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LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS, AND AFRICA

Timothy Palmer

Three sets of experiences prompted the writing of this essay.

First are the colorful paintings on the back of Nigerian lorries. Amidst the many bright and vivid drawings of lions and jets are two common sets of religious symbols. On the one hand is the cross of Jesus, often painted red. On the other hand are pictures representing Islam, sometimes with a mosque and possibly some palm trees, but frequently with crossed swords at the top of the painting. Even though owners may have different motivations for putting symbols on their lorries, it remains true that both the cross and the sword can be instruments of execution. In the first case, the founder of Christianity died on a cross; in the second case, the founder of Islam is reputed to have used the sword in carrying out his mission.

Secondly, one observes in Nigeria, as well as elsewhere in the world, a persistent "big man complex." A "big man" is one who uses all the resources of the state or the institution to perpetuate his own rule and glory. Blaine Harden describes the big man: "His cult equates his personal well-being with the well-being of the state. His rule has one overriding goal: to perpetuate his reign as the Big Man."¹ The big man is one who puts his own well-being above that of his subjects. This pattern of behavior is common in political life, but is also not uncommon in other spheres of society including the church. The big man complex can hinder the development and well-being both of church and of society.

A third phenomenon is the Prosperity Gospel. Nigerian television regularly

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¹ Blaine Harden, *Africa: Dispatches from a Fragile Continent* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), p. 218.

carries sermons and religious services from prosperity preachers, and “prosperity” churches are springing up all the time. Peter Young remarks that “the main element of the prosperity teaching is that all Christians have the right, and even the responsibility, to be prosperous in all areas of life. This most notably includes the areas of financial prosperity and prosperity in the realm of physical health and well being.”² Paul Gifford notes that “wealth has become far more important than health, though not entirely displacing it.”³ Prosperity theology has enormous implications for one’s view of God, Jesus and the Christian life.

This essay attempts to relate Martin Luther’s theology of the cross to some of the above phenomena. We maintain that this theology of the cross is useful for reflecting on the needs both of church and of society in Africa today.

Theology of Glory

The Roman Catholic Church in Luther’s day was in a state of crisis. The great scholastic theological system of Thomas Aquinas was crumbling. The institutional church was promoting personal advancement and glory, but the glory of God was distant. In all of this, Jesus Christ was difficult to find.

Scholasticism was a great achievement of the medieval church. James Atkinson says that scholasticism “was a wholly credible attempt to understand Christianity and to integrate it with current thought. . . . Scholasticism sought to penetrate the meaning of revealed Christian truth by definition, analogy, logic and dialectic, and by means of these tools to systematize that knowledge.”⁴ In other words, scholasticism used reason together with faith to understand the Gospel. “The inherent strength of scholasticism, a titanic strength that eventually became its own undoing, was its rationalism.”⁵

² Peter Young, “An Evaluation of Prosperity Teaching,” *TCNN Research Bulletin* 43 (March 2005): 5.

³ Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 336.

⁴ James Atkinson, *Martin Luther and the Birth of Protestantism*, rev. ed. (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1982), p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Despite its magnificence, scholastic theology failed to give a clear and certain answer to the way of salvation. The medieval church taught that salvation came through the church and its sacraments, but in the end there was great uncertainty as to one's own salvation.⁶ At the beginning of the 16th Century, "traditional religious culture seemed no longer able to deal effectively with the religious anxiety and idealism of many people."⁷ Thus the church failed in meeting the spiritual needs of its people.

Combined with this failure was a massive abuse of power by the clergy. The higher clergy at Rome and elsewhere were engaged in political intrigues to advance their positions. Bishops used their authority to extract money from the lower clergy and the laity; and the priests did the same to the laity.⁸

In this entire system, Jesus Christ was hard to find. For all the glory of scholasticism and the medieval church, the crucified Christ was suppressed and pushed aside. Luther calls the prevailing theological and ecclesiastical culture of his day a theology of glory. This theology stands in stark contrast to the theology of the cross.

Luther claimed that the whole indulgence scam of 1517 was evidence of a theology of glory. In his commentary on his 95 Theses, Luther wrote:

From this you can see how, ever since the scholastic theology—the deceiving theology...—began, the theology of the cross has been abrogated, and everything has been completely turned up-side-down. . . . A theologian of glory does not recognize . . . the crucified and hidden God alone.⁹

Gerhard Forde tells us that for Luther the theology of glory and the theology of the cross are "two ways of being a theologian."¹⁰ These two theologies are

⁶ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform. 1250-1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 29-31.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 211-16.

⁹ Martin Luther, "Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses," *Luther's Works (LW)* 31:225, 227.

¹⁰ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 10;

diametrically opposed: “the two theologies are always locked in mortal combat.”¹¹ Ultimately, since every person is a theologian, these two theologies are about two different worldviews or life perspectives. The theology of glory, like the theology of the cross, encompasses all of theology. It is a way of life.

In this brief survey we will highlight three aspects of the theology of glory: its view of God, the Christian life and justification.

A theologian of glory, according to Luther, will look for God outside of Jesus Christ. But Luther maintains that “God can be found only in suffering and the cross.”¹² Thus, “seeking God outside of Jesus is [the work of] the devil.”¹³

Luther claims that the theologian of glory will look upon the “invisible things of God” like God’s “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth.” But a true believer should focus on “the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.”¹⁴

The theologian of glory “does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls ‘enemies of the cross of Christ,’ for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works.”¹⁵

Thus one’s view of God will impact one’s Christian life. If God is understood to be only transcendent, powerful and glorious, then we too will chase after power and glory. Luther says: “Because men do not know the cross and hate it, they

see also Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. H. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); and Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

¹¹ Forde., p. 4.

¹² Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” *LW* 31:53 (on thesis 21).

¹³ Luther, WA 40(3), 337; cited by Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. R. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 21, fn. 1.

¹⁴ Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” *LW* 31:52-53 (on theses 19-20).

¹⁵ Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” *LW* 31:53 (on thesis 21).

necessarily love the opposite, namely, wisdom, glory, power, and so on. Therefore they become increasingly blinded and hardened by such love, for desire cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of those things which it desires." Luther continues: "the desire for glory is not satisfied by the acquisition of glory, nor is the desire to rule satisfied by power and authority, nor is the desire for praise satisfied by praise." Thus: "the remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it."¹⁶

The theology of glory is thus not only a view of God but also a way of life. This was clearly evident in the indulgence scam that sparked the Reformation. In his 95 Theses of 1517, Luther warns against "the lust and license of the indulgence preachers." "Why does not the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the wealth of the richest Crassus, build this one basilica of St. Peter with his own money rather than with the money of poor believers?"¹⁷

For the indulgence sellers to use the symbol of the cross of Jesus to pursue their personal gain is pure blasphemy: "to say that the cross emblazoned with the papal coat of arms, and set up by the indulgence preachers, is equal in worth to the cross of Christ is blasphemy."¹⁸

Of course, the theology of glory is seen in the way of justification. The first 12 theses of the Heidelberg Disputation deal with this question. A theologian of glory relies on human works for salvation, not the works of God. The works of God, i.e., the cross, seem unattractive; but the works of man seem attractive. But the reality is the reverse. In reality, the works of men are a form of pride, since it is a trusting in one's own works for salvation. And: "where there is pride there are the wrath and judgment of God, for God opposes the haughty."¹⁹ Those who believe in "works without Christ" are "haughty" for they deprive God of his glory.²⁰

¹⁶ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:53-54 (on thesis 22).

¹⁷ Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses," *LW* 31:31, 33 (theses 72, 86).

¹⁸ Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses," *LW* 31:32 (thesis 79).

¹⁹ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:47 (on thesis 8).

²⁰ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:47 (on thesis 9).

This brief summary of Luther's theology of glory depicts the lives of many who trust in their own goodness and strive after their own glory, neglecting the glory of God and the well-being of their neighbor. In stark contrast to this is the theology of the cross.

Theology of the Cross

The theology of the cross is Luther's term for a radically different approach to God and to life. Again, three questions are addressed: how do we know God, how are we saved, and how should we live the Christian life?

A key text is John 14 where Philip asks: "Lord, show us the Father" and Jesus answers: "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Luther concludes: "For this reason, true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ."²¹

Instead of focusing on God's invisible qualities, we should focus on the "visible things of God, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness." Again: "it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross."²²

God is thus "hidden in suffering." Luther states it boldly: "God can be found *only* in suffering and the cross."²³

This is radical theology. It is somewhat analogous to Karl Barth's christocentric theology, even though African theology and missiology might argue that God can also be found in the world of nature. But Luther's main point stands: Jesus Christ reveals God. Traditional theology tends to stress the transcendence and power of God; but Christian theology recognizes that God is love since God came down and suffered and died for us. Jesus reveals the compassion of God.

God's work in us seems unattractive because he "humbles and frightens us

²¹ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:53 (on thesis 20).

²² Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:52-53 (on thesis 20).

²³ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:53 (on thesis 21); italics added.

by means of the law"; he "humbles us thoroughly, making us despair, so that he may exalt us in his mercy."²⁴ In other words, the law of God shows us that we are worthless sinners and we can have worth or salvation only in Christ.

We become righteous only through faith. "The righteousness of God . . . is imparted by faith."²⁵ Through faith we are not only justified by also one with Christ: "Through faith Christ is in us, indeed, one with us."²⁶

The consequence of our justification and union with Christ is a life of good works: "Since Christ lives in us through faith so he arouses us to do good works through that living faith in his work." Thus, "deeds of mercy are aroused by the works through which he has saved us."²⁷

The radical demands of the Christian life are an implication of Luther's theology of the cross. We find this teaching throughout Luther's writings. But this is perhaps most forcefully set forth in the 1520 treatise "The Freedom of a Christian," where a Christian is called both "a perfectly free lord of all" and "a perfectly dutiful servant of all."²⁸ Even though we are lords through justification by faith, yet we should be servants to our neighbors. Luther frequently refers to the example of Christ in Philippians 2, who emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. Luther writes:

Although the Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in this liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant, . . . to serve, help, and in every way deal with his neighbor as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him.²⁹

Towards the end of the treatise, Luther says:

²⁴ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:44 (on thesis 4).

²⁵ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:55 (on thesis 25).

²⁶ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:56 (on thesis 26).

²⁷ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:56-57 (on thesis 27).

²⁸ Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *LW* 31:344.

²⁹ Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *LW* 31:366.

... a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.³⁰

The theology of the cross will thus lead one into radical Christianity.

The Theology of the Cross and our World

As suggested in the introduction, there is too much theology of glory in this world. By nature people pursue their own glory and not that of their neighbor.

This is not the place to make a definitive judgment on other religions. Yet the incarnation and crucifixion of God in the Christian religion make Christianity unique. Many religions see God as being purely transcendent and glorious; but the cross of Christ reveals the humility and love of God. The cross reveals the compassionate heart of God. This is significant because one's view of God's nature often determines our own nature. If God is compassionate, then we too should be compassionate.

The theology of the cross also helps us to understand who a big man really is. According to Luther, the big man *par excellence* is Jesus Christ, who, being in the form of God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:6-7). "Big men" today are only concerned about their own well-being; Jesus Christ, who was the biggest man, took the form of a servant.

Luther's theology of the cross is in the same line as the biblical principle of servant leadership. When Jesus' disciples were arguing about who should be first, Jesus said: "whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant." Our lives should be patterned after that of Christ, for "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43, 45). A true big man will love and serve his neighbor.

The theology of the cross also helps us to reexamine the presuppositions of

³⁰ Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *LW* 31:371.

the prosperity gospel. Prosperity teaching focuses on material prosperity. The late Benson Idahosa of Benin City in Nigeria wrote: "We are saved. From what to what? Death to life! Sin to righteousness! Darkness to light! Poverty to prosperity! Fear to faith! Failure to success! And more and more."³¹ He added: "No one in God's family was ever destined to exist in sickness, fear, ignorance, poverty, loneliness or mediocrity."³² The prosperity gospel is focused on one's personal success and well-being. Paul Gifford summarizes the spirit of prosperity teaching in these words: "True Christianity necessarily means wealth: it inevitably *brings* wealth."³³

In this context, Luther's words are still incredibly timely: "Because men do not know the cross and hate it, they necessarily love the opposite, namely, wisdom, glory, power, and so on."³⁴ Luther's theology reflects the words of Jesus: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:35). Luther's theology has grasped a central aspect of Jesus' teaching.

One may not agree with every dimension of Luther's teaching, but his theology does reflect the radical nature of Christianity, and can help us to think biblically about the needs of church and society in Africa today.

³¹ Benson Idahosa, *I Choose to Change: The Scriptural Way to Success and Prosperity* (Crowborough: Highland Books, 1987), p. 10; cited in Young, p. 6.

³² Idahosa, p. 14; cited in Young, p. 5.

³³ Paul Gifford, *Christianity and Politics in Doe's Liberia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 149.

³⁴ Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:53-54 (on thesis 22).

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