

Theology of the Cross. A Singapore Congregational Presentation

Colleagues:

Here's an item from our three months in Singapore. Peace & Joy!

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THE CROSS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

- 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. St Paul claimed that the Cross was "new" and the theologies of the world into which that Cross came were very "old." Such theologies have been around forever in human history. "Theology of the cross" was "new," in the early experience of Christians. So new that they associated it with all sorts of other "new" things that came with the Crucified and Risen Messiah—a new covenant, a new creation, even a new commandment. So what's old and what's new?*

2. What does “modern” mean in today’s world? Are East and West the same in their “modernity?” What about “post-modernity?” Actually our so-called “post-modern world,” at least in the West, may be more open to Christian theology, since some “post-moderns” acknowledge that everybody has a “meta-narrative,” a “big picture,” a blueprint, from which they construct their worlds and find their homes, their meaning, their significance. But no one “meta-narrative” is any more “scientifically” warranted than the next one. An almost pragmatic yardstick is the norm: which blueprint works best for “covering the waterfront” of our lives as humans. “Meta-narratives” function not only for making sense of one’s world, but slide over into being objects of trust. People “hang their hearts” on their own meta-narratives. That looks like an open door for Christian theology.
3. Martin Luther’s words (in the Small Catechism on the First Commandment) about “having a god” sound just like that. So here’s a connector with the post-modern world. What people “fear, love, and trust” is the REAL god they have, regardless of what they say they “believe” – or “don’t believe.” “Fear, love, and trust” are verbs of the heart. In the Large Catechism at this point Luther speaks of “hanging your heart” on whatever god you have. Meta-narratives do not stay merely cerebral, they regularly become cardio-vascular. They pump blood into our lives.
4. That is people’s “practical” theology in any age—modernity, post-modernity, included.
5. Finally, said Luther, in his famous Heidelberg Theses, there are only two sorts of theology. That is true of any age or time. The “modern/post-modern” world too, he would say. The two alternatives are “theology of the cross” or “theology of glory.” [The full text of the Heidelberg Theses—and my comments on each one of them—is below.]

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS "THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS?"

1. *Theology of the cross for Luther is not primarily focused on suffering – either God's or our own. At least, that is not Luther's main point. Medieval theology before the Reformation had already "celebrated" suffering in monastic life, in "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 Corinthians, chapters 1 & 2. Christ's cross is the very center of our "righteousness, sanctification and redemption." Theology of the cross is about the salvation of sinners.*
3. *Just six months before the Heidelberg meeting of the Augustinian monks, Luther's 95 theses on indulgences had been a bombshell. When the Augustinian monks gathered for their annual meeting that year, 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]*
4. *Just as Paul was not wrestling with the problem of suffering in his debate with the Corinthian Christians, 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. It proposes a different way for the salvation of sinners.*
5. *When Luther uses the term theology of the cross, there is pain and suffering involved. But the focus of the pain, (on GOD'S side) is the cross of Christ. Here the second person of the Trinity accepts the suffering that sinners deserve. The focus on OUR side is the crucifixion of the Old Adam/Old Eve in every one of us, the crucifixion of*

our sinner-self.

- 6. This double crucifixion (Christ and our sinner self) is needed for JBFA to happen at all. Thus the theologian of the cross "tells the truth" about the deepest human need, the topic of "us and our salvation." The glory-theologians have no understanding of this, neither of the sinner's deepest sickness, nor of the work of Christ to heal us.*
- 7. St Paul contrasts his own "theology of the cross" with the "theologies of glory" in his day. He does this in his opening chapter of I Corinthians. Let's read it and study it.*

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 THEOLOGY

Living by "wisdom of the wise, discernment of the discerning, the scribe (scholar) the debater (philosopher). Seeking SIGNS (of achievement), desiring WISDOM, lofty words of wisdom."

2. TRUSTING GLORY THEOLOGY.

Having "faith" in this wisdom, these signs, their power, glory. Trusting them from the heart. No faith in the "foolish" Cross. Christ crucified a stumbling block.

3. THE GOD-PROBLEM IN GLORY THEOLOGY.

Not knowing God. Perishing. God shames the wise, shames the strong. God destroys the wisdom of the wise, reduces it/them to nothing. Glory-theology leaves you dead in relationship to God.

NEW PROGNOSIS: The Good News of the Theology of the Cross

4. SAVED BY THE WEAK POWER OF CHRIST AND HIS CROSS.

Christ 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." [Paul's own proclamation of Christ and his cross also carries the same trademarks—weakness, trembling, no lofty words of wisdom.]

5. CALLED TO FAITH.

Called 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 LORD.

Living 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.'

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.

[Introductory note: 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. Remember that 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."]

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. Cor 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.

Schroeder's Commentary—

Theses 1-12: Good Works

1. God's law (actually a very good thing) makes human righteousness unattainable.
2. Yet without God's law, just on our own efforts, righteousness is even more impossible. Paradox.
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."
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 "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).

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 one's ability to be OK with God opens us for humility, and then for Christ's grace.

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).

20. The “genuine” theologian centers the search for God in [Christ’s] suffering and cross.

21. Glory theologians call bad things good and good things bad. Cross-theologians speak the truth about what things really are.

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.

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. Grace says: Believe this, and everything is done!

27. In good works Christ is 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 lovable-ness in the object of God’s love. God loves what’s unlovable, namely sinners – and makes them lovely. Human love is completely different: it arises when we encounter something inherently lovable. Examples: I love ice cream. But God loves sinners. That’s the center of the theology of the cross.