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BIBLICAL INERRANCY AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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I begin with the thesis: "Inerrancy is not enough." I propose further that if we wish to preserve the Holy Scriptures as the sole fount, source and norm for all faith and life, it is decidedly not enough to engage in an empiric defense of the infallibility and inerrancy of God's Word, but that we need to return our attention to a sadly neglected doctrine of the Lutheran Reformation—the theology of the cross. It will be our thesis that this principle, established by Scripture itself, stands alongside law and gospel as the Bible's own interpretive principle.

For Lutheran confessional theology, i.e., for faith and life under the pure gospel, answers to questions about faith and reason and about revelation and interpretation do not belong under topics dealing with the intellect or the nature of man, or under a quasi-philosophic study of "Christian epistemology." Answers to questions about faith and reason rather are to be sought under the heading "The Theology of the Cross."

This theology of the cross is not merely an idiosyncrasy of Luther, of curious, historical interest and tantalizing to the Luther scholar, but of no practical import or significance for the Christian in the pew or the parish hall. Rather, this theology of the cross stands alongside law and gospel as the divinely given hermeneutical guide for the teaching and proclaiming mission of the church.

T. S. Eliot, in a much overlooked and neglected essay,

"Christianity and Culture," wrote:

The purpose of a Christian Education would not be merely to make men and women pious Christians; a system which aimed too rigidly at this end alone would become only obscurantist. A Christian Education would primarily train people to be able to think in Christian categories.¹

Educational philosophers, both within and without the church, have all too often deprived both children and older learners by failing to offer a concrete quantity of knowledge. But just as often, educational systems, including those used in the church, have failed because they have offered a concrete quantity of facts and data, and little else by way of thinking processes. And so we have often, I fear, thought we were offering a good Christian education to the young and old when we filled them with Bible stories and taught them to play "Bible Trivia," but have failed to teach them to think in Christian categories.

In this century, the great attacks on Holy Scripture were not so bad, i.e., one hardly needed to take them seriously, any more seriously than Madalyn Murray O'Hair, when they came from Athens—the secular world and the world of skepticism and unbelief. But when they came from Jerusalem—the spiritual world—they hurt and did serious and lasting damage. It is still not often enough remembered that the higher critical method was born at Halle University, the seat of pietism—after a glorious period of triumph, when great empirical victories in the apologetic defense of Scripture had been rung up. But it was that same empirical defense of Scripture which in turn became the destroyer. For the very methods which were thought to prove the truth of Scripture soon began to call those results into question. In adult games, when you set up rules, those rules remain in effect the whole game.

In our century, the line of defense has been drawn at the doctrine of biblical infallibility and inerrancy. Perhaps I oversimplify, but perhaps not, when I suggest that we erred when we gave people lists of easy-to-memorize facts and lists of places where the inerrancy of the Bible was proven—"Yes, Virginia, there really were Hittites." And apparently, there still are those who think they will have beaten the enemy back when they can show a brag book with pictures of Noah's Ark.

Have you ever wondered why there is so little material in Luther or in the confessions of our church by way of defense of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture? One easy answer is that there weren't so many attacks on Scripture back then. Maybe not. But there were skeptics in that age too. And Luther and his coworkers have more to say about the authority and purity of Scripture than one might think.



None of that, however, is to teach people to think in Christian categories, or perhaps we should rephrase Eliot to say "believe in Christian categories." Rather, it is to play the game of the empiricists and the naturalists. But that is a

game, as any informed empiricist knows, that no one ever wins and where the last word is never said.

What I am leading up to is the suggestion that in these questions about faith and reason and about revelation and interpretation, and about the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, there is an approach to Scripture which has been missing. Have you ever wondered why there is so little material in Luther or in the confessions of our church by way of defense of the authority and inerrancy of Scripture? One easy answer is that there weren't so many attacks on Scripture back then. Maybe not. But there were skeptics in that age too. And Luther and his coworkers have more to say about the authority and purity of Scripture than one might think. But I suggest that Luther's answer to questions about faith and reason, revelation and interpretation, actually are to be found under an altogether different topic—the theology of the cross.

What is this theology of the cross? One who has never heard this discussion before would not be unjustified in supposing that "the theology of the cross" refers to a theological statement about the importance and significance of Calvary—and certainly, that is true enough so far as it goes. But it is much larger than that. The concept and the language, *theologia crucis* or "theology of the cross," have a biblical foundation and a history. Theological expressions about the theology of the cross are rooted in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 and Paul's words there about the preaching of the cross:

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent" [Isa. 29:14]. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wis-

dom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom did not know God, it pleased God by the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For the Jews request a sign and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men [*The New King James Bible*].

It is the practice of this theology, this preaching, that Luther elsewhere terms "Theology of the Cross," its converse being "Theology of Glory." This theology of the cross finds its most simple and basic expression in perhaps an unexpected place, in Luther's explanation of the Third Article in the *Small Catechism*:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and kept me in the one true faith.²

The question which poses itself for Luther at nearly every juncture is: How does God reveal Himself—to me and to all men? And that is precisely the ultimate question in the theology of the cross. In the *Heidelberg Disputation of 1518*, three theses are the primary exposition of the theology of the cross:

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.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.³

In Luther's discussion of the theses, the biblical appeal is especially to 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. In the commentary, Luther says, among other things:

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. . . . So, also, in John 14[:8], 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. . . . He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering.⁴

In 1525, well before the preparation of the catechisms, Luther gave fullest expression to the theology of the cross in his profoundly significant book, *The Bondage of the Will*. In the key passage, this theology of the cross, with all of its hermeneutical ramifications, is laid out most clearly and is worth quoting at length.

Faith's object is things not seen. That there may be room for faith, therefore, all that is believed must be hidden. Yet it is not hidden more deeply than under a contrary appearance of sight, sense and experience. Thus, when God quickens, He does so by killing; when He justifies, He does so by pronouncing guilty; when He carries up to heaven, He does so by bringing down to hell. As Scripture says in 1 Kings 2, "The Lord killeth and maketh alive; He bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up" (1 Sam. 2:6) . . . Thus God conceals

His eternal mercy and loving kindness beneath eternal wrath, His righteousness beneath unrighteousness. Now, the highest degree of faith is to believe that He is merciful, though He saves so few and damns so many; to believe that He is just, though of His own will He makes us perforce proper subjects for damnation and seems (in Erasmus' words) "to delight in the torments of poor wretches and to be a fitter object for hate than for love." If I could by any means understand how this same God, who makes such a show of wrath and unrighteousness, can yet be merciful and just, there would be no need for faith. But as it is, the impossibility of understanding makes room for the exercise of faith when these things are preached and published; just as, when God kills, faith in life is exercised in death.⁵

What does all of this mean? Before we attempt to apply this material to the issues at hand, our issues of inerrancy, education, etc., let us try to summarize the meaning of the theology of the cross, which we will do with some help from Herman Sasse in his "Letter to Lutheran Pastors," No. 18.⁶ The starting point is simply this, that God reveals Himself in the cross. The question behind the inerrancy and infallibility discussions, as well as behind the faith and reason questions, is "How does God reveal Himself?" And of course, the answer is in the Word and in the cross, i.e., through the foolishness, the message of the cross. "Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil."⁷

If we can understand what Luther is suggesting here, a great deal else falls into place. Neither Moses nor Paul are permitted to see God. Moses pleads with God to show His glory: "I pray thee, shew me Thy glory," and God's answer, "You cannot not see My face, for no man can see Me and live!" But Moses is permitted to see the backside of God:

"You shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen" (Ex. 33:18-23). The brilliance of God's creating work cannot be seen, but can only be summarized: "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." All eyes are blinded and stunned before God in His deep, impenetrable majesty. And so is Paul stunned on the road to Damascus, rather than be permitted to see the exalted Lord in all His glory.

What does it mean to say that God reveals Himself in the cross? For one thing, that is simply to emphasize the fact that as hidden as God is in the person of Christ, there is no place where God is more hidden than in the passion of our Lord. But yet, it is in the passion of Christ that God's glory is revealed—the glory of His grace.



But yet this God is seen and He does reveal Himself, but not in the way the mind of man expects. When Philip wants Jesus to show him God, the answer is, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). God, in all of His brilliance, is hidden behind the visible, humble man in Nazareth. The baby in the manger is the almighty, creating God. The twelve-year-old precocious boy in the temple is the mighty God of all power and wisdom. And the abject, miserable form on the cross is the eternal God Himself, in

all of His glory. There in the simple and humble is the brilliance of the fount of all life and being, the creator of the universe. Sasse sums it all up:

Thereby the unique meaning of the cross is established. In creation we do not see God. But we see him on the cross—that is as much as a human being can see him. Therefore the cross is the revelation of God and the theology of the cross is alone worthy to be called theology.⁸

What does it mean to say that God reveals Himself in the cross? For one thing, that is simply to emphasize the fact that as hidden as God is in the person of Christ, there is no place where God is *more* hidden than in the passion of our Lord. But yet, it is in the passion of Christ that God's glory is revealed—the glory of His grace. It is in the crucified Christ that God's glory is manifested, for there all of His work of creation and His work of providence are overshadowed by the glory of His love and grace. For that reason, I lament with Sasse the shame that in our Lutheran churches, we have made the norm those empty, Protestant crosses, instead of the glorious crucifix which represents as nothing else the glory of God revealed in the crucified one. What a great wealth we give up in the empty cross. Think what a proclamation it would be if the crucifix was restored in our Lutheran houses of worship so that day after day and week after week, we would be reminded not only by the abstraction of the empty cross, but by the powerful declaration of the crucified one that this is where we find our God in all of His glory.

REVELATION AND FAITH

The theology of glory is the theology which wants to *see* God in His glory, and the way of doing that is by reason and experience, by the sort of perception with which we

function in the visible world. All ways of thinking and all approaches to the God of salvation which elevate reason, science, and experience in such a way as to wrest attention from the centrality of His own revelation, belong to the theology of glory. Like Philip, it wants to *see* the Father. It may seek to see the Father in a picture of Noah's Ark, in scientific proofs of creation, miracles, resurrection, or in the success of the outward church. The church growth movement and its preoccupation with numbers and results is the epitome of a theology of glory, and all theologies which attempt to make the church "as visible as the republic of Venice" (Bellarmine) are likewise theologies of glory. That is natural theology which functions in terms of what it can see and experience. All of the humanisms of our day—from the secular humanism of liberalism to the theological humanism of so much of conservatism and fundamentalism and the modern apologetics movement—likewise simply want to live by sight and cannot bear to live under the cross of faith. And that, after all, is the theology of glory in the worst way.

The theology of the cross, however, is always a theology of pure faith. The cross always demands faith, for it is contrary to what the eye can see. "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). Whatever can be known by reason and the senses is *not* an object of faith. Only that which is contrary to or apart from sight, sense and reason belongs to faith. The believer, like everyone else in this world, lives his life under empirical reality. But as a believer, those things of God, revealed by the Word and hidden in the sacraments, are known only by faith. And thus does Luther appeal repeatedly to Hebrews 11:1, as the core definition of faith: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen."

Those things which are presented to faith are those things which are repugnant to reason. The cross itself is most abhorrent to reason and experience (foolishness to Greeks, stumbling block to Jews) for to all human sense of justice, it is an utter absurdity that life for all men should be won in the inert form on the cross and that one should be punished in place of others. To reason and experience, it is an abomination that the one on the cross is God, and that God dies on the cross. The great Lutheran hymn wants us to sing "*O grosse Not!...Gott selbst ist todt Am Kreuz ist er gestorben,*" but our sensibilities, in the Lutheran hymnals today, have revised that, if they can even stand to have the hymn in the first place, to "God's Son is dead." But in the God who is dead on the cross, life is won for all men, and that can be grasped only by faith. So in that sense, all faith theology must be cross theology.

Now, it is, I submit, that attitude, that way of looking at the Scriptures which must again be taught and instilled, beginning in catechetical instruction, and following through every phase of the teaching ministry of the church. As Sasse says, "All that we think and do in the church has to be cleansed by the theology of the cross if we are to escape the perils of a theology of glory."⁹ In the twentieth century, we have been locked in battle with those who have attacked Scripture, and our tendency has been to fight them on the ground of their choosing, so that for every disproof of inerrancy, we have thrown up in their faces another collection of empirical and archeological facts. Of course we all enjoy cramming the Hittites and the walls of Jericho down the throats of the critics, and indeed, our flesh does need the external comfort of those discoveries. But it is not on them that faith rests. And it is not on the basis of that natural knowledge that the salvation of the cross is proclaimed. Faith can rest only on God's revelation, a revelation which, as absurd as it may be to the sense of the world,

is the very Word of the Almighty God. And faith knows that that revelation is only under contrary appearances—the helpless infant in the manger; the dead man on the cross is the almighty, everlasting God.

The heart of our task at the turning of the second millennium, as we seek to be faithful to God's inspired and inerrant Word and to our Lutheran Confessions, is not just to prove to and convince the Christians about inerrancy and infallibility, but to teach the believer to think in that basic Christian category of the theology of the cross.

This cross theology is also a sacramental theology. That is our heritage as Lutherans, but it may well be that we have drifted so far from the Reformation that we do not remember it so well as we should. When the Apology says that preaching is the highest office of worship, it certainly does not restrict preaching to the proclaiming of the pulpit. It is the proclaiming which God's sacraments do as well. Where else are we called to faith in a more humbling way and asked to bear His cross than when we are asked by our Lord to believe that in water made holy by His Word He cleanses us and regenerates us spiritually. It is too much for the mind to believe. Where else than in the blessed Supper, when we are asked to believe that under the forms of bread and wine are His true body and blood, are we brought to our knees and called to live by faith and not by sight. And where else than when we are asked to believe that in the voice of the minister or the fellow Christian who forgives us our sins, none other than our Lord Christ Himself forgives sins as He did the sins of the paralytic.

A theology of the Word without the sacraments is at best only half a theology of the Word, and thus, not a theology of the Word at all. If the sacraments are taken away, or submerged or de-emphasized, then the very nature of God's dealing with man is shifted to empirical and rational communication and becomes a word without the cross.

The Christianity of the cross is found hidden behind the mask of the sacraments. It is not a popularity contest between Word and sacrament. For without the Word, there are no sacraments. And without the sacraments, the Word is reduced to an abstraction.

When our Lord calls us to follow Him and bear the cross, He calls us to live by faith and not by sight. To bear the cross is to suffer ridicule for believing what is absurd in the sight of men, in their theology of glory. To bear the cross is to suffer and believe that God means it for good. To bear the cross is indeed to live under the gospel and the sacraments and to live by faith.

All of this is the great task before us today as we struggle to confess our faith before the world on the eve of the twenty-first century. Without remembering what it is to bear the cross and to live under the cross, we can have all the inerrancy and infallibility in the world and yet have nothing to offer anyone. Only those who live thus by the cross can carry it.

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Notes

1. T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1949), 28.

2. *Small Catechism*, 2:6, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 345.
3. *Luther's Works*, American edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959-86), 31:40.
4. *LW*, 31:52-3.
5. Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, translators J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Revell, 1957), 101.
6. Herman Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, translator Normal Nagel (St. Louis, Concordia, 1984), 36ff.
7. *Smalcald Articles*, III, VIII, 10f., Tappert, 313.
8. Sasse, 47-48.
9. Sasse, 52.