

Theology of the Cross

Holden Village Board Session-Bowling Alley Disputation

Fred Niedner, 24 June 2006 [still amazing, after all these years--pkh]

Here are my own theses on Theology of the Cross

1. If you want to see God, you look to the cross of Christ (or as Luther points out, whole passion of Christ).
2. There we see God-with-us in the most wretched moment of human misery, failing, and cussedness.
3. The world is full of pain, and God loves the world. Only by joining the world in its pain can God love the world. (Hall, 32)
4. To 'fix' the world would not be to love it, but to make of us automatons, puppets, incapable of love. Cf. the story of Jesus' temptation in Matthew 4 and Luke 4.
5. All theologies that look elsewhere for a starting point result in triumphalism, ideology, and crushed naivete in the face of ambiguity. E.g., if we look at resurrection and happy endings, we deny reality and seek a religion of vindication: "We finally best the bad guys!" And if you look for a gracious God in nature, do you think folks in Louisiana want to be coddled again by Mother Katrina, or would the people of Indonesia welcome another visit from the Christmas *tsunami*?
6. Theology of cross seeks the virtues of faith, hope and love. Alternatively, theology of glory seeks virtues of sight, finality, and power.
7. Theology of glory finds the first and last words about God as power, supremacy, and authority. Theology of cross finds ultimate words about God as compassion, mercy, grace, benevolence
8. A theologian of cross also talks *about* the cross, and thus deals in doctrine, but knows that all formulations are icons and potential idols. All are flawed, even though necessary. (Contextual nature of theology makes the helpful icons of one age the deadly idols in the next. No one icon can capture all there is to know of God for all times and places.) You can never say, "Now I've got it right!" or "At least for this Christ needn't have died." (Doctrine is what must be said to keep the good news good, no more; and it must be continually reviewed so that it makes sense from age to age.) Lutheran Confessions, e.g., Apology IV, propose the honor of Christ's death as ultimate test of theology—i.e., does our theology see that death as a) necessary; b) sufficient?
9. Proclaiming the crucified Christ, living out of theology of cross, leads to suffering discipleship and *ecclesia Crucis* (a church of the cross). But suffering is not the object of discipleship; rather, it's the inevitable consequence. (Hall. 55)
10. Theology of cross does not glorify suffering or say it's good. (Contra those who have said the abused should put up with their abuse for Christ's sake, and those who have trashed theology of the cross because they think this is the point.) But suffering is inevitable. This is Luther's anthropology. We suffer, we fail, and even our best moments are flawed. But precisely in those inevitable times, we find that we have landed in the embrace of the crucified one.

11. You can never keep theology of the cross straight. Or “get it right.” That’s first of all because it’s by nature counter-intuitive and against what we seek. We seek vindication, sight, finality, and power. And lots of theologies would give us that today: A final answer. Being right. Success in our endeavors. Happiness. But theology of cross won’t give those things.
12. And second, it’s precisely when you’ve gotten something right that you are at your most vulnerable and dangerous state.
13. Theology of cross is accused of having a low regard for humanity, but actually has high estimate of human capacity and dignity, but also a totally realistic estimate of human alienation, and a sense of God’s full and compassionate commitment to bring humankind to full authenticity, which is love/*agape*. (Hall, 91)
14. Theology of Cross is essentially blasphemy-proof. Same for its practitioners. They’re already crucified. What else could you do to them? Hurt their feelings? (Recall Luke’s picture of Jesus kingdom—those two crucified guys in Luke’s death scene, hanging on crosses but making plans.)

Sources:

Theses 16-24 of the Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.
17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.
18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.
19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1.20].
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 theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ [Rom. 4.15].
24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.

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

Douglas John Hall. *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Fortress, 2003.

‘The Cross alone is our Theology’ Martin Luther