

This paper examines Martin Luther's theology of the cross and discusses how it has impacted North American religious life.

### Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross

In Protestantism, there are two distinct guiding philosophies that are normally used as the foundation for the teaching and worship of the church. These philosophies are the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. Which philosophy a church practices is up to the individual church; however, it is rare, possibly even unheard of, for both philosophies to be utilized together in the same church. The theology of glory and the theology of the cross are both so very different from one another, that to mix them would be a challenging enterprise. The theology of the cross was formulated by the founder of the Protestant churches, Martin Luther, and continues to have an impact on theology and on churches today, nearly five hundred years after its creation. This paper examines Martin Luther's theology of the cross, compares it with the theology of glory, and discusses how the theology of the cross continues to have an impact on churches today.

To Martin Luther, Jesus Christ is the only moderator between God and humans.<sup>1</sup> Through his death, he effects a reconciliation between God and man. Christ, through his death, has removed God's wrath from humankind. Martin Luther created his theology of the cross as a distinct opposite of the theology of glory that the Catholic church accepted at the time. While the theology of glory seeks to know God directly in His divine power and glory, the theology of the cross seeks out God in His sufferings. The theology of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Augustana," *The Luther Project*, n.d. <<http://www.augustana.edu/religion/lutherproject/HEIDELBU/Theology%20of%20the%20Cross.htm>>.

cross views humans as being called to suffer for their sins, and to rely on the redemptive power of Jesus Christ to save them. The theology of the cross is meant to destroy the self-confidence of humans so that they will allow God to do everything for them. Therefore, the theology of the cross leads a person from moralistic activism to pure receptivity.<sup>2</sup>

In order to properly understand the theology of the cross, it is first necessary to understand how it compares to the more commonly used theology of glory. The theology of glory begins with a one-time trip for the new Christian to the metaphorical cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> The theology of glory directs the teachings of the gospel only to unbelievers, in order to get them saved. Once someone is saved, their need to continue hearing the gospel supposedly vanishes. When a person comes to the cross of Jesus Christ, their sins get wiped away, and then they need never make this trip again.

In the theology of glory, repentance is defined as a sinner being sorry for his or her sins and resolving not to sin anymore.<sup>4</sup> This repentance then results in the sinner wanting to lead a better life according to the laws of Christ. If you later backslide and begin sinning again or having problems leading a Christ-like life, you can either re-dedicate yourself to Christ or make an emotional commitment to be stronger and to avoid sin and temptation. You do not, however, need to go back to the Cross, as you have already been there. The theology of glory states that once a person is saved, he or she is always saved.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Don Matzat, "A Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross," *Issues, Etc.* 3, no. 2. (1998) <<http://www.issuesetc.org/resource/journals/gloryvs.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Further, the theology of glory tends to produce people who believe themselves to be better than other people because they have been saved. People who have been saved in the theology of glory tend to think of themselves as better than those who have not been saved. These people who have been saved then go out and share their testimony with those who have not been saved in the hopes of getting them saved, too. Sometimes, there are other steps to take after getting saved through the theology of glory, such as sanctifying oneself, a process which involves removing ones' old sinful nature so that one is no longer a sinner. Sometimes, baptism must take place after sanctification, depending on what church one belongs to. Baptism is meant to give one spiritual power that one did not have before.

The theology of the cross is quite different from the theology of glory. In the theology of the cross, salvation is an ongoing process. There is no one-time trip to the cross under this theology. Instead, the preaching of sin and grace and the law and the gospel is intended to continually convict one of sin and to lead to continual contrition for that sin; in addition, the words of the gospel are intended to continually produce faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the theology of the cross is a never-ending process, continually bringing a person to Christ over and over again through the continual reminder that one is a sinner and in need of the salvation that Christ has to offer.

Also, the theology of the cross defines repentance as contrition and faith, rather than contrition and human determination.<sup>7</sup> Preaching of the law in this theology is intended to produce contrition and sorrow over sin, while the preaching of the gospel is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

intended to produce faith in the redemption that Jesus Christ offers. Repentance for sins is therefore not a single act that a Christian performs one time, but defines the totality of Christian life.<sup>8</sup> The theology of the cross, unlike the theology of glory, never gets a person past the cross. The cross is the destination, not a stopping point on the trip. The preaching of the law is not intended to provide one with a list of do's and don'ts for living a Christ-like life, as in the theology of glory. Instead, the preaching of the law is intended to continually drive one back to the cross over and over again. Out of the gospel, one's faith is strengthened, and out of this faith the good works that define a Christ-like life are produced.<sup>9</sup>

Further, in the theology of the cross, there is never meant to be any feeling among anyone that they are better than anyone else. The theology of glory is meant to show people the extent of their holiness, but the theology of the cross is meant to show people the depth of their sin.<sup>10</sup> This awareness of just how much one has sinned is meant to make one even more in awe of the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. Therefore, instead of witnessing to people about getting saved, one witnesses about the work of the cross and the grace of God. There is no step toward God or increase in holiness for someone under this theology, only the saving grace of God. The theology of glory turns one toward oneself, while the theology of the cross turns one away from oneself.

The theology of the cross is really a theology of humility and suffering, of realizing that we are nothing compared to God and that we have deeply offended Him through our sins. Upon realizing this, the theology of the cross is meant to make us contrite through the horror of the knowledge of the enormity of our sins. Once we realize

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

our sins and are contrite regarding them, then God will reveal Himself to us, through the hiddenness and lowliness of the cross and its sufferings.<sup>11</sup> Only upon this realization will we be able to share Christ's sufferings and become cross-bearers for him.

For Martin Luther, the theology of the cross was also the theology of the Apostle Paul. Luther based his entire theology of the cross on the teachings of Paul that are found in the Bible, thereby making the theology a biblically-based one, and not just something that Martin Luther created on his own with nothing to back it up. The theology of the cross encompasses the entire redemptive story of Christ's suffering and death for our sins. Through the theology of the cross, Christ's experiences on the cross and our participation in that experience find a common bond.<sup>12</sup> The theology of the cross helps people see the link between theology and life.

Martin Luther once said that the wisdom of the cross was hidden in much mystery. Luther stated that the wisdom of the cross, at the time of his writings, was not only almost unheard of within the church, but was a fearful thing to the rulers of the church. Luther believed that it was because of this fear of the wisdom of the cross that church leaders of his day had stopped focusing their sermons and teachings on the holy scriptures and had instead begun writing theses on church finances. This trend can even be seen in churches today, with a plethora of writing on fundraising and other financial matters coming out of churches, rather than sound doctrinal teachings.

Martin Luther saw, as he was studying the scriptures for guidance after posting his famous Ninety-Five Theses, that the theology of the cross and the theology of glory

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<sup>11</sup> "The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod," *The Lutheran Church*, n.d., <<http://www/lcms.org/cic/theologs.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> Michael S. Horton, "Our Constant Struggle: The Theology of the Cross vs. The Theology of Glory," *Modern Reformation*, 2002 <<http://www.modernreformation.org/mr97/julaug/mr9704itistruggle.html>>.

were both present in the Bible and were both struggling with each other for dominance. Luther saw that part of the Bible seemed to be advocating the various spiritual steps to salvation required by the theology of glory, but he also saw where the Bible seemed to indicate that one who found God this way would find an all-consuming fire, as they would have sought Him in the wrong places. He also saw where the Bible indicated that God kept Himself hidden, and would reveal Himself to those who were saved, rather than those people seeking to find Him in His hiding place. Luther, from what he read in the Bible, did not believe that humans could handle encountering god directly, as the theology of glory advocated, without being turned into ash.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Luther saw a God portrayed through scripture as one who wanted to have a saving relationship with us through Jesus Christ the Mediator, and who graciously clothed Himself in flesh in order to be near us.<sup>14</sup> God then clothed us in His righteousness and will one day lift up our bodies as the fruit of victory of his own physical resurrection.<sup>15</sup> To Luther, this meant that one day there would be glory, but for now, we must bear the cross. While the theology of glory has been the one most commonly accepted and used by Protestant churches today, the theology of the cross has been gaining a renewed interest and study behind the scenes. Since the theology of glory has been the dominant Protestant theology for so long, there has been much talk but little true understanding of the meaning of the theology of the cross. Martin Luther's theology has now become a timely topic of theological debate. Much of the talk in Protestant churches of late has been that of a "vulnerable God" who suffers with us. This is basically a take on the old adage that misery loves company.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

This is also part of the person-centered theology of glory. The theology of the cross, however, is different.

There is no sentimentalism in the theology of the cross as there is in the theology of glory. This is not to say that modern theologians do not recognize that the theology of the cross is mainly about suffering. Martin Luther, in fact, said that a true theologian of the cross would look at all things through suffering and the cross, because Jesus Christ enters into our own suffering and death. To a true theologian of the cross, then, the realization would come quickly that we as humans suffer because we are at odds with God and are trying to rush headlong into some cozy identification with Him.<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther is quick to point out that God and Jesus Christ are the operators in all spiritual matters, not those whom are operated upon. Luther even points out how Jesus said in the Bible that no one would take his life from him unless he laid it down willingly. In the end, Jesus died because no one identified with him.<sup>17</sup>

Because of this lack of identification with Jesus while he was on earth, Luther states, humans suffer now the absolute and unconditional working of God upon them.<sup>18</sup> Humans are rendered passive by divine activity. The word passive comes from the same word as passion, which means “to suffer.” Therefore, humans must suffer due to divine actions. With this kind of understanding of the suffering of the cross, the theologian of the cross can look at the world anew in the light of Christ’s suffering. Through this light, humans can see that they suffer the sovereign workings of God.<sup>19</sup> This realization is

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<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Forde, “On Being a Theologian of the Cross,” *Religion Online*, 1997 < [http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item\\_id=320](http://www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll/showarticle?item_id=320)>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

nothing like the theology of glory, which teaches that Jesus Christ and God fight with us and suffer with us against some unknown enemy.

Those who study the theology of the cross today find much fault with the theology of glory. The theology of glory tells us that we are not really sinners, simply victims of all of the evil in the world, constantly sought out and tracked down by victimizers who would lead us astray; the theology of glory teaches that we must seek out and accuse these victimizers so that they will lose their power over us. Since people are victims and not sinners under the theology of glory, what they need is affirmation and support rather than suffering and guilt. Theology then becomes therapeutic rather than evangelical.<sup>20</sup> Martin Luther states that a theologian of the cross states what a thing is, while a theologian of glory calls bad things good and good things bad. This makes it clear that Luther is telling theologians that their use of language is important in their discussion of theological matters. When theologians of today believe that their language must be constantly adjusted so as to not give offense and to stroke people's psyches rather than put them under attack, religion then runs the risk of descending into nothing more than mere greeting card sentimentality. This can be seen, modern theologians of the cross charge, in the lack of words such as sin, law, accusation, repentance, judgment, wrath, punishing, perishing, death, devil, damnation, and even the cross itself in services in today's Protestant churches that are following the theology of glory.<sup>21</sup>

However, as Martin Luther pointed out, a theologian of the cross does not adjust his language in order to not give offense to someone or to not upset them. A theologian of the cross calls a spade a spade, so to speak. One who looks upon all things through

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

suffering and the cross is compelled to tell the truth in all circumstances. The theology of the cross contains the appropriate theological framework to hold the truthful language in place.<sup>22</sup> Theologians of the cross today recognize that much language that has disappeared from modern Protestant services can indeed be frightening and upsetting, but such theologians also recognize that the only way to rectify the problems the church is facing and that people are facing is to go back to the cross and its suffering, not to erase things that are unpleasant. When erasures of this type happen, then the church becomes little more than a support group and not a gathering of the body of Christ.

The theology of the cross should not be misunderstood as simply a repetition of the Passion and resurrection story, nor should it be misunderstood as just another treatment of the doctrine of atonement. The theology of the cross is a particular perception of the world and of our destiny, what Martin Luther came to call looking at all things through suffering and the cross. It has to do with the way the cross is put to use in our lives. Without doubt, the theologian of the cross will be looked upon initially as one who is very negative and critical, especially compared to the optimism of the theology of glory. Many people may think it cruel to crush what little optimism people have in their lives today. Yet Martin Luther had no such difficulty in doing this when he stripped away all notions of the usefulness of good works in salvation. When it comes right down to it, theologians of the cross believe that the theology of glory is the theology of a fallen race and that it is the responsibility of theologians of the cross to expose that fact. A theologian of the cross also recognizes that the theology of the cross ultimately brings people hope, the only true hope there is for humankind.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

It is interesting to note that in past centuries, those who have proclaimed the theology of the cross have been labeled as heretics. The theology of glory was so deeply ingrained into the very fabric of the church--much as it is today--that any theology that challenged it could not be tolerated. In fact, the theology of glory has been the dominant theology of the Christian church since the third century A.D.<sup>23</sup> Just as those who follow the theology of the cross have complained that the theology of glory makes God out to be vulnerable puts him in a suffering state with us, those who follow the theology of glory throw the same charges back at them. Further, those who follow the theology of glory claim that in the theology of the cross, evil is never conquered, only diffused. This, adherents of the theology of glory feel, is a sacrilegious attitude to take, as God is all-powerful and should not be portrayed with the human weakness of suffering.

However, those who follow the theology of the cross have much truth in their philosophy to defend themselves against these charges. Among the core beliefs of those who follow the theology of the cross are:

- A God who apologized to Noah, as opposed to a "Santa Clause" God that is portrayed in the theology of glory.
- A God who cooperates with us rather than commands us.
- A God whose justice is reconciliation rather than retribution.
- A God whose judgment is to draw us back to Him, rather than a God whose judgment is to punish.

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<sup>23</sup> John Westerhoff, "The Spirituality of Nonviolence," *Access Atlanta*, 2000  
<[http://communitylink.accessatlanta.com/servlet/groups\\_ProcServ/dbpage=page&GID](http://communitylink.accessatlanta.com/servlet/groups_ProcServ/dbpage=page&GID)>.

- A crucifixion that affects us by drawing us closer to God, rather than a crucifixion that affects God.

The undeniable truth is, most Christians today believe in a God who will deliver us from trials and tribulations, when the fact is that the Bible does not say anywhere that God will do these things. Many who follow the theology of the cross are asking why it is so plausible to so many that God would not want us to suffer. Martin Luther railed against such attitudes when he developed his theology of the cross, claiming that those who followed the theology of glory sought to reach God without Christ as a mediator. There are many different theories as to why the theology of glory has taken such a hold in the world today. One popular theory is that the influence of modernity on the world that tells us that everyday in every way things are getting better and better for us has spilled over into religion as well. The modern doctrine of progress fits hand-in-glove with the inherent flesh and world-denying beliefs of the Fundamentalist movement, some of the biggest proponents of the theology of glory. The Fundamentalist movement stresses overcoming the flesh and finding victory in Christ through this triumphant action. There is no call to suffer in the body and wait for Christ to bring glory; instead, glory can be sought out and attained through one's own efforts if one is committed enough to overcoming the world and its concerns.

Martin Luther was a forward thinker for his time, and for him to develop a theology that was so different and opposed to the doctrine that had been the prevailing doctrine of the church for centuries was groundbreaking and took great courage. It is also interesting to consider from where he developed his ideas, as there were no ready sources for him to use to develop a doctrine so radical, other than the Bible itself. Martin Luther

seems to have three influences when putting together his theology of the cross. These influences were humanism, the philosophical nominalism of the *via moderna*, and the theology of the Augustinian Order.<sup>24</sup>

Humanism influenced Martin Luther by introducing him to the ancient sources of scripture and the writings of the early church in Greek. Like other humanists (not to be confused with secular humanists) of the time, Luther rejected scholasticism--the tendency in some academic circles toward extreme theological abstraction.<sup>25</sup> The influence of humanism upon Luther was more of a means than a substance, meaning that Luther was helped by the tools of humanism (such as the New Testament) rather than its teachings. The humanist ideal of reform was not primarily doctrinal, but was moral and administrative.<sup>26</sup>

Nominalism, which was a denial of realism in favor of a focus on particulars from which real things derived their qualities, also influenced Luther. Nominalism influenced Luther by getting him to consider the dialectic between the two powers of God--the absolute and the ordained. The absolute powers of God are those powers which are open to Him as possibilities while the ordained powers are those powers which God has determined to use. This dialectic was set up to ensure that God acted reliably but not out of necessity.<sup>27</sup> This meant that God was at liberty to justify man by other means than grace. That God chose to use grace to justify man was not out of any necessity on His part; it was simply His choice to make because that was the way He preferred it to be.

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Bair, "A Summary of McGrath's Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Xenos-Cincy*, 2001  
<<http://www.xenos-cincy.org/study/luthcross.htm>>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

The Augustinian Order also had an influence on Martin Luther in the development of his theology of the cross. The Augustinian Order helped Luther move toward a more personalized concept of grace, which was the personal appearance of the Holy Spirit within the believer. However, during the time of Luther's writing, the Augustinian Order and other Christian groups still believed that grace was achieved through some sort of action on man's part. In other words, it was commonly believed that to receive grace required something of man. Luther, though, expanded this concept of personal grace into his theology of the cross.

In expanding the concept of personal grace, Martin Luther said that it was not meritorious works, but a prepared condition that allowed one to receive grace. That prepared condition, according to Luther, was one's admitting one's need for grace and an appeal to God, in His mercy, to bestow it. Still, Luther's concept of grace was a humanly initiated thing that God would then respond to. Faith required humility, the recognition of one as detestable. This requirement made faith into a work of sorts.

Luther initially had difficulty in his theological thought in determining how a righteous God could be "good news" to sinful man. The origins of the theology of the cross lie in his attempts to resolve this troubling question. Initially, Luther believed that God and men had a covenant together and that God would, through His righteousness, give to each person whatever was his due. An individual person's due would depend, in large part, on how well he or she upheld their end of the covenant. Since mankind was so sinful and God so righteous, Luther could not see how God could ever justify the ungodly ways of man.

Luther's breakthrough came when he realized that man was not capable of the true humility required of him through the covenant. Instead, it would require an act of God to move man toward repentance. In order to truly repent, man would need the alien righteousness of God--alien because it did not belong to man. Humans are sinners by nature. Therefore, the righteousness of God is given to man as a gift, and is therefore good news.<sup>28</sup>

This concept of God's righteousness was a contradiction of the concept of righteousness in classical thought. Classical thought, such as Aristotle's, stressed righteousness as coming from doing good works. However, most scholars believe Martin Luther's rejection of this concept of righteousness to be not a repudiation of the concept of good works in its entirety, but of projecting human ideas onto God. Through Martin Luther, God reveals Himself to be very different from our expectations.

This breakthrough of Martin Luther has had, and continues to have, a big impact on all aspects of theology today. Luther's philosophy is more than a mere terminological clarification; it represents a whole new concept of God.<sup>29</sup> This new God who deals with man in such a way was an entirely new concept for the church. This God is none other than the crucified and hidden God--the God of the cross. The theology of the cross shatters all human ideas of strength and wisdom, for God's power is revealed in weakness, and His glory is revealed in shame, while His wisdom is revealed in a crucified savior.<sup>30</sup> Through Luther's new philosophy, no one could any more say that

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

God was not involved in human suffering, because he so clearly identified himself with that suffering.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, Martin Luther was also heavily influenced in his creation of the theology of the cross by the Bible itself. The Apostle Paul speaks at length about the cross in the Bible, providing a clear picture of the ultimate truth to Luther. The theology of the cross is a very simple concept, but Paul himself wrote in the Bible that because of its simplicity, many would not understand it. He wrote that the idea of the cross would be a stumbling block to Jews and would seem foolish to the Greeks. However, Paul stressed again and again that Christians preached about Christ crucified. This, stated Paul, was the central idea and theme of the Christian religion. Paul also stressed that if we put our focus of receiving grace on good works, then Christ's work on the cross has been of no effect on us.<sup>32</sup>

For Martin Luther, God is revealed not in the majesty of the heavens or the beauty of the earth, but in the cross and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> While there is much beauty in nature, there is also much death and destruction. Also, Luther believed that God was not to be found in the love within the human heart. The human heart is certainly capable of much love, but it is also capable of great acts of hatred and violence. However, the Bible tells us that we can know and be certain that Christ laid down his life for us. This is a sure thing, the one thing that we can know and count upon to be true. Martin Luther, through his theology of the cross, has revealed this to us in no uncertain terms.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Max Solbrekken, "The Theology of the Cross," *Easter Resurrection*, 2003  
<<http://www.mswm.org/easter.resurrection.htm>>.

<sup>33</sup> David K. Wood, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," 2002  
<<http://home.twncv.com/fpcu/Sermons/TheologyOfTheCross.pdf>>.

The theology of the cross may seem like a harsh theology compared to the common and popular theology of glory. If this is true, it is only because people today are so used to having feel-good messages thrown at them from every angle and are also used to having their egos stroked constantly by the excesses of modern life. The theology of the cross does not tell people what they want to hear; instead, it tells them the truth and makes no bones about it. The cross, and Christ's suffering on it, must be the central focus of any church and any theology that is following the truth, according to Martin Luther and those who follow the theology of the cross. It is through the cross that we receive God's grace and through the cross that we can be given glory by God. The theology of the cross teaches people to put all of their hopes and their reliance on the one sure thing in the universe--God's redeeming love for us that leads him to give those who suffer and those who have faith his grace which leads to salvation.

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