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The Theology of the Cross

Karl Wengenroth

I. A Contemporary Perspective

Moved by a deep understanding of the theology of the cross, Johann S. Bach incorporated the following words into his cantata for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity:

The cross then I will gladly bear,
Bestowed on me by God's dear hand.
It leads me safe through many a snare,
Into my God's own promised land.
Into a grave shall then pass all my fears,
My Saviour then shall wipe away all tears.

On his missionary and pastoral journeys Pope John Paul II uses a bishop's staff fitted with a crucifix. Does that staff give new force to the theology of the cross in our world? Will the personable style of this man make the crucified Christ more real to the millions of people who embrace him? Will the appeal of this pope lead his immense following to seek out the crucified Christ and embrace Him by faith, or is immediate communication with divinely gifted men really all our contemporaries want from God?

Does the use of the cross by a gifted church official with great appeal really give new force to a theology of the cross? Helmut Heissenbuettel speaks of our "seduction by the live appearance of the original." A charismatic figure conducts immensely popular journeys on behalf of a Christ who died a humiliating death, forsaken by God and men. Does not this phenomenon turn the reflection of the lowliness of Christ crucified into an attempted manifestation of His glory and power, doing away with the scandal of the cross, substituting the theology of glory for the theology of the cross? Indeed, the church stands at the threshold of enthusiasm if a personal encounter displaces the message of justification through faith in the crucified Christ which Augustana IV recognizes as the heart of the Gospel. It is certainly no mere accident that during the papal visit to Germany in November of 1980, although many note-worthy statements were made by the pope, not one sentence was heard to the effect that our salvation is based upon the vicarious atonement of Christ on the cross.

The theology of the cross is likewise of little concern to the ecumenical movement. Thanks to Philip Potter, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, one need have no doubt whatsoever about the content of present ecumenical

theology and its practical aims. As far as he and his ilk are concerned, the concept of *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae* never enters the picture. He has unmistakably declared that liberation is the topic of present-day theological concern.

While Luther's theology of the cross emanated from his concern with the question, "How can I find a gracious God?" the Genevan ecumenists have centered their attention upon the question, "How can I find a gracious neighbor?" Christ's suffering on the cross *for us* is turned into a suffering *with us*, suffering *with* all the oppressed and enslaved in the world. Such a struggle to join with other human beings in the process of liberation to bring about true human community has nothing to do with the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross actually testifies to the fact that on the cross Christ has liberated me for true communion with God and all others who have received that liberation through faith.

The forces of ecumenism in our day are responsible for a decisive shift in emphasis from theology to anthropology. The question, "Who am I?" is posed before all others, yet the question, "Who am I before God?" receives no answers. Christ is considered the great example of true humanness. The suffering that took place for our redemption becomes a proof of the human potential for self-sacrificing love. Christ and His cross become a motivation to master the problems of life in accordance with His moral standards and to find a meaning in life through reasonable deliberation. In contrast to such a view, the theology of the cross shows me that I can now live a life empowered by a source wholly outside myself. I need no longer rely upon my own strength. Because the theology of glory is such a dangerous temptation for the church, a careful definition of the theology of the cross is clearly essential.

II. The Biblical Perspective

Biblically the theology of the cross finds its basic text in I Corinthians 1:18 within the context of the first two chapters of that epistle: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Nevertheless, in seeking for evidence of a theology of the cross in the New Testament, there are no other instances where the language is equally clear. In Philippians 3:18, to be sure, allusion is made to the concept when Paul informs his readers that many "live as enemies of the cross of Christ." One is, however, faced with the question of whether or not the theology of the cross can function as a key concept in theology on such a narrow textual basis.

A number of parallels may be found in the Pauline writings, especially in Romans 1:16-17 and the third chapter of that epistle. For Paul the *logos tou staurou* is of ultimate significance for man. The fate of the whole world is bound up with it. For the cross is not merely a place where one man died; it is rather the place where the Son of God died to redeem all men. If, then, the theological task is not merely to talk abstractly about God, but rather to describe the saving action of God, "the word of the cross" deserves a central position. It testifies to the dynamic by which God in His gracious love accomplished the salvation of all men. That Paul really intended this "word of the cross" to be the basic foundation of all theology becomes clear as we look at his negations. Neither *sophia* (1 Corinthians 1:21) nor *nomos* (Romans 3:21,28) - neither reason nor law - can be a foundation. Such concepts would make human thought or action the standard for salvation. Man attempts, of course, to find security by these means, but the cross reveals the fundamental folly of human wisdom and the fundamental impotence of human achievement. God refuses to display His divinity in the ostentatious way desired by the Jews; rather, He went to the cross, renouncing His glory. Nor is a true recognition of God granted through the philosophical proof desired by the Greeks, but only through the gracious revelation of the Gospel, as the gift of God in Jesus Christ, which can be accepted only by faith. One must conclude, therefore, that God can be defined only from the starting point of the cross. All true teaching about God must be a theology of the cross, without any concession to a concept of self-enlightenment apart from the cross. A sinner can live only by the power and wisdom that emanates from the crucified Christ. Karl Rahner correctly stated, "Theology itself is crucified theology, not merely talk about the cross."

The question may be asked, however, whether such statements, based on the Pauline corpus, are representative of the New Testament as a whole. It is true that the books of the New Testament were not generally designed as systematic treatments of Christian dogma. The letters of Paul were ordinarily written to address contemporary problems in particular places, and it must be granted that the *sedes* of the theology of the cross as opposed to a theology of glory are Pauline assertions. In the broader sense, however, every writing in the New Testament deals with the cross of Christ, but at times the cross is treated as so integral to salvation that it is seen as one aspect of divine glory. Nevertheless, Paul's theology of the cross retains its key role in that it makes use of the cross in polemical criticism of all other approaches to salvation.

Examples of this use of the theology of the cross may be found in Paul's criticism of the Judaistic and Hellenistic approaches to salvation.

According to this view, then, the cross is the subject rather than the object of theology. It has an interpretive function. From the cross light falls upon the world in general and the Christian community in particular. The cross has a concrete significance for the world; the death of Jesus on the cross shows the world its sin and offers salvation or judgment. For the Christian community the cross means the completed reconciliation with God which through faith brings righteousness and peace to men. The cross rescues us from a merciless compulsion to prove ourselves, to create our own righteousness.

This theological starting point gives every other salvation event its special significance in the whole scheme of salvation. Already the incarnation stands in the light of the cross when the angel says of Jesus, ". . . for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The Baptism of Christ is followed by John the Baptizer's words, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Christ's preaching and healing ministry is accompanied by the announcement of His death on the cross. The risen Lord is the crucified Lord, and in the returning Lord we meet the "Lamb that was slain" (Revelation 5:12).

Another aspect of the theology of the cross receives special emphasis in the Gospels and the First Letter of Peter, namely, that those who belong to Christ by virtue of His self-sacrifice on the cross will themselves bear the cross and suffer with Christ, as they follow Him. Paul, for example, suffered in the course of his ministry (cf. Ephesians 3:13; Colossians 1:24). That not only the apostles, but all Christians, experience suffering is proof that we do not live yet in the time of the consummation when God Himself will turn the theology of the cross into a theology of glory.

III. The Historical Perspective

In a fragment of a sermon which Luther preached on St. Martin's Day we come across a pivotal statement, "Unum praedica: sapientium crucis!" ("Preach one thing: the wisdom of the cross!"). Luther thus tersely summarized what he learned from Paul about the "word of the cross" (I Corinthians 1:18) — that the cross is the actual content of all Christian theology. Luther's perception of the centrality of the cross was unique in the church of his day. We can see how unique it was when we compare it with the theology of the early church subsequent to the

apostolic age. There the cross played a relatively insignificant role. The incarnation was considered to be the pivotal event of salvation. Irenaeus described the significance of the incarnation with these words, "In His immeasurable love God became what we are in order that we might become what He is." In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus one sees even more clearly why the Eastern church, to this day, has not developed a theology of the cross. Gregory wrote, "Seek to imitate God's friendliness. Man can do nothing more divine than to do the right thing. You have the opportunity to become like God without drudgery. Do not let this opportunity of your deification pass in vain." This is a blatant case of *theologia gloriae*. Like the Roman Emperor Constantine's use of the cross as a sign of political victory, Gregory's statement is alien to the *theologia crucis*. Hermann Sasse has argued, in attempting to explain this phenomenon, that the Eastern church with its Greek heritage has always held an idealistic view of man. Sinful man is, in effect, merely ill and can with much love and patience be cured. According to this anthropology, man has no real need for a Savior to redeem him from spiritual death by means of His own painful and humiliating death and thus no need for a theology of the cross.

Some noteworthy statements about the cross of Christ do occur in the liturgy and creeds of the early church. If one proceeds from the Apostles' Creed, via the Nicene, to the Athanasian Creed, one sees the "crucifixus" ("was crucified") give place to the richer "crucifixus etiam pro nobis" ("was crucified for us") and finally to "qui passus est pro salute nostra" ("who suffered for our salvation"). The Agnus Dei became part of the Roman mass around A.D. 700. The pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the adoration of the cross rather than the crucified Christ were acutally manifestations of a theology of glory. For Christians of that time, the cross was a symbol of the victory of God's power in the world.

The breakthrough for the proclamation of a theology of the cross came in the reform efforts of Martin Luther. He gained his basic insight into the matter between the years 1515 and 1518. In the previously cited sermon fragment of 1515 he admonished all preachers "to lead all Bible readers to the true foundation, namely, the cross of Christ." In this statement he aptly hit upon the pivotal truth of Scripture. In 1517 he took up this theme in the Ninety-five Theses in a different way by referring to "the church's treasure" and extensively elaborated upon it in 1518. This treasure is "given the church through the merit of Christ" (thesis 60) and "is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God" (thesis 62).

In May of 1518 Luther used the terminology of *theologia crucis* as opposed to *theologia gloriae* at the Heidelberg Disputation. His own spiritual struggle to obtain the grace of God as well as his own disparagement of all works-righteousness (thesis 18) is unfolded theologically in theses 19 and 20. "He is not worthy to be called a theologian who means to perceive and understand in his own works God's invisible nature" (thesis 19). "But he properly deserves to be called a theologian who grasps whatever of God's nature is visible and seen in the world as being made real in the suffering of the cross" (thesis 20). In Luther's own commentary on these statements we read: "Thus it is neither satisfactory nor useful for anyone to perceive God in His glory and majesty, if he does not at the same time perceive God in the lowliness and the shame of the cross . . . Therefore in Christ the Crucified we have all the substance of theology." Luther states: "The theologian of honor calls the evil good and the good evil, but the theologian of the cross calls things by their proper names." Luther describes the "theologian of honor" in this way: "Since he does not know Christ, he does not know God hidden in suffering. This is why he gives preference to works over suffering, to glory over the cross, to power over weakness, to wisdom over folly, in short, to the pleasant over the unpleasant; such people the apostle calls 'enemies of the cross of Christ' " (Philippians 3:18).

Luther later unfolded other aspects of this theology of the cross in *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525), addressed to Erasmus of Rotterdam, in his lectures on Isaiah (1527-1530), and in his great lectures on Genesis (1535-1545). It may truthfully be said that the theology of the cross dominated Luther's entire theological and ecclesiastical career.

According to the theology of the cross, a proper perception of God comes only "in the cross and suffering." Perceiving God merely as the omnipotent Creator is only a partial understanding of God and cannot prevent man from lapsing into foolishness (Romans 1:20-22). For a sinner to stand before a righteous and almighty God necessarily means damnation unless he knows of the cross of Jesus Christ. This knowledge comes not through human reason or any other human sense, but only through the "folly" of what we preach "to save those who believe" (I Corinthians 1:21). The perception of God understood in this way is perception of salvation. A theology based upon the cross of Christ perceives salvation as a gift from God, not something achieved by *ratio* or *lex*.

Luther further explicated the theology of the cross as a

theology of faith. It substitutes the “foolish God” hidden under the cross for any human thoughts or deeds as the means to salvation. Only through faith can the salvation of the God of the cross be obtained. Faith is a certainty that can rely on the God who is hidden from one’s senses on the cross and in suffering. “Cruce tectum” (Apol. VII:19) - “hidden under the cross” - is the basis of a theology of faith rather than sight. “But our life is hidden in God (i.e. in the bare confidence in His mercy).”¹

Finally, it was almost inescapable for Luther that the theology of the cross should be a theology of suffering. Whoever believes in the cross must be prepared to bear the cross. “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.”² Luther understands the salutary significance of the holy cross by which a member of God’s people comes to be like his Head, Christ.³ Part of the theology of the cross is “to be crucified with Christ.” Thus, it is not merely a Christian philosophy, as the bloodless theology of glory will always be; rather it is an attitude enveloping one’s whole life and death.

The profoundly comforting nature of Luther’s theology of the cross is apparent in a letter which he wrote to a fellow monk, the Augustinian Georg Spenlein of Memmingen. On April 8, 1516, Luther wrote, “My dear brother, get to know Christ and Him crucified. Learn to praise Him and to despair of yourself. And then say to Him: Dear Lord Jesus! You are my righteousness; I am Your sin. You have accepted what is mine and given me what is Yours. You took upon Yourself what You were not and gave me what I was not . . . For Christ lives only among sinners . . . In Him alone, utterly despairing of yourself and of your works, will you find peace. He makes His righteousness to be yours, just as He accepted you and made your sins to be His very own. If you firmly believe this . . . then continue your fellowship with your brethren. . . How pitiful the righteousness of a man if he compares himself with others, finds them to be worse than himself, and for that reason will grant them no fellowship . . . He should remain among them, to serve them with patience, with intercession, and with his personal example . . . If you desire to be a rose or a lily of Christ, then you will need to know that your way leads through thorns.”

IV. The Practical Perspective

The church of Jesus Christ as a whole, and our Evangelical Lutheran confessional churches in particular, committed to the

theology of the cross in proclamation and life, are constantly being challenged and endangered by the spirit of a theology of glory. The *theologia gloriae* manifests itself in many different forms, yet as a distinctive way of doing theology. The theology of the cross, therefore, must assume a polemical role toward a church under the influence of the so-called ecumenical spirit of the times. Some manifestations of a theology of glory in the church today are the following:

1. Charismatic and "holiness" movements either seek certain visible signs from God, or they identify themselves as a sinless Christian community. The theology of the cross puts an end to both claims by testifying that the decisive criterion of Christian living is faith. It is not from the holiness of its life that the church receives its perfection but from the forgiveness of sins. As Luther put it in his comments on thesis 28 at the Heidelberg Disputation: "Sinners are beautiful because they are loved; they are not loved because they are beautiful."

2. Syncretistic movements speak of many ways of salvation. They make the salvation accomplished by Christ on the cross merely one of many religious possibilities for man.

3. Some modern "missionary" strategies consider the development of certain social structures equally as important as the proclamation of justifying grace in Christ.

4. Political theology misconstrues the realization of democracy or racial integration as participation in human salvation.

5. Contextual theology calls for the adoption of non-Christian cultural elements to express the Gospel in order to make it more easily acceptable to prospective Christians. Thus, human religious activity becomes more important than simple trust in the grace of God.

6. Unionism makes corporate size, organizational efficiency, and public influencé the criterion of church union, rather than agreement in confession. Unionism has as its goal the visible establishment of the kingdom of God in this world. In actuality, the church cannot retreat from the scandal of the cross if it is to be the church of Christ. True unity in Christ can exist only in and under the cross.

7. A theology of success looks upon financial gain and external growth as sure signs of divine blessing.

The theology of glory, understood in this way, is constantly in search of progress in this world. It draws up programs which are designed to make the kingdom of God sufficiently manifest that we may recognize at least the outlines of paradise in this world. But since sin, death, and the devil cannot be overcome except

through the daily forgiveness of sins, and since the power of this world has not been eliminated, the theology of glory stands in sharp contrast to the form of God's kingdom under the cross. The theology of the cross looks forward to an end of this world and in the meantime expects every Christian to live as a disciple of the crucified Lord in obedient suffering.

Conclusion

As dangerous as the *theologia gloriae* is, the church must do more than simply expose and reject it. Rather, the church must seek to *live* in accord with the *theologia crucis* in terms of personal piety, worship, pastoral care, administration of the sacraments, and stewardship.

FOOTNOTES

1. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955 ff.), 31, p.44.
2. *LW* 31, p.55.
3. *LW* 41, p.164.