

THE CROSS, SUFFERING, AND ASSURANCE: FUNDAMENTAL INSIGHTS FROM THE REFORMATION

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Introduction

It is a great privilege to speak here tonight on the theology of the Reformation before a company of people who love and serve the Lord Jesus Christ for it was, I believe, at the Reformation that the gospel was clarified and defined in a way that it had not been so before. That is not to say that there had been no gospel before Luther and company came on to the scene – far from it – but it is to say that something of the biblical message was recaptured at the Reformation which helped to revitalise the church and which, to the extent that it reflects the heart of God as revealed in the heart of the Bible, cannot be abandoned by the church without a great loss to its life and worship. This is why the project you are undertaking here, to set up a Centre for Reformation Studies, is of such importance. An Evangelical church that ignores or disparages the Reformation is ultimately a church that lacks that which gives it much of its historical and theological identity; furthermore, it is a church that robs its people of some of the richest insights into the Christian life that the history of the church has to offer. For these reasons, if for no other, a knowledge of the Reformation is of vital importance. It is with this in mind that I was delighted to be able to accept the invitation to speak tonight, particularly as my instructions were to teach something about the Reformation with particular reference to the lessons which it can teach the church today.

It was with this in mind that I chose tonight's topic, The Cross, Suffering, and Assurance. I am, of course, acutely aware of the fact that I come from a country that has enjoyed religious freedom for baptists for a good deal of the last 150 years; and before that, the social and political persecution, frequently ignored in a church history generally written by members of the established Church of England, was not on a scale to compare with the suffering, political,

social, and economic, of Christians in Romania. I hope, however, that what I am to say will not appear presumptuous – as will become clear by the end of my paper, I have a twofold purpose here: to offer comfort to those who have suffered persecution, but also to give a rebuke to churches, such as my own, which have, so to speak, lived at ease in Zion for too long. This, I hope you will agree, is the great thing about Luther's insights into the biblical message – indeed, it is the great thing about the biblical message itself: it is universally applicable to all people in all places at all times. For the rich and complacent, it offers rebuke; for the poor and needy, words of comfort and hope. And no-one saw this more clearly or expressed it with greater biblical precision than my chosen subject tonight, Martin Luther, the humble German monk, whose writings and thought did so much to shape the Reformation and indeed the whole of Protestant Christianity.

Martin Luther and the Heidelberg Disputation

In April 1518, the chapter meeting of Augustinian Order, held in the city of Heidelberg, gave the young monk, Martin Luther, his first public chance to expound his new theology in public since the crisis over indulgences had broken late in the previous year. It is, of course, ironic that the issues raised in the document which sparked that crisis, the Ninety Five Theses Against Indulgences, were far from radical and scarcely expounded a theology which struck at the very foundations of the dogma of the pope. Indeed, the fury surrounding the indulgence crisis derived less from its theological radicalism and more from the damage it was doing to Albert of Brandenburg's finances. Nevertheless, as time was to show, what started as an attempt to correct what Luther saw as an abusive practice was to escalate within a few years to a wholesale shaking of the foundations of contemporary theology.

The first shot in this theological battle had been fired by Luther some months before he took up the issue of indulgences when he had publicly attacked the prevalent theological method of the medieval church in his *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*. This work, criticising as it did the use of Aristotle in theology, struck much harder and much deeper at the intellectual framework of Catholic theology than anything in the Theses against Indulgences and, if one were to date the start of the theological Reformation, one could do worse than to locate it at this earlier disputation when, in retrospect, we can see many of the themes of Luther's mature Reformation

theology laid out in an embryonic but nonetheless decisive form.

If the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* marked the beginning of the public expression of a truly radical theology, and the *Theses Against Indulgences* almost accidentally launched Luther onto the national, if not the international, ecclesiastical stage, the Heidelberg Disputation brought the two together. Here, Luther was able to use the public platform which his notoriety on the indulgence issue had brought him to develop within the public arena the radical theology which underlay his attack on scholasticism. The opportunity was not missed: what Luther did here was to propose not only a new way of doing theology but a completely new way of understanding who God is and how he acts.

While the majority of the Heidelberg theses are taken up with specific attacks on medieval theology, the heart of Luther's position is contained in Theses 19, 20, 21, and 22 which read as follows:

19. The one who beholds what is invisible of God, through the perception of what is made, is not rightly called a theologian.
20. But rather the one who perceives what is visible of God, God's "backside" by beholding the sufferings and the cross.
21. The "theologian of glory" calls the bad good and the good bad. The "theologian of the cross" says what a thing is.
22. The wisdom that beholds the invisible things of God as perceived from works, puffs up, blinds, and hardens man altogether.

The meaning of the theses is perhaps not self-evident; but when they are set against the background of Luther's intellectual development since ca. 1513, the implications of what he is saying will become clear. Luther's spiritual biography is, of course, well known and so I will only give the barest of outlines at this point. His problem as a young monk had been that of assurance, frequently summarised by scholars in the phrase "Where can I find a gracious God?" Luther himself tells us that he had been taught by his medieval masters to understand God's righteousness as an objective standard to which he needed to conform in order for God to be propitious towards him. This had led him to despair: the more he had tried to be righteous, the less righteous he had felt himself to be; his own efforts at pleasing God through good works only led him to a deeper understanding of his own sinfulness and unworthiness to stand before God. The breakthrough came when he realised that the righteousness of God was not an objective standard to which he had to conform, but a gift of

God, grasped by faith, whereby the believer is made righteous by God's grace, not human effort. In time, he came to identify this with the righteousness of Christ imputed, rather than imparted, to the believer, and hence the great Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith was launched upon an unsuspecting church.

So much is well-known, but fully to understand the nature of Luther's breakthrough, and thus to see the importance of the references to the theology of the cross in the Heidelberg Disputation, we must dig deeper in Luther's theology and ask not simply how his understanding of salvation changed but also – and this is the real point at issue in Luther's Reformation theology – how his understanding of God himself had changed. When we look at Luther's Reformation breakthrough with this question in mind, it becomes clear that we do not simply have here a change in the understanding of how sinful human beings can stand before a righteous God, but a change in the very understanding of who God himself is.

For the young Luther, God was the one who deals with humanity in the way in which humans expect him so to do. Hence, God's righteousness was assumed to be an objective standard: for human beings, justice and righteousness are functions of desert – to deal righteously with someone is to give them the treatment which they deserve. Thus, talk of God's righteousness was to be, for the young Luther in accordance with his medieval training, understood in a manner analogous to that of humans. God's righteousness was, of course, infinitely perfect, but it could be understood abstractly along the same lines as human righteousness. In this way, a theology was produced where human reason, steeped in the thought of Aristotle, was allowed to define the theological terms which were then applied to God, albeit in an infinite manner. The result, theologically, was a God who behaved in a remarkably human, albeit infinitely perfect, manner. The result, existentially, was a God whose standards were always too high for a sinful human being to satisfy and yet who offered no help to the tormented soul incapable of placating him.

It is this kind of theology to which Luther refers when he speaks of the theology of glory in the Heidelberg Disputation – that is, it is a theology in which man accords himself the greatest glory possible: he makes God in his own image rather than vice versa. And it was the antithesis of this theology, the theology of the cross, which Luther now proposes as the only true theology.

The theology of the cross is exactly what the name suggests: a theology

which takes the cross as its starting point. Instead of building our theology on the basis of our own rational expectations of who God is and how he should behave, and instead of defining our theological terms on the basis of human reason and understanding, Luther proposes that the starting point for all theology should be God's own revelation of himself on the cross. Only when the theologian looks to where God has given himself to be seen can he truly grasp who God is and how he acts. For Luther, this revelation occurs supremely on the cross at Calvary; thus, all theology should be cross-centred and developed with reference to what is revealed there; the cross is therefore not just the starting point for theology but also the very thing that shapes and defines the whole of theology.

The Theology of the Cross: Redefining God

According to Luther, picking up on the Pauline idea of the cross as foolishness to Greeks, the cross is a flat contradiction of what human beings expect God to be like. The anthropomorphic God of human invention behaves, as we noted above, like humanity writ large. His power is like the power of an earthly ruler expanded to an infinite degree. His holiness is like the holiness of the upright citizen multiplied beyond measure. His wisdom is like that of the most profound intellectual extended indefinitely. The God on the cross, however, is the precise opposite of all these things: his power is demonstrated through the weakness inherent in his submission to the authorities and his helpless death; his holiness is that expressed through the sinner's curse of hanging upon a tree; his wisdom is shown in the utter folly of dying such a terrible death when he has the power to call down a legion of angels to rescue him; and his love is shown not in the reciprocation of affection but in total self-surrender and submission to those who hate him. In other words, the God of the cross is the precise opposite in every way to the God of glory as imagined by the godless.

What we have in the theology of the cross, then, is not simply a modification to the contemporary theology with which Luther disagreed but a total rejection of that theology. The very definitions of terms such as holiness, power, wisdom and love are turned on their heads, according to Luther, in the light of the cross at Calvary. The very grammar and syntax of theology have been utterly transformed and it is not too much to say that the God of the cross and the God of glory are in fact two different Gods with nothing at all in common. The one is the revealed God of the Bible, the other an imaginary idol

invented by human pride. Luther's reformation breakthrough on this point, then, strikes not just at the accepted theological methodology of the day but also at the very identity of who God himself is.

The Theology of the Cross: the Eyes of Faith

The theology of the cross, however, is not something that is open for all to see: the empirical data of the cross are not obvious indicators of what is going on there and who is being revealed. To the eyes of the rational man or woman, it would appear that the figure hanging on the cross is not powerful, not holy (for cursed is he who hangs on a tree) nor particularly wise. The truth of the cross is thus deeply hidden under the signs of outward defeat, affliction and suffering. True theology, therefore – and this is a very important point with implications for Christian experience, assurance, and behaviour – true theology, therefore, is not an empirical science open to rational investigation. No – the truth of the cross, the revelation of God, is well and truly hidden under the outward, empirical phenomena.

Hiddenness is, of course, a commonplace of Luther's theology. Pre-eminently, it is used to refer to the incarnation: Christ's deity is hidden in his humanity. It also occurs in his discussion of the Lord's Supper: Christ's presence is hidden in, with and under the elements of bread and wine. In both cases, empirical analysis will not lead anyone to the deeper truth. If it had been possible to dissect Christ's body after his death, no divinity would have been found tucked away on the inside; and cutting open the bread or filtering the wine at communion will yield material evidence of nothing but flour, yeast and fermented grape juice. The same is true on the cross: the divinity of Christ is hidden there – perhaps, if one can use the phrase meaningfully, more fully hidden there and then than at any other point in his life; moreover, the purpose of God, that which he is trying to achieve is hidden from the eyes of reason under the means he is using to achieve it. No-one can see the deity of Christ in the humanity, nor the victory of God in the defeat of Christ – no-one, that is, except the one with the eyes of faith.

It is here, indeed, that faith comes into its own. For Luther, the cross should not be looked at with the eyes of reason, for reason's preconceptions will never accept that God is doing there what he is in fact doing. Instead, one must look at the cross with the eyes of faith. Faith, in its very essence, does not prescribe how God should behave but rather looks to see how God does in fact behave. In

other words, faith lets God be God. It does not seek to fit him into its own pre-ordained pattern of who God is and what he does; it rather accepts that he is and does what he has shown himself to be and to do.

The Theology of the Cross: God's Proper Work through his Alien Work

When faith looks to the cross and sees God there, mighty in his weakness, victorious in his defeat, holy through being cursed, it learns a profound lesson with implications well beyond the physical cross at Calvary: that God achieves his proper work through his alien work. What this means is that God achieves what he intends through doing the precise opposite of what we expect. In the case of Calvary, he defeats sin by appearing to be overcome by evil; he establishes himself as ruler over all by submitting himself to the powers of earth; he demonstrates his might and wisdom by behaving in (humanly speaking) a weak and foolish way. The cross thus redefines not only who God is but how he acts towards his creation.

This point is of central importance to Luther's theology as a whole, for the cross becomes a paradigm for God's behaviour which is to be the basic criterion by which God's actions, and human experience of God, are to be judged. In addition, it also becomes the pattern of Christian service for believers with reference to those people with whom they come into contact.

We shall explore these issues below – and it is my belief that Luther's insights into the New Testament teaching on the cross here have profound and important lessons to teach the church today. What we should note in the first place, however, is how this revolutionary way of thinking about God solved Luther's immediate problem of how to find a God who would be gracious to him. The answer is simple: the anthropomorphic God of the early Luther could never be gracious – he demanded that Luther make himself righteous in order to merit grace; that is, after all, precisely what a human being would require, so it is reasonable to assume that God's standards are no less rigorous. But the God of the cross, the God who does the precise opposite of what is expected, can be gracious: he is gracious because he himself has stood in the place of sinners and died on the cross in order that he might freely receive sinners to himself even without them being righteous. Indeed – and how remarkable and unexpected this must have been for the tormented Luther – he is gracious to sinners precisely in their unrighteousness. A stupid doctrine, an idiotic doctrine – but, for Luther, the doctrine of the cross – foolishness to the Greeks and to the

worldly wise, and offence to the Jews and those confident of their own righteousness, but to those of faith, the power of God to salvation.

For Luther, the principle that God achieves his proper work through his alien work has a wider reference than simply the cross at Calvary. In one respect, of course, the cross was unique – the death of Christ, by virtue of who he was, made the act of God on Calvary an event that was different in kind from any other. Thus, the significance of the cross as the saving act of God in Christ cannot be replicated by anyone else at any other time or in any other place. Nevertheless, the event of the cross can – and indeed should – be repeated on a daily basis in the life of the church and of individuals. As a paradigm of how God deals with his people in order to achieve his purposes, the cross has continuing and universal significance.

Thus, when the believer suffers in this life, Luther would argue that this is because God achieves his ultimate purpose – the bringing of the believer to glory – through doing the precise opposite of what the believer expects. Thus, sufferings, curses, and even damnation in the eyes of the world are the stuff of which the normal Christian life should consist. When confronted by inexplicable suffering, Luther argued that the believer should not curse God or question him – for a start, the path of inexplicable suffering and hardship was the path Christ trod to the cross, and so should believers expect their path to be any different or any easier. Furthermore, if God achieves his proper work through his alien work, then it is absolutely necessary that the Christian suffer, for if he or she does not suffer, they can have little confidence that God is actually achieving that proper work. Suffering is, for Luther, a hallmark of the authentic Christian life – in fact, it is of the essence of the Christian life. That is why he says that one becomes a theologian not by studying and filling one's head with knowledge but by being cursed, damned and cast into hell – it is the *experience* of God through his alien work that establishes one's Christian credentials, and it is through this experience that one truly comes to know God.

The implications of this position for Luther's theology thus go well beyond the cross at Calvary. What he is saying is that questions concerning the suffering of the believer and concerning the believer's assurance of salvation cannot be answered without reference to the cross. In the former case, that of suffering, the issue is not one of why God allows suffering but whether the believer has the right to expect an experience of life which is any different to that of the Saviour. Put bluntly, if suffering was good enough for Christ, it is good enough for the

Christian. In addition, the ethical implications of this should not be ignored. Much modern New Testament scholarship has set itself in conscious reaction against what it argues is Luther's individualistic approach to salvation which construes the issue solely in terms of the believer's relation to God. To anyone who has actually read Luther for themselves, such a portrait seems to have been painted entirely without the scholars concerned bothering to look at their subject, to see if their picture bears any resemblance whatsoever to the original. In fact, Luther's understanding of the cross is anything but individualistic: it is because Christ suffered on behalf of us that we are now called to suffer, and if necessary give our lives, for the service of our fellow men and women. The theologian of the cross accepts suffering as his or her lot – and accepts that this suffering will often be on behalf of others, many of whom could not care less about it. Such was the path of Christ; such is the calling of those who seek to follow him.

As to the second issue, that of assurance, Luther's theology of the cross effectively solved this problem for him. At the theological level, it demonstrated to him that another had stood in his place and had died for his sin – salvation was his as a gift, based on the objective and unilateral work of God; at the experiential level, with its emphasis upon suffering as of the essence of the Christian life, and upon God's proper purpose always being achieved through his alien work, the theology of the cross indicates to the believer that empirical experience is no guide to status before God. For Luther, it is precisely when the believer is suffering, persecuted by fellow men, abandoned by friends, overwhelmed with sin that he or she is, paradoxically, most likely to be standing in a proper relation to God. It is, as Luther would say, when we feel that God has totally deserted us, and when we have nothing but Christ to cling to, that God in Christ is thus at his closest to us.

These insights, of course, were not the sole preserve of Luther's reformation. Indeed, Luther's thinking on this point made a profound impression on John Calvin, the great French Reformer of Geneva, a man whose theology was developed under conditions of exile from his homeland and always with the condition of those suffering in his homeland in mind. In his little book of 1550, *Concerning Scandals*, Calvin locates the basic intellectual, moral and experiential scandal of Christianity in the cross and death of Christ:

For the fact that the Son of God, who is life eternal, is declared to have put on our flesh and to have been a mortal man, the fact that we are said to have

procured life by his death, righteousness by his condemnation, salvation by the curse he bore – all that is so greatly out of step with the common outlook of men that the more intelligent a man is the quicker he will be in repudiating it... People are also greatly offended by the severity of the demands for the denial of ourselves, the crucifying of the old man, contempt for the world, embracing of the cross. But even today experience itself is far more harsh when faith is put to the test by persecutions and other hardships.¹

Elsewhere in the same work, Calvin points to the fact that God's glory has been shown most effectively at times when the church has been most crushed by persecution and then raised up purely by God's power.² Indeed, Calvin even locates the glory of the church in its sufferings, whereby it mirrors those sufferings that are the glory of Christ.³ In this connection, such sufferings and persecutions also serve to subjugate the old man within the individual and thus form part of the process of Christian sanctification.⁴ In all of this, Calvin's thinking mirrors that of Luther: both men suffered in their different ways for the gospel and thus both saw through their reading of the Bible and their experience of the Christian life that the cross is central to all aspects of Christianity. The Reformation, then, in one respect marks the return of the cross to the central place which it should always occupy in any theology worthy of the name Christian.

A Pauline Insight

I said at the start of this paper that the Reformers are of use to us today, and indeed only of use to us today, to the extent that they enable us to see more deeply and more clearly into the heart of the biblical message. This is what I believe Luther is doing when he articulates his theology of the cross. What he was doing here was bringing to bear upon his own contemporary theological situation the insights into God and his activity which Paul develops in the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians. There, Paul confronts a church which had allowed its expectations concerning what constituted an appropriate style of leadership to be determined by the standards of the world around them.

¹ *Concerning Scandals*, 12-13.

² "[T]he more the Church has been crushed beneath the cross, the more clearly has the power of God shown itself in raising it up again." *Concerning Scandals*, 40.

³ *Concerning Scandals*, 47.

⁴ *Concerning Scandals*, 47.

In contrast to these worldly standards of what constitutes strong leadership, Paul sets the foolishness and weakness of the cross:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (1 Cor 1:20-25)

Thus, when Luther stresses the cross both as the centre of the Christian message and as the contradiction of all human criteria for who God is and how he should behave, he is doing little more than echoing the apostle Paul.

To regain the Reformation, then, is for the modern church to regain the message of the cross as Paul and Luther and Calvin understood it. Much modern Evangelical preaching has focused – and rightly so – upon Christ's death as a substitution for sinners; to do this is, I believe, not unbiblical or wrong – in fact, it is essential if the good news is to be preached. Nevertheless, this emphasis upon substitutionary atonement should not be allowed to squeeze out other, equally important, aspects of the Pauline understanding of the cross. It is in these other aspects that some of the cross's most powerful lessons for today are to be found.

For Western churches, there is a profound lesson here. A church that does not suffer persecution must surely ask itself why this is so. It may be for entirely laudable reasons, such as pertain at points in history when God seems to be peculiarly at work. However, the biblical teaching of the cross would seem to indicate that such periods of ease, both on a personal and a corporate level, are to be the exception rather than the rule. The reason for ease is more likely to be that the church itself has lost its distinctive edge as that which is to build its life on the cross, with all its accompanying foolishness and offence. Indeed, the signs of this are all around in western Christendom: the obsession with management techniques as the way forward for church building, as symbolised by the increasing emphasis in seminary education on presentational and organisational skills rather than theology, study, and personal devotional formation; the emphasis in the wider church culture upon the conversion of

celebrities and the famous, rather than an acknowledgement that God's bias, if one can phrase it in such a way, is clearly to the poor and the despised things of this world; and the presentation of Christianity as the answer to a whole world of personal problems, from self-image to losing weight, rather than as a coming to terms with human sin and God's righteousness. Perhaps such a cross-less Christianity reaches its apex – or, perhaps better, its nadir – in the health, wealth and happiness gospel of those who promote the prosperity doctrines so popular in certain circles. For such groups, the cross as understood by Paul, Luther, and Calvin has no place: that God should achieve his proper work through the alien work of suffering, victory through defeat, life through death is truly foolish and offensive to such people – a position which surely indicates precisely how Christian such movements really are. Nevertheless, my own fear for the church in the West is that many of us buy into the prosperity doctrine without really realising it: we enjoy our creature comforts and find ourselves outraged at even the smallest inconvenience or discomfiting circumstance. Yet is that attitude itself not a fundamental rejection of the deepest lessons of Christ's cross, those which concern the kind of life and treatment which the Christian can expect as part of the normal Christian pilgrimage. The cross is simply incompatible with the methods and expectations of an affluent, consumer-driven society. The West needs to rethink its church life not in terms of management theory, technique, and catering to the perceived needs of its members but in terms of the cross: such a rethinking must inevitably entail some hard questions concerning why it is that the church in places like Britain is not so much tolerated as completely ignored, an object not so much of derision as of complete indifference to most people. If it were placing the cross at the centre of its testimony, surely both its intellectual and, perhaps even more so, its moral offence must inevitably provoke a reaction. One thing that Paul does not say is that the cross can be a matter of indifference; it can only ever be a matter of offence to those who do not believe. Thus, a cross that is a matter of indifference is simply not the cross of Christ. But then I hope that this rediscovery of the cross at the Reformation, while a clear rebuke to the church in the West, will yet prove to be a source of strength and comfort to those in places such as Romania where suffering is not something to which the church is a stranger. Suffering is a mark of the cross and the mark of a cross-centred Christianity. Those who suffer persecution have every right to see in their suffering a sign that God is working his proper purpose out within them through his alien work, as he did with his own Son. As

I say these things, I am conscious that I speak as one who has never suffered in any meaningful way for my faith – indeed, I stand under the general censure which I have outlined against churches in the West – but Balaam’s ass spoke relevant words despite being only an ass; and the lesson of the cross, as emphasised by Paul, Luther, and Calvin, is the lesson of the cross no matter who happens to speak it out. There is then, great comfort for you here. As Luther would argue, when Christians suffer physically for their faith, or, indeed, when they suffer psychologically for their faith, they are not to base their assurance of God’s favour on their outward circumstances, for such often stand as contradictions of the true state of affairs; they are rather to base their confidence and their joy upon what Christ accomplished for them on the cross and through his resurrection, and to see in their own outward discomforts a sure sign that they have been called to live lives centred on the cross in much the same way as Christ himself did.

Finally, the message of the cross, as Luther understood it, is urgently needed in the Europe of today. Indeed, what greater message could there be for Christians in situations of conflict and hatred: the path of Christ and of the Christian is not to be one of violence and resistance, but one of self-giving and self-sacrifice to those who hate, despise and persecute them. That is the message which Luther sees in the cross and which has, I believe a profound relevance and urgency at the current time, when Europe is once again witnessing ethnic conflicts and hatreds which all too often claim some kind of religious ideology as their basis. For Luther, the Christian is first and foremost a person of the cross, not Bosnian or Serbian, not Irish or British, and that cross effectively removes ethnic boundaries as bases for conflict or hatred. The Christian is one who is to strive to follow in the footprints of the Master and to give him or herself unconditionally to those who hate and curse them. That is the mark of the true disciple, and is one which, far from leading to the individualistic pietism some impute to the theology of Luther, is a means of showing forth God’s glory, and the saving power of the gospel – a gospel which will still be foolishness to Greeks, but which is the power of God to those who are being saved.