

The Theologian of the Cross

Luke 23:33 “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him...”

⁴⁰ But the other [criminal] rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”

⁴¹ And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

⁴² And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom...”

⁴⁶ “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”

(Luke 23:33, 40-42, 46)

“They Crucified Him” and “He Breathed His Last”

What if, instead of making Christianity **easy to believe**, we told people it would be impossible? What if, instead of promising non-Christians their **Best Life Now** if they turned to Christ, we told them that once you turn to Christ you might actually begin to experience your worst life now? What if instead of putting in front of them **riches and happiness**, we told them about poverty and suffering? What if

instead of showing them how great things can be in **the present world**, we put before their eyes the world to come? What if instead of telling Christians they'd better **get their act together**, we told them they will never completely get their act together—any of them? What kind of Christianity would we now have?

“**And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him**” (**Luke 23:33**). What mysteries are unfolded before our ever blind eyes here? What truths have just been laid bare? How do they relate to the questions I've just asked? I'm sure you've heard this verse a hundred times. Do you know what treasure has just been uncovered? Do you think you understand what you've just heard? “**I'm a Christian,**” you say. “**Of course I understand what I've just heard.**”

“**Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last**” (**46**). Did you hear that? “**He breathed his last.**” Do you comprehend the depths of that statement? Do you realize what profound utterances have just gone into your ears? “**Stop patronizing me, pastor. I'm a Christian. Of course I understand. That's why I'm saved. I believe these words.**”

But I didn't ask you if you *believed* them. That's clearly necessary, and I'm glad you do. I asked if you *understood* them. The nature of my question gets at something deeper. Do you think you have no temptation in this life, no propensity in your heart, no outside or inner forces that might lead you astray here because you are a Christian? You think that you've heard that Jesus was crucified and so this makes you a biblical theologian, someone who has mastered God's word, someone who now comprehends the root of the matter? Good to go? We shall see. Come with me as I take you on a journey of a theologian of the cross.

The Heidelberg Disputation

The “*Theology of the Cross*” or Staurology (from Gk: *stauros* or cross and *-logy*, “the study of”), is a phrase coined by Martin Luther. It finds its most direct treatment in his *Heidelberg Disputation*. A *disputation* is a formal academic debate. *Heidelberg* is the city in the southwest quadrant of modern Germany in which the debate was held. The city is perhaps more famous to protestants for yielding the *Heidelberg Catechism*, written by Ursinus and Olevianus, and approved by a synod in Heidelberg in January 1563.

The Heidelberg Disputation was held at the lecture hall of the Augustinian order on April 26, 1518, or 45 years prior to the Catechism being written, but just one year after he made such a splash with his *95 Thesis* in Wittenberg on the other side of the country. It is, as more than one scholar has said, “Theologically much more important and influential ... than the Ninety-five Theses ... Yet these pieces of public theology, with the possible exception of the Ninety-five ... remain among the least known and read of his works.”¹ It has even been called “as far as the theology of the Reformation is concerned ... the most influential of all Luther’s disputations.”² No less than six future Reformers were in the room when he presented it. And they struck them all to the core with the theology of the cross.

I would like to explain just a little about [way Luther put his disputation together](#), as we will be looking at the last part of it later. Like the 95, it is composed of a number of *theses*. But in this case, it is only about ¼ the size, with [28 theses](#) in total. As you learned in your seventh grade writing class, a thesis is a proposition a person advances which is maintained

¹ [Gerhard O. Forde](#), *On Being A Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 19-20. Most of this sermon is reflections and ideas from the commentary in this short book, which sets out each of the theses and then gives comments on them.

² 19.

by argument; it is a theme or a subject. It begins with the law of God. “The law of God, the most salutary [helpful] doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him” (Thesis 1). It ends with the love of God. “The love of God does first discover, but creates, what is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through attraction to what is pleasing to it” (Thesis 28).

Many have called these the two “pillars” of the disputation, with the 26 Thesis in the middle being “a great arch stretching between” them.³ Together, they frame the question which is how we are moved from one to the other, that is from the law of God which cannot save to the love of God which does? If you are having a problem knowing, feeling, or understanding God’s love, then this is for you. On the other hand, if you are falling back upon your own obedience and goodness, or are stuck in your sin or even refusal to admit it, then this is also for you.

The “arch” consists of four carefully crafted sections. The first (Thesis 1-12) deals with the nature and worth of human works over against the question of sin. The second (13-18) deals with the impotence of human free will to avoid

³ Ibid., 21.

sin. The **third** (19-24) deals with the “**great divide**,” the fundamental contrast between approaching these questions as a *theologian of glory* or a *theologian of the cross*. The **fourth** (25-28), declares that the climactic outcome is God’s love in Christ which is the sole power that brings believers into being. “**When all our human possibilities have been exhausted and we have been reduced to nothing, the one who creates out of nothing does his ‘proper work.’**”⁴

Paul On “Crucifixion”

Later, I will take you through many of these disputations, especially those in the **third section**. But first, I want to take you through a brief journey of the term “crucified” in the teachings of **Peter and Paul**, for these Scriptures teach you of the fundamental nature of what is before us—the cross.

The first three are found in **Peter’s first two sermons** in Acts. “**This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, *you crucified* and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:23). “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both**

⁴ Ibid., 22.

Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom *you crucified*” (Acts 2:36). “Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom *you crucified*, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well” (Acts 4:10).

These three verses have **two things in common**. The first is **God’s power and plan**. 1) The crucifixion was determined by God. 2) Through it, God has made Jesus Lord and Christ. 3) And by his name God has just healed a lame beggar. Notice the order. God put Jesus to **death**. Through this and the **resurrection**, God enthroned Jesus. Through Jesus alone, a man is **healed**. This is all about God’s power and plan through Christ.

The second is that in all three instances, “***you crucified***” Jesus. Even though we read about the priests and scribes, about Pilate and Herod, about the roman soldiers, Peter was not shy about telling the crowds that *they* were the guilty party. *They* put Jesus to death. Until a person realizes that through *their* sins, they put Jesus to death, nothing else will matter. **You killed Jesus**. Luther wrote,

You must get this thought through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ thus, for your

sins have surely wrought this. In Acts 2 [:36–37] St. Peter frightened the Jews like a peal of thunder when he said to all of them, “You crucified him.” Consequently three thousand alarmed and terrified Jews asked the apostles on that one day, “O dear brethren, what shall we do now?” Therefore, when you see the nails piercing Christ’s hands, you can be certain that it is your work. When you behold his crown of thorns, you may rest assured that these are your evil thoughts, etc.⁵

The logic is simple. If Jesus died for sin and Jesus died for *your* sin, then your sin put him to death. You therefore killed him. And I killed him.

This is bad enough. But you must understand something more. It is not just the sins you *have committed*, but also those you are *presently committing* and will in the *future commit*. It is very easy to look only to our past sins, especially when the sins before us are those we do not want to admit are really there. And Christians can be just as good at hiding those are non-Christians are. The point is to pat ourselves on the back even while we say that we flee to the cross.

⁵ **Martin Luther**, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 42: Devotional Writings I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 42 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 9.

How? I get myself into a bad relationship with my spouse, making myself depressed and feel helpless as I blame them, not me. I refuse to do what my parents tell me, justifying it as procrastination or being too busy. I treat my kids terribly for how they deal with their relationships, saying I would never do that. I harbor anger and bitterness at someone who is angry at me and say it's their fault. I choose to continue the same sin again and again, saying it does not matter. I run away from my problems, but can't run away from myself. There are a million ways.

At root, it's called **boasting in our self-righteousness** under the pretense of being obedient Christians who love God. The Apostle went to town on such hypocrisy. **“You are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (Rom 2:19-**

24). The source is believing in **total depravity** (good theology) ... *except for myself*, at least at the point of this sin that I don't want to face. *That* didn't really put Jesus to death. This makes not confronting the sin we are presently engaging in seem not quite as bad.

That was Peter [save for Rom 2]. Now I'm going to turn to Paul. Like the disputation, I will categorize Paul's teachings in **four headings**. The **first** is *the message*. What is the message that Paul preached? He tells the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ *and him crucified*" (1Cor 2:2). The crucifixion of Jesus was the message. It isn't that he never spoke of anything else, he does even in that very letter. But there was **no other message that mattered**, for it is here and here alone that all power is given to the Christian. We will see why and how this is opposed to our own clever attempts to kid ourselves, to ignore our own consciences, and to prop ourselves up in our own eyes later.

Similarly, he tells the Galatians, "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed *as crucified*" (Gal 3:1). If Jesus had died many years previous, then when could he have possibly been publicly portrayed? The answer is **through Paul's**

preaching. His message was the crucifixion, and when that message is preached, it is a public portrayal of Jesus' crucifixion.

Second, we see that through the proclamation and faith in this message of the cross, something literally happens to us. He tells the Roman Christians, “We know that *our old self was crucified with him* in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom 6:6). Our old self [lit: man] was somehow crucified with Christ. This has implications on how we then live. Something happens to us in being put to death with Jesus that our body of sin might (subjunctive mood, a hopeful anticipation with present application) be brought to nothing and we would (present active) no longer be slaves to sin.

Similarly, he tells the Galatians, “I have been *crucified with Christ*. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20) and therefore, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus *have crucified* the flesh with its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24). My intent here is not to explain to you here how all that works, as I'm not even sure I understand it all that well. What I am explaining is that it comes through the knowledge, work, power, belief, and constant returning to the cross of Jesus Christ. This is why the message of the cross

was all Paul wanted to proclaim. As we saw last time in Luke, there was power there to convert a criminal, a Gentile soldier who was at that very moment putting him to death, and a Jewish priest whose entire tribe concocted and went through with the whole thing.

Similar to the message and its power, but I think also a little different, Paul says, “**But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world**” (Gal 6:14). This takes me to a **third** aspect of Paul’s teaching. The idea is that Paul is now showing that his life as a Christian—not merely as an evangelist or preacher, and not merely as a teacher, but as a Christian—is to **boast in the cross**. He boasts in his weakness, suffering, and someone else’s work rather than his own. He understands that no one, not even himself, can ever leave this idea behind. Burk Parsons recently said in *Table Talk*,

One of my greatest fears for the church today is that we will become bored with the cross of Christ. I am concerned that any mention of Christ and Him crucified is leading many professing Christians to say to themselves: “Yeah, I know all about Jesus dying on the cross for my sins—**let’s move on to**

something else. Let's get past the basics, and let's deal with bigger theological issues." [This is precisely what I was saying at the beginning of the sermon.] I firmly believe that Satan is set on trying to destroy us, but he'll settle with just getting us to lose our astonishment regarding Christ and Him crucified. Such loss of astonishment usually begins in the pulpit, and it quickly trickles down into the hearts and homes of those in the pew. When pastors stop preaching about the cross or mention it only when they have to, the people of God can easily begin to see the cross as a perfunctory matter that only needs to be considered occasionally.⁶

In a word, Paul was a theologian of the cross.

But many people aren't. And there is a reason for that. The last set of verses from Paul explain why. "But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1Co 1:23), and again, "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1Co 2:8). How does this explain why people won't be theologians of the cross? For some, it is because they don't understand it. It is foolishness to them, like hearing elvish in Lord of the Rings. If you don't understand

⁶ Burk Parsons, "Theology of the Cross," *Table Talk* (April 2019).

it, then you move on to something you do. If you don't understand it, you might think it isn't that important. If you don't understand it, you might mock it. For others, it is a **stumbling block**. This is like hearing the dark tongue of Mordor. It sounds evil to you. You view it as something you need to avoid, lest you trip over it. *The cross isn't the way God does things. Power, not weakness, glory not suffering, my merit not his, this is how he does it!*

But make no mistake, **I'm talking to you, to Christians**. I'm not talking here to unbelievers. This is our problem. Beloved, there is a reason why Churches today by and large never talk about the cross, why our songs of the cross have been replaced with ourselves, why the message of the cross has been replaced with therapy and self-help or really anything else, and why in our lives when we are busy justifying our sin it is the furthest thing from our minds. Paul was talking to Corinthian *Christians* when he said these things, to Jews in the congregation who thought the cross was a stumbling block, to Gentiles in the congregation who thought it was foolishness. He was trying to correct them. They didn't understand what they were neglecting, ignoring, and demeaning. Or, *they didn't like it*.

Luther's Disputation

This take me to *Luther's Disputation*. In focusing in on the cross and the theology of the cross, it is tempting to start at disputation 19, which begins what has been called the keystone of the great arch spanning the cleft between the law of God and the love of God, and is where the language theology of the cross is found. But as has been noted, doing this can cause us to take the whole thing out of context and to actually *miss the point* that what is at stake here is not merely being a good theologian of the cross, but “*the very survival and viability of the theologian*” himself.⁷ So we will briefly go through the theses that get us to 19.

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

Luther's point here is stated by Paul, “*Now the law came in to increase the trespass*” (*Rom 5:20*) and, “*I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive...*” (*Rom 7:9*). His point is that the law was given to *reveal and show and even increase our sin*, even though

⁷ Forde, 70.

this law itself is good (12). That's counter intuitive. But that's its purpose ... to lead us to Christ. For many Christians, they get that—at least they think they do. So Luther adds a second point.

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.

Though many say they get the first idea, once they become a Christian, the temptation is to go right back to the law for their own legal righteousness. It's like they've graduated from the gospel, which is for unbelievers as we've been taught by 200 years of revivalistic preaching. But the Apostle says, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (Gal 3:3, 2). He says this to Christians, not unbelievers. We are just as prone to a works-righteousness after salvation as before.

The gospel just doesn't seem right to us. In fact, it seems exactly backwards. Nearly all counseling is based on the idea of quitting what you're doing. In the immortal words of Bob Newhart to the woman who was afraid of being buried

alive in a box, “**Just stop it!**” And the thing is, counselling like this can work! And it isn’t even necessarily a bad thing. But *we do not get our righteousness from it*. We only get our righteousness from Christ. So, although we know that outright unrepentant sin leads to death, we who are morally earnest people are tempted in a more subtle way.

Turning our back on the gift of the Gospel after salvation we are saying in effect, “**I do agree with what you demand, but I don’t want charity. That’s too demeaning. So I prefer to do it myself. What you are offering is ‘too cheap.’ I prefer the law, thank you very much. That seems safer to me**” than mercy and grace.⁸ I know many Christians who refuse the “charity” of the church when they are in need. But do you know that “**charity**” comes from root *charis*—grace? And did you know that the Latin often translated “**agape**” (love) as charity (*caritas*). **Charity is literally “loving grace.”** To refuse it out of stubborn pride when desperately in need is sin, a refusal of loving grace. I prefer to do it myself! Frankly, we do this all the time with God—especially as Americans, as conservatives, as Reformed people. In fact, any time we turn back to our works, this is what we do.

This is precisely what led to Luther’s next two theses:

⁸ Ibid., 27.

3. *Although the works of man always appear 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.*

These are parallel, as you can see in the following chart:

The Works of Humans	The Works of God
Always look splendid	Always look deformed
Appear to be good	Appear to be bad
Are nevertheless in all probability moral sins	Are nevertheless in very truth immortal merits

This is how *we* view them. Is this not why **the Pharisees** were so proud of how they followed the law to its letter? Is this not why they said that **Jesus's works were the works of Beelzebub**? We think that what we do is meritorious. We see what God does as ridiculous nonsense. That's why we return to our works and give up the cross.

But lest we get confused, he adds a clarification.

5. *The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works that apparently are good), as though they were crimes.⁹*

⁹ The sixth is like it, "*The works of God (those he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.*" The idea here is that even the works that God does in us are not sinless works—because we still sin.

Luther has in mind our best works, not our worst works. He isn't talking about our criminal behavior, but our *best* behavior. He is using an old term found in Rome (“mortal sins”) to make a point. You think that those **really bad sins are mortal sins, but others are ok**? You've made a huge error in judgment on both, and it will cost you your eternal soul. In truth, your best acts are mortal sins, or as Isaiah might say, “**Filthy rags.**”

This seventh point is an amazing paradox.

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.

In other words, the only works you do that are not deadly sins are those you fear that *are* mortal sins *because you fear God*. To put it another way, **it is the fear of God**—or *faith*—that alone makes a good work not a deadly sin.

After a few more theses, **Luther turns his attention to the will**. In doing this, he tries to show why it is that our good works are really so bad. We fell so badly in Adam that **the will is only able to commit mortal sin** (Thesis 13). It only has the power to do good passively, but in doing evil it is always

able (Thesis 14-15). To use an analogy, water has the passive capacity to be heated, but it can't heat itself. So the will cannot prepare itself or the soul to receive anything. Anyone who thinks otherwise has just added to his sin through pride and is now doubly guilty (Thesis 16).

Some people say that this is nonsense and that if anyone actually believed that it would lead to despair. But Luther next says (Thesis 17-18) that far from that, it actually **arouses in us a desire to humble ourselves** and seek the grace of Christ. Think about it. If you are at the absolute end of your rope, having come to the conclusion that there is absolutely no good in you, in what you do, no ability to prepare yourself for God, to assist God, nothing ... **then you are ready to hear the Gospel**. This is as true every bit as much after conversion as before. If you've returned to self-righteousness and blaming everyone but yourself as a Christian, then you are not prepared to hear any good news. You need to be blasted out of your pride first. But Luther's whole point is that **the Gospel is always here**, waiting and powerful. He is not going to leave a person in despair apart from Christ. That's taking him out of context.

This brief tour of the *Disputation* now takes us to what I wanted to begin with. Theses 19-20:

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 that have happened.*
20. *He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.*

Here is where we get his language of **the theologian of the cross**. This is the person who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God not by looking to secret invisible things, as if they were clearly perceptible, but who looks to public suffering and the cross. Specifically, to the suffering of *Jesus* on his cross. Everything hinges on this.

We are talking about seeing one kind of thing vs. seeing another kind of thing. **The Glory of God** is his heaviness, his weightiness, his otherness. And it is blinding to our eyes. Men shield their eyes from God's glory in the Bible. **It is terrifying**. People sing about wanting to see God's unmediated glorious face. They are singing about wanting to die!

God hides his glory from us for our protection. Isaiah said, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior" (**Isa 45:15**). Yet, **God has revealed his**

glory to us in precisely the place we refuse to look, in the place we think is foolish and powerless, so that we can in fact gaze upon him and not be blinded. This is the cross.

Ironically, it is our blindness that leads us to try to gaze upon the “naked God” as Luther talked about it. He spoke of **three kinds of ladders** that we climb to get up to God and see him “in the nude.” These are what he calls **theologies of glory** and they are what he meant in thesis 19 and those “invisible” things. These are our clever attempts to kid ourselves, to ignore our own consciences, and to prop ourselves up in our own eyes later. They have the outward form of spirituality and religion, but they have no power to restrain the flesh.

We might call these the ladders of **merit**, or the **miraculous**, and of the **mysterious**. We’ve already looked at the merit-ladder and how terrible that one is to trust in. We’ve seen how it feigns spirituality and religion and obedience, but it is a deadly poison to the soul.

What about the others? **The miraculous** are ladders that are profoundly tempting to us. And I’m not talking about brute miracles, but power. Our churches are full of it. We have power churches that offer power encounters as we bra-

zenly sing about seeing God’s glory. We have massive budgets, massive buildings, masses of people listening to power bands. In the words of Peter Gabriel, we are “Big Time.” “*And I will pray to a big god, As I kneel in the big church.*”¹⁰

“*Give us a miracle, Jesus! Give us another one! Show us a sign that you are who you say you are,*” the people demanded. A wicked generation asks for a sign. The only sign you will get is the sign of Jonah. “*Do you want us to call down fire on our enemies,*” John and James asked him? He rebuked them. “*Can my sons sit at your right hand and your left,*” their mother asked Jesus. You do not know what you are asking, Jesus said. “*Show us the Father,*” Philip cried. “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” “*Surely, this will never happen to you,*” Peter told Jesus after he predicted his suffering. Can you drink the cup I am about to drink? Jesus asked them. “*Of course we can!*” Glory, glory, glory. Anything to subvert the suffering. Anything to subvert the cross.

What about *mysticism*. You hear this word and you might think of all those religions that look inward rather than outward. But it isn’t just that. We *speculate* about all kinds of things—especially in philosophy and theology, about *God’s nature*, about *what we think he and his works*

¹⁰ Peter Gabriel, “Big Time,” *So* (Charisma Records, Virgin Records, 1986).

and [salvation](#) should be like. We reason about things, but think *our reasoning* will show us who God is, will penetrate the veil of his inner secrecy and hidden reasons for this works. We abandon reason for madness.

It is we Christians, religious people by nature, who are especially prone to this. In some circles, it is their “*spirit-ese*” talk where they know God is doing something or in something because “the Spirit told me.” Can’t question that! For others, it is the subtle trappings of doing theology. We see this, for instance, in the never-ending debates about God’s nature. I once read a 200 page paper expounding one doctrine of God from people who profess to believe in Scripture alone, and it had exactly one verse in it. It was pure philosophy and historical theology. Meanwhile, anyone who disagreed with the paper was labeled a heretic. These can be opposites on the denominational spectrum, but the same [root ladder of glory](#) underlies behind both. It’s about pride, pride in myself. Both undermine the cross by losing themselves in a sea of abstractions or unassailable personal power encounters.¹¹

Thesis 21 is fascinating. Here’s an old translation.

¹¹ For more on these ladders see [Michael Horton](#), “[Fascinations that Lead Away from the Cross...](#)” *Modern Reformation* 6:4 (July/Aug 1997).

21. *A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the things what it actually is.*

This older translation was actually a mis-translation, for Luther spoke not of a “theology of glory,” but a “*theologian*” of glory. Why use the older translation? Because it makes a point. “Our temptation is always to change the subject. In this case the blame is switched from us to theology. The assumption is that we can more or less easily escape the error described by just disavowing the theology. ‘Call evil good and good evil? Who? Me? No way! I don’t hold with the theology of glory!’”¹²

A theology of glory tends to think on comfortable, happy things as “from God” and pain and suffering as from the devil (or some other source, but certainly not from God).¹³ Theologies of glory *don’t want to talk about sin*. They don’t want to be confronted with what I’m doing wrong right now. They don’t want to deal with bad thinking. They want to left alone.

¹² Forde, 81.

¹³ Cameron Cole, “[Theology of the Cross](#),” *Modern Reformation* (Jan 1, 2019).

The theology of the cross forces you to look at what happened to Jesus, why he went to the cross, why he died on the cross. Think about [that verse](#) from the beginning again. “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last” (46). Do you have any idea what has just been said? The God of the universe, the Creator of all things, the one who incarnated to become a man, breathed his last. He died. Jesus died. He did nothing wrong. [The thief next to him](#) knew this, as he contemplated not his own existential existence, or how he was wrongly hanging there himself because of a corrupt court, or the finer points of God’s immutability, or how a good God could let him suffer like this, but what was happening to Jesus. He became the first theologian of the cross!

Friend, “God refuses to be seen in any other way, both for our protection and to put down the theologian of glory in us. Theologians of the cross are therefore those whose eyes have been turned away from the quest for glory by the cross, who have eyes only for what is visible, what is actually there to be seen of God, the suffering and despised crucified Jesus.”¹⁴ “The theology of Glory is [like addiction](#) ... it is a

¹⁴ Forde, 79,

temptation over which we have no control in and of ourselves, and from which we must be saved.”¹⁵ We do not want to be confronted with where we are falling short. No one does. And so we are in need of greater help than we ever knew.

The only remedy to this is the cross. Luther’s last section brings us that help.

25. He is not righteous who works much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.

Doctor Luther understood one thing above all others. It is **Christ’s work alone that is the power of the Christian**. His work *of the cross*. Faith receives this not just at the beginning of salvation, but every day. When our conscience is pricked by something we are running from, we turn to the cross. When anger gets the best of us, or lust, or pride ... we don’t turn outward and lash out in blame; we turn to the cross. We turn to Christ and what happened on the cross. We see what God did for us, for our present and future sin, not just our past sin on the cross.

¹⁵ Ibid., 94.

We do not turn to our own goodness in keeping the law either.

26. The law says "Do this", and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this" and everything is already done.

When we think about our own works and how it could ever be that they would be considered righteous in God's eyes, **we look to the cross.**

27. 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.

In other words, “The real operative power in all works that can be called good is the work of Christ, that outrageous assertion that in Christ all that God demands has been fulfilled and that this Christ dwells in us by faith. The believer is ‘aroused’ to work through living faith in Christ’s work, to be ‘imitators’ of God as Ephesians admonishes, ‘drawn’ after Christ.”¹⁶ Some of you, no—all of you—are really struggling with sin. If you aren’t one of those people, then the first sin you need to start struggling with is your pride.

¹⁶ Forde, 111.

But for the rest, this is where the power comes. It comes in trusting in Christ's full work done once-for-all for you. Ironically, this is where we get the power to repent, to turn, and to obey. This is where good works come from. It's all backwards. In giving up everything of ourselves, we gain everything for ourselves. In giving up self-righteousness, we get the righteousness of God in Christ. Running away, hiding in your sin, blaming everyone else, propping yourself up in self-righteousness **kills you**. And deep in your soul, you know that it does. That's why you come to church. To hear the truth of the matter from God's word. To know the power of salvation again anew. If you are struggling with your own sin or that of others, this is your remedy. It is your *only* remedy.

This is how Luther arrives at his final thesis.

28. The love of God does not find, but creates, what is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through what is pleasing to it.

You want to know **how to move from the law of God to the love of God**? You've now heard. And what you see here is that the love of God is so powerful that it does not find you

prepared for him, it does not find you moving towards him, it is not your helping hand. It has found you guilty and wanting and awaiting trial. Yet, by faith, **it has declared you not guilty**—because of the cross of Jesus Christ.

Out of nothing, when the best you were was God's enemy—Christ died for you. God's love through faith—his gift—is creating a new creation, creating that which is pleasing to it and to him. This is not how our love works. We love because we are attracted to a thing that already is. God loves to create a thing that wasn't even there before.

That **thing is you**, if you are in Christ. And if you are not, then may God's love find you out through his powerful word. We must all turn from our self-righteousness, be it before or after salvation. Every time we sin. The only remedy is believing that God's love has found you out, that Christ died for the ungodly, for his enemies, for the world. In seeing your own depravity, it stops the judgmentalism you project onto everyone else. And through it, God shows you his love for you.

Look to the cross and become a theologian of the cross, as **the thief**, as **Paul**, and as **Martin Luther** tried so hard to be. Make it your life's goal to know nothing but Christ and him crucified. And if you do, you will find that great paradox

that God considers you righteous and accepts your works because it pleased him to do it in Christ.

Appendix: Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation

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 appear 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 that apparently are good), as though they were crimes.
6. The works of God (those 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 do evil in an active capacity.
15. Nor could the free will endure in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in a 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 that have happened.
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 things what it is.
22. That wisdom that 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.
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. 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, what is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through what is pleasing to it.

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