

## THE OFFENCE OF JESUS AND HIS CROSS

John the Baptist was probably looking for spectacular and powerful demonstrations of Jesus' majesty, spectacular baptism with the Spirit, and awesome baptisms with the fire of judgment. Instead, Jesus said that the poor were having the Gospel preached to them, and added, "Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me."

Jesus' humility, culminating in His cross, is a scandal, and it is also a scandal and an offence to His followers. We, who suffer as Christians, are at odds with God. The true theology of the cross is God's visiting upon us a similar kind of suffering to what He visited upon His Son, Jesus Christ, the crucified.

In 1518, soon after the nailing up of the 95 theses, Luther was involved in a disputation at Heidelberg. In 28 theological theses he focussed on the theologian and how he does his work. In thesis 21 he made a distinction between a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross. So how is a man a theologian of the cross? What does he do? And how is he different from a theologian of glory? If someone is looking for suggestions about how to become a theologian with a reputation for excellence and careful scholarship, he will be disappointed. The crucial point is that a theologian must have the ability to distinguish between Law and Gospel as he speaks about God, and his goal is not academic success, but salvation.

A theology of glory denies the death of the Son of God and the death of the believer before God. A theologian of glory is convinced that there is a way for the sinner to find resources to return to glory with the God of glory. He regards Jesus as his Helper in this. A theologian of the cross, on the other hand, is grounded on the Word of God, which reveals that he must go through death to receive the gift of new life with God through the cross of Christ. For him God is a God who kills and makes alive. There are two poles, the Law of God, and the love of God manifested in the cross.

The theologian of the cross does not advance by his works or by the exercise of his will, for these are put to death. Natural man's will is dead in spiritual matters. The theologian of the cross despairs of any possibility of preparing himself for God's grace. He advances in righteousness by moving from the Law to the Gospel through a death that God brings about. Through the Law he becomes dead to the Law, and he lives by the offence of Christ's cross.

The theologian of the cross moves from responsibility to inability; from the Law of life to death, from his best works to damnable sin; and from resolve to failure. To walk the road of the cross is a journey into death, the theologian's death, before the demands of God's Law.

The theologians of glory are different. They were evident in medieval Roman Catholic theology and are evident in Protestant revivalist teaching. Both talk about a waiting God, who graciously comes to bless those who first do their own little bit. They expect God to reward them after they have turned, prayed, committed, surrendered, desired, chosen, lived well, and so on. When Luther talks about the theology of the cross, he says that when we try to do "what is in us to do", even our best, we commit damnable sin. For the will of the sinner is in bondage to sin. A bound will is neither compelled nor inactive. It simply has no power to change itself. For the bondage of the human will means that the human being is fallen, and has no fear of God, love for Him, or trust in Him. He is a slave to sin. The works of a human being as he is by nature flow from a human will that has fallen. So if such a person is required to do his best, he will necessarily be sinning when he does his best. The same applies to natural human reason.

Rather, the theologian of the cross understands what is visible in connection with God through suffering and the cross. He does not understand God in the invisible realms of heavenly glory, but in what looks disgraceful, in the visible and horrible spectre of the blood-spattered cross of Christ.

Jesus revelation of Himself was not primarily in His miracles, but it was indirect and concealed. Like Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex 33:23) we see the visible and rearward parts of God through Christ's suffering and cross. Blessed is he who is not offended at this kind of Christ!

However, suffering and the cross have a double reference, both to Christ's path of suffering and His public execution, and to the theologian's own suffering and death. For every Christian, humility and shame are masks that at the same time conceal and reveal. God reveals Himself under what looks contradictory, like a baffling riddle. That is how the eyes of faith see God and His mercy. The theology of the cross does not merely mean that God is known through suffering- Christ's or the theologian's suffering -but it means that God actively makes Himself known through suffering.

In this sense, Christ's suffering and His cross are God's active attack upon the sinner. God's foreign work is making both Christ and the sinner suffer. The devil is God's instrument in performing this task. The devil

tempts the sinner to respond to suffering and death with either “No hope!” or “No problem!” Both responses destroy true faith in God. The theologian of glory sees suffering and evil as intrusions into the world. Rather, they are the working out of our salvation by our loving and merciful God. For the crisis of sin, and all spiritual matters, matters above human beings, are only viewed correctly through suffering and the cross. However, the response cannot be, “So let us go and suffer for Christ!” For our suffering is what God brings about. God blesses the sinner when he, himself offended, clings to the offence of Christ’s cross. So we must not merely look at the cross, but look through the cross, to glory. Otherwise we miss seeing God and ourselves as each truly is. The Christian sees himself as wretched, and God as gracious. When Pilate says, “Behold the man!” we look at that Man, and in this way we know God in suffering.

Luther maintained, “The cross alone is our theology.” Theology that rightly divides Law and Gospel has the crucified Christ as its content, and it is also God’s Word to us that kills us and makes us alive. If we do not get God’s Word in judgment (Law), we won’t get in it grace (Gospel). Without the cross there will be no glory. From Christ’s death on the cross the love of God works in us what is pleasing to Him. By grace, through faith, God already accomplishes all that the Law demands.

So when we see death, we affirm life out of death; When we see injustice, we affirm God’s justice and righteousness. When we fear judgment, we cling to God’s mercy. When we see that we deserve rejection, we assert God’s favour. When we see our lack of love, we affirm God’s love to us.

“Theodicy” is the word for people’s attempt to prove that, in spite of suffering and injustice, and evil in the world, God is right after all. Rather, the Christian should not classify suffering with rot, but with the things of God. Christ’s cross is God’s attack, not on the worst we have to offer, but on the best that we have to offer. The best we have to offer are the works in which we are tempted to trust, but we are cursed if we do trust them. We glory in tribulations (Rm 5:3).

What works are we tempted to offer today to justify our existence before God? Our exemplary lives? Our attempts to increase numbers in church by meeting what people feel to be their needs? For the theologian of the cross there is a scandalous, shocking indifference to works. Who needs them? Neither God nor the sinner in Christ! We are free therefore to look after our neighbour’s interests instead. The Law says, “Do this”, and it is never done. Grace says, “Believe in this”, and it is done already. For what the Law requires is ultimately freedom from the Law. And that freedom comes through the righteousness of Christ, which will stand before God. Christianity is not greeting-card sentimentality. The church must keep hard-hitting theological language such as sin, Law, accusation, repentance, condemnation, judgment, wrath, punishment, death\_ devil, damnation, and even the cross itself. The theology of Christ’s cross is a wake-up call that gives us a jolt. When we ponder that “God so loved the world”, we need to remember that He gave His Son over to the awful cost of that love, suffering and the cross. Blessed indeed is the one who is not offended in Him!