

Theology of the Cross: Challenge and Opportunity for the Post-Christendom Church¹

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As a non-Lutheran for whom Martin Luther has been, since I first encountered him half a century ago, the most *interesting* historically prominent Christian of them all, I have gradually come to the conclusion that, of all the major voices of the Protestant Reformation, Luther's is the least familiar. That seems obvious enough where Anglo-Saxon Protestants are concerned, but sometimes I have the impression Luther remains something of a stranger even among the churches which call themselves by his name. Perhaps, like many renowned figures of history, Luther's fame has obscured his reality.³

We English-speaking Protestants of WASPish origin usually *think* we know Luther. After all, he did 'launch' the Reformation with his famous Hallowe'en prank there in Wittenberg nearly five centuries ago. But we tend, most of us, to lump Luther together with all the other heroes of our religious past—Zwingli and Calvin and Knox and the English reformers right down to Wesley. And the truth is, he's significantly different from all of them.

Luther's 'difference' can be discussed in many ways. For instance, it can be said that he is still a late-medieval man and a mystic, whereas the other reforming spirits (including Melanchthon!) were 'modern', trained in the humanist tradition, and tending towards rationalism. Or that Luther, though a scholar, never lost touch with his peasant origins, whilst Calvin and the others were already part of the emerging Middle Classes. And so forth.

But what really separates Anglo-Christianity from Luther, I think, is his *theology*. There are shadings and nuances in his way of articulating Christian faith that the typical English-speaking Protestant finds puzzling—even uncomfortable. And this discomfort isn't limited to Presbyterians, Methodists, and Anglicans. Many avowed Lutherans feel it, too. For Luther's most basic ideas are conspicuously 'out of

sync' with the culture by which we are all shaped today, no matter what our denominational tag.

Take what's usually regarded as the central claim of the man: "justification by grace through faith"—*sola gratia, sola fide*. Who, in our success-driven society really believes that—and behaves accordingly? The somewhat-informed churchgoing Protestant may dutifully deplore "works righteousness," but will he or she be satisfied with a son or daughter who isn't a high achiever?

Or consider Luther's paradoxical notion that Christians are "*at the same time* justified and sinners" (*simul justus et peccator*). In a country like the USA, where "true belief" admits of neither intellectual doubt nor moral duplicity, what kind of concession to backsliding is that?

And what of Luther's conception of the authority of the Bible? Certainly the Bible was indispensable for the Saxon Reformer. His *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone) was as adamant as Calvin's. But no-one who knows him even a little could ever accuse Luther of encouraging Fundamentalism. He was fond of quoting the then-popular saying, "The Bible has a wax nose." You can twist it to your own preference in . . . noses! Besides, Scripture is only 'the cradle' of Christ, Luther insisted. One should not confuse it with the Baby. Only the living Christ himself is Truth—and, sorry, you may possess a Bible but you can't possess *Him*!

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I could go on in that vein, but all this 'difference' in Martin Luther is summed up in one great, underlying distinction: the distinction that he himself, early in his reforming career, designated by two Latin terms: *theologia crucis*, and *theologia gloriae*—usually translated 'theology of the cross' and 'theology of glory'. Luther wanted his theology to be (and it usually was) a theology of the cross. There's a temptation to the theology of glory in all of us, even Luther; but he at least knew that it's a matter of *temptation*, and many Christians, apparently, do not.⁴

By 'theology of glory' Luther meant what some of us call *triumphalism*. Religious triumphalism is the kind of belief that imagines itself the only true belief, the only 'orthodoxy'. In the language of a popular song of my youth, this theology "accentuates the positive, eliminates the negative, and doesn't mess with Mr. Inbetween."⁵ So,

for instance, the great ‘positives’ of resurrection, redemption, sanctification and the triumph of God’s righteousness are ‘accentuated’, and crucifixion, divine judgement, continuing sinfulness and the reality of evil are ‘eliminated’ (except, of course, as they apply to other people!). Whether in old-fashioned doctrinal language, or in the psychologized lingo of the church-going middle classes, the theology of glory offers a full package of Positive Spiritual Reinforcement—for those whose economic and other *material* sorts of reinforcement are firmly in place.

The theology of the cross, on the other hand, is not able to shut its eyes to all the things that are wrong with the world—and with ourselves, our human selves, our *Christian* selves. It doesn’t accentuate *the negative*, as its critics sometimes claim; but it does want to acknowledge the presence and reality of that which negates and threatens life. Death and doubt and the demonic are still with us, and Luther never tired of talking about them and struggling with them. Any faith that depends on *denying* all that darkness isn’t faith at all in the biblical sense of the term; it’s credulity, repression and self-deception. The ‘Word of the Cross’ doesn’t *banish* the darkness, it *lightens* it—which means that the Gospel both reveals ‘the darkness’ for what it truly is, and provides enough light for us to make our way within it, one step at a time.⁶

If I had to characterize Luther on the basis of the approaches offered in the aforementioned song of my adolescence, I’d say that he intends neither to overemphasize the positive nor to overlook the negative. His main quest is to understand how, as disciples of the crucified One, we can live with “Mr. Inbetween”—or, to put it more learnedly, how we can live faithfully in the midst of what Reinhold Niebuhr called “the ambiguities of historical existence.” For Luther, neither those who say it’s all bad nor those who say it’s all good represent rightly the biblical view of the human condition. Life is a voyage on the great murky sea of Inbetween; and the trick is how to navigate one’s frail bark with eyes wide open to the real perils of the depths, yet with courage and expectancy. Only Luther, among the great founders of the Protestant way, as I see it, does justice to the ambivalence and contrarities of life; only he consistently refuses to offer us religious ‘answers’ that sit lightly to our never-ending human questions.

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The theology of the cross isn't just about Jesus's crucifixion and its meaning for us, though the cross of Calvary is of course its central symbol—its window on the world. The *theologia crucis* refers rather to a whole spirit and method of 'doing' theology; and, as Jürgen Moltmann put it succinctly in his book, *The Crucified God*, "*Theologia crucis* is not a single chapter in theology, but the key-signature for all Christian theology."⁷ It has as much to do with our understanding of God and the world and humankind and the church as it does with Jesus as the Christ and the doctrine of atonement.

I have found that the best way of capturing the *spirit* of this theological tradition is by considering the three so-called "theological virtues" named by St. Paul in the famous passage about love (*agape*) in 1 Corinthians 13: faith, hope, and love. But in order to bring out the deeper meaning of these positive Christian virtues, it is necessary to make explicit what they negate, what they rule out. Without these clarifying negations, faith, hope and love too easily devolve into pious platitudes.

So let us put it this way: the theology of the cross is a theology of (1) faith—*not sight*; (2) hope—*not finality or consummation*; (3) love—*not power*.

A Theology of Faith

Faith means trust—trust in *God*; *trust* in the absence of conclusive proof; trust in the presence of a good deal that normally makes for distrust! Paul, whose affirmation in 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 ("We preach Christ crucified") is the most explicit biblical source of this theology, continually contrasted "faith" with what he called "sight." Luther was fond of quoting especially Hebrews 11:1: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*." If as Christians we think we "see" something ultimate, absolute, it is only "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor 13:12 KJV).

A theology of *faith* therefore has to be a modest theology. As trust, faith knows periods of real confidence (*con + fide*), but it is consistently denied certitude—the unflinching sureness of those who believe they have "seen." Indeed, the faith that is "not sight" knows moments of serious doubt (Luther experienced many such moments—

Anfechtungen, he called them: periods of utter abandonment). Such faith, being conscious of its own incompleteness, is neither threatened by nor scornful of the faiths of others; on the contrary, unlike the religiously sure-of-themselves, it is ready to listen to all seekers after God and Truth.

Just here is one of the many reasons why the theology of the cross represents (as I indicated in my title) both challenge and opportunity for the Christian Movement as it enters its post-Christendom phase. Faith that is *faith* and does not pretend to be “sight” is modest enough to know (a) that it is one alternative among many, (b) that its public witness must be thoughtful and not just declaratory, and (c) that it may and must dialogue with other faiths. A triumphalistic religious community that confronts its world as the one body that really “sees” and “knows,” is destined to be a divisive—and perhaps a violent—influence in our diverse and volatile global context today. Only a faith that is conscious of how far short it falls of ultimate truth and goodness (‘sight’) can contribute to the peace and justice of a planet as diverse and as fragile as ours.

A Theology of Hope

Christian Hope has to be distinguished from every world view, religious or secular, that presents the goal of history as though it were already accomplished—at least in the religious or political theories of the world view in question. While the Gospel proclaims that God’s victory over sin, evil and death has been achieved already *in Christ*, it does not interpret the resurrection triumph of God in Jesus as though the cross—and all the creational and human suffering that the cross of Jesus stands for—were simply a thing of the past. That is precisely the temptation of the theology of glory. Those who are under the spell of that theology, in whatever form, tend to treat the existing suffering of the world, including individual pain and death, less than seriously.

In fact a good deal of religion in the world today (some of it allegedly Christian) must be blamed for retarding or subverting changes that are demanded by persons and groups, often working in secular agencies, who care deeply about creation and human civilization. For one thing, too much religion is still fixated on ‘heaven’ as the great and glorious goal of existence, thus relegating earthly troubles to second place at best. More subtly, religion provides its adherents,

especially among the more affluent peoples of Earth, with a panoply of well-being which effectively insulates them against the suffering of many creatures, human and extrahuman.

To be concrete, many have argued that the main function of religion in the United States seems to be to undergird the “national philosophy of optimism” (Sydney Hook) with a super-optimism born of faith and producing ‘peace of mind’. But this optimism is not to be confused with Christian hope. Hope, as it is conceived of under the sign of the cross, is not based on the capacity of humans (some of them!) to think positively, cheerfully, ‘hopefully’; it is based on faith in the grace and providence of God. God, who brought Jesus again from the dead, is at work in the world to fulfil the promises of creation, appearances to the contrary. Such hope doesn’t have to turn away from all the seemingly hopeless things that occur in order to sustain its hope. It can be honest about the way the developed nations are despoiling nature and oppressing the materially deprived; it can face the reality of our ongoing wars, of devastating pandemics like AIDS, of the worldwide marginalization of women, of racial tension, etc. Hope that is fashioned “beneath the cross of Jesus” will even, despite itself, be driven to greater and greater honesty about the data of despair, the realities that make for earthly hopelessness.

And that kind of honesty is ethically extremely important. For unless human beings have the courage to confront what is wrong with their world, they will never be in a position to help to right the wrong. So, far from being an attitude of blessed contentment, lulled by the feeling that “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world,” Christian hope is a catalyst of involvement, participation, action! It grabs us by the throat and thrusts us into the life of our tumultuous times, making us *responsible* for our world in a way we never associated with . . . religion.

A Theology of Love

The theology of the cross is a theology of love, not of power. The contrast between love and power is both dramatic and subtle. Some people like to speak about the ‘power of love’, as though love were just another kind of power, maybe the most powerful. But if it is a power, love is the only power that, to achieve its aim, must become weak. A love that ‘comes on strong’, trying to take the beloved by storm, is a

contradiction in terms. Love that is real has to accommodate itself to the condition of the beloved.

That is what God, in the crucified Christ, has done and is doing. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, "The crux of the cross is its revelation of the fact that the final power of God over humankind is derived from the self-imposed weakness of God's love."⁸ Tillich was fond of quoting Luther on the same theme: "If God had come in power, He would not have won our hearts. 'God made himself small for us in Christ' [Luther]."⁹

So much religion—including the Christian religion—has been driven by the illusion that it could make a difference only if it were able to compete with the other great powers of the world, including governments and political ideologies and other religions. Christendom throughout its more than 1500-year history (from Constantine onwards) has been, with a few glorious exceptions, little more than a scramble for worldly power on the part of a religion that claimed to base itself on the life and death of One who said, "My kingdom is not of this world." Still today in the United States and elsewhere, many churches threatened with extinction or 'sidelining' expend their energies trying to grow bigger and more influential; and other Christian groups—the most statistically successful of the lot—eagerly lend their support to a government that no longer dissimulates but openly flaunts its imperial ambitions.

Meanwhile, the poor of the earth cry out, the sick (the millions with AIDS in Africa, among them) are forgotten and left to die, and the natural order 'groans in travail' (Rom 8:22) under the great weight of human rapaciousness and apathy. Isn't it obvious that (quoting another song) "what the world needs now is love, love, love"? And (unlike the song, perhaps) *I don't mean sentimentality. I mean *agape*. Suffering love.*

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As the Christian Movement emerges out of its constantinian cocoon and tries to enter again, after fifteen centuries of religious Establishment, the big, wide, many-cultured world, we Christians need all the help we can get if we are to find a way into the future. Yes, only God can provide that help. But, as usual, God works in "mysterious ways" that involve God's *people* in very ordinary tasks—

like becoming newly aware of our own Judeo-Christian past, especially the parts we forgot, or never knew, or maybe didn't *want* to know. Among those unremembered memories, the kind of Christian thought and discipleship that Martin Luther named "theology of the cross" (he didn't invent it, but he named it) is, in my experience, the most important challenge and opportunity presented to serious Christians today. Maybe that kind of Christianity could not make itself heard very often in our Christendom past. Maybe *that* Luther had to remain a stranger to most of us 'til now, even Lutherans. But now that the "theology of glory," like other ideologies of triumph (e.g. doctrinaire Marxism), has begun to show up as the spiritual illusion it always was, a theology that is directed to the Inbetween place that this world is can speak to our condition as no triumphalism, religious or political, ever can.

Notes

1. This essay appeared originally in *The Lutheran* 17.3 (March 2004): 12–18.
2. Douglas John Hall, C.M. is Emeritus Professor of Christian Theology, Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, Montreal, Canada.
3. If you would like to renew your acquaintance with the course of Luther's life, look at James A. Nestingen's new and very readable book, *Martin Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003).
4. For an extensive treatment of the theology of the cross, see my recent book, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).
5. Written by Johnny Mercer and Harold Arden, and sung in popular versions by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters.
6. That's why I called my first larger book, *Lighten Our Darkness: Towards an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976; rev. 2001, with Foreword by David J. Monge; Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal).
7. Trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: S.C.M., 1974), 72.
8. In Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 22.
9. In a sermon entitled, "The Yoke of Religion," *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: S.C.M., 1949), 93–103.