

Martin Luther's "Theology of the Cross"

Primary Sources:

Luther's Theology of the Cross is derived primarily from the theses he defended in the **Heidelberg Disputation** of May 1518 (*Luther's Works* 31:39). It was at Heidelberg that Luther compared "a theologian of the cross" to "a theologian of glory." The Theology of the Cross is derived secondarily from other sources, such as Luther's exposition of the **Magnificat** (*Luther's Works* 21:297).

Secondary Sources (in order of importance):

Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1976).

Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993 (originally published in German, 1972).

Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1988.

Heino O. Kadai, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," in *Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation*, edited by Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 230-72.

Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

The Heidelberg Disputation

At the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther defended the following theological theses. Forde argues that these must be understood collectively as they logically progress from one to the next. Nevertheless, the central assertions relative to the Theology of the Cross are highlighted in the list below.

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.
3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.

4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.
5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.
6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless. *[In his exposition of this point, Luther wrote, "If someone cuts with a rusty and rough hatchet, even though the worker is a good craftsman, the hatchet leaves bad, jagged, and ugly gashes. So it is when God works through us."]*
7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.
8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.
9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.
10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.
11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.
12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.
13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.
14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.
15. Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.
16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.
17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.
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.** *[It should be noted that the word here translated "manifest" is used of the "rearward" part of God as revealed to Moses in Exodus 33. Luther emphasizes that this revelation is not complete. In his exposition of this point, Luther wrote, "The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Cor. 1 calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering. As the Apostle says in 1 Cor. 1, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isaiah says, "Truly,*

thou art a God who hidest thyself” (45:15). So, also in John 14, where Philip spoke according to the theology of glory: “Show us the Father.” Christ forthwith set aside his flighty thought about seeing God elsewhere and led him to himself, saying, “Philip, he who has seen me has seen the Father.” For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ, as it is also stated in John 10: “No one comes to the Father, but by me.”]

- 21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.** [*In his exposition of this point, Luther wrote, “This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls “enemies of the cross of Christ”, for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are dethroned and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible 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.”]*
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.
- 24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.**
25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
26. The law says, “do this,” and it is never done. Grace says, “believe in this,” and everything is already done.
27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.
28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

Quotations from *The Magnificat* (1521)

(page numbers are from *Luther’s Works*, volume 21)

299—When the holy virgin experienced what great things God was working in her despite her insignificance, lowliness, poverty, and inferiority, the Holy Spirit taught her this deep insight and wisdom, that God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, break what is whole and make whole what is broken.

Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues unchanged. 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.

301—For this reason God has also imposed death on us all and laid the cross of Christ together with countless sufferings and afflictions on His beloved children and Christians. In fact, sometimes He even lets us fall into sin, in order that He may look into the depths even more, bring help to many, perform manifold works, show Himself a true Creator, and thereby make Himself known and worthy of love and praise.

Doubtless there were in Jerusalem daughters of the chief priests and counselors who were rich, comely, youthful, cultured, and held in high renown by all the people; even as it is today with the daughters of kings, princes, and men of wealth. The same was also true of many another city. Even in her own town of Nazareth she was not the daughter of one of the chief rulers, but a poor and plain citizen's daughter, whom none looked up to or esteemed. To her neighbors and their daughters she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today, who does as she is told around the house.

302—In the days of David and Solomon the royal stem and line of David had been green and flourishing, fortunate in its great glory, might, and riches, and famous in the eyes of the world. But in the latter days, when Christ was to come, the priests had usurped this honor and were the sole rulers, while the royal line of David had become so impoverished and despised that it was like a dead stump, so that there was no hope or likelihood that a king descended from it would ever attain to any great glory. But when all seemed most unlikely—comes Christ, and is born of the despised stump, of the poor and lowly maiden! The rod and flower springs from her whom Sir Annas' or Caiphas' daughter would not have deigned to have for her humblest lady's maid. Thus God's work and His eyes are in the depths, but man's only in the height.

309—But the impure and perverted lovers, who are nothing else than parasites and who 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, that is, how deeply He makes them feel His goodness and how many good things He does to them. They esteem Him highly, are filled with joy and sing His praises, so long as this feeling continues. But just as soon as He hides His face and withdraws the rays of His goodness, leaving them bare and in misery, their love and praise are at an end. They are unable to love and praise the bare, unfelt goodness that is hidden in God. By this they prove that their spirit did not rejoice in God, their Savior, and that they had no true love and praise for His bare goodness. They delighted in their salvation much more than in their Savior, in the gift more than in the Giver, in the creature rather than in the Creator.

317—Thus the word 'low estate' shows us plainly that the Virgin Mary was a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, who served God in her low estate, nor knew it was so highly esteemed by Him. This should comfort us and teach us that though we should willingly be humbled and despised, we ought not to despair as though God were angry at us. Rather we should set our hope on His grace, concerned only lest we be not cheerful and contented enough in our low estate and lest our evil eye be opened too wide and deceive us by secretly lusting after lofty things and satisfaction with self, which is the death of humility. . . .In short, this verse teaches us to know God aright, because it shows us that He regards the lowly and despised. For he knows God aright who knows that He regards the lowly, as we have said above.

321-22—Note that she does not say that men will speak all manner of good of her, praise her virtues, exalt her virginity or her humility, or sing of what she has done. But for this one thing alone, that God regarded her, men will call her blessed. That is to give all the glory to God as completely as it can be done. . . . Not *she* is praised thereby, but God's *grace* toward her. In fact, she is despised, and she despises herself in that she says her low estate was regarded by God. Therefore she also mentions her blessedness before enumerating the works that God did to her, and ascribes it all to the fact that God regarded her low estate. From this we may learn how to show her the honor and devotion that are her due. How ought one to address her? Keep these words in mind, and they will teach you to say: "O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised; yet God in His grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You were worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merit of yours."

323—Will not the blessed Mother of God also gladly be such an example to all the world? But now she cannot be this because of the fulsome eulogists and empty chatterers, who do not show the people from this verse how the exceeding riches of God joined in her with her utter poverty, the divine honor with her low estate, the divine glory with her shame, the divine greatness with her smallness, the divine goodness with her lack of merit, the divine grace with her unworthiness. On this basis our love and affection toward God would grow and increase with all confidence, which is why her life and works, as well as the lives and works of all the saints, have been recorded.

339—This then is the first work of God—that He is merciful to all who are ready to do without their own opinion, right, wisdom, and all spiritual goods, and willing to be poor in spirit. These are the ones who truly fear God, who count themselves not worthy of anything, be it ever so small, and are glad to be naked and bare before God and man; who ascribe whatever they have to His pure grace, bestowed on the unworthy; who use it with praise and fear and thanksgiving, as though it belonged to another, and who seek not their own will, desire, or honor, but His alone to whom it belongs.

Interpretations of Luther's Theology of the Cross

Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, translated by Herbert J. A. Bouman (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1976).

22—Thus we have sketched with broad strokes Luther's concept of a theology of the cross. Five aspects emerged as essential.

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

23-24 (quoting Luther's *Explanations of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgences*, 1518)—A theologian of glory does not recognize, along with the Apostle, the crucified and hidden God alone. He sees and speaks of God's glorious manifestation among the heathen, how his invisible nature can be known from the things which are visible and how he is present and powerful in all things everywhere. This theologian of glory, however, learns from Aristotle that the object of the will is the good and the good is worthy to be loved, while the evil, on the other hand, is worthy of hate. He learns that God is the highest good and exceedingly lovable. Disagreeing with the theologian of the cross, he defines the treasury of Christ as the removing and remitting of punishments, things which are most evil and worthy of hate. In opposition to this the theologian of the cross defines the treasury of Christ as the impositions and obligations of punishments, things which are best and most worthy of love.

34—Hence if Erasmus thinks he can prove the necessity of free will from the Ezekiel passage, he is mistaken; he has failed to take the hidden God into account.

45—Albrecht Ritschl's interpretation is not generally accepted today. . . . He claims that Luther in his polemics against Erasmus took refuge in the Occamistic God of pure arbitrariness, the *Deus exlex*, the God bound by no law. . . . For God's will there is no cause or reason "that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it." Then the sentence does not mean that God's activity is purely arbitrary, but only that it need not submit to any norm imposed from without.

58 [contra Augustine]

Luther would never think of denying the "Thou hast made us for Thyself." The theology of the cross concedes two things:

1. Man is created for fellowship with God, and
2. The knowledge of God and faith have a psychological side.

Nothing that affects our inner self can evade psychological mediation.

However—and to emphasize this is more important for the theology of the cross—this predisposition is never something given that man can simply insert in his dealing with God. It is not only a gift but also an accusation. It is not the rock on which our house could be built. Rather, it really has to do with a destroying, a radical demolition and a complete reconstruction of the foundations. And because the

doctrine of synteresis has obscured this, it has no place in the theology of the cross. In all seriousness, the watchword must be *turning around*, not *turning inward*, *beyond*, not inside.

64—In neoplatonism the higher ability of the soul of man is itself a divine power. The direct way to God from a competence in man would be open. In the concept of understanding we would be dealing with theology of glory.

82—For this exposition is the work of a man who suddenly finds himself removed from the quiet of the monastery and placed into battle with the world and must daily be prepared for martyrdom. He is doing theology in the face of death. All props that do not stand firm in the presence of the ultimate have been dropped. Hence we are not surprised that faith is ardently opposed to all human feeling and all human observation.

Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

1—The 'crucified God—to use Luther's daring phrase—is not merely the foundation of the Christian faith, but is also the key to a proper understanding of the nature of God. The Christian can only speak about the glory, the wisdom, the righteousness and the strength of God as they are revealed in the crucified Christ. For Luther, the cross (2) presents us with a riddle—a riddle whose solution defines the distinctively Christian understanding of both man and God. If God *is* present in the cross, then he is a God whose presence is hidden from us. As Luther observed, citing Isaiah 45.15, 'Truly you are a hidden God!' And yet the unfolding of that hidden presence of God in the scene of dereliction upon the cross holds the key to Luther's protracted search for a gracious God. No one would dream of seeking God in the 'disgrace, poverty, death and everything else that is shown to us in the suffering Christ'—nevertheless, God is there, hidden and yet revealed, for those who care to seek him.

149—(1) The *theologia crucis* is a theology of revelation, which stands in sharp contrast to speculation. Those who speculate on the created order have, in effect, forfeited their right to be called 'theologians.' God has revealed himself, and it is the task of the theologian to concern himself with God as he has chosen to reveal himself, instead of constructing preconceived notions of God which ultimately have to be destroyed.

(2) This revelation must be regarded as indirect and concealed. This is one of the most difficult aspects of the *theologia crucis* to grasp: how can one speak of a *concealed* revelation? Luther's allusion to Exodus 33.23 in Thesis 20 is the key to understanding this fundamental point: although it is indeed God who is revealed in the passion and the cross of Christ, he is not immediately recognizable *as God*.

150—(4) This knowledge of God who is hidden in his revelation is a matter of faith. . . .

(5) God is particularly known through suffering. Although this is essentially a reference to the *passions Christi*, a far deeper spiritual truth is involved: a fundamental contention of the *theologia crucis* is not merely that God is known *through* suffering (whether that of Christ or of the individual), but that God *makes himself known* through (151) suffering. For Luther, God is active in this matter, rather than passive, in that suffering and temptation are seen as means by which man is brought to God.

151—Far from regarding suffering or evil as a nonsensical intrusion into the world (which Luther regards as the opinion of a 'theologian of glory'), the 'theologian of the cross regards such suffering as his most precious treasure, for revealed and yet hidden in precisely such sufferings is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves.

161—God is revealed in the cross of Christ. Yet, as the Christian contemplates the appalling spectacle of Christ dying upon the cross, he is forced to concede that God does not appear to be revealed there at all. This insight is fundamental to a correct appreciation of the significance of Luther's theology of the cross. The God who is crucified is the God who is hidden in his revelation. Any attempt to seek God elsewhere than in the cross of Christ is to be rejected out of hand as idle speculation: the theologian is forced, perhaps against his will, to come to terms with the riddle of the crucified and hidden God.

163—According to Luther, it is natural that man may have preconceptions of God, through which divine revelation may be appropriated: nevertheless, the effect of that revelation is to *destroy* such preconceptions, and replace them with the ‘crucified God’.

165—(1) *Deus absconditus* is the God who is hidden *in* his revelation. The revelation of God in the cross lies *abscondita sub contrario*, so that God’s strength is revealed under apparent weakness, and his wisdom under apparent folly. . . . Both the *deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus* are to be found in precisely the same event of revelation: which of the two is recognized depends upon the perceiver. For example, consider the wrath of God revealed in the cross. To reason, God thus appears wrathful; to faith, God’s mercy is revealed in this wrath. There is no question of God’s mercy being revealed independently of his wrath, or of an additional and subsequent revelation of God’s mercy which contradicts that of his wrath. In the one unitary event of revelation in the cross, God’s wrath and mercy are revealed simultaneously—but only faith is able to recognize the *opus proprium* as it lies hidden under the *opus alienum*; only faith perceives the real situation which underlies the apparent situation. (2) *Deus absconditus* is the God who is hidden *behind* his revelation. . . . [T]here are certain aspects of God’s being which will always remain hidden from us. The *Deus absconditus* is thus understood as the God who will forever remain unknown to us, a mysterious and sinister being whose intentions remain concealed from us. This understanding (166) of *Deus absconditus* is closely linked to the riddle of divine predestination, where faith is forced to concede the existence of a concealed will of God. . . . God wills many things which he does not disclose in his Word, and there is every reason to suppose that the hidden and inscrutable will of God may stand in contradiction to his revealed will. ‘God does not will the death of a sinner *in his Word*—but he does it by that inscrutable will.’ The *Deus incarnates* must find himself reduced to tears as he sees the *Deus absconditus* consigning men to perdition. Not only do such statements suggest that Luther has abandoned his earlier principle of deriving theology solely on the basis of the cross: they also suggest that the cross is not the final word of God on anything.

181—(From Luther’s preface to the 2nd volume of the Wittenberg edition of his works) It is not we who can sustain the church, nor was it those who came before us, nor will it be those who come after us. It was, and is, and will be, the one who says: ‘I am with you always, even to the end of time.’ As it says in Hebrews 13: ‘Jesus Christ, the same *yesterday, today and for ever.*’ And in Revelation 1: ‘*Who was, and is, and is to come.*’ Truly he is that one, and no one else is, or ever can be. For you and I were not alive thousands of years ago, yet the church was sustained without us—and it was done by the one of whom it says, ‘*Who was*’, and ‘*Yesterday*’ . . . The church would perish before our very eyes, and we along with it (as we daily prove), were it not for that other man who so obviously upholds the church and us. This we can lay hold of and feel, even though we are reluctant to believe it. We must give ourselves to the one of whom it is said: ‘*Who is*’, and ‘*Today*’. Again, we can do nothing to sustain the church when we are dead. But he will do it, of whom it is said: ‘*Who is to come*’, and ‘*For ever*’.

Heino O. Kadai, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross,” in *Accents in Luther’s Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation*, edited by Heino O. Kadai (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 230-72.

242—A true theologian seeks God where God Himself has hidden His revelation: in the foolishness, humility, and shame of the cross. 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*.

248—The Magnificat taught Luther that a Christian does not place his trust in God’s gifts; he trusts in His grace, in God Himself. Perverted lovers of God, the parasites, hirelings, and slaves, love salvation but not their Savior. . . . When He hides His face and withdraws the rays of goodness, love cools promptly.

264—[pastoral considerations—a letter Luther wrote to a friend, John Reineck, who had just lost his 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.

Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993).

Regarding Luther, Moltmann has much to say. See the chapter titled, “The ‘Crucified God.’”

Moltmann does much more than just comment on Luther. His own concerns are for a Christian theology that is both relevant (in contrast to the *Kulturprotestantism* of the state church) and genuinely Christian. Following his experience in a prisoner of war camp, Moltmann was convinced that “only the suffering God can help,” and that his God “would always be the crucified Jesus.” The identification of the crucified one with those who are forsaken in this life became central in Moltmann’s theology. His treatment of the theme is especially helpful early in this work as he treats the cross as the center of New Testament theology and the heart of a relevant Christianity. However, his creative questions about the nature of God’s own suffering eventually lead him to an open-endedness and an identification between God and creation that seems much like panentheism, though he resists being labeled a process theologian.

Moltmann argues that the distinction between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* is not necessary if the cross is rightly viewed in a Trinitarian sense. Traditional theism and protest atheism have made the same mistake, he believes, in arguing from the state of the world to God as from effect to cause. “One can just as well speak of ‘God’ as of the devil, of being as of nothingness, of the meaning of the world as of absurdity” (p. 221). “Cosmological theism . . . [justifies] this world as God’s world. In so doing it passes over the history of suffering of this world. Either it must be tolerated, or it will be compensated for by the second world in heaven. This answer is idolatry” (p. 225). Against both this kind of theism and protest atheism, Moltmann argues for the crucified God who is all wrapped up in the world and does not stand apart from suffering.

It is appealing to recognize that our sufferings touch an emotional side of God, but an overstatement of that theme can reduce our perception of divine providence and of purposefulness in suffering. Thus a theology designed to offer relevance and comfort may result in despair.

Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

This more popular book by McGrath seems at times overly dependent upon Moltmann. (“The identity and relevance of Christianity are both irrevocably tied up with the crucified Christ” [p. 12]. See also his argument that a theology of the cross stands against both classical theism and protest atheism.) Still, his more approachable discussion is often refreshing.

97—The full impact of culture upon the concept of God which we *want* to discover inevitably means, given the richness of the Christian understanding of God, that we isolate and identify one aspect of that understanding of God as normative. In western culture, this has led to the hard-won insight that ‘God is love’ being construed to mean he is a sugar-coated benevolent God who endorses all the insights of western culture and lends them a spurious sanctity. This concept of God—which owes more to nature-religion than Christianity, and continually threatens to degenerate into sheer sentimentalism—arises

largely, if not entirely, through dissociating the insight that ‘God is love’ from the source of that insight—the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

159—Experience cannot be allowed to have the final word—it must be judged and shown up as deceptive and misleading. The theology of the cross draws our attention to the sheer unreliability of experience as a guide to the presence and activity of God. God is active and present in his world, quite independently of whether we experience him as being so. Experience declared that God was absent from Calvary, only to have its verdict humiliatingly overturned on the third day.

Regin Prenter, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

17—But how shall we learn to take our daily earthly life seriously in such a way that the reality of guilt and death becomes a genuine (18) experience of the Creator’s wrath? I believe that we can in no way guarantee it; we possess no theological or homiletical method in order to bring this about. We can only do one thing: we must be concerned about both life and the word of god with equal honesty and determination, so that we neither play life against the word, as is the case in a theology of the cross without the word, nor play the word against life, as is the case in all sorts of thinking in terms of two realms such as occurs in the orthodoxy entrenched in the church. . . . But a cross which is either only objective (outside of us) or only subjective (personal to us) is not the cross of Christ which is the means of our salvation. The deep truth of Luther’s theology of the cross is that it views the cross on Golgotha and the cross which is laid upon us as one and the same.

Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

viii—In the absence of clear understanding, the theology of the cross tends to become sentimentalized, especially in an age that is so concerned about victimization. Jesus is spoken of as the one who “identifies with us in our suffering,” or the one who “enters into solidarity with us” in our misery. “The suffering of God,” or the “vulnerability of God,” and such platitudes become the stock-in-trade of preachers and theologians who want to stroke the psyche of today’s religionists. But this results in rather blatant and suffocating sentimentality. God is supposed to be more attractive to us because he identifies with us in our pain and suffering. “Misery loves company” becomes the unspoken motif of such theology.

A theology of the cross, however, is not sentimentalism. To be sure, it speaks much about suffering. A theologian of the cross, Luther says, looks at all things through suffering and the cross. It is also certainly true that in Christ God enters into our suffering and death. But in a theology of the cross it is soon apparent that we cannot ignore the fact that suffering comes about because we are at odds with God and are trying to rush headlong into some sort of cozy identification with him.

ix—A sentimentalized theology gives the impression that God in Christ comes to join us in our battle against some unknown enemy, is victimized, and suffers just like us. Like the daughters of Jerusalem we sympathize with him. A true theology of the cross places radical question marks over against sentimentality of that sort. “Weep not for me,” Jesus said, “but for yourselves and for your children.”

xiv—Is the “official optimism of North America,” as Douglas John Hall spoke of it, finally running off into sand? Could that be one of the reasons for the despair and chaos in our homes and in our streets? Has the thirst for glory finally issued in the despair that Luther foresaw? This treatise is written with the suspicion that the malaise of the theology of glory is the ultimate source of contemporary despair, not the theology of the cross. My writing proceeds on the assumption that a theology of the cross brings hope, indeed, the only ultimate hope.

5—[Forde compares the “glory story” to the “cross story,” and the former is centered around the exiled soul, stranded far from its true home. Its true destiny is to return to glory.]

7—“The theology of the cross arises out of the realization that it is simply disastrous to dissolve the cross in the story of glory.”

35—The most consistent complaint about being a theologian of the cross is that one sets forth a view of life that is much too negative, gloomy, and depressing. But that is simply to repeat in contemporary jargon what Luther has been saying: “The works of God are always unattractive and appear evil. . . .” Our complaint—as is generally true of arguments with Luther!—does not really refute the argument but rather just illustrates it. We actually do “hide our faces” and look for something more “positive, self-affirming, and attractive.” And so we don’t see. We can’t look. We [36] call evil good and good evil. As addicts, as theologians of glory, we have no choice.

50—The question of will and its freedom over against God and his [51] sovereign grace has, of course, always been a difficult one for biblical faith. When it is asserted that we are saved by divine election, the protest is always raised, “We aren’t puppets, are we? If everything happens by divine will, how can we be held responsible? We just can’t accept such a God! There *must* be some freedom of choice!” But the point is that this kind of protest is precisely the proof of the pudding. It is evidence of theologians of glory at work defending themselves to the end.

74—[on theologians of glory who keep trying to define away God’s sovereignty, whom he compares to Sisyphus] . . . even if such attempts were to succeed, theology would only make God ludicrous. For what is God without the attributes of divine majesty? No doubt that is why we sense something is amiss, and the stone keeps rolling back down to crush us.

83-84—Thus theologians of glory are not above turning even “The Theology of the Cross” to their own advantage. So it can even happen as we see today that “The Theology of the Cross” comes into a certain vogue. It provides additional levers for therapists and ethicists. As a “theology,” the theology of the cross turns very easily into a negative theology of glory. Our occasional pain becomes our good work. If we can’t make it by escaping suffering, perhaps we can by entering into it. So we hear a good bit of sentimental talk these days about entering into solidarity with those who suffer, as though it were something we might do on weekends.

Observations:

A theologian of glory is surprised by suffering and tries to avoid it.

A theologian of the cross is not surprised and embraces it.

It seems to me that McGrath may be overstating the “sinister” nature of the *Deus absconditus*. That we cannot see all that God has ordained does not mean that His “hidden” character is inconsistent with His revelation (and with His promises in particular). I do think it is correct that the cross is not “the last word,” for we await the revelation of Christ (1 Pet. 1). Even in the present, the cross and suffering are not the *only* word, though clearly the *unavoidable* word. While we wait for His revelation, we recognize that in *this* day God is revealed in His word, in the cross, and in our suffering more than in inner contemplation or in apparent manifestations of glory. Against Augustinian inwardness, Aristotelian natural theology, and the theologians of glory, in the theology of the cross and in the language of 1 Tim. 3 (and later creeds), He has been “revealed in the flesh.”

We should see the suffering of God in relationship at the cross, not just the physical sufferings of the human nature of the Savior. At the same time, I think Moltmann goes too far.

Forde is right that liberationists and others miss the sovereignty so explicit in Luther. I'd say the same with the free will theists (and Moltmann). One cannot appeal to a theology of the cross without recognizing personal inability and the bondage of the will. To say that we must have a theology of the cross in order to have genuine human freedom seems to me to miss the point. At the same time, I have seen believers in sovereignty calling a thing what it isn't by speaking of evil as if it were good. It seems to me that a theology of cross and hope will find meaning by faith without trying to break God's silence.