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The Theology of the Cross and the Lutheran Confessions

Andrew J. Preus

What is the theology of the cross? Although the topic of the cross does not receive its own article in any of the symbolical writings, the Augsburg Confession, in passing, identifies the cross as a doctrinal topic.¹ Melancthon even identifies afflictions as a sacrament, if rightly understood.² There is a promise attached to our afflictions that God will compensate us for our losses.³ Yes, the topic of the cross is taken up in our Confessions. But what about the theology of the cross?

I. The Theology of the Cross

The theology of the cross is a common term among Lutherans, yet this term is not found in the Lutheran Confessions. Does this mean that the Lutheran Confessions do not teach the theology of the cross? Now, this is a loaded question, because it assumes that all agree on what the theology of the cross is. The theology of the cross is part of a greater debate on what Luther's theology really was. This has been the quest of Luther research since the start of the so-called Luther Renaissance in the twentieth century. Much has been written about when Luther discovered his Reformation theology and what exactly the defining feature of that theology was. We know that it has something to do with faith and the righteousness of God because this is what Luther describes in the preface to his Latin writings, published in 1545.⁴ Here, Luther recounts his discovery of the gospel, when he realized that the righteousness of God was not his judgment on sinners and his strict standard

¹ AC XXVI 15, 30; cf. Ap XV (VIII) 43 (= XV 43, Tappert p. 221). For references to articles from the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, follow Benjamin T. G. Mayes's research notes in "Apology of the Augsburg Confession Comparison Chart," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 80, nos. 3–4 (2016): 337–339.

² Ap XIII 17.

³ Ap IV (III) 242 (= IV 363, Tappert p. 162).

⁴ Martin Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (1545): vol. 34, pp. 323–338, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

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that we must accomplish but rather the mercy of God by which he justifies sinners. It is the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel (Rom 1:17).⁵

The theology of the cross is simply one term to describe Luther's understanding of the gospel. He often referred to this as "our theology." Many readers of Luther may be familiar with the famous Latin phrase from Luther's *Labors on the Psalms* (1519–1521).⁶ Commenting on Psalm 5, he says, "*CRUX sola est nostra theologia*," "The cross alone is our theology."⁷ "Our theology" was a common term Luther used throughout his life. One should not consider this simply *his* theology. It is "our theology." This is the Reformation theology to which Luther subscribed in his catechisms, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, and his own Smalcald Articles.

The theology of the cross itself is a very broad topic, even addressing certain themes of prolegomena, such as revelation and natural theology. It also treats the topic of salvation, including faith, the atonement, and the life under the cross. In his foundational work, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*,⁸ first published in 1929, Walther von Löwenich describes the theology of the cross as a theology of revelation and faith, focusing also on the Christian life. Thus, Luther's theology of the cross was taken as an overall approach to theology. In his more recent study of the same name, Alister McGrath focuses on Luther's discovery of the righteousness of God (*iustitia Dei*), arguing that Luther's breakthrough in the theology of the cross centered on his understanding that God's righteousness is given to the Christian through faith when he is humiliated by God.⁹ Drawing from Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, McGrath and Löwenich both summarize the leading features of the theology of the cross in the same five points. They are as follows.

First, the theology of the cross is a theology of revelation, contrary to speculation and preconceived notions of God. Second, such revelation is indirect and concealed; God is only seen with eyes of faith. Third, this revelation is recognized

⁵ Luther, *Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings* (1545), AE 34: 337.

"At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'"

⁶ Martin Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), in Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*, 73 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 5:19–352, hereafter WA.

⁷ Luther, *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–1521), WA 5:176.

⁸ Walther von Löwenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976).

⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing Inc., 1990).

in the suffering and cross of Christ, not in man's moral activity or in the created order. Fourth, such knowledge of God is a matter of faith. And fifth, God is known through suffering, first in Christ's suffering, but also then in the Christian's suffering.¹⁰ These five points serve as the outline for Luther's theology of the cross.

So, how do the Lutheran Confessions teach the theology of the cross? To go through all five points would require a much longer study. Instead, this study will focus on the fifth point. God is known first through Christ's suffering and then also in the Christian's own suffering. The Lutheran Confessions have much to say about Christ's act of salvation by his death on the cross, and they also say much about afflictions in the Christian life. While discussing how the Confessions treat this topic, it is beneficial to review briefly Luther's theology of the cross, specifically from his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518.¹¹ As one takes up the topic of Christ's work and the Christian life, it is necessary to pay attention to how Luther's theology of the cross teaches what Christ did to accomplish our salvation. What is Christ's righteousness? And how does this affect the Christian life? What one teaches about Christ's cross determines how one understands the Christian's cross. In other words, Christ's life and death determine what one teaches about the Christian's life and death.

II. Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*

The first place to start when discussing Luther's theology of the cross is his *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518. Luther's goal in this disputation is to combat the false teaching that man has any natural powers or free will to come to God. Luther intends to show that natural man does not even understand God rightly. Instead, the cross of Christ destroys the works and wisdom of man. Here, Luther makes a distinction between the theologian of the cross and the theologian of glory. The theologian of glory, who does not deserve to be called a theologian, is described in Thesis 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."¹² In other words, Luther explains that just because someone recognizes the virtues of God (such as wisdom, godliness, justice, and goodness), this does not make one a theologian. It does not mean that one knows God.

In Thesis 20, Luther describes a true theologian as a theologian of the cross: "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and

¹⁰ McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 149–152; Löwenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 19–22.

¹¹ AE 31:35–70.

¹² Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:52.

manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.”¹³ Here, Luther sets the cross up against human works. God cannot be grasped by human wisdom and merits. Instead, by his humility and weakness, God destroys the wisdom of the wise. He saves those who believe through what the world counts as foolishness (1 Cor 1:21). It is in this way that God hides himself, just as Isaiah says (Isa 45:15).

A theologian of glory imagines that he can know God rightly through his own wisdom and works. A theologian of the cross knows God only in the suffering of Christ, through faith. It follows that the theologian of glory is going to call the cross and suffering evil. But the theologian of the cross calls it good.¹⁴ Thus, Luther, in his *Fourteen Consolations*, published in 1520 for Elector Frederick, lists seven evils and seven blessings, and he calls all fourteen of them comforts.¹⁵ The evil of suffering is good. It is comforting. This is true, first of all, because Christ’s suffering saved us and, second, because our suffering proves our faith, teaching us that our good works are not our own but God’s.¹⁶

The concept of God revealing himself by hiding himself under weakness and affliction is thoroughly biblical. God hides himself under his improper work of wrath so that he might reveal his proper work of mercy (Isa 28:21).¹⁷ St. Paul says that God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise and the weak things of the world to shame the mighty (1 Cor 1:27). Luther alludes to the theme of God hidden under the assaults of the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh in his treatment of the third petition, “Thy will be done,” as well as the sixth petition, “Lead us not into temptation.” It is through these assaults of the devil and his minions that God strengthens his Christians in their spiritual battle. And as Luther says in his Large Catechism, one should expect this whenever the word of God is proclaimed and believed rightly; the cross cannot be wanting.¹⁸ Christ tells St. Paul that his strength is made perfect in weakness. Paul, therefore, concludes from this that he is strong precisely when he is weak (2 Cor 12:9–10). The Lutheran dogmaticians often argued

¹³ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:52–53.

¹⁴ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:53.

¹⁵ AE 42:117ff.

¹⁶ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:53.

¹⁷ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:44.

¹⁸ LC III 65. Cf. *Commentary on Psalm 117* (1530), AE 14:31–32. Walther von Löwenich comments, “At one time [Luther] traces the trial back to the devil, at another time to God. We see now that this can only be a tentative distinction. Both views find their unity in the idea of the hidden God or the alien work, as the case may be. God conceals himself under the devil’s mask. If faith succeeds in recognizing this as a mask, if it comes to the insight that in the alien work of trial God has become the devil, then the trial is overcome” (Löwenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 137).

from this passage of 2 Corinthians that God sends the cross through the instrument of the devil, or, as St. Paul calls it, a messenger of Satan.¹⁹

God meets us in our weakness even as he saved us in the weakness of his Son. The theology of the cross teaches that what Christ did to save sinners (dying on the cross) permeates not only all Christian doctrine but also the entire Christian life and outlook on life. Christ suffered. Therefore, those who are in him suffer. As Christ says, a servant is not above his master (John 15:20). The faithful must be conformed to his image by means of suffering (Rom 8:29).

III. The Righteousness of Christ and the Cross of Christ

The cross of Christ describes Christ's action to save poor sinners. The cross of the Christian describes God's action in testing and proving the faith of his children. But what is Christ's action to save sinners? What is the righteousness by which we stand righteous before God? Luther is clear in his *Heidelberg Disputation* that the righteousness of God is not acquired through works, but it is obtained through faith. He is clear that, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ is our righteousness. But what does this entail? How is Christ our righteousness? Did he actually fulfill a standard or norm of righteousness? Did he satisfy God's justice against sin?

Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* does not thoroughly answer these questions. It describes how the individual is righteous through faith in Christ, and it identifies Christ as our righteousness. The disputation discusses how this is revealed, namely, through the cross, hidden under wrath. But Luther's theses do not define Christ's righteousness received through faith as comprehensively as our Lutheran Confessions do. The Solid Declaration defines the righteousness that faith receives as the "obedience, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, since he has made satisfaction for our sake to the law and paid for (*expiavit*) our sins."²⁰ It understands Christ's righteousness as that which fulfills and satisfies God's law under which Christ placed himself to redeem mankind (Gal 4:4).²¹ This assumes that God's law is his eternal, immutable will, a standard of righteousness.²²

¹⁹ Cf. Abraham Calov, *Biblia Novi Testamenti Illustrata* (Dresden and Leipzig: Zimmermannus, 1719), 2:344.

²⁰ FC SD III 14. Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions in this article are from W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). "*Itaque iustitia illa, quae coram Deo fidei aut credentibus ex mera gratia imputatur, est obedientia, passio et resurrectio Christi, quibus ille legi nostrae causa satisfecit et peccata nostra expiavit*" (*Triglot Concordia*, 918).

²¹ FC SD III 15–16.

²² FC SD VI 3, 15, 17.

This is where it is crucial to pay attention to what is written about Luther's theology of the cross. Many are already familiar with the works of Gerhard Forde such as *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. Forde fundamentally rejected what the Formula of Concord teaches about the righteousness of Christ. He specifically denied what has often been called the vicarious satisfaction, namely, that Christ, taking the place of sinners, paid to God's eternal justice what his law demanded from sinful mankind.²³

Some may assume that as long as one does not follow Forde's atonement theology, the rest of his theology of the cross is of great value. It cannot be denied that Forde and confessional Lutherans have common enemies. He was a staunch opponent of prosperity gospel, and with his heavy emphasis on the word of God, a confessional Lutheran can find an ally against those who promote the false notion that one can preach the gospel without using words. His emphasis on the bondage of the will should also find much commendation. While one can, with discerning eyes, glean benefit from Forde's insights, it would be nothing short of naive to assume that his denial of this central tenet of the Christian faith is not deeply rooted in his overall approach to the theology of the cross.

At the beginning of his book, Forde endorses the approach of *being* a theologian of the cross rather than merely studying a theology *about* the cross. He explains this further by expressing the vanity in writing about the theology of the cross. Such an attempt, Forde argues, "would no doubt be just another attempt to give a final propositional answer to Jesus' cry from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' We can't answer Jesus' question. We can only die *with him* and await God's answer in him."²⁴

It is true that human reason cannot sufficiently answer this question. That Christ, the innocent Son of God, must die, is contrary to the wisdom of this age. But this does not mean that there is no answer revealed in God's word. Christ died to pay what sinners owed, just as Luther explains in his Large Catechism on the Second Article.²⁵ While a confessional Lutheran can appreciate the emphasis on the

²³ For a more thorough summary of Forde's atonement theology, see Jack Kilcrease, "Gerhard Forde's Theology of Atonement and Justification: A Confessional Lutheran Response," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 76, nos. 3–4 (2012): 269–294.

²⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 3.

²⁵ LC II 31. "Let this, then, be the sum of this article that the little word Lord signifies simply as much as Redeemer, i.e., He who has brought us from Satan to God, from death to life, from sin to righteousness, and who preserves us in the same. But all the points which follow in order in this article serve no other end than to explain and express this redemption, how and whereby it was accomplished, that is, how much it cost Him, and what He spent and risked that He might win us and bring us under His dominion, namely, that He became man, conceived and born without [any stain of] sin, of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, that He might overcome sin; moreover,

mysterious power of the word of the cross killing and making alive, the idea that one cannot give a propositional answer to Jesus' cry of abandonment from God leads to something in Forde's theology that does not jibe with the theology of the Lutheran Confessions.

Forde identifies some errors for which he may be commended. For example, he warns against turning "occasional pain" into "our good work" that merits some kind of favor.²⁶ But his disdain for propositional answers to Jesus' cry from the cross manifests itself in his denial of Christ's vicarious satisfaction of God's wrath. Describing the erroneous speculations of theologians of glory, he writes,

[The cross] becomes a launching pad for speculative flights into intellectual space, into the invisible things of God. It is not simply that a man sent from God is suffering, forsaken, and dying at our hands—as if that were not enough!—but he is a payment to God (whose justice one has supposedly peered into and figured out) in some celestial court transaction.²⁷

But Forde's real problem with Jesus satisfying God's wrath is not that it is an attempt to figure out God's justice. Again, one cannot deny that the depths of God's justice are a mystery to our sinful reason. Rather, Forde denies that Christ satisfied God's wrath because he denies that God's wrath is something active and eternally binding. Instead, Forde understands wrath as simply the sinner's perception of God. The law is merely the conditional scheme we sinners place on life, which leaves us with a wrathful God. This is why he can still speak of the sinner experiencing the wrath of God in inner struggles.²⁸

In his "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ,"²⁹ Forde further explains his understanding of God's wrath. He warns against the "fatal flaw" of looking away from the actual events of the atonement to "eternal truths," ignoring or obscuring the event and our part in it.³⁰ He again expresses his concern that one

that He suffered, died and was buried, *that He might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owe, not with silver nor gold, but with His own precious blood.* And all this, in order to become my Lord; for He did none of these for Himself, nor had He any need of it. And after that He rose again from the dead, swallowed up and devoured death, and finally ascended into heaven and assumed the government at the Father's right hand, so that the devil and all powers must be subject to Him and lie at His feet, until finally, at the last day, He will completely part and separate us from the wicked world, the devil, death, sin, etc." *Emphasis added.*

²⁶ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 83–85.

²⁷ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 76.

²⁸ Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 86.

²⁹ Gerhard Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 85–97.

³⁰ Forde, "Caught in the Act," 86.

should avoid what he sees as abstract propositions. Throughout his essay, he discusses some different theories of the atonement.

This should be the first red flag for any subscriber to the Formula of Concord. When people discuss different “theories” of the atonement, they are assuming that doctrine is human theory and speculation. But these propositions about what Christ did and how he did it are not simply human speculations. Sure, man can, to an extent, follow the theme. Natural man can understand, at least outwardly, the concept of God paying the debt his servants owed him by sending his Son to suffer. But this does not mean that such teachings are man’s theories. The Scriptures do not teach theories of the atonement. Instead, the Scriptures reveal a doctrine of the atonement. They reveal God’s wrath from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (Rom 1:18). They reveal that Christ paid to God what we sinners owed, thereby freeing us from God’s wrath, from sin, from the devil’s dominion, and from death (Gen 3:15; Isa 53:4–6, 10, 11; Matt 20:28; John 14:30b–31; 2 Cor 5:19, 21; Gal 3:13; Eph 5:2; 1 Thess 1:10; 1 John 2:2). This encompasses the so-called theories of the atonement, whether we call it the vicarious satisfaction or the victory motif.

Forde’s theology of the cross does not allow affirming any objective proposition about God’s wrath and the need for his wrath to be satisfied. He sees this as mere speculation. He admits that, in a sense, the work of Christ was to “satisfy” divine wrath, but he affirms again that we are mistaken to say that Jesus was killed to satisfy God’s justice and bring reconciliation. “[We] miss the point that *we* are the obstacles to reconciliation, not God.”³¹ The wrath of God is of our own creating, so to speak. He came to have mercy. We killed him. So the God who is only a God of mercy becomes to us a God of wrath. Yet Jesus was so devoted to showing mercy that he endured the murder. His unconditional love was a threat to our conditional way of running things. That is why we crucified him.³²

Therefore, Forde asks, why must Jesus die? He explains that God’s “problem” is not that he cannot show mercy until he has been satisfied but rather that he will not be satisfied until he has shown mercy. The problem, then, is that the sinful world will not have it, and we are thus under God’s “wrath.” As long as he is not satisfied in showing mercy, he remains jealous, and this is his “wrath.” God shows unconditional mercy. We are in a conditional world. God knows this, but he will not stop himself from showing mercy. He knows that we will resist his Son, but he still sends Jesus, knowing that we will kill him. Thus, Jesus bears the “wrath” of God in that, obedient to the will of the Father, he shows mercy relentlessly, all the way to the cross. Forde says that Jesus concretely bears our sin by being beaten and tortured

³¹ Forde, “Caught in the Act,” 91.

³² Forde, “Caught in the Act,” 92–93.

by wicked men. So he puts to death the old as his death becomes our death.³³ Faith, therefore, when created in us, fulfills God's satisfaction of showing mercy. Forde writes, "When faith is created, when we actually believe God's unconditional forgiveness; then God can say, 'Now I am satisfied!' God's wrath ends actually *when we believe him*, not abstractly because of a payment to God 'once upon a time.'"³⁴

Again, one can notice Forde's suspicion of abstractions and so-called eternal truths. He believes that he is representing the atonement concretely, while a penal substitution is the product of mere abstract thinking of the eternal truth of God's wrath on sinners. By rejecting the doctrine of Christ paying our penalty to God's justice, Forde is being faithful to his view of the theology of the cross. After all, the cross must destroy all human wisdom, all man-made theories and concepts of justice. And if the vicarious satisfaction is a speculative theory attempting to answer a question from the cross that cannot be answered by such propositions, then the theologian of the cross must reject it.

But does Luther's theology of the cross exclude any understanding of Christ satisfying God's justice? This again goes back to Luther's understanding of righteousness. What is the righteousness of God in the theology of the cross?

McGrath sees Luther's understanding of the righteousness of God as the catalyst of his theology of the cross. He explains that Luther viewed the righteousness of God according to its mode of being received in man, as well as according to its nature. First, Luther recognizes that man attains this righteousness only when he is condemned and humbled. This is the humility of faith (*humilitas fidei*).³⁵ As he comments on Psalm 96, Luther lists a series of maxims elaborating on Christ's words, "He who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).³⁶ Here he says that when man makes himself a fool, he becomes wise, and when he condemns himself, he is saved.³⁷ Compare this to Luther's twenty-fifth thesis in his *Heidelberg Disputation*, where he says, "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without works, believes much in Christ."³⁸ Whether he calls it

³³ Forde, "Caught in the Act," 94–96.

³⁴ Forde, "Caught in the Act," 97.

³⁵ McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 153ff. Here, McGrath builds on the work of Löwenich, who sought to demonstrate that Luther's theology of the cross was not a simple rehashing of the monastic moral instruction of humility, a mere ethic for the right demeanor of a Christian. Instead, Löwenich shows that Luther's view of humility is an emptying and nothingness on the part of the sinner who realizes that he can contribute nothing before God. Thus, Luther often speaks of humility synonymously with faith. Cf. Löwenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, passim.

³⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version' (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

³⁷ Luther, *First Psalm Lectures* (1513–1516), WA 4:110–111, cf. AE 11:263.

³⁸ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:41.

condemning himself or making himself a fool, Luther speaks in the same way as he speaks of faith making one righteous. As faith exists in such humility, McGrath points out that God's mercy is only recognizable in wrath. This is why Christ is the righteousness of God by his cross, because his cross is where God's wrath is revealed.³⁹ McGrath explains that the nature of the righteousness of God is revealed in the cross, because it is completely contrary to man's understanding of righteousness. Thus, the essence of the righteousness of faith is when the sinner recognizes his total unrighteousness.⁴⁰

However, McGrath does not describe the nature of the righteousness of God as much as he simply reiterates how man, humbled because of his sin, receives this righteousness by faith. To be fair, McGrath focuses on Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, which does not flesh out Christ's righteousness as thoroughly as the Formula of Concord and later Lutheran dogmaticians. Instead, like much of Luther's explanations of justification, he focuses on how the individual Christian receives what Christ did.

This is often how the theology of the cross is presented. It is not so much about what and why Christ did what he did. Instead, it is a theology of revelation and faith, as described by Löwenich. Thus, the righteousness of Christ is presented mainly in how it is revealed and received. Instead of being the means by which Christ earned for sinners God's favor, the cross is rather revelation of God's favor. But what is the actual basis of this revelation? What is being revealed? Can the Christian not explain from Scripture why there is no life apart from Christ's act of salvation? Is it not clear that Christ was obedient to God's law because we, by our sin, were not (Rom 5:18–21; 8:3)? We cannot hold to the revelation of Christ's righteousness if we do not affirm what that righteousness actually is. Romans 1:17—that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel from faith to faith—is incomplete without Romans 3:25–26 and 5:18–21, which describe what that righteousness of God is. It is that Christ fulfilled what the law demanded but, being weakened by the sinful flesh, could not produce (Rom 8:3).

While Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* does not explicitly spell out how Christ fulfilled the Christian's righteousness, this does not mean that Luther has no concern for Christ's vicarious obedience. After all, while teaching from the Scriptures that Christ is our righteousness (1 Cor 1:30), he says that what Christ does actively is received by us as an accomplished fact. Here he refers to Matthew 5:18, that not one jot may pass from the law until it is accomplished.⁴¹ Luther thereby implies that Christ's righteousness fulfills the law, which is identified as that

³⁹ McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 155ff.

⁴⁰ McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 156.

⁴¹ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), AE 31:51–62.

immutable will that must above all things be accomplished. To fulfill such a law is to make satisfaction. This central detail was by no means lacking in Luther's theology.

Christ's vicarious obedience is indispensable for a certain and confident faith, a central tenet in the theology of suffering. This point came alive in Luther's disputes about repentance, or the practice of penance. The papists made a distinction between satisfaction of guilt and that of punishment, asserting that while Christ alone made satisfaction for guilt, one cannot enjoy this benefit without making satisfaction for the punishment of sin. By doing this, they rendered the distinction practically moot. After all, if the full benefits of Christ's satisfaction are not enjoyed apart from the penitent making satisfaction for punishment, then for all intents and purposes, the forgiveness of guilt remains dependent on the remission of punishment. For one to enjoy the remission of guilt, one must, through works of satisfaction, attain the remission of punishment as well.

But Luther begged to differ. In his theses entitled *For Seeking the Truth and Consoling Terrified Consciences* (1518), written the same year as his *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther says that it is actually more useful to salvation if the punishment remains on the penitent. Instead of making satisfaction for punishment a necessary part of enjoying the full benefits of Christ's satisfaction of guilt, Luther turned the punishment into a salutary cross, that exercises faith. "It is more profitable to salvation," Luther asserted, "if the one absolved from guilt omits the redemption of punishment."⁴²

In these theses, Luther does not specifically address the satisfaction of Christ, but, as in his *Heidelberg Disputation*, he focuses on how the individual is justified by faith. However, the satisfaction of Christ is the basis for the benefits received by faith. In his *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517–1518), we find this connection between Christ's actual work on our behalf and the certainty of faith. Commenting on Hebrews 9:14, "How much more will the blood of Christ . . . purify our conscience," Luther again presses the centrality of faith. A clean conscience is nothing other than faith in the word of Christ, which proclaims the atoning death of Christ. This is, as St. Paul calls it, the testimony of our conscience (2 Cor 1:12).⁴³

⁴² Luther, *Pro veritate inquirenda et timoratis conscientiiis consolandis conclusiones* (1518), WA 1:631: "Magis prodest ad salutem, si absolutus a culpa omittat redemptionem penarum." Translation my own. With such certainty of faith, Ronald Rittgers comments, "the believer could face divine penalties joyfully, knowing that they were not a means of rendering satisfaction for sin to the divine judge; rather, they were (and could only be) an opportunity to have one's faith and love proved by one's heavenly Father" (Ronald K. Rittgers, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012], 107–108).

⁴³ Luther, *Lectures on Hebrews* (1518–1518), AE 29:172. "St. Bernard speaks axiomatically in the following way: 'It is necessary for you to believe that God can remit your sins, bestow grace on

From here, Luther attacks any meritorious view of human suffering. Only the flesh and blood of Christ can cleanse the conscience. Therefore, when people meditate on Christ's passion as a way to suffer with him and thereby merit favor from God, their meditation is fruitless and heathenish.⁴⁴

Luther speaks even more explicitly of Christ's satisfaction in his Smalcald Articles as he sets it against the vain satisfaction of the papists. "Neither can the satisfaction be uncertain," he writes, "because it is not our uncertain, sinful work, but it is the suffering and blood of the innocent Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world."⁴⁵

Christ making satisfaction for sins is crucial to a correct understanding of any Lutheran theology of suffering. This was especially evident in the later Lutheran dogmaticians when they treated the topic of the cross in the Christian life. They distinguished the Christian's cross from Christ's cross for this specific reason.⁴⁶ If Jesus has satisfied God's wrath against sins, then the suffering Christians endure reminds them of this. Suffering is no accident. It is either punishment or comfort. In itself, it is a sign of wrath and punishment, but the Christian's suffering is seen through faith as a sign of God's mercy. And this is only true because Christ satisfied God's wrath.⁴⁷

you and give glory to you. And this is not enough, unless you believe with complete certainty that your sins have been remitted, that grace has been bestowed on you, and that glory is to be given to you.' And this is the testimony of our conscience—the testimony which the Spirit of God gives to our spirit. Concerning this the apostle says in 2 Cor. 1:12: 'Our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience.' For, as St. Bernard says, the testimony of the conscience is not understood as being of the kind that is to us from us—for this is Pelagian—and glory in shame, but as the testimony which our conscience receives, just as it receives righteousness and truth, etc."

⁴⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Hebrews* (1518–1518), AE 29:210–211.

⁴⁵ SA III III 38.

⁴⁶ Jakob Heerbrand explains: "Only the cross of Christ appeases the wrath of God, makes satisfaction, propitiation for the sins of the whole world (Isa 53). 'I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the gentiles no one was with me (Isa 63:3)'. But the cross and sufferings of the pious have other causes and goals. They are not expiation of sins, neither of themselves nor of others" (Jakob Heerbrand, *Compendium Theologiae questionibus methodi tractatum* [Tubingen: Gruppenbachius, 1572], 463). Translation my own.

⁴⁷ Selnecker lists four headings when discussing the cross: (1) The filth of sin, (2) the satisfaction Christ gave on sinful man's behalf, (3) the example given for the Christian to imitate, and (4) the consolation in every cross and calamity (Nikolaus Selnecker, *Institutiones Christianae Religionis* [Leipzig, 1579], 1:396–397. Cf. 1:409). "Afflictions are not signs of wrath or perdition, but they are signs—rather certain seals *σφραγίδες* [2 Tim 2:19]—of the mercy and grace of God. Pericles knows that he is being divinely punished. But he is not able to be strengthened by the thought that he is being punished in this way, so that he might be called back to repentance rather than that he might be reduced to nothing. But Christians ought to be strengthened that calamities are testimonies and pledges of the good will of God toward us, and that they are exercises of faith, of fear, and of the subsequent spiritual fruits in us. As Peter says, it is necessary to be saddened by various afflictions so that the proving of our faith might be purer than fire. And Jeremiah says 31[:18], 'O Lord, you have chastised me, and I was instructed; as a bullock untrained, after you

What is said about Christ's cross determines what is said about the Christian's. If Christ's cross did not satisfy God's justice, then the Christian's cross must play some role in this, or else God's wrath might be defined as simply one's own existential estrangement or despair rather than God's active will to punish sinners according to his strict justice. If this is the case, then the basis for our justification before God becomes our own realization that God is not mad at us, rather than Christ's saving work on our behalf by which he turned his own wrath away. In other words, instead of being justified before God through faith on account of Christ, it is on account of faith—*propter fidem* rather than *per fidem propter Christum*. We know, of course, that if this were the case, then the certainty of our salvation before the law's condemnation would not be the objective obedience of the Lamb of God who bore the sin of the world but rather some personal encounter with God's mercy. And who is to say that this encounter is legitimate?

Speaking of the relationship between Christ's obedience and the Christian's obedience, one must remember that what is taught about the one affects the other. Bearing this in mind, one may consider another aspect of Christ's obedience. The Lutherans of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries distinguished between Christ's active and passive obedience. If this distinction is rightly understood, then it should give insight into understanding the Christian's own life within the new obedience.

The distinction between the new obedience and Christ's obedience is similar to the distinction between active righteousness and passive righteousness, not to be confused with active and passive obedience. The distinction between active and passive righteousness describes what Luther calls "our theology" in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535). The passive righteousness is the righteousness possessed by the Christian through faith, and the active righteousness is the righteousness of the law as it is acted out in the Christian life with good works. These two kinds of righteousness have nothing to do with each other when one considers justification. This is because the passive righteousness of the gospel is received only by faith and pertains to the new man, while the active righteousness of the law requires works and pertains only to the old man. Passive righteousness means to know nothing but that Christ has gone to the Father and is in heaven.⁴⁸

It appears that Luther did not see Christ winning salvation by an active fulfillment of God's law, since he says that these two kinds of righteousness have nothing to do with each other. It would appear instead that Christ brings about something completely different, a different dialect than the word of law.

converted me I repented.' Further David says [Psalm 119:71], 'It was good for me that you humiliated me, that I might learn your righteousness.' Translation my own.

⁴⁸ Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535), AE 26:7–9.

However, one should not draw from this that the law has nothing to do with the gospel. Rather, Luther's distinction between the two kinds of righteousness has to do with the obtaining of righteousness, not the essence of it. The righteousness of faith is not the righteousness of works, since the righteousness of faith is received as an accomplished fact wrought by Christ's obedience, while the righteousness of works is always imperfect. The active righteousness pertains to the law because it is acted out by works, not because it is an accurate manifestation of the law. The law requires much more than this active righteousness. In fact, it condemns it.

It is worth discussing what the fulfillment of the law actually is. Although it is true that Luther spoke of the atonement in a less systematic way than his successors, one cannot deny that Luther understood Jesus' saving act in his fulfilling of the whole, eternal law. Luther especially emphasizes this in the heat of the Antinomian Controversy in 1536–1537. This is where the obedience of Christ relates to the new obedience. In his *A Beautiful Sermon on the Law and the Gospel*, printed at Wittenberg in 1537, Luther highlights the connection between the law and the gospel. The gospel gives what the law demands. The law teaches what man is, what he has become, and what he should again become. Jesus fulfilled the law; the law is therefore being fulfilled in us, albeit imperfectly. It is fulfilled first by imputation and then formally in us.⁴⁹ Here, the obedience of Christ precedes the new obedience of the Christian.

As he does in his *Antinomian Disputations*, Luther also connects Christ's fulfillment of the law with the Christian's imperfect fulfillment of the law in this life. He cites Matthew 5:17b;⁵⁰ Romans 3:31;⁵¹ and 8:3–4.⁵² Jesus fulfilled the law. Luther argues this by pointing out that the law should be fulfilled in us.⁵³ To fulfill the law summarized in the Ten Commandments is, as Luther describes in his Large Catechism, part of the goal in the Christian's life of prayer as he battles against the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh.⁵⁴ The fact that the righteousness of the law is being fulfilled in us demonstrates what Christ fulfilled on our behalf, namely, the righteousness of the law!

⁴⁹ Luther, *A Beautiful Sermon on the Law and the Gospel* (1537), AE 79:173–174. Cf. Martin Luther, *Solus Decalogus est Aeterna: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Theses and Disputations*, trans. and ed. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2008), 45, 51, 77.

⁵⁰ "I have not come to abolish [the Law or the Prophets] but to fulfill them."

⁵¹ "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."

⁵² "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

⁵³ Luther, *Church Postil on Matthew 22:34–46* (1544), AE 79:173.

⁵⁴ LC III 2.

Of course, we do not fulfill the law perfectly. And Luther says this is so “because we do not believe [what Christ did for us] with a firm faith.”⁵⁵ Faith and unbelief are the difference between righteousness and unrighteousness. If we believed perfectly, then we would fulfill the law perfectly. This is because the first commandment—that we fear, love, and trust in God above all things—encompasses all of the commandments, which Luther says in his Large Catechism “are to be referred and directed to it.”⁵⁶ The whole law is fulfilled when the first commandment is fulfilled, that is, when faith receives what Christ has given.⁵⁷ Christ fulfilling the entire law (Matt 5:17; Rom 10:4) is what is received by faith (Rom 3:31).

Christ’s fulfillment of the first commandment is his obedience to the Father, who gave him the command to save sinners (John 14:31). His passion marks his fulfillment of the first commandment by loving God with everything he had, even unto death. But this is precisely how he fulfilled the *entire* law, since all other commandments are encompassed in the first. In fact, he loved God by means of loving his neighbor. And so he fulfilled the law.

But why the distinction between active and passive obedience in the later Lutheran theologians? Martin Chemnitz described a double debt to the law, which is fulfilled by the obedience of Christ. He both fulfilled the demands of the law and suffered the penalty for our sins.⁵⁸ This is what is known as his active and passive obedience. It cannot be denied that there was a difference in terminology among the later Lutheran teachers and Luther.⁵⁹ But is Luther’s understanding of Christ fulfilling the law, encompassed in the first commandment, really different in substance than the later understanding of Christ fulfilling both the active and passive requirements of the law?

⁵⁵ Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 72–73. “*In Christo est impleta perfecte, in nobis non, quia hoc firma fide non credimus.*” Cf. Luther, *Solus Decalogus*, 104, 105. “*Dixi supra, incredulitatem in filium duplicem transgressionem esse. Primum contra legem, quae requirit timorem, fidem, dilectionem Dei perfectam. Quia vero nemo eam praestat, ideo sunt omnes eius transgressores et mortis rei. Deinde quia non suscipiunt sed oderunt filium, qui venit legem implere etc.*” “I said above that unbelief in the Son is a double transgression. First, against the law which requires perfect fear, faith, and love of God. Since, however, no one is able to render it, therefore all are its transgressors and guilty of death. Second, since they did not accept but rather hated the Son, who came to fulfill the law etc.”

⁵⁶ LC I 321.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ap IV (III) 149–150 (= IV 270–271, Tappert pp. 147–148).

⁵⁸ Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 890.

⁵⁹ Robert Preus shows this to be the case with the use of infusion and imputation. “There is no doubt that [the later dogmaticians’] terminology differs from Luther’s to a marked degree, especially after the Formula of Concord. Luther, in speaking of the foreign righteousness which becomes ours through faith, does not shrink from calling it a *justitia extra infusa*, even though he insists that it is a *justitia aliena*” (Robert Preus, “The Justification of a Sinner Before God: As Taught in Later Lutheran Orthodoxy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 13, no. 3 [1960]: 274).

Such a distinction was a response to the papal teaching that justification is not only the forgiveness of sins but also the renewal of the Spirit.⁶⁰ The Lutherans clarified that Christ did not suffer and die only so that the righteousness required by God would be infused into our souls through the habit of divine grace. This would not be true forgiveness. Rather, such righteous requirements of God's law are already fulfilled outside of us in Christ (Matt 5:17–18).⁶¹

It is important to clarify that this distinction between active and passive obedience was not a synthetic one but rather analytical. That is to say, it does not suggest that Jesus was first obedient actively and then, in a series of events, was obedient passively, as if he conceivably could have been obedient in one way and not the other. The words of St. Paul from Philippians 2:8, “to the point of death, even death on a cross,” describe the obedience of Christ, which he rendered to the Father.⁶² The passive obedience describes the active obedience, as the writer to the Hebrews says (Heb 5:8), “He learned obedience through what he suffered.” Commenting on the Formula of Concord, Edmund Schlink argues,

The series “obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection” seems at first to suggest the understanding of a succession in time. But at the same time the whole way of Jesus until death is described as obedience. In his entire life he rendered “total obedience” to God “by doing and suffering, in life and in death” (SD III, 15).⁶³

This distinction is an analytical distinction, an observation about Christ's work revealed by the Scriptures as a clarification against those who would try to obscure the true benefits of Christ. The active and passive obedience of Christ should not be taken as two different acts of obedience, one active and one passive. Rather, there is one obedience, which is both active and passive. As the Formula explains, it is his only (*sola*),⁶⁴ whole (*solidam*),⁶⁵ most perfect obedience (*perfectissima obedientia*).⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Chemnitz describes the error of Johann Gropper (1503–1559), a German theologian active at the Council of Trent, who argued “at great length that Christ by His obedience did not merit only the remission of sins but also the Spirit of renewal; and that God remits sins to no one without at the same time renewing the spirit of his mind [Eph 4:23]” (Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 874).

⁶¹ As we have seen in Luther, Chemnitz used Matthew 5:17–18 (specifically v. 18) to prove this (Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 889, 986, 1000, 1026ff.). In Hafenreffer's short *Compendium*, he cites Matthew 5:17 as the *sedes* for Christ's active obedience (Matthias Hafenreffer, *Loci theologici . . . , De cruce et precibus* [Tübingen, 1600], 384–385).

⁶² Cf. FC Ep III 3.

⁶³ Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehnke, Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 80.

⁶⁴ FC SD III 55.

⁶⁵ FC SD III 58.

⁶⁶ FC SD III 4, 9, 15, 22, 30.

To elaborate further on the active and passive obedience, one may compare the passive obedience to the weightier matters of the law, while the active obedience is the outward duty. Jesus calls the weightier matters of the law justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt 23:23). Matthew also records Jesus referring to the prophet Hosea (Matt 9:13; Hos 6:6), “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” The weightier matters of the law describe the very heart of God. And this is why the law requires us to fear his justice, be merciful as he is merciful, and trust his faithfulness. Thus, the explanation of every commandment of the second table of the law, describing our outward, *active* obedience, is prefaced in Luther’s Small Catechism with “fear and love God.” The law condemns us not simply because we neglect outward duties. It condemns the heart precisely because it is contrary to God’s heart. It is not moved with compassion as God is.

IV. The Obedience of Christ and the New Obedience

God is love. He is just. He is merciful. He is faithful. He does not choose the easy part but gives his dearest treasure. He is the suffering and dying God who declared, “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25). Jesus says this right before his passion, which glorifies God’s name (John 12:28). In other words, it is the glory of God, the very nature of God, who from eternity has begotten the Son (John 17:5).

Therefore, obedience without suffering is simple hypocrisy, which neglects the weightier matters of the law. It proves that one does not know who God really is. And this is why Moses condemns those who reject Christ, because they do not believe in mercy incarnate (John 5:45–46).

The active obedience is the outward duty in one’s station in life. The passive obedience is the suffering of love, which bears all things (1 Cor 13:7). To pursue the weightier matters of the law apart from this active obedience is to create justice, mercy, and faithfulness in one’s own image. It is to ask with the lawyer seeking to justify himself, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). Rather, God teaches that the Christian is to pursue justice, mercy, and faithfulness within the concrete stations in life—as a child obeying his parents, as a neighbor protecting another’s property, as a husband loving his wife, and so on. Jesus fulfilled all of these active stations even if he did not occupy each one. And he did this by fulfilling the weightier matters. He passively commended himself to God, whose justice is true (1 Pet 2:23). Thus, he fulfilled all righteousness, just as he bore witness at his Baptism (Matt 3:15). Such righteousness is a baptism of fire and anguish (Luke 12:49–50). It is hidden in suffering and death.

Christ's active obedience is hidden under his passive obedience. One may, therefore, make the same observation about the new obedience, except, of course, that it is not perfected.⁶⁷ The new obedience is hidden under suffering just as Christ's obedience was hidden under suffering. The teaching of the new obedience and good works includes the cross, in which the Christian must fight against his sinful flesh as he bears other afflictions. In fact, the cross shapes and encompasses the new obedience. As he suffers the crosses of the devil, the world, and his own sinful flesh, the Christian constantly requires consolation, even while he is walking in good works.⁶⁸ The new obedience, while active in good works, remains passive under the cross and in need of consolation from the gospel. After all, while the law requires such weighty matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness, only the gospel bestows them.

There should, therefore, be no disconnect between Christ's obedience and the Christian's obedience. Surely they are distinct, but the latter proceeds from and is constantly dependent on the former. The fact that the new obedience is hidden under suffering demonstrates how faith remains central to the entire new obedience. This is because the suffering—passive obedience—of the new obedience teaches the Christian that he is a sinner, drives him to constant repentance, and proves his faith in the righteousness of Christ. In his *Treatise on Good Works* (1520), Luther argues that because faith is most needed in suffering, suffering is therefore the greatest work.⁶⁹ This is also why the Apology can entertain the thought that the bearing of afflictions is a sacrament, since it has God's promise attached to it.⁷⁰ It follows that the new obedience is not simply moving on to an active obedience. Instead, the active obedience—fulfilling the law in one's calling and station in life—remains subordinate to the passive obedience, which, pursuing the weightier matters of the law, finds rest through faith in the righteousness, mercy, and faithfulness of Christ.

V. The Cross and the New Obedience

This connection between the passivity of the new obedience in suffering and the passivity of faith in receiving consolation from the gospel is demonstrated by the

⁶⁷ FC SD III 28, 32, 34, 51.

⁶⁸ As Luther says in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1531/1535), describing the active righteousness, "We do not fulfill the law even when we fulfill it" (AE 26:8).

⁶⁹ AE 44:28–29. "For faith and confidence make precious before God all that which others think most shameful, so that it is written even of death in Psalm 116[:15], 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.' And just as confidence and faith are better, higher, and stronger at this stage than in the first, so the sufferings which are borne in this kind of faith excel all works of faith. Therefore there is an immeasurable difference between such works and sufferings, and the sufferings are better."

⁷⁰ Ap XIII (VII) 17 (= XIII 17, Tappert p. 213).

fact that the Apology assumes the sixth and twentieth articles of the Augsburg Confession (“Of New Obedience and Of Good Works”) into its defense of the fourth and fifth articles (“Of Justification and Of the Ministry”).⁷¹ In other words, just as faith passively receives what the gospel gives, so does the new obedience passively endure suffering under God’s mighty hand (1 Pet 5:6). Here lies the relation between Christ’s vicarious obedience and the Christian following Christ’s example in his new obedience. It is an example of suffering (1 Pet 2:21). While this suffering brings to mind God’s anger against sin, faith meanwhile receives the comfort and assurance of the gospel. In this part of the Apology, one may see the predominance of afflictions in need of consolation within the doctrine of good works and the new obedience.

The doctrine of justification and the doctrine of good works and new obedience are related through the cross and afflictions. One learns to show mercy by constantly knowing what it means to need mercy. After condemning the Anabaptists and others for teaching that the Holy Spirit comes through their own preparation and works, without the external word,⁷² Melancthon then turns it around by teaching that only in the heart that has been prepared by the terrors imposed by God himself is faith received. This faith alone gives the sinner peace with God precisely in the midst of such suffering (Rom 5:1). Such afflictions demonstrate that man cannot be justified by his works.⁷³ Thus, while the Christian is not justified or preserved in his faith by his works and afflictions, his faith is strengthened in his afflictions.⁷⁴ That is to say, in the cross, faith grows by the power of the gospel.

The Apology affirms that the Decalogue requires much more than outward works, but that one truly fears, loves, and trusts in God, obeying him in death and afflictions. Therefore, only the specific faith (*fides specialis*), which lays hold of the remission of sins for Christ’s sake, can fulfill this. That God wishes to be worshiped through faith and not because of man’s merits is the greatest consolation in all afflictions.⁷⁵ The Christian needs the constant application of the gospel precisely because he cannot, with his own strength, bear these afflictions required and imposed by God.⁷⁶ His works are helpless, only pleasing to God on account of faith, by which he submits to God in all afflictions.⁷⁷

⁷¹ Ap IV (II) 1 (= IV 1, Tappert p. 107).

⁷² AC V 4.

⁷³ Ap IV (III) 74 (= IV 195, Tappert p. 134).

⁷⁴ Ap IV (III) 21, 212 (= IV 143, 333, Tappert pp. 126–127, 158)

⁷⁵ Ap IV (II) 8, 45, 60 (= IV 8, 45, 60, Tappert pp. 108, 113, 115); Ap IV (III) 172, 212, 266 (= IV 293, 333, 387, Tappert pp. 152, 158, 166).

⁷⁶ Ap IV (II) 45–50 (= IV 166–171, Tappert p. 130).

⁷⁷ Ap IV (III) 51, 135 (= IV 172, 256, Tappert pp. 130–131, 144).

Here one can speak of *propter fidem*, that is, when one considers why the Christian's works, labors, and especially suffering are accepted before God. As the Apology maintains that faith exists within repentance,⁷⁸ it is with this insight that one may understand how faith exists within the new obedience. The new obedience consists of constant repentance. This includes suffering the cross, which constantly drives the Christian to repentance in true faith in God's promise.

VI. Conclusion

If Luther's theology of the cross is the same as "our theology," then of course we should expect it to be taught in the Lutheran Confessions. This is why Robert Preus identified the theology of the cross as simply the article of justification. It cannot be divided or separated from the other articles, whether creation, sin, grace, Baptism, the church, the Lord's Supper, or Christ's return.⁷⁹

If it is simply the article of atonement and justification, then of course this is taught in the Confessions. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession speaks specifically of how we are justified through faith in Christ, who made full satisfaction for our sins, and how we are not found righteous in God's sight by anything that we do. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession calls this the chief topic of Christian doctrine.⁸⁰ In his Smalcald Articles, Luther calls this the first and chief article, without which "all is lost, and the Pope and devil and all things gain the victory and suit over us."⁸¹ Throughout the Confessions, the main concern is that Christ alone is our salvation, and that we obtain this not by works or merit, but only through faith.

Preus would also refer to this theology of the cross as the *solus Christus* principle (Christ alone). This teaches not merely that Christ is our only Savior from sin but also that indeed all theology is only about Christ. Such a principle is not meant to reduce doctrine to a lowest possible standard. Instead, if understood rightly, it does the opposite. If all doctrine is about Christ, then all doctrine is crucial to Christian faith and life.

Every article of faith pertains to Christ alone. In other words, every part of Christian doctrine is about Christ and what he did, specifically by his death on the cross, to save poor sinners. Whether we are talking about how we are to behave in our various stations in life or we are contending for a true confession of doctrine, we live and speak in the weakness of our flesh under the afflictions of the devil and this world, and we hold the treasure of Christ's word in jars of clay (2 Cor 4:7).

⁷⁸ Ap IV (III) 21 (= IV 142, Tappert p. 126).

⁷⁹ Robert Preus, "The Theology of the Cross—Part 1," *Reformation and Revival* 7, no. 4 (1998): 49.

⁸⁰ Ap IV (II) 2 (= IV 2, Tappert p. 107).

⁸¹ SA II I 5.

All of this—God’s holy doctrine as well as our weak faith to confess it—is sent by God so that we might take refuge in the weakness of Christ, who is our only strength. To speak of the theology of the cross, whether we call it the *solus Christus* or the chief article, is to say that what Jesus did to save poor sinners from the wrath to come and to declare them righteous is the very center and sum of all Christian doctrine and life.⁸²

This should also, then, inform our understanding of polemics. We do not fight for the truth for our own pride of being right and winning debates but, as St. Peter says, in meekness and fear (1 Pet 3:15). Fear of whom? Of God! This is because we are dealing with much more than our own opinions or encounters of the Almighty. We are dealing with God’s eternal truths, which have eternal consequences.

This is what the cross teaches us. Whether we are talking about the doctrine of creation, marriage, the church, the sacraments, sin, wrath, hell, death, faith, or even good works and the new obedience, every topic of Christian doctrine revealed in Scripture is centered in Christ and his saving act. We know this by how the world opposes such doctrines, just as it opposes Christ. And this means that these things are all worth suffering for and even dying for. Some pastors might be sneered at for defending the existence of God’s wrath and Christ’s act of satisfying it. Some might be driven out of their parishes for defending the right use of the sacraments. Others might be marginalized for defending the order of creation. All of these issues are united in the cross of Christ. They are, therefore, all worthy of our cross.

One more element deserves emphasis when considering the theology of the cross in the Lutheran Confessions. Following Melancthon’s lead, the later Lutheran theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries described the cross of the Christian as that which brings to mind God’s judgment and wrath.⁸³ This is the mark of the theologian of the cross, when he makes his confession with such confidence that God’s real judgment is in mind. This is why Chemnitz insists that some ancient and medieval writers erred in the doctrine of justification, because they treated it purely academically apart from the cross and prayer under the tribunal of God.⁸⁴ A

⁸² Robert Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (1996): 196–197.

⁸³ Philip Melancthon, *The Chief Theological Topics: Loci Praecipui Theologici 1559*, trans. J. A. O. Preus, 2nd English ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 352. “Since the world does not consider that this inner uncleanness of human nature, our doubts about God, or our neglect of Him are things which are condemned by God, and since it despises the wrath of God, the church is even more pressed down because God wills that His wrath against sin be seen, and He wills that repentance increase among us [1 Pet. 4:17; Jer. 30:11; Isa. 66:2].”

⁸⁴ Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, 925. “The diversity of opinions arises mostly from this, that without the struggle of temptation, idle and secure disputations, joined with the philosophical opinions of human reason, have disturbed the minds of men. But this exertion, illustrating the doctrine of faith more than all commentaries, is undertaken chiefly in two ways—either the

theologian of the cross sees his confession the same way the original signers of the Christian Book of Concord saw theirs:

This Confession also, by the help of God, we will retain to our last breath, when we shall go forth from this life to the heavenly fatherland, to appear with joyful and undaunted mind and with a pure conscience before the tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁸⁵

May Christ's cross—his vicarious obedience—permeate our entire theology, our entire confession, our entire lives. It is what consoles us before the tribunal of God and under every cross we bear. It makes every part of our task as pastors imminently relevant and always practical. God grant that we confess this theology of the cross, even as we learn it from the Scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions!

conscience places itself before the tribunal of God . . . or it finds itself under the cross and temptation, in petition and expectation, both spiritual and corporal.”

⁸⁵ Preface to the Christian Book of Concord, 16.