

Luther's Theology of the Cross Examined: The Heidelberg Disputation

In understanding and appreciating Luther's theology of the cross, there are several issues that need to be examined.

First, how is this form of meditation on Christ in his suffering similar to and different from the various forms of late medieval passion meditation?

- Is Luther's theology of the cross (Latin: *theologia crucis*) simply to be traced back to medieval patterns of affective devotion to Christ in his suffering upon the cross ("passion meditation")?
- Or is Luther reacting against late medieval concepts of how one is saved, which he finds inadequate and inaccurate?

Perhaps both—meditation upon Christ's suffering on the cross is retained from medieval devotion, but it is linked with other concepts in a novel way and understood to have different function. This new vision underlies Luther's teaching about temptation and despair in the Christian life, the nature and goals of pastoral care, and the role played by the sacraments in the edification and consolation of the believer.

Late medieval passion meditation—two divergent approaches:

- (1) the external way (*der Weg nach außen*)—Christ's death points to the establishment of the Church and its sacramental system and the security one may find there (*the Mass as a re-presentation of Christ's sacrifice*, which has *merit* in God's sight and is a *source of effective grace*)
 - a. Luther's response: No, it is not that contemplation of Christ's suffering directs us to the Mass, but rather that the Mass directs us to contemplate Christ's suffering.
- (2) the inner way (*der Weg nach innen*)—through devout contemplation of Christ's suffering, the individual is drawn into an immediate subjective and *affective* union with Christ.
 - a. In such contemplation, one should "feel pity for Christ, lamenting and bewailing" one's sins. This suffering together (*compassio*) with Christ—feeling pity with Christ, sorrowing with him and feeling the deepest sympathy for him—is
 - i. a work of great merit and
 - ii. a means to attain union with Christ through external imitation of him as an example to be followed.

Luther's response: No, the principal thing is not to work oneself up into a state, nor to point to the Mass/the institutional church but rather

- a. to bewail and sorrow for our sins (which made it necessary for Christ to suffer)
 - i. to feel the effect of the judgment on Christ and by terrified, even crushed, by recognizing the awfulness of one's own sins, so that one despairs of oneself. To fail to recognize this would simply be to use the cross as a charm that one could manipulate for one's

own benefit and never come understand the real significance of the Cross.

- b. to have faith that Christ's blood was shed for one's own sins
 - i. to know and experience Christ's suffering and shedding of blood as something done *pro se* (for oneself). Cf. "Meditation," p. 8: "What help is it that God is God, if he is not God to you."
 - ii. only through faith are we justified and united to Christ

Luther's Theology of the Cross

The Way of Glory vs. The Way of the Cross

"A theologian of the cross...looks at all things through suffering and the cross...it is rather a particular perception of the world and our destiny" (viii, xii)

The biggest obstacle to the real living out of the faith we receive from God is thus not obvious carnality, but rather our spiritual aspirations.

In what Luther calls "the theology of glory" our conventional ideas of what is right and what has merit are applied to the religious realm and are expressed in spiritual language.

- Example: A colleague recently gave me a book that he had shared with the leadership of his local church. The book is entitled, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*.
 - The author states in the introduction that he wrote the book because he has "a passion for strong congregations to be more effective," moving from good to great.
 - The author also notes that the present book is a sequel to his earlier book in which he described how "individuals who realize they have lived their life chasing success but have not yet found the fulfillment they are seeking" can begin their journey toward significance.
 - The author asserts that following the prescriptions in the present book will help larger congregations to gain an even greater and more positive public profile: "Can you imagine city leaders valuing your church's friendship and participation in the community even asking for it? Can you imagine the neighborhoods around your church talking behind your back about 'how good it is' to have your church in the area...?"

Forde (p. 5): "The most common overarching story we tell about ourselves is what we will call the glory story. We came from glory and are bound for glory. Of course, in between we seem somehow to have gotten derailed—whether by design or accident we don't quite know—but that is only *a temporary inconvenience to be fixed by proper religious effort*. What we need is to get back on 'the glory road.'"

- (1) The reason that it's hard to ask questions about the glory story is that **the glory seems like the only obvious and reasonable way to move forward**. After all, don't you want to be effective and successful? Don't you hope you and your congregation will live up to their potential and achieve great things? Who would want to be less effective and less successful?

- (a) Example: "...Jesus described the church and its impact on the world. And indeed, filled with the Holy Spirit, the early church demonstrated a spiritual energy and depth that transformed the surrounding culture. Don't let your church settle for less!" (*The Church of Irresistible Influence*, back cover) Who could argue with such an appeal?
- (2) As Forde (pp. 6-7) notes, "one of the difficulties in the attempt to set the theology of the cross apart from the theology of glory is that the differences between the two are often very subtle. Obviously they use much the same language in Christian theological circles."
- (3) **The glory story has enormous power and often has great effectiveness in managing the visible and obvious things of this world** (cf. Lk. 16:8). In fact, the only way we can break free from the glory story is if God causes us to be gripped by the story of the cross. Forde (p. 9): "Unless the cross story does claim us and become our story, we shall not escape the clutches of the glory story. A theology of the cross assumes that the will is bound and must be set free. The cross story does that. Either it claims us or it doesn't. If it does it is the end of the glory story. We see in the death of Jesus our death, and we remember that we are dust. We begin to take the truth. We learn dying...We look at all things through 'suffering and the cross.' So the question (and the hope) comes to us. 'If we die with him shall we not also live with him?' That is the end of the story –for the time being. But it is the beginning of faith."

The basic difference between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross is this:

- "The **theologian of glory** ends by calling evil good and good evil. **Works are good and suffering evil**...It is hard to see how such a god could even be involved in the cross...for the system to work there must be a 'glory road'...which the...creature can traverse by willing and working and thus gain the necessary merit to arrive at glory...The theologian of glory sees through the cross so as to fit it into the scheme of works. The cross 'makes up' for failures along the glory road" (Forde, pp. 12-13; cf. p. 16)
- **Theologians of the cross**, by contrast, ""do not believe that we come to proper knowledge of God by attempting to see through the created world to the 'invisible things of God,' but instead "look on all things 'through suffering and the cross.' They, in other words, **are led by the cross to look at the trials, the sufferings...and do not try to see through them** as mere accidental problems to be solved by...adjustment." **They know from the Cross that God can be active even when this is not outwardly evident to sight or reason.** Having been "killed and made alive by the cross alone as *the* story, theologians of the cross "reject "the way of glory...because **the way of glory simply operates as a defense mechanism against the cross**" (Forde pp. 13,12) "**The thirst for glory is not ended by satisfying it but rather by extinguishing it**" (Luther cited in Forde, p. 15; cf. p. 17).
 - **The reason that our hope must be turned away from the performance of good works is that this is a way of trying to use our powers to make sure that we end up in the right place:** "It is impossible to trust in God

unless one has despaired in all creatures and knows that nothing can profit one without God” (Luther in Forde, p. 47; my emphasis). What is needed is not the active independence of people who are a law unto themselves, but rather the admission that we have failed, need God and are wholly unable to fix our own problems by our own efforts. God is not a supplement to increase the efficacy of our works; neither is he a backup plan in the event that our own efforts fail.

- Furthermore, **to try to set things right by our own efforts pushes back the cross so that we can try to set matters right ourselves, out of our own power and on our own terms**, which is deadly to the life of the soul and only confirms it in its bondage to sin apart from God. Thus, Luther’s Thesis 3 on Forde, p. 30: **“Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.”**
- What conversion gives the soul is the ability to discern how matters really stand with the Cross; Luther’s Thesis 4: **“Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless eternal merits.”** (Cf. the parallels set up on p. 31.) The theologian of glory can’t discern how matters actually are in God’s plan. The most the theologian of glory can do is seek to avoid suffering or try to rationalize suffering by looking through and past the suffering to arrive at some standard by which suffering can be quickly explained or at some (human) means by which suffering can soon be remedied and abolished so that one can move on to more attractive things.