
JANUARY 1985

**Propitiation in Old Testament
Prophecy Douglas Judisch 1**

**Luther and Moltmann: The Theology of
the Cross Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr. 19**

Theological Observer 29

Homiletical Studies 31

Book Reviews 65

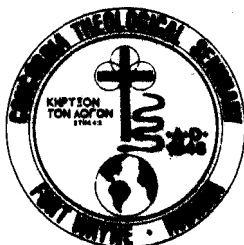
Indices to Volume 48 (1984)

Author Index 71

Title Index 75

Subject Index 77

Scripture Index to Homiletical Studies 79



Luther and Moltmann: The Theology of the Cross

Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr.

Since he borrowed two key expressions from Luther, "theology of the cross" and the "crucified God," it might easily be supposed that Moltmann's theology is similar, by and large, to Luther's. It is true that both focus upon the crucifixion and its effects as the locus of theology, but since the interpretation of this event radically differs from Luther to Moltmann, they actually have very little in common. To one, "theology of the cross" means something altogether different than to the other.

I. Luther's Theology of the Cross.

For Luther, the key to understanding not only theology, but reality in general, is in the cross. There we see what we would not naturally expect to see. Man's love is naturally directed toward the attractive. It is attracted by what appears good to it. But in the cross, the love of God is directed toward the unattractive, toward sinful humanity.

Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.¹

The crucifixion is the demonstration that reality cannot be interpreted in light of empirical evidence. The empirical evidence is that the dying Christ is defeated in the crucifixion. In reality, however, Christ is there victorious, the conqueror of evil. God is manifested to us on the cross, where He is suffering for us, though our natural inclination is to look for God in His glory, that is, in His creation and the marvel of His works.

For Luther, the cross is opposed to glory; suffering is opposed to works. God accomplished the redemption of the world through the suffering of Christ, not through works of creation. So also man is justified not by his works, but through faith in the suffering of Christ. Furthermore, a man's own suffering is, in view of the cross, good for him, and his works are worthless. Luther speaks of the "evil of a good deed," explaining that

it is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.²

The key to the theology of the cross, therefore, lies in applying the cross to reality as its material principle. By "the cross," Luther means the suffering of Christ as His redemptive act, an event which appears to be a tragedy, but which is in fact the grandest event God ever performed. The theology of the cross is therefore theology which is guided by the knowledge that God's activity on our behalf is not what we as humans can perceive. The divine perspective is invisible to us. This is a crucial point of the theology of the cross. Luther labels those who fail to understand this truth unworthy to be called theologians.

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. . .

That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.³

He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.⁴

Luther alludes to Exodus 33:23 in discussing the "backside" of God. The theologian of glory attempts to look directly at God's majesty by recognizing such things as "virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth" as true greatness and as central to theology. But, says Luther, "the recognition of all these things does not make one worthy or wise." Rather, we must look, as did Moses, upon God's backside, at "suffering and the cross."⁵ Luther weaves the suffering of Christ with the suffering of the Christian in such a way that he speaks of each interchangeably with the other. Both are beneficial for like reasons. Both serve the Christian's eternal good, the former in a primary way, and the latter in a secondary way. The Christian's "cross" is shown by the theology of the cross to be beneficial to him, in the same way that the theology of the cross shows that the cross of Christ is beneficial.

The joining of two apparent opposites, suffering and good (or benefit); is seen in the cross. So also, in the realm of a person's experience and life, the applying of the theology of the cross entails the corresponding joining of two apparent opposites, the individual's suffering and the individual's benefit. Thus suffering, which appears evil, is

actually good, since in the case of Christ it is victory. Suffering in the Christian's life is in fact explained by Luther not only as beneficial, but as necessary.

He who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. He thus misuses and defiles the gifts of God. He, however, who has been emptied [cf. Phil. 2:7] through suffering no longer does works but knows that God works and does all things in him.⁶

Paul Althaus explains Luther's theology well:

The cross is opposed to . . . the theology of glory, and that in two senses, as the cross of Christ and as the cross of the Christian. The theology of the cross works with a standard exactly contrary to that of the theology of glory and applies it both to man's knowledge of God and to man's understanding of himself and of his relationship to God. This standard is the cross. This means: The theology of glory seeks to know God directly in his obviously divine power, wisdom, and glory; whereas the theology of the cross paradoxically recognizes him precisely where he has hidden himself, in his sufferings and in all that which the theology of glory considers to be weakness and foolishness.⁷

The theology of the cross and the theology of glory are contrary to each other because of the cross and humiliation of Christ, which the theologian of glory fails to take into consideration. In His humiliation, Christ changed places with humanity. That is, He took upon Himself the sins of the world while giving to sinners His righteousness. Luther exhibits a keen awareness of this transfer, as, for instance, in the *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, where he explains it succinctly:

He took upon himself our sins [cf. Isa. 53:12]. Christ himself is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" [John 1:29]. All the righteousness of Christ becomes ours.⁸

Because the theology of glory fails to consider this transfer of righteousness from Christ to the sinner, which is the central effect of the cross, it perceives reality in the opposite perspective. That is,

A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.⁹

The cross negates the negative effect of sin on one's perspective. Sin reverses one's perspective, so that he "calls evil good and good evil." But on the cross, the good Christ *became* evil (i.e., "became sin"), and those who believe this realize that they in turn have become righteous (i.e., by the transfer of Christ's merits). Since the cross "turns the tables," so to speak, they are thereby re-turned, for they had been

turned first by sin:

The element which makes one a theologian of the cross, which reverses his perspective to see reality properly, is faith. It is faith (and faith alone) which makes one capable of perceiving God properly, from His visible "backside," and which prevents one from attempting to behold "the invisible things of God" as though they were visible. For this reason, Luther views faith and its maintenance as of principal importance. He continually emphasizes the importance of faith, going as far as to say that

it ought to be the first concern of every Christian to lay aside all confidence in works and increasingly to strengthen faith alone and through faith to grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ Jesus, who suffered and rose for him.¹⁰

It is faith which brings the perspective of the theology of the cross to a person. Faith gives him a new, reversed, and proper perspective. Faith and its preservation is for Luther the task of theology.

Here lies the reason Luther's theology is highly sacramental, for it is by the sacraments that faith is maintained and preserved. It is also on account of Luther's high regard for faith that he opposed the practices of Rome, for he believed that the sale of indulgences (and the like) was working as a detriment to faith.

This ignorance and suppression of liberty very many blind pastors take pains to encourage. They stir up and urge on their people in these practices by praising such works, puffing them up with their indulgences, and never teaching faith. If, however, you wish to pray, fast, or establish a foundation in the church, I advise you to be careful not to do it in order to obtain some benefit, whether temporal or eternal, for you would do injury to your faith which alone offers you all things.¹¹

For Luther, faith and the theology of the cross are inseparable, as opposite sides of the same coin. Faith is the operative element in the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross is the resultant theology developed from true Christian faith.

II. Moltmann's Theology of the Cross

For Moltmann, as for Luther, the cross must be central to Christianity. It is "the test of everything which deserves to be called Christian."¹² But in contradistinction to Luther, Moltmann rejects the language of atonement,¹³ and prefers to think of Jesus' death primarily as an event in which Jesus was abandoned by God. And Jesus, being Himself the second person of the Trinity,¹⁴ was also abandoned as God. Moltmann exhibits here what has been termed a "radical

kenotic Christology."¹⁵ The Son is rejected by the Father and thus becomes utterly destitute on the cross. This event unites Him with all the destitute and rejected of the world's humanity. Jesus becomes the God of the destitute by abandoning His "divine identity" at the cross.¹⁶ He thus identifies Himself with all the forsaken, poor, "godless," and homeless in the world.

Moltmann rejects the traditional "two-natures" doctrine of Christ, saying that it was merely an attempt to preserve God's incorruptibility in keeping the divine nature from humiliation. Moltmann argues that—since, according to the two-natures doctrine, the human nature has no personality of its own and yet Jesus suffered specifically in His humanity—His personality, according to this doctrine, did not suffer.¹⁷ In rejecting this doctrine, Moltmann holds that God actually suffered in His divinity, that God's divinity was humiliated. In this way, God becomes the God of all the humiliated of humanity.

Moltmann's theology may fairly be called panentheistic. He himself labels it as such.¹⁸ This orientation is basic to his concept of the "trinitarian history of God."¹⁹ God is "becoming."²⁰ Thus, God is not so much a being as an event, in the process of being completed.²¹

Therefore, in order for someone to be "Christian" and united with God, that person's *medium cognoscendi* cannot properly be called "faith" in the traditional sense, for faith is trust in a being. Rather, it is *identification* with God through suffering. Though Moltmann frequently speaks of "trust" and "faith," he does not employ these terms in a traditionally theological way. He uses them more as terms which denote an understanding of the responsibility one has toward the world's homeless.²² He speaks of the call to follow Jesus not as the call to believe in Him, but as "the commandment of the eschatological moment,"²³ that is, the commandment to engage in the activity of bringing the eschatological moment, the completion of God and His creation, to pass.²⁴ Since God is a God of suffering, through the cross, identification with Him is by joining in suffering.

Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ, to the extent to which one has accepted the proclamation that in him God has identified himself with the godless and those abandoned by God, to whom one belongs oneself.²⁵

Moltmann is not advocating a type of asceticism here. Jesus' call is to suffer, but not in isolation. Rather, in joining the struggle for emancipation of all who suffer in the world, one joins the crucified God,

"identifies" with Him. In this way the history of God moves toward eschatological fulfilment, the future hoped for, and he who suffers for those who are suffering is taken up into it.

This action involves a risk of one's own identity, a crisis of identity, so to speak, an "existential testimony which is ready for sacrifice," since it is a giving of one's self to the struggle on behalf of the alienated and oppressed. In this action, "a man abandons himself as he was and as he knew himself to be, and, by emptying himself, finds a new self." This is the essence of Christian life, "to take one's cross upon oneself in imitation of the one who abandoned his divine identity and found his true identity in the cross (Phil. 2)."²⁶ As we might therefore expect, Moltmann is opposed to a view of faith which seeks to maintain itself and its creeds. This faith he calls "pusillanimous." Faith must risk itself in order to be active.

He who is of little faith looks for support and protection for his faith, because it is preyed upon by fear. Such a faith tries to protect its 'most sacred things', God, Christ, doctrine and morality, because it clearly no longer believes that these are sufficiently powerful to maintain themselves. When the 'religion of fear' finds its way into the Christian church, those who regard themselves as the most vigilant guardians of the faith do violence to faith and smother it.²⁷

More radical Christian faith can only mean committing oneself without reserve to the 'crucified God'. This is dangerous.²⁸

The one who does not follow this course is, and again Moltmann borrows Luther's terminology, a "theologian of glory" who "secretly creates for himself free room for activity in his own interest which will allow him to love what is like."²⁹ Moltmann, as Luther, sees the theology of glory and the theology of the cross as diametrically opposed to one another. Moltmann sees the former as seeking its own interests and the latter as seeking the interests of the world's homeless and alienated. The task of theology is therefore "becoming a theology of the cross"³⁰ which seeks the psychological and political liberation of man from the forces of oppression in the world.

Christian theology. . . must adopt a critical attitude towards political religions in society and in the churches. The political theology of the cross must liberate the state from the political service of idols and must liberate men from political alienation and loss of rights.³¹

Christians will seek to anticipate the future of Christ according to the measure of the possibilities available to them, by breaking

down lordship and building up the political liveliness of each individual.³²

III. Comparison and Analysis.

Though Luther and Moltmann both focus their theological attention continually on the cross, their respective theological systems are radically different from each other, since Moltmann places a different interpretation on the meaning of the cross and so superimposes an altered definition on Luther's term "theology of the cross." It is true that Moltmann sees suffering as a sign of theological health,³³ and Luther sees the responsibility of the Christian as rendering "love and support to Christ in his needy ones."³⁴ But beyond this similarity, there is little these two theologians have in common.

Luther's view of the cross may be considered similar to that of Anselm although, while Anselm tended to stress primarily Christ's substitution for sin (the negative side of the atonement),³⁵ Luther tended to stress the transfer of Christ's righteousness to the unrighteous (the positive side).³⁶ This, for Luther is the main thing accomplished on the cross. Moltmann, on the other hand, sees the cross as an event taking place entirely in God—as God's self-abandonment.³⁷ It is an event which is part of God's process of becoming. As such, it is not a completed event, but an event which can only be called complete in an eschatological sense.

The reason for these differing interpretations lies in the difference between Luther's and Moltmann's concepts of God. To Luther, as to traditional Christianity, God is a being. He is the Creator and is perfect and complete in every way. Not so, however, for Moltmann. Since Moltmann considers God more as an event, he sees God as perfect only in an eschatological sense. In this sense it would perhaps be more accurate to call God eschatologically perfected!³⁸ It is in this context that Moltmann speaks of the "trinitarian theology of the cross."³⁹ The Trinity is still being perfected at this point in time, and since Moltmann is panentheistic, he holds that God will be perfected only when creation is perfected. Therefore, the cross is for Luther an activity which has nothing to do with God's internal perfecting, since He is already perfect and complete. But, for Moltmann, the cross is the key element in God's process of being perfected.

Because of these differing interpretations, Luther's theology of the cross is a system which shapes his interpretation of reality, while Moltmann's is one which seeks to shape reality itself. In Luther's theo-

gy, the event of the cross is seen as completed, and thus faith in this completed event is stressed as the task of theology. Stress on works is seen as detrimental to the Christian, for this tends to minimize the completed work on Calvary.⁴⁰ In Moltmann's system, however, since the cross-event is still carrying on, something more than faith is still required, in order that this event may, in the eschaton, be completed. Moltmann thus stresses works over faith. He refers to "political theology," "orthopraxy," and terms which emphasize *doing over believing*. At this point, he is clearly Luther's enemy.

Moltmann minimizes faith and stresses works; Luther stresses faith and speaks of the evil of works improperly understood. But Luther does not minimize works (though he has been accused of doing so), for he indeed places high regard on works in their proper perspective. He sees works as a necessary outgrowth of faith, not in the sense that they *ought to* follow faith, but that they invariably *do*.

It is impossible for it [faith] not to be doing good works incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them.⁴¹

Moltmann does not agree. He allows for the possibility of faith existing without works.⁴² Therefore he stresses works, presumably to insure that they accompany faith, that faith may not be "pusillanimous."⁴³ This also sets him against Luther, for Luther's concern is that the faith of the Christian be preserved, while Moltmann's concern is that faith "risk" itself and that works be accomplished. He speaks of "identifying" with Christ where Luther speaks of faith. But this "identifying" is none other than doing those things which involve suffering for the cause of the world's homeless. As such, it is a type of work. Moltmann's theology therefore speaks of works where Luther's speaks of faith.

Both indeed speak of the benefit of suffering, but while Luther speaks of it as beneficial because it drives one's attention away from himself to the cross and faith, which alone bring the merit of Christ, which alone justifies, Moltmann speaks of suffering as beneficial because suffering itself is, in a way, meritorious. For Luther, ultimately, suffering drives one to faith while, for Moltmann, it drives one to works. Moltmann calls suffering virtuous and thus "looks upon the invisible things of God [including virtue] as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened."⁴⁴ This position makes him, according to Luther's system, a theologian of glory.

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *Luther's Works*, 31, *Career of the Reformer*, I, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), p. 57.
2. *Ibid.*, p.53.
3. *Ibid.*, p.52.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
7. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p.27.
8. Luther, "Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses," *Luther's Works*, 31, p. 190.
9. Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," p. 53.
10. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," *Luther's Works*, 31, p. 347.
11. *Ibid.*, p.370.
12. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, tr. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden [from the German *Der gekreuzigte Gott*, published by Christian Kaiser Verlag, Munich, second ed., 1973] (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 7.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 306. Moltmann makes substantial use of Freudian psychology in criticizing what he often calls the "pusillanimous" faith of conservative, fundamentalist Christianity.
14. Moltmann is actually somewhat of an adoptionist here: "The earliest titles which say who Jesus is come from the experience of the appearances of Jesus and have their foundation in the resurrection event. By his resurrection Jesus was made Christ, Son of God, Kyrios, by God. *Formulas of adoption* were used for this act: by his resurrection Jesus was adopted as the Son of God (Rom. 1.4)." *Ibid.*, p. 179. See also p. 123.
15. David P. Scaer, "Theology of Hope," in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson (Chicago: Moody, 1976), p. 213.
16. Moltmann, *Crucified*, p. 16.
17. Here Moltmann seems to exhibit a shallow conception of what *unio personalis* entails. He interprets the doctrine as holding that the divine nature is the center of Christ's person (and implies that therefore the human nature must in this understanding be outside the center): "If this divine nature in the person of the eternal Son of God is the centre which creates a person in Christ, then it too suffered and died." *Ibid.*, p. 234.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 277. Moltmann's view of the cross allows him to be panentheistic, while at the same time making an attempt to deal with the problem of evil. Moltmann exhibits Hegelian tendencies in his view of the Trinity. In including evil in his system, however, he adds an element with which Hegel does not deal. See pp. 245-247.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
20. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope*, tr. by James W. Leitsch (New York: Harper

and Row, 1967), p. 106.

21. Moltmann, *Crucified*, pp. 247, 255.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
24. Moltmann could easily be called a type of Zionist at this point.
25. Moltmann, *Crucified*, p. 19.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 329.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
34. Luther, "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods," *Luther's Works*, 35, *Word and Sacrament*, I, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), p. 54.
35. See Anselm of Canterbury, "Why God Became Man" in *Why God Became Man and the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, tr. Joseph M. Colleran (Albany, New York: Magi, 1969), esp. pp. 139-141.
36. Luther, "Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses," *Luther's Works*, 31, p. 190.
37. See Moltmann, *Crucified*, pp. 146-153.
38. The resurrection of Christ is interpreted by Moltmann as a series of visions received by the "eyewitnesses" of that eschatological future and the completion of God. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
40. "The inner man . . . needs neither laws nor good works but, on the contrary, is injured by them if he believes that he is justified by them." Luther, "Freedom," p. 358.
41. Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," *Luther's Works*, 35, p. 370.
42. Moltmann, *Crucified*, p. 59.
43. This is not unlike practices currently prevalent, ironically, in church bodies which purport to reject Moltmann and uphold Luther.
44. Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," p. 52.