

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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Abstract: A more specifically Lutheran assessment of the prosperity gospels arising from a biblical study of discipleship can be summarized by the categories of Martin Luther's theology of the cross, which was first articulated by the reformer in the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. A theology of the cross seeks to understand Christian theology and life from the perspective of Jesus Christ's incarnation, ministry, self-sacrificial death, and his resurrection for sinners. In this sense, Luther's specific categories (i.e. the centrality of Christology; his distinctions between two kinds of righteousness, and law and gospel; a theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory; an insistent focus on the "revealed" rather than the "hidden" God; and the place of human suffering) together accent the death and resurrection of Jesus as the source, substance, and shape of cruciform Christian existence.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As I noted briefly in the overall introduction to all three presentations, classical Lutheran theology does have a context within which to consider the most prominent themes of Christian discipleship, especially as they pertain to bearing one's cross and suffering as a follower of Jesus Christ. That context is routinely called "the theology of the cross," and its historical springboard (if not its ultimate antecedents) goes back to a regularly scheduled meeting of Martin Luther's fellow Augustinian monks in Heidelberg, Germany, in April of 1518. A common feature of those meetings was a public theological "disputation," at which participants would discuss a set of theses prepared by one of their teachers. In 1518, the crafting of these particular theses was the responsibility of Luther himself, who had become famous (or notorious, depending on one's perspective) with the posting and mass circulation of the "95 Theses" the previous autumn. History has come to know the theses Luther prepared for this 1518 meeting of his monastic order as the Heidelberg Disputation.¹

Simply described, the Heidelberg Disputation consists of 28 theological theses and 12 philosophical theses, followed by short explanatory "proofs" (for the theological theses). The theological theses are our principal concern this afternoon. For purposes of our more focused topics, I will call your attention to 11 of the theological theses, following Luther's own numbering thereof. Together, they offer both expressions of—and a coherent, mutually reinforcing picture of—Luther's theology of the cross insofar as it addresses the topics of our three presentations. The most pertinent theses are as follows:

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
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 which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20].

¹ For more detailed background of the larger context of the Heidelberg Disputation, connecting it to both the other events of these years and to Rome's disciplinary measures against Luther, see the first volume of the magisterial biography by Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483–1521*, trans. James L. Schaaf (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985 [German 1981]), pp. 215-216, 231-235.

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 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, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15].
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.
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.²

Several of these theses are famous as almost "stand alone" statements of Martin Luther, by which I mean that they are often quoted by themselves as capsule summaries of Luther's thinking on a particular topic. While the above represents a selection, I have shared with you the sequence and context within which they were first spoken. These 11 theses, read together, provide a sense for how Luther's thought progresses and hangs together.

TOWARD A WORKING DESCRIPTION OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

At one level, Luther's materials as presented and discussed at Heidelberg were a success. His theses and their brief explanatory expositions were such that he won new and important friends. But, interestingly, the materials of the Heidelberg Disputation were seldom reprinted thereafter (unlike the "Ninety-Five Theses," which were disseminated to a mass audience); and the vocabulary of the theses themselves, so regularly cited today, seemed to have had little impact on Luther's own contemporaries.³ Here we are confronted with an interesting historical phenomenon: For many modern and contemporary theologians, the theology of the cross is one of Luther's enduring and oft-cited categories; however, Luther himself rarely if ever used the expression again. Moreover, while the language was well known to European students of Luther, it did not become a common descriptive designation in the English-speaking world before the translation of Walther von Loewenich's book, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, was published in North America in 1976.⁴ Thereafter, it became more common to claim that the theology of the cross, while explicitly used only fleetingly by Luther himself in 1518, nonetheless can be claimed as a summary of his entire theology from his earliest lectures on the Psalms right up to his last published sermon in 1546.⁵ There is one more complicating factor to consider, and this one is textual. If one looks back at Luther's theological theses themselves, he or she will observe that Luther never actually *defines* what the theology of the cross is in so many words. He holds up the attributes of a true, "deserving" theologian (in Theses 19 and 20); and he notes the kinds of things a theologian of the cross and a theologian of glory will say

² These Theses are taken from the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, as found in *Career of the Reformer I*, which in turn is volume 31 of the American Edition of Luther's Works; with the Theses translated and edited by Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), pp. 39-41. This volume is cited as LW 31. Also, the various Heidelberg Theses are referred to throughout these next two presentations and always come from these same pages; therefore, they will be identified immediately in the body of the text itself.

³ This observation was made by Timothy J. Wengert, in a plenary session at the International Congress for Luther Research, on July 31, 2017.

⁴ The book was translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman, and it was published by Augsburg Publishing House in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Von Loewenich's book was first published in German in 1929.

⁵ See, for example, von Loewenich, pp. 12-13.

and do (in Theses 20, 21, and 24). But he stops short of providing actual definitions. Many of Luther's interpreters have been much less hesitant. This means that one can find working definitions of the theology of the cross that have a more—or sometimes less—direct connection to the primary source texts themselves.⁶ Also, because Luther rarely if ever used the expression itself after 1518, there are fewer direct textual "controls" available as one attempts his or her own definition.⁷

The fact that (a) Luther himself seems not to have used the expression after 1518, and (b) even in 1518 he did not define the "theology of the cross" in so many words, means that interpreters of Luther have to be cautious and perhaps even tentative as they suggest or venture their own definitions. Equally important, their unfolding of the implications of the theology of the cross ought to be textually supportable from Luther himself, even if he did not subsequently unfold his theology with direct reference to this specific vocabulary. Can one use "theology of the cross" as a summary, integrative designation? Yes, I think so. Having said that, I am making a plea here for honesty, humility, and caution in one's use of Luther's primary source materials.

With that prolegomenon in place, on the basis of the Heidelberg Disputation and a broader consideration of Martin Luther's writings, I would offer the following description⁸ of Luther's theology of the cross: A theologian of the cross seeks to orient all of his or her theology—indeed, finally, to understand everything—from the perspective of Jesus Christ's incarnation, his ministry, his self-sacrificial death, and his resurrection for sinners. In this sense, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is the source, substance, and shape of Christian existence.⁹ In other words, quite literally, Christian

⁶ It may be worth stating at the outset that in this presentation I am following Luther himself in understanding the cross to refer to the historical crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, who was and ever remains the Son of the living God. In other words, what I am offering is not an abstract or generic discussion about the difficulties or even tragedies of contemporary human life, with the cross as some sort of academic cipher. Nor will I venture into the more modern "God suffers with us" territory. To that controverted point, I will only say that the task of dealing with and conquering sin requires a Savior and not only or primarily a sympathetic companion.

⁷ Along with the Heidelberg Disputation, scholars will suggest different primary works that most illumine the theology of the cross as such. Routinely, these include Luther's lectures on the Psalms, especially those delivered from 1519 through 1521; his interpretation of Mary's Magnificat; and sometimes also *The Bondage of the Will*. Also, according to James Arne Nestingen, who was a splendid Luther scholar, Luther had planned to include a special section on the theology of the cross when he wrote the Small Catechism. However, when Luther actually worked on the Catechism, he found the theology of the cross unfolded so clearly in the Lord's Prayer that the discrete section was no longer necessary. See Nestingen, "The Theology of the Cross in the Lord's Prayer," in *Luther's Large Catechism with Annotations and Contemporary Applications*, ed. John T. Pless and Larry M. Vogel (St. Louis: Concordia, 2022), pp. 516-521.

⁸ Again, please note, I am stopping short of a definition, because descriptions are easier to defend textually. Also, since Luther obviously held no "ownership" over the phrase itself, more modern theologians are free to unfold their own versions of the theology of the cross with greater or lesser attention—not to mention adherence—to the primary texts of Luther himself. This observation is not intended as an indictment of anyone's work, which may in fact be quite useful. It is simply a recognition that there are many "theologies" of the cross on offer, and their fidelity to Luther himself will have to be individually assessed. The exposition offered in this presentation attempts to be grounded in the reformer's own writings and in the categories and themes derived from them.

⁹ Note well that this is not an exercise of pitting the crucifixion and resurrection against each other. On this point, the counsel of Gerhard O. Forde is indispensable: "The word 'cross' here . . . is, of course, shorthand for the entire narrative of the crucified and risen Jesus. As such it includes the OT preparation (many of the foundational passages for the theology of the cross come from the OT!), the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and his exaltation. It is important to include resurrection and exaltation because there is considerable confusion abroad about their place in a theology of the cross. It is often claimed, for instance, that a theology of glory is a theology of resurrection while a theology of the cross is 'only' concerned with crucifixion. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, a theology of the cross is impossible without resurrection. It is impossible to plumb the depths of the crucifixion without the resurrection." See Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 1, note 1 (emphasis Forde's).

existence is "cruciform."¹⁰ From this description, I will accent those features of the theology of the cross that have the most direct bearing on the overall topics of these three lectures.¹¹

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AND THE CENTRALITY OF THE PERSON AND WORK OF JESUS CHRIST

First, whatever else it might mean, any theology of the cross worthy of the name will insist that the core assertions of theology will always begin with and ever return to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In terms of theology proper, one cannot finally say anything adequate about God without talking about this Jesus Christ as he is proclaimed in the Word of God. To state this in other words, genuine theology will always be "soteriology," that is, it will always be concerned with the saving, promissory benefits of Jesus as they are imparted to sinners by the spoken gospel and by baptism and the Lord's Supper.

If we use language closer to that of the Heidelberg Disputation, this means that saving knowledge of God is not to be found in a consideration of God's attributes in any abstract sense, however accurate one's formulation of such attributes might be. Instead, saving knowledge of God—that is, the knowledge of God that one can "use," in the best sense of the word, when confronted with his or her own "terrors of conscience"—is to be found where God seems to be least powerful, namely, on the cross of his Son.

Note well what Luther insists is actually going on when the Son of God was crucified. Luther's own "atonement theology" is so rich precisely because he draws upon the breadth of the New Testament's own vocabulary in considering the meaning and the implications of the events of Good Friday and Easter. Luther's arguably most characteristic soteriological move is to exploit (in the best sense) passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:13 to talk about what he called a "happy exchange" (in German, *fröhliche Wechsel*), wherein Jesus Christ assumes human sin and all of its consequences in himself; and, in "exchange," the gospel Word of God bestows Christ's righteousness upon sinners who trust this promise.¹²

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN "TWO KINDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS"¹³

By referring just now to the bestowal of Christ's righteousness to sinners, we have brought into consideration another one of many all-important distinctions in Luther's expression of his theology. This

¹⁰ While his materials are infrequently cited explicitly here, no one has influenced my own thinking on the theology of the cross more than Robert Kolb, who has published extensively on the topic in both academic and popular settings. For two representative pieces, see "Nothing But Christ Crucified": The Autobiography of a Cross-cultural Communicator," in *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century: Signposts for a Multicultural Witness*, ed. Alberto L. Garcia and A. R. Victor Raj (St. Louis: Concordia, 2002), pp. 37-53; and "Luther's Theology of the Cross for the Twenty-First Century: Deus Revelatus, Homo Revelatus," a 2002 article from *Lutheran Quarterly*, which has been reprinted in Robert Kolb, *Luther's Way of Thinking: Introductory Essays* (Trivandrum, India: Luther Academy India, 2006), pp. 38-62. For an essay particularly relevant to the initial audience of these presentations, see also Eshetu Abate, "The Theology of the Cross in the African Context," in the Concordia volume edited by Garcia and Raj, pp. 121-137 (of which I found pp. 123-125, 130-131, and 134 particularly helpful).

¹¹ If I might be pardoned a parochial reference, the website of my own denomination (The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod) offers the following working definition in its "Frequently Asked Questions" section: "The 'theology of the cross, as this phrase is used in Lutheran circles, usually refers to Martin Luther's insight that God reveals himself most clearly, graciously, and 'gloriously' not through obvious outward 'blessings' or 'spiritual experiences' or the 'wisdom' of human reason (this is how a 'theology of glory' seeks after God), but in the 'hiddenness' and lowliness of the cross and sufferings—first and foremost, through the cross of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:18-25), and then also through our identification with Christ's cross through faith (Gal. 2:20) and through our sharing in his sufferings as cross-bearers for him." When printed, this definition was dated March 3, 2003. These "frequently asked questions" on the synodical website had earlier appeared without attribution in the *Lutheran Witness*, the LCMS monthly magazine. Given the 2003 date, this paragraph was very likely written by Jerald Joersz, a fine exegetical and pastoral theologian. As an accessible and short summary, this is as good as one might hope to find.

¹² Other relevant passages here are Isaiah 53:6 and Romans 6:3-11.

¹³ Interested readers might consult the essays in Robert Kolb, ed., *The Alien + the Proper: Luther's Two-Fold Righteousness in Controversy, Ministry, and Citizenship* (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2023). In the initial essay in this volume, I offer a historical introduction to Luther's use of the "two kinds of righteousness."

particular distinction is the one Luther makes between two kinds of righteousness, and fortunately for students this one is better defined in the primary sources. In his *Lectures on Galatians*, first delivered in 1531 and published in 1535, Luther called this distinction between two kinds of righteousness "our theology." In terms of what this distinction entails, I will let him speak for himself:

This is our theology, by which we teach a precise distinction between these two kinds of righteousness, the active and the passive, so that morality and faith, works and grace, secular society and religion may not be confused. Both are necessary, but both must be kept within their limits. Christian righteousness applies to the new man, and the righteousness of the Law applies to the old man, who is born of flesh and blood.¹⁴

The "passive righteousness" of which Luther speaks is always the gift of Christ's righteousness, which the Christian enjoys as he or she trusts God's promises. In simple terms, passive righteousness is always gospel. It comes from God to sinners who can lay no rightful claim to it. In this dimension, no human works ever avail before God; rather, God's promises as brought to fulfillment in Jesus establish and determine the relationship. This Gospel pronounces righteous (hence, its "forensic" character); and at the same time it recreates, restores, and empowers. Likewise, in its most basic sense, "active righteousness" is the righteousness of human performance. Properly exercised—that is, as empowered by God's mercy given in Jesus—it expresses itself through acts of love in service to one's neighbor.¹⁵ Its most direct biblical antecedent is Paul's reference to "faith working through love" in Galatians 5:6.

One will recognize immediately that this distinction between passive and active righteousness (and I always try to speak of these two in that order, because the latter properly arises out of the former)¹⁶ is intimately related to Luther's more celebrated distinction between law and gospel. In fact, the two distinctions are interdependent; but they are not, strictly speaking, identical.¹⁷ They are related as well to the more immediate topic of today's presentation, the theology of the cross, where in Thesis 25 of the Heidelberg Disputation Luther previewed his distinctions between law and gospel and the two kinds of righteousness: "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ."

JESUS AS "MIRROR OF THE FATHER'S HEART," CONTRA ALL THEOLOGIES OF GLORY

Thesis 25 signals the transition to the next main feature of the theology of the cross, namely, that the work of Jesus Christ and the redemptive character of his life, death, and resurrection are declared solely in the Word of God and are apprehended (i.e., made one's own by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit) through faith alone. If one aspires to know the disposition of God and relate properly to God—that is, with fear, love, and trust and not in obstinate rebellion—Luther instructs people to look exclusively to

¹⁴ This quote is taken from an essay at the beginning of these lectures, "The Argument of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians," in *Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1–4*, translated and edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, volume 26 of the American Edition of Luther's Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), p. 7. In slightly more than eight pages (in the English translation), the "Argument" essay may be the single best and tightest presentation of Martin Luther's mature theology from his own hand. This volume will hereafter be identified as LW 26.

¹⁵ An "improper" (which is my adjective and not Luther's) exercise of active righteousness would take place when one aspires to use that active righteousness as contributing to—in any degree—his or her relationship to God. In order to illustrate and underscore this point, in many writings Robert Kolb has situated passive righteousness on the vertical plane of human existence (i.e., the God to human creature dimension, in which the sinful human creature is the one "given to"); and he has situated active righteousness on the horizontal plane (i.e., the dimension in which the redeemed human creature performs acts of loving service for the benefit of the neighbor). Also, it is in this latter context that Luther's theology of Christian vocation comes to appropriate expression, which has been aptly encapsulated by my colleague Richard Carter as "free in Christ, for service to one's neighbor." Carter's summary distinguishes nicely between these vertical and horizontal dimensions.

¹⁶ Conversely, the theological problems arise when the order is reversed, or, restated more theologically, when one's own acting precedes one's having been "given to" by God in Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ Similarly, Luther's distinction between "two governments" (or "two kingdoms") presupposes and is a corollary of these distinctions between law and gospel and the two kinds of righteousness. However, the concept and workings of the "two governments" exceed the scope of this presentation. Also, it should be acknowledged that Kolb's deceptively simple vertical / horizontal distinction can be applied similarly and helpfully to other dimensions of Christian existence in a fallen and broken world.

Jesus Christ, whom he describes in the Large Catechism as a "mirror of the Father's heart" (Large Catechism II, 45).¹⁸

This Jesus of New Testament revelation is always "Christ crucified" (see 1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2), the message of which the apostle Paul declared already in the first century was "a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles" (1 Corinthians 1:23). In both the 16th and 21st centuries, "Christ crucified" is also a stumbling block and folly to theologians of glory. Luther does not exactly define "theology of glory" either, but he does offer some suggestions. For our purposes, and given our overall topics, I would tentatively describe a theologian of glory as one who seeks and looks for something—whether it is a privileged spiritual experience or an empirical "result" of one's active righteousness—other than the historical cross and resurrection of Jesus as the source and hope of Christian existence. On such a flawed reading of the biblical record, some of which we will explore in tomorrow's presentation, the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified and risen to atone for the sins of humanity must produce such quantifiable consequences, or it will be regarded as deficient. It may be true as far as it goes, perhaps, but deficient nonetheless. From this logic it follows inexorably that God's justification of the ungodly is similarly inadequate, and the forgiveness of sins is at least implicitly considered insufficient.¹⁹

THE "HIDDEN GOD" AND THE "REVEALED GOD"

This consideration of a theology of glory in contradistinction to the theology of the cross introduces yet another vitally important and related distinction. Luther spoke about the "hidden God" (the *Deus absconditus*) and the "revealed God" (the *Deus revelatus*). Martin Luther spent much of his classroom time teaching the Old Testament, and he appropriated the concept of the hidden God from such texts as Isaiah 45:15 and his reading of the Psalms. It is not God as such who somehow goes into hiding; rather, the hidden God refers to the apparent absence of any trace of God's grace. Stated directly, the hidden God is God as considered apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ. To our perception, in these moments God retains all of his transcendent attributes—except the only one on the basis of which we can stand before him, namely, his mercy toward sinners. Theologians of glory have an affinity for the hidden God. Luther had something like this in mind in Thesis 19 of the Heidelberg Disputation: "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)."

A theologian of the cross has been taught by the Word of God to leave the hidden God altogether and entirely alone. That Word of God is preeminently Jesus Christ and his gospel.²⁰ This promissory Word proclaims before it teaches: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). This is the "revealed God" to whom one must flee and to whom one must cling (Romans 1:16-17). For Luther, and for any and all theologians of the cross, the stakes could not be higher: "[T]his is the reason why our theology is certain: it snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which

¹⁸ For the larger context of this designation, Luther is writing at the conclusion of his exposition of the Apostles' Creed: "[H]ere you have everything in richest measure. For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. For . . . we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is a mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit" (Large Catechism II, 64-65). Throughout these presentations, all references to documents from *The Book of Concord* come from the volume edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), and they will be cited in the body of the text.

¹⁹ See the excellent discussion in Gerhard O. Forde, "Is Forgiveness Enough? Reflections on an Odd Question," in *Word and World*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Summer 1996), pp. 302-308.

²⁰ Lest there be the slightest ambiguity, in this context I am talking about the personal and proclaimed Word of God. Holy Scripture as the written and authoritative Word of God is assumed, but it is not at issue here.

cannot deceive."²¹ For Luther, the alternative would not just be a matter of error, for presumably one could address error with better information. To the extent that one drifts from the revealed God and tries to catch a glimpse of the hidden God, he or she is walking down a pathway from uncertainty and doubt, through skepticism, and finally to despair.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS, DISCIPLESHIP, AND HUMAN SUFFERING

The foregoing discussion of the distinction between the hidden and revealed God, and the theological imperative to use the Word of God in order to embrace the latter and shun the former, is directly relevant to the larger topic(s) of these three presentations. Following some of the work we did in the first essay on discipleship, we observe again here that this exercise of new life in Jesus Christ will at a minimum entail service and sacrifice. In addition, probably more often than not, the disciple will be called to follow Jesus on a path that may entail suffering, and sometimes extraordinary suffering (Matthew 16:24-26; 1 Peter 4:12-14). Luther had something to say about that in Thesis 20 of the Heidelberg Disputation: "He deserves to be called a theologian . . . who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross."

Indeed, for a theologian of the cross, catechized by the biblical gospel, such occasions of suffering offer both a caution and an opportunity. They are a caution in a vitally important sense, for in a theology of the cross, one's standing before God or one's Christian life dare never be evaluated by the presence of "success" (however defined), or, on the other hand, by the absence or even the alleviation of suffering. Instead, the Christian life is constituted only by the "alien" or external righteousness conferred by God in the death and resurrection of Jesus.²² In fact, such occasions may also afford an opportunity to bear witness to the presence, promise, and power of the triune God in the face of suffering and evil. In these two contexts, a theology of the cross sets some appropriate limits to our reflection and may at the same time suggest some resources as one confronts suffering.

To begin with, a theology of the cross inculcates real and comprehensive humility. Thesis 22 of the Heidelberg Disputation is helpful here: "That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened." Admittedly, this is challenging language. But Luther and the best of the classical Christian tradition are adamant that fallen human creatures are in no position to draw inferences about the mysteries of providence—not to mention the character of the God behind such providence—on the basis of what they see around them or what they personally experience.²³ Here we are following the good counsel of Luther's friend and colleague Philip Melancthon, who reminded his Roman interlocutors at the Diet of Augsburg as follows: "For a human being, particularly in the terrors of sin, cannot be sure of the will of God (namely, that he ceases to be angry) without a sure Word of God" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, on p. 161 of the Kolb-Wengert edition; see also, Apology XV, 17, on p. 225). My restatement of Melancthon's point is simpler: In the absence of a clear and relevant text, personal inferences can be very dangerous.

The desire for explanations²⁴ and the often glib confidence with which they are offered expose more than a theology of glory at work. That would be bad enough, but it too would be an error that one could address in essentially academic terms. One could point out the mistake and caution the person against making it again. More seriously, these kinds of explanations are often thinly disguised attempts to penetrate the veil of the hidden God. Even more seriously, one often does not realize that he or she has

²¹ LW 26, p. 387, regarding Galatians 4:6.

²² Robert Kolb has written about this in a variety of contexts. Perhaps the most accessible and popular treatment is in *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993), p. 27.

²³ This point is true regardless of whether one experiences great loss or great bounty.

²⁴ If this were a more philosophical essay, such "explanations" would be called "theodicies," which literally refer to attempts to provide a rational defense of God's character and perhaps even God's actions in the face of great evil. Robert Kolb describes a theodicy more existentially—and theologically—as "the attempt to deal with a God from whom we expect all good things when he does not deliver the good we expect." This is from the Kolb essay cited above, "Luther's Theology of the Cross for the Twenty-First Century," p. 51.

stumbled into "hidden God territory" until it is too late. When this happens, one is face to face with sin, death, and the devil—very likely working in sinister conspiracy. In such moments, there is no avenue of escape; there is no solution to one's plight; and one cannot conceive of any help coming from anywhere. For this reason, sometimes on pain of death, a theologian of the cross will decline to come up with explanations or answers to matters that are never open to fallen human inspection.

Stated more positively, theologians of the cross exercise their intellects and hearts in the Word of the *Deus revelatus*. Even here, it is important to recognize that the "revealed God" is—specifically and blessedly—gospel. It is the promise of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, understood as comprehensively as the New Testament unfolds it; or, in the verse from 2 Corinthians 5 from the first presentation, it is the apostle Paul's declaration that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The use of this adjective "revealed" should not be taken as somehow providing the desired information that will now unravel the mysteries of human existence under the cross. The theology of the cross and the resurrection gospel embedded therein offer absolution, not resolution. They offer genuine, God-given hope and not temporary escape. The theology of the cross says that one's dying and rising with Jesus Christ is finally all we have or will be given, but that such dying and rising is not only enough but is literally everything. This point is helpfully stated by Gerhard Forde: "There is no solution to the 'problem' of the hidden, almighty, electing God in theology. The solution is given only if this God comes to us here now to do the deed [i.e., one's baptismal death to sin and rising to new life that is precisely God's act]. That is what the preaching and the sacraments are all about. And theology must drive us to that deed. This is the breaking in of the eschatological future."²⁵

CONCLUSION

This positive presentation of Luther's theology of the cross and at least the beginning of a critique of theologies of glory in their varied manifestations would not be theologically complete if we ended things here. At least one major pastoral—and therefore at the same time theological—task remains. Everything to this point has either extolled the theology of the cross or exposed the problems of a theology of glory. Now it is time for an admission, perhaps even a confession in a stricter sense of the term. The confession is this: There is a theologian of glory in all of us, who raises his or her voice from time to time, even to the point of pleading with what amounts to the hidden God for some immediate answers to our various modes of suffering, answers with which we think we can live—and without which we are convinced we will be left without hope.

In these moments, we will avail ourselves of almost any theological resource to help us, some of which are genuinely unobjectionable and perhaps even laudatory. But to borrow a line from Luther's Thesis 24 of the Heidelberg Disputation, "without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner." In moments when we go down this desperate path, we need to hear from the apostle who had every opportunity to indulge in a theology of glory, but who in the context of personal suffering knew better. At such points, Saint Paul's reliance on the Speaker and the content of his message became a model for Martin Luther and for all of us: "But [Jesus] said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I [Paul] will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

Martin Luther understood the grace of which this text speaks. That is evident from Thesis 25 of the Heidelberg Disputation: "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ." The rest of his life was a comprehensive exercise of this trust in the promises of God in Jesus Christ. May our lives as disciples be such an exercise as well.

²⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, "The One Acted Upon," in *Dialog*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Winter 1997), p. 61.