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Luther . . . mistrusted reason as a guide in the realms of divine truth . . . Luther knew perfectly well that the faculty of reason could in itself lead a man to a knowledge of God, but not to a saving knowledge of God, which only Christ gives. To Luther, human reason was capable of discerning that there was a God, that he created the world, and that he punished rebellious man. It was capable, too, of arguing logically and profitably. Where it was inadequate was in its attempt to judge the "foolishness of God" by means of "the wisdom of man." Man's reason was to be distrusted only in the matter of salvation. Luther meant here that when the good, normal, rational man thinks about God he always thinks he can find him by using his intellect; by growing more worthy by means of his goodness and decency, his ethics and morality; and by drawing near to him by means of a sensitized spirituality or religious practices.

—JAMES ATKINSON, *MARTIN LUTHER AND THE BIRTH OF PROTESTANTISM* (ATLANTA: JOHN KNOX PRESS, 1968), 49.

It is certain that a single monk must err if he stands against the opinions of all Christendom; or that Christendom itself would have erred for more than a thousand years.

—CHARLES V IN HIS JUDGMENT AGAINST MARTIN LUTHER

## A REVIEW ARTICLE

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### *ON BEING A THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS: REFLECTIONS ON LUTHER'S HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION, 1518.*

Gerhard O. Forde

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans (1997).

121 pages, paper, \$20.00.

Talk about a "theology of the cross" is very fashionable these days. Many contemporary theologians speculate about an empathetic deity who enters into solidarity with victimized people who suffer unjustly at the hands of malevolent forces in the world. Their god stands with the oppressed over against those who inflict the tribulations. Gerhard Forde notes that this most certainly is not what Luther had in mind as he presented his cross theology in the *Heidelberg Disputation*. On the contrary, Luther presents Theses which elucidate a suffering that comes about because we who suffer are at odds with God—a suffering which God visits upon us as upon his Son, Jesus Christ the crucified.

As the title of his work suggests, Forde offers the reader reflections on Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* (Theses 1-28, the theological ones), which focus on the theologian and how he theologizes. Forde offers a correction to the translation of Thesis 21 in the American Edition of *Luther's Works*. Luther wrote not about a distinction between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross, but rather, between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the

cross. Hence the title of his work, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. Forde engages the reader in a consideration of Luther's views on how to be one, what they do, and how they are different from a "theologian of glory."

The reader is forewarned not to anticipate Luther offering any sage advice on how to become professionally successful or theologically accomplished in the academy. That's a shame. We aspiring theologians do want to become accomplished. Most of us are concerned about establishing good reputations for excellence and careful scholarship. And to this end, which of us would not welcome some guidance and good insight from theologians as accomplished as Luther? Luther's Heidelberg Theses, and Forde's consideration of them, disappoint in this regard. Luther does not instruct to advance the reader in professional "careers for Christ." Academic prowess is not the criterion by which he measured the theologian; rather it is the ability and willingness to distinguish law and gospel as we think and speak about God. It is the matter of salvation—not academic success—that Luther pushes under the nose of would-be theologians. The key question that Luther takes up in the *Disputation* is: "How can the theologian advance in the path of righteousness?" The survival of the theologian, not his accomplishments, is what Luther sees at stake (p. 70). Luther set forth and defended his Theses to advance would-be servants of the Word in righteousness before God. In the course of the *Disputation*, Luther does indeed reveal the contours of a theology of the cross and how it is at odds with a theology of glory. In his book, Gerhard Forde wants to acquaint the reader with the plot and cast of the "Cross Story" vs. the "Glory Story." A theology of glory is premised on the denial of death before and by God. It is convinced that there is a way that the sinner can find and use divinely available resources to return to a life of glory with the God of Glory. Jesus is our helper. Con-

versely, a theology of the cross is founded on God's Word which reveals that we must go through death to receive the gift of new life with God through the cross of Christ. Indeed, it is God who kills to make alive. Forde explains that Thesis 1 presents the law of God and Thesis 28, the love of God, as two poles. They are spanned by Theses 2-27 which form a kind of arch between the two. The whole *Disputation* intends to move the reader from the former pole to the latter, from the law of God to the love of God, from law to gospel.

Dialectically, from the perspective of the Cross and then Glory, Luther indicates how we are (and are not) advanced in righteousness. In the cross, theologians move from law to gospel by a death that God effects. We do not advance by our works, for these are put to death (Theses 1-12). Nor do we advance in righteousness by any resolve or commitment of our will (Theses 13-18). Natural man's will is also dead in spiritual matters. Theses 1-18 take the would-be theologian along a path from the law of God which cannot advance us in righteousness (Thesis 1), to despair of any ability to prepare for God's grace (Thesis 18). The movement is dialectical—from responsibility to inability, from the law of life to death, from our best works to damnable sins, from resolve to failure. To qualify as a theologian of the cross, the student must walk the road of the cross from Theses 1-18. It is a journey into death—the theologian's death. All true theology is done from this cross of death. This death comes from God through his law. It is revealed by an honest consideration of the demands of God's law as explored by Luther in his first eighteen theses.

The Glory Story is different. Its contours can be found in medieval Roman Catholic theology and in contemporary Protestant Revivalist teaching, both of which assert a waiting God who graciously comes to bless those who first do the "little bit" they can—e.g., turn, pray, commit, surrender, desire, choose, etc. Luther, however, charges that

when we do "what is in us to do" (i.e., when we do our best), we commit damnable sin (Thesis 13). The will of the sinner is in bondage to sin. A bound will (not coerced or inactive) means that we are "bound to sin," in both senses. It is inevitable; we have no power to make it otherwise.

In Theses 13-18, Luther's point about the bondage of the will is not that we cannot do some outwardly wonderful things, and do them willingly, but that this is all done (apart from Christ) without any fear of God. Theses 1-12 charge that our works are fallen, but 13-18 indicate that this is because they flow from a human will that is fallen as well. Here Luther strikes at the heart of the strains of human optimism that to varying degrees have plagued the church's proclamation throughout the ages. The conditional requirement of sinners for grace, *se facere quod in se est*, "to do what is in one to do," was a common feature of scholastic and nominal theology in Luther's day. It is also alive and well today in many theological circles. Luther reasons that if our best is a requirement, we who are doing it shall sin necessarily—for all, like the Apostle Paul, are slaves to sin (Rom. 7:14). Then we who perform the works have no fear, love and trust in God. So Luther charges: we are indeed obligated to be righteous, but bound not to.

Moreover, we cannot by any initiative of human reason or endeavor reach the invisible God of heavenly glory (Theses 19-24). Theses 19-21 are the best known and receive most of the attention—often, charges Forde, to the exclusion of Theses 1-18. Here Luther describes the character of the Theologian of the Cross vis-a-vis a Theologian of Glory. One deserves to be called a theologian in Luther's eyes who comprehends what is visible of God, through suffering and the cross (Thesis 20). Being a theologian in Luther's mind is a certain way of knowing God. We comprehend Him not in the invisible realms of heavenly glory, but in the visible specter of the bloody cross.

Luther presents a theology of revelation that simultaneously tells us something important about God and the theologian of the cross. God's revelation is indirect and concealed. Luther's reference to the "manifest things" of God is the Latin *posteriora*: God's "backside" or "rearward parts," to put it politely. Luther here makes an allusion to God's revelation of Himself to Moses (Ex. 33:23). The theologian views the "visible and rearward parts of God" through "suffering and the cross." This is certainly a reference to the suffering and crucified Christ. Christ the crucified is the "light" that Luther equates with the *posteriora*, the backside of God. We are denied direct knowledge of God or a direct view of the splendor of His glorious face. His glory is present, but hidden in the shame and suffering of the crucified Christ.

Forde reminds us that Luther's phrase, "As seen in suffering and the cross," has a dual reference. It refers both to the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the theologian. Beneath the humility and shame of the cross lie concealed the omnipotence and full glory of God. Humility and shame are masks which simultaneously conceal and reveal. God is revealed *sub contrariis*. Theologians of the cross know this, seeing God and His mercy through the eyes of faith; but to others, this insight is denied. *Theologia crucis* means not merely that God is known through suffering (whether Christ or the theologian), but that God makes Himself known through suffering. God is active in this matter.

Forde warns the reader that for Luther, the cross is God's active attack upon the sinner. He brings the suffering. It is the *opus alienum* of God (Christ's suffering and ours). The Devil is God's instrument who performs this task. Suffering and evil are not senseless intrusions into the world (a theology of glory). Rather, they are the revelation and working out of our salvation by our loving and merciful God. The issue is how will we respond to the crisis of sin as revealed by the righteousness of God in the law. The Devil's

temptation is to respond with either a "no hope" or "no problem." Both destroy true theology and the theologian. The crisis of sin and the things of God (spiritual matters, things above Him) are viewed aright by the theologian only through suffering and the cross. Needless to say, suffering is not a new program for church committees or Christians to implement. There is nothing here for us to do, as in, "Let's go suffer for Christ!" We suffer divine action.

If the theologian misses apprehending the cross as it truly is (looking through the cross to glory, instead of at the cross), the theologian misses seeing himself and God as each truly is: the theologian as wretched and God as gracious. Our attention is directed to the suffering of the despised, crucified Jesus. Here, Luther beckons us to see the one whom Pilate presented with the words: *Ecco Homo!* "Behold the man!" Whoever does not know God in suffering does not know Him at all (p. 85). Miss this and you have strayed from the path of righteousness and the theologian's craft.

As Luther maintained, "The cross alone is our theology." Cross theology, which rightly divides law and gospel, is both the substance of Christ crucified, and the address of God which kills and makes alive. What you speak and what you hear is what you get. But if you don't get it in judgment (law), you won't get it in grace (gospel). Without the cross there will be no glory, for the glory is in the cross. From the death in the cross, the love of God works in us what is pleasing to Him. By grace through faith, all that the law demands is already accomplished (Theses 25-28).

This little work by Forde does a fine and succinct job of clearly and dramatically capturing the paradoxical Luther and his cross theology: Life out of death, justice out of injustice, righteousness out of unrighteousness, mercy out of judgment, favor out of rejection and love out of the unloving. Such is the way of the cross and the theologian of the

cross. By "cross" Luther meant in shorthand the "entire narrative of the crucified, risen and exalted Christ." The theologian of the cross walks the road of the cross (Theses 1-28) and then proclaims the law and gospel, rightly divided, so that God might advance sinners (through the theologian) in the path of righteousness. The biggest complaint about theologians of the cross, Forde observes, is that they set forth a view of life that is too negative.

Forde rightly observes that most would classify suffering with evil and not with the things of God. Indeed, suffering and injustice are the grist for modern discussions of theodicy, something Forde notes was unheard of in Christian theology before 1800. Nevertheless, for Luther, "the Cross is the doing of God to us" (p.4). It is God's attack on the best (not the worst) of what we have to offer. These are the works we are tempted to trust in, but cursed if we do. What works today are we tempted to offer up to justify our existence as the people of God and the church? The Great Commission? Church growth? Meeting people's felt spiritual needs? We hear, "and the Lord blessed our work." Do we make sweet success the pure mark of faithfulness and God's approval? Do we make such things our escape from the cross and our ticket to glory?

Ours is an age that is obsessed with appearances and form. Even the church gets caught up in this. "They will know we are Christians by our love" is not only a pious wish; it is often considered essential if any real advances are to be made in the extension of the kingdom of God. It is not cleaned-up theology but cleaned-up lives, we are told, that really unleashes the power of God unto salvation. Luther's perspective is the opposite. For the theologian of the cross, there is a shocking indifference to works (p. 98). Who needs them? Neither God nor the sinner in Christ. We are free, therefore, to look after our neighbor's interests instead. Luther asserts that the law says, "Do this," and it is

never done. Grace says, "Believe in this," and everything is done already (Thesis 26). It is, as Leif Grane has noted, "what the Law requires is freedom from the Law." Luther's punch line in the face of the law's demand is that all demands of the law are obtained by faith already—a righteousness of Christ that will stand before God (p. 108). For us, good can be done only when all that is necessary has already been done, when the "shall" of the law is transformed by the cross of Christ into a delight of faith which rests in the works of Christ (pp. 110-11).

What I disliked most about this book was finishing it. It was a short work and I wanted more. Not that Forde is unfair to the reader or fails to deliver as promised. He indicated at the onset a limited scope: First, to provide something accessible to the ordinary reader which would be "a modest addition to the understanding of the theology of the cross" (p. viii). Second, Forde intended to make "some small contribution" to holding the line in the erosion of theological God-talk which has declined to the level of "greeting-card sentimentality." Lamentable is the virtual eclipse from many quarters of the church of hard-hitting theological language such as "sin, law, accusation, repentance, judgment, wrath, punishment . . . death, devil, damnation and even the cross itself" (p. x). But like a wake-up call that packs a jolt, Forde here succinctly presents Luther at his revolutionary best—a Luther who reminds us that when we ponder that "God so loved the world," we need to remember that He gave his Son (and theologians!) over to suffering and the cross.

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