Luther’s Theology of the Cross is Not a Theology of Suffering

Marie here. Medication for Ed’s symptoms—headache, nausea—are working pretty well., But the double vision persists, and overall weakness and wobbliness too. We appreciate greatly the cards and e-mails we’ve been receiving. You are a “great cloud of witnesses.”

Ed talking now, Marie at the computer. For this Reformation Day posting we have dug back into the “barrel” and come up with one from our mission days in Singapore in 2004, which did go to you as ThTh #314, June 17, 2004: “Theology of the Cross. A Singapore Congregational Presentation.” Comes now a new and “improved” version. Well, maybe.

The request from the Singapore Lutherans was to link the theology of the cross to the “modern world.” I don’t remember how it happened, but something in Singapore triggered in my mind the notion that Luther’s theology of the cross was NOT about pain and suffering, but about something else. Since the antithetical term to theology of the cross is theology of glory, the key image in “cross” must be “un-glory, shame, dis-honor, worthlessness” and not the horrendous “ouch” we moderns associate with “cross and suffering.” Even apart from my current malaise, that idea keeps recurring. Most recent trigger for that was the book sent for review from Augsburg Fortress: Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today, Now dyslexic – even worse double-lexic – I can’t really read it, but from the chapter titles that Marie has read to me, it looks like “cross” is the metaphor for pain and suffering. I don’t think so. Nor do I think the New Testament supports that notion. Nor does Luther in his famous Heidelberg Theses of 1518.

So Marie and I, after her reading the Heidelberg Theses to me again, have pasted together a revision of the Singapore piece to make the case that “cross” equals something else – for sure, in the Heidelberg Theses, and also in the “scandal” of the cross in New Testament language – with this week’s Reformation Day posting.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

The Cross for the Modern World
Queenstown Lutheran Church, Singapore
March 24 and 31, 2004

1. Is the Cross “old” and the world “modern?” Or is it just the opposite? Depends on what you think “Cross” means, and what “modern” means.
2. What does “modern” mean in today’s world? Are East and West the same in their “modernity?”
3. Martin Luther’s words about what it means to “have a god” in the First Commandment apply to modernity –“Western modernity” for sure, possibly also “Eastern modernity.” What people “fear, love, and trust” is the actual god they have, regardless of what they say they “believe” – or “don’t believe.” “Fear, love, and trust” are verbs of the heart, not of the head. Human reason comes second. It “serves” the gods that we “fear, love, and trust.” And they are usually plural. Any one of us may have several going at the same time.
4. That is people’s “practical” theology in any age – modernity included.
5. Finally, said Luther, there are only two sorts of theology. It makes no difference if they are “modern” or

not. The two alternatives are “theology of the cross” or “theology of glory.”

6. The key text for Luther in his Heidelberg Theses is 1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5.1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 22 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.
   26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

   2:1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not

come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

DIAGNOSIS: The Bad News in Theologies of Glory

1. Daily Life in Glory TheologyLiving by “wisdom of the wise, discernment of the discerning, the scribe (Jewish religious expert), the debater (Greek religious expert). Seeking signs (of moral achievement, the Jewish religious goal), desiring wisdom (the Greek religious goal).”
2. Trusting Glory TheologyHaving “faith” in moral achievement (Jewish) or religious insight (Greek). No faith in the scandalously immoral and absolutely “moronic” (Paul’s actual word) Cross. Christ crucified a stumbling block.
3. The God-Problem in Glory TheologyNot knowing the God who was crucified, the God who saves, 1 Cor. 1:31. Perishing. God shames the wise, shames the strong. God destroys the wisdom of the wise, reduces it / them to nothing.
   NEW PROGNOSIS: The Good News of the Theology of the Cross

4. Saved by the [Weak] Power of Christ and His CrossChrist the power of God and the wisdom of God. God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. The foolish wisdom, the weak power, the shameful glory of “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The consequences: “righteousness and sanctification and redemption,” which heal the God-problem of #3 above.
   [Paul’s own proclamation of that Christ and his cross also carries the same trademarks—weakness, trembling, no lofty

words of wisdom. His very biography – the “loser” apostle, harried from one town to the next – replicates his Lord’s own biography, and that Lord’s own theology of an unglorious God.]

5. Called to FaithCalled by God to find the “source” of your life in Christ Jesus. Resting your faith in the power of the crucified Christ.
6. Boasting in the LordLiving from that Source in a world full of theologies of glory. Demonstrating the Spirit and power in your own weakness and in fear and in much trembling. Living the cross’s “wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption” in daily life “in the modern world.” We hear that in order to be a superlative person in Singapore you must have 5 C’s: cash, credit card, condo, car, country club. Any time you need to bring along your own credentials to be somebody, you’re stuck in a theology of glory. But that’s just as much the case in my country – and then the calling of being Christian in the face of it all – as it is in yours, and maybe even more so.
   [In 1 Cor. Paul contrasts “cross” with “glory.” “Cross” is the ultimate shameful way to die. Ergo, the theology of the cross is a theology of the unglorious God. It’s not focused on horrendous suffering, though that’s the way Mel Gibson took us in his super-movie. Remember, important people were executed by the daggers of other important people in the Roman Forum. “Worthless” villains were dragged out of town and crucified.

   Paul is doing here in 1 Cor. 1 and 2 what John does throughout his gospel. This un-glory, Christ’s cross, is paradoxically the actual glory of God, Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Do you know any other theology that makes such an offer?]

The Heidelberg Disputation

Brother Martin Luther, Master of Sacred Theology, will preside, and Brother Leonhard Beyer, Master of Arts and Philosophy, will defend the following theses before the Augustinians of this renowned city of Heidelberg in the customary place, on April 26th 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.

[GOOD WORKS]

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 are always 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.[HUMAN WILL]
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 remain 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.[THEOLOGIAN OF GLORY, THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS]
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; cf. 1 Kor 1:21-25),

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 theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology 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 (Rom. 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.
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.[GOD’S WORK IN US: THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH]
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 (operans) and our work an accomplished work (operatum), 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.

Some Reflections—

1. Theology of the cross for Luther is not primarily focused on suffering, either God’s or our own, as is often claimed today. Medieval theology before the Reformation had already “celebrated” suffering (monastic theology, “humility” theology)

and turned it into a glory-theology, a super-way to be saintly.

2. The contrast – cross-theology vs. glory-theology – came from Paul's language in 1 Cor. 1 & 2. Christ's cross is the very center of our "righteousness, sanctification and redemption."

3. 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 Augstinian 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?" [hereafter: JBFA] 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.

4. Just as Paul was not wrestling with the problem of suffering in his debate with the Corinthian super-apostles (glory experts), so also Luther in his work of reformation. Theology of glory is not the opposite of suffering—for Luther or for St. Paul in 1 Corinthians. Instead it is the antithesis of JBFA. 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!

5. 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. The focus on OUR side is the crucifixion of the Old Adam / Old Eve in every one of us, something ultimately to be desired for our

salvation. 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.

6. This double crucifixion (Christ and our sinner self) is needed for JBFA 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, as we would say today.

7. The 28 Heidelberg Theses come in 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. All of that was the new stuff that was whirling around Wittenberg. The antitheses are scholastic theology vs. cross-lensed theology, that is, "natural" knowledge of God brought to completeness by God's grace (the nature-grace paradigm of scholasticism) vs. the scandal of running all theology through the needle's-eye of Good Friday (the law / promise paradigm of the Reformation Aha!). No wonder it brought conflict. These are two different universes. But they do intersect as alternate proposals for Christian salvation. Yet they are eons apart.

8. Now to the theses themselves to highlight the central focus of each group. Remember Luther calls them "paradoxes." [Webster's dictionary defines paradox: "Contrary to expectation. A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet true."]

8.1 Theses 1-12: Good Works

> *1. God's law (actually a very good thing) makes human righteousness unattainable. No one can measure up even to the first commandment. We all have false gods.2. Yet without God's*

law, just on our own efforts, righteousness is even more impossible. That's a paradox: what then is the law good for?

3. Even "good-looking" works carry a "deadly" label, because they are produced by sinners, people "dead in sins."

4. God's works don't look "attractive" (e.g., Christ on the cross), yet they are of eternal value.

5. Human works are not deadly in the sense that they are wicked actions, such as crimes.

6. The works God does through humans are not of value in the sense of being untouched by sin.

7. Works of faith-righteous people would be deadly sins if done apart from "pious fear of God," i.e., apart from acknowledging that even my super-best doesn't measure up to God's performance criteria.

8. Even more are human works "deadly" when arising from my own "self-confidence" and not from fear of God.

9/10. Some say: Works done without Christ are "dead," but not "deadly." Not true. Fearing God is absent in such works, and that is always "deadly."

11. Without acknowledging God as the critical judge of every work, arrogance arises in sinners, hope in God flees.

12. In the sight of God sins are then truly "venial" [= non-damning] when we fear that they may be mortal (damning). Another paradox.

8.2 Theses 13-18: Human Will

13. After the fall "free will" is a fiction. Even "doing the

best it can," it always does "deadly" sin.14/15. After the fall "free will" can theoretically do good, but in actual fact always does evil. For it is now the will of a sinner, someone who now is God's enemy. That enmity marks every action of that will. There's no innocence.

16. Such a person, believing that God will give rewards for "doing your best," is doubly guilty.

17. Is this just super-pessimism, super-negativism? Promoting despair? No. It's simply a clear factual diagnosis to arouse a sinner's desire for Christ.

18. Despairing of our own ability to be OK with God opens us for humility, and then for Christ's grace.

8.3 Theses 19-24: Contrasting Theologians of Cross and of Glory

19. No "genuine" theologian looks into creation for "invisible" things about God (supernatural power, glory, wisdom – all those "omni-" adjectives we learned about God in our catechisms).20. The "genuine" theologian centers the search for God in [Christ's] suffering and cross. Everything about God, but everything, must pass through the needle's eye of Good Friday. [You can see what an agenda this laid out for the Reformers: "Everything theological must pass through that needle's eye.]

21. Glory theologians call bad things, e.g., the "true facts" of human inability for salvation, good, as though they are resource for sinners to work with, and good things bad. Cross-theologians speak the truth about what things really are, e.g., the horror of Good Friday is the glory of God, Christ the Lamb taking away the sins of the world.

22/23. The wisdom that glory-theologians are seeking results in making them even greater enemies of God. They never find the

Cross-of-Christ center. Thus they are defenseless before law. The law criticizes them to death.

24. Yet wisdom and law are not bad things in themselves. But without the theology of the cross we use good things for evil purposes. Large sections of scholastic theology cannot survive the squeeze of going through the needle's eye. If this be pessimism, then so is the cancer doctor's news that his patient is smitten. But to cover up the deadly fact is criminal malpractice indeed. And for sin's affliction there is healing.

8.4 Theses 25-28: God's Work in Us: The Righteousness of Faith

25. Righteousness comes not from "much doing," but without any "doing," it comes from much Christ-trusting.26. Law says: Do this, yet it never gets done. No one ever fulfills the law, not even commandment #1. Grace says: Trust Christ, and the whole salvation agenda is "finished."

27. In good works of a Christian, Christ is the Doer and we are the Done-deed, God-pleasing because of the Doer.

28. [Contrary to what Aristotle says] God's love is not activated by lovableness in the object of God's love. God loves what's unlovable, namely, sinners – that makes them lovable. Human loving runs in the opposite direction. It arises when we encounter something inherently lovable: I love Bach; I love ice cream. But God loves sinners. That's the center of the theology of the cross: un-glorious God loving shameful glory-empty sinners, bringing us all back home via a beloved Son's criminal biography.

But it works! So, where's glory? Boastable glory? "Let him who boasts, boast in THIS Lord."