

Truths of the Reformation

(8) Luther's Theology of the Cross

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We're going to continue for a while to deal with various truths of the Reformation even though the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation has come and gone. There is so much that has come down to us via the Reformation that is important and edifying, that there is plenty of material for a few more sermons. Today we will consider what is known as Luther's Theology of the Cross. The subject is appropriately called Luther's Theology of the Cross because he has helped us so much in highlighting it and expounding it, but it is a biblical theme.

Now this phrase "the theology of the cross" as it is used in connection with Martin Luther refers to certain implications of the cross of Christ for our understanding of God and his way of working in salvation and in the world and in the lives of believers. It is not about the meaning of the cross. There are whole books on the cross of Christ that do not deal with what Luther was expounding under the theology of the cross. Luther's theology of the cross is the working out of the implications of 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. In that passage Paul is not expounding the meaning of the cross of Christ. He is drawing out certain implications of the fact that God chose to accomplish salvation in the very unexpected and strange way of the cross. The death of Jesus does not seem so strange to us because we are so familiar with it, although I suspect that most of us have been struck with the strangeness of it from time to time. But for the society in which salvation through the cross of Christ was first proclaimed, this teaching of salvation through the crucifixion of a convicted criminal was more than strange. It was absurd.

And this is what Paul is reflecting on and expounding in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. And what Luther understood from studying this passage, and other passages in the light of this one, is that Jesus' death on the cross is the key to understanding God and his strange and unexpected ways of working out his plans and purposes in the world. The words that Paul

uses to refer to the strangeness and unexpectedness of the cross are folly and foolishness and weakness. In verse 18 Paul says that the "cross is folly to those who are perishing." And in verse 25 he writes, "²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." These are not the kinds of words we would expect to refer to God and his way of salvation. Paul is saying that salvation through the cross of Christ seems like foolishness and weakness in the opinion of the world and to our natural ways of looking at things. Sending his Son to die on a cross is not the method of salvation that we would expect God to use. If we want to use more respectful language, we can say that it seems strange and it is not what we would expect. If we want to use the kind of language that the world would use, we would think of words like bizarre and outrageous and even ridiculous. The "cross is folly to those who are perishing."

So, Luther grabs on to this biblical idea and works out the implications of it. He makes much of the fact that apart from faith in God and particularly faith in the God of the cross, we look at things in terms of human wisdom and human strength. But if we look at things from the perspective of human wisdom and human strength, we can never know God and we can never understand his ways because he works out his salvation through what our normal human way of thinking sees as foolishness and weakness. And so, Luther, building on Paul, says that it is only in the light of the cross that we can really know what God is like and it is only in the light of the cross that we can understand God's way of accomplishing his purposes in salvation.

Luther expounded this theme at what is known as the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. Luther was in trouble with the Pope and the Pope had ordered Luther's superior in the Augustinian Order to discipline him, but instead the man organized an event for Luther's ideas to be discussed and that event is known as the Heidelberg Disputation. For that event Luther prepared 42 theses and the first 28 of these are often referred to to get at Luther's understanding of the theology of the cross. In his introduction, Luther referred to the basic subject matter as theological paradoxes. That is what we see in the 1 Corinthians passage. God's foolishness is really wisdom and God's weakness is really strength. Luther referred to this sort of language as theological paradox.

Here is the fourth thesis, “4. Although the works of God always seem unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.” We see this in the cross. It seemed unattractive and appeared to be evil and, yet it merited eternal salvation for believers.

In working out this concept, Luther made a distinction between what he called theologians of glory and theologians of the cross. Theses 20-21, “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 things what it actually is.” A theologian of glory thinks of God and his ways through the lens of worldly expectations and wisdom. What seems wise and powerful by worldly standards is respected. A theologian of the cross however looks at God and his ways through the lens of the cross. And so, what appears to be strength is weakness and what appears to be weakness is strength. What appears to be wisdom is foolishness and what appears to be foolishness is wisdom.

Luther considered his Roman Catholic opponents to be theologians of glory. The Roman Catholic hierarchy had lots of worldly power. And in the Roman Catholic understanding of salvation human strength was valued and not human weakness. While there was some acknowledgment of the need for grace, yet acceptance with God depended on works to some extent and so it was strength that was valued and not weakness. So, Luther’s claim was that the church did not really understand the implications of the cross for our knowledge of God and for our knowledge of his way of salvation. They did not get the paradoxes of 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. They thought of strength and weakness and foolishness and wisdom according to human expectations and they failed to understand what Paul was talking about when he said that God’s foolishness is wiser than men and God’s weakness is stronger than men.

One of the ways that Luther developed this idea is in his teaching on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. We are so familiar with justification by faith alone that we do not notice how counter-intuitive and how strange it really is. But think of it this way. Most people who

have not been instructed in the biblical way of salvation will always think in terms of doing good works as the way to be righteous with God. It is natural for us to think in terms of doing better in order to be right with God. That is the wisdom of the world. That is our natural inclination. It focuses on human effort and human power. But what does the gospel say? In order to be right with God we must acknowledge that we can do nothing. The way to salvation is not through effort, but through coming to see that we can do nothing to please God.

So, Luther says in the 18th thesis: “18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.” And in the 25th thesis: “25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.”

This is part of the absurdity of salvation from the perspective of human wisdom and human power. Human wisdom says, “You must work hard in order to be accepted by God.” The foolishness of the gospel is that you are not justified by working, but by not working and only believing in Christ.

Another expression of this same truth is the phrase that Paul uses in Romans 4:5. God is described as the one “who justifies the ungodly.” From the perspective of human wisdom that is absurd. Human wisdom would say that God justifies the worthy, or that God justifies those who try hard. Human wisdom is expressed in the little adage, “God helps those who help themselves.” To the normal human way of thinking, the idea that God justifies the ungodly is plain foolishness. But according to the gospel it is the wisdom of God.

It is helpful for us to reflect on this because it is a tendency that we all have to think in terms of earning God’s favor even if we understand the doctrine of justification inside and out. We know in our minds that how we are doing in the Christian life does not contribute to our acceptance with God, but we have this deeply rooted tendency to feel that God’s acceptance of us is somehow conditional on our performance. But that is human wisdom raising its ugly head. The foolishness of the gospel is that God justifies the ungodly through faith in Jesus Christ.

Now we must always add at this point when speaking about justification that those who are justified will seek to please God by living holy and God-honouring lives. Obedience is important and necessary for Christians. But it is helpful to see and to understand how justification of the ungodly contradicts the wisdom of the world. It belongs to the foolishness of God that is wiser than men.

Actually, the way to obedience and good works is also part of the gospel truth that contradicts the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world says that justification by faith apart from works will lead to careless and sinful lives on the part of the justified. The wisdom of the world is expressed by the little doggerel, "Free from the law, o blessed condition, I can sin all I want and still have remission." That seems to make sense, doesn't it? If works don't contribute to our justification, why bother? But the foolishness of God says that those who believe in Jesus **will** live lives of obedience, not so much because they have to, but because they want to. The greatest motivation for obedience is not fear, but love and gratitude. And so, strange as it may seem, those who have the clearest understanding of their justification by faith are the most zealous to do good works.

We see this in a passage like Colossians 1:4-5 where Paul expresses his thanksgiving to God because of the love that the Colossians have "for all the saints." But then he goes on to say that this love that the saints are expressing is "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." They are confident of going to heaven. And it is that confidence of their salvation that motivates and empowers their love for all the saints. It belongs to the foolishness of God that justifying the ungodly does not lead to lax living, but to hungering and thirsting after righteousness on the part of the justified.

Now getting back to Luther and the Roman Catholic Church, Luther was applying Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1 to the errors of the church concerning justification. The Roman Catholic theologians were theologians of glory rather than theologians of the cross because they did not see the hidden wisdom in God's foolish way of justification by faith alone. Their understanding of salvation involved God justifying the **godly**. In their understanding, God's grace enabled people to live holy

lives and then they were justified on the basis of their own holiness. For them the idea that God justified the ungodly was foolishness. In Roman Catholic thinking God justifies the godly. But Luther saw that the true gospel can only be understood if we understand that God works in ways that that seem foolish and weak in the eyes of the world.

Now this teaching of the theology of the cross which Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and which Luther saw as the paradigm for knowing God and his ways, gives us insight into many other doctrines and themes in Scripture. Luther understood that Paul in these verses was teaching something fundamental about God. Graham Tomlin in a very illuminating article on Luther's Theology of the Cross wrote, "Luther arrived at a realization that the cross was not just the way God chose to save the world, or the path to be trod if salvation was to be achieved, but that it reveals God's characteristic way of working in the world.... On the cross, Christ seems to be suffering defeat, yet, to the eye of faith, God is working out the salvation of the world. In this theology, therefore, revelation is back to front, hidden, and contrary to what is expected. Things are not what they seem and the sign and the thing signified are out of joint. What seem to be valuable (human piety, wisdom, philosophy) are in fact worthless, and what seem weak and negligible (the experience of suffering, temptation, awareness of sin and failure) are in fact God's precious work to humble and then save the sinner." (Tomlin, G. (1997). "The Theology of the Cross: Subversive Theology for a Postmodern World?" *Themelios*, 23(1), 64–65.)

The part of this quote that is most suggestive for further application is this sentence: "On the cross, Christ seems to be suffering defeat, yet, to the eye of faith, God is working out the salvation of the world." This is in line with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1 that "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." "On the cross, Christ seems to be suffering defeat..." and yet it was, in fact the greatest victory ever." It seemed like a defeat. Luther helps us to see that this is a paradigm. This tells us what God is like and how he works. He brings great victories through what seem to be defeats.

Let's apply this idea to a few areas. In our Westminster Confession of Class, we have been discussing God's decree and part of that discussion

is the question of why God allowed the fall to happen. Why is there sin at all? Why is there suffering at all? Well think of this in the light of what we learn about God from the cross and from what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1. What appeared to be the greatest defeat turns out to be the greatest victory. We can see the fall in this same light. The fall of Adam and Eve into sin seemed to be a disaster, a catastrophe, a calamity. But it was part of the plan of the same God who planned the cross which seemed to be a disaster too; and yet was a great victory. If we look at the fall through the lens of the cross, we are helped to understand why God allowed the fall to happen – why it was part of God’s plan for the world. This is how God works! Here too the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

We confess in WCF 5:4 that, “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God manifest themselves so completely in his providence that it extends even to the first fall....” The theology of the cross puts this into perspective because the theology of the cross tells us that God works in surprising ways that contradict the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world says that God should have left the fall into sin out of his plan and then we would live in a perfect world and everyone would be happy and there would be no suffering or horrific evil. The foolishness of God decreed the fall and all the terrible consequences that followed, but from the cross we learn that the foolishness of God is wiser than men. The end result of God’s plan will be far better than if he had not decreed the fall.

This is also a helpful perspective for apologetics. One of the great questions that apologetics must answer is the question of why God allows suffering. The terrible reality of suffering in the world makes it hard for some people to believe that God exists. If God exists and is good and all powerful, how could he allow all of the terrible suffering that we see in the world. The cross sheds light on this question as well. The cross was the greatest evil; the creature murdering the creator! And yet it was God’s way of bringing about the greatest possible victory. This is what God does. He does not operate according to human expectations. He pursues his purposes through ways and means that seem foolishness to men. And we must see suffering in that light – in the light of what the cross reveals about God. The God of the cross is

constantly showing that what seems foolish to us is in fact the wisdom of God.

And it is because of this that we can live in confidence and hope. God's way is to take disasters and turn them into victories. That is what we see pre-eminently on the cross. But we must take what we learn about God from the cross and apply it to other situations that seem to be disasters. That is true both in our own lives, but also in the big picture of the kingdom of God. Human wisdom says that we are blessed when we are happy. Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we mourn in Matthew 5:4. Human wisdom tells us that we are blessed when we have religious freedom. Jesus tells us that we are blessed when we are persecuted in Matthew 5:11. Human wisdom tells us that when we are weak we are powerless. God tells us in 2 Corinthians 12:10 that when we are weak we are strong.

And this truth had a very practical payoff for Paul. Just before he says that when he is weak, he is strong, he says, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities." In Romans 5:3-4 Paul writes, "[W]e rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope...." From the perspective of the wisdom of the world that is just crazy. Suffering is to be avoided at all costs. You don't rejoice in sufferings; you endure them. But Paul understood what the cross revealed about God and his way of working out his good purposes. God's foolishness is wiser than men and God's weakness is stronger than men.

There is an interesting application of this truth that applies it to the postmodern thinking of our time. I read of this in the article by Graham Tomlin. The title of the article is, "The Theology of the Cross: Subversive Theology for a Postmodern World?" This article gives a very helpful and encouraging insight into life for Christians in a postmodern world.

Postmodernism is way of looking at the world that is very influential in our society. It rejects the idea of there being one truth that applies to everyone. Instead everyone has their own truth. So, people will say that something may be true for you, but it is not true for me. So, Islam is true for Muslims and Christianity is true for Christians and Naturalism is true

for atheists. But the question of which religion or worldview is just plain true is ruled out of order. There is no overarching truth that applies to everyone. Truth is what we want it to be. This, by the way, is where transgenderism comes from. If you were born a boy, but you identify as a girl your own subjective convictions trump everything else. You are whatever sex you want to be. That is a postmodern way of thinking.

Now one of the tenets of postmodern thought is that claims to truth are really claims to power. Those who say that they have the truth are saying that so that they can control other people. Truth claims are about power. They are about controlling others. And there is something to be said for that for often truth claims are made so that those making them can have power over other people.

Well Christianity is a truth claim. Christianity is a worldview. We say that what the Bible says about God and right and wrong and salvation in Jesus Christ and heaven and hell is true not just for Christians, but for everyone. Christianity rejects the idea that everyone has their own truth. There is one truth. It is found in the Bible. The biblical worldview is the only worldview that corresponds with reality.

Postmodernism says that this is all about power. It is all about controlling people. And it must be admitted that this has often been the case in the history of the church. But consider the theology of the cross in the light of this claim that truth claims are all about power. What does the cross say about God's way of advancing his kingdom and his purposes? Think of the way that God uses weakness, foolishness, defeat and suffering to advance his purposes. Graham Tomlin writes, "The vital clue for understanding the way God works is always the cross: God works and reveals himself in suffering and weakness, not strength and glory, whether in Christ or the Christian."

This perspective both gives us hope and also a vision for seeking to advance the kingdom. The hope is that the very things that discourage us, weakness and suffering, are the very things that God uses to accomplish his goals. And the vision for advancing the kingdom is that we are to reflect God in his way of salvation. Promoting the kingdom is not about power over others and controlling others. It is about God's

power working through weakness and suffering and sacrifice to bring salvation and healing and blessing to the sinful and the weak.

Christianity is not about power as the world understands and respects power. Sometimes Christians have been too influenced by the thinking of the world when it comes to thinking about the advance of the kingdom of God. They have been too hopeful in times when Christians seem to have greater influence in government, for instance, and too discouraged in times when Christians seem to have less power in society. The theology of the cross is a wonderful antidote to this kind of thinking. The kingdom of God does not come through human power. It comes through God's way of working through weakness and defeat and calamities.

This is a wonderful encouragement for us in our personal struggles and in our discouragement with the way that Christianity is less and less influential in our society. God is present when he seems to be absent. God is working when he seems to be inactive. God's kingdom comes through foolishness and weakness and suffering and defeat. That does not mean that we can just take it easy, but it does mean that as we struggle and as we seem to be so ineffective in our mission to the world, God is at work in ways that seem unimpressive and foolish – through the foolishness of the word preached and the sacraments and prayer and humble service. The theology of the cross teaches us that God's ways are not our ways and that is the greatest encouragement of all.