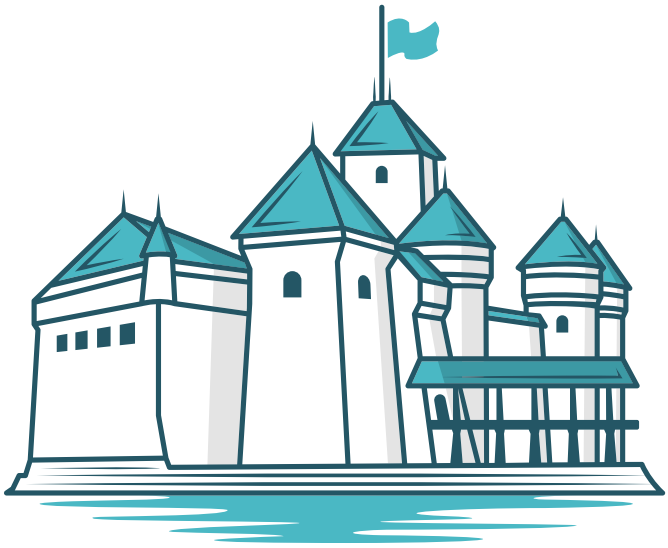


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For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion:
in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me;
he shall set me up upon a rock.
—Psalm 27:5

Contents

3 MEDITATION
Perfecting What He Has Begun

4 THE SCRIVENER
Martin Luther's "Theology of the Cross"

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Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

—Philippians 1:6

Perfecting What He Has Begun

God had begun a good work in his people in Philippi. And God finishes what he starts; he perfects that which he has begun. The apostle knew this about God. And thus the apostle knew with the confidence of faith that God, who had begun a good work in the Philippians, would perform it and perfect it and finish it to the uttermost—even to the day of Jesus Christ. What was true of God's work in the Philippians is always true of his work in his elect people. Let us hearken with joy to the apostle's doctrine, for it is the gospel of God's preservation of the saints.

God had begun a good work in his people in Philippi. What was God's good work? Why, it was his mighty wonderwork of salvation in Christ! God's people in Philippi were sinful and ignorant and dead. Some of them were very cruel in their sin. The jailor handled Paul and Silas roughly, casting them into the inner dungeon and twisting their limbs into the painful iron stocks (Acts 16:24). Some of them seemed pious in their sin. Lydia went down to the river to pray and to worship God (vv. 13–14). But whether cruel or pious, they were lost. Their hearts were closed. They knew neither the true God nor Jesus Christ. God's elect people needed help; that is, they needed a deliverer to open their eyes and their hearts and to reveal to them the glad tidings of what God had done for them in Christ. But even in their need for help—especially in their need for help—they were helpless! They did not know that they needed help; that is, they did not know that they needed salvation. So helpless were they that they could not even ask for help. They did not summon the apostle Paul to help them; rather, God sent to Paul the Macedonian vision-man to summon him: "Help us"! (v. 9).

God had begun a good work in his people in Philippi. He had declared to them the holy gospel. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31). By the sovereign operation of the Spirit, God had applied to his people that which they had in Christ, "namely, the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives" (Form for the Administration of Baptism). God had opened Lydia's heart (Acts 16:14). He had caused the jailor to believe (v. 34). He had comforted the brethren (v. 40).

God had begun a good work in his people in Philippi. And what God begins, he perfects! God does not begin his work of salvation only to leave it unfinished. God does not allow those whom he has delivered ultimately to perish. It is impossible for God to leave his work unfinished, for God's work is rooted in his being. The apostle does not merely speak of the good work of salvation, but he emphasizes the one who performs it. The apostle speaks of *he*: "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it." God has decreed in his unchangeable counsel that his people shall be saved—he will perform it! God has given his people to Christ from before the foundation of the world that they should be saved—he will perform it! God has shed the blood of his only begotten Son in the place of his people that they might be righteous before him forever—he will perform it! It is as impossible for God's people to perish as it is for God to cease being God. For "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

Ah yes, "the day of Jesus Christ." It is the day in which the Lord Jesus Christ shall appear on the clouds of glory to raise the dead, judge all men, and make all things new. The day of Jesus Christ is the church's great hope. It is what she longs for. For her Lord left her with this promise ringing in her ears: "Surely I come quickly. Amen" (Rev. 22:20). And with that promise resounding in her soul, the bride by the Spirit cries out, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus"! (v. 20). God's people long for that day so ardently because they know already now what will happen then. They shall not be lost! Though the whole world of the reprobate ungodly shall be cast into the lake of fire at Christ's return, every last one of God's elect people shall "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). For "he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6).

This is the gospel of the perseverance and preservation of the saints. This gospel is the very thing that the apostle was "confident of." And this gospel is the very thing of which God's people are confident by faith. For God has revealed to us in his word and sealed to us by his Spirit that he perfects what he has begun.

> Of this preservation of the elect to salvation, and of the perseverance of true believers in faith, believers themselves can be sure and are sure, according to the measure of faith, whereby they assuredly believe that they are and ever shall remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the remission of sins and life everlasting. (Canons of Dordt 5.9)

—AL

The Scrivener

A lightly edited transcript of Remnant Reformed Church's 2026 Reformation Day lecture is reprinted here with the prayer that God will use it for the encouragement of his people, who by faith look not at the things that are seen but at the things that are not seen.

Opening Remarks—Dewey Engelsma

Before introducing our speaker and the subject of this evening's lecture,[1] on behalf of the Evangelism Committee, I want to take just a few minutes to tell you something about Remnant Reformed Church, especially for those who may not know much about us.

We are a young congregation. Our history began in 2021 with a work of reformation when we came out of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) during a controversy over justification by faith alone. That struggle ended, as struggles for reformation so often have in the history of the church, with the deposition of a minister and the formation of a new congregation.

Our history since then has not been without further struggle. We experienced another period of reformation, this time concerning the worship of God, particularly the question of whether God is to be worshiped only as he has commanded in his word or whether such worship may be according to man's will. That struggle led to the formation of Remnant Reformed Church.

Our confession is that through these years God has been exceedingly good and merciful to us. He has taught us more clearly that our righteousness before God is found entirely outside of ourselves, in Jesus Christ alone, and that this righteousness is received by faith alone. He has also taught us that the church belongs to Christ and that we must worship him not according to our own imaginations or wills but only as he has commanded us in his word.

Our history is a short one, only about five years. But those years have been marked by controversy, difficulty, struggle, and loss. Although that kind

[1] This is a copyedited transcript of a speech given October 30, 2026, at Remnant Reformed Church. The speech can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dVjA8qsrTs.

of history may be new to us, it is not new to the church of Jesus Christ throughout history.

And that brings us naturally to the subject of this evening.

The history of the church reminds us that the work of God does not look the way that men expect or desire it to look. There is a strong desire in the church world today for peace, acceptance, and the avoidance of controversy. And Christians ought to desire peace. We ought never to seek controversy for controversy's sake. We ought to be gentle, patient, charitable, and eager to live together in the unity of the truth.

But the history of Christ's church has never been a history of uninterrupted peace and ease. It is a history that leads us back through Luther and the Reformation; through centuries of persecution and controversy; through the apostles and the early New Testament church; and ultimately to a hill outside Jerusalem, where our savior was crucified for our sins.

At the center of Christianity stands a cross.

And that is why the subject before us tonight is so fitting: "Martin Luther's 'Theology of the Cross.'" Luther came to understand that God so often works in ways exactly opposite to what human wisdom expects. God reveals strength but does so through weakness. He reveals wisdom through what the world calls foolishness; he reveals glory through suffering; and he reveals salvation through the shame and agony of the cross.

That does not mean that every controversy is righteous, that every division is a reformation, or that suffering itself proves faithfulness. It does not. But it does mean that the church should not be surprised when faithfulness to Christ brings suffering and loss. And it means that we must never judge the work of God by what we consider success: numbers; ease; or that most seductive of siren songs, the approval of men.

And God has been good to us in another way as well, by giving us the privilege of developing relationships with fellow believers far from us, including a fellowship in Singapore and a fellowship in the Philippines. In doing so he has reminded us that his church is not confined to one congregation, denomination, or country but is gathered from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

It is our prayer that God would continue to give us such fellowship, both near and far.

So if you live in the area and are looking for a church home where nothing is known among us save Jesus Christ and him crucified (the praise of which does not redound to us; all praise and glory to God), then we warmly invite you to worship with us. And if there are churches, fellowships, or individuals, whether nearby or afar, who desire to speak with us, study the scriptures with us, or simply get to know us, we would be very glad to hear from you.

Our desire is not that attention be directed to Remnant Reformed Church. Our desire is that together we might know Christ, confess his truth, worship him as he has commanded in his word, and find our righteousness and our salvation where the Reformation directed the church to find them: not in ourselves but entirely in Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And so it is especially appropriate as we celebrate this Reformation Day that we consider together "Martin Luther's 'Theology of the Cross.'"

Martin Luther's "Theology of the Cross"

Introduction

Tomorrow is October 31, which we commemorate as Reformation Day. For it was on October 31, 1517, that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Although Luther did not intend this as a revolutionary act, God used the Ninety-five Theses to begin the great Reformation of his church. Publishers rapidly reprinted the Ninety-five Theses on the new Gutenberg printing press and distributed the theses widely throughout all of Europe. The theses captured Europe's attention: they were the talk of every home,

every university, every pub, and every pulpit in the land. And although the doctrines of the Reformation were not yet fully developed in Luther's Ninety-five Theses, it was the Ninety-five Theses that first electrified Europe. The tap-tap-tapping of monk Martin's mallet on the wooden door in Wittenberg caused the very stones under Rome to tremble. Therefore, we mark October 31 as Reformation Day. On behalf of Remnant Reformed Church, it is my privilege to welcome you, on this Reformation Day weekend, to our annual Reformation Day lecture.

The topic of our Reformation Day lecture this year is "Martin Luther's 'Theology of the Cross.'" The term *theology of the cross* comes from a debate in which Luther participated in April 1518. During the course of the debate, Luther made this statement: "A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."[2] By this statement Luther introduced two opposing ideas. On one side was a theology of glory. On the other side was a theology of the cross. A theology of glory lies, calling evil good and good evil; a theology of glory is the theology of man. But a theology of the cross tells the truth and calls things what they really are; a theology of the cross is the theology of God.

It is our purpose this evening to learn about God's theology of the cross and to reject man's theology of glory. Our evening will include some fascinating church history, as we revisit the heady days of the early Reformation. Our evening will also include some simple, deep, and satisfying doctrine—the theology of the cross. Without further introduction, then, let us proceed.

The Historical Background

The Ninety-Five Theses

Our story this evening begins in Wittenberg, Germany, on that most important of all "Halloweens": October 31, 1517. The Roman Catholic Church of that period celebrated November 1 as All Saints' Day—a day that Rome had set aside to worship all those saints who did not have their own assigned day in the year. Much like ancient Athens' altar to the unknown god, All Saints' Day ensured that the Roman Catholic Church did not inadvertently exclude the worship of some saint. Everyone in the city would be expected to attend services at the church on All Hallows' (Saints') Day.

In preparation for All Hallows' Day, Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the wooden church door in Wittenberg on October 31—All Hallows' Eve, which today has been shortened to Halloween. The church door was a natural place to post the Ninety-five Theses, for the door served as a kind of bulletin board or message board in those days. Everyone arriving for church on All Hallows' Day would be able to read the Ninety-five Theses, as well as all the other notices that other monks had posted. There was nothing unusual about what Luther did in posting his Ninety-five Theses to the church door the night before a worship service.

But the content of Luther's Ninety-five Theses was very unusual, indeed. The topic of the Ninety-five Theses was indulgences. An indulgence was a certificate from the pope that forgave the penalty of sin. The idea was that the saints, through their good works, had accumulated more merit than they needed for themselves. By an indulgence the pope could apply some of the extra merits of the saints to others, which would shorten the indulgence-holder's time in purgatory. Because indulgences could be purchased with money from the pope's indulgence peddlers, indulgences were a tremendous source of income for the church. Pope Leo X had recently authorized a large-scale sale of indulgences to fund his building projects in Rome. One of the pope's more effective indulgence peddlers, Tetzel, had been selling indulgences near Wittenberg.

At the time that he wrote the Ninety-five Theses, Luther was a firm supporter of the pope, of the Roman Catholic Church, and of the practice of indulgences. Luther was a good monk and a good priest. But Luther stood aghast at the crass and cruel methods that Tetzel used to sell indulgences. Tetzel turned the spiritual matter of the forgiveness of sins into a mere earthly financial transaction. Tetzel played on people's love for their dead

[2] Heidelberg Disputation (1518), thesis 21. Theses from the Heidelberg Disputation are quoted from https://bookofconcord.org/other-resources/sources-and-context/heidelberg-disputation/.

family members, whose torments in purgatory he described in graphic detail. People who had lost their mothers, fathers, siblings, children, spouses, and friends were terrified by the sufferings that Tetzel conjured for their beloved. But there was a way to spare them further suffering! Buy an indulgence and set them free! The more expensive the indulgence, the sooner the loved one would be released from purgatory to enter heaven! A ditty has been ascribed to Tetzel that captures the sheer earthly carnality of Tetzel's methods: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." People beggared themselves to buy indulgences for their dearly departed. After all, whose heart could be so hard that he would keep his last coin in his pocket while his dear mother was suffering such agonies as Tetzel described?

So Luther wrote his Ninety-five Theses to guard against such a crass and cruel view of forgiveness as Tetzel's. The forgiveness of sins was not a financial matter between indulgence buyer and indulgence seller. Rather, the forgiveness of sins was a spiritual matter between God and his people in Christ. What made Luther's Ninety-five Theses stand out as so unusual in his day was that he took an entirely spiritual approach to sin, forgiveness, repentance, and faith. Whereas the pope bought and sold salvation, Luther gave it away for free in Christ. For example, theses 1–2: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. This word cannot be understood as referring to the sacrament of penance, that is, confession and satisfaction, as administered by the clergy."[3] Thesis 27: "They preach only human doctrines who say that as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory." Thesis 37: "Any true Christian, whether living or dead, participates in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is granted him by God, even without indulgence letters." Thesis 62: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." And the stirring conclusion in theses 92–95: "Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Peace, peace,' and there is no peace! (Jer. 6:14). Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Cross, cross,' and there is no cross! Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death, and hell. And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace (Acts 14:22)."

At the time, Luther thought that he was saying what the pope would say if he knew about Tetzel. Luther thought that he was defending the pope's honor from being associated with the buffoonish but cruel tactics of Tetzel. What Luther did not fully realize at the time was that he was actually undermining the entire Roman Catholic system of indulgences. Indeed, he was undermining the entire Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation. For he was pointing God's people away from the emptiness of man, his money, and his works; and he was pointing God's people toward the biblical gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That gospel was like a little stone that would gather size and speed as it rolled down the mountain toward Rome—and it must destroy not only Tetzel but indulgences and penance and bishops and cardinals and even the pope besides.

The Reaction to the Ninety-five Theses

Germany's reaction to the Ninety-five Theses was swift and explosive. The Ninety-five Theses were printed and reprinted and reprinted again. Within weeks, copies of the Ninety-five Theses were posted on street corners, on public buildings, and even on trees along the road. Luther's single sheet of paper posted on a single church door in Wittenberg on All Hallows' Eve was now ten thousand papers on ten thousand doors, and they were being read and discussed every day by every German in the land.

The Ninety-five Theses were most refreshing to God's people. The people could sense that they were finally being released from prison, even though they had not even known that they had been bound. The pope had kept them bound under their sins unless they produced all his required works, payments, penalties, penances, and merits. The people could

[3] Theses from the Ninety-five Theses are quoted from https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html.

only despair! But in the Ninety-five Theses, they heard the doctrine—taught from the Bible, no less!—that a Christian has all the blessings of Christ by the gracious gift of God, regardless of any indulgence. What freedom! No wonder the Ninety-five Theses spread so rapidly.

But the freedom of the Christian came at a cost to the pope. The more the Christian was given Christ and his gospel, the less he needed the pope and his law. Just as the people could sense that they were being released from the pope and his indulgences, so the pope saw that he must hold the people more tightly under works and indulgences. Luther's attack on indulgences was an attack on the pope and his hierarchy, and it could not be tolerated.

There were especially two sources of powerful opposition to Luther that began to stir against him in those early days. First, the Dominican monks made Luther their special target. In those days, as today, there were several orders of monks that operated within the Roman Catholic Church. Luther belonged to that order of monks known as the Augustinians. The Dominicans included such men as Tetzel, who had so offensively sold the indulgences near Wittenberg. The Dominicans began publicly to preach Luther's doom. "Tetzel threatened publicly to have Luther burned and his ashes scattered on the waters."[4] Many other Dominican priests "were already preaching from their pulpits throughout the Saxon lands that within a month at most Luther would be burned at the stake."[5]

Second, the Roman Curia began to investigate Luther. The Roman Curia was the official church court of the Roman Catholic Church. The Curia decided doctrinal matters in the church, judged whether men were heretics, and enforced the church's judgments. If the Curia would declare Luther to be a heretic, then excommunication and death would soon follow. And the Curia was mainly composed of Dominicans! The Reformation had hardly begun, but it was already a sure thing that Luther would never get a fair hearing before the courts of the church.

However, before the Curia took official action—which would involve many complicated political maneuvers—it gave the Augustinian monks an opportunity to handle Luther in house, as it were. If the Augustinians could convince their fellow Augustinian Luther to back down from his position on indulgences, then the whole controversy could go away quietly. The pope himself, Leo X, could not make up his mind whether Luther was a brilliant theologian who was envied by his peers or a drunken German who needed to sober up. But the pope was sure that Luther could be brought to heel, so he sent messages through back channels and quiet contacts, asking the Augustinians to "solve this problem within their own group."[6]

The Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

The Augustinians had a major meeting coming up in April 1518 in the city of Heidelberg, Germany. Luther was scheduled to attend as a delegate, and it was at this meeting that the Augustinians would have their best opportunity to solve the pope's Luther problem and to convince Luther to soften his stance against indulgences.

The atmosphere in Germany leading up to the Heidelberg meeting was thick with tension. Luther's friends and colleagues in Wittenberg sensed the danger Luther was in and pleaded with him not to attend. But Luther—who was still a practicing monk—had taken a vow that he would walk the five hundred miles to Heidelberg; and walk he would. Luther's life was in danger the entire way, but Elector Frederick had given orders to all the towns en route that Luther was to be protected on his journey. The trip was arduous and wearying for Luther; but, with his typical wit, he used the hardships of his journey to take a swipe at indulgences. He wrote to a friend, "I sinned by coming on foot. Since my contrition for this sin is perfect, full penance has already been done, and

[4] E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 321–22.

[5] Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 325.

[6] Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 325.

no indulgence is needed."[7] If any Augustinians thought that Luther was coming to Heidelberg to soften his stance on indulgences, they were sorely mistaken.

During the course of the meetings, Luther was asked to participate in a debate. The debate is known to us today as the Heidelberg Disputation. In the debate Luther proposed twenty-eight theological theses that he argued were in harmony with scripture and agreed with Augustine. It was Europe's opportunity to hear what Luther had to say now that the weight of the pope was beginning to lean against him. It was in the Heidelberg Disputation that Luther articulated his theology of the cross.

The Theology of the Cross

What the Theology of the Cross Is

What would Luther say? Would he qualify his strong statements on indulgences? Would he grant that, after all, there was a place in the forgiveness of sins for works and the law and penance? Would the pope's Luther problem be solved? Far from it! Luther opened the Heidelberg Disputation with this astounding statement: "The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him" (thesis 1). What was this? The righteous law hinders man from being righteous? Luther rather should say that the righteous law helps man be righteous! Luther appeared to have it backward. Luther was saying the opposite of how things appeared. But Luther was not finished. He followed up his outrageous statement about the law with an even more outrageous statement about man's works: "Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins" (thesis 3). How could Luther say such a thing? Man's good works are mortal sins? That is, man's good works make man worthy of death? Luther rather should say that man's *sinful* works make man worthy of death, but man's *good* works make man worthy of life! Again, Luther appeared to have it backward and was saying the opposite of how things appeared. The righteous law hinders man from being righteous! Man's good works make man worthy of death!

Ah yes, Luther appeared to have it backward; but that is exactly what Luther intended. Luther appeared to be saying the opposite of how things are; but that was exactly his point. For Luther was explaining what he called the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross was Luther's observation that God does not reveal himself in a way that appeals to man's wisdom, man's sensibilities, man's reason, man's common sense. Rather, God reveals himself in the way that offends man and is hidden from man's mind. God seems to have everything backward. God does the opposite of what man thinks is good. For God did not reveal himself in a blazing descent of glory from heaven; all men could understand and embrace a blaze of glory from heaven. But God revealed himself in the sweat and blood and death and curse and scandal of the cross; no man can understand and embrace the cross—men can only shrink from the shame and stench of it. God did not reveal himself in Caesar of Rome; all men could adore the mighty Caesar and marvel at the glory of Rome. But God revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth; men can only hate and crucify a Jesus of Nazareth. God makes himself known in Jesus and his cross? How foolish!

And yes, it is foolish. God did choose a foolish way to reveal himself to man. Do not hesitate to call Jesus and his cross foolishness. Jesus is the foolishness of God. The cross is the foolishness of God. Foolishness, that is, as man counts foolishness. For man is very wise. Man knows many things. Man is reasonable. Man is sensible. Man knows a good thing when he sees it. And the cross is not a good thing to man! Jesus—the true Jesus—is not a good thing to man! What can you do with Jesus, anyway? You cannot build man's kingdom with Jesus. You cannot keep the world and its things with Jesus. You cannot preserve your life with Jesus. You cannot even claim your own goodness with Jesus. It all has to go. Your kingdom, your world, your life, your goodness—all must go. But where is the sense in that? Where is the wisdom in that? Wise

[7] Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 327; Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor Books, 1950), 66. The quotation here is a combination of the two translations given in these books.

and knowledgeable man knows that Jesus and his cross are foolishness.

Man does not want a theology of the cross. Man wants a theology of glory. A theology of glory appeals to man's wisdom. A theology of glory conforms to man's sensibilities. In man's theology of glory, the righteous law becomes good news for man, who keeps that law well enough. In man's theology of glory, the good works of man are to his credit. In man's theology of glory, sufferings and persecutions are to be despised, while the honor and acclaim of men are to be prized. Wise man has no love for a theology of the cross. Wise man loves a theology of glory.

But God does not think like man. The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. God revealed himself in the foolishness of Jesus, and therein is his wisdom made known. God revealed himself in the weakness of Jesus, and therein is his power seen. For in the foolish way of sin and grace—which is the foolish way of Jesus—God does by foolishness and weakness what no man could do by wisdom and might. Behold: God gives righteousness—not by the righteous law, as man would give it, but by the cursed cross, which only God can do. How wise is the foolishness of God! How mighty is his weakness! And behold: God gives eternal life—not by the good works of man, as man would give it, but by the death and burial of God's own Son, which only God can do. How wise is the foolishness of God! How mighty is his weakness! And behold: God takes his people to their home in glory—not through their outward victory in this world, as man would give it, but through their tribulation and death here below, which only God can do. How wise is the foolishness of God! How mighty is his weakness!

This is what Luther meant by the theology of the cross. The theology of the cross is not so much a doctrine about Jesus or his atonement, although it certainly illuminates who Jesus is and what his atonement was. Rather, the theology of the cross is a doctrine about God. It is the doctrine that God's thoughts are higher than man's thoughts. It is the doctrine that God is known under the appearance of the opposite. God hides his glory under shame; God hides righteousness under sin; God hides life under death; God hides joy under suffering. None of this makes sense to man. Of course not! For God is God! God does not behave in the way that appeals to man's wisdom, man's sensibilities, man's reason, man's common sense; rather, God behaves in the way that offends man and is hidden from man's wisdom. God reveals himself and all his glory in the scandal and shame of the cross.

Here is Luther's explanation of the theology of the cross, given at the Heidelberg Disputation:

> A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
>
> 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" (Phil. 3:18), 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.[8]

Understood by Faith Alone

What does this mean for the child of God? If the knowledge of God is hidden under the opposite, can the child of God know God? Can the child of God understand his God? Can the child of God be

[8] Thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation and Luther's explanation of it, from https://www.reverendluther.org/pdfs/The_Heidelberg_Disputation_With_Proofs.pdf.

comforted by him? Yes, certainly! The child of God knows his God. The child of God understands his God. The child of God sees clearly the God whose righteousness is hidden under sin and whose victory is hidden under persecutions.

Oh, the child of God does not know his God by the wisdom of man. The wisdom of man is useless for understanding God. In fact, for understanding God and his ways, the wisdom of man is not only useless but harmful. The wisdom of man is poison. The wisdom of man is our enemy. The wisdom of man must be crucified. The wisdom of man must be despised and held in contempt and repudiated and spit upon. The wisdom of man is what Luther meant by a theology of glory. Man likes the glittering glory of the law, of works, of ease, of acclaim. Man's wisdom can only ever recommend to man a theology of glory. But away with the wisdom of man! Crucify the theology of glory! No, the wisdom of man will not help the child of God know his God.

But the child of God knows his God and all his ways by faith. Faith is a strange gift from God—strange in the sense of being otherworldly. Faith does not fit in this world. Faith does not fit in man! For faith despises all the things that the world tells it and listens only to what God says. Faith repudiates all the things that man can know and embraces what God knows. Faith abhors the wisdom of man and cleaves to the foolishness of God. Faith sees the glory of man and says, "There is shame"; faith sees the shame of the cross and says, "There is glory!" Faith sees the riches of the world and says, "There is poverty"; faith sees the poverty of Christ and says, "There is riches!" Faith hears the acclaim of men and says, "What a curse"; faith hears the reproach of men and says, "What a blessing"! Faith sees the world's life and says, "What death"; faith sees Christ's death and says, "What life!" Faith sees its works and says, "What dung"; faith sees Christ's works and says, "What unsearchable riches!" Faith sees all working and says, "What unrighteousness"; faith stops all working and says, "What righteousness!" Faith sees the peace of the world and says, "What trouble"; faith sees the trouble of the cross and says, "What peace!"

This is the theology of the cross, and only faith understands it. For faith is not the wisdom of man but the gift of God. About this knowledge of the theology of the cross by faith, Luther said this at the Heidelberg Disputation: "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ. The law says, 'Do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done" (theses 25–26).

Revealed in the Scriptures

How does faith know the theology of the cross? How can faith think like God? Because God has revealed his thoughts in the scriptures. In the scriptures God makes known the truth of things that are hidden under the opposite appearance. In the scriptures God reveals what is so offensive to man but so delightful to faith. And by his Spirit God causes his people to know that what man counts as wisdom is foolishness, and what man counts as foolishness is wisdom. Let us hearken to the scriptures, shall we? For here God reveals the truth of what appears to be hidden.

> "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:8–9).
>
> "At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matt. 11:25).
>
> Consider what God said to childless Abraham: "Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee" (Gen. 17:5).
>
> Or concerning barren Sarah: "Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son" (Gen. 18:14).
>
> Or consider what foolishness God spoke by the mouth of Isaiah, which is the wonder

of our savior and his incarnation: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

"And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen" (Ex. 33:23).

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:3–4).

"Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Cor. 1:25).

"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (II Cor. 4:8–10).

Consider the heart of the gospel of our salvation, which is foolishness to men but wise to faith: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28).

The Effect of the Theology of the Cross

The Historical Effect

What was the effect of Luther's theology of the cross? We can answer this question, in the first place, from the point of view of the historical effect of the Heidelberg Disputation.

The response to Luther's Heidelberg Disputation was explosive. Many were appalled that Luther was so enthusiastically tearing down the wisdom of man. The wisdom of man had built the grand institution that was the Roman Catholic Church. The wisdom of man had enthroned Aristotle and other pagan philosophers as the source and standard of truth. The wisdom of man had elevated the pope and the entire hierarchy of the church. The wisdom of man had made the church prosperous and comfortable. Luther's proposal that the wisdom of man must give way to faith in the scriptures was audacious. Although Luther was still a good monk, his doctrine must topple the entire Roman Catholic system. And although the details were not yet worked out—even in Luther's own mind—men were beginning to see how fundamentally different Luther's doctrine was from Rome's. At one point while Luther was speaking, one of monks present was overcome with indignation and cried out against Luther, "If the peasants heard that, they would stone you!"[9]

Furthermore, the Heidelberg Disputation did not solve the pope's Luther problem. Hanging over the meeting was Pope Leo's instruction to "quench" Martin Luther "and thus smother the fire before it should become a conflagration."[10] Some of the Augustinian leaders submitted bitter letters against Luther, which were read on the floor and entered into the minutes of the meeting. But the meeting took no official decision against Luther. The most that the Augustinians required of Luther was that he finish writing the document that he was already working on—a further explanation of his Ninety-five Theses to show that his doctrine was biblical and not novel—and submit it to the pope. But without a firm decision from the Augustinians, the Roman Curia would now have to take matters into its own hands. The pope had told the Augustinians to quench Luther; the Curia would now seek to set Luther ablaze.

In fact, so far from solving the pope's Luther problem, the Heidelberg Disputation was a tremendous advance in the Reformation. Luther's theology of the cross went far toward clarifying the difference between God's way of doing things, as revealed in the scriptures, and the pope's way of doing things. The religion of Rome was not biblical; it was a theology of glory. The religion that Luther was proclaiming was the biblical theology of the cross. Staunch and brilliant defenders of the pope would begin lining up to oppose Luther and rout him from the field.

[9] Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 328.

[10] Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 65.

Luther lost friends because of the Heidelberg Disputation. His friend Johann Eck was in attendance but turned against Luther after Heidelberg. From then on Eck would dedicate his considerable intellectual gifts to opposing Luther. Although it is a story for a different day, Eck would become the man who laid the trap that resulted in Luther publicly acknowledging that he was a heretic as far as Rome was concerned. Luther also lost the friendship of several of his former professors, whom he still greatly respected and admired. One professor refused to meet with Luther anymore. Another was pensive in his presence. The memory of these losses would later cause Luther to wonder in moments of weakness whether the Reformation had been of God or of Luther. The loss of one's family, friends, and colleagues has always been a heavy cross for God's people to bear.

But God also caused many who heard the Heidelberg Disputation to rejoice at its gospel and to embrace the theology of the cross. The Augustinians as a whole were warm to Luther and agreed with him. Even one Dominican monk in attendance—Martin Bucer—became so enraptured with Luther's doctrine that he wrote about Luther in glowing terms. "Luther has a marvelous graciousness in response and unconquerable patience in listening. In argument he shows the acumen of the apostle Paul."[11] Bucer would be a lifelong devoted follower of Luther and a fellow reformer of the church.

Luther himself considered the Heidelberg Disputation to be a success. He returned home in the victory of the gospel, which is always a great and precious gift of God to his people. Accepting a ride home to Wittenberg so that he did not have to walk again, Luther, with his earthy German humor, described his triumphant return: "I went on foot; I came back in a wagon."[12]

The Gospel Effect

We can also examine the effect of Luther's theology of the cross from the point of view of the personal effect of the gospel upon God's people. After all, the Reformation was not merely a series of historical events, but it was God's gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the church. And the gospel makes God's people glad!

Consider the effect of the gospel upon your heart. For the good news for sinners is this: "Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed" (Rom. 9:33). Salvation is by a stone of scandal? Salvation is by an offensive rock? That is all backward to the wisdom of man. Men do not run to a stumbling stone. They avoid it. Men do not rest on an offensive rock. They dig it up and throw it away. And the rock that God has laid in Zion is truly offensive. It is truly a scandal. For that rock is Christ. Let us come close to that rock. Let us examine it. Let us see how offensive it is. Let us understand its scandal.

That rock is full of iniquity. Jesus is full of sin. For God said to Jesus, "You must become David and commit adultery with Bathsheba. You must commit murder by conspiring to slay your friend Uriah. You must become Solomon and marry one thousand women. You must learn to serve their idols and have your heart turned away from me. You must become Peter and blaspheme my name by cursing and swearing that you do not know my Son. You must become Paul and enter into the houses of my people to arrest them. You must breathe out threatenings and slaughters against my church. You must become all my people in all their sin. And when you have done all the evil of my people to the uttermost, I will come find you and kill you."

And Jesus said, "Yes, Father. Not my will, but thy will be done."

So Jesus became David and lusted after naked Bathsheba and took her into his bed, and she conceived. Jesus lied to his friend Uriah and put him in the front line of the battle to be slain. Jesus became Solomon and Peter and Paul and you and me and all his people, given to him by his Father. He spoke your angry words to your spouse and

[11] Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 66.

[12] Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 66.

thought the wicked thoughts of your heart and lusted after the images on your phone and loved money and fell asleep in church and drank himself drunk and doubted all the word of God. Oh, do not say about Jesus' sin that it never happened. Do not say that we have gone too far. Listen to the word of God: "He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). True, he knew no sin. Also true, he was made sin for us. He was made all the sin of all his people.

And when Jesus was made sin for us, as really as if he himself had committed them all, God took him, lifted him up on the tree of the cross, held his cup of wrath to Jesus' lips, and cursed him. The sun went dark. Out of the darkness came Jesus' voice, loud with agony: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And yet he drank and drank and drank the cup. He drank for his idolatry. He drank for his coveting. He drank for his lusting and his murder and his rebellion. He drank until the cup was empty. And when the cup of God's wrath was empty, he said, "It is finished." Finished! David's sin—which was made Jesus' sin—is finished. Solomon's sin is finished. Peter's sin is finished. Paul's sin is finished. Your sin is finished. My sin is finished. And all the sin of all his people is finished.

That is the scandalous stone that is laid in Zion. That is the offensive rock that is planted there. Men think that the glory of the church is her works. Men think that the beauty of the church is her law. But sinners know that the law has no place on that shameful rock. Sinners know that man's works must be left off that scandalous stone. The beauty of Zion is that offensive stone and that shameful rock. For when David says, "What about what I did with Bathsheba?" God answers, "That was Jesus' sin, and I already emptied that cup." When you and I say, "What about all my wretched iniquity?" God answers, "That was all Jesus' sin, and I have already emptied that cup. You are righteous. You belong here with me." For he made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

The righteous one is condemned; the unrighteous ones are justified. The beloved Son is cursed by his Father; the rebellious children are blessed. The light of the world is plunged into darkness; those who sit in darkness see a great light. He who is the resurrection and the life dies; they who are dead live. It is the theology of the cross, and it is very good news for sinners.

> The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. (Ps. 118:22–23)

Understanding that truth of the gospel by faith, the child of God also understands all his sufferings in this life. A theology of glory expects life to be nice and labors to keep one's earthly life. But a theology of the cross knows that the life of the child of God is spent in sufferings and tribulations, and he is glad.

This was Luther's theology of the cross. This was and is its effect.

> And in that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation. And in that day shall ye say, Praise the LORD, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted. Sing unto the LORD; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth. Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee. (Isa. 12:1–6)

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