

Martin Luther

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Luther's Christology and 'Theology of the Cross'

Luther's christology is not a matter of fundamental departure on any point of the church's historic formulations manifest in the ancient creeds (esp. the Chalcedonian and Nicene). Rather, it is a matter of *emphasis* that is entirely soteriological in scope. Fittingly, considering Luther's aversion to overly-speculative or philosophical theology, his christology centred primarily on the matter of human salvation in light of Christ's person, ministry, death, and resurrection. The juxtaposition of his implicit assent to the early church's formulations of the Christological nature, while maintaining the soteriological emphasis is clear in section 2.2 of his *Small Catechism*: 'I believe that Jesus Christ is truly God, born of the Father in eternity and also truly man, born of the Virgin Mary. He is my Lord! He redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, bought and won me from all sins, death and the authority of the Devil.'¹

That Luther affirms Christ to be 'truly God...and also truly man' is a lucid reference to the Chalcedonian Definition (451) in which two natures, Divine and human, are mutually affirmed of the one person of Christ. But it is not enough for Luther to merely note the importance of this piece of theology without the stronger reference (the christological affirmation is merely the preamble) to the person of Christ as the consummate Saviour—the historical figurehead who reconciles fallen humanity to Himself, whose work was primarily one of redemption, reconciliation, and peace. This emphasis is again made plain in his seminal *Commentary on Galatians*:

Let us see how Christ was able to gain the victory over our enemies. The sins of the whole world, past, present, and future, fastened themselves upon Christ and condemned Him. But because Christ is God He had an everlasting and unconquerable righteousness. These two, the sin of the world and the righteousness of God, met in a death struggle. Furiously the sin of the world assailed the righteousness of God. Righteousness is immortal and invincible. On the other hand, sin is a mighty tyrant who subdues all men. This tyrant pounces on Christ. But Christ's righteousness is unconquerable. The result is inevitable. Sin is defeated and righteousness triumphs and reigns forever.²

Christ takes the place of the sinner, deserving of punishment, receives the wrath of God the Father, and transforms the sinner into a positionally righteous state in God's eyes. Christ alone accomplishes this work. Moreover, concerning salvation,

¹ *The Small Catechism of Martin Luther*. Trans. Robert E. Smith. (Fort Wayne, IN: Project Wittenberg, 2002), 4.

² Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1939), 64.

this work is not to be construed, as by some (notably Peter Abelard), as *exemplary* in nature. Luther railed against this popular notion:

To follow the example of Christ, to love one's neighbour, to do good to them that persecute you, to pray for one's enemies, patiently to bear the ingratitude of those who return evil for good, is certainly praiseworthy. But praiseworthy or not, such virtues do not acquit us before God. It takes more than that to make us righteous before God. We need Christ Himself, not His example, to save us. We need a redeeming, not an exemplary Christ, to save us.³

Still, while this work was to be thought of primarily in substitutionary or 'forensic' terms, this was not all for Luther. He also stressed the *unitive* scope of Christ's soteriological work. Luther (and later Calvin as we shall see in Unit 5) placed a tremendous premium upon the importance of recognizing Christ's personal activity in the mystical union (*unio mystica*) between humans and God, made possible through atonement. Luther emphasizes the vitality of this union as being '...so intimately with Christ, that He and you become *as it were one person*. As such you may boldly say: "I am now one with Christ. Therefore Christ's righteousness, victory, and life are mine." On the other hand, Christ may say: "I am that big sinner. His sins and his death are mine, because he is joined to me, and I to him."'⁴

The righteousness borne in us of Christ's reconciling act is both unitive and regenerative, bringing with it new life. While we are gifted with a new life that is not our own, we are, at the same time, made one with the Godhead through Christ. This has an alterative effect on the centre of our person wherein we are no longer estranged as a being unanchored in that which we are principally created to be. We are made whole, *actualized*, by being made part of the dynamism of Trinitarian relationality.

The new life of unity with God, however, brings with it some seeming contradictions, embodied in Luther's famous notion of *simul iustus et peccator*. While the forensic, positional nature of righteousness has been granted to us through Christ's mediating work; and while we enjoy the deposit of the Holy Spirit in a regenerated life, we continue to struggle against the 'flesh.' Luther writes, 'I may live in the flesh, but I do not live after the flesh. I do my living now "by the faith of the Son of God"...We may now understand how spiritual life originates. It enters the heart by faith. Christ reigns in the heart with His Holy Spirit, who sees, hears, speaks, works, suffers, and does all things in and through us over the protest and the resistance of the flesh.'⁵

As we live out the course of this new life, granted to us in Christ, we await our ultimate glorification with Christ in eternity. In the here and now, however, we face a struggle as 'justified sinners' who constantly strive against the flesh. And it

³ Ibid, 57.

⁴ Ibid, 77.

⁵ Ibid, 43.

is here that Luther pays key attention to the importance of having a 'theology of the cross' which we shall consider next.

The Texts: Three key christological texts include Luther's *Large Catechism*, his *Commentary on Galatians*, and the sermon, 'Christ Our Great High Priest.' The selections from each of these texts cut to the heart of Luther's Christology which, while maintaining the historic distinction of Christ's person enjoining both a Divine and human nature, nevertheless concentrate primarily on the soteriological import of his ministry.

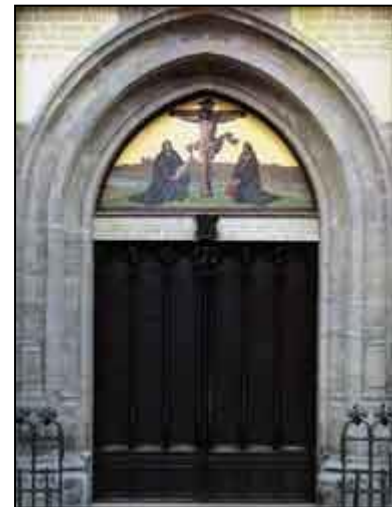
Theology of the Cross

In September 1517, prior to the posting of the famous 95 Theses, Luther circulated his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (97 Theses). In many ways, it is strange that this document did not cause as much, if not more, uproar than the latter. While the 95 Theses were primarily a polemic against indulgences and the scope of ecclesial power in the Roman Church, the latter was a sweeping critique of the very warp and woof in which the theological enterprise had been carried out for centuries throughout the medieval period and up to Luther's day.

The *Disputation* raises a set of theses that are sharply critical of the reigning scholastic theology—especially with regard to its emphasis on human reason and autonomous free will. Further shunned is the influence of Aristotle in particular, going well back into the medieval period in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Luther rejects the manner in which Thomism seemed to have set the tone for subsequent theology.

As usual, Luther's language is decidedly acerbic, though it nevertheless remains somewhat charitable toward the institutional church. The central focus is on switching gears from the current framework of theology. Thesis 34, for example, says quite concisely: 'man by nature has neither correct precept [reason or understanding] nor good will.' Theses 43-44 follow up on this saying, 'It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle. This in opposition to common opinion. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle.'

Theology, Luther believed, had become far too mired in seeking out the (philosophically) hidden things of God, when it should rather have concerned itself only with a theology thoroughly grounded in the self-disclosure (special revelation) of God, through Christ, in Scripture. Accordingly, he detested what he thought were the overly-philosophical discussions concerning theology and he showed no reserve in hurling invective at those whom he felt placed too heavy an emphasis on reason. Terms like 'pagan beasts,' 'rascals,' 'stinking



The Castle Church (Schlosskirche) door on which Luther is said to have nailed his 95 Theses. He wrote his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (97 theses) about a month earlier in September 1517.

philosophers,' and 'billy goats'⁶ were common fare for Luther when describing those whom he felt over-philosophized. Revelation is where theology must begin, not in a philosophical prolegomena that attempts to lay the preliminary groundwork of theology and which inevitably has the result of setting the entire trajectory for further theological reflection. To do this is to give human reason priority and, in effect, turn God into an *object* rather than the Divine author and creator.

In April 1518, Luther was summoned to Heidelberg by his monastic superiors to explain himself before an assembly of German Augustinians (Luther was, we recall, an Augustinian monk). Luther did not, on this occasion, raise a discussion over indulgences, papal authority, or related issues, but concentrated entirely on the task and method of theology, especially as it relates to God and man in a contradistinguished relationship of holiness and sin.

In the space of 40 theses in the *Heidelberg Disputation*, the first 28 deal essentially with theology including: freewill, humanity's stance as sinner before an all-Holy God, the utmost need for unmitigated grace, and the relationship between faith and works. The last 12 theses deal with the place of philosophy in doing theology and argue that the theological enterprise should eschew its reliance on it and perhaps even avoid its integration altogether. Theses 19-22 in particular raise a harsh polemic against theology that is too speculative and apparently divorced from the immediate revelation of Christ and the cross:

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 [Rom. 1:20]. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.⁷

Earlier in his ministry, Luther had already expressed a fervent desire to jettison the ostensibly hyper-influence of philosophy on the work of theology and to instead construct a more pure theology that, 'gets at the meat of the nut.'⁸ To be a 'theologian of the cross' rather than a 'theologian of glory' is the only manner in which one carries out this task. This 'theology of the cross' (*theologia crucis*)—a term which Luther had coined earlier during his New Testament lectures at Wittenberg—succinctly encapsulates the entire trajectory of his theology, including both his understanding of the purpose and message of the Bible and his 'Reformation Discovery' of justification through faith alone.

For Luther, the true theologian sees all the works of God in suffering and in the cross in direct parallel to the manner in which Christ condemned sin and

⁶ Terms collected in John Gerstner, et al, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 196.

⁷ Heidelberg Disputation, 1518. Online: <http://www.augustana.edu/Religion/LutherProject/HEIDELBU/Heidelbergdisputation.htm>

⁸ Weimar Ausgabe, 1 Nr. 5, 40. Cited in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 36.

redeemed fallen humanity through his suffering and death at Calvary. Scholastic theology, Luther thought, led to a theology of works and merit, while a theology of the cross focuses on being baptized into the death of Christ. The cross is entirely soteriological in nature and therefore naturally gives rise to both his notion of justification through faith alone and the manner in which God's justice and wrath is not quelled by human achievements, but by the grace of an 'alien righteousness' imputed to sinners by God, through faith.

God Hidden and Revealed

Luther often distinguished between the 'hidden God' (*Deus absconditus*) and the 'revealed God' (*Deus revelatus*). The hidden God concern God's *essence*, or, as he exists *in himself*. This is simply beyond the grasp of human intellection, especially to the extent that the noetic effects of sin, in the absence of grace, relegate the human mind to a state of interminable darkness. And yet, the hidden God also reveals himself in order to show himself plainly in the context of the Divine-human relationship. However, as Luther scholar, Robert Kolb, observes, there remains an irony in this self-revelation of God:

Luther observed that God is to be found precisely where theologians of glory are horrified to find him: as a kid in a crib, as a criminal on a cross, as a corpse in a crypt. God reveals himself by hiding himself right in the middle of human existence as it has been bent out of shape by the human fall. Thus, Luther's theology of the cross is a departure from the fuzziness of human attempts to focus on God apart from God's pointing out where he is to be found and who he really is.⁹

At Heidelberg, as well as in his *Bondage of the Will*, Luther emphasizes the deep chasm that separates the human understanding from God. The condition of fallen humanity is such that one can neither understand God, much less see Him face to face. Thus, true revelation is manifest in the suffering and humility of Christ. The hiddenness of God of necessity means that we must implicitly reject philosophy as the starting point for theology. Rather, we must begin with the revealed Word of God and with faith in Christ—the only human who has seen God. The God on the cross reveals both God's love and redemptive plan—a plan which excludes all efforts to autonomously please him.

The Texts: The texts for this section are the entirety of Luther's *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (1517) and *The Heidelberg Disputation*. In the former, Luther lays much of the groundwork that would permeate all of his subsequent theology by arguing against placing too high a premium on human reason and its resultant speculative theologies. Luther argues that such an approach blunted the force of the central gospel message. The second text, *The Heidelberg Disputation*, embodies the theses delivered in 1519 among a meeting of Luther's Augustinian order, during which he debated papal envoy, Johann Eck. It is in this

⁹ Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross" *Lutheran Quarterly* (Vol. 16, No. 4, 2002), 449-50.

theses, and during this debate, that Luther most clearly defined his theology of the cross.

Further Reading

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Questions for consideration

1. How does Luther distinguish between a 'theologian of glory' and a 'theologian of the cross'? What is the background to this distinction?
2. Can 'natural theology' hold a place in Luther's theology? Why or why not?
3. How does Luther's understanding of *simul iustice et peccator* relate to his understanding of the *unio mystica*?