent"). Asaph, like Job, finally admits defeat, "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Ps 73:16-17).

Again, well-timed silence can serve us well. As we sit in the pastoral study and ponder our congregations and craft ministry plans and sit across from weary and burdened souls begging for answers and care, we begin to think, "What is God leading me to do or say...?" We start to peek behind the curtain and get into God's head. This is the weakness of that word in our call letters, "God led me to...." Who are you to pin down the will of God?

But that is what our people want. They want to know why their spouse left, or why this sickness will not go away, or why their kids still struggle in school. They want to know if they are being punished or if they made some bad decisions somewhere along the line. They want to know if they should pursue or end a relationship with that special someone. They want solutions, but, as Wengert says, what we



included, Job especially, "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge" (Job 38:2)?

These guys should have gone with their first instinct: "Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his

have is news. At least from the divine end. Of course, God has solutions. He has all kinds of solutions. He works out all things for the good of those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose. He has solutions to everything as he works out the times and days leading up to the end. But he does not reveal them all. Least of all to us.

This causes us, or, better, tempts us to put God on trial. Is not this always the case when we speculate? It is God in the dock, God being justified. This is all wrong. In his book on the history of suffering, Ronald Rittgers analyzed Luther's theology of the cross and determined that Luther reversed it. The Scriptures, and thus the theology of the cross, puts humanity on trial, not God (Rittgers, 118).

So did Luther at Heidelberg. In those opening theses on the law he reveals that the best good works we do are the worst. So did Isaiah. But we need to hear this anew. If I cannot do God's good works, how can I possibly do my own? If my good works are very likely mortal, what in all the world am I doing blaming God for anything? Failure to see this, failure to come to grips with the law leads to my arrogant speculations, as it did for Job and for his so-called friends. It nearly shipwrecked Asaph. Luther concludes, "Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work" (Thesis 11). In every work!?!?

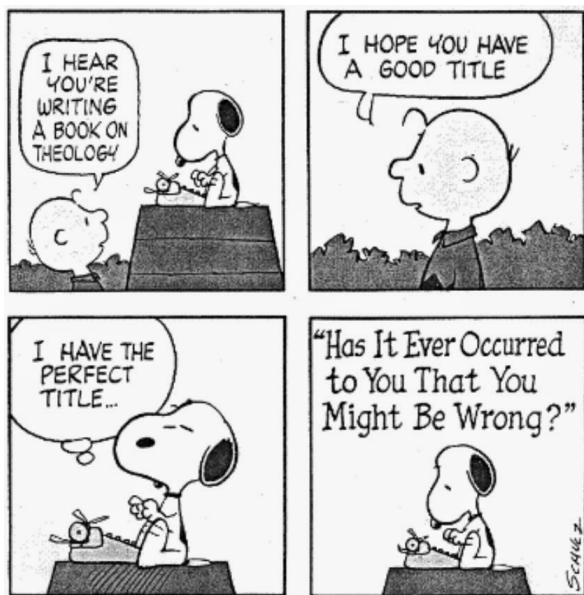
What am I doing speculating about God, the universe, and everything if my every work condemns me? This changes all my thinking about everything. Rittgers asks, "What did you think would happen when you were born" (Rittgers, 41-42)? Cyprian writes,

"But nevertheless it disturbs some that the power of this Disease attacks our people equally with the heathens, as if the Christian believed for this purpose, that he might have the enjoyment of the world and this life free from the contact of ills; and not as one who undergoes all adverse things here and is reserved for future joy. It disturbs some that this mortality is common to us with others; and yet what is there in this world which is not common to us with others, so long as this flesh of ours still remains, according to the law of our first birth, common to us with them? So long as we are here in the world, we are associated with the human race in fleshly equality, but are separated in spirit. Therefore until this corruptible shall put on incorruption, and this mortal receive immortality, and the Spirit lead us to God the Father, whatsoever are the disadvantages of the flesh are common to us with the human race. Thus, when the earth is barren with an unproductive harvest, famine makes no distinction; thus, when with the invasion of an enemy any city is taken, captivity



at once desolates all; and when the serene clouds withhold the rain, the drought is alike to all; and when the jagged rocks rend the ship, the shipwreck is common without exception to all that sail in her; and the disease of the eyes, and the attack of fevers, and the feebleness of all the limbs is common to us with others, so long as this common flesh of ours is born by us in the world" (*On Mortality*, para 8).

The theology of the cross says “no” to all such speculation about God. It says that you do not really know God until you see him on the cross, God crucified, bleeding, dying. As Paul Wendland pointed out last year, what I see with my eyes is God’s hand. Romans 1:20 teaches me that the invisible God makes himself and his power known in creation. Even my conscience tells me of this God (Ro 2:14-15). But that is his



hand, and my eyes see a terrible, punishing hand. Or, when there is any bit of success, my eyes grab hold of that and say, “Yes, glory, power, might! This is my God! This is heaven! Show me more of this glory!” His hand seems to send me mixed messages. It gives and it takes away. Yet here is how wicked my heart is. It does not occur to my heart that I might be wrong.

Consider Mary at the tomb in John 20. Knowing what she knows, having heard what she has heard, up to and including the words of the angels at the tomb itself, she can still only conclude, “They’ve taken the Lord away.” Peter and John cannot put it all together either. They see this strange scene. Burial linens lie there. The napkin is folded off to the side. The smell of incense still lingers. Somewhere a dead body is without its’ burial shroud. They are not able to ask and answer, “Who would steal a dead – and naked – body?” Because they are speculating.

They define God on their own terms. They put God in the dock. They judge God.

Until it occurs to us (or our people) that we might be wrong, we are in for a world of hurt. At best, it is a lifetime of terrible *Anfechtung*. These battles will never end. We will tilt against the windmill of God and have no answers so long as we make ourselves the arbiters of what is right and wrong and we define God. This will always end up being a god in our own image. Such a god will always let us down, because this god is no greater than us. Or, if it is the true God that we see, we will be ashamed, embarrassed, or angry at his works, because his works do not match our expectations.

So, what do we do when we butt up against the law of God? We work ever so hard to tip the scales in our favor. Luther moves on from the law and discusses free will in his next batch of theses. He says, flat out, “Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin” (Thesis 13). This is because what my “free will” is able to do, the *quod in se est*, is spiritually dead. “Nothing good lives in me.” Doing what is in me, doing my thing, damns me; but it sure doesn’t stop me from trying.

Consider Abraham. He hears the promises of God. God gives direct revelation. God makes promises, clear promises. In many instances Abraham does well. He lets Lot take whatever land he will. He goes off to fight for Lot against the wicked kings. He clings to the promises of God about a son. He circumcises himself (yikes!) and his household. He sacrifices his son. To paraphrase Luther from his Genesis lectures, “I must hold on to what God says, even when he does the opposite. Even when I am being killed” (cf. LW 4:94-97).

But, there is also the Abraham who takes his wife’s advice and sleeps with another woman to get a son. That must have been really painful. Or there is the Abraham who also laughed at God,

never forget. There is the Abraham who not once, but twice, tried to save his own skin and exposed Sarah to the sexual fancies of foreign kings – for the sake of the promised son, of course! And the Abraham who gave God a big, “Yeah, but!” “Yeah, but I have no son! I’ll have to make Eleazer my son and heir!” Though he had a faith that could move mountains, still Abraham tried to tip the scales in his favor. At least he could argue that he was trying to tip them for the sake of the words and promises of God.

Or there is Jonah. Now there is a guy who tried to tip the scales. He does not want to preach to Nineveh. They do not deserve the gospel. He knows the heart of God. The people will hear the word. They will repent. God will forgive. Doggonit! But Jonah forgot that God is not shaped by man, God does the shaping (cf. *LW* 19:11). So God sends the storm and the fish.

This scale tipping flows naturally from my wicked speculation. When I have determined who God is and what God desires, then I will bend all my efforts in directions I believe to be of benefit. But that assumes I have correctly defined God and his desires.

I find this in my parish. Perhaps you do as well. I find it in my study. I will master all things, no? We will elect the right officers at the parish, circuit, district, or synod levels. We will budget like mad. The new task force will do it! I will do and do and do and do! The next program, the next initiative, the next this, that, or the other, that will finally tip the scales towards success. That will please God! That will make the kingdom come! Or, more likely, that will bring me some bit of glory, praise, acclaim, and election to a higher office. Let us not forget that

motivation to tip the scales. For every Abrahamic good intention, there is a Jonah inside who wants only what I want because that is what I want. I must have it.

But as the God revealed in his law tells me, “Stop trying harder: you are dying” (cf. Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” 446). What will I accomplish with my will? Certainly not grace. Not even so many of the lesser things. When have the ripples I created in the pond been such great, positive blessings? The good that comes so often comes in spite of me. God enriched Abraham as he slunk off from Egypt after being exposed as a cruel husband. God repeated his promises after Abraham argued. Only then does it say, “Abraham believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6).



I try so hard, though I cannot see. But I must do! Like Job’s friends, I poke those suffering, “What have you done!” Or, if I am Job, I weep

and mourn and wail. I shake my fist and curse my birth and swear, swear that I will do more and better. But, the point is, I will do something!

Where does action without understanding get me? In the most recent *Star Wars* (Episode VIII, *The Last Jedi*), Poe Dameron wants to take action. The enemy must be destroyed. We must take the fight to him. He argues with his military commander, Amilyn Holdo. He is convinced that her seeming inaction has traitorous intent. She is handing the resistance over to the enemy. So he will act, orders be damned! But he does not know the truth. He is not privy to all the information. He does not know the admiral’s

mission and plan. He knew parts, but not all. In that lack of knowledge was his downfall. As it was for Abraham and Jonah. As it is for us.

But we must do something. Or must we? In his novel, *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), Sinclair Lewis ponders the rise of a fascist state in America. His protagonist, Doremus Jessup, a New England newspaper man, muses one day: "Blessed be they who are not Patriots and Idealists, and who do not feel they must dash right in and Do Something About It, something so immediately important that all doubters must be liquidated - tortured - slaughtered!" Do you see? When we must do something, when we tip the scales, we tend to go awry. Again, look at Abraham or Jonah. Or Peter. Peter is the definition of the man who "must dash right in and Do Something About It." He makes confessions. He cuts off ears. He rebukes Christ. He denies. But he is a man of action, no? This is where the free will gets us. We make decisions, but they tend to serve God less and our own selfish interests more. Yes, Abraham survived Egypt, but at what cost to his marriage? Yes, Ishmael was born, but at what cost to his marriage and his soul?

Why must we master everything? We work hard to master the ministry, the Scriptures, and life! We will succeed! So we strive and fret and clutch and try to get! Rather, why not let the Scriptures master us and just live? "Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" (1 Cor 7:17). We are in the midst of earthly life. Death and hell surround us. This is no excuse for laziness. No doubt the apostles had methods, questions, hopes, and dreams. No doubt they made proactive decisions and plans. But they also heard the Word of the Lord, "Do not worry." Paul knew that even his call came from outside of him, "Called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" (1 Cor 1:1). He could say he had learned to be content in any and every circumstance. He did not rely on his

heritage or his learning or his planning. It was all garbage and manure.

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:7-11).

Somehow to attain to the resurrection. That is not tipping the scales. This is being mastered by God. That is a theology of the cross, relying on God, letting God shape, letting God reveal, letting God show me that my only escape is Christ. "It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ" (Thesis 18).

Even as God ends my despair by showing me who I am, my truly mortal sins, and his true self – the crucified God, crucified for me – even then my eyes drift away from that cross, from that theology, and find other more satisfying theologies. Luther called this being a theologian of glory. A theologian of glory reads Psalm 91("They will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against a stone" [v12].) without noticing that Psalm 90 precedes it. "All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan. The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow" (Ps 90:9-10). A theologian of the cross reads them together.

A theologian of glory somehow misses the theme of Isaiah 53. God speaks to his Son and says, "You don't get your glory today. In fact, I will crush you." A theologian of glory can, as Luther said in Thesis 19, only comprehend God in the visible things, his hands, his creation, and assume that that is all there is about God to know. A theologian of glory belts out "Onward Christian Soldiers" and can

to a way of living. I live out this theology. I meticulously count the noses in the pews, and then eagerly scratch out the count of the ushers because I found two more. I want the titles and prestige that come with office. I like that part of my report that lists the projects I have been given or assigned. Because the kingdom of God is advancing! I crave the approval of a mention in the synodical



even manage to mangle "Sing my tongue the glorious battle" and see in it a rising Christendom (Sasse, 391). A theologian of glory puts the cross at the head of his army, as the crusaders did. A theologian of glory is enamored of the thought of "Christendom" and "Christian America." He shouts "*Deus vult!*" instead of "*Deo volente!*"

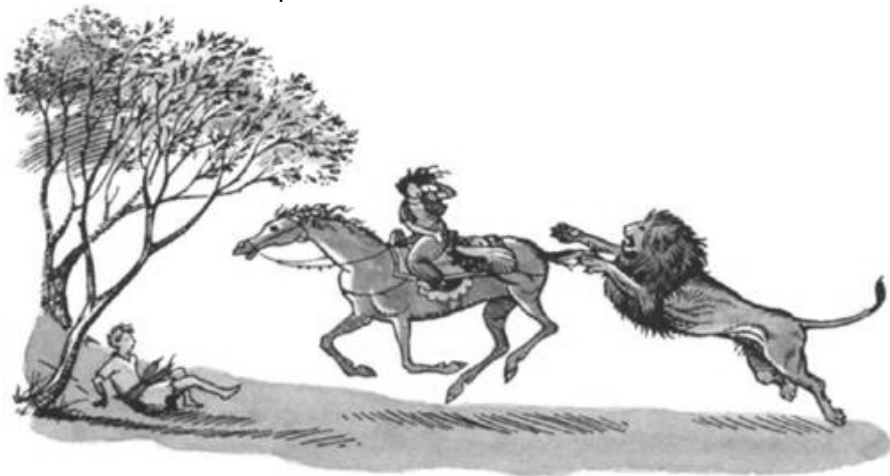
We must confess to being theologians of glory. Notice how Luther makes this personal. He does not refer to a theology of glory or the cross, but theologians. People, pastors, teachers, Christians. This becomes quite personal. It goes from being a way of thinking

magazine or video newsletter. And what theologians do we see there? Are they in the muck or the mire? Or are they "succeeding"? Are they in the tiny, struggling burg, or the rich, populous urban and millennial filled city?

Even as I call out such things, I expose my own bad theology and failure as a theologian. Paul told me, "Be content where you are with what you have." Where has God called you to be? What has God called you to do? That is the theme of 1 Corinthians 7 whether we are talking marriage or ministry.

This is why, as Schaller suggests, theology is the least satisfying of the arts and sciences (Schaller, 172-173). For we never get to where we want to go. We never climb the highest mountain. We march off to war and it often ends in defeat. The demographics are not our friend in America. Nor is the culture. Not even the greatest moment of our Lutheran history, the Reformation, could capture a continent.

But this is it. This drags us where God wants us to be. This fixes our theology squarely on the cross. This makes us theologians of the cross. "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and



manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross" (Thesis 20). This theologian does not redefine the terms or pull the wool over the eyes or pee on my leg and say that it is raining (calling "evil good and good evil", Thesis 21). This theologian "calls the thing what it actually is" (Thesis 21).

But I do not know what the thing actually is. Ah! Yes. This is it. This is the center, the heart and core of Christian lore. This is the lesson learned by little Shasta in *The Horse and His Boy*. In the second of C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, we meet Shasta. He is enslaved in a land not his own. He escapes, along with a noble princess named Aravis. They have many adventures. Along the way, a lion hounds and pursues Shasta. We know (or least suspect)

that it is Aslan, the lion that stands in for Christ in Lewis' Christian allegory; but Shasta does not know this lion well, or at all. Actually, he thinks he is quite bad. The lion tries to run him down on a beach and chases him through a mountain pass. Finally, the lion attacks him and Aravis and wounds her terribly. If Aslan is Jesus, this is terribly confusing, no? For those of us who know the Scriptures, it is no less confusing than Jesus' strange encounter with the Gentile woman begging for her daughter's life in Matthew 15.

Finally, Shasta meets Aslan.

"I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you

lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you."

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?"

"It was I."

"But what for?"

"Child," said the Voice, "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own."

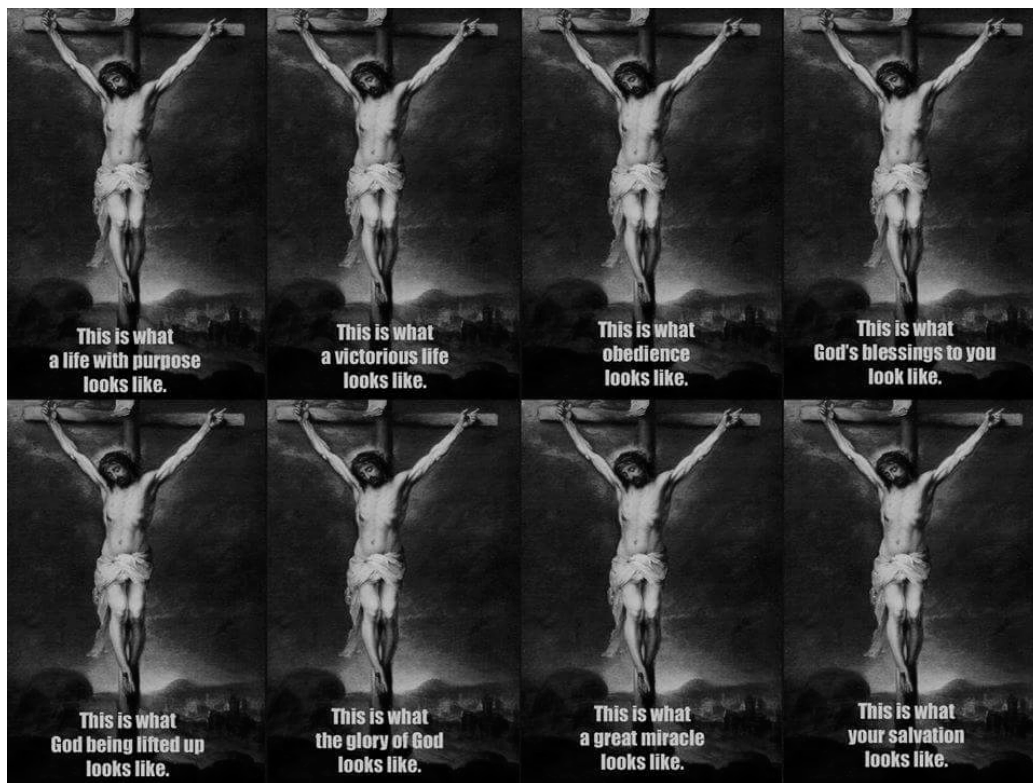
Aslan tries to make Shasta a theologian of the cross. As Jesus did for that woman in Matthew 15. Jesus tells it like it is. Our ministry is not about numbers or offices or successes.

Instead, the Lord tells us our story. It is a story that we cannot understand. We cannot understand God's silences. We misunderstand them as rejection. Too often we discover that it is not really faith in our hearts, because it was crushed at the very moment when we do not see, taste, or hold on to everything we expect from God. But God is not about putting absolutely everything into our hands immediately. God is about hope. In the end all we can do is hope for a merciful God. Like that woman. Like Shasta. That woman discovered that the hunter was actually the hunted. She hunted Jesus down to heal her daughter. It turns out Jesus was hunting her to expose her faith, to strengthen her faith, to put her faith in the only possible place where it could bear fruit: upon Christ!

This is how Romans 5 works. We keyed in on rejoicing in suffering earlier, but note how it begins and ends. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces...hope. And hope does not disappoint us."

Theologians of the cross see everything through suffering and the cross. It is not first our suffering. It is first the suffering of God. God crucified for me shows me that I have nothing except Christ. With his silence he draws me closer, closer, closer! So that I can

only cry out, "Jesus!... Jesus!... JESUS! Have mercy!" Then suddenly there is that great moment, when the Lion who has so grievously wounded you and your friends turns and says, "O, my dear child! Look at my hands and my feet! Look at my side! Look at how I bled for you! Look at me! I have always been with you! I have always been for you!" It is when we



see that that we, like that woman's daughter, are healed.

It turns out that if you seek a theology of the cross, look about you! Hidden behind everything is God. Like Aslan he moves and shapes and guides. He does everything he asks you to pray for in the Lord's Prayer. He does it in such a way so as you put an end to your theology of glory. Because being that kind of theologian "misuses the best in the worst manner" (Thesis 24). You need think only of all the prosperity gospelers out there to see the great misuse to which my wrong speculations, my tipping of the scales, and my misplaced eyes put Christ's cross. That very theology we bring into our hearts and lives

when we put our hope elsewhere than in God crucified for me. When we look somewhere other than at the cross for a life of purpose, for victory, for obedience, for God's blessings, for God's glory, for a great miracle, for salvation, then we are "completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened" (Thesis 22). And as theologians, we will only lead our people away from Christ.

So, finally, Luther concludes with God. Let God create. Let God do. "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it" (Thesis 28). "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ" (Thesis 25). "The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done" (Thesis 26).

I am continually amazed by how our Lutheran fathers had only one goal in mind. They wanted to bring consolation to troubled consciences. Time and again that is the refrain of our confessions. They just wanted to be theologians of the cross, consoling consciences through forgiveness. Luther identified this in the *Large Catechism*:

"Everything, therefore, in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs, to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the <grace of the> Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but <continuous, uninterrupted> forgiveness of sin" (III:55).

In the *Apology*, Melanchthon writes:

"The audiences are held by useful and clear sermons. (Neither the people nor the teachers

have ever understood the doctrine of the adversaries.) There is nothing that keeps people at church more than good preaching. The true adornment of the churches is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the Sacraments, fervent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are fitting, but they are not the specifically unique adornment belonging to the Church. If the adversaries make these things the focus of worship, and not the preaching of the Gospel, in faith (and the struggles of faith) they are to be numbered among those whom Daniel describes as worshiping their god with gold and silver" (24:50-51).

In other words: just let me be a theologian. All the elections, all the budgets, all the numbers, programs, and initiatives in the world will not do what happened at Pentecost. Let me baptize, commune, and preach. It is what I am called to do. It is how God creates. He pulls our eyes to that cross, to the place where he suffered for me, where he was crucified for me. He pulls me there by means of the means.

The early church got this. Acts 2:42, what we might call the first congregational constitution, tells us what they were devoted to: the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. That lets God create. Through those tools, God makes us loveable. He creates things that are pleasing to himself, because his Son, who knew no sin, became sin for us. So that we can become the righteousness of God.

I said it before, I will say it again. This *theologia crucis* reshapes all of Scripture. Or, rather, it is already the shape of Scripture. The crux, the crucial point, of all Scripture is that it is cruciform. Not every moment is Good Friday, as Sasse says, but you cannot properly see

Easter without it (Sasse, 387). Or Christmas for that matter. The crucified God puts paid to the words of Paul where he says God began a good work in you and God will complete it (Phil 1:6). It fills out what God's word does,

It is not bearable that we suffer. God shows me his suffering. It is not bearable that God would raise Lazarus from the dead and put him immediately into the pickle of having a price on his head right alongside Jesus. God



what it means that it does not return empty (Is 55). It is the something God makes out of nothing (Ro 4:17). "When God speaks, reality results" (Kolb, *op. cit.* 449). It also brings us full circle. If the law damns us as much as Luther suggests (and it does); if our free will is as nonexistent as Luther suggests (and it is); if, as Luther says, I must see everything through the cross of Christ (and I must), then we are right back there with Job. At the end of all his speculating with his friends, when they have blamed him and suggested how he might tip the scales in his favor, when the prize has been defined as a life well lived, then God comes and says, "Who the heck are you? You are nobody! I am God and you are not!" This is a word that, as Jesus told his disciples, is "more than you can now bear" (Jn 16:12). How does God make it bearable? Through the cross. By being crucified for us.

shows me his Son's death. As God takes every success and crutch and skill and craft and strategy away from me, he leaves me in the mud of my sins, realizing that they are all mortal, all of them, deadly, damnable, hellish. Then, *then*, he shows me those grotesquely outstretched arms, that torn and ripped flesh, that blood covered deity, and in that suffering he lifts me up. "Therefore, it is the sweetest righteousness of God the Father that he does not save imaginary, but rather, real sinners" (LW 31:63). He has turned me into a real sinner. Then he shows me how he made Christ into a real sinner for me.

For this reason, Luther speaks so strongly about preaching as he explains Thesis 52 of his famous ninety-five. "May every single sermon be forever damned which persuades a person to find security and trust in or through anything whatever except the pure

mercy of God, which is Christ" (LW 31:209). As I agonize over letting God create, letting God be God, I learn that I have just one recourse: the means of grace. The means of grace is how I deal with God being God (Rittgers, 122), because in the means I find God being God for me.

The means of grace cause me to distrust completely my own wisdom. They provide for me God's theological paradoxes. They form the crux, the crucial point. They bring the cross to me. They crucify me. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

The means of grace let me lose myself in Christ, in this crucifixion, in my crucifixion. A thing I cannot do and do not wish to do on my own. So God makes it happen. God strips away everything from himself, "Who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing" (Phil 2:6-7). Then he strips it away from me, as he allowed it to be stripped from Abraham, Job, Jonah, Paul. Each one faced death. They had nothing. In death, we have nothing. We have no systems, no politics, no philosophies, no methods, and no technologies. Only Christ. This faith in our crucified God is all we have going for us. What a crucified God tells me is that his wrath is not his last word. "The fundamental insight, recognized by faith alone, is that God's wrath is his penultimate, and not his final word" (McGrath, 155). What faith does, McGrath says (163), is move my hope from God's being (*esse*) to his will (*velle*). Or, in Wendland's

words, I move from God's hand to his heart. The crucified God shows me God's heart.

In his lectures on Romans, Luther says: "For inasmuch as the saints are always aware of their sin and seek righteousness from God in accord with His mercy, for this very reason they are always also regarded as righteous by God. Thus in their own sight and in truth they are unrighteous, but before God they are righteous because He reckons them so because of their confession of sin. They are actually sinners, but they are righteous by the imputation of a merciful God. They are unknowingly righteous and knowingly unrighteous; *they are sinners in fact but righteous in hope*" (LW 25:258; emphasis added).

This theology makes us theologians. This is the means by which we console consciences. This is the reality which kills us every day (cf. Ro 8:36) and at the same time the hope found in the crucified God. We are attractive to God because he loved us, not because of our lovable doing. So we sit on Thesis 25 and do not budge, "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ."

This is the kind of theologian I want to be, a theologian of the cross. I want to restore that where necessary, keep that where it is. I want to hold an office devoted in service to the cross and the constitution laid out in Acts 2:42. It will not end the death and hell that surrounds us. But it allows us to say in every situation that confronts us, in every suffering, in all despair, in all hopelessness, "Your crucified God has ended death and hell for you." That is the crux of the matter.

HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION

Brother Martin Luther, Master of Sacred Theology, will preside, and Brother Leonhard Beier, Master of Arts and Philosophy, will defend the following theses before the Augustinians of this renowned city of Heidelberg in the customary place. In the month of May, 1518.

THEOLOGICAL THESES

Distrusting completely our own wisdom, according to that counsel of the Holy Spirit, "Do not rely on your own insight" [Prov. 3:5], we humbly present to the judgment of all those who wish to be here these theological paradoxes, so that it may become clear whether they have been deduced well or poorly from St. Paul, the especially chosen vessel and instrument of Christ, and also from St. Augustine, his most trustworthy interpreter.

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.

2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.

3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.

4. Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.

5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.

6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.

7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.

8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.

9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.

10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.

11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.

12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.

13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.

14. 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.

15. Nor could free will endure in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.

16. 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.

17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

19. 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].
20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15].
24. 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.
25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
26. The law says, "do this," and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this," and everything is already done.
27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.
28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

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