

The Theology of the Cross

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As I now—at the end of our conference—present a short summary of Luther's theology of the cross, I would like to make clear from the start that by no means is this a definitive rendering of the theme before us; it is not even something fundamentally new. Clearly our theme has a certain relevance insofar as the old opinion advocated by O. Ritschl in his *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus* has been taken up again by Gyllenkrok¹ and Bizer², and indeed also Barth thinks that the young Luther must be seen in this way. This opinion holds that the theology of the cross is the quintessence of the prereformation views of Luther and points back to the humility-piety [*Humilitas-Frömmigkeit*] of mysticism. At the same time W. von Loewenich's comprehensive and excellent book³ has refuted this understanding of early Luther scholarship as far as it deals with the theology of the cross in Luther. It has shown that Luther's theology of the cross is an entirely new understanding of the theme acquired from mysticism. In connection to this I would like to show that in this theological catch-word lies a theological epistemology with which Luther surmounts the old scholastic method and, to a certain extent, the Augustinian Neoplatonic method in glowing formulae at the Heidelberg Disputation. Along with the development of this new theological epistemology Luther also employs it as the basis for interpreting the Psalms, a work which he completes through Psalm 22. Then he must go to Worms. But precisely the 22nd Psalm becomes for him the highpoint of an entirely unmystical understanding of the theology of the cross. The suffering of Christ that he finds prophesied here symbolizes for him the defection of the false church and its attempt to turn the kingdom of Christ into a kingdom of this world. Thus this Psalm is also an outstanding document for Luther's original, radical thought of the separation of the two kingdoms in a negative and positive sense. The cross demonstrates hard and inflexible opposition against the misuse of God's name and honor for the purposes of human wisdom and the pan-Christian empire. Thus the basic understanding of Paul in the fight against Gnosticism shows through more clearly than mysticism. Additionally I will treat a third work from the context of the theology of the cross, which chronologically lies somewhat earlier, but practically is first understood out of this theological root. This third work has to do with the pastoral [*seelsorgerlichen*] character of this theology and will develop into a new concept of reality which resigns itself to the cross in faith. For this early version of the theology of the cross points in an entirely different direction than, for example, Theodosius Harnack argues in his great interpretation of Luther's theology:⁴ it points not in the dogmatic direction of the doctrine of the atonement, but in the practical direction of a new relationship to reality. It is new insofar as it contains in itself a fundamental change from the medieval conception and holds the first thoughts that the theologian of the cross—in contrast to the understanding of monasticism, that exercised cross-piety [*Kreuzesfrömmigkeit*] by cursing and overcoming the world—withdraws from the cloister, abolishes its fundamental principle of piety and meets God in the reality of an entirely unpredictable, historical life filled by infinite and to a great extent unfathomable vicissitudes. This third work, in which I would like to exemplify the theologian

¹ Axel Gyllenkrok: *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung in der frühen evangelischen Theologie Luthers*, 1952.

² Ernst Bizer: *Fides ex auditu, eine Untersuchung über die Entdeckung der Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch Martin Luther*, 1958.

³ W. v. Loewenich: *Luthers Theologia crucis*, 1929.

⁴ Theod. Harnack: *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre*, Bd. I, 1862; Bd. II, 1885. See especially the forewords of both volumes.

of the cross's understanding of life, is the seven penitential psalms which Luther published in German translation in 1517. In linguistic respects they belong to the most beautiful writing of his that we possess. These could also be named the *Vademecum*⁵ of evangelical pastoral care and comfort.

I.

The Heidelberg Disputation, one of the customary theological assemblies of the chapter of the order of Augustinian Hermits, took place on 26 April 1518. For this disputation Luther drew up 28 theses which deal with three theological questions: with “works,” in particular the “*opera iustorum*,” with the question of the “*liberum arbitrium post peccatum*,” and third with the distinction of the “*theologus gloriae*” and “*theologus crucis*.” First, Luther does not here write about the “*theologia gloriae*” and “*theologia crucis*.”⁶ Not theology as such, but the man who pursues it, the theologian, is in the foreground. This is indicative of a contrast with the medieval starting point of theological epistemology, for this starting point ignores man’s situation. Therefore the fact that a fallen, sinful man would acquire the knowledge of God is disregarded at first: it comes secondarily and only incidentally gets a hearing.

In the superscription Luther calls these theses: “*theologica paradoxa*.”⁷ He cites Paul (“if Paul had not preceded in this”) and Augustine, his “most faithful interpreter,” as sources. Luther believes that the Church Father who gave his name to the order is the middleman between Paul and himself. He presents his theses “*an bene an male elicit sint*.”⁸ We know some of the glorious manner in which the young Luther disputed and brought his ideas to the younger members of the order for approval from the letter of Martin Bucer, the subsequent Strasbourg reformer, to Beatus Rhenanus: “As greatly as our champions strained themselves to throw Luther out of the saddle, they were unable to extract a hair’s breadth from him. Marvelous his elegance in responding; incomparable his patience in listening; etc.”⁹ The theses have an appendix of twelve theses on philosophy, which defend Plato against Aristotle and designate Anaxagoras as the “*optimus philosophorum*”¹⁰ because he understands the infinite as “*forma*.”¹¹ It is apparent that with the attack on the “*theologia gloriae*” Aristotelianism as the presupposition of theological epistemology is also attacked. If one considers that the introduction of the Aristotelian principle of thought (*analogia entis*)¹² is characteristic of the High Middle Ages from the time of Alexander of Hales and serves as the foundation of the Catholic doctrine of revelation up to today, then one sees how sweeping was the blow which Luther here dealt under the name of the “*theologia crucis*” and his *paradoxa*.

⁵ “Guidebook” *Trans.*

⁶ With the “works,” especially the “works of the just” (Theses 1-12), with the question of the “free will after the fall into sin” (Th. 13 to 18), and third with the distinction of the “theologian of glory” and the “theologian of the cross” (Th. 19-28). [Luther is not discussing the “theology of glory . . . theology of the cross,” but the theologian. *Trans.*] The Disputation is in WA 1, S. 353 ff. (Cl. 5, 375 ff.); Translation by the Müncher Lutherausg. (MA), 3. Aufl., Bd. I, S. 125 ff.

⁷ “theological paradoxes” *Trans.*

⁸ “so that it might become clear, whether rightly or wrongly from the godly Paul . . . just as from Saint Augustine . . . they are inferred.”

⁹ WA 9, 162, 1: Ut summa quidem vi nostri primores amolirentur, ne latum unguem tamen ab instituto dimovere suis argutiis. Mira in respondendo suavitas, in audiendo incomparabilis longanimitas.

¹⁰ “best of philosophers” *Trans.*

¹¹ Thesis 39.

¹² “analogy of being” *Trans.* “*the analogy of being*: specifically, the assumption of an *analogia*, or likeness, between finite and infinite being which lies at the basis of the *a posteriori* proofs of the existence of God and at the heart of the discussion of *attributa divina*.” Muller, Richard A. *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985. *Trans.*

The formulations are elegant and at the same time so significant that they lose their striking trenchancy when one translates them into German.¹³ I will therefore present the two most important theses, 19 and 20, in Latin and comment on them from the Latin text. They read: *Non ille digne theologus dicitur, qui 'invisibilia' Dei 'per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciit,' Sed qui visibilia et posteriora Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit.*¹⁴

Luther, in dialectical manner, highlights the contrast between “*intelligere*” and “*conspicere*.”¹⁵ He has in mind an opposing method—the scholastic method as it is gleaned from Peter Lombard’s textbook of scholasticism, the *Sentences*—which ascends to the invisible world of God “*per ea, quae facta sunt*.”¹⁶ The formulation is apparently derived—this is the curious part of it—from Paul: “*Invisibilia enim ipsius, a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur*” (Romans 1:20).¹⁷ Lombard explains Paul: “*Per creaturam mundi intelligitur homo, propter excellentiam qua excellit inter alias creaturas; vel propter convenientiam quam habet cum omni creatura.*”¹⁸ Human perception is in a position to transcend creation—that is, the *creatura mundi*. Human perception has an “*excellencia*” denied other creatures. It “rises above them,” is ecstatic, and is therefore able to grasp the invisible. Other creatures are not able to do this. However, at the same time man himself is a creature; he has a certain “*convenientia*”¹⁹ with every creature. He is himself a creature. According to the scholastic understanding man as intelligible essence is the point within creation where creation reaches over itself, where it no longer comes to view in sensible understanding, that is, in a scattered and diffused manner from thing to thing and from impression to impression, but in a coherent manner resting on the “*intelligere*,” the human “*excellencia*.” This perception of the invisible world, in which the visible world has its unity, is an intelligible perception. That is the basis of the scholastic worldview and its doctrine of man in the midst of the created world. Man—alone capable of intelligible perception—is the center of creation. Here creation has its eyes, through which it is able to view the invisible essence of God. However, this intelligible perception does not leap over created matter—*ea quae facta sunt*—but ascends from it. In this way Romans 1:20 is interpreted and this interpretation remained unchanged despite every transformation in Late Scholasticism. In fact, this is the single thing to which knowledge attaches in order to ascend from it into the invisible world in the thought of Aristotelian epistemology, ever more elaborated from its unprovable premise. There is a certain idealistic strain within the scholastic knowledge of God, which we here encounter, and the concept of the intelligible perception, encountered later from Spinoza to Schelling, is anchored here. Luther speaks to this method of allowing theological knowledge to begin “*per ea, quae facta sunt*.” He says: “*Non ille digne theologus dicitur.*” Whoever begins in this way does not deserve the name “theologian.” Luther inverts the predicate and the participle. The predicate for the Scholastics becomes the participle for Luther and vice versa. He also speaks of a perception of God, and appends understanding, *intelligere*, to this perception. Yet in this he does not begin with the visible things that have been created. With this knowledge of God he does not begin with visible things, but with

¹³ Or English. *Trans.*

¹⁴ “He is not rightly called a theologian, who God’s ‘invisible essence perceives and understands through his works,’ but he who comprehends that which is visible of God’s essence and is facing toward the world, as portrayed in suffering and the cross.”

¹⁵ “understand” and “perceive” *Trans.*

¹⁶ “through those things, which have been made.” *Trans.*

¹⁷ “For the invisible things of God are observed from the creation of the world, understood through those things which have been made.” *Trans.*

¹⁸ “Man perceives him (the Creator) in the creation of the world on account of his superiority, by which he excels the other creatures, and on account of his conformity with every creature.” Petrus Lombardus sent. I, dist. 3, 1 (Migne ser. lat. 192, 529).

¹⁹ “conformity” *Trans.*

God. God's hidden "*visibilia et posteriora*" are the opposite of the "perception." They give us the assignment of *intelligere*. Accordingly the content of such a revelation of God is seeing God as in the midst of us, as the hidden God, who is nevertheless visible and "*a posteriori*," that is, God is seen first of all in his economy—not in things, but in his humanity.

In the commentaries on the theses, which are perhaps synopses of Luther's part of the discussion, it says: "*Quia homines cognitione Dei ex operibus abusi sunt, voluit rursus Deus ex passionibus cognosci et reprobare illam sapientiam invisibilium per sapientiam visibilium.*"²⁰

Did Luther wish to say with this that the work-righteous also seek God in his "*opera*," or perhaps did he wish to say that idolatry is the expression of the error which seeks God in his "*opera*?" It almost seems so. For "*ut sic qui Deum non coluerunt manifestum ex operibus colerent absconditum in passionibus.*"²¹ The incarnation is therefore identical with the "*deus absconditus.*"²² The theology of the cross and the principle of the knowledge of God alone in Christ must now coincide. Although it is said today that it has always been customary in Dogmatics to distinguish between a natural revelation and a saving revelation, nevertheless here it becomes clear that the Reformation begins theologically with the unilateral knowledge of God in Christ. As in Barmen for the first thesis John 14:9 "Whoever sees me, sees the Father" is cited as the foundation and John 10 "I am the door" is cited as evidence. The revealed God is the hidden God: "*Vere absconditus tu es Deus*" (Isaiah 45:15). "*Ergo in Christo crucifixo est vera Theologia et cognitio Dei.*" "*At Deum non inveniri nisi in passionibus et cruce.*"²³

If then the theology of glory had as its goal a seeing—seeing God through intelligible perception—then the theology of the cross has as its goal an "*intelligere*," a grasping and understanding. But what should be grasped? This further point is observed here. I said above that Luther makes the object of his theses the theologian of the cross, the "man." He actually asks what kind of man stands behind the theology of glory and what kind of man stands behind the theology of the cross. We also saw that there was a certain conception of man that was essential for the epistemology of Scholasticism: Man between God and animal, rising above the domain of the creatures on account of his spiritual capability—his "*intelligere*." Man as spiritual being is related to God. Luther formulates his theses in such a way that man is first revealed in view of this "*Deus absconditus et crucifixus.*" What man is first emerges here. "*Qui dum ignorat Christum ignorat Deum absconditum in passionibus.*"²⁴ For this reason man has an erroneous feeling of worth. He tends to prefer work to suffering. These are the people whom Paul names "*inimici crucis Christi*" (Phil. 3:18). Here then we touch on the sentence, so rich in content: "*per crucem destruuntur opera et crucifigitur Adam, qui per opera potius aedificatur.*"²⁵

There are not many sentences as instructive for the theology of the young Luther as this one. Here one sees how the two themes of his theology—Law and Gospel the one, the theology of the cross and the theology of glory the other—are interconnected. One hangs from the other. Of

²⁰ "Since men abuse the knowledge on the basis of his works, God willed, on the other hand, that he be known from suffering, and therefore willed to repudiate such wisdom of the invisible through a wisdom of the visible." WA S. 362, 5 (MA S. 133).

²¹ "so that those who did not honor God as he is revealed in his works should honor him as the one who is hidden in suffering." Ibid. Z. 8.

²² "hidden God" *Trans.*

²³ "Truly you are a hidden God" (Isaiah 45:15). "Therefore in Christ crucified is the true theology and knowledge of God," Erl. zu Th. 20, WA Z. 14 u. 18. "God however can only be found in cross and suffering," Erl. zu Th. 21, WA Z. 28 (MA S. 134).

²⁴ "Indeed, whoever does not know Christ, he also does not know the God hidden in suffering," Erl. zu Th. 21, WA Z. 23.

²⁵ "Enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil. 3:18). "Through the cross works are destroyed and Adam is crucified, who prefers to be built up through works," WA Z. 26 u. 30.

course Luther also says that reason is blind; of course he also opposed the natural knowledge of God because of original sin, objected—and this Th. Harnack particularly has emphasized and Lutherans to the present day stress so passionately—to the knowledge of God in “*Gloria et maiestate*” if it is not bound with the knowledge in “*humilitate et ignominia crucis!*”²⁶ But here Luther goes further. Here he defines Adam as the one who through “works is built up.” Adam lives by doing works with which he can be justified before himself. Good works are the hiding place into which Adam crawls when God calls. We could say pointedly: The flight from God’s word of grace to the performance [of works], the conversion of the theological situation into an ethical one is a deed congenial to Adam, therefore also to us natural men. Luther sees in this “practical” act the root of the intrusion of natural theology. “*Adam per opera potius aedificatur.*”²⁷ One could walk the length of theology and its history with this sentence as a divining rod: it would show us where living water flows. For this reason Luther can say in his commentary on the Psalms: “*CRUX sola est nostra theologia.*”²⁸ Since man has lost his value judgment, he judges falsely. He judges suffering and pain to be something bad, something evil. He seeks good where it is not. Therefore he lives perversely. He lives falsely. “*Dicit malum bonum et bonum malum, Theologus crucis dicit id quod res est*” (Thesis 21).²⁹ Here the concept of reality comes to light.

II.

It would certainly not be saying too much if one asserted that he who wants to understand Luther’s theology of the cross rightly must read the *Operationes in Psalmos*. This commentary on the Psalms is the genuine interpretation of Luther’s understanding of this theological principle. The Psalms and the theology of the cross—they are one and the same. Here it was lived, confessed, and expounded. Here it was made known in Scripture. If one wanted to decode the Psalms, if one wanted to bring the prayers of those who had spoken here to sound anew, if one wanted to enter the circle of this people of God, then he would have to begin from the theology of the cross; better yet, he would have to begin from the cross of Jesus Christ. In this suffering all were justified—in view of their persecutors and mockers—all who had hoped in God alone. Only in him. Luther contrasts the active and passive life of the pious. The way goes from doing to suffering, and first in suffering—so he thinks—is it shown whether I trust in God alone. “*Activa sane vita, in qua multi satis temere confidunt, quam intelligunt quoque per merita, non producit nec operatur spem, sed praesumptionem, non secus ac scientia inflat.*”³⁰

There again is the “*Adam qui operibus aedificatur.*”³¹ That is the “*positive Christianity,*” which one can see and to which one can adhere in himself as in others. Accordingly the “*vita passiva*”—suffering—must be included. Only there is faith preserved. “*Addenda est vita passiva, quae mortificet et destruat totam vitam activam, ut nihil remaneat meritorum, in quo superbus gloriatur. Quo facto, si homo perseveret, fit in eo spes, idest discit nihil esse, in quo gaudendum, sperandum, gloriandum sit, praeter Deum. Tribulatio enim, dum a nobis omnia tollit, solum utique deum relinquit—das heißt: allein auf Dich vertraue ich [that is: I trust alone in You]—,neque enim deum potest tollere, imo deum adducit.*”³²

²⁶ “So it is sufficient for no one and profits no one to know God in his glory and majesty if he is not at the same time known in the humility and pain of his cross,” Erl. zu Th. 20, WA S. 326, 11 (MA S. 133).

²⁷ “Adam prefers to be built up through works.” *Trans.*

²⁸ “The cross alone is our theology,” zu Ps 5, 12, *Operationes in Psalmos*, WA 5, 176, 32.

²⁹ “The theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls the things by its proper name.”

³⁰ “An active life, on which many place their trust without basis and which they look at only according to things merited, truly brings and works no hope, but presumption; it puffs up no less than knowledge,” on Ps 5, 12 a (WA 5, 165,33).

³¹ “Adam who is built up through works” *Trans.*

³² “The passive life is to be added, which kills and demolishes the entire active life, so that no merit is left remaining, of which the presumptuous could boast. Through this—if man endures—hope arises in him, that is, he learns that there is

Here the definition of “hope” becomes clear. In the Middle Ages the foundation of hope in God was that God would reward in heaven that which is not rewarded here on earth. In a similar way Kant later understood the concept of reward—the certainty that a reality of good corresponds to the good deed, and this reality is God. Luther’s understanding of “*spes*” is entirely defined by the theology of the cross: To hope where there is nothing more to be hoped, where nothing else remains for me save the living God and his promise, the pure word. “*spes purissima in purissimum Deum.*”³³ Even God’s wrath cooperates for the destruction of my self-trust. In such tribulation, in which the “soul is stretched out with Christ”—the soul’s being crucified with Christ is meant, the “being abandoned by God”—hope is conceivable only as “*patientia*,” as patience. “*Ita ut spem recte quispiam possit patientiam spirituale[m] seu patientiam in culpis sustinendis appellare.*”³⁴

Luther understands this passivity therefore not as some sort of being-dead or being-empty, but paradoxically as the highest activity. But an activity of hoping is born, which “*fit*” (arises) in such suffering. This hope is present as the work of the Spirit. It hopes. It hopes, where nothing more is to be hoped. It is related not to any sort of reality, but it is related to God alone. To this, that God is. Hope consists in this: that it hopes. In this hoping the despairing one lives.

“*In his vero conscientiae procellis et meritorum ruinis spes ipsa pugnatur contra desperationem et fere contra seipsam, immo contra deum, quem sentit sibi iratum.*”³⁵ Luther can portray this hoping in the decline and collapse of all “*merita*”³⁶ as a process of being undressed—fundamentally death is such an occurrence for him. We are placed before ourselves naked and must be tested to see whether we trust solely in God’s mercy, whether we live solely from this. Here is the independence of faith from “*sentire*”³⁷—we feel nothing more of God’s grace. But this process itself is becoming man: he dies and is fabricated anew. He goes under and walks forth reborn. This is very different from what Schleiermacher later understood. Here the new birth is bound up with a death, and to be precise with a death not only of the evil or the old man, but simply the man—the man who thinks that he is able neither to live nor to endure before God without works. So this man is baptized through “*life*.” Life is a baptism. That means death. “*Et tamen si perseveret homo et contra spem in spem speret, probatus invenietur et hac tribulatione meritis exutus spe induetur et coronabitur inconfusibili corona in aeternum.*”³⁸

Passivity—*vita passiva*—is thus still something other than the “*vita contemplativa*”³⁹ that the Middle Ages knew. For Luther this “*vita passiva*” hangs together with “*pati*.”⁴⁰ Suffering first makes man into another. But the matter lies still deeper. We become ones who hope. While we are given to taste the very depths of despair we experience genuine growth. Works must collapse so that we find an inner foothold on nothing more—hope arises (*fit*) in view of nothingness. It is really born in us; and the emptiness of life, the nothingness in the collapse of all worth, is the reverse side which we perceive and which we feel in this birth. In the moment of faith’s breakthrough we can know ourselves only as fallen away, doubting, and despairing. There is nothing to be seen in the place where we know of ourselves. It comes, so to speak, from behind; from the other side faith and

nothing in which he can rejoice, on which he can place his hope, of which he can boast, except God. For tribulation, when it takes everything from us leaves only God behind, and cannot take God from us; on the contrary: it brings God near,” Ibid. Z. 35.

³³ “entirely pure hope in the entirely pure God,” S. 166, 18.

³⁴ “So that one can define hope only as spiritual patience or as patience in bearing debts,” Ibid. Z. 29.

³⁵ “Indeed: in these storms of the conscience and the ruins of merits hope itself fights against despair and in a certain sense against itself, yes, against God, whom hope feels is angry with itself,” Ibid. Z. 25.

³⁶ “merits” *Trans.*

³⁷ “perceiving, feeling” *Trans.*

³⁸ “And nevertheless: if man persists and against hope hopes in hope, he is tested and founded anew and—in this tribulation stripped of merit—clothed with hope and crowned with a crown which abides eternally,” Z. 34.

³⁹ “passive life . . . contemplative life” *Trans.*

⁴⁰ “to suffer” *Trans.*

hope and the ability to love come over us. “*Sola vero passiva vita purissima est.*”⁴¹ True life means genuine life. Life without hypocrisy. Only faith, which we do not appropriate for ourselves, is genuine. This becoming man is a work of God in us. His Spirit leads into hell and out again. Accordingly it then continues: “*Quid enim est fides, nisi motus ille cordis, qui credere, Spes motus, qui sperare, Charitas motus, qui diligere vocatur.*”⁴² One sees that for Luther it is a movement in which we are the ones moved and God is the one moving.

From here on he criticizes the scholastic doctrine, which distinguishes between “*habitus*” (attitude, disposition, being) and act. Luther’s theology knows no ethic built on human acts since it arises from the theology of the cross. The doing always arises from a being [*Sein*], a being-moved proceeding from faith. The man who himself moves himself thinks that he has himself in his hand. The man moved by God, however, can not be moved by God without being consumed. And that is suffering; that is the hard and barren way.

In this connection, however, we encounter also an entirely new aspect of the *Verbum Dei*.⁴³ One can perhaps understand from this what pure doctrine, “*purum verbum,*” means for Luther. These powers, namely of faith, of love, and of hope “*versantur circa purum verbum interne, quo capitur et non capit anima.*”⁴⁴ They therefore procure the being in the word for the soul, for the human self-confidence. “*rapitur per verbum in solitudinem.*”⁴⁵ Thus one can only have the word, that is, it can only have us, when it becomes everything for us. All or nothing. That is the inevitable either-or connected to the movement with the word. That is the “*verbum purum.*” “*Exiit tam rebus tam phantasmatis,*”⁴⁶ therefore we live neither in reality nor in fantasy when we live in the word.

In this way the word forms the soul. The word leads the soul into nothingness. Here Luther takes a passage from mystical theology. But what comes from this! “*Redacta sum in nihilum et nescivi. In tenebras et caliginem ingressa nihil video, fide, spe et charitate sola vivo et infirmor (idest patior), cum enim infirmior, tunc fortior sum.*”⁴⁷

Luther says that mystical theologians call this “*ductus*”⁴⁸ the ascent above being and non-being. He says that he does not know whether they were truly in agreement over this; the mystics had made this into “acts,” but in truth it is a matter of “*mortis inferni passiones,*” of suffering death and hell. And here then stands that very sentence, the conclusion of the entire section on afflicted man: “*CRUX sola est nostra Theologia.*”⁴⁹ Because man is by birth an enemy of God, therefore he can experience the work of God in him only as suffering, as trial, and divestment; not as elevation of life, but as judgment and death. Therefore Luther now protests against “*liberum arbitrium,*” against free will. We cannot decide for faith—how could we manage that! “*Velle enim illud, quod credere, sperare,*

⁴¹ “A passive life alone is truly an entirely pure life,” Z. 11.

⁴² “What else then is faith than that movement of the heart, which is called believing; what else is hope than that movement, which is called hoping; what else is love than that movement, which is called loving!”

⁴³ “The Word of God” *Trans.*

⁴⁴ “[These powers] live on account of the pure inner word, through which the soul is captured, but does not itself capture,” *Ibid.* Z. 16.

⁴⁵ “It [the soul] is torn into isolation through the word,” Z. 19.

⁴⁶ “It (the soul) is stripped of things and even from imagined things,” Z. 18.

⁴⁷ “I am called back into nothingness and know of nothing. I have stepped into darkness and obscurity and I see nothing. Alone in faith, hope and love I live and fade away in weakness (that is, I suffer); since when I am weak, then I am strong.” Z. 26.

⁴⁸ “having been led” *Trans.*

⁴⁹ “THE CROSS alone is our theology.” *Trans.*

*diligere iam diximus, est motus, raptus, ductus verbi dei et quaedam continua purgatio et renovatio mentis et sensus de die in diem in agnitionem dei.*⁵⁰

So Luther can then describe this becoming, becoming one who hopes from one who despairs, as being recreated: “*Creamur ad imaginem eius, qui fecit nos. Voluntas vero incarnata seu in opus externum effusa recte potest dici cooperari et activitatem habere. . . . Quare sicut gladius ad sui motum nihil cooperatur, ita nec voluntas ad suum velle, qui est divini verbi motus, mera passio voluntatis, quae tum cooperatur ad opus manuum orando, ambulando, laborando.*”⁵¹

There would still be much to say in this regard, but one thing ought to have become clear: The theology of the cross is neither an exclusively theoretical expression nor a mere antithesis to the theology of glory, but it is to be inscribed in our life. From this is to be understood what it means to be a believer, one who hopes, one who loves—indeed, what it means to be a Christian. Yet strictly speaking one can never be a Christian; one can only become one. Being a Christian is hidden in God. One cannot lift it into consciousness without destroying it. In our consciousness we have the reverse side, the not-being. And nevertheless Luther says: “*Oportet non modo credere, sperare, diligere, sed etiam scire et certum esse, se credere, sperare, diligere. Illud in abscondito tempestatis, hoc post tempestatem agitur.*”⁵²

III.

What this theological starting point means practically can be assessed from an analysis of Luther’s commentary on the seven penitential Psalms. Such a theological analysis, in my opinion, has not yet been put forth. For the most part the fine points are unnoticed and the immense change in the view of Christian existence that lies in this commentary, the first published in German, is not observed.

I begin with Psalm 32: 10⁵³: “I will give you understanding and will show you the way in which you should walk.”

In the comments on this passage it reads: “This is where I want you to be. You ask that I deliver you. Do not let it be wearisome for you. Do not teach me and do not teach yourself. Surrender yourself to me; I am enough of a master for you. I will lead you to walk on the way that pleases me. You think that it is disastrous when things do not go as you think they should—that thinking is harmful to you and hinders me. Things must happen not according to your understanding, but above your understanding. Submerge yourself in foolishness and I will give you my understanding . . . not knowing where you are going is truly knowing where you are going. My understanding makes you entirely ignorant. Thus Abraham went out from his fatherland and did not know where he was going. He yielded himself to my knowledge and let his knowledge go, and by the right way he came to the right end. Behold, that is the way of the cross, which you cannot find, but I must lead you like a blind man.”⁵⁴ The way of the cross is therefore a clear, unmistakable

⁵⁰ “This willing, namely, about which we already said that it believes, hopes, and loves, is a movement, an abduction, a being led by the Word of God and to a certain extent a perpetual purification and renewal of the spirit and senses from day to day in the knowledge of God,” S. 177, 12.

⁵¹ “We are created in the image of the one who has made us (Col. 3:10). The will, which has taken form in life, which extends itself into external work, can be designated in the deed as cooperating and as fully active. . . as therefore the sword contributes nothing to its movement, so the will contributes nothing to its willing. Rather, it is moved by the Word of God; it is purely suffering for the will, which then cooperates in the work of the hands—in prayer, in going, in working,” Ibid., Z. 21.

⁵² “It is not only necessary to believe, to hope, and to love, but also to know and to be certain that one believes, hopes, and loves. The former happens during the storm in a hidden way, the latter after the storm,” S. 165, 8.

⁵³ In modern translations the reference is Psalm 32:8. The verse numbering in the 1517 edition (WA 1), quoted here, is changed in the 1525 edition (WA 18, the edition published in the American Edition of Luther’s Works) to match the numbering of modern translations. *Trans.*

⁵⁴ WA 1, 171, 25.

reality in our life. It lies, so to speak, before us. Nothing exceptional happens when we traverse it, or to be more precise, when we are led on it. The true life—that is the way of the cross. Not the abstract, self-made existence, spent in an established isolation from the world, formed if possible by self-torment and self-chastisement. The call of God extends to a defined place—there it is audible, only there. And if I avoid the real life in its heights and depths, its afflictions and comforts, then I do not hear the call of God. For then I stand in the place that I have chosen for myself. If Abraham had remained in Ur, then what would God’s call have meant for him? Today we often speak of the secularized world and think that secularization is the reason men have turned away from the Church. One could look at it the other way around. One could ask if a fixed, preconceived, impressed meaning of “being pious” and “being Christian” is not the reason that the church has turned away from men. God’s call to men is not issued where and how the Church, by itself, dictates. This is the precise location of the Reformation’s break with the medieval church—for the way of the cross, on which God leads us, is not life in the Church, but the way of the people of God in the world.

This way is incomprehensible. It is closed to our understanding. One must and ought to concede that we do not understand God in it. If we understood him it would not be his way but our way. So these two things can always be found together: God, the real God, who is the Lord of my entire life, and the reality of this life itself in all its deep obscurity. The deepest and most difficult mystery is in us, in man.

Another passage that speaks to this is a comment on Psalm 32:2: “And there is not any deceit in his spirit.” “That is, his own heart does not betray him so that he appears outwardly pious and considers himself to be nothing but pious and one who loves God, while nevertheless inwardly this opinion is false. . . . This evil, false, deceptive lie leads astray, above all, the great, hypocritical, and spiritual people, who stand fearless on account of their pious life and their many good works and do not discern their spiritual, inner attitude.”⁵⁵

This means that such men do not suffer from themselves. Their works do not live by them, their works are not signs and expression of their being, but they live by their works. “Also they do not want to take to heart that this deceptive, harmful lie spares no one, but is the basic spirit of all and is driven out alone by God’s grace.”⁵⁶

This evil, which is in us and with us, lies beyond all our freedom. It is the authentic suffering of man—he must do what he does not want. The whole doctrine of his “freedom” is an empty dream. Therefore the history of his life, as well as the history of peoples, is determined by this unpredictable factor which is located in man, in his suffering and foolishness. “[It is] not a lie which man tells and knowingly devises against himself or against another, but which he suffers and which is innate within him. This can be covered and adorned with a good life.”⁵⁷

But: “Yet underneath lies the evil filth which the doctors call *amorem sui, amorem dei concupiscentie*,⁵⁸ so that man is pious out of fear of hell or hope of heaven and not because of God. However, this is difficult to recognize and even more difficult to free oneself of.”⁵⁹

The question is, how are we “freed” from this? For this reason man ought not to free himself from the suffering that God has ordained for us in the unpredictable aspects of this life. Therefore marriage, therefore work; therefore out with a prepared form of Christian existence!

⁵⁵ Ibid. 167, 30.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Z. 36.

⁵⁷ S. 168, 3.

⁵⁸ “self-love, impure love that seeks to possess God for personal enjoyment” *Trans.*

⁵⁹ Ibid. Z. 6.

Therefore (one could perhaps say) always oriented toward life, which itself is the result of our errors and suffering.

Again, on verse 10⁶⁰: “Therefore not you, not a man, not a creature, but I, I myself will lead you on the way you should walk. Not the work which you choose, not the suffering which you devise, but that which comes against your choice, thought, and desires: there follow, there I call, there be a student, there it is the time, there your Master has come.”⁶¹

Here it becomes apparent that we walk in this incomprehensible way solely with true confidence and faith—otherwise, if we go our own way, what need do we have of God! “Have you not read, that the eyes of God are upon the righteous . . . that is, briefly, nothing other than a genuine, simple faith and a firm trust.”⁶²

But even here the inner struggle of life does not cease. In this way of life we are, in the eyes of God, hopeful and despondent at the same time. “For God is so astounding in dealing with his children, that he blesses them with contradictory and discordant things. For hope and despair are opposites. Yet they must hope in despair, for fear is nothing other than the beginning of despair and hope is the beginning of recovery. And these two things, opposites by nature, must be in us, for two men, opposites by nature, are in us: the old and the new. The old man must fear and despair and drown; the new man must hope, withstand, and be raised up. And these are both present in one man, indeed in one work at the same time. Just as a sculptor, even as he takes and hews away the wood that does not belong to the image, still improves the form of the image, so also in the fear that hews down the old Adam hope arises which forms the new man.”⁶³

This genuine hope is distinguished from false hope by the fact that it does not dictate to God “the purpose, manner, time, and measure”⁶⁴ in which he should help. Those who do that “do not tarry and wait upon God. God should wait on them, be ready at once, and not help in a way different than they have designed. Those who wait on the Lord, however, seek grace, but they leave it to God’s good will when, how, where and through what he will help. They do not doubt this help. But they also do not give it a name; they let God christen and name it, . . . But whoever names the help does not receive it.”⁶⁵

+ Translated by Aaron Moldenhauer, Reformation 2004 +

⁶⁰ See footnote 53. *Trans.*

⁶¹ S. 172, 2.

⁶² *Ibid.* Z. 12.

⁶³ On Psalm 130: 5. (*Ibid.* S. 208, 19).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Z. 34.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Z. 37.