

# Luther's Theology of the Cross

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## 1. The importance of the cross

"Preach one thing, the wisdom of the cross!" That is Luther's answer to the vital question posed by the ministry of all ages: what shall I preach? The wisdom of the cross, the word of the cross - that great stumbling block to the world - is the proper content of Christian preaching, is the Gospel itself. Thus Luther teaches and the Lutheran church with him.

The Christian world regards that preachment as greatly onesided. The cross is just part of the Christian message besides others. The second article of the Creed is not the whole creed, and even in the second article, the cross stands in the midst of other facts of salvation. What narrowing of Christian truth is Luther guilty of when he limits real Christian theology to the theology of the cross! - so even some Lutherans today feel. After all, are there not also a theology of incarnation and theology of resurrection? Must not what is taught about God in the second article be supplemented by what is taught in the third article of the Creed, by a theology of the Holy Spirit and his activity in the church? Luther indeed had much to say about these matters also, for example, in his teaching on incarnation and on the sacraments. He likewise understood the article of creation as few theologians before him.

How then shall we answer that much criticized onesidedness of Luther's theology of the cross? What does that alleged narrowing mean? Apparently it does not mean that the whole church year shrinks to Good Friday, but rather that one cannot understand Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost without Good Friday. Luther, like Irenaeus and Athanasius, was certainly one of the great theologians of the incarnation. Yet he was so because he saw the cross behind the manger. While he understood the victory of Easter as well as any theologian of the Eastern Church, he understood it because he saw Easter as the victory of the *Crucified*. The same can be said about his view of the Holy Spirit's activity.

According to Luther, then, all topics of theology are illuminated by the cross. Why is this so? Because the deepest nature of revelation lies hidden in the cross. For this reason Luther's theology of the cross intends to be more than one of many theological theories which have appeared in the course of church history. In contrast to that other theology prevailing in Christendom, which Luther calls the theology of glory, the theology of the cross claims to be the correct scriptural theology by which Christ's church stands or falls. The preaching of the cross alone, Luther contends, is the preaching of the Gospel.

What then is the theology of the cross?

## 2. The cross in the ancient church

The church had to go a long way until it fully clarified the understanding of the cross of Christ through Luther's theology of the cross. It has often been observed how small a role the cross played in the theology of the ancient church. It is true that the church in the first centuries as well as the church throughout the ages has lived by Christ's death and has recognized that fact. The death of the Lord is a present reality every Lord's Day and at every celebration of the Lord's Supper (there has never been another Supper!). Hardly any other Old Testament passage is quoted by the Fathers as often as Isaiah 53. The sign of the cross was already an established Christian custom by the second century. And yet Christian art of the time represented our redemption by portraying types from the Old Testament rather than scenes of Christ's passion. Only by the fourth century does Christian sculpture reluctantly begin to depict the passion as one of the gospel stories. Even early theology is not able to say much about the death of Christ.

When at a later date the great question is raised: Why did God become man? The question is not

directed to Christ's death, but to the reason for his incarnation. In this way the cross is taught in connection with the incarnation, not yet as a teaching of its own. The cross is also included in the mystery of the resurrection (what we call Good Friday and Easter were celebrated by the oldest church simultaneously in the festival of *pascha* or Passover). But even so, the actual event of our salvation remained the incarnation - as Irenaeus said: "On account of His infinite love He became what we are in order that we might become what He is"<sup>i</sup> - while his resurrection marked the beginning of our redemption and of our resurrection.

Thus for the ancient church, as for the Eastern church even today, the cross is hidden in the miracles of Christmas and Easter. The darkness of Good Friday vanishes in the splendor of these festivals. The cross is outshone by the divine glory of Christ Incarnate and the Risen Lord. Even long after the church had begun to represent Christ Crucified in its art, the glory outshone the cross. When at the end of antiquity and in the early Middle Ages the crucified Christ replaced the victorious Christ (*Christos Pantocrator*) in the triumphal arch of the church above the altar, he is still portrayed as kind and triumphant. The Christ represented in the ancient church and in the Romanesque churches of the Middle Ages does not suffer. He remains triumphant even on the cross, and the cross itself always appears as the sign of victory rather than of suffering and death - "In this sign you will conquer" or "The royal banners forward go; the cross shines forth in mystic glow."<sup>ii</sup>

Why was this so? How are the limitations of ancient Christianity and its theology to be explained? Certainly we must not forget that divine revelation in the Holy Scriptures is so rich that whole centuries are needed to clarify its contents. We cannot expect the church of the first ecumenical councils already to have solved the problems of the medieval Western world. Their problems were determined by the horizon of their life and thought, In what bad taste it would have been for a Greek to represent the scene of crucifixion! Would you hang a picture showing a criminal on the gallows in your dining room?

As for understanding the redemption, the Greek Fathers could not escape the idealistic conception of man. Even the great Athanasius never considered "by what measure one weighed a sin." They were all Pelagians. For them, as for Dostoevski and the Russians, the sinner is at bottom a poor sick person to be healed by patient love and heavenly medicine, and not, as for the Romans, a criminal and lawbreaker who stood in need of discipline and justification. How, then, is a person to understand the cross if he does not know by whom and by what Christ was brought to the cross? How can he understand the cross if he does not know with Paul Gerhardt: "I caused Thy grief and sighing by evils multiplying as countless as the sands. I caused the woes unnumbered with which Thy soul is cumbered, Thy sorrows raised by wicked hands!"<sup>iii</sup> Lacking an understanding of the full dimensions of sin, the ancient church and the Eastern church never attained a theology of the cross.

### 3. The cross in the Western church

The theology of the cross belongs to the Western church. As every true theology, it is rooted in the liturgy. These liturgical beginnings come from the Orient, especially from the Syrian church. After all, did not the Syrians' connection with the language of the Old Testament and thereby also with its thought world lead them to a better understanding of the Old Testament gospel of the Lamb of God? Thus the *Agnus Dei* was included in the Roman Mass about A.D. 700 by a Pope of Syrian descent, even as the reference to the Lamb of God in the *Gloria in Excelsis* likewise originated in the Orient. Besides these origins in Syria, the place where the death of our Lord was naturally commemorated in a special way was in Jerusalem. Here the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which Constantine constructed and which housed the alleged relic of the Holy Cross, became the destination for pilgrimages from all parts of Christendom and provided the starting point for the veneration of the cross.

This practice soon spread throughout the whole church and found its first Western center in Rome at the Church-of-the-Holy-Cross-in-Jerusalem. Such a veneration of the cross, still a part of the Roman Good Friday liturgy in our day, may be called the oldest form of the theology of the cross. By venerating the cross and the relics of the cross, the devotion for the Crucified became an important feature of medieval Western piety. The two great hymns of the cross which are still part of the liturgy of Good Friday - "Sing, My Tongue, The

"Glorious Battle" and "The Royal Banners Forward Go"<sup>iv</sup> - are hymns addressed not to the Crucified but to the cross. Venantius Fortunatus wrote these hymns about A.D. 600, inspired by an enthusiasm for the relics of the cross which Emperor Justin II had sent at that time to the Franconian Queen Radegunda. The hymn "Sing, My Tongue" praises the cross as the sign of victory and addresses it as the holy cross, the holy tree of paradise which had become the instrument of salvation:

Tree which solely was found worthy	<i>Solo digna to fuisti</i>
Earth's great victim to sustain,	<i>Ferre mundi victimam</i>
Harbor from the raging tempest,	<i>Atque port um praeparare</i>
Ark that saved the world again,	<i>Arco mundo naufrago</i>
Tree with sacred blood anointed	<i>Quam sacer cruor perunxit</i>
Of the Lamb, for sinners slain.	<i>Fusus Agni corpore.</i>

Such an application of the Christian tree-symbol is reminiscent of the use of holy trees which had been common in the cultic worship of the Germanic peoples.

The powerful hymn of battle and victory, "The Royal Banners Forward Go," similarly addresses the holy tree:

O Cross, our one reliance, hail!	<i>O crux, ave, sees unica</i>
So may thy power with us avail	<i>Hoc passion is tempore</i>
To give new virtue to the saint	<i>Pus adauge gratiam</i>
And pardon to the penitent.	<i>Reisque dele crimina.</i>

From this adoration of the holy tree, it was still a long way to singing "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," which 500 years later, in the high Middle Ages, became the salutation to the Crucified.

On closer examination these oldest expressions of a theology of the cross appear to be typical examples of what Luther later called the theology of glory, for in them the cross remains *a direct* revelation of God's glory on earth. Triumphantly it precedes the victorious armies of the Christian emperors and the valiant hosts of the church militant. Just as in the first centuries the demons fled from the sign of the cross, so now the enemies of the church flee in confusion where the banner of the cross or the relics of the cross appear. Who can resist the power of this sign? The cross is the sign by which unfailing victory is gained. In it God's power becomes visible and real in the world.

#### 4. The cross in medieval Catholic theology

A deep change in the innermost life of Christendom took place when the suffering of the cross was for the first time understood in the churches and monasteries of Europe. This change can be seen in the crucifixes of the Middle Ages. The Crucified now no longer stands as victor on the tree of the cross as in the Romanesque period. Rather, he hangs on the cross - suffering, later even writhing in pain, and dying. This changeover is completed in the late Middle Ages when the great crucifixes in the triumphal arch of the Gothic cathedrals show the Crucified in a quite realistic way, no longer as the divine victor, but as the man of sorrows. The lowly Christ, the God-man in the state of deepest humility, becomes the brother of man. The imitation of Christ, even in the sense of mystically feeling all pains of the Crucified, becomes an ideal of medieval piety. Certainly only a small minority of the church people experienced such feelings. But all were at least touched by the idea. The liturgy and the whole atmosphere of the churches saw to that.

It is significant that the discovery of Christ's suffering and death as a dreadful reality was accompanied by a more serious understanding of sin and of the forgiveness of sin such as had not been similarly found in the ancient church. Much could be said against the medieval doctrines of sin and justification. Truly no one at that time had plumbed the depths of the Biblical understanding of sin. The whole system of penitence was

faulty, and even a denial of the gospel. Yet it also remains true that those people at least took sin more seriously than modern Protestants, including theologians.

People at the time knew that they were sinners and needed absolution. The question "How shall I find a gracious God?" had influenced theology in the Latin Church for a thousand years before it became the question of the Reformation. For many centuries this question had brought the most pious men of the Middle Ages into the monasteries before it became the vital question of the last great medieval monk. In those thousand years Christendom had learned that the two belong together: the sin of the world and Christ's suffering, my sin and Christ's death on the cross, even though it was not yet possible to find an answer to the question *how* they belong together. In pondering this problem, the Medieval Church developed its theology of the cross.

The greatest result of this theology is the small and simple, and yet daring and profound, book by Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?* ("Why did God become man?"). Much might be, and indeed must be, said against the way in which Anselm attempted to prove the miracles as necessary and reasonable, to figure out God's plan of salvation and the cost of carrying it out, and, for that matter, against whatever else is objectionable in the assumptions of Anselm. But in his writings the great theological expression of the vicarious satisfaction has been completed for the first time. While medieval theology already criticized and corrected Anselm - often more convincingly than modern theologians have done - yet the church has never given credence to those protests which have been voiced repeatedly against the *doctrine* of satisfaction as such.<sup>v</sup>

It is a remarkable fact that the teaching which proclaims Christ's death as the satisfaction for the sins of the world is the only teaching of the Middle Ages which eventually found general assent. The medieval doctrines on sin and grace have remained in dispute. The formula on transubstantiation has been limited to the Roman Church. All doctrines developed in the 16th century are limited to certain sections of Christendom. But the doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction has been formulated independently by the Lutheran, the Reformed, the Anglican, the Roman Churches in their respective confessions. Never before was this doctrine officially formulated.

The Nicene Creed does not say anything about how the phrase "who for us men and for our salvation" is to be understood. The Augsburg Confession was the first to teach that Christ "by his death *made satisfaction* for our sins" (AC IV). The Reformed confessions teach correspondingly, and likewise the Council of Trent (Session VI, 7). The Thirty-nine Article of the Anglican Church do not use the word "satisfaction." They teach that Christ died "to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men" (Article II). In the "Homily on Salvation," however, this sentence is explained by stating that Christ died ". . . to make a sacrifice *and satisfaction* or, as it may be called, amends to His Father for our sins."

This teaching, then, is the actual contribution of the Middle Ages to the theology of the cross.

## 5. Luther's contribution to the theology of the cross

If the question is raised concerning Luther's contribution to the theology of the cross, one is at first inclined to find it in the way Luther appropriated the comforting faith in Christ's atoning death. Luther had indeed experienced and shown others what it means to believe in Christ Crucified and that a soul in deepest distress and despair can find peace and real life in that faith. But we must not forget that the Middle Ages also knew faith in Christ as the only Savior and the comfort derived from that faith. Luther himself was deeply convinced that it was this faith by which the saints of all times, the church of all ages, had lived.

When Thomas Aquinas was taken ill on his way to the Council of Lyons and knew that he was going to die, he received his last Eucharist with the words: "I receive thee, ransom-price of my soul. Out of love towards thee I have studied, passed watchful nights and exerted myself. Thee have I preached and taught..." Thus the greatest thinker of the Middle Ages leaves his uncompleted work (he was not quite fifty years old). Forgotten is all the wealth of philosophical and theological learning. The great system of thought which encompasses earth and heaven, world and super-world, has shrunk to the one thing needful. Now, like St. Paul, he knows nothing

except Jesus Christ and him crucified (I Cor. 2:2), whose body and blood he receives for the last time on earth, the ransom-price of his soul. This Christ is the content of all theology. Forgotten is the theology of glory found at the beginning of the *Summa Theologica* in the semi-pagan proofs for the existence of God. Forgotten is the belief in the abilities of natural man, forgotten the "triumph of theology" which Thomas had won in overcoming Averroism and which had become a subject matter for Christian art.

This Christian, this truly evangelical, side of the Middle Ages must always be kept in mind if the Reformation is to be understood rightly. The mass indeed had an evangelical core. They chanted "Thou alone art holy" in the *Gloria in Excelsis*. They prayed "not weighing our merits, but freely granting us forgiveness" in the canon of the mass.<sup>vi</sup> They used the *Kyrie* and the *Agnus Dei*, the words of the Holy Communion and the baptism formula. They sang the hymn "O King of majesty tremendous, who doest free salvation send us" in the mass for the dead.<sup>vii</sup> They constantly referred to the thief on the cross. All these things, according to Luther, have preserved the church in the Middle Ages and are preserving it at present in Roman Catholicism. We should never forget that *sola gratia* is a possibility also within the Roman Church. But since it is only one possibility besides others, it never becomes *sofa fide*. For whatever the Roman Church may be otherwise, it wants to be and is also the church of the cross, the church of the Crucified, whose sacrificial death plays a greater part in the life and thought of that church than in many Protestant churches. God alone knows whether perhaps in our time more Catholics believe in the saving merit of Christ as the only source of salvation than do Protestants.

But Luther was more than a Roman Catholic Christian who, like many of his fellow believers and perhaps in a particular way, believed in the Crucified as his only salvation. His theology of the cross is different from that of pious Christians of the Middle Ages. In what does the difference lie? The difference becomes apparent when Luther draws a line of distinction between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory. When from his spiritual experience of seeking a gracious God Luther learned to understand what the cross of Christ means for us men, he realized as none before him the deepest nature of the cross's revelation. He did not merely perceive the depth of divine love revealed in the cross, but by understanding both, he perceived the deep mystery of the way God comes to man. He saw the secret of God's dealing with man, the *mystery of revelation itself*.

## 6. The theologian of the cross vs. the theologian of glory

What is the secret of the divine revelation? Man wants to see God, but he cannot do so. Even the great saints of God cannot see him. "Show me your glory," Moses asks the Lord (Ex. 33:18). The answer came: "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." But one thing God does grant his servant. God's glory will pass by and the Lord will allow him to see "his back," that is, Moses should look at God from behind: "You will see my back, but my face must not be seen" (vs. 22).

It is generally known how often Luther made use of this passage to clarify the nature of our perception of God. As men, we cannot see the face of God in its unveiled glory, however strongly we may desire it and strive for it. The attempt to perceive God as he is, whether from observing the world, by mystical experience or by philosophic speculation, is the theology of glory. It is the theology of natural man, of the heathen, of the philosophers, and, most unfortunately, also of the professors of theology. Being Christians, they ought to know better. But "we theologians," so Luther remarks in comment on Psalm 65:17, "use the blessed name of God by which we are baptized and at which heaven and earth tremble, in disputations, even in prayer, very irreverently. We exhibit the art of keen and loquacious disputing on divine truths - which we have learned from Aristotle - so that we talk of the blessed Trinity as the shoemaker about his leather" (WA 3, 382, 7ff). That means that God becomes an object, a thing about which one talks. But whoever talks about a thing has to stand above a thing, has to *command* it, and so, in pursuing theology, a Christian is constantly in danger of losing the right relationship towards God.

In Thesis 29 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* Luther says: "He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ" (LW 31:41). Otherwise

he will become a theologian of glory, and that would mean he is no theologian at all. For the two theologies which Luther distinguishes, the theology of glory and the theology of the cross, are not two grades of one and the same theology which supplement each other. They are not like the natural and the revealed perception of God in those systems of Catholic and Protestant theology determined by Aristotle. Rather they mutually and irreconcilably exclude one another, as false and true theology. "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who perceives and sees God's *invisible* nature by his works [Rom. 1:20]. He rather deserves to be called a theologian who sees and perceives that which God shows to us, which he makes *visible* to us when he allows us to look *after* him, by suffering and the cross" (LW 31:52). These are the famous Theses 19 and 20 of that famed disputation of A.D. 1518.

Luther does not deny that it is possible to perceive the invisible things of God from his works in creation; that is, as he himself defines in the commentary to Thesis 19, to perceive God's power, his wisdom, his righteousness, his goodness, etc. What he denies is that this perception of God is of any use. It makes men neither worthy nor wise. It does not change our relationship to God. Men have misused the perception of God from his works, as the explanation of Thesis 20 says: "They have become fools. The perception of God by his words has not hindered anybody from falling away from God and from becoming an idol-worshipper." And so "God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (I Cor. 1:21). This preaching is the message of the cross (I Cor. 1:18). While the theology of glory perceives and sees the invisible things of God from the works of creation, the theology of the cross sees and perceives the visible (posterior) things of God by the suffering and by the cross. The theologian of glory looks upon the world, the works of creation. By his reason he perceives beyond them the invisible nature of God, his omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness. But God remains for him invisible.

The theologian of the cross, on the other hand, looks upon the crucified. Here there is nothing great, beautiful, or sublime as in the splendid works of creation. Here there is nothing but humility, shame, weakness, suffering, and painful death. But this frightening and depressing aspect shows the visible and posterior things of God, those things which God lets us see of himself. Here God, who in the works of creation remains invisible, becomes visible. That means he becomes visible as far as he can possibly become visible to mortal men, as he became visible to Moses when he was allowed to look after him to see the back parts of God. What is visible of God is what can be seen from behind, the backside of God.

In this way the singular meaning of the cross is established. We do not see God in creation, but we see him on the cross, as far as human eyes are able to see him. Therefore the cross is *the* revelation, and the theology of the cross the only one which deserves the name theology. In the explanation of Thesis 20 Luther continues: "When according to John 14 Philip just like a theologian of glory spoke, 'Show us the Father,' Christ at once set aside his flighty thoughts about wanting to see God elsewhere and led him to himself, saying: 'Philip, he who has seen me has seen the Father.' For this reason true theology and perception of God are in the crucified Christ." This is repeated in the following thesis by the sentence: "He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering and the cross."<sup>viii</sup> This then is a firm principle of the theology of Luther and the Lutheran Church: theology is theology of the cross, nothing else. A theology which wants to be something else is pseudo-theology.

## 7. The cross as God's revelation

The cross is *the* revelation, for it is the only place where God makes himself visible. What does that mean? What does Luther mean when he says that we can find God nowhere else than in Christ Crucified? How is it that God is present in a special way in the cross?

To understand that, we have to ask what revelation is. Revelation occurs when something hidden comes forward and makes itself visible. Revelation of God is God's coming forward out of secrecy. For God is hidden as all objects of faith are hidden. Faith, according to the definition of Hebrews 11:1 which Luther quotes very often, has to do with things unseen. God remains hidden for us as long as we live on earth. He is dwelling in the light which no man can approach, as his word teaches us (I Tim. 6:16). He also said that he

"would dwell in a dark cloud" (I Kings 8:12). He is a "hidden God" (Is. 45:15) whose face cannot be seen by any man (Ex. 33:20, John 1:18, 1 John 4:12) until we shall see him in the light of glory "as he is" (I John 3:2), "face to face" (I Cor. 13:12, Rev. 22:4). But although God remains hidden to our *eyes*, he still reveals himself by his word. So the revelation in the word is the way of revelation in this world.

At many times and in various ways God spoke to the fathers through the prophets, until in these last days - that is now at the end of the world - he has spoken to us by his Son, who is more than a prophet, being the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb. 1:1f). He is the Eternal Word which was in the beginning. This Word is the content of all written and preached words of God. About him we are told: "The Word became flesh... and we have seen his glory..." Thus the revelation in the word becomes incarnation. Therefore Jesus Christ as the (Logos) Word Incarnate is *the* revelation of God on earth. In him alone who is the Eternal Word, God comes forward from his secrecy. He is the content of all the divine word; his incarnation is the manifestation of the word. The man Jesus is the visible Word. Anyone who has seen him has seen the Father, as far as it is possible to see him in this present age.

From here we understand Luther's doctrine of the cross. If God wants to reveal himself and make himself visible to man, he cannot show himself as he is. He cannot show his glory unveiled. For no man could bear the sight of God as he really is.<sup>ix</sup> Therefore he chooses the veil of human nature. Thus the incarnation is at one and the same time a revelation of God and a hiding of his glory. The God who is hidden, who is the invisible, eternal God, becomes for us the God revealed in Jesus Christ. But this revelation, this unveiling of God, is at the same time a veiling, a hiding. So Luther's twofold use of the expression "God hidden" is to be understood. Luther can speak of the hidden God in the sense of God as he has not yet revealed himself. He can also speak of the hidden God in the sense of God who has revealed himself by hiding himself in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Incarnation, then, is at one and the same time both an unveiling of God as well as a veiling or hiding of God in human nature.

Nowhere does this disguise, the veil behind which the divine nature hides itself, become so evident as in the passion. Gethsemane and the cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!" are the end of all attempts to misinterpret the gospel as the message of the triumphant epiphany of a savior-god after the manner of the ancient mystery religions, or as the epic of a religious hero. How often has such a theology of glory tried to take hold of the gospel. The miracles of Jesus have been understood again and again in this way. Certainly Jesus by a miracle like that of Cana, as the text itself declares, manifested his glory. But explicitly it is said: "And his *disciples* believed on him." Not the people of Cana, not the five-thousand whom he fed, not the sick whom he healed, not even the dead whom he raised from death believed in him. For also these deeds were at the same time a revelation and a disguise of his divine majesty. In faith, only his disciples saw his glory. Even his resurrection was not a demonstration for the world. Faith always deals with hidden realities. Also for the apostles and the apostolic church, faith in Jesus Christ the LORD was faith in his secret glory, in God hidden in the flesh, in the true divinity within the true humanity.

This secrecy finds its deepest expression in the cross. "Hidden under the cross", that is Luther's formula for this character of the divine revelation.<sup>x</sup> Hidden under the cross is his royal office, his kingdom, the church ("What he quickens by his Spirit is always the same kingdom of Christ, whether it be revealed or hidden under the cross" - CAApol. 7/8,10). "Hidden is the church, concealed are the saints" (WA 18,652, 23). It cannot be otherwise, for "all objects of faith are necessarily hidden" (WA 18, 653). Hidden is the word of God in the letters and words of the Bible, in the human word of the preacher. Hidden are the true body and blood of Christ in the earthly elements of the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper. Faith and the cross belong together. The cross demands faith *against the evidence*.

If the cross is the place where God reveals himself, then it is furthermore the place where God's revelation *contradicts human reason* most severely. Judged by everything that the world calls wisdom, the word of the cross, as St. Paul had already seen, is the most foolish doctrine a philosopher can meet. That the death of one man is to be the salvation of all, that this death on Calvary is to be the atoning sacrifice for all sins of the world, that the suffering of an innocent should assuage the wrath of God - these claims contradict all ethical and religious feelings of natural man. Indeed, the assumed doctrine of the universal

sinfulness of all men is beyond discussion because it means the end of all philosophical ethics. For all such ethics rest upon the principle formulated by Kant in the words: "You can, because you should." But Holy Scripture claims otherwise: just this foolish preaching of the cross is the wisdom of God which nullifies the wisdom of this world's wise. Between God's wisdom and the world's wisdom there is an irreconcilable clash. The wisdom of human reason is foolishness for God, \*and God's wisdom is foolishness for the world.

Luther understood the depth of this contrast as no theologian before or after him. From here it becomes clear what the fight against the theology of glory means for him. It is a fight for the gospel, for the *sola gratia*, for the right understanding of God and man. "The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things what they are" (*Heidelberg Theses*, 21). What man regards as good may be sin in the sight of God, as for example, the striving for virtue by moralists following Aristotle and Kant. What human wisdom thinks to be luck and therefore desirable for man - health, wealth, success, victory - precisely that may be regarded by God as hurtful for man and therefore denied to him. In the judgment of God, sickness, failure, poverty may be much more precious; and this judgment of God is right even if it contradicts all human reason. Confronted by an incurable sickness which after years of suffering leads to a painful death, our human judgment sees something definitely negative. But as God sees it, such unreasonable fortune may be something quite positive.

Thus Luther in *The Bondage of the Will* ventures to say: "When God brings to life, he does so by killing; when he justifies, he does so by accusing us; when he brings us into heaven, he does so by leading us to hell" (WA 18, 633). He makes alive by killing! - that is the adequate way to speak of the unreasonable way God acts.<sup>xi</sup> Only beneath the cross of Jesus can we learn to believe that expression. There we see nothing but weakness, solitude, shame, suffering, dying, final defeat of the just cause, the triumph of evil forces. For the believer, however, all this is the "visible things of God," that which God lets us see, his strange work behind which he hides his proper work of forgiving, saving, life-giving. Deeply hidden in the events of Good Friday which were seen by human eyes is the great event of reconciliation between God and mankind, the victory of the Redeemer of the world, which can only be believed against evidence and reason.

These are some, but by no means all, of the fundamental ideas of Luther's theology of the cross. If this theology is not the theology of a great Christian thinker, but as it claims, the faithful reproduction of a great New Testament doctrine, then it must be important not for one section of Christendom only, but for the whole church. Then Luther's theology of the cross also has a message for all Christians in this time of ours.

### **Addendum: The theology of the cross today**

In conclusion, Luther's theology of the cross can help us to get rid of that theology of glory by which many of us have lived and which is not theology at all. Rather, as with all theologies of glory in the history of the church, it is the natural religion of fallen mankind revived.

Let us take one example. On 23 June, 1910, John Mott delivered the closing address of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. That important meeting marks the beginning of the ecumenical movement of our age. Mott's words were a powerful appeal to missionary action, inspired by the hope that the final goals of all Christian missions would soon be reached. He began with the words: "God grant that all of us may in these next moments solemnly resolve henceforth so to plan and so to act, so to live and so to sacrifice, that our spirit of reality may become contagious among those to whom we go: and it may be that the words of the Archbishop (here he refers to some saying of Archbishop Davidson of Canterbury) shall prove to be a splendid prophecy, and that before many of us taste death we shall see the Kingdom of God come with power."

Four years later the First World War broke out. Seven years after that conference, Bolshevism started the greatest persecution which has ever threatened the existence of the church. Forty years later China was conquered by Bolshevism, and the Christian missionaries were forced to leave the greatest mission field of the contemporary world. "Lead on, O King Eternal, the day of march has come; henceforth in fields of conquest



Thy tents shall be our home" - that had been the battle song of the American missionaries at the time of the Edinburgh conference.

When now the last still-living members of that great conference look over these forty years, they will understand better why Jesus has promised his disciples not glorious victories, but the cross of martyrdom. They will understand the wisdom of the cross, the comfort of the theology of the cross, of God's making alive by killing, for the kingdom of God in this world is always hidden under the cross. If we look through all those important statements and proclamations of the Christian churches and of the ecumenical conferences regarding war and peace, church and state, disarmaments and rearmaments, League of Nations and United Nations, we shall understand why Christian theology today needs a revival of the theology of the cross.

How many secular illusions have entered our thinking about the church and the world! Among all the illusions which have taken the place of religion in the souls of modern men, there is also the contemporary theology of glory. It is not only nationalism and pacifism, liberalism and socialism, fascism and communism, militarism and antimilitarism which are deprived of the glory they used to have in the eyes of their adherents. Also deprived of such glory is that Christianity which prevailed in all denominations over the last centuries. It is a Christianity which dreamed of a Christian nation or a Christian world, a Christian faith which has been secularized by the theology of glory. Now the time has come to hear the theology of the cross. When the church today asks "What shall I preach?" the only answer can be: "*Preach one thing, the wisdom of the cross!*"

To preach the Gospel as the wisdom of the cross presupposes that we understand that the theology of the cross can never be a philosophy. The theology of glory is always a philosophy- a Christian philosophy, of course - reconciling reason and revelation. But I cannot face the Crucified as a philosopher faces the object of his research, passing his judgment on this object. Before I am able to pass judgment on Christ, stating who he is, he will have judged me. This is the reason why the theology of the cross has that *practical aspect* which makes it so vital for the theologian. A theologian of the cross cannot be without faith in the Crucified. How can I believe in the cross of Christ if I am not prepared to take up the cross and follow him? It is not by accident that, whenever Jesus speaks to his disciples about his cross, he also mentions the cross which they are to take up (see esp. Mt. 16:21-24).

According to Luther, one of the marks by which the true church of Christ on earth is recognized is that it has to go through persecution and suffering (LW 41:1641). The theology of the cross includes the "yes" of faith to the cross which Christ wants us to take up. This aspect of the theology of the cross is expressed by Luther in an explanation of Romans 12:1 ff: "Just as God's wisdom appears under the disguise of foolishness, God's truth in form of lie - for as often as God's Word comes, it comes in a way contrary to our mind! - so God's will, which is naturally good and well-pleasing and perfect, appears to us as an evil will, as the devil's will and not God's will." Thus the gracious, loving will of God is hidden, but only as long as man takes his ideas of what is good, well-pleasing, and perfect for granted. If man abandons his own will, then like Peter he lets the Lord guide him where he himself does not want to go (John 21). "Thus he is at the same time willing and unwilling, even as the Lord himself in Gethsemane made perfect his not-willing by the most ardent will .... In this way God acts in all his saints by making them will what they do not will." "At this contradiction," Luther continues, "the philosophers are astonished, and people do not understand it. This is why I said that it had to be understood by experience and practice" (LW 25:438).

This experience is the experience of faith - of that faith which does not see, of that faith which like Abraham's faith is faith in a promise that, humanly speaking, cannot be fulfilled! It is belief in that which is hidden to human eyes. It is faith which sees the light in the darkness. As Luther, in his comments on Genesis 17, writes in a profound word about Abraham's faith: "With closed eyes he hid himself in the darkness of faith, and there he found eternal light" (EA op ex4, 136).

H. Sasse<sup>xii</sup>.

## END NOTES

Abbreviations:	EA	= Erlangen Ausgabe (Edition) of Luther's Works
	LH	= The Lutheran Hymnal
	LH:WS	= The Lutheran Hymnal: Worship Supplement
	LW	= Luther's Works (American Edition)
	WA	= Weimar Ausgabe (Standard edition of Luther's Works)

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<sup>i</sup> Irenaeus, Adv. haer. 5, praef.

<sup>ii</sup> According to the legend recorded by Eusebius, the embattled Roman Emperor Constantine and his entire army (!) saw the sign of the cross in the sky, over which the words were written, "Touto nika," that is, "In this sign, conquer!"

<sup>iii</sup> LH 171:4. Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), Lutheran preacher and hymnwriter in North Germany, reflected Luther's theology of the cross in many of his hymns.

<sup>iv</sup> "Sing, My Tongue, the Glorious Battle" is found in LH:WS 728; "The Royal Banners Forward Go" in LH 178. The translation of the first example cited in the text is from *The Maryknoll Missal* (1964), pp. 323-325 (it is found in different form in LH:WS, stanza 4). The translation of the second example is from LH 168:6.

<sup>v</sup> For objections to Anselm's theology, see the introductory discussion in S.N. Deane, *St Anselm: Basic Writings* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962). Also refer to the expressions concerning "satisfaction" on pages 201 ff, and 222 ff.

<sup>vi</sup> "Non aestimator meriti, sed veniae largitor." See *The Maryknoll Missal* (1964), page [33] in the book center, under the "Liturgy of the Mass: Remembrance of the Faithful Departed."

<sup>vii</sup> Translation from LH 607:8.

<sup>viii</sup> "Deum non inveniri, nisi in passionibus et cruce."

<sup>ix</sup> This paragraph concerning the distinction between God-nude (as he is) and God-revealed is the key to Luther's theology of the cross and needs to be reread.

<sup>x</sup> "Cruce tectum."

<sup>xi</sup> "Occidendo vivificat," (LW 33:62). This truth is illustrated most vividly in the work of our Savior, Romans 6:1-14.

<sup>xii</sup> The essay here translated is Letter 18 of Hermann Sasse's "Briefe an lutherische Pastoren." The translation is a reworking of the work done in *The Lutheran Outlook*, October, 1951.