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THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS—PART ONE LUTHER AND LUTHERANISM

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There is one article and one basic principle in theology, and he who does not hold to this article and this basic truth, to wit, true faith and trust in Christ, is no theologian. All the other articles flow into and out of this one, and without it the others are nothing. The devil has tried from the beginning to nullify this article and to establish his own wisdom in its place. The disturbed, the afflicted, the troubled, and the tempted relish this article; they are the ones who understand the Gospel.

—WHAT LUTHER SAYS, 1357

The factors which make a theologian are: (1) the grace of the Spirit, (2) temptation, (3) experience, (4) opportunity, (5) sedulous reading, (6) a knowledge of the useful arts (*bonarum artium*).

—WHAT LUTHER SAYS, 1354

I. LUTHER AND LUTHERANISM

For Luther the most important article of our Christian faith, the most beautiful and precious message that could be preached, believed, taught, and confessed, was the message of Christ crucified, the redemption of the world through His doing and suffering and death and the salvation and justification of the sinner who believed in Him and belonged to Him. This is the heart and center of the gospel, which alone saves a poor sinner. It is the *Leit-motiv* and theme of Luther's witness to the world and that of our Lutheran Confessions. If one were to epitomize all that Luther wrote, taught, preached, sang, and confessed about the gospel of Christ, one might simply repeat the words of Luther's explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

These words of Luther's, which have been memorized and confessed by millions of Lutherans since he first penned them, show us the relationship between Luther and Lutheranism. It is an intimate theological relationship, a consensus, a fellowship in the gospel and all its articles. It binds all Lutheranism together with Luther in a way which is not possible in the Roman Church or in any of the Reformed denominations.

The theology of the cross, the article of justification, is not divided or separated from the other articles of faith, creation, sin, grace, baptism, church, Lord's supper, Christ's return and eternal life. Rather all these articles take their meaning from the article of redemption and the theology of the cross, and one understands and applies all other articles only in the light of the cross, which points to Christ's atoning and saving work of redemption.



For the article of redemption, or justification as Luther so often termed it, or, what is the same thing, the theology of the cross, really sums up all of our theology, sums up the meaning and implications of the *sola scriptura*, the *sola fide*,

and *sola gratia*. The theology of the cross, the article of justification, is not divided or separated from the other articles of faith, creation, sin, grace, baptism, church, Lord's supper, Christ's return and eternal life. Rather all these articles take their meaning from the article of redemption and the theology of the cross, and one understands and applies all other articles only in the light of the cross, which points to Christ's atoning and saving work of redemption.

Luther puts it all very beautifully when he says:

There is one article and one basic principle in theology, and he who does not hold to this article and this basic truth, to wit, true faith and trust in Christ, is no theologian. All the other articles flow into and out of this one, and without it the others are nothing. The devil has tried from the beginning to nullify this article and to establish his own wisdom in its place. The disturbed, the afflicted, the troubled, and the tempted relish this article; they are the ones who understand the Gospel.¹

For it is the theology of the cross which engenders and sustains faith in the hearts of sinners, even as it is the theology of the cross, the article of justification, which is the object of faith, the gospel which saves poor sinners. Listen again to Luther:

The other articles are rather far from us and do not enter into our experience; nor do they touch us . . . but the article on the forgiveness of sins comes into continual experience with us, and in daily exercise, and it touches you and me without ceasing. Of the other articles we speak as of something strange to us (e.g., creation, Jesus as the Son of God). What is it to me that God created heaven and earth if I do not believe in the forgiveness of sins? . . . It is because of this article that all the other articles touch us.

Statements like these can be found frequently in Luther's writings. They dominate his sermons, his hymns, the very liturgy which he reformed, and the hymns of those who followed him for the next 150 years. Many today may not be able to sing the mighty Lutheran chorales of the Reformation era and the age of orthodoxy which followed, but they most certainly can pray them and preach their message.

Let me give you just one example of a hymn from the age of orthodoxy which expresses eloquently the theology of the cross. I cite two stanzas (6 and 8) from J. H. Schröder, "One Thing Needful!":

I have naught, my God, to offer,
 Save the blood of Thy dear Son;
 Graciously accept the proffer:
 Make His righteousness mine own.
 His holy life gave He, was crucified for me;
 His righteousness perfect He now pleads before Thee;
 His own robe of righteousness, my highest good,
 Shall clothe me in glory, through faith in His blood.

And Schröder's classic stanza, number 8:

Jesus, in Thy cross are centered
 All the marvels of Thy grace;
 Thou, my Savior, once hast entered
 Through Thy blood the Holy Place:
 Thy sacrifice holy there wrought my redemption,
 From Satan's dominion I now have exemption;
 The way is now free to the Father's high throne,
 Where I may approach Him, in Thy name alone.

No wonder then that Schröder can go on to exult in the next stanza:

Joys unnumbered, peace and blessing
 Are the comforts full and free,
 Richly now I am possessing,
 For my Savior shepherds me,
 How sweet the communion, beyond all expression,
 To have Thee, O Jesus, as my heart's possession.
 O nothing in me can such ardor unfold
 As when I Thee, Savior, in faith shall behold.

Already during the life of Luther the theology of the cross epitomized in the article of justification by grace through faith was taught all over Lutheranism to be the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. Throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century the article of justification was given the chief and central position in Lutheran theology. This is still the case among confessional Lutheran theologians. We believe that all other articles are either antecedent to it or consequent from it. We believe that to know this article and keep it in our hearts will alone enable us to be good theologians and convinced and pious Christians. Therefore the above aphorism, attributed to Luther, correctly indicates the relationship between Luther and Lutheranism.

*The recognition and stress upon
 the theology of the cross and the
 centrality of the article of justification
 was new with the Reformation.*



Here we stand on holy ground. Here we are faced with a fact which is of greatest significance for us all, the fact of our reconciliation, the fact that through the death of Christ we can stand before God, not stripped and naked in our sin, like Adam, but righteous and holy, bedecked with the righteousness of Christ Himself. Here is answered for us the agonizing question of Luther and countless others: How may I find a gracious God?

The recognition and stress upon the theology of the cross and the centrality of the article of justification was new with the Reformation. The emphasis upon the forgiveness of sins through Christ's redemption is found in Paul's epistles to the Galatians and Romans, in the gospel of John, and all over the Bible; but it was lost with amazing rapidity in the post-apostolic age. We notice this from the writings of the apostolic fathers and the apologists. With the exception of the Epistle of Diognetus, the post-apostolic age seems almost to have forgotten Paul's theology on this point and the very claims of Jesus for Himself (Luke 19:10; Matt. 20:28).

The Eastern Church, although it led the way in developing the doctrine of the person of Christ, had much less to say explicitly about the redeeming work of Christ or justification or reconciliation, except for references where Christology necessitated an emphasis upon a statement on Christ's redemption. In the West, St. Augustine attempted to articulate an evangelical doctrine of grace and thus referred much more often to the vicarious atonement of Christ; but after his time Pelagianism and synergism gained ascendancy in the West as in the East, thus proving that where Pelagianism reigns, there will never be great interest in the vital question of salvation focused on the theology of the cross. Often humanism results, and we note that Abelard in the Middle Ages denied the vicarious atonement altogether, claiming that the innocent Christ suffering for

the guilty sinner is both cruel and unjust. At the time of the Reformation both Servetus and Socinus denied the vicarious atonement as well as the deity of Christ—and both of them arose out of Roman Catholicism. However, throughout the centuries the theology of the cross was articulated beautifully in the liturgy and in many hymns of the church.

With Luther and the Reformation the theology of the cross gained its rightful prominence and centrality in the preaching and teaching of the church. Let me quote some of the many statements of Luther on this point which will give insight into how he viewed the role of the theology of the cross in the entire theological enterprise and the importance of this message for all sinners.

"If this doctrine of justification is lost, the whole Christian doctrine is lost."



This is the highest article of our faith, and if one should abandon it as the Jews do or pervert it like the Papists, the church cannot stand nor can God maintain His glory which consists in this, that he might be merciful and that He desires to pardon sin for His Son's sake and to save.² If this doctrine of justification is lost, the whole Christian doctrine is lost.³

This doctrine can never be urged and taught enough. If this doctrine is overthrown or disappears, then all knowledge of the truth is lost at the same time. If this doctrine flourishes, then all good things flourish, religion, true wor-

ship, the glory of God and the right knowledge of all conditions of life and of all things.⁴

This last statement of Luther's is no overstatement but deliberately is intended to indicate the pervasiveness of the theology of the cross, the gospel of justification, in the life of the church in the world. Luther does not show how the theology of the cross can exert such an impact. In fact, the effect of the theology of the cross, the gospel of the crucified Savior, is not seen except through the eyes of faith. That is the reason why the cross is foolishness to Paul and to Luther. But Luther does become more specific as to how the theology of the cross dominates in Christ's church. The most important statement in the *Smalcald Articles* is found exactly in the middle of this great confession (II, I, 1-5):

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:25). He alone is the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isa. 53:6). Moreover, "all have sinned," and they are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23-25).

Inasmuch as this must be believed and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as Paul says in Romans 3, "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Rom. 3:28), and again, "That He [God] might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

After the statement of the principle, Luther immediately expresses himself on the importance of holding fast the gospel of justification at all costs.

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as Peter says, "There is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). "And with His scourging we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the Devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise all is lost, and the pope, the Devil, and our adversaries will gain the victory.

Luther then goes on in Part II of the *Smalcald Articles* to apply the article of redemption to the doctrine and practice of the papacy, thus illustrating how his theology of the cross is to be used in the church. Thus the article on redemption and its place in the theology of Luther and of Lutheranism is given a confessional status, still accorded by every evangelical Lutheran who wants to be faithful to the Lutheran Confessions. Melancthon in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* follows Luther in Article IV, and Article III of the *Formula of Concord* does the same. But why must the theology of the cross reign supreme?

Why must this one article or principle, which we might call the *solus Christus*, have total prominence?⁵ The theology of the cross must judge all doctrine in the church and guide the teaching of the church for two reasons. First, this doctrine opens up the entire Scripture to us and teaches us to know Christ aright and give Him proper honor and brings to our troubled consciences the most abundant consolation. Melancthon puts this matter very succinctly in his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (IV, 2):

In this controversy [on justification] the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which, understood aright, illumines

and amplifies the honor of Christ [which is of special service for the clear, correct, understanding of the entire Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible], and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences. . . .

It is clear from Melancthon's words that he is making the theology of the cross, or the article of justification, a hermeneutical principle for the interpreting of all Scripture, a principle which was not understood by the Papists and was never followed by the Reformed. The principle does not mean that one should atomistically bend the Scriptures and all the articles of the faith to agree logically with the article of justification. For the articles of faith, although agreeing with each other in truth, do not agree at all with each other according to human reason, as we shall see later when we discuss the subject of law and gospel. The agreement is in Christ and in theology and event of the cross. It is the theology of the cross centering as it does in the atoning work of Christ which enables us to distinguish between law and gospel and through faith to understand the Scriptures and apply them.

This principle which Melancthon derived from Luther is based upon Luther's unique understanding of Scripture as Christocentric. To Luther the unity of Scripture was a Christological unity. The entire message of Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, point to Christ, the Savior. And the purpose of Scripture—as well as the purpose of all teaching in the church—is soteriological (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). The purpose of Scripture is for our comfort, our forgiveness, our union with God. Like Christ Himself (John 5:39), Luther uses the Scriptures to bring people to faith in Christ. How can this be? Because Christ is the center and theme of all the Scriptures.⁶ Luther and Melancthon and

all Lutherans make Christ the center and focus of the Scriptures and interpret the Scriptures and all of life according to the theology of the cross. They are not reductionistically undermining the *sola scriptura* principle, and thus making the theology of the cross, or the gospel, a cipher for interpreting the Bible, but they are actually undergirding and enhancing the authority of Scripture, both its canonical authority as the only source of Christian doctrine and its causative authority to work faith. It is for this reason that Luther, like our Lord Himself, points to the authority of Scripture as he teaches and makes claims for the theology of the cross, as we shall see.

And so the Scriptures make us happy, trustful, confident Christians and put us at peace with God. They are our defense against temptation of the Devil, the world, and the flesh; they instruct us in true worship of God and how to be good theologians; and all this because the divine Word of Scripture proclaims the theology of the cross, because the Scriptures lead us to Christ. All Scripture and Christian doctrine and preaching and confession have their authority and power not only because they are revealed by God and because the Holy Spirit powerfully works through these means, but because of their divine message, because they point to Christ and His grace and proclaim the "foolishness" of the cross.

But Melancthon, by calling justification the chief teaching (*praecipuus locus*) of our faith, is saying more about the article of justification and the theology of the cross than merely its hermeneutical function. It is the source of "abundant comfort" for "troubled consciences." This is an immensely important assertion of Melancthon's which draws directly from Luther's theology of the cross. Speaking of the inestimable value of the article of justification Luther rhapsodizes:

For the issue here is nothing trivial to Paul. It is the principal doctrine [*articulus*] of Christianity. When this is recognized and held before one's eyes, everything else seems vile and worthless. For what is Peter? What is Paul? What is an angel from heaven? What is all creation in comparison with the doctrine of justification? Therefore if you see this threatened or endangered, do not be afraid to stand up against Peter or an angel from heaven. For this cannot be praised highly enough.

Luther points out that Paul is opposing not the apostolicity of Peter when he makes his comments in Galatians 2:11, but the practice of Peter, which seemed to yield something to the Judaizers and thus endangered "the majesty and doctrine of justification." Luther continues: "When it comes to the defense and truth of the Gospel, therefore, we are not embarrassed to have the hypocrites accuse us of being proud and stubborn, the ones who think that they alone have the truth."⁷

From the above citation we learn that the justification of the sinner before God for Christ's sake was not only the principal doctrine of Christianity for Luther but the very essence of Christianity. It is the essence of the gospel itself and of the Christian faith and life. It is the reason for all that exists. It is the only doctrine or message which can offer a poor sinner hope, salvation, and life and fellowship with God.

For Luther to lose the doctrine of justification would be to lose the very grace of God and the peace offered by Christ and the gospel. To lose the theology of the cross would make one prey to the Devil and every kind of heresy.

For if we lose the doctrine of justification, we simply lose everything. Hence the most necessary and important thing is that we teach and repeat this doctrine daily as Moses says

about the Law (Deuteronomy 6:7). For it cannot be grasped or be held enough or too much. In fact, though we may urge and articulate it vigorously, no one grasps it perfectly or believes it with all his heart. So frail is our flesh and so disobedient to the Spirit.⁸

"Grace" and "peace" contain a "summary of all Christianity," and grace and peace are impossible unless we first learn to know the forgiveness we have through Christ. For to take away this article is to take away Christ the "Propitiator."⁹

Only Christ can make atonement to God, not works, fasts, cowl and tonsure, and meditation. Without Him we inevitably enter into horrible despair and "lose God and everything." True theology, the theology of the Cross, begins by taking hold of salvation in Christ, to "begin where Christ began—in the virgin's womb, in the manger, and at His mother's breast." For this purpose He came down, was born, lived among men, suffered, and was crucified, and died, so that in every possible way He might present Himself to our sight. He wanted us to fix the gaze of our hearts upon Him and thus to prevent us from clamoring into heaven and speculating about the divine majesty.

Therefore, whenever you consider the doctrine [*locus*] of justification and wonder how or where or in what condition to find a God who justifies and accepts sinners, then you must know that there is no other God than this man Jesus Christ. Take hold of Him. Cling to Him with all your heart, and spurn all speculation about the divine majesty; for whoever investigates the mystery of God will be consumed by His glory.¹⁰

This statement of Luther pertaining to the doctrine of justification is an excellent description of his theology of the cross. We note that the very incarnation and birth of Christ took place and are preached for the sake of Christ's crucifixion, His atonement, the theology of the cross.

And Luther knows what he is talking about, because he

has experienced the theology of the cross himself, and he concludes this section by saying: "Take note, therefore, in the doctrine [*causa*] of justification that when we all must struggle with the Law, sin, death, and the devil, we must look at no other God than this incarnate and human God."

Luther is most insistent that Jesus Christ be linked with God the Father. The theology of the cross does not consist of some kind of sweet Jesus Christo-monism. In no way is the second article of our faith separated from the first or the third. To Luther all theology, all language about God, constitutes one organic whole, and the "center of the circle" is Christ. And so the center of the article of justification and the center of all theology is the crucified Christ:

[Christ] should be such a treasure to me that in comparison with Him everything else is filthy. He should be such a light to me that when I have taken hold of Him by faith, I do not know whether there is such a thing as Law, sin, or righteousness in the world. For what is everything in heaven and on earth in comparison with the Son of God?¹¹

These words of Luther constitute the Christian's response to the theology of the cross, namely, "Faith which is the highest worship of God."

The theology of the cross is not learned overnight, and it can be easily lost. The doctrine of justification by grace for the sake of Christ's atoning suffering and death is a slippery thing. It is, as Luther says, a foolish doctrine.¹² That God's Son would become incarnate, suffer, and die for the sins of the world is inconceivable to common sense and reason, and we are tempted in a hundred ways to discard such a theology or relegate it to the periphery of our religion or alter its meaning. Luther and Lutheranism are well aware of this fact. On one occasion Luther wrote, "On my heart one article alone rules supreme, that of faith in

Christ, by whom, through whom and in whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth day and night."¹³ So totally is he taken up in the theology of the cross! But then he immediately confesses, "And still I find that I grasp this so high and broad and deep a wisdom only in a poor and weak and fragmentary manner." In his commentary on Paul's epistle to the Galatians he confesses this slippery nature of the gospel even more strongly:

Now the matter of justification is a slippery thing, not because of itself—for in itself it is absolutely sure and certain—but it is slippery in respect to us. I myself have often experienced this. For I know in what hours of darkness I sometimes wrestle. I know how many times I suddenly lose the rays of the gospel and of grace, as though they were covered with a dense cloud. And I know what a slippery place those occupy who seem to be so well exercised in this matter and to have such a firm footing. We have had abundant experience in this matter; and therefore we can teach it to others, which is a certain sign that we understand it. For no one is able to teach others what he doesn't know himself. . . . But when in present trouble we ought to use the Gospel which is the Word of grace and comfort and life, then the Law, the Word of wrath and bitterness and death, obscures the Gospel and begins to rage, and the horrors it begets in the conscience are no less severe than what was brought forth by that horrible spectacle on Mount Sinai. Thus only one passage of threatening in the Scripture ruins and vitiates all comfort and so strikes away at all our inward powers that we completely forget justification, grace, Christ, and the Gospel. Therefore with respect to us it is a slippery matter because we are slippery.¹⁴

Just as Lutheranism in its preaching and confession follows Luther's adherence to the *theologia crucis*, so also those of us who hold such a treasure know that we are in con-

stant danger of losing it or defiling it, and we live according to the first of Luther's *Ninety-five Theses*: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt. 4:17], He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."¹⁵

The reader will no doubt have observed that I have used the term "theology of the cross" interchangeably with the doctrine of justification by grace, or the teaching of redemption and the vicarious atonement through Christ's suffering and death. This is altogether warranted. Actually Luther seldom uses the term "theology of the cross" as such. But he is constantly referring to the theme as the real meaning and center of the Christian gospel. His most significant discussion which actually uses the term *theologia crucis* is in his *Heidelberg Disputation of 1518*, early in his career.¹⁶ There he shows the theology of the cross is simply the way God reveals Himself graciously to man, namely, as a poor suffering human dying for the sins of the world. There Luther tells us that the theology of the cross is the revelation of God, the very opposite of God's glory which no man can see or conceive. This basic theme runs through all of Luther's works. God can be known only through the revelation of His Son who came to us and for us in the flesh, and then only by His suffering. Thus Luther can say, "Therefore in the crucified Christ is true theology and the knowledge [*cognitio*] of God."¹⁷ Again Luther says, "God can only be found in sufferings and the Cross." And so the crucifixion of Christ is indeed the revelation of God, and the theology of the cross is the only true theology open to fallen man. This is the foolishness of the gospel.

It is important to note that Luther's theology of the cross is not some novel animadversion or theory that underlies Luther's entire theology and represents his correct, but private, reading of the Scriptures. We note once again that the Lutheran Confessions represent as central this theology of the cross. The *Augsburg Confession* clusters

all articles around Article III and IV on the work of Christ and justification. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Melancthon's most crucial exegesis and argumentation concerns the theology of the cross (Articles IV, XII, XIX, XXI, XXIV). Already we have seen how in Luther's *Smalcald Articles* all discussion is carried on and coordinated to the "chief article" of Christ's work of redemption.

In recent years there has been a certain amount of theological discussion, some edifying and some not, on Luther's theology of the cross. By far the most significant contribution to the discussion, which perhaps initiated much of the interest in the subject, was a brief article written by Hermann Sasse in the 1940s and titled "Luther's *Theologia Crucis*." The article appeared in translation in *The Lutheran Outlook* in October 1951. It was translated again by Norman Nagel and appears in a collection of essays titled *We Confess Jesus Christ*. Sasse's position is that "Theology is theology of the Cross, nothing less. A theology that would be something else is a false theology."¹⁸ Then Sasse says:

Many Christians regard this [the theology of the cross] as gross one-sidedness. The cross is only a part of the Christian message, along with others. The Second Article is not the whole Creed, and even within the Second Article the cross is only one fact of salvation among others. What a constriction of Christian truth Luther has been guilty of! Nowadays you can even hear Lutherans saying this sort of thing. How can Christian theology be limited to a theology of the cross, as if there were not also a theology of the resurrection, as if the theology of the Second Article were not in need of being amplified by the Third, by a theology of the Holy Spirit and His work in the church as its means of grace and in the saints then and now?¹⁹

Sasse responds to these objections by Lutherans and others:

Obviously the "theology of the cross" does not mean that for a theologian the church year shrinks together into nothing but Good Friday. Rather, it means that Christmas, Easter, and

Pentecost cannot be understood without Good Friday. . . . Always it is from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation. Because this is so, Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) wants to be more than just one of many theological theories that have appeared in Christian history. It stands against its opposite, the prevailing theology in Christendom, that *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory), as Luther calls it, and claims to be that right and Scriptural theology with which the church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther maintains, can it be said that it is the preaching of the Gospel.²⁰

Then Sasse explains what the theology of the cross is, centering as it does in the work of Christ and the doctrine of justification by grace.²¹

II. LAW AND GOSPEL: THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS IN ITS CONTEXT

The distinguishing mark of the theology of Luther and Lutheranism is the theology of the cross. A complementary mark of Lutheranism is to present the theology of the cross in the context of law and gospel. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Melancthon defines the law and gospel as the two chief teachings, or themes (*loci*), revealed in Scripture. He summarizes Luther's view as follows:

All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines [*duos locos praecipuos*], the Law and the promises [Gospel]. In

some places it presents the Law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this it does either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for His sake, or when, in the New Testament, the Christ who came promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life. By "Law" in this discussion we mean the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures (Apology IV, 5).

The proper distinction between law and gospel is the most important task a preacher can carry out, for the failure to do so will turn the theology of the cross into a false theology of glory, of some kind or other.²² This concern is repeated again and again by Lutherans to this very day. In the *Formula of Concord* a passage expresses this deep concern in its discussion of "Law and Gospel."

The distinction between Law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the Holy Prophets and Apostles may be explained and understood correctly. We must therefore observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the Gospel into Law. This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort which they would otherwise have in the holy Gospel when it is preached purely and without admixture, whereby Christians can support themselves in their greatest temptations against the terrors of the Law (FC, SD V, 1).

For the Scriptures teach two doctrines which are in utter conflict with each other. The law tells us of our sin and guilt before God and of His terrible wrath against us. The gospel promises forgiveness, grace, eternal life because of the Son of God who bore God's wrath as a victim on the cross (the theology of the cross). Both of these doctrines

are clearly taught in Scripture, and they must be preached and taught in the church in a way that they be not confused. People by nature believe that they can be saved by the law, by their own character or works, that is, if they believe in any kind of salvation.

The proper distinction between Law and gospel is the most important task a preacher can carry out, for the failure to do so will turn the theology of the cross into a false theology of glory, of some kind or other.



The law, which reveals our sin and guilt before God and God's wrath against sinners, is a presupposition for understanding the theology of the cross, for believing the gospel. The incarnation of Christ, His sermons, His good works in obedience to God's law, His penal suffering and death and resurrection are completely unnecessary, if man is not a sinner and God is not angry at sin. No one will rightly understand or value the work of Christ and the comfort to be found in the theology of the cross who has not become convinced of his own sin and guilt before God. This basic fact is taught throughout the Scriptures.

But also throughout the Scriptures it is taught that men do not believe in their own sinfulness or take it seriously,

and certainly often do not think that God is angry at all, that is, if they believe in God at all. In fact, in our relativistic, materialistic, skeptical day modern man scorns the very idea of any kind of final truth: Neither the accusations of the law nor the promises of the gospel are understood and believed. In fact, in the modern Western world many are merely nominal Christians, culture Christians, practical atheists. It is necessary, therefore, that the law be presented to these people, as well as to the Christian community. For the prime purpose of the law is to reveal man's sin and guilt before God.

Most people, of course, tend to recognize the reality of sin in some sense or other, even those who have not learned this from the Word of God. In the tradition of Western Christendom there has always been a notion of natural law, and from the time of Aristotle numerous books have been written on the subject of ethics. And in most pagan cultures vain worship and sacrifices and works have indicated a sense of law and sin. However—and this is most important—it is only from God's supernatural revelation that we learn the whole story of the depravity, the radical evil, and lost condition of man. Only from the revelation of God do we understand that man not only sins and deviates from human or divine norms of behavior, but is in fact a sinner before God and is guilty and lost in His sight. This fact is put clearly in Luther's *Smalcald Articles* (III, I, 3): "This hereditary sin is so deep and horrible a corruption of nature that no reason can understand it, but it must be believed from the revelation of Scriptures, Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12. . . ."

In Scripture we learn the hopelessness of trying to atone for our sins and reconcile ourselves with God by our own will or efforts. The paradigm of one who knows that he is not merely guilty of this or that slight infraction of divine law, but stands before God as a sinner, is the Publi-

can in the temple, according to Jesus' parable. His simple prayer is this: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). His prayer is that God be no longer angry with him (*hilastheeti*). He stands before God as "the sinner" (*ho hamartolos*). I was once asked by a professor of theology whether one ought to confess one's original sin. I replied that the confession of the Publican in the temple is just such a confession. And I added the confession from our Lutheran order of service, "We confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean . . ." Luther rightly says (SA III, III, 36), "[Repentance] does not debate what is sin and what is not sin, but lumps everything together and says, 'We are holy and altogether sinful.'"

And so the law which teaches man to know his own sinfulness, his own radical evil, and guilt before God and reveals the wrath of God against all sin must be preached before the gospel, if the gospel, the theology of the cross, can mean anything to a sinful person.

This basic biblical and Lutheran orientation, which has been essentially followed in the Reformed and Roman Catholic tradition as they teach and practice the doctrine of repentance, has been turned on its head in modern times by what we might call the neo-Antinomianism of Karl Barth and his disciples. Barth insists²³ that there is simply no place for an autonomous section in any dogmatics on the subject of sin. In other words, you must know Christ as your Savior before you can know that you are a sinner. To Barth the theology of the cross, which he eloquently presents at times, reveals both the sin of man and the grace and forgiveness of God. Barth is right, of course, when he says that one cannot have a true understanding of sin unless he knows that sin is against God. And he criticizes severely the liberalism of former generations of theologians like Schleiermacher. Barth quotes Luther, of all peo-

ple, to prove his point. In his *Table Talk* Luther says:

We do not count sin as anything very great, but toss it to the wind as though it were a little thing which is nothing. And even if it comes about that sin bites into our conscience we think that it is not so very great but we can wipe it out with a little work or merit. But if we see the greatness of the precious treasure which is given for it, we will then be made aware that sin is a great and mighty thing, that we can never wipe it out with our own works or powers, but that the Son of God had to be offered up to do this. If we take this to heart and consider it well, we will understand what the word sin includes, the wrath of God as well as the whole kingdom of Satan, and that sin is not such a small and light thing as the complacent world dreams and thinks.²⁴

It is clear that Luther, with all his allusions to the theology of the cross, is preaching law at this point and not gospel. He is speaking to Christian people and reminding them of the enormity of their sin which brought about the death of Christ. Johan Heermann makes the same point in one of the stanzas of his great passion hymn:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon Thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee!
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied Thee:
I crucified Thee.

Again Barth quotes Luther as he is cited in the *Formula of Concord* (FC SD, V, 13): "Yea, what more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, His Son?"

This indeed sounds as though the gospel reveals sin and guilt to man. But Barth has omitted what Luther adds immediately to the words just spoken.

But as long as all this preaches God's wrath and terrifies men, it is not yet the preaching of the Gospel nor Christ's own preaching, but that of Moses and the Law against the impenitent. For the Gospel and Christ were never ordained or given for the purpose of terrifying and condemning, but of comforting and cheering those who are terrified and timid.

Luther is a master at preaching sin and law by alluding to the cross and what happened there.²⁵

Yes, the cross can be preached in such a way that it frightens and terrifies sinners. Luther and the Confessions and our hymns, too, teach that the horrible character of sin is revealed in the cross. Think of Paul Gerhardt's Good Friday hymn:

Lord, from Thy sorrows I will learn
How fiercely wrath divine doth burn,
How terribly its thunders roll;
How sorely this our loving God
Doth smite with His avenging rod;
How deep His floods o'erwhelm the soul.

Adolf Köberle puts the matter eloquently:

So in the shadow of Good Friday the roads of salvation lead to the final station of that mountain they seek to surmount, where there is written *perfecta cognitio sui ipsius*—the recognition of the sinfulness of all our ways. The cross of Christ forces us to turn about. It is true that we can still defy even this crucifixion sermon of God, which speaks so much more convincingly than any personal message of conscience; we can continue in our previous course, trying to bring an imaginary satisfaction to God and a false quietness to our restless heart. Even here we can again try to escape the accusing reality of

hard facts by submerging ourselves in some mysterious unity. But in this way we only pile up new guilt, become more and more involved in rebellion against God, who, in the death of Jesus Christ, has spoken His final judgment on every human attempt at self-salvation. We must abandon the intoxication of an *apotheosis*. The twenty-fifth chapter of Job has spoken the final word: "How then can a man be justified with God? Or how can he be clean that is born of a woman? Behold even to the moon and it shineth not; yea the stars are not pure in His sight. How much less man. . ." On the ruins of a perished glory humble man learns to seek the Word of the Gospel.²⁶

But the order is always kept straight. Sin is preached and then grace; law then gospel. The words of Speratus will always ring true:

The Law reveals the guilt of sin,
And makes men conscience-stricken;
The Gospel then doth enter in,
The sin-sick soul to quicken:
Come to the Cross, look up and live!
The Law no peace to thee doth give,
Nor can its deeds afford it.

Sin, Law, and guilt are the absolutely necessary presuppositions for the preaching of the atonement, the theology of the cross. Karl Barth's entire thesis tumbles in the face of the clear words of Romans 3:20, "For through the law comes the knowledge of sin," and by the preaching practice of Christ and the apostles.²⁷

When speaking of sin and guilt as a presupposition for the preaching of the theology of the cross and the atonement, we must point out that sin must never be toned down but taken seriously and preached seriously. Otherwise the sweetness of the theology of the cross will be

ignored and set aside. The history of the church is filled with examples where synergism prevailed and the doctrine of justification is either contaminated or rejected outright. We see this in the case of Rome, Socinianism, Unitarianism, modernism, liberalism, etc. Here we might recall Staupitz' words to Luther that as long as he thought of himself as only a painted sinner, Christ was then only a painted Savior. Sin must be preached in all its severity. Let me quote one more of Luther's remarkable statements on this point. I was actually warned by a colleague against quoting in a sermon I preached this statement of Luther's because he thought it would be dangerous for students to hear it, but I am sure that one who understands the theology of the cross will not be offended.

If you are a preacher of God's grace, then preach not an invented, but a real grace. If it is real grace, then you dare not bring up any invented sin. God does not justify imaginary sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly (*pecca fortiter*), but believe more boldly and rejoice in Christ the Victor over sin, death, and the world. We sin as long as we are here. Life is no house of righteousness. It is enough to confess the Lamb who carries the sin of the world. From Him no sin can separate us, even if we whored and murdered a thousand times a day. Do you think the redemption and price is so small which such a Lamb paid for our sins? Pray boldly, for you are a bold sinner.²⁸

Melanchthon, to whom these words were addressed, probably did not understand them fully, and neither have many other people.²⁹ After citing many, many examples of man's futile attempts to approach God or whatever he thinks to be God by his own acts of will, decision, emotion, or intellect, Köberle says the following:

In the Old Testament piety, the attitude is a different one. Here men are sure that if every sin is an affront to God's majesty and a mocking of His holy will, then forgiveness can neither be taken for granted nor be acquired. Only a single way of salvation lies open, a way that man himself does not control, namely, when God Himself through a paradoxical free eudokia which cannot be forced nor set in motion by any human means, decides to overlook and pardon sin, and so by His act, makes communion possible! The statement to the palsied Israelite, "Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven," could be the words of only a blasphemer—or the words of God Himself. In Israel the proclamation of the remission of guilt could never mean that the fear of God is only a fancy springing from an unwholesome unhealthy exaggeration in the fears of conscience, which needs only to be overcome to enable man to live with free assurance in the gracious light of divine love. This religious fallacy has been once for all excluded and forbidden in the Bible by the terrible seriousness of its warnings concerning judgment as they are found in the messages of the great prophets and in the eschatological discourses of Jesus.

When Jesus brings forgiveness unconditionally, He can do so only because He knows that He has come from the One who is the source of the free decree of love and that He is in unity with Him; because He knows that He is indeed the coming Messiah, in whom God anew approaches the humanity that has become estranged from His will. The miracle of His presence is the pledge that God has taken pity on the world. He has not constituted Himself the Reconciler, but God has appointed Him. His word of absolution is finally established on His absolute knowledge of His mission.

Many themes and deep realities constitute the preaching of God's law. Most essential to the biblical doctrine is that God is angry (our Confessions say "horribly angry")

[*horribiliter irasci*]) (Apology IV, 129). That God is angry against sin and wickedness is surely an unpleasant and disagreeable thought, a terrifying thought, which some have found hard to reconcile with a loving God. But the wrath of God is a fact which is taught with such frequency and clarity in Scripture that it cannot be demythologized or deanthropomorphized, or wished away. For the wrath of God, like His love, is not some quiescent, otiose potentiality or quality in God, but “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18). Divine vengeance and destruction upon sin really take place in real history (Isa. 30:27-28): “Behold, the name of the Lord cometh from a remote place, burning is His anger, and dense is His smoke; His lips are filled with indignation, and His tongue is like a consuming fire; and His breath is like an overflowing torrent, which reaches to the neck, to shake the nations back and forth in a sieve, and to put in the jaws of the people the bridle which leads to ruin.” Hosea 5:10-11: “The princes of Judah have become like those who move a boundary. On them will I pour out My wrath like water.” Micah 5:14-15: “I will root out your Asherim from among you and destroy your cities. And I will execute vengeance in anger and wrath on the nations which have not obeyed.” Such passages from the Old Testament show that the anger of God is active, not some inert grudge against the actions of mankind. And the New Testament says the same. Ephesians 5:6: “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things [filthiness, foolish talking, whoring, etc.], the wrath of God [*hee orgee tou theou*] comes upon the sons of disobedience.”

It is not correct to say that God hates sin but not the sinner. Scripture goes further than that. Psalm 5:4-6: “For Thou art not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; no evil dwells with Thee. The boastful shall not stand before Thine

eyes; Thou dost hate all who do iniquity. Thou dost destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.” (Cf. Ps. 7:11f.; 11:5.) It is man the sinner who commits sin. It is man the sinner whom God punishes. Impenitent sinners, not some abstraction called sin, are condemned to eternal perdition. This fact, that God hates sinners, is important not only for the correct preaching of the law, but for the correct teaching of the theology of the cross. The vicarious atonement simply means that Christ, the God-man, suffered the wrath of God against all sinners in the place of the sinners themselves. This is the heart of the gospel, the foolishness of the cross.

The fact of the wrath of God proclaimed throughout the Scriptures and revealed from heaven does not seem to square for many people with the idea of a loving God. Of course, we might expect this troubled reaction. The law does not square with the gospel. The great liberal theologian Albrecht Ritschl was unable to harmonize God’s wrath with His love and, therefore, criticizes severely Luther’s doctrine of reconciliation:

Moreover, a plain contradiction is involved in the way in which Luther derives reconciliation from the love of God, but at the same time derives from the wrath of God the satisfaction which Christ has to work out through the vicarious endurance of punishment. For it is impossible to conceive sinners, at the same time and in the same respect, as objects both of God’s love and God’s wrath.³⁰

That a teaching is inconceivable is a poor reason for rejecting it. Ritschl cannot harmonize the love and wrath of God, so he denies the wrath of God. But if there is no wrath of God against sin and sinners, what does Paul mean when he says that God sent His Son “for sin” [*peri hamartias*] (Rom. 8:3)? What does he mean when he says that Christ

has loved us and “gave Himself up for us, an offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2)? What does Peter mean when he says, “Christ also has died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18)? What does Isaiah mean when he says that Christ carried our sorrows, that He was “smitten of God and afflicted,” that “He was pierced for our transgressions,” that “the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa. 53)?

In denying the wrath of God Ritschl has actually denied the grace of God.³¹ Ritschl seems to be arguing that if there is divine wrath, then there is no divine love. Karl Barth dialectically counters that if there is no wrath, there is no love either. Ironically, in the mystery of the theology of the cross both God’s wrath and love are merged. In Christ’s crucifixion His wrath succumbs to His love, and He saves us. How beautifully Paul Gerhardt put this in his Lenten hymn:

A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth,
The guilt of all men bearing;
Laden with the sins of earth,
None else the burden sharing!
Goes patient on, grows weak and faint,
To slaughter led without complaint,
That spotless life to offer;
Bears shame, and stripes, and wounds and death,
Anguish and mockery, and saith,
“Willing all this I suffer.”

That Lamb is Lord of death and life,
God over all forever;
The Father’s Son, whom to that strife
Love doth for us deliver!
Almighty Love! What hast Thou done!
The Father offers up His Son—
The Son content descendeth!

O Love, O Love! How strong art Thou!
In shroud and grave Thou lay’st Him low
Whose word the mountains rendeth!

In the cross God’s wrath against sin was satisfied. This was an act of divine love, and righteousness now is promised in the gospel. “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

The medieval scholastic theologian, Peter Damian, taught that God is so powerful that He can make the past so that it never happened. This is not true. Our God is a righteous God, righteous in His condemnation of sinners, and righteous in His absolution of the world through the vicarious death and resurrection of Christ. And so as the apostle Paul says in Romans 3:26—right in the midst of his classic discussion of justification by faith—God is just as He justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Since man cannot pay his debt to God, God pays it for him at the supreme sacrifice of His only begotten Son. It cost God His greatest treasure to save us and deliver us from divine wrath. Luther alludes to this often, the great “cost” to God revealed in the theology of the cross.

I have often said that faith in God is not enough, but there must also be a cost. And what is the cost? For the Jews and Turks believe too, but without means or cost. The gospel shows us what the cost is. For the Holy Spirit teaches therein that we do not have the Father without means and we cannot go to the Father without means. Here Christ teaches us that we are not lost, but have eternal life, that is that God loved us so much that He was willing to pay the cost of thrusting His own dear Son into our misery, hell and death and having Him drink that cup. That is the way in which we are saved.³²

Luther puts the same thought beautifully in his well-

known hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All Rejoice":

Then God beheld my wretched state
 With deep commiseration;
 He thought upon His mercy great,
 And willed my soul's salvation;
 He turned to me a Father's heart;
 Not small the cost! To heal my smart,
 He gave His best and dearest.

Ritschl and his ilk, in whatever culture they may find themselves, by denying the wrath of God, have turned their backs on the theology of the cross. The converted Jew, Philippi, has answered the watered-down theology of Ritschl and classical liberalism as follows:

He who takes away from me the atoning blood of the Son of God, paid as a ransom to the wrath of God, who takes away the satisfaction of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, vicariously given to the penal justice of God; who hereby takes away justification or forgiveness of sins only by faith in the merits of this my Surety and Mediator, who takes away the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, takes away Christianity altogether, so far as I am concerned. I might then just as well have adhered to the religion of my ancestors, the seed of Abraham after the flesh.³³

Philippi's witness to Christ crucified leads us into the very essence of the theology of the cross, the vicarious atonement of Jesus, initiated at His very incarnation, but culminating on Good Friday.

Let us now trace the biblical basis for the theology of the cross. One word, more than any other, depicts the life of Christ from beginning to end, Christ's life of love and

suffering and death. It is the word "obedience," a precious word to us, when we consider that this obedience was vicarious, for us; when we consider that it was no small thing for Him, who was in the very form of God, to become obedient unto death (Phil. 2:8), and that the Son of God must through suffering learn obedience (Heb. 5:8). Christ came with a mission (John 5:38; 12:47). He was sent by the Father (John 3:47; 4:34), and He *must* carry out what His Father has sent Him to do (John 9:4; Luke 2:49). His mission, essentially, is to die for the sins of the world (Matt. 16:21; John 1:29). He would do this as the "Servant of the Lord" (Isa. 42:1-5; 52:13-53:12; Ps. 40:7-9). By His willing obedience of God's Law and His obedience unto death (John 10:18; Phil. 2:8; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2) Jesus Christ would save the whole world.

His willing obedience was *for us*, for the world, the world of the ungodly (Rom. 5:6; 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18; Rom. 3:13). Christ did not just die on behalf of the whole lost human race or for the benefit of mankind but He died as our Substitute (Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 3:18; Luke 10:45). This "for us" cannot be overemphasized. We are not talking about a masquerade or an idea or a myth here. Everything in heaven and earth depends upon the fact that Christ took up our cause and put Himself in our place. This great fact, this "blessed exchange" and its results are brought out by many biblical motifs.

1) Christ is our *Sacrifice*. Christ's crucifixion is called throughout Scripture a "sacrifice" (*thusia*) and "offering" (*prophora*). He is both the great High Priest (Heb. 4:14, 7:1f.) and the Sacrifice (Heb. 9:23, 26; Eph. 5:2; John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19). This terminology is closely connected with the language of ransom, for it is by His sacrifice that Christ paid our ransom and the ransom was for all (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

Christ's sacrificial atoning death on the cross was prophesied and typified in the Old Testament. At the time

of Moses sacrifices were appointed by God for the purpose of bringing God and man together. By God's institution the blood of bulls and goats became a means of grace: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement for the soul" (Lev. 17:11). It is clear that these sin offerings in the Old Testament were propitiatory sacrifices. The slain animal was offered not merely for the benefit of the sinner but in the place of the offender whose sin made him guilty of death. These sacrifices were vicarious because God appointed them to be so. On his own initiative man cannot offer anything to God which will make satisfaction for his sin. Moses wanted to give his own life for Israel, but God refused (Ex. 32:31f.). Only the offerings appointed by God are of value. Therefore the people were instructed to bring forth only the sacrifices which God approves. "Offer the sacrifices of righteousness," the psalmist says (Ps. 4:5).

*The guilt of all men has been
transferred to Christ.*



These sacrifices were vicarious because they pointed to Christ's sacrifice; they had their atoning power in His death and sacrifice on the cross. In themselves they were not enough; they were only promise, a shadow of things to come (Heb. 1:4). They all typified the one Lamb of God "who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The

word *airoo* means both to bear and to take away; both connotations are included in this passage. The Lamb takes our sin on the altar of the cross and bears it Himself. Thus we are redeemed "with the precious blood, of a Lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:19).

The guilt of all men has been transferred to Christ. This great fact is brought into sharp relief by two remarkable passages in Paul's writings. Galatians 3:13 tells us that Christ has been made a "curse" for us and thus redeemed us from the law's curse. Christ is not merely called cursed but He became a curse. Similarly, Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that God made Christ to be "sin" for us. Again he is not merely called sin but is made sin. All the sins of the world gravitate to Him. The apostle Paul in these two verses is obviously drawing from Isaiah 53 and other Old Testament passages. There in Isaiah the Servant is charged with our sins, and our sins smite Him and afflict Him. God lays our sins on Him, bruises Him for our sins, puts Him to grief, and makes His life an offering for our sin. Of this matter August Pieper in his great commentary on Isaiah comments:

This Servant was above all others the object, the goal of suffering; He is sought as one on earth whom suffering really had in mind. Like a magnet He drew to Himself all the suffering of this curse of earth. And these pains and suffering are not just outward infirmities, but guilt and wrath and curse and punishment which have been removed from us and cast on Him.³⁴

2) Christ is our *Redemption* (satisfaction). The result of Christ's sacrifice was the redemption of the world. The blood of the Lamb was a penal death. He died as one punished by God, as one under God's wrath and curse. The ancient church called this satisfaction. God is satisfied. The

New Testament word which most typifies this result of Christ's suffering and death is the term redemption. We are told in Scripture that Christ redeemed us from the curse and dominion of the law with a price, namely, His blood (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). The purchase price is called a ransom (Matt. 20:28). The ransom is demanded by God's law (Col. 2:13-14; Eph. 2:15), and the ransom is for sin (Rom. 8:3; 1 Peter 3:18) which is committed against God (Ps. 51:4, etc.). The ransom *frees us*. Note the prefix in *exagoradzo* (Gal. 3:13; 4:15; compare also Rom. 3:24; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 1:14). In the old Greek papyri the "ransom" (*lutron*) was the purchase price by which slaves were set free. Jesus nailed the accusations of the law which stood against us to the Cross, and thus wiped them out and freed us from them (Col. 2:14).

By means of this purchase price those who are redeemed become the possession of the Redeemer. Paul says that God purchased the church with His own blood. The word "purchased" here is used in the middle mood and means to purchase or acquire something for one's self, as one's own possession. In 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle calls us a "people for God's own possession." We have confessed this since childhood in Luther's *Small Catechism*: "Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from sin, death, and from the power of the devil . . . that I might be His own. . . ." Now the lives of all sinners have been ransomed. Christ has paid the price, the price which will satisfy perfectly the claims of God. The death of Jesus, the Lamb without blemish, was the full price, satisfying all the claims of God's justice against us.

3) Christ is our *Propitiation*. The ransom which Christ paid brings about propitiation. God's justice is satisfied and His anger stilled. This is expressed in the Hebrew word *kipper*, which means "to cover," but also "to pacify by covering over," "to propitiate." It is rendered in the King James

Version by "make atonement," at-one-ment (reconciliation) (cf. Ex. 30:10, 15). And so God is at peace with us. Angels declared this peace on Christmas day. The "day of atonement" presaged this peace throughout the Old Testament. On that day of atonement the high priest went into the Holy of Holies. There was the Ark of the Covenant with its cover called the "mercy seat" (*caporeth, hilasterion*). The blood of the sin offering was sprinkled on this mercy seat, enveloped by a cloud of incense. This was the act of propitiation. In the New Testament Jesus is our mercy seat: "Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation (*hilasterion*; mercy seat) in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed" (Rom. 3:25).

It is important to understand that on the day of atonement in the Old Testament and on the cross it was God who once and for all was propitiated, not man. There are many who do not care for a theology which speaks of an angry God who is propitiated, of a God who turns away His wrath and then forgives for the sake of Christ, His Son. But this is exactly what happens (Ps. 78:38). Listen to Luther extol this great fact of our propitiation:

We have a Propitiator before God, and Christ makes God into a kind and merciful Father. From birth and from our own reason man has nothing but sin and corruption by which he deserves God's wrath. For God is an everlasting righteousness and brightness who by His nature hates sin. Therefore men and God are always enemies and cannot be friends and agree. For this reason Christ became man and took our sin on Himself and the Father's wrath, and drowned them both in Himself that He might reconcile us to the Father. . . . Whatever we receive from God must be got and secured through this Christ who has made Him a gra-

cious Father for us. Christ is our support and our protection under which we hide like little chicks under the wings of the hen. Only through Him may we pray to God and be heard. Only through Him do we receive favor and grace from the Father. For He has made satisfaction for our sins and turned an angry Judge into a kind and merciful God.³⁵

Again many modern theologians have rebelled against any idea of reconciliation which considers seriously the law and the wrath of God. It is not a matter of God's wrath being turned away and love replacing it, they say.



4) Christ is our *Reconciliation* (atonement). This great theme runs through the New Testament, as it interprets the suffering and death of Christ. The verb reconcile (*katallasso*) means "to change completely, to reconcile." Reconciliation presupposes estrangement. Where there was once unity and fellowship there is now separation. Reconciliation is the reestablishing of the harmonious relationship: peace between God and man. That Christ has reconciled the world to God is brought out with great clarity in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19: "Now all things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the

world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them." What has happened here is simply this: God taking the initiative has completely changed man's status. This was done solely through the death of Christ, through His being made sin for us (v. 21). By virtue of Christ's satisfaction the wrath of God is turned away from us. He does not impute to us our sins. A status of enmity has been changed into a status of peace. The term reconcile in the New Testament is very closely related to the term propitiate. They are both derived from the same Old Testament term, *kipper*.

Again many modern theologians have rebelled against any idea of reconciliation which considers seriously the law and the wrath of God. It is not a matter of God's wrath being turned away and love replacing it, they say. We must never say that God is reconciled; God is unchangeable and does not need to be reconciled. It is man who is reconciled in this transaction.

Nothing can be further from the truth. The death of Christ, before it was preached, did not change anyone. Man remained an enemy of God, dead in his sins. What has taken place is that God's wrath has been removed: "While we were yet sinners (passive, *echthroi*, that is, hated by God), Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8; compare Rom. 5:1). Whose enmity did Christ remove on the cross? Not man's, but God's. The natural man still hates God. Again we see that God's wrath is not something that is quiescent. It needs to be taken seriously. Man does not do so, but God does so.³⁶ God turns away His wrath (Ps. 78:38) for Christ's sake. This is not an idea merely, a myth, a metaphor which needs to be endlessly demetaphorized; no, it is a great truth of the theology of the cross. "Peace on earth!"

It is tremendously important that we recognize in Christ's struggle in Gethsemane and on the cross not primarily our Savior's struggle with men but with God; that we recognize that the victorious struggle of the one true

Man effected a change of status for all men. Reconciliation is complete. It is now the business of the church to carry out the "ministry of reconciliation," to proclaim to the world a finished reconciliation, to preach an unconditioned gospel.

The atonement which Christ has accomplished on the cross is full, applying to all sins of all men; it is complete, and it is universal, applying to all sinners who have lived on the earth. That is why we can and must do mission work. That is why we must carry out the ministry of reconciliation and offer the gospel, the stupendous theology of the cross, Christ's vicarious atonement to all men everywhere.

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Author

The late Robert D. Preus was one of one of this century's best scholars of Lutheran orthodoxy. He received doctorates from Edinburgh University and the University of Strasbourg. For many years he was president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. Before becoming president at Concordia, Fort Wayne, he served as a Lutheran pastor (LCMS) and for seventeen years was a professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. A prolific writer his books included *The Inspiration of Scripture*, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (2 volumes), and *Getting Into the Theology of Concord*. He was often published in numerous journals including *Concordia Theological Monthly*, *The Lutheran Witness* and *Scottish Journal of Theology*.

Notes

1. W-T, No. 1583.
2. Erl. lat. 10, 137.

3. Erl. lat. 21, 20.
4. Erl. lat. 21, 12.
5. WA 39¹, 502: *Articulus justificationis est magister et princeps, dominus, rector et iudex super omnis genera doctrinarum, qui conservat et gubernat omnem doctrinam ecclesiasticam.*
6. W² 4, 2098.
7. LW 26, 106.
8. LW 26, 26.
9. LW 26, 28. "Propitiator" is a very common descriptive term used by Luther for Christ, especially in his lectures on Galatians and other commentaries and in his sermons. It is a kind of umbrella term for all that Christ has done to save us. The term *theologia crucis* is also a technical term used much less often by Luther for the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the humiliation which He endured to save us.
10. LW 26, 28-29.
11. LW 27, 182.
12. LW 31, 46ff.
13. Erl. lat. 21, 3.
14. WA 40¹, 128-129.
15. LW 30¹, 83.
16. LW 31, 39f.
17. LW 31, 53.
18. Hermann Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, translated by Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 48. Others have written on the theology of the cross: Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976); Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971). More recently Alister McGrath, without consulting Prenter's or Sasse's previous works, has written *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985). The concept of Luther's *theologia crucis* has apparently intrigued many scholars, even though Luther uses the term very seldom.
19. *We Confess Jesus Christ*, 38.
20. *Ibid.*, 39.
21. Much of the material in this lecture is drawn from a paper I delivered at Bethany Lutheran College, Reformation, 1992, and published in the *Clergy Bulletin* of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod the following year. The essay was titled, "Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession."
22. See C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, translated by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), 23 *passim*.

23. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, "The Doctrine of Reconciliation," translated by G. W. Bromily (Edinburgh, 1957) 4:1:141.
24. WA Tish. 6, 103.
25. "And here it follows that our sins are so great and infinite and invincible that it is not possible for the whole world to make satisfaction for one of them. For surely the greatness of the cost (namely, the blood of the Son of God) declares clearly enough that we cannot make satisfaction nor get control over our sins. The force and power of sin is intensified greatly by these words 'which gave Himself for our sins.' And yet we don't seem to care and we look down upon sin as something small and of no importance; even when our conscience is troubled, still we think that sin is not very great and we can take care of it with some little work or merit. But let us look at the infinite greatness of the price which was spent for us. Then we will see what a force and power sin is; no work can be made up for it. The Son of God must be delivered for it" (WA 40¹, 85).
26. Otto Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, translated by John C. Mattes (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), 47.
27. See Walther, *The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel*, Thesis VII, p. 2: "The Word of God is not rightly divided when the Gospel is preached first and then the Law: sanctification first and then justification: faith first and then repentance: good works first and then grace."
28. WA, Tr. 2, 372.
29. Köberle, op. cit., 52, underlines Luther's great emphasis, as he shows that only in the Old and New Testament, in all the world, is sin revealed in all its enormity, thus preparing sinners for the foolish message of the Cross.
30. Albrecht Ritschl, *The Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (Clifton, New Jersey: Reference Book Publishers, 1966) III:262.
31. Karl Barth points out the inevitability of such a conclusion. *Church Dogmatics*, IV:I:490.
32. WA 103, 161-162.
33. Cited in Ritschl, op.cit., I:551.
34. August Pieper, *Jesias II* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), 401.
35. WA 10³, 136-137.
36. The fact that it is God who is propitiated and reconciled is emphasized again and again throughout Luther's writings and in the Lutheran Confessions (see AC III, both Latin and German texts). See also Footnote 9. It is interesting that the term "Propitiator" is the most commonly used term by Melancthon to name Christ according to His redemptive office in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*.