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Luther's Theology of the Cross

Heino O. Kadai

As a young man, before the Reformation in Germany, Martin Luther advised his friend George Spenlein: "My dear Friar, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, 'Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin.'"¹ Years later, in heated literary battle with the illustrious humanist Erasmus, Dr. Luther, by then well known himself, held true to this advice. Again he said, "We teach nothing save Christ crucified."² This remained the heart of Luther's theology throughout life. Once at a disputation in Heidelberg he called it *theologia crucis*.³ In his swan-song lecture series on the first book of the Pentateuch that took a decade to deliver he called it the "theology of the Gospel."⁴ The label does not matter. The important point is that Luther's theology centers uniquely around the crucified Jesus. As *doctor biblicus* and professor of exegetical theology at the University of Wittenberg, his calling was to expound the word of God, and in his considered judgment Jesus Christ was the central message of the Holy Scriptures. "Take Christ from the Scriptures—and what more will you find in them?" he asked.⁵

¹"Letter to George Spenlein, April 8, 1516," *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 volumes, edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), 48:12. Subsequent references to volumes in this series will be abbreviated *LW*.

²Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, edited by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), 107.

³"Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:40.

⁴"Lectures on Genesis," *LW* 8:30.

⁵*Bondage of the Will*, 71.

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Luther did not attempt to penetrate the mysteries of God not revealed in the word. He realized that "there is a great deal hid in God of which we know nothing."⁶ God must be sought where He has revealed Himself, that is, in Jesus. To find God, Luther turned to this humble Jew of Nazareth, who long ago had told Thomas: "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; henceforth you know Him and have seen Him."⁷ Of all places, the glory of God was to be sought on the cross of Golgotha. Luther agreed profoundly with St. Paul's words to the Galatian Christians: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁸ The central figure in Luther's theology is the crucified Christ. It is fitting that his theology be known as *theologia crucis*.

I. The Cross as the Common Christian Heritage

The cross is the catholic heritage of all Christendom. Although there are indications that its religious significance extended beyond the pale of Christendom—pre-Christian crosses were used symbolically in Assyria, Persia, India, and northern Scandinavia—the cross has come to be identified with Christianity.⁹ There is good reason for this. The heart of the Christian faith is summed up in the cross of Jesus Christ. Leon Morris has demonstrated just how extensively the cross motif penetrates the marrow of New Testament theology.¹⁰

⁶*Bondage of the Will*, 71.

⁷John 14:6-7.

⁸Galatians 6:14.

⁹Daniel J. Fleming, "Religious Symbols Crossing Cultural Boundaries," *Religious Symbolism*, edited by F. Ernest Johnson (New York: The Institute for Religious and Social Studies and Harper & Brothers, 1955), 84.

¹⁰Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965), especially pages 364 and following.

Cross and the Early Church

While making use of the symbol of the cross, early Christian writers seldom saturated theological treatises with allusions to it, especially as the instrument of torture on which Christ died.¹¹ Early Christian artists also seemed reluctant to use it, preferring the indirection of the symbol: the anchor, mast, and crossbeams of the ship and the Greek letter X, the initial of Christ. In fact the cross as a graphic symbol was probably overshadowed by the fish, *ichthus* (ἰχθύς), the individual letters of which spell out the initials of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.¹² The sign of the cross, however, gained popularity early and by the end of the second century was an established custom in Christian piety.

Crucifixion as such does not appear in early Christian art.¹³ Probably the earliest remaining pictorial presentation of the crucifixion of Christ was drawn during the second century by hostile hands. On the wall of the Domus Celotiana in Rome, a building used as a school for imperial pages, one sees a drawing of a crucified ass with the Greek inscription "Alexamenos (adores) God."¹⁴ Not until the fourth century did Christians begin to represent in art form the narrative of the death of Christ. Why did the Passion narrative appear so relatively late in Christian art? Several reasons come to mind. Perhaps there is some truth to the conjecture that since the cross remained a sign of foolishness and a stumbling block to the Graeco-Roman

¹¹Here note an interesting study by G. Q. Reijners, *The Terminology of the Holy Cross in Early Christian Literature* (Nijmegen: Dekker Van de Vegt N. V., 1965). He demonstrates that the usual name for the cross in patristic texts and earliest apocryphal writings was an instrument of torture. This usage agrees with the vocabulary of the evangelists in the Passion narratives and with usage in contemporary profane literature. It is remarkable, however, that the word never occurs in the Septuagint. See page 215.

¹²Eric Newton and William Neil, *2000 Years of Christian Art* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 31.

¹³Crucifixion as a subject of art does not appear before the fifth century in the West. See Gilbert Cope, *Symbolism in the Bible and the Church* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 41.

¹⁴For a reproduction of the drawing see Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years*, volume I of *The Christian Centuries* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), plate 10.

world, believers found it more advantageous to stress the resurrection of their Lord rather than draw attention to His ignominious death.¹⁵ A sounder reason is to be found in the theology of the period. As Jean Daniélou has indicated, early Christian theology saw in the symbolism of the cross the expression of Christ's irresistible power and divine efficacy.¹⁶ The lowly, suffering Jesus of the Passion story simply did not fit into the scheme of patristic Christology. The Greek Fathers were more impressed by the doctrine of the Incarnation than the Vicarious Atonement. This is well illustrated by Irenaeus, the brilliant second-century Greek-speaking Father from Lyons, in whose hands the Incarnation becomes *the* event of man's salvation: "The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . through His transcendent love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."¹⁷ Hermann Sasse is right when he states that here the doctrine of the cross is contained in the doctrine of Incarnation, but it has lost its independent status. For the ancient church as well as the later Eastern church the reality of the cross tended to become hidden in the glory of Christmas and Easter. The cross was outshone by the divine glory of Christ incarnate and the risen Lord.¹⁸

Cross and Byzantine Christianity

As the patristic era progressed into the so-called Middle Ages, the cross became a common symbol in artistic representation. In early Byzantine art it played a major role, becoming a favorite architectural design. The little cruciform building in Ravenna known as the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia may have the distinction of being the earliest major example of Christian art

¹⁵Cope, 41.

¹⁶Daniélou and Marrou, 78-79.

¹⁷Irenaeus "Against Heresies" (Preface to Book V), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), 1:526. Also consult the excellent work by Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959).

¹⁸Hermann Sasse, "Theologia crucis," *Briefe an lutherische Pastoren*, Nr. 18 (April 15, 1951), 3.

in Italy. Its opulent Oriental decor includes the mosaic panels of Martyr St. Lawrence and the beardless Good Shepherd, both prominently incorporating the cross into the design. But the work is so heavily laden with brilliance, mystery, and decorative magnificence that the stark reality of the pain of the cross is largely lost. To be sure, it is there, but it does not dominate.¹⁹ The story is much the same with the mosaic in the apse of Santa Pudenziana in Rome where Christ is depicted as teacher of the apostles in the heavenly Jerusalem (401-417). Again the cross is prominent, but its golden majesty hardly suggests suffering. Rather, it stands as a token of Christ's victory.²⁰

The Greek and the Byzantine artists took the cue from their theologians, who tended toward an idealistic conception of man with a leaning toward what came to be known as Pelagianism. The lack of a truly biblical understanding of the serious nature of sin helped prevent the early and the Byzantine churches from reaching the full significance of the cross. Thus they remained short of a true *theologia crucis*.

Cross and the Medieval West

Sasse convincingly contends that *theologia crucis* belongs to the Western church.²¹ It was in the West that Constantine, the first Roman ruler really friendly toward the Christians, conquered under the sign of the cross. It was he who had the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built in the holy city of Jerusalem to house the alleged relic of the Holy Cross. The act was a definite boost for the veneration of the cross throughout all Christendom. But the real home of cross-centered piety was the "Holy Cross in Jerusalem" Church in Rome.

¹⁹For reproductions of the mosaics in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (d. 450) see Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *Early Christian Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1961), plates 146 and 147. For a discussion of the subject see Newton and Neil, 41.

²⁰For a reproduction see Volbach, plate 130.

²¹"*Theologia crucis*," 4.

Western veneration of the cross had its liturgical aspects. Important hymns were produced. The Latin poet Venantius Fortunatus (circa 530-circa 600) composed two, *Pange lingua gloriosi* and *Vexilla Regis*. Both were directly addressed to the cross and became part of the Roman liturgical heritage for Good Friday worship. There is no doubt that this type of liturgical piety was sincere and cross-oriented. In fact it was a kind of theology of the cross. While not yet the theology of Bernard of Clairvaux's *Salve caput cruentatum*²² or the popular, tender *Stabat mater dolorosa/juxta crucem lachrymosa*, it pointed the way toward such theology.²³

As in the early church, so also in early medieval piety the cross remained a symbol of divine victory and power. Christian emperors carried it on the battlefield and were confident that they conquered and killed under its blessings. The church militant looked and learned from the secular environment and battled demons and devils by its power. The cross became an almost magical weapon, at the disposal of the visible church to repel its enemies.

The discovery of the naked reality of the suffering and dying Savior by medieval monks and churchmen was of monumental significance to the life and theology of the church. The great Pantocrator Christ, for example, in the magnificent Norman-built twelfth-century cathedral at Cefalù in Sicily²⁴ gave way to Benedetto Antelami's modest conception of "The Deposition"

²²Paul Gerhardt's hymn (1656) *O Haupt von Blut und Wunden* is based on Bernard's *Salve caput cruentatum*. Gerhardt's hymn is in *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), Hymn 172.

²³The hymn is of unknown origin. Suggested authors are Innocent III (d. 1216), St. Bonaventura (d. 1274) and Jacopone da Todi (d. 1306). The hymn came into liturgical use in the late Middle Ages and found its way into the Roman Missal in the eighteenth century. See F. L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1285. See also Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, volume 5, *The Middle Ages* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 859-868.

²⁴For illustration see Newton and Neil, 81.

(1178) in Parma²⁵ or to the humble Passion narrative on the tympanum of the central portal of the Gothic Cathedral of Strasbourg (thirteenth century).²⁶ The Man of Sorrows replaced the image of the victorious Christ. Christ's humility, suffering, pain, and death continued to interest both the medieval theologian and the artist. This piety perhaps is climaxed in the work of Grünewald, a German painter and contemporary of Luther. Grünewald's artistic representation of the crucifixion forms the central panel of the Isenheim Altarpiece (about 1509-1515) and is one of the most moving ever produced. According to Eric Newton, the noted art critic, "it strains the possibilities of the tragic, the static, the mystical and the macabre to a point never reached before or since in Christian art. Perhaps it is the one great series of paintings that dwells, almost hysterically, on horror and yet never loses the spirit of reverence for suffering."²⁷

Changing moods in the fine arts were symptoms of change in theological attitudes. Discovery of the suffering and death of Christ as a bitter reality went hand in hand with realization of the serious nature of sin and guilt, and medieval theologians began to take the plight of sin far more seriously. Unfortunately, the answers they proposed to the problems of sin and grace were often unbiblical. The penitential system, developed as cure for men's souls, turned out to harbor serious contradictions to the gospel. However, medieval man, both cleric and layman, was impressed by the magnitude of his sin and his dire need of absolution. It was this type of theological climate that formed the context for Luther's quest for the gracious God and in 1505 helped him decide for the monastic way among the Augustinian Eremites. The quest for the meaning of the cross had already moved the Latin church for a thousand years before it became a crucial problem for the German Reformation.

²⁵For illustration see Newton and Neil, 99.

²⁶For illustration see Marcel Aubert and Simone Goubet, *Gothic Cathedrals of France and Their Treasures* (London: Nicholas Kaye Limited, 1959), plate 273.

²⁷Newton and Neil, 157. For a good reproduction see plate IX.

One of the fruits of medieval reflection on the doctrine of sin and salvation was Anselm's profound book *Cur Deus homo*. This work was a product of the age of Scholasticism and therefore understandably suffers some of the weaknesses inherent in the attempted synthesis of faith and reason. In some respects, however, Anselm of Canterbury transcended the weaknesses of his theological milieu.²⁸ Students of the history of Christian thought note with interest that Anselm was the first to raise the *satisfactio vicaria* to its rightful place in theology. According to Sasse:

it is a remarkable fact that the doctrine according to which the death of Christ is the satisfaction for the sins of the world is the only doctrine of the Middle Ages which eventually found general assent. The medieval doctrines of sin and grace have remained in dispute. The dogma of transubstantiation has been limited to the Roman Church. All doctrines developed in the 16th century are limited to certain sections of Christendom. But the doctrine of the *satisfactio vicaria* has been dogmatized by the Lutheran, the Reformed, the Anglican, and the Roman Churches independently in their respective confessions.²⁹

Thus Anselm made a lasting contribution to the theology of the cross.³⁰

It is evident that the cross was no stranger to the Christian tradition before Luther. It had already appeared in many shapes: the Greek cross, the Latin cross, the Egyptian cross, the Maltese cross, the Papal cross, and the cross of Lorraine. Iconographers have identified more than fifty varieties, all of

²⁸ An interpretation of Anselm's theological significance and scope that deserves praise is Karl Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1960).

²⁹ "Theologia crucis," 5.

³⁰ For a convenient English text of Anselm's *Cur Deus homo* see *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, edited by Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 100-183.

which have figured in Christian symbolism.³¹ It appeared in and on reliquaries, graced church buildings, formed the ground plan for some of the houses of worship, rode in processions, was embroidered on the silk and satin of ecclesiastical vestments, and appeared as a perennial sign on the fingertips of cleric and layman alike. It was ever on the lips of the whole of medieval Christendom. Yet the real depth of the theology of the cross also eluded the Middle Ages. Only in the sixteenth century did *theologia crucis* come to full biblical dimensions in the theology of Martin Luther.

II. Luther's *theologia crucis*

Luther did not need to discover that Jesus Christ had died on the cross for the sins of the world. The church had known that for a long time. In fact, his Catholic superior Staupitz and his father confessor at the monastery both directed him to the forgiveness available in the cross of Christ when he was waging a desperate struggle for righteousness and salvation. In a measure the theology he was taught was that of the cross. It was not, however, all that Luther's own *theologia crucis* came to mean.

In some respects the *theologia crucis* was a radical reversal of the medieval theology of the cross, which Luther later came to call *theologia gloriae*, theology of glory. As Luther came to recognize the full sweetness of God's love in the cross, he realized that the cross also had an epistemological dimension. It offered clues to understanding the mysteries of divine revelation. This formed the backbone of the *theologia crucis*. Luther realized that the love of God toward the sinner that the dying Savior symbolized and manifested as He atoned was, although important, only one aspect of the theology of the cross. An equally important aspect of *theologia crucis*, the cross event, was that it revealed the mystery of God's revelation and afforded insight into the secrets of God's dealings with men. Luther made this discovery rather early in his career. By the

³¹See *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, edited by Julius Bodensieck (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), 1:640-641.

time the Ninety-five Theses shook the foundations of Western Christendom he had already given concise definition to his ideas on *theologia crucis*. His early lectures on the Epistle to the Hebrews (1517) clearly show that he had already grasped its full dimensions.³² The lectures were interrupted midstream when Luther received a summons to appear before the regular triennial meeting of the German Congregation of the Augustinian Eremites in Heidelberg (1518).³³ During these meetings Vicar General Johann von Staupitz offered him the opportunity (April 26, 1518) to preside over a debate covering 28 theological and 12 philosophical theses that Luther had prepared beforehand.³⁴ The theses demonstrated the growing maturity of his evangelical thought and are of particular interest to those who seek to grasp his *theologia crucis*. Never did Luther express his theology of the cross more succinctly.

Heidelberg Theses on theologia crucis

The most relevant of the Heidelberg Theses are 18 through 21:

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

³²Luther: *Early Theological Works*, edited and translated by James Atkinson, volume 16 of *Library of Christian Classics* (London: SCM Press, 1962). See particularly page 82, note 1.

³³Luther: *Early Theological Works*, 21.

³⁴Actually Leonhard Beier debated the theses, with Luther presiding. *LW* 31:38.

21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.³⁵

A number of theological insights emerge.

Paradox of the Knowledge of God

How do Christians know and recognize God? Luther faced this epistemological question. First, there is a contrast between man's attempt to know God on his own and the knowledge and encounter that God makes available. Using his reasoning power man may seek to know God by way of philosophical reflection or contemplation of created reality. In such cases the goal is the knowledge of God as He is in His naked majesty. Luther knew that such a quest was doomed to failure. Man simply cannot bear exposure to the glory of divine majesty. God had told Moses: "You cannot see My face; for man shall not see Me and live. . . . Behold, there is a place by Me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while My glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with My hand until I have passed by; then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen."³⁶

Prior to eternity God does not encounter man in naked majesty but adjusts Himself to the human situation, that is, He covers Himself with a mask, revealing Himself in concretized, humanized, and incarnate form. Any attempt to push the mask aside or glance behind it results in tragedy. Man must learn to find God in the masks He has chosen to clothe Himself. The most important of the masks is the Incarnation. God took upon Himself humanity and revealed Himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Luther well knew that God had given Himself to be known in Jesus and that outside of Him God was not to be found. Whoever seeks God outside of Christ, said Luther, actually ends up by finding the devil. Thus the knowledge of God can come only on God's own initiative and terms. But He has chosen the way of masks and veils in order to accommodate human frailty. A paradox obtains: God in His revelation conceals Himself

³⁵LW 31:40.

³⁶Exodus 33:20-23.

behind masks. This is the way of God even today. Paul Althaus writes: "The Holy Spirit comes to us through the external, physical, sensible means of the word, of the human voice, and of the sacraments. All these words and sacraments are his veils and clothing, masks and disguises with which he covers himself so that we may bear and comprehend him."³⁷

In Thesis 19 Luther speaks primarily to scholastic theologians when he warns that true theologians should know better than to try to speculate about God on the basis of the created world and historical data. The "invisible things of God," His eternal power and deity, cannot be properly derived from a knowledge of things.³⁸ Luther clearly rejects the Thomistic type of natural theology. But he does not reject a "natural" knowledge of God.³⁹ As far as Luther is concerned, to move from below to above, from creation to the Creator via *analogia entis*, is not sound theology.

According to Luther, a theologian worthy of the name "comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross" (Thesis 20). Here a contrast is established between the invisible nature of God and His majestic attributes (see Romans 1:20) on the one hand, and His visible back side of humanity, weakness, and foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:25) on the other. Further contrast emerges between knowledge of God from His works and from His suffering. A true theologian seeks God where God Himself has

³⁷Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 22.

³⁸Romans 1:20.

³⁹Philip S. Watson's work *Let God Be God* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947) is more helpful than most treatments of the subject. Watson writes (78, 79): "For Luther, God is not to be sought behind His creation by inference from it, but is rather to be apprehended in and through it. . . . In a certain sense, therefore, the Creator is concealed by His works. Yet the *larvae Dei* have another and more positive significance than that of mere concealment. Rightly understood, they are media of Divine revelation." See also "Lectures on Genesis," LW1:11: "God also does not manifest Himself except through His works and the Word, because the meaning of these is understood in some measure."

hidden His revelation: in the foolishness, humility, and shame of the cross.⁴⁰ A theology of glory seeks God only in the manifestation of His power. But in His blinding glory and power God is beyond man. He wants to and must be known in His suffering and death. This is the essence of Luther's *theologia crucis*. Accordingly, a theologian who seeks God must stop at the foot of the cross of Golgotha. In the crucified Savior God meets man as his gracious and merciful Father. The real reality is not accessible to man as man but must be revealed to him.

Radical Revelation of Reality

In Thesis 21 Luther complained that the theology of glory did not have a true understanding of reality. While having a taste for pomp and ceremony, majesty, might, and power, *theologia gloriae* was embarrassed by the suffering Savior figure, as well as by the suffering God placed on the shoulders of the followers of Christ. Man had decided to use his own standards in evaluating God's reality. To be sure, by human standards the cross, suffering, and weakness were to be avoided as unworthy of a mighty and benevolent God. It was not so at all in God's sight. He had chosen to offer His grace in a form that was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews, an offense to man's good common sense. Think of the bystander at the scene of the crucifixion. What he saw was the dying Jesus of Nazareth, the final defeat for a religious enthusiast. In reality, as God's revelation testifies, it was *the* event of history. God's Son was conquering the forces of evil and making the salvation of mankind possible. Once Luther told Erasmus, "Your thoughts of God are too human."⁴¹ He implied the same when he reprimanded the theologians of glory at Heidelberg.

Luther's explanation of Thesis 21 indicates that he was unconvinced that his opponents really knew the full revelation of God in Christ. "He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering," he said.⁴² Such a man "prefers works

⁴⁰See an excellent discussion of the matter by Althaus, 26.

⁴¹*Bondage of the Will*, 87.

⁴²LW 31:53.

to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil."⁴³ Luther was convinced that God could be found only in suffering and the cross.⁴⁴ Friends of the cross would therefore call suffering good. Friends of *theologia gloriae* would prefer humanly devised good works to suffering. They would want to attain God's favor by works that they by themselves had decided should please God. Luther had no sympathy with such opinions. He believed that "through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified."⁴⁵

There was little room left for man's pride, but Luther was not upset. If man is to receive God's grace, he must "utterly despair of his own ability" (Thesis 18). The divine law must do its work of leading him into hell and showing him that he is a sinner in all his works. Only after man has learned to accept the fact that it is utterly presumptuous of him to strive for grace on the basis of his own strength is he ready for God's grace in Christ.⁴⁶ "It is impossible," said Luther, "for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's."⁴⁷

The radical reevaluation of reality is possible by faith alone. The new insight into reality appeals neither to reason nor to common sense. It is the foolishness of God which is wiser than men.⁴⁸ In this light Luther's *theologia crucis* might also be called a theology of faith. The very nature of faith, Luther once told his students, is "to see what cannot be seen and not see what can be seen."⁴⁹

⁴³LW 31:53.

⁴⁴LW 31:53.

⁴⁵LW 31:53.

⁴⁶LW 31:51-52.

⁴⁷LW 31:53.

⁴⁸On wisdom and foolishness in divine economy as it relates to Luther's theology of the Heidelberg Disputation see the perceptive essay by Edmund Schlink, "Weisheit und Torheit," *Kerygma und Dogma* 1 (1955): 1-22.

⁴⁹Luther: *Early Theological Works*, 222.

III. Luther Remains True to His *theologia crucis*

Any serious student of Luther knows that the Reformer's theology evolved over a period of many years. While his tower experience, the discovery of the biblical meaning of the "righteousness of God," may have occurred abruptly, his theology as a whole matured slowly.⁵⁰ Therefore it is not altogether misleading to speak of the "young Luther" or the "mature Luther" when evaluating his work. Understandably, Luther needed time to extricate himself from the theological patterns of thought in which he was trained and nurtured. Once the "Copernican revolution" in theology had begun, thinking through its implications required time. Luther sometimes found that his early theological views needed modification. To cite examples, consider his changing attitude toward the papacy, purgatory, and indulgences. His *theologia crucis* does not belong in this group. To contend that theology of the cross merely belongs to the young or Catholic Luther is to err.⁵¹ It characterized his whole theological effort. Walther von Loewenich, the best-known interpreter of Luther's *theologia crucis*, heartily agrees that "*theologia crucis* is a principle of Luther's whole theology, it may not be limited to any particular period."⁵² No less a Luther interpreter than Gerhard Ebeling supports this view, pointing out that although Luther in his later work did not use the phrase *theologia crucis* frequently — quite

⁵⁰This writer finds it difficult to see real merit in perennial discussion on the date of Luther's famous discovery. The early date of 1513 or 1514, held by E. G. Schwiebert (*Luther and His Times* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950], 282 and following) and Gordon Rupp (*The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1953]), considering all factors, seems much more satisfying than the late date proposed by Ernst Bizer (*Fides ex auditu* [Neukirchner Verlag, 1961]) and Uuras Saarnivaara (*Luther Discovers the Gospel* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951]).

⁵¹Otto Ritschl called it "monk's theology" and assigned it to Luther's prereformatory period. See his *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus*, volume 2 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichsche Buchhandlung, 1912), especially pages 40-84.

⁵²*Luthers Theologia Crucis*, 4. Auflage (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954), 7; Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 12-13.

the opposite is true – the label nevertheless well describes all his theology.⁵³ This writer is convinced. A spot check of Luther's work dispels all doubt.

The Commentary on the Magnificat and theologia crucis (1521)

Luther's commentary on the Magnificat is a devotional tract composed in the stormy days of the spring and summer of 1521. The work was addressed to Prince John Frederick of Saxony, the elector's nephew, who was later destined to become the benevolent evangelical ruler of Electoral Saxony (1532-1547). The writing of the commentary was interrupted by Luther's call to the Diet of Worms and was completed during the relative quiet of the Wartburg confinement. By June 10, 1521, the work was ready for the printer.⁵⁴

The commentary is a delightful pamphlet of considerable spiritual depth. In it Luther offered remarkably candid advice to the young nobleman: "Unless a lord and ruler loves his subjects and has for his chief concern not how to live at ease but how to uplift and improve his people, his case is hopeless; he rules only for his soul's perdition."⁵⁵ As Luther saw it, a good ruler was a true Christian and took "the fear of God for his defense and rampart," and it was his duty as a Christian theologian, citizen, and subject to offer "wholesome instruction and admonition" to his future prince and lord.⁵⁶

The burden of the message of the Magnificat was Christian humility, and he developed this theme in such a manner that it becomes quite clear that his *theologia crucis* underlay the whole exposition.⁵⁷

⁵³Luther: *Einführung in sein Denken* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964), 259; See also chapter 14: "Verborgener und offenbarer Gott," 259-279.

⁵⁴"Letter to George Spenslein, June 10, 1521," *LW* 48:254. For a discussion of the composition of the commentary see *LW* 21:xvii and following.

⁵⁵*LW* 21:357.

⁵⁶*LW* 21:357, 356.

⁵⁷*LW* 21:300, 306, 315-316, 343. Luther calls it the highest of virtues, 313.

In the introductory paragraphs Luther established that God's and man's evaluation of reality did not coincide. He wrote:

Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dying. In this manner no creature can work.⁵⁸

He was convinced that God humbled the proud and gave grace to the humble.⁵⁹ Where the experience prevails that God "looks into the depths and helps only the poor, despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken, and those who are nothing, there a hearty love for Him is born."⁶⁰

Luther believed that Mary, whom he often called the Mother of God, taught how to know, love, and praise God by word and example.⁶¹

Knowing God

There is a false way and a true way to the knowledge of God. Of the false, the way of speculation and reason, Luther said:

There are many who praise God with a loud voice, preach about Him with high-sounding words, speak much of Him, dispute and write about Him, and paint His image; whose thoughts dwell often upon Him and who reach out after Him and speculate about Him with their reason; there are also many who exalt Him with false devotion and a false will.⁶²

Speculation and philosophical reflection do not lead to a true knowledge of God because God dwells in the darkness of

⁵⁸LW 21:299; see also 356.

⁵⁹Luther is thinking here of 1 Peter 5:5.

⁶⁰LW 21:300.

⁶¹LW 21:301.

⁶²LW 21:307.

faith.⁶³ The true reality of God cannot be seen; man must comprehend by faith, which Luther defines as "firm confidence in the unseen grace of God that is promised us."⁶⁴ Since God's works are in secret, without semblance of power, and men judge by appearances, men often err.⁶⁵ God operates by a standard unfamiliar to man's conception of the deity. His wisdom and power are not those most highly esteemed by men.⁶⁶ In fact, He chose what is foolish in the world in order to shame the wise.⁶⁷ If man really wants to know the truth, his eyes need to be changed. He must realize that God's value judgments are tipped in favor of the lowly and the despised.⁶⁸ God has power, but that power is seen through faith; moreover to understand God's works requires faith. By faith the real nature, will, and mind of God become known.⁶⁹ Even God's greatest work, the Incarnation, seems a humble historical event to the natural eye,⁷⁰ but without this event the whole world would still be in sin and accursed, and this in spite of man's doing and knowing.⁷¹ One must view the whole Christ event with faith. To the human eye Christ looked powerless on the cross, yet it was there that He performed His mightiest work. So sense and reason must close their eyes and faith must take over.⁷² As man comprehends God's gracious regard to him, a sinner, God gives Himself to man and lets Himself be known as the gracious Father. One might wonder about proof. Hardly! God's word and work do not demand proof of reason; man must know in free and pure faith alone.⁷³ Luther was convinced that to know God was to

⁶³LW 21:304.

⁶⁴LW 21:305.

⁶⁵LW 21:339.

⁶⁶LW 21:314.

⁶⁷LW 21:313.

⁶⁸LW 21:317.

⁶⁹LW 21:331.

⁷⁰LW 21:350.

⁷¹LW 21:352.

⁷²LW 21:340-341.

⁷³LW 21:353.

believe that He was good even if His goodness escaped man's sense experience.⁷⁴

The Magnificat taught Luther that a Christian does not place his trust in God's gifts; he trusts in His grace, in God Himself.⁷⁵ Perverted lovers of God, the parasites, hirelings, and slaves, love salvation but not their Savior.⁷⁶ They "seek their own advantage in God, neither love nor praise His bare goodness, but have an eye to themselves and consider only how good God is to them."⁷⁷ When He hides His face and withdraws the rays of goodness, love cools promptly. They seem to be unable to love the bare, unfelt goodness hidden in God. Contrary to this spirit the Christians, the truly lowly, naked, hungry, and God-fearing—like the Virgin Mary—love God Himself, not only the good things of God.⁷⁸ The hirelings, thinks Luther, would let God's good things go unloved and unpraised if heaven and hell did not exist.⁷⁹ Such men are actually trying to make a lackey out of God. They surely will not obtain a reward; God is not their Savior; they have fabricated a savior for themselves.⁸⁰

Praising God

A Christian is to lay claim to nothing as far as his own ability is concerned.⁸¹ God alone is to be exalted and praised.⁸² However, praise of the Lord with gladness is not a man-fabricated work, rather it is joyful suffering.⁸³ Self-chosen works neither afford salvation nor render praise. Faith alone makes men pious, united, peaceable; human works tend to breed discrimination, sin, and discord.⁸⁴ One must remember that God

⁷⁴Luther comments that it is a practical impossibility that a Christian would never experience God's goodness. See *LW* 21:310.

⁷⁵*LW* 21:325.

⁷⁶*LW* 21:309, 312.

⁷⁷*LW* 21:309.

⁷⁸*LW* 21:311.

⁷⁹*LW* 21:312.

⁸⁰*LW* 21:312.

⁸¹*LW* 21:308.

⁸²*LW* 21:328.

⁸³*LW* 21:302.

⁸⁴*LW* 21:304-305.

looks at the heart and not at works.⁸⁵ True worship and service of God is to let God be God and let Him perform His works in the believer. Luther was definitely unhappy with what people tended to associate with "service of God."

Alas, the word 'service of God' has nowadays taken on so strange a meaning and usage that whoever hears it thinks not of these works of God, but rather of the ringing of bells, the wood and stone of churches, the incense pot, the flicker of candles, the mumbling in the churches, the gold, silver, and precious stones in the vestments of choirboys and celebrants, of chalices and monstrances, of organs and images, processions and churchgoing, and, most of all, the babbling of lips and the rattling of rosaries. This, alas, is what the service of God means now. Of such service God knows nothing at all.⁸⁶

He was likewise critical of the worship service. He complained: "There is today in the churches a great ringing of bells, blowing of trumpets, singing, shouting, and intoning, yet I fear precious little worship of God, who wants to be worshiped in spirit and truth, as He says in John 4:24."⁸⁷

According to Luther the real praise is God's own work which He performs in the believer; it is joyful suffering.⁸⁸ Of course this does not agree with those who are ready to praise God only when He does well to them.⁸⁹ Ironically, God's good gifts often have an undesirable effect; they tend to feed man's pride and self-confidence, producing complacent hearts.⁹⁰ Therefore God often allows Christians to remain poor and hapless.⁹¹ He places the cross of Christ on them in order to help them maintain their

⁸⁵LW 21:318.

⁸⁶LW 21:350.

⁸⁷LW 21:325.

⁸⁸LW 21:302.

⁸⁹LW 21:307.

⁹⁰LW 21:308.

⁹¹LW 21:309.

humble spirit.⁹² Humility, said Luther, is a truly Christian virtue. God cannot condone the proud, powerful, and smart-alecky. Of such a man he writes:

Especially when he finds he ought to give way or confess himself in the wrong, he becomes so insolent and is so utterly devoid of the fear of God that he dares to boast of being infallible, declares God is on his side and the others on the devil's side, and has the effrontery to appeal to the judgment of God. If such a man possesses the necessary power, he rushes on headlong, persecuting, condemning, slandering, slaying, banishing, and destroying all who differ with him, saying afterward he did it all to the honor and glory of God.⁹³

A Christian must remain humble, truly humble. He should be the last person to recognize his own humility, let alone boast about it.⁹⁴

But even a humble Christian must accept the cross of suffering. Luther has some definite opinions on this. God may use the opportunity to test faith and in the process actually strengthen man's trust.⁹⁵ Knowing this may be the case, a Christian surrenders patiently that which God sees fit to deprive him of.⁹⁶ He will suffer lack with equanimity. There is no question about demanding "rights" because in God's sight man has no rights.⁹⁷ He will patiently suffer wrong if necessary, endure shame if that is his lot. All this he will do for Christ's sake and in so doing will cling to Him alone.⁹⁸ Sometimes a Christian may even be called upon to suffer for the sake of the community in which he lives.⁹⁹ If this happens, he will do so

⁹²See LW 21:301.

⁹³LW 21:333. Luther may have in mind particularly the ecclesiastical leaders of his day.

⁹⁴LW 21:313. Luther has some sharp words for those who cover their pride with the garb of humility, 316.

⁹⁵One may see LW 21:334.

⁹⁶LW 21:335.

⁹⁷LW 21:337.

⁹⁸LW 21:336-337.

⁹⁹LW 21:337.

gladly. But what he will not do is compromise on his confession of the love and mercy of God in Christ. If that entails suffering, he will gladly suffer, but he will remain steadfast.¹⁰⁰

Luther obviously enjoyed writing the commentary on the Magnificat and felt personally quite committed about its content. While he did not once use *theologia crucis* in this devotional exposition, the entire commentary is based on his theology of the cross.

Lectures on Genesis 45 and theologia crucis (1545)

Like Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, Luther's lectures on Genesis were momentous. They extended over a full decade, frequently interrupted by illness or urgent business away from Wittenberg, and were finally concluded late in 1545. Just three months later Luther closed his eyes for the last time in Eisleben, where he had been born some sixty-two years before. The lectures on Genesis are lengthy. They fill eight volumes of the American Edition of his works. Their very length indicates the seriousness with which the author viewed them. Since these were Luther's mature years, it is interesting to know whether he remained true to his *theologia crucis*. If he did, then it is reasonable to conclude that *theologia crucis* also penetrated his entire theological harvest. An analysis of the entire Genesis commentary exceeds the scope of this essay. To reduce the task to manageable proportions, we selected Genesis 45, the beautiful Joseph-meets-his-brothers story that Luther approached in January 1545.¹⁰¹

Early in chapter 45 of his commentary Luther showed that he had detected a certain parallel between Joseph's revelation of his identity to his brothers and God's dealings with men. Luther himself must be heard here.

Accordingly, this is a very beautiful example of how God deals with us. For when He afflicts the godly and conceals

¹⁰⁰LW 21:334.

¹⁰¹LW 8:ix.

the fact that He is our God and Father and rather conducts Himself as a tyrant and judge who wants to torture and destroy us, He says at last in His own time and at a suitable hour: 'I am the Lord your God. Hitherto I have treated you just as if I wanted to cast you off and hurl you into hell. But this is a game I am wont to play with My saints; for if I had not wished you well from My heart, I would never have played with you in this manner.'¹⁰²

The Paradox of the Knowledge of God

To Luther knowledge of God was the chief and highest knowledge.¹⁰³ In his commentary on Genesis 45 Luther once more pointed out that philosophers argue and speculate about the existence of God and arrive at some sort of knowledge of Him. This, however, is limited to what Luther called objective knowledge.¹⁰⁴ It falls short of the true knowledge of God, which entails comprehension of His nature and will. The latter knowledge implies a trust that God cares, that He has the will, wisdom, and power to help, and that He wants to help. It implies that God wants to be a personal Lord and merciful Father.¹⁰⁵ This is beyond metaphysical knowledge. A philosopher like Plato, according to Luther's colorful imagery, remains like a cow who looks at a new door, refusing to enter.¹⁰⁶ The real knowledge of God, unlike metaphysical speculation, one must gain in a "practical" manner.¹⁰⁷ To know God, one must learn to understand His ways, His masks, His gospel, His cross.

God and His Masks

Luther closed his commentary on Genesis 45 with quotes from Exodus 33:23 and 33:20: "You shall see My back, not My face;

¹⁰²LW 8:4-5.

¹⁰³LW 8:28.

¹⁰⁴LW 8:17.

¹⁰⁵LW 8:17.

¹⁰⁶LW 8:17.

¹⁰⁷LW 8:28.

for man shall not see Me and live."¹⁰⁸ As the regions of heaven and earth differ, so do the ways of God and man.¹⁰⁹ In dealing with men God often conceals Himself. He acts as a tyrant, who in Joseph's story deserts the father and hurls the son into slavery.¹¹⁰ Behind a mask "He offers Himself to us as the God of wrath, death, and hell."¹¹¹ Frequently it seems that only groanings, tears, troubles, and oppression for the poor prevail. Rather than seeing God's face, man gazes at the devil's behind.¹¹² Worse yet, there seems to be no easy way out of this dilemma. Says Luther: "I cannot escape or draw away that horrible mask which hides the face of God, but I must stay in darkness and in exceedingly dark mist until a new light shines forth."¹¹³ This must be so; how else would there be room for faith?¹¹⁴ Instead of being scandalized by the masks, man must learn to understand what God really means with His unfamiliar and strange forms.¹¹⁵ He must learn to trust that behind the masks is the true face of God, according to which He is the God of life, glory, salvation, joy, and peace.¹¹⁶ That this is so, God has revealed in His word.¹¹⁷ According to biblical revelation, the God who kills also brings to life; the God who terrifies man with frightening faces provides salvation. This a Christian can and must know, but only by God's grace, and in faith.¹¹⁸ So a Christian dutifully bears burdens, endures ill and pain, and lets God act as He pleases.¹¹⁹ Luther's advice is clear enough: believe, hope, pray, listen to the word of God, and cling to it.¹²⁰

¹⁰⁸LW 8:74.

¹⁰⁹LW 8:29.

¹¹⁰LW 8:31.

¹¹¹LW 8:31.

¹¹²LW 8:47.

¹¹³LW 8:33.

¹¹⁴LW 8:37.

¹¹⁵LW 8:31.

¹¹⁶LW 8:31.

¹¹⁷LW 8:17.

¹¹⁸See LW 8:20; 8:35; see also 8:10, 8:20.

¹¹⁹LW 8:30.

¹²⁰LW 8:47.

God and the Gospel

No matter how angry God seems, men should believe that He is their personal Savior and Father.¹²¹ On one occasion Luther called this the doctrine of the Christians, on another, the theology of promise.¹²² He knew that neither the philosophers nor the jurists would understand and teach it. For the human mind the death of Christ on the cross naturally seemed to be utmost confusion and wretchedness, not the glorious salvation event it really was.¹²³ But a Christian knows better in spite of tears, sorrow, pain, and death. Luther confessed boldly: "I believe in Christ, Him I confess and invoke. Let the world laugh or be angry, who cares?"¹²⁴ In the face of adversity and the cross a Christian will grab hold of God's sure promises and will stand his ground. In the lectures Luther reminds his students repeatedly on what Christian hope is based. He would say: "I have been baptized, I believe in God the Father. I believe in Jesus Christ!"¹²⁵ "I have been baptized; I have been called through the Word; I believe in the Son of God, who suffered for me."¹²⁶ "The Lord lives. I have been baptized. I have the Word."¹²⁷

There is no doubt in Luther's mind that God frees, defends, and governs. His grace is sufficient at all times, also in adversity. In faith there is no difference between life and death, wealth and poverty, disgrace and fame. This makes a Christian powerful in battle and enables him to stand above the horrors of death, hell, and all adversity.¹²⁸ He knows that, through the gospel of forgiveness, hell is closed, heaven opened, faith bolstered, and consolation made to sound sweeter than ever.¹²⁹ This is as far as a Christian can go in this life. In eternity God

¹²¹LW 8:9.

¹²²LW 8:30; see also 8:11.

¹²³LW 8:35.

¹²⁴LW 8:36.

¹²⁵LW 8:8.

¹²⁶LW 8:8-9.

¹²⁷LW 8:32.

¹²⁸LW 8:10.

¹²⁹LW 8:27, 58-59.

will pour Himself out completely on His children. But meanwhile only a glimpse of His real face is visible in His promises.¹³⁰ This to Luther was the theology of the gospel.¹³¹

God and the Cross

The God of the gospel made wonderful promises, but sparing the Christian of his cross was not one of them. Luther is reminded of what the saints, Matthew and Paul, wrote: "He who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:38) and: "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death" (Romans 6:3). To be sure, grief, torment, and pain will continue.¹³² Spiritual trials, struggles of conscience, sorrow, and anguish must also occur.¹³³ The heart must be smitten by terror; the old man must be destroyed.¹³⁴ Struggles with unbelief, indignation against God, even despair plague the Christian because he often cannot see the will of God and His counsel in time of suffering.¹³⁵

Luther's advice is clear: Be still; let God rule.¹³⁶ Thank God that He has given you the word and the promise. Luther, thinking of 2 Peter 1:19, urges the Christian to fix his eyes and keenness of mind on the word alone, on baptism, on the Lord's Supper, and on absolution. Everything else may be regarded as darkness.¹³⁷

Why must afflictions and the cross be borne by the Christian? In his Genesis commentary Luther suggested several reasons. Since man is proud, he needs to be humbled. Afflictions often help man to know himself better and come to a starker

¹³⁰LW 8:12, 30.

¹³¹LW 8:30.

¹³²LW 8:6, 9.

¹³³LW 8:7.

¹³⁴LW 8:27, 29.

¹³⁵LW 8:8. It is interesting to note that in Luther's opinion "God does not reckon those complaints and that murmuring as sin."

¹³⁶LW 8:33, 36.

¹³⁷LW 8:33.

understanding of the plight of his original sin.¹³⁸ Above all, he must be purged of sin.¹³⁹ Then again, afflictions could serve as punishment for sin or as chastisement for the benefit of others who see and hear about it.¹⁴⁰ Only God knows the details. But there is something that afflictions are definitely not. They are not an opportunity to render satisfaction to God. "It is the merit of His [Christ's] suffering that our humbling, mortification, rejection, and damnation are pleasing to God."¹⁴¹ Of course reason does not understand all this; it despairs.¹⁴² However, faith comes to rescue. Therefore Luther's advice is: "Let us keep on believing, teaching, suffering, and dying."¹⁴³

We now face the question whether Luther held to *theologia crucis* in the Genesis commentary. We believe that the above discussion fully supports the thesis that all the salient features of *theologia crucis* are present, many developed in depth, perhaps even beyond his earlier work. Certainly neither the epistemological nor the soteriological aspects of the theology of the cross have been altered in basic structure. It is true that one notices nuances in the more mature Luther that are not quite the same as in the earlier years. There seems to be greater emphasis on eschatology.¹⁴⁴ The written word and the sacraments as means of God's revelation of Himself, His real nature, seem more prominent than, for example, in the Heidelberg Disputation.¹⁴⁵ Although *theologia crucis* – law and gospel, too, for that matter – are never used as labels in his commentary on Genesis 45, Luther's text is never far from the ideas they express. As indicated earlier, in 1545 Luther called his doctrine the theology of the gospel. This certainly is apt. Theology of the

¹³⁸LW 8:5.

¹³⁹LW 8:5 and following; one may also see 8:27. Without purging we get spiritually lazy and sluggish in the flesh, thinks Luther. "God pricks and drives the stupid, and lazy ass, our flesh, which oppresses us with its huge bulk" (15).

¹⁴⁰LW 8:73.

¹⁴¹LW 8:6.

¹⁴²LW 8:8.

¹⁴³LW 8:36.

¹⁴⁴LW 8:20, 26, 35, 46, 54.

¹⁴⁵LW 8:17, 42, 47, 54, 60.

gospel and *theologia crucis*, however, are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are more like the two sides of the same coin. It seems quite safe to conclude that Luther remained true to his theology of the cross throughout his life.

IV. Luther's *theologia crucis* and Late-Medieval Theology

This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Luther's *theologia crucis* and late-medieval theology. More groundwork still needs to be done. But the question whether Luther borrowed his *theologia crucis* from medieval mystics simply cannot be ignored in any treatment of *theologia crucis*. Only the more obvious observations can be sketched here.

Certain Similarities

The late-medieval piety that may have exerted significant influence on the development of Luther's *theologia crucis* has many facets. The theology of the German Dominican mystic Johann Tauler (circa 1300-1361) appealed to Luther, who especially appreciated his sermons.¹⁴⁶ The theology of an anonymous work probably written by a member of the Teutonic Knights of Sachsenhausen near Frankfurt in the latter half of the fourteenth century impressed Luther so deeply that he edited the work for publication in 1516 and again in 1518, the second time under the title *A German Theology*.¹⁴⁷ In the preface to the later edition Luther said: "No book except the Bible and St. Augustine has come to my attention from which I have learned more about God, Christ, man, and all things."¹⁴⁸ There was also the fatherly interest and influence of Johann von Staupitz (1460-1524), the vicar general of the Augustinian Eremites in Saxony and the first dean of the theological faculty of Wittenberg. In personal correspondence Luther gratefully acknowledged the

¹⁴⁶"Letter to John Lang, February 8, 1517," LW 48:36.

¹⁴⁷*Late Medieval Mysticism*, edited by Ray C. Petry, volume 13 of the *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press and London: SCM Press, 1957) 321 and following; LW 31:73-74.

¹⁴⁸LW 31:75.

help his superior had given him in his struggles for the biblical meaning of penitence.¹⁴⁹ Staupitz' theology perhaps can be described as biblically oriented practical mysticism, somewhat akin to the *Devotio moderna* piety.¹⁵⁰

There seems to be no question about the influence of German mysticism on Luther. The question remains, however, to what extent, if any, was his *theologia crucis* derived from this source. One cannot deny surface similarities. Like Luther, mystics speak of the life of a Christian in terms of accepting the cross, humility, resignation, and conformity to Christ and His suffering.¹⁵¹ In *The German Theology* one finds the statement:

No one can become perfect in a day. A man must first wholly deny himself, and willingly forsake all things for God's sake, and must give up his own will, and all his natural inclinations, and purge and cleanse himself thoroughly from all sins and evil ways. After this let him humbly take up the cross and follow Christ.¹⁵²

It is true that in his early days, especially in his lectures on Romans, Luther sometimes spoke the language of the mystics.¹⁵³ But even when he is close to the letter of the mystics, he is far from their spirit.

Radical Differences

Both mysticism and faith are independent religious orientations proposing different ways of comprehending God. All mysticism is basically being oriented. It conceives of God as the *summum esse* and brackets Him together with creation in the category of being. Personalism simply has no room here. The religious goal of the mystic is not communion, but the establishment of oneness and unity with the Divine. Contrary to

¹⁴⁹"Letter to John von Staupitz, May 30, 1518," *LW* 48:65.

¹⁵⁰See Loewenich, 163 and following.

¹⁵¹Loewenich, 148.

¹⁵²*Late Medieval Mysticism*, 335.

¹⁵³*Luther: Lectures on Romans*, edited by Wilhelm Pauck, volume 15 of the *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press and London: SCM Press, 1961), xxxiv and following; Loewenich, 154.

the mystic way, faith-oriented religion rejects the dissolution of the pious soul in God. Faith regards God as the covenant partner in an I-and-Thou relationship. It never abrogates the difference between the creature and the Creator. As one would expect, mysticism and faith-oriented religion differ sharply concerning the doctrine of sin. For the mystic, sin is creatureliness that must ultimately be overcome. For a faith-centered theologian like Luther sin is unbelief, disobedience to God's will. Systematically speaking, Luther was no mystic; in fact his theology was in many respects sharply opposed to mysticism.¹⁵⁴

In the light of this it is not at all strange that Luther's *theologia crucis* differs substantially from mystic theology. Examples bear this out clearly. Tauler's theology, for instance, essentially proclaimed the birth of God in the human soul and looked in the direction of ultimate submergence of man in God. From Luther's point of view Tauler's theology is more a *theologia gloriae* than *crucis*. To Tauler, suffering was an important yet temporary aspect in the process of salvation. To Luther, God Himself brought the cross into the life of the Christian in order to do His strange work (*opus alienum*), which served the purpose of His proper work (*opus proprium*). Furthermore, Tauler's concept of suffering was based on speculative Neoplatonism, whereas Luther's similar-sounding expressions were ethically oriented.¹⁵⁵

Much the same could be said about *The German Theology*. However, a difference that may complicate the matter emerges. The Frankfurter, as some call the author, seemed to hold to both, religioethically and Neoplatonically oriented concepts of sin.¹⁵⁶ Luther definitely did not adopt the speculative bases of *The German Theology*.

¹⁵⁴See Loewenich, 149 and following.

¹⁵⁵This is substantially what Loewenich contends, 159.

¹⁵⁶Loewenich, 162.

Staupitz is closer to Luther's *theologia crucis* than other mystics. For both theologians Christian humility and self-accusation (*accusatio sui*) play a significant role. Unfortunately it becomes evident after some probing that Staupitz' theology did not escape basic medieval work-righteousness.¹⁵⁷ This emerges when one looks at the function of suffering. For Staupitz the plight of the cross afforded opportunities for pleasing works. Luther saw in the cross an encounter with the reality of God, who through His strange work was seeking the sinner.¹⁵⁸

One may conclude then that Luther's faith-oriented *theologia crucis* was not simply the product of late-medieval piety. In spite of some similarities, they differed radically. However, the similarities – an emphasis on the cross, suffering, and practical piety – are also important. To be sure, Luther had learned something from the German mystics, as he readily admitted. One might even go so far as to say that Luther's *theologia crucis* might have been impossible without the author's monastic experience.¹⁵⁹ However, all this does not challenge the conclusion.

V. Some Implications of Luther's *theologia crucis*

Many implications come to mind. For the sake of convenience they may be looked at in terms of theological, pastoral, and ecumenical concerns.

Theological Concerns

To spell out the manner in which Luther's theology radiates from the core of *theologia crucis* would be a welcome task but one definitely beyond the scope of this piece. Not much imagination is required to see how several aspects of the German Reformer's theology ultimately converged on the cross. His conception of God, Christology, anthropology, soteriology, doctrine of the word, sacraments, the church, ministry, and

¹⁵⁷Loewenich, 165 and following.

¹⁵⁸Loewenich, 166.

¹⁵⁹Loewenich, 166.

ethics all stand in the context of the cross. Not to recognize the implications of *theologia crucis* in the several aspects of his theology is to a large extent to miss what makes Luther's theology Lutheran. Luther scholar Heinrich Bornkamm tends to agree. He contends that Luther's theology "receives its inner unity and its distinctiveness from the other churches" from the theology of the cross.¹⁶⁰

Many contemporary theological difficulties stem from lack of clarity on *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*. For example, the so-called death-of-God theologians—radical theologians, as they prefer to be known—insist on seeing God as He is. Disappointed in the results of metaphysical reflection, they tend to abandon the God of the Christian faith altogether and turn for religious stimulus to oriental mystics and nineteenth-century philosophical malcontents.¹⁶¹

Luther's theology is—and Lutherans would do well to heed this—Christocentric. Man's relationship to God depends on the saving event of the cross of Christ. Without Incarnation and Atonement he would be, in sin and thus alienated from God. Luther's theology is also revelation oriented. God meets man in the cross of Jesus Christ. Now His gracious revelation continues in the word, the Holy Scriptures. God also offers His gracious forgiveness in the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist. Again Luther's theology is faith-centered. It does not seek support in reason, philosophy, or metaphysical speculation. One apprehends salvation, healing, and new life through faith alone. The affairs of the world may often confound the Christian, but he can—and this in spite of what he may see or hear—believe by grace in God's gracious presence.

¹⁶⁰Heinrich Bornkamm, *The Heart of Reformation Faith: The Fundamental Axioms of Evangelical Belief*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 54.

¹⁶¹Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), and Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

Luther's *theologia crucis* is also relevant in the realm of Christian ethics. As noted above, his theology demands a radical reevaluation of all values.¹⁶² The *theologia crucis* suggests a mysterious identity of man's and Christ's suffering. But disposing of the matter in terms of *imitatio Christi* is too simple.¹⁶³ God calls on Christians to accept the cross in hope and faith. This may have implications for contemporary social concerns. It may even suggest guiding principles in charting out the Christian quest of ameliorating social injustices. Further, it speaks to Luther's understanding of the concept of vocation and the honorable place of work in God's perspective.

This writer has a special interest in historical theology and therefore in the Christian interpretation of history. Here too, it seems, Luther's *theologia crucis* is relevant. In fact it may go a long way in helping historians toward a truly Christian understanding of history. Much has been written on Christian interpretation of history.¹⁶⁴ Unfortunately, however, one often encounters confusion. Especially in the past many able historians, including church historians, have insisted on a *theologia gloriae* oriented interpretation. They have interpreted events as if God's acts were plainly visible and not hidden behind His masks. According to *theologia crucis*, the meaning of history is not what it appears to be in man's mind. Nor is man capable of figuring out God's ways step by step. A Christian interpreter of history must realize that he too must live by faith alone. God does not need man for His counselor, even the historian. In history God shows His "back side" and acts like a "tyrant." Only by faith can one conclude that God performs His "strange work" in order to accomplish His "proper work." Only

¹⁶²Regin Prenter, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran World* 6 (December 1959): 222.

¹⁶³Prenter, 223-224.

¹⁶⁴This writer has been impressed by Alan Richardson's *History Sacred and Profane* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), and Eric C. Rust's *Towards a Theological Understanding of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963). One may also consult the very useful study by John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963).

thus can it be, as it was on Golgotha, that what seems defeat is God's victory. On the other hand some empirical victory of the Christian church may actually be an embarrassment to God's kingdom. A Christian historian must simply accept the fact that he is unqualified to write the definitive biography of God and His deeds. He has no special insight into interpreting reality. He too must live by faith alone, holding on to the sure promises of the word and the sacraments.

Pastoral Concerns

Luther's work, like that of other truly great theologians, was deeply immersed in pastoral concerns. This is particularly evident from the many sermons, table talks, and the more than 3,000 letters that survive.¹⁶⁵ As a spiritual counselor Luther was called on to address the sick, the dying, and the epidemic-stricken. Sometimes he was called on to deal with those who suffered from a variety of spiritual temptations and trials. On many occasions he addressed words of comfort to the mourners.

His pastoral counsel was almost always a practical application of *theologia crucis*. For example, in 1531 Luther wrote to his own dying mother:

First, dear mother, you are now well-informed about God's grace and know that this sickness of yours is his gracious, fatherly chastisement. It is quite a slight thing in comparison with what he inflicts upon the godless, and sometimes even upon his own dear children. One person is beheaded, another burned, a third drowned, and so on. And all of us must say, "For thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter." Therefore, this sickness should not distress or depress you. On the contrary, you should accept it with thankfulness as a token of God's grace, recognizing how slight a suffering it is (even if it be a sickness unto death) compared with the

¹⁶⁵Luther: *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert, volume 18 of the *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster and London: SCM, 1955) 22.

sufferings of his own dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did not suffer for himself, as we do, but for us and for our sins.¹⁶⁶

To a friend of long standing, John Reineck, Luther wrote on the occasion of the death of Reineck's wife:

How should we conduct ourselves in such a situation? God has so ordered and limited our life here that we may learn and exercise the knowledge of his very good will so that we may test and discover whether we love and esteem his will more than ourselves and everything that he has given us to have and love on earth. And although the inscrutable goodness of the divine will is hidden (as is God Himself) from the old Adam as something so great and profound that man finds no pleasure in it, but only grief and lamentation, we nevertheless have his holy and sure Word which reveals to us this hidden will of his and gladdens the heart of the believer.¹⁶⁷

Basic human relationships have not changed since the sixteenth century. Illness, personal tragedy, death, and doubt still plague modern man. There are no more profound answers to the perennial "Why did this have to happen to me?" than those based on *theologia crucis*.

Much the same holds true of the preaching ministry. What is a pastor to preach in this complicated and often frightened space age? Luther's answer is as vital as ever: "*Unum praedica: sapientiam crucis!*" The wisdom of the cross is relevant for any age. The cross is relevant also for today.¹⁶⁸

Ecumenical Significance

"The cross of Christ binds together the whole of Christendom; it stands on the altars of all confessions" observes Professor Bornkamm of Heidelberg.¹⁶⁹ It is, however, equally true that on

¹⁶⁶Luther: *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 33-34.

¹⁶⁷Luther: *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 69.

¹⁶⁸One may see "Theologia crucis," 2.

¹⁶⁹*Heart of Reformation Faith*, 45.

closer examination differences emerge in the common heritage. Honesty demands that neither aspect of *theologia crucis* be brushed aside lightly. *Theologia crucis* both binds and separates. To see only one side of the matter is to indulge in harmful oversimplification. As much as all Christians need and want to rejoice in the unity of the cross of Christ, they cannot afford to overlook the distinctive characteristics, theological and practical, that the symbol has assumed in Christian church bodies. St. Thomas Aquinas, the leading spirit of Roman Catholicism, knew that man is a sinner and that Jesus Christ the Crucified is his Savior. But it is unlikely that anyone would seriously contend that he and Luther shared the same *theologia crucis*. God can and may answer the fervent prayers of most Christians for a true and speedy unity. The unity, however, dare not be created by violent hands or for wrong reasons—for *theologia gloriae*. The biblical insights of Luther's *theologia crucis* are too precious to be lost. On the theology of the cross stand the four great *solas* of the Reformation heritage: *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰Heart of Reformation Faith, 15.