

THEOLOGIA CRUCIS ET THEOLOGIA GLORIAE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

[This article in substantially this form was delivered as a paper at the 29th International Congress on Medieval Studies held at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, in May of 1994. Prof. Kiecker teaches church history at Wisconsin Lutheran College.]

James G. Kiecker

Martin Luther referred to his theology as a "theology of the cross," which he distinguished from a "theology of glory." Scholars who have investigated this, e.g., Paul Althaus¹ and Walther von Loewenich², have tended to deal with that writing of Luther in which this theology is most clearly enunciated, i.e., the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518). On the other hand, in a recent study, Alister E. McGrath³ refers to Luther's theology of the cross as "emerging"⁴ in the *Heidelberg Disputation* and finds that "the characteristic die of Luther's *theologia crucis* has already been cast by late 1515."⁵ I would agree with Althaus and von Loewenich that Luther's theology of the cross is most clearly enunciated in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, and thus I would disagree with McGrath that it only emerges there. But I do not agree with the approach of Althaus and von Loewenich which ignores what precedes the *Heidelberg Disputation* and thus I find McGrath's historical approach to the theology of the cross more congenial.

Taking a historical approach, I hope to show the following:

First, Luther's theology of the cross did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather in response to what Luther perceived as mistaken notions in the medieval Sacrament of Penance.

Secondly, Luther's theology of the cross, while displacing what he termed the prevalent theology of glory, emerges as the *true* theology of glory.

And thirdly, since Luther's theology of the cross emerges over time, from at least 1513 onwards, the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518 should be viewed as the *terminus ad quem* for this theology, rather than the *terminus a quo*.

As early as 1513 Luther began to feel that the cross was being excluded from people's lives at the very place where it should have been most prominent, the medieval penitential system⁶. To the earlier three-part system—contrition, confession, and absolution—a fourth part had been added. Between confession and absolution a work of satisfaction had been inserted, a temporal penalty or punishment performed to show the sinner's seriousness about sin and repentance. As such the work could be innocently done. But the moment it would be viewed as necessary for gaining salvation, the full sufficiency of the cross would be compromised. This in fact happened. The fully developed Sacrament of Penance included contrition, confession, absolution, and a work of satisfaction which conditioned absolution. The focus shifted from Christ's work on the cross to a work of man.

¹ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

² Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1967).

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

⁴ McGrath, p. 148.

⁵ McGrath, p. 161.

⁶ The summary which follows is based on the *Cambridge Modern History*, vol. II, *The Reformation* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 123-130.

Early on the idea arose that, if the satisfaction proved too severe, it could be lessened or removed. The church might be indulgent to the penitent. This too had a downside. To gain the church's indulgence the penitent might perhaps visit a shrine to view the relics, or endow a monastery, or go on a crusade. Or he might borrow from the "treasury of merits," a sort of heavenly bank account containing the over-and-above good works of the saints. Upon payment of a service charge, an indulgence would be issued, and the work of satisfaction would be cancelled.

Strictly speaking, indulgences took care of temporal penalties, while absolution took care of eternal ones. Temporal penalties were performed in this life, or, if necessary, in purgatory, while eternal penalties were reserved for hell. But purgatory and hell seemed to have about the same temperature. If indulgences could remove temporal penalties, could they also remove eternal ones, especially if labeled "plenary"? In fact, in one version of the indulgence system, all eternal penalties were commuted to manageable temporal ones. There was no need for the cross to cancel eternal punishment; one needed only to purchase an indulgence. So the indulgence, like the work of satisfaction, shifted the focus from Christ's work on the cross to a work of man.

The cross was diminished still further when attrition, a sort of half-hearted sorrow for sin, replaced contrition. It was said that attrition could be elevated to contrition by confession and absolution. For many thoughtless sinners, the way of salvation came down to attrition (vague sorrow for sin), followed by confession and absolution (which mechanically upgraded attrition to contrition), followed by indulgences (which took care of temporal and even eternal punishments). This system obviously appealed to everything that was worst in man. The indifferent or self-righteous sinner thrived. The concerned and fearful sinner trembled, since the cross had been squeezed out and he had only his own works on which to rely. And Martin Luther was certainly not an indifferent or self-righteous sinner.

Luther's theology of the cross may now be viewed as his response to what he perceived were mistaken notions in the medieval penitential system. He began gingerly, accepting the idea of works of satisfaction in the original sense of mere displays of sincerity about repentance. So understood, works of satisfaction were nothing but crosses which the church laid on people, and it was good for Christians to bear crosses. Commenting on Psalm 84:4 in his *First Psalm Commentary* (1513-1515), Luther asks: "[W]hy try to escape what every creature is teaching you? Why not accept the cross which is shown you everywhere? Why flee where there is no cross . . . ?" (*LW* 11:142).⁷ Crosses, whether the regular daily crosses of Christians, or the works of satisfaction imposed by the church, were good for Christians.

Since crosses were wholesome, Christians should accept them willingly. Commenting on Romans 5:3 ("We rejoice in our sufferings"⁸) in his *Lectures on Romans* (1515-1516), Luther observed: "Whoever is unwilling to suffer tribulation should never think that he is a Christian." In fact, "since the Lord . . . is given the name of Savior and Helper. . . , he who is unwilling to suffer as much as he can deprives Him of His true titles" (*LW* 25: 289,90).

Yet even at their best, i.e., as crosses, works of satisfaction dared not undercut the perfect satisfaction Christ alone rendered for sin on the cross. Luther's concern for adequate satisfaction for sin appears in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1516-1517). Commenting on Galatians 5:2 ("Now, I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you"), he writes: "[T]hose who receive circumcision in slavish fashion and out of fear of the Law, because thereby they want to render satisfaction of the Law . . . are surely casting Christ and the grace of God aside, since they presume to fulfill the Law in another way than through Christ" (*LW* 27:327). Neither circumcision in the Old Testament, nor works of satisfaction in Luther's day, i.e., no human works, could displace Christ's work on the cross.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press and Fortress Press, and St. Louis; Concordia, various dates), various volumes, cited as *LW*.

⁸ All scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1953), which is employed by *LW*.

People might even wind up glorying in human works rather than in Christ's satisfaction. Paul described the problem in Galatians 6:12-14. Judaizers wanted to avoid persecution for preaching salvation through Christ's cross alone by preaching a combination of the cross and the need for circumcision which exemplified submission to the Law—salvation by both the cross and also by works. But Paul would not glory at all in the works of the Law signified by circumcision. He would glory only in the cross.

Luther was intrigued by the contrast between glorying in works and glorying in the cross. In Paul's day it was Judaizers glorying in circumcision, i.e., in the works of the Law, instead of in the cross alone. In Luther's day it was people glorying in their own works of satisfaction rather than in the cross alone as the basis of complete satisfaction for sin. Or, one step removed, it was people glorying in indulgences. Either way, it was people glorying in their own works rather than in Christ's.

As far as I can tell, Luther uses the phrase "theology of the cross" for the first time in his *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517-1518). Commenting on Hebrews 12:11 ("For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness"), Luther draws the contrast between discipline as an alien work of God—God sending pain—and a proper work of God—the pain is for our benefit. "Here we find the Theology of the Cross," says Luther, because the fruit of righteousness is "hidden" by pain, just as salvation is "hidden" by the cross.⁹ The complementary phrase, theology of glory, however, does not yet appear.

Luther's response to the element of satisfaction in the medieval penitential system was the first step in the development of his theology of the cross. His response to indulgences was the second. Whereas works of satisfaction understood as crosses were good for Christians and even to be accepted willingly—though admittedly bad if they led to the exclusion of Christ's perfect satisfaction on the cross, or to glorying in one's own works—indulgences had very little to recommend them. As Luther tried to purge the penitential system of reliance on works of satisfaction, so he aimed to do the same with indulgences. His goal was to restore reliance on Christ's cross alone.

Luther's concern with indulgences was of long-standing. In a sermon preached in February of 1517 he remarked that through indulgences "people learn to flee and dread the penalty of sins, but not the sins themselves [P]eople ought rather to be exhorted to love the punishment and embrace the cross [I]ndulgences are rightly so called, for to indulge means to permit, and indulgence is equivalent to impunity, permission to sin, and license to nullify the cross of Christ" (*LW* 51:31). Indulgences undermined the wholesome use of works of satisfaction for Christians, i.e., as crosses, and, even worse, undercut the cross of Christ.

Perhaps Luther's call for an academic *Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* (*LW* 31:17f.) which he issued on October 31, 1517, can best be understood as a response to what he perceived were errors in the medieval penitential system, and as a corresponding attempt to restore the preeminence of Christ's cross to the Sacrament of Penance. These ninety-five theses attack both works of satisfaction which are understood as works displacing Christ's work on the cross and the use of indulgences.

The first thesis sets the tone: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Luther contended that Jesus did not tell his disciples to "do penance" (i.e., do works of satisfaction) but to be sorrowful daily for their sins. In one stroke Luther was doing away with all works of satisfaction—and by extension all indulgences—and restoring contrition to its rightful place.

Nevertheless, in keeping with his earlier position, Luther left room for "various outward mortifications of the flesh" (Thesis 3), i.e., for works of satisfaction as they had originally existed in the ancient church, as nothing more than a way of showing that one's repentance was sincere ("fruits that befit repentance," Luke 3:8). Luther went so far as to say that repentance would be "worthless" without outward killing of the flesh.

⁹ *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 16, *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. by James Atkinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), pp. 233-234.

Having left room for the wholesome use of works of satisfaction, Luther also logically allowed for indulgences at this early stage of his career, while severely limiting their power and efficacy. His intentions were spelled out in a set of *Explanations of the Ninety-flue Theses* (LW 31:77f.) published in 1518, which should be read as a commentary in conjunction with the theses themselves.

Luther first eliminated indulgences for the dying and the dead. As the church canons already taught, works of satisfaction should not be imposed on the dying (Thesis 8) since they couldn't fulfill them, and death ended all works of satisfaction. If no satisfactions were needed, then, of course, no indulgences were needed. To the charge that this position would "cheapen indulgences exceedingly," Luther agreed, but retorted, "it is better to cheapen indulgences than to make the cross of Christ of no effect." He added that he didn't care much for indulgences "in which my opponents glory" (LW 31:112, 3). If works of satisfaction were imposed, then indulgences, when used to cancel them, would work their mischief. They would remove works of satisfaction understood as crosses and therefore wholesome for people; or they would simply displace works of satisfaction as other works detrimental to the cross of Christ; or they would replace works of satisfaction as the object of glorying. In all ways the effect of indulgences on Christian spirituality would be negative.

Luther then struck at the use of indulgences for the living. While the church sanctioned such indulgences, it also limited them. At most such indulgences might cancel "the penalties of sacramental satisfactions" (Thesis 34), imposed in accordance with canon law. Where the church had imposed a cross, the church could remove it. But as indulgences for the dying and dead were improper, so indulgences for the living really weren't necessary. "Any truly repentant Christian . . . participates in all the blessings of Christ" without indulgences (Theses 36 and 37). In a cleansed Sacrament of Penance, true contrition would eliminate both works of satisfaction and indulgences.

In addition, Luther advised Christians to "[c]onsider the dangers of indulgences. They are preached to people directly contrary to the truth of the cross [P]eople . . . even look upon them as that holy gospel of God" (LW 31:205). If works of satisfaction already were rivals to the cross of Christ, then indulgences used to cancel such mistaken works only compounded the error.

The fundamental problem, said Luther, is that the treasures of the church are not understood (Thesis 56). They are not a treasury of works nor a treasury of indulgences. Rather, "the true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God" (Thesis 62), the glorious good news of what God has graciously done for man through Christ's work on the cross. He who has this treasure has no need for works of satisfaction nor for the indulgences that were used to cancel them. Adhering to this thesis would purge the Sacrament of Penance. Remaining would be what belonged there—contrition, confession, and absolution, nothing else. The cross, which had been squeezed out of medieval piety, would be restored.

But how did the cross get squeezed out of the penitential system and the Christian life? Luther found two culprits, and in bringing them to justice he employed the phrase "theology of glory" to characterize their position and the phrase "theology of the cross" to describe his own.

The first culprit was scholastic theology. "[E]ver since the scholastic theology . . . began, the theology of the cross has been abrogated, and everything has been completely turned upside-down. A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all" (LW 31:225). The orientation of the theologian of the cross is toward God hidden behind Christ at work on his cross, and acceptance of the crosses that God's people may expect in their daily lives.

But everything had been turned upside-down. "A theologian of glory does not recognize, along with the Apostle, the crucified and hidden God alone" (1 Cor. 2:2). Instead, he focuses on "God's glorious manifestation among the heathen, how his invisible nature can be known from the things which are visible . . . and how he is present and powerful in all things everywhere" (LW 31:227). Luther hereby lays a good share of the blame on the philosopher-theologians of the Middle Ages, who, wishing to know something about God, focused on God's

general revelation of himself in nature, rather than on God's special revelation of himself as the one who saves through Christ's work on the cross. Thus they turned people's thoughts away from the cross and toward what they thought was more important about God.

Furthermore, the theologian of glory "learns from Aristotle that the object of the will is the good, and the good is worthy to be loved, while the evil, on the other hand, is worthy of hate [H]e defines the treasury of Christ as the removing and remitting of punishments, things which [in his view] are most evil and worthy of hate" (*LW* 31:227). Guided by reason, the medieval philosopher-theologians naturally concluded that crosses—those of Christ and his followers—were bad and therefore to be avoided, while a crossless, painless religion was good and desirable. In such a scheme of things indulgences made good sense. They provided a way to avoid what was perceived as evil, i.e., works of satisfaction, and therefore a way to attain the good, i.e., painless religion. Again, people's thoughts were turned away from the cross of Christ and human crosses.

The theologian of the cross, however, "defines the treasury of Christ as impositions and obligations of punishments, things which are best and most worthy of love" (*LW* 31:227). The treasury of Christ—the thing most valuable about Christ—is first of all the cross laid on Christ to cancel all guilt of sin and all justly deserved punishment. In turn, this treasury of Christ imposes on Christ's followers crosses and sufferings which are to be expected and even welcomed, though not relied on for salvation. For the theologian of the cross a crossless Christianity is a contradiction in terms.

It is here in his explanation of Thesis 62, while he is attempting to displace the prevalent theology of glory with the theology of the cross, that Luther draws a daring inference about the theology of the cross. The true treasury of the church, he has said, is the gospel, and "the true glory of God springs from this gospel" (*LW* 31:231). If the gospel shows the true glory of God, then the cross, which is the heart of the gospel, must also show the glory of God. Properly understood, then, a theology centering on the cross would be the *true* theology of glory. At first this doesn't seem possible. Cross and glory seem poles apart. But through the eyes of faith, the cross is nothing but pure glory, "the true glory of God." Luther does not elaborate on this inference, but it nicely completes his theology of the cross.

The development of Luther's theology of the cross reaches culmination in his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) (*LW* 31:35f.), and so this document should be treated as the *terminus ad quem* for Luther's theology of the cross, rather than the *terminus a quo* as scholars have sometimes done. Luther here continues to assign blame for the abrogation of the cross. However, along with the philosopher-theologians, he now scores medieval monks, even though (or maybe one should say *because*) the disputation took place before an audience of his fellow Augustinians. Both groups had fallen into a false theology of glory rather than adhering to the theology of the cross which was the true theology of glory.

The philosopher-theologians attempted to discern the invisible things of God, such as "virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth" (*LW* 31:52) by looking at creation. But Paul rightly called such people fools (Romans 1:22). Even if they learned such things about God it did not make them "worthy or wise" (*LW* 31:52). For "it is not sufficient...to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless [one] recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross" (*LW* 31:52,53). When Philip wanted to see the invisible Father, Jesus pointed to himself, the humble and soon to be crucified one. Luther concluded that the wisdom "which sees the invisible things of God in works...is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened" (*LW* 31:53). Focusing on God's work in creation, the philosopher-theologians found the wrong wisdom. He needed the true wisdom which came from focusing on God's work through Christ on the cross.

Meanwhile, the monk was "puffed up by his good works" (*LW* 31:53). Different from the philosopher-theologian, the monk sought works of satisfaction and gloried in them. He needed to hear that "through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified" (*LW* 31:53). Luther reminded the monk that "the law brings the wrath of God . . . and condemns everything that is

not in Christ [Rom. 4:15]" (*LW* 31:54). Focusing on man's works, the monk found the wrong righteousness. He needed the true righteousness of Christ's cross.

Luther granted that "that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded" (*LW* 31:55). It is good to ponder God's works in creation and to be impressed by them, and good to try to bring one's own works into line with God's law. "[B]ut without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner" (*LW* 31:55). If the dying of Christ on the cross is not upheld as God's chief work since by it we are saved, and if that same work is not upheld above man's ethical works—if, in fact, the Christian life does not revolve around the cross—then man "misuses and defiles the gifts of God" (*LW* 31:55).

I have dealt with the development of Luther's theology of the cross in contradistinction to the theology of glory only from its inception to its culmination in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, "Although," as Gerhard Ebeling says, "[Luther] did not make constant use of [these terms] as slogans to represent his theological outlook, but only took them up again on rare occasions, they are a very accurate expression of his understanding of theology."¹⁰ So it would be possible to show further how Luther's theology of the cross, which developed historically in the context of his dispute with mistaken elements in the medieval penitential system, permeated and shaped his thought for the rest of his life.

It is also possible to apply Luther's insight to the church today. By God's grace we have faith, and our good works are the fruit of this faith. But when our strenuous activities in the ministry become the focus of our attention—when we glory in what our faith has produced rather than focusing on Christ's work on the cross and glorying in that—then the theologian of glory is very much alive.

Furthermore, the God who created the heavens and the earth has certainly done great things among us. But when we focus on such great works of God—when we glory in a smoothly running synodical organization, a superb educational system, a successful local building project rather than focusing on God's greatest work done through Christ on the cross and glorying in that—then everything has been turned upside-down. The cross has been squeezed out, and we are left with a false theology of glory.

Of course, Luther would grant that it's all right to rejoice in the good works our God-given faith has produced and in the undeserved blessings God has given us as a church body. But above all else the theologian of the cross will center his thoughts on Christ's cross and will glory in that, and this theology of the cross will be the true theology of glory.

¹⁰ Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther, An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 226.