



Cranach, Weimar Altarpiece

*Crux sola est nostra theologia.
The cross alone is our theology.*

Luther, Commentary on the First Twenty-Two Psalms [cited Forde, 3]

LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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What is the Theology of the Cross?

NOT “simply a repetition of the Passion story,” or “just another treatment of the doctrine of atonement,” or a theodicy or theology of suffering, or “just an account of an unusual sort of religious experience, a kind of spirituality.” “It is rather a particular perception of the world and our destiny, which Luther came to call **looking at all things through suffering and the cross.**” [Forde, xi-xii]

or, to put it another way:

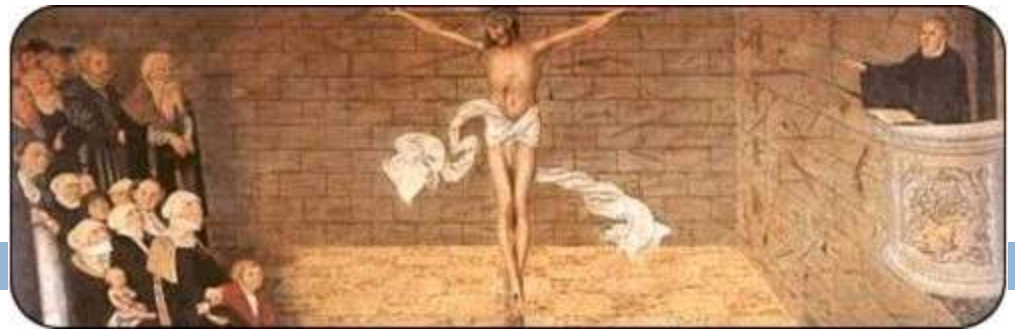
in one's whole life, suffering God's action in the cross.

Baptized into crucifixion with Christ

Romans 6:3-8

³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were **baptized into his death**? ⁴We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

Overview



Cranach, *Luther preaching the cross*, Wittenberg altarpiece

- In the 21st Century, just how foolish is the cross?
- A brief word about the historical setting
- Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (following Forde)
 - ▣ I-VIII: The Problem of Good Works
 - ▣ IX-XII: The Problem of Will
 - ▣ XIII-XIV: The Way of Glory versus the Way of the Cross
 - ▣ XXV-XXVIII: God's work in us: the Righteousness of Faith
- Concluding thoughts and *more* discussion
- The “metal hits the meat” in the next two sessions!

A 16th C. sinner in the hands of an angry God: How can I be justified before Him?

- Problem: “We do not have what God wants or expects of human beings.”
- “God is an all-too-present, angry, demanding parent!”
[Kolb, 445]
- Luther starts the Disputation with the matter of trying to keep the law, but doesn't stop there!

Michaelangelo, *The Final Judgment*



God in the hands of apathetic 21st C. sinners: Justify God to me, or I will not believe in him!

- Problem: I do not have and receive what I want and expect—and I want to know the reason why!
- “God is a modern parent: neglectful, absent, too little concerned about me to be of much use!”

[Kolb, 445]

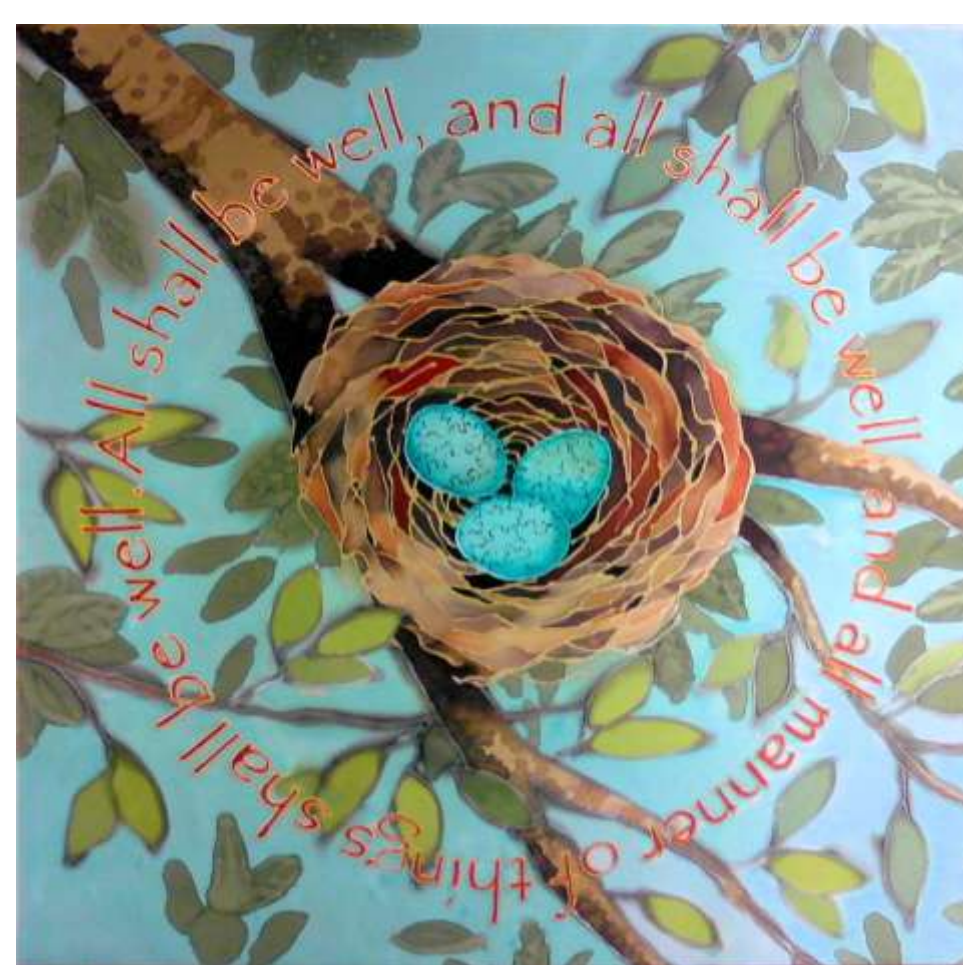
- In our time, *guilt* is replaced with *meaninglessness* [Forde, x]



If nobody still cares about good works, why push the theology of the cross?

- Explaining the difference between desire and experience, between perception and reality
- but *not* so as to justify or manipulate God's action as suffered by individuals
- Disappointed? Hebrews 2:8-9: "We do not yet see everything in subjection to Him. But we see *Him* who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone"
- Confused? What does it mean to be God, and to be human?
 - ▣ *Deus Absconditus* and the cry of "Why?"
 - ▣ *Deus Revelatus* and the response: "Christ!" [Kolb, 453-4]

What the theology of the cross is *not*: a mystical justification of divine activity



Julian of Norwich: “The picture of Christianity” in the Stanford CIRCLE



All shall be well, and all shall be well,
and all manner of things shall be well.

Julian of Norwich

Dame Julian of Norwich, 1342-c.1416, was probably a Benedictine nun of the house at Carrow, near Norwich, but lived for the greater part of her life in an anchorage in the churchyard of St. Julian at Norwich. The rectory of St. Julian later remained a part of Carrow, and the anchorage was inhabited by recluses after Julian's time.

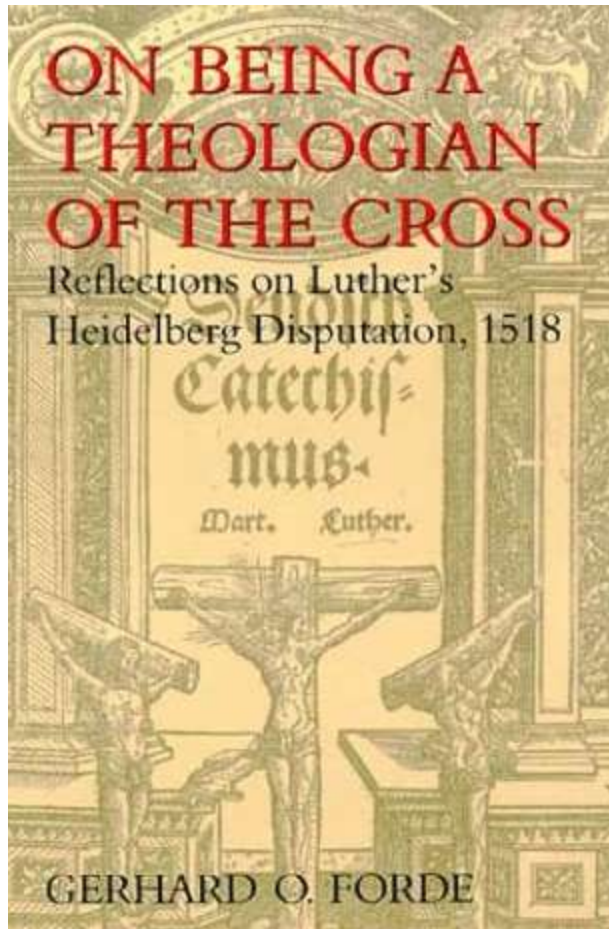
On May 13, 1373, Julian was healed of a serious illness after experiencing a series of visions of Christ's suffering and of the Blessed Virgin, about which she wrote two accounts; the second, longer version was composed 20 or 30 years after the first. Unparalleled in English religious literature, *Revelations* spans the most profound mysteries of the Christian faith—such as the problems of predestination, the foreknowledge of God, and the existence of evil. The clarity and depth of her perception, the precision and accuracy of her theological presentation, and the sincerity and beauty of her expression reveal a mind and personality of exceptional strength and charm.

Artist – Eliza Linley

The cross doesn't explain life to us, it kills us and makes us alive!

- “Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed, he himself wants to be God, and does not want God to be God.” [LW31:10] (Genesis 3!)
- “Because in Adam we mounted up toward equality with God, he descended to be like us, to bring us back to knowledge of himself. That is the sacrament of the incarnation. That is the kingdom of faith in which **the cross of Christ holds sway**, which sets at naught the divinity for which we perversely strive and restores the despised weakness of the flesh which we have perversely abandoned.” [Luther, Work on the Psalms, cited Forde, 14]
- *Cross theology* is necessarily a polemic against every kind of *natural glory theology*: it must leave us to rely on grace alone!

Our guide: Gerhard Forde's *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*



Forde's motivations

- Form theologians of the cross (those who suffer God's action in life, Word and Sacrament)
- Combat sentimentality: "Misery loves company" (open theism?)
- Combat erosion of theological language: the guilt culture vs. the culture of victimization

Glory and cross: two theologies, or two kinds of theologians?

- Does the theologian manipulate God by understanding the rules by which he operates, or is he transformed by suffering God's action upon himself? He is part of a story—what story and who moves it along?
- “[Theologians of the cross] are led by the cross to look at the trials, the sufferings, the pangs of conscience, the troubles—and joys—of daily life as God's doing, and not to try to see through them as mere accidental problems to be solved by metaphysical adjustment.” [13]
- “Faith means to live in the Christ of the story”
- Preaching means to “do the story” to the hearers

The word of the cross kills and makes alive [1-22]

- The cross (cross = death + resurrection + exaltation) [18-19] (Dt 32:39)
 - ▣ First, God's attack on the sinner and the sinner's spiritual aspirations ("alien work")
 - ▣ Then, Salvation from sin ("proper work")
- "As an *attack* it reveals that the real seat of sin is not in the flesh but in our *spiritual* aspirations, in our 'theology of glory.'" [1]
- The cross refuses to be part of another story. It becomes our story, draws us into itself. (Gal 2:20)

Deuteronomy 32:39

³⁹" 'See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

Galatians 2:20

²⁰I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The cross conquers the flesh's spiritual aspirations 1 Cor 1:18-25 (& Rom 1)

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” ²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Historic occasion of the Disputation

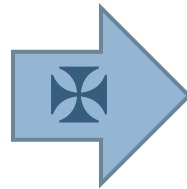
[Forde ,19-22], [LW31:37-38]

- Staupitz (at the behest of Leo X, via Volta) summoned Luther to defend his theology before the German Augustinian Congregation on Feb 25, 1518
- Luther was also invited to present “non-controversial” articles on April 26: sin, free will and grace
- 28 theological theses (with proofs, esp. of thesis VI) appeal to St. Paul and to St. Augustine, Paul’s “most trustworthy interpreter”
- 12 philosophical theses
(e.g. “**XXIX**: He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ.”) [LW 31:41]

Overall scheme of the Disputation

- Basic question: Which story, *law+merit* or the *cross*?
- Moves the theologian from God's law to God's love, from alien to proper work, through death to life.

I: The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.



XVIII: The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. (The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.)

- Prods the theologian onto the plank that leads only one place: Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended.

The law demands love, not grudging labors

- Deut 6:5: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”
- “What the law requires is freedom from the law!” [Grane, cited Forde, 29]
- (Luther putting words in God’s mouth) “I am obliged to forgive them their sins if I want the law fulfilled by them; indeed, I must also put away the law, for I see that they are unable not to sin, especially when they are fighting, that is, when they are laboring to fulfill the law in their own.” [LW 33:218]

Luther's starting point:

The Problem of Good Works (I-XII)

- Law drives either to despair or to presumption—the theologian of glory uses it to fend off the attack of the cross. The theologian of glory is *bound* to misjudge!
- “the very essence of sin: refusing the gift and thereby setting the self in the place of God.” [27]
- The cross attacks not only our obviously bad works, but our justifications, our “good” ones. *Sin* is more than *sins*.
- **I:** The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot **advance man on his way to righteousness**, but rather hinders him. (*Rom 3:21; 5:20; 7:9; 8:2; 2 Cor 3:6*) (cf. thesis **II**)

Theses III-VIII: Works of God and of men [30-43]

(Mt 23:27; Gal 3:10; Isa 53:2; 1 Sam 2:6; 2Cor 6:9-10) (cf. theses XIX-XXII)

III,V: The works of men

- always look attractive
 - appear to be good
 - are likely mortal sins
-
- *but*, when apparently good, are not mortal sins, as though crimes

IV, VI: The works of God

- always look unattractive
 - appear to be evil
 - are really eternal merits
-
- *but*, when done through men, are not merits, as though sinless

VII: The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of **pious fear of God**.

(compare theses VIII, XI-XII)

Closing the escape hatches

- “The theologian of glory searches endlessly for escape hatches, for a way to glory enticing enough to attract the free will (or what is left of it) of the seeker.”
- But the theologian of the cross knows: “The thirst for glory is not ended by satisfying it but rather by extinguishing it.” [16]
- Seeker as *addict*: shall we coddle or intervene?
- If the will is assumed to be free and must be attracted, we need attractive, optimistic words. Such don’t really *kill*—and hence cannot *make alive*. Despair yawns.
- “Theologically and more universally all must learn to say, ‘I am a sinner,’ and likewise never to stop saying it until Christ’s return makes it no longer true.” [17]

Excursus: The benevolent pagan and “dead” but not “deadly” works? (IX-X)

- Some would say not every work needs be feared as deadly...but not Luther.
- **IX:** To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God. (*Sir 5:8*)
- **X:** Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin. (*Prv 15:8*)
- There is no “neutrality” in evaluating works, because the will is bound to favor them! (remember Amsdorf and FC IV: Good Works?)

Excursus: The benevolent pagan and “dead” but not “deadly” works? (IX-X)

Excerpt from *Lumen gentium* (Vatican II, 1964)

“Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.”

[LG 16; CCC 2nd Ed., 847, p. 244]

“A theology offers no hope and no consolation.”

[Wengert]

A final thought on the theses on works: Safeguarding relationship and gift

- **XI:** Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work
- God insists on being the giver of the gift
- Two ways we destroy the relationship
 - ▣ worldliness, heedlessness: addicted to failure
 - ▣ pride, “self-esteem”: addicted to “success”
- “One can be addicted either to what is base or to what is high, either to lawlessness or to lawfulness. Theologically there is not any difference since both break the relationship to God, the giver.” [27]

The Problem of Will (XIII-XVIII) [49-67]

- Now the theologians of glory protest:
 - ▣ If our righteous deeds can't do it, perhaps we can at least decide to lay hold of Christ's work for us!
 - ▣ Sure, we're saved by grace—you can't be saved without it—but you do have to prepare for it. “Do what is in you” and God will not deny grace to complete your salvation.
 - ▣ There must be some freedom of choice, or how can God hold anyone accountable?
- The will is bound to itself—it will not will God to be God—and must be killed and raised anew.
- The old man can't stand the idea of a God actually *above* him, the electing God. He won't trust him.

Human will: willing, but bound to do nothing but evil (and that *willingly*)

- **XIII:** Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do it commits a mortal sin.
- The only thesis quoted in *Exsurge Domine* (1520)
- “The self seeks itself in all things, even in its piety. There is no way out.”
- “It commits deadly sin because it refuses to recognize the power of God to save and cuts off from grace.” [54]
- John 8:34, 36; Hos 13:9

What, then, does the will do?

- **XIV:** Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity. [54-56]
- **XV:** Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.
- How was man related to God before the fall? By works or by grace? [56-58]

Forde on creation and will [58]

“Before the fall the creature lives by faith, trusting that creation is good and bending all effort toward taking care of it. The creature has only a passive capacity for the good, not an active one. That is, the creature is never meant to stand or operate alone but to be one through whom the creator works. The creature is turned about to take care of the creation, to seek the good of the other, not the self. To fall is precisely to be captivated, bond, seduced, and blinded by another vision, another hope, that of the active capacity of free will and its works. ... [W]e are blind to the original sin, the sin of independence from God, the sin of unfaithfulness parading as piety.”

... but God gives grace to the humble
[1 Pet 5:5; Matt 23:12]

- **XVI:** The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty. (*Jer 2:13; 1 Pet 5:5; Matt 23:12; Rom 3:20*)
- But isn't humbling yourself a work?
- “[H]umans have no active capacity to humble themselves but only a passive capacity. They can be humbled. ... The instrument of this doing is the law and wrath, God’s ‘alien work,’ not our pious posturing.” [62]

The cross doesn't *explain life to us*, it *kills us and makes us alive!*

- “Because in Adam we mounted up toward equality with God, he descended to be like us, to bring us back to knowledge of himself. That is the sacrament of the incarnation. That is the kingdom of faith in which **the cross of Christ holds sway**, which sets at naught the divinity for which we perversely strive and restores the despised weakness of the flesh which we have perversely abandoned.” [Luther, Work on the Psalms, cited Forde, 14]
- “[Theologians of the cross] are led by the cross to look at the trials, the sufferings, the pangs of conscience, the troubles—and joys—of daily life as God’s doing, and not to try to see through them as mere accidental problems to be solved by metaphysical adjustment.” [13]

In this despair of self there is finally hope in another!

- The theology of the cross is pessimistic only to a theologian of glory. True optimism hopes in the resurrection, which only comes after a real death.
- **XVII:** Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ. (*Mark 10:14, 16*)
- Final despair vs. true hope: advice to the sick [64, 66]
- **XVIII:** It is certain that a man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

The Great Divide: The Way of Glory vs. The Way of the Cross

- Most discussions begin (somewhat abstractly) here, but what follows demands what has gone before
 - ▣ A fault in estimation of works (part 1)
 - ▣ ...is based on a false estimate of the power of the will (part 2)
 - ▣ ...which in turn presumes a knowledge of God's judgment on such works (part 3)
- Theologians, not theologies, are distinguished. [70]
- At this point the theologian of glory is well down the plank, in a crisis: despair of self.

Two theologians: how they seek God and what they say of him (XIX-XXI) [69-90]

XIX:

The theologian of glory

- claims to see into the invisible things of God
- by seeing through earthly things (events, works)

XXI:

- *calls evil good and good evil*

XX:

The theologian of the cross

- comprehends what is visible of God
- through suffering and the cross

- *says what a thing is*

The theologian of glory sees *through* it all without *looking at* anything

- Sees through created things (and human works) to see “the invisible things of God”: virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, ..., then tries to “reconcile” the attributes by human reason [73-4]
- May even try to “see through” the cross! [76]
- “How could a loving God...?”
- But there is no abstract solution to the problem of divine majesty. “The only solution is the cross itself and the subsequent proclamation of the word of the cross as a divine deed, the work of the Spirit, in the living present.”[75]

The wisdom of men and the law of God (XXII-XXIV)

- **XXII:** That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
- **XXIII:** The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4:15].
- **XXIV:** Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.
- The theology of the cross condemns not only moralism but also mysticism, speculation, and rationalism.

God's Work in Us: The Righteousness of Faith (XXV-XXVIII) [103-115]

- **XXV:** He is not righteous who works much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
- “For the righteousness of God is not acquired by means of acts frequently repeated, as Aristotle taught, but it is imparted by faith, for ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live (Rom 1:17),’ and ‘Man believes with his heart and is justified. (Rom 10:10)’”
- **XXVI:** The law says, “do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe this,” and everything is already done.

Luther on good works

in *Operationes in Psalmos*

“Wherefore, let this be your standard rule: wherever the holy Scriptures command good works to be done, understand that it forbids you to do any good works by yourself, because you cannot; but to keep a holy Sabbath unto God, that is, a rest from all your works, and that you become dead and buried and permit God to work in you. Unto this you will never attain, except by faith, hope, and love; that is, by a total mortification of yourself (Col 3:5) and all your own works.”

- “The Christ of the cross *takes away* the possibility of doing something.” [109]

All that remains for us to rely on: God's creative love

- **XXVIII:** The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.
- “The theologian of the cross knows that the love of God creates precisely out of nothing. Therefore the sinner must be reduced to nothing in order to be saved. The presupposition of the entire Disputation is laid bare. It is the hope of the resurrection.”
[114]
- “Our life is hidden in God (that is, in the simple confidence in his mercy)” LW 31:44

Preaching the cross: Acts 2:36-39

³⁶Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” ³⁷Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”

Living the cross: 2 Cor 12:7-10

⁷So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

A final note from Kolb

- “Instead of justifying God’s failure to end evil today, or justifying human actions that are truly evil, [the theology of the cross] justifies *sinner*s so that they may enjoy true life, life with God, forever.”

[Kolb, 457]

Five distinguishing points from von Loewenich [22]

1. The theology of the cross as a theology of revelation, stands in sharp antithesis to speculation.
2. God's revelation is an indirect, concealed revelation.
3. Hence God's revelation is recognized not in works but in suffering, and the double meaning of these words is to be noted.
4. This knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation is a matter of faith.
5. The manner in which God is known is reflected in the practical thought of suffering.

Discussion starters

- Deus revelatus, Deus absconditus... Homo absconditus, Homo revelatus: what did we learn about God? about ourselves?
- The soul that sins must die... either eternally or baptismally [Kolb, 461]. How does Christian vocation function in the theology of the cross?
- What are the implications of the theology of the cross for the life of the Christian community?
- How does one “do” the cross to the baptized (and catechized)? (i.e., how much of an attack is necessary?)
- How do theologians (cross and glory) hear the Law, especially the 3rd use? The Gospel? What are the applications for pastoral care and preaching?

Further reading

- Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Eerdmans, 1997.
- , *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, Eerdmans, 2007.
- Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, tr. Herbert J.A. Bouman, Augsburg, 1976.
- Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” *Lutheran Quarterly* XVI:4 (Winter 2002), 443-466.
- Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, LW31:37-70.
- , Bondage of the Will, LW33.
- , Commentary on the Magnificat, LW21:297-358.
- Hans Joachim Iwand, “The Freedom of the Christian and The Bondage of the Will,” tr. Jacob Corzine, in *Logia* XVII:2 (Eastertide 2008), 7-16.
- John Kleinig, “Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio: What makes a theologian?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66:3 (July 2002), 255-267.