This reflection on Martin Luther’s theology of the cross begins with a deceptively simple question: Does a theology of the cross bless suffering? Final answer: No. This lack of equivocation arises, not only from knowledge of the historical record in general and Luther’s writings in particular, but also from experience. Eleven months after receiving an invitation to address this topic for a Lutheran convocation of teaching theologians, my wife of twenty-six years was diagnosed with terminal cancer. If experience truly makes a theologian, then this experience makes unmistakably clear that a theology of the cross blesses nothing.

The Wrong Question: Two Dangers

As adamant as this initial response sounds, the actual reason for such certainty in this matter comes from insurmountable weaknesses in the question itself. First, more often than theologians care to realize, the issue comes down to what is the meaning of the word “is.” Or, to do President Clinton one better, the meaning of the word “a.” A theology of the cross! What a strange place to use an indefinite article! Luther, of course, did not have that problem—in Latin, anyway. Theologia crucis can be definite (the theology of the cross), indefinite (a theology of the cross), or indeterminate (theology of the cross). What is a good English-speaking theologian to do?

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At the outset, before arriving at a second and more substantive objection to the topic, one must quibble over this little word. Precisely if it is merely a theology of the cross among many other competing theologies (perhaps even among many other competing theologies of the cross), then there can be no blessing, no comfort. Here, before taking refuge in the safety of Luther’s works—a sure defense for any Lutheran Reformation historian—one is tempted to wander out among the philosophers of this age, rail against deconstruction tendencies in Nietzsche, Derrida, and even the pragmatist Rorty (and beyond), and insist that it is not “words all the way down” or, in our case, not “theologies all the way down.” For, if it were, then we Christians, of all people, are most to be pitied. Then the weight of personal suffering—and the much greater suffering of millions of others—would finally crush everyone. A theology offers no hope and no consolation. It proves merely to be a particularly perverse form of whistling past the cemetery, at which the demons of this world only laugh. It is as if Kant taught that the uncertainty of the subjective consciousness is a virtue. It is not; it is a curse.

It is not without deep irony that in the single, formal, face-to-face confrontation between Luther and Rome, the issue came down to a similar kind of certainty. In October 1518, Cardinal Cajetan, the papal legate attending the Diet of Augsburg that year, interviewed Martin Luther at the request of Luther’s prince, Elector Frederick the Wise, instead of arresting him and shipping him off to Rome for a summary trial and execution. The debate, as described by Scott Hendrix, revolved around two things. On one hand, Cajetan hoped to demonstrate that Luther did not have a complete knowledge of canon law. In this he failed. Luther was smarter and better prepared than the papal legate had anticipated. On the other hand, the cardinal pointed out that in the explanation to the seventh of the Ninety-Five Theses Luther had stated, “People must be taught that if they really want to find peace for their consciences they should learn to place their confidence, not in the power of the pope, but in the word of Christ [in the absolution] who gives the promise of forgiveness to the pope.”

This was new and dangerous doctrine. It contradicted all good late-medieval piety, which, as an expression of Augustinian humilitas theology, insisted that, to avoid the sin of spiritual pride, people must remain uncertain about whether or not they receive forgiveness. On the contrary, Luther insisted that people trust Christ’s word in the mouth of the priest

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2For an exploration of the importance of this issue in the sixteenth century, see Susan E. Schreiner, Are You Alone Wise? The Quest for Certainty in the Era of the Reformation and Its Challenge to the End of Modernity (forthcoming).
with complete assurance. Otherwise, there is only uncertainty and despair. Later, this assertive attitude in evangelical pronouncements so disturbed Erasmus of Rotterdam that he took it as the beginning point of his attack on Luther.⁵ Present-day obsessions with uncertainty in philosophy and hermeneutics may play well in the classroom, but they ring a sour note at the bedside of the sick or in the ears of the poor. A theology of the cross, like a theology of liberation, may be the last, worst refuge of the theological dilettante, who sits at the academic club, pours a snifter of brandy, lights up a cigar, and muses, "And what's on the theological menu tonight? Suffering? Well, bless my soul!" Such theological indecision rarely consoles the weak; it nearly always crushes them.

There is a second, more substantial objection. The question is: Does a theology of the cross bless suffering? Even after agreeing to speak of the theology of the cross, the sentence still does not make sense. Quite the reverse! It serves up the single greatest temptation to sin that any theologian faces: imagining that what he or she does—theology—actually accomplishes anything so grand. No theology of any kind ever blesses. God blesses; the Crucified One blesses. A theology of the cross can make no such claim. However often theologians agree that they are dealing with second-order discourse in theology, the temptation still lurks to make that discourse worth something before God. Indeed, if Genesis 3 has anything to say to this day and age, it is that human beings are always tempted to make themselves gods, knowing and deciding good and evil, bane and blessing.

In the theological enterprise, there is no greater temptation to sin than this. Evil lurks, not in that we think and speak about God, but, rather, in that we imagine that our thoughts and words determine to some degree the outcome of our encounter with God. This, in Luther's words, is the heart of Satan's cunning already in the Garden of Eden. "He does not immediately try to allure Eve by means of the loveliness of the fruit. He first attacks humanity's greatest strength, faith in the Word. Therefore the root and source of sin is unbelief and turning away from God, just as, on the other hand, the source and root of righteousness is faith."⁶ Our temptation is always to have faith in theology or, even worse, faith in faith. Thus, to be quite honest, the theology of the cross blesses nothing; only God delivers the word of blessing. Any claim that theology brings a blessing surely glitters with glory.

This introduces the heart of the theological dilemma. On one hand, the cross has often functioned in theology as a sneaky way to excuse social structures that oppress the poor and weak.⁷ The temptation of power elites and their theologians to pat their brother or sister on the head and say, "Be

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⁶From Luther's lectures on Genesis (LW 1:162; WA 42:121).
of good cheer,” threatens us all. Just to complicate matters, the true comfort delivered by pastors to one generation of sufferers can easily become a cover-up for sin in the next. One need look no further than the perverse direction that Jesus’ comment, “The poor you always have with you,” takes in the hands of those who wish to excuse humanitarian inaction.

On the other hand, and similarly diabolical, has been the response of certain other, equally elitist theologians—from Thomas Müntzer, clerical leader in the Peasants’ War of 1525, to the present. Such thinkers desire to rescue the oppressed from society’s sins by empowering them to “take arms against a sea of troubles.” This results, ironically enough, in the opposite of liberation theology’s goal to stand with the poor or become one with them. Instead, the poor bear the brunt of our foolish, bourgeois advice and commit social suicide. To prevent suffering (the opposite of blessing it), Müntzer encouraged his people with these words: “Begin to fight the fight of the Lord! . . . Even if there are only three of you who trust God and seek only to honor Him, you need not fear a hundred thousand. At them! At them! The time is now. . . . God marches ahead of you. Follow, follow! . . . Power will be given to the common people. . . . God the Almighty wants to purify the world now. He has taken power from the government and has given it to the subjects.”

The result was wholesale slaughter of misguided peasants, with Thomas Müntzer found hiding in an attic bed in Frankenhausen, pretending to be an old man.

Have there not always been those who preach liberation from social ills or healing from bodily ones but are nowhere to be found when disaster strikes? I still remember from my own parish experience the day after a self-proclaimed, traveling healer came to the Roman Catholic Church in the nearby town and promised to one of my parishioners healing for her cancer-ridden, five-year-old son and her wheelchair-bound, teenage daughter. That liar and charlatan was missing in action when I buried the boy. He is absent to this day, unable to help or comfort the intelligent young woman with spina bifida, who, despite her training to be a teacher, has found it so hard to gain employment.

Here, too, Luther’s experience is instructive. In 1536, he wrote the Smalcald Articles (SA). Among the signatories was John Agricola, a new teacher at Wittenberg. In 1538, scarcely two years later, the antinomian controversy had broken out between the two men. As Luther oversaw the first printing of those same articles, he added two sections to the document, both designed to rebuke his erstwhile student, turned disputant. On one hand, Luther condemned Agricola’s antinomian theology for its rejection of the law in the Christian life (SA III.3.42). On the other hand, and more important for consideration here, he also rebuked Agricola’s high-handed theological method. He named it Enthusiasmus, after an ancient

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monastic heresy that worshiped the god within \textit{(en theou)} and rejected the authority of the external word.

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit apart from the external Word that goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts. . . . On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scripture or oral Word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who set themselves up as shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach. The papacy is also purely religious rav­
ing. . . . This is all the old devil and old snake, who also turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts and led them from the external Word of God to "spirituality" and their own presumption. . . . In short: enthusiasm clings to Adam and his children from the beginning to the end of the world—fed and spread among them as poison by the old dragon.9

Does a theology of the cross bless suffering? The question itself flirts with the very enthusiasm that marks every theology of glory! As if our cheap words and wisdom could somehow rectify the suffering of this world! Never! The world needs something stronger or, rather, weaker. The word of the cross itself must do the work, not any helpless, all-knowing speculation.

\textbf{THE NINETY-FIVE THESSES AND THEIR DEFENSE}

These caveats explain the title for this essay: "Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross." The words are an allusion to Martin Luther's \textit{Ninety-Five Theses}, posted on October 31, 1517.10 More important, the title refers to Luther's defense of the \textit{Theses}, the \textit{Explanations of the Disputes concerning the Power of Indulgences}, published in August 1518 with a preface to Johann von Staupitz dated May 30, 1518.11 Theses 92 and 93 read, "Away then with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Peace, peace,' and there is no peace! [Jer 6:14]. Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, 'Cross, cross,' and there is no cross!"12

In 1518, Luther explained these paradoxical statements with scarcely two sentences. "Enough has been said previously about cross and punishments. Rarely do you hear a sermon about it today." As will become clear below, the last sentence contains \textit{in nuce} the program for the entire Reformation and gives us the one insight so sorely needed for linking suffering and the cross. Luther’s first sentence gives the reader leave to turn first to previous comments in the \textit{Explanations} to shed some light on his approach. Because Luther was writing this document

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10They were most likely posted on Wittenberg’s Castle Church door (according to an eyewitness, Georg Major) and certainly posted to the Archbishop of Mainz with a sharp letter attached.
11For an English translation (without the prefatory letters to von Staupitz and Pope Leo X), see LW 31:77–252. Johann von Staupitz was the head of Luther’s order, the Augustinians, in Germany.
12LW 31:33; WA 1:228.
at the same time as his famous disputation in Heidelberg, where he first unveiled his theology of the cross, it vividly demonstrates how one theologian applies the theology of the cross to a particular theological problem.

Thesis 15

Luther first addressed the question of suffering and the cross in comments on Thesis 15. There he argued that the true suffering and terror of repentant believers suffice for the punishment of purgatory. The thesis itself stated that "[t]he fear or horror [of possessing an imperfect love] is sufficient in itself, to say nothing of other things, to constitute the penalty of purgatory, since it is very near the horror of despair." In the middle of defending this thesis, Luther suddenly launched into one of the earliest known accounts of his own spiritual crises. It contains several keys for unlocking the relation between suffering and cross.

I also "knew a person" [2 Cor 12:2] who asserted that he had very often suffered these punishments—to be sure over a very brief period of time. Yet they were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and no inexperienced person could believe them. Thus, if they had been endured or lasted for half an hour—nay rather for one tenth of an hour—he would have perished completely and all of his bones would have been reduced to ashes. In such a situation, God appears terribly angry, along with all creation. At such a time, there is no flight, no comfort—inside or out—only accusation of everything. Then he cries this verse, "I am cut off from thy sight" [compare Ps 31:22], nor does he scarcely dare to say, "Lord, do not chasten me in thy wrath" [Ps 6:1]. In this very moment (amazing as it is to say), the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed except that it does not yet sense complete punishment. Yet, it is eternal [punishment], and [the soul] cannot imagine it to be temporal. All that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but [the soul] does not know where to turn for help. In this situation, the soul is stretched out with Christ so that all of its bones may be counted [Ps 22:17]. Nor is any corner in the soul not filled with the greatest bitterness, with dread, trembling, and sorrow—and all only in an eternal way.

It is similar to what happens when a ball crosses a straight line. Any point of the line touched by the ball bears the whole weight of the ball, yet it does not embrace the whole ball. Just so the soul, at the point where it is touched by a passing eternal flood, feels and imbibes nothing except eternal punishment. Yet the punishment does not remain, for it passes over again. Therefore if that punishment of hell, that is, that unbearable and inconsolable trembling, takes hold of the living, much more does such punishment of souls seem to be the same as that in purgatory—except that it is continuous there. . . . If there are those who do not believe this, we do not contend against them. We have merely proved that these preachers of indulgences speak too audaciously about many things of which they are ignorant or uncertain. For one ought to believe those who are experienced in these matters rather than those who are inexperienced.\(^{13}\)

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Here Luther outlines the basic premises of the theology of the cross. First, he describes himself and, by alluding to Paul's vision in 2 Corinthians 12, informs the reader of that fact. This realization profoundly shapes the theology of the cross. The inexperienced have no clue. They cannot do theology (the true theology of the cross) but can only imagine they walk a glory road, from one pinnacle of success, victory, healing, liberation, and works to another. For Luther, the theology of the cross is strictly a matter of experience.

This point penetrated the very bones of evangelical theology during the Reformation. Even Philip Melanchthon, at Augsburg in 1530, to answer the vicious attacks of John Eck's *404 Sentences*, appealed in Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession (CA) not only to Scripture and the Fathers but also to experience. There he wrote, "Moreover, although this teaching is despised by those without experience, nevertheless devout and anxious consciences find by experience that it offers the greatest consolation" (CA XX.15 [Latin]).

Luther and Melanchthon refer not simply to an emotive side of experience but to its truth and certainty. At present, society appears addicted to feelings, where vicarious experience of other peoples' emotions often seems to define who we are. No wonder television reporters from coast to coast push cameras and microphones into the faces of devastated people and ask, inexplicably, "How do you feel, now that your life is destroyed?" Pray for the day when the victim replies, "Who cares how I feel? Put down your camera and console me, help me, or—at very least—tell the truth about the awful thing that happened to me."

The link between suffering and cross for the theologian of the cross must be the experience of reality, not a fantasy of feelings. Otherwise, our words to sufferers sound like advice for the lovelorn: theoretically true, but in actuality only bent on titillating the readers. "Look, Martha, a man hanging on the cross. Can't you just feel it? I wonder what it means?"

Furthermore, the cross of Jesus Christ forges the inescapable link between my suffering and God. Luther's soul experienced being stretched out with Christ on the cross, bones exposed, reduced to naked cries and groaning. There can be no voyeurism here—we view Christ's cross from the experience of our own God-forsaken lives. When the anonymous poet first sang, "Nobody knows the trouble I see, nobody knows like Jesus," he or she was not speaking metaphorically or emotively. It is not any old experience that makes a theologian, but precisely the experience of having been stretched out on Christ's cross.

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14 John Eck was one of Luther's chief Roman opponents and stood against him at the Leipzig Debates of 1519. Eck's *Articles* referred directly to this thesis of Luther (see John Eck, *Four Hundred Four Articles for the Imperial Diet at Augsburg*, in *Sources and Contexts of The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001], 34 [art. 4]). Philip Melanchthon, Luther's colleague at the University of Wittenberg, was the chief drafter of the CA.

Moreover, no one can transfer this experience to another person, let alone across generations, races, genders, or social categories. Thus, when returning in 1522 to Wittenberg from the exile at the Wartburg Castle, Luther could only begin his first sermon from Wittenberg’s pulpit with these words: “The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Every one must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another’s ears, but every one must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me.”

For at the heart of the experience of the cross is death. This is precisely the reason Luther, in 1518, employed such vivid, shocking language to describe his plight. His is an eternal suffering captured in a brief moment.

Finally, Luther used his experience to attack the preachers, as Melanchthon also did in the Augsburg Confession (CA XX). This links these comments on Article 15 with the brief sentence at the end of the Explanations. Nobody preaches this way any more! This same famine of the word of God, to borrow a lament from Amos, marks the present day and age as well—perhaps more so than Luther’s. He at least had Johannes Tauler (the fifteenth-century German mystic whom he cites just before our text), von Staupitz (to whom he dedicated this text), and a host of lesser lights to blaze a path for him.

"Here was someone whose best qualification as pastor came in the form of atheism, yet she could scarcely tell a soul."

It would seem that any desire for success in Christian faith and life spells death to the foolishness of the cross. It affects everyone, although we generally only notice other people’s sins. Thus, criticisms of one group by another are telling. The cranky conservatives are correct when they point to the pathetic preaching in “mainline” pulpits and complain about a smarmy, meaningless gospel of positive thoughts and good feelings. Then again, those who attack the “evangelical” church-growth crowd accurately smell the same “katastauric” rat—the illusion that each individual owns the truth (or at least freedom of choice about the truth) and deserves to have his or her needs met.

At the same time, they also know whereof they speak who suspect that ecumenical agreements, which claim to identify in institutions and their histories visible expressions and signs of the true church, simply mask our addiction to glory. Yet, reactionaries

16 LW 51:70; WA 10/3:1–2.
17 "Katastauric": a word made up to form an adjective for being against (kata) the cross (stauros).
who worship congregational autonomy have fallen into the same trap and have earned the same criticism.

But why speak theoretically? Frankly, I fall into this trap. I look for praise and thirst for success. I am respectful of authority as long as it does not impinge upon my own self-importance. I lust after large classes and reward clever students. More to the point: I became a seminary professor operating under the assumption that any doubts and crises of faith, which had accompanied me in the parish, would now disappear. Surely someone whom a colleague had once labeled a crypto-systematician would no longer have the time of day for faith-shattering, dark nights of the soul. However, the devil was not so lazy and God not so tame that I no longer experienced the heavy weight of hell crossing the thin line of my soul. In some ways, it was far worse. Imagine a Lutheran losing faith in the middle of teaching the Lutheran confessions! At the same time, however, I discovered—with the help of Heiko Oberman’s masterful *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*—that I was not alone in this predicament but was joined by Luther himself. Moreover, I learned that it was Christ’s cross upon which I was being stretched, not simply my own.

Then, much to my surprise, whenever I was bold enough to allude publicly to such struggles, students came and described the same or similar experiences in their own lives. For example, a bright and talented young woman of twenty-four would scarcely volunteer to her candidacy committee and its resident theologians of glory that she had lost her faith, or (more accurately) that God had completely abandoned her. Who would believe her? Who would call her? This was not a psychological problem or even a pastoral one; it was precisely a theological struggle of highest import. Here was someone whose best qualification as pastor came in the form of atheism, yet she could scarcely tell a soul. Mind you, this was not the theoretical atheism that any armchair philosopher or pietist easily cooks up. Hers was precisely the atheism that cried from the cross, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” By virtue of having experienced the same thing, I now had something to say to just such souls.

**Thesis 58**

The explanation to Thesis 15 provides a vantage point from which to examine Luther’s explicit comments on the theology of the cross in his explanation to Thesis 58. This thesis and its explanation constitute Luther’s single most important public statement on the theology of the cross, far more widely published in the sixteenth century than the Heidelberg Disputation and yet almost completely ignored by scholars.

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Here is the theology of the cross intended for public consumption, so to speak, and forged in the heat of public controversy. It is the most important early tract that Luther wrote in his famous case with Rome. It summarizes the very heart of the matter—with the exception of the crucial reference to experience, noted above, without which the entire enterprise becomes a theology of glory.

The thesis itself reads, "Nor are [indulgences] the merits of Christ and the saints, because (quia), even without the pope, the latter always work grace for the inner person and the cross, death, and hell for the outer person." After proving this thesis in six different ways, Luther concluded his Explanations concerning this article by arguing that the thesis contains its own proof (noted by the use of the word "because" [quia]). The merits of Christ and the saints—which in Luther's mind were nothing other than their suffering—bring to life the new creature and put to death the old. From this thesis, Luther then sketched the entire outline of the theology of the cross.

First, he made a distinction between God's opus alienum and opus proprium. Translating these terms is particularly tricky. Luther argued that through these merits—what Luther called the treasury of God the Father—God effects something that is completely foreign and alien to God's nature and something that is proper to it, owned by it. He goes on to say, "The merits of Christ perform an alien work, for that is what Isaiah calls it in

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19 Gerhard O. Forde, On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) does not discuss it, given the narrow focus of this work. Walther von Loewenich, Luther's Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) occasionally refers to it (see, for example, p. 30), but only as a disembodied source with no hint of its provenance. Even Graham S. Tomlin, "The Medieval Origins of Luther's Theology of the Cross," Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 89 (1998), 22-40 ignores this document, despite the fact that it points to an important medieval source for Luther's theology of the cross, namely, Johannes Tauler. (See also Kurt K. Hendel, "Theology of the Cross," Currents in Theology and Mission 24 [1997], 223-31.) Yet, this tract was published several times in 1518 and 1519, it was translated into German, and it found its way into both the Jena and Wittenberg editions of Luther's collected works. By contrast, Luther never published the Heidelberg Disputation himself. It was first published in Paris in 1520 and later found its way into the Wittenberg edition of Luther's works.

20 LW 31:212; WA 1:605.
chapter 28[:21], in that they effect the cross, labor, all kinds of punishment, finally death and hell in the flesh, to the end that the body of sin is destroyed [Rom 6:6], our members which are upon earth are mortified [Col 3:5], and sinners are turned into hell. For whoever is baptized in Christ and is renewed is being prepared for punishments, crosses, and deaths, to the end that 'such a one shall be accounted as a sheep for the slaughter and shall be slain all the day long' [Ps 44:22; compare Rom 8:36]."

Here is the heart of the distinction between law and gospel—not a formal division of God’s word into commands and promises, or between Old Testament and New, but the alien and proper work of God. This distinction formed the basis of Luther’s revolutionary theology of the cross. God’s word works death and life on us (that is, law and gospel), putting to death the old and bringing to life the new.

So profoundly did this perception shape Luther’s theology that it formed the heart of Melanchthon’s thought as well. In writing the “Apology of the Augsburg Confession” in 1531, Melanchthon discussed the evangelical understanding of penance, outlined in CA XII and first proposed in the Ninety-Five Theses. Melanchthon hearkened back to the same alien and proper work of God. Quoting Isaiah 28, as had Luther thirteen years earlier, Melanchthon wrote that the prophet “calls it an alien work of God to terrify, because the proper work of God is to make alive and console. But he terrifies, he says, in order to make room for consolation and vivification because hearts that do not feel the wrath of God loathe consolation in their smugness.”

For neither theologian was this distinction prescriptive. Instead, it simply told the truth about God’s work, describing what happens when God does something to human beings and basing that description chiefly on baptism itself. This means, however, that the cross does not bless suffering, punishment, and the rest; rather, it forces us to tell the truth that such things are curses. Suffering is not some great salvific act in and of itself. On the contrary, it is God’s alien work, opposed to God’s very nature. It sends humanity to the slaughterhouse.

However, because this theology is descriptive and not prescriptive, it never imposes new, theoretical suffering upon us. Instead, the cross reveals that the senseless suffering of this sorry existence has a point in God, and that this point is penultimate—God’s first, alien work that clears the way in us for God’s proper work of salvation. Thus, the cross reveals human suffering for what it truly is—a curse—and thereby opens us up to receive God’s own, proper work and blessing in the resurrection.

In the NRSV: “For the LORD will rise up as on Mount Perazim, he will rage as in the valley of Gibeon; to do his deed—strange is his deed! and to work his work—alien is his work!"

22The Book of Concord, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, XII.51.
With this distinction firmly in place, Luther then introduced the competing theologies of glory and the cross. He wrote, "From this you can now see how, ever since scholastic theology—illusory theology (for that is the meaning of the word in Greek)—began, the theology of the cross has been abrogated, and everything has been completely turned up side down." What Luther earlier and later said about preaching he now placed at the feet of the regnant theology of his day. Rather than calling it a theology of glory—he used those words later on—he named it a *theologia illusoria* on the basis of some sleight of hand with the Greek word *schole*. The word *illusoria* means make-believe, play at, or self-amusement. This make-believe theology turns everything upside down by refusing to connect suffering or cross to God and God's will. The entire medieval penitential system, as Luther was coming to realize, was based upon the notion of avoiding punishment, especially through the purchase of indulgences. Suffering is an evil to be avoided; pleasure—at least of a spiritual kind—is a virtue to be sought. Nice work, if you can get it, but it is simply pretense. Human existence does not work that way at all. Over against such high jinks, Luther wrote, "A theologian of the cross (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself has consecrated and blessed, not alone by the touch of his most holy flesh but also by the embrace of his exceedingly holy and divine will, and he has left these relics here to be kissed, sought after, and embraced. Indeed fortunate and blessed is the one who has been deemed by God to be worthy that these treasures of the relics of Christ may be given to such a one; nay rather, who understands that they are given. For to whom are they not offered?"

What was Luther up to here? First, he provided a brief definition of a theologian of the cross—a term he preferred to theology of the cross—as one who speaks of God crucified and hidden. Hiddenness for Luther is no Platonic dreamworld; it marks, instead, the very visibility of God in the last place reason would deign to look—on the cross. Note, too, that such a theologian speaks. This *theologus loquens* exactly matches the *Deus loquens* and, in the sense of law and gospel, the *viva vox evangelii*.

Second, it would seem Luther has contradicted this essay's introductory remarks, in that the theologian of the cross calls these punishments, crosses, and death sacred relics and most blessed. Are they not a curse? Yes, but only when viewed as God's alien work alone. Properly speaking, these relics are but prolegomena to resurrection. More than that, the theologian of the cross does not make suffering holy but teaches that it is holy by virtue of Christ's own suffering and by virtue of God willing these...
travails to be what they are not. God simply chooses to declare suffering to be what it can never be in and of itself. To be sure, God chooses because of Christ's suffering and resurrection, because of the divine identification with suffering and its ultimate, proper goal—life. However, even more to the point, the triune God simply has mercy on the human predicament as it now stands and takes it into the very heart of God through the cross. By the word alone, God wills what is not—suffering, punishment, and death—into an existence enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

That is why, at the very end of this passage, in what seems like a throwaway line, Luther added, "For to whom are they [cross and suffering] not offered?" Everyone is in the same predicament, unless, of course, they cook up one form of idolatry (theology of glory) or another to deny the truth of the human situation. Luther did not concoct suffering for Christians or imagine blessing where there truly is none. Instead, he described the human predicament and made everyone an equal participant—excepting only those on the glory road who will not and cannot live by faith alone.

"For those stretched out on the cross, all attempts at constructive theology finally crumble, deconstruct, under the reality of suffering."

Luther then contrasts the traditional running after relics to the true relics of Christ, namely, suffering. This is a double irony in light of his own prince's burgeoning collection of relics at Wittenberg's Castle Church, and in light of Luther's encouragement to that same prince, upon leaving the Wartburg in 1522 to go public, to thank God for the new, true relic of the cross, which was Luther's immanent appearance in Wittenberg. Luther placed traditional medieval practices regarding relics and the concomitant sales of indulgences at the door of the theologian of glory:

A theologian of glory does not recognize, along with the Apostle [Paul], the crucified and hidden God alone [1 Cor 1:18-2:5]. Instead, such a one sees and speaks of God's glorious manifestation among the heathen: how his invisible nature can be known from the things which are visible [compare Rom 1:20] and how he is present and powerful in all things everywhere. This theologian of glory learns from Aristotle that the object of the will is the good and the good is worthy to be loved, while the evil, on the other hand, is worthy of hate. He learns that God is the highest good and exceedingly lovable. Disagreeing with the theologian of the cross, he defines the treasury of Christ as the removing and remitting of punishments, things which are most evil and worthy of hate. In opposition to this the theologian of the cross defines the

28 Compare 1 Cor 1:27-29.
treasury of Christ as impositions and obligations of punishments, things which are best and most worthy of love. Yet the theologian of glory even receives money for his treasury, while the theologian of the cross, on the other hand, offers the merits of Christ freely. Yet people do not consider the theologian of the cross worthy of consideration, but finally even persecute him.\textsuperscript{30}

Now Luther has reached the heart of the problem. Aristotle—and not just Aristotle, but every thinker worth his or her salt—insisted that we love the good and hate the evil. This perfectly reasonable philosophy condemns human beings to a theology of avoidance and, worse yet, illusion. It condemns them to wonder about the relation between suffering and blessing. They must somehow figure out a way around the suffering and destruction of this world—as if humanity had the power to abrogate the Second Law of Thermodynamics, to say nothing of sin—by their thoughts! This avoidance forces them—as Paul already suspected (1 Cor 1:29)—to rely on and, thus, to boast in themselves, to create theologies capable of blessing suffering. From this perspective, the soul becomes immortal, the will free, and the human being a pure and unadulterated \textit{imago Dei}, if not cocreator and coredeemer with God.

Therefore, the theologian of glory cries, “Peace, peace,” and there is no peace. They—we—look for the good—in words, in history, in ethics, in society, in life—and do their damnedest to avoid evil. Then, they turn around and impose that task on all those poor, suffering souls that they meet. These theologians pretend that such lives are not filled with suffering or—as a liturgy of baptism states—not marked with the cross of Christ forever. Just work a little harder, take Christ seriously, bring in the reign of God, preach a little more purely, choose a little more intensely. Come on, souls, you can do it! You can avoid the weight of that eternal ball of fire as it passes over your soul.

But it is all a lie. We cannot do it. We are stuck in a world where suffering knows no end, where the poor are always with us, where it seems for all the world that God has abandoned us completely and forever. Most of the poor and the sick and the dying know this by experience, unless we have sucked them into one of our glorious lies. They are “stretched out with Christ” on the cross.

For the true sufferer, the theologian of the cross has good news—news, mind you, not solutions. It is the good news that, in the Crucified One, God has simply willed to force the curse to be a blessing, that the Crucified has, thus, borne our very suffering, that this suffering cannot destroy God’s choice about us but, rather, points to God’s preference to save the weak, broken, and poor, and to resurrect the dead.

\textsuperscript{30}LW 31:227; Clemen 1:129–30 (=WA 1:614).
PRAYER, SUFFERING, AND THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Lutheran theologians are not exempt from human addiction to glory. For example, many American Lutherans remain deeply enthralled to certain pietistic pretensions, what Luther called in his clever translation of Col 2:23, “self-chosen spirituality.” Over against this, consider the experience of a theologian far greater than I. One year ago, a denominational newsletter arrived in our mailbox. The inescapable front cover had emblazoned upon it: “Ten Ways to Improve Your Prayer Life.” I suppose this is a Christian magazine’s equivalent to Glamour’s, “Fifty Ways to Satisfy Your Lover.” My wife took one look at it and said, “I know how to improve your prayer life. Get cancer!” Now, there a theologian of the cross has blown down our religiosity in a single breath.

Those of us on the glory road can attempt to sweep up the pieces and pretend that nothing has changed. Let’s see. How do we systematize this insight? Perhaps we could say to people, “If you do not have cancer, don’t bother praying.” Or, we could infect them with some equally dreadful disease and then holler, “Start praying!” Or, since that is too dangerous (after all, we might accidentally become infected), we could pontificate gloriously about God’s preference for cancer victims—something for which cancer victims would never stand. Or—and I have heard this—we could denigrate my wife’s attempt to undermine our petty theological constructs concerning prayer: “Well, you only got around to praying seriously after you got sick. I pray all the time. If you had been more faithful in prayer, perhaps you would not be suffering now.” The speaker was doubtless a direct descendant of Job’s friends. Even Luther sometimes fell into that trap. However, for those stretched out on the cross, all attempts at constructive theology finally crumble, deconstruct, under the reality of suffering.

Luther, in later years not one for directly using the theology of the cross with the common folk, nevertheless had this to say about prayer in his Large Catechism of 1529. After pointing out that God commands us to pray and promises to hear us, he added a third topic. In the Lord’s Prayer, God gives us the words to say. Not only does this console those who may be uncertain whether God appreciates their particular wording for prayers, but the Lord’s Prayer also reveals the depth of our human need. Luther then reflects on the nature of that need:

But where there is to be true prayer, there must be utter earnestness. We must feel our need, the distress that drives and impels us to cry out. Then prayer will come spontaneously, as it should, and no one will need to be taught how to prepare for it or how to create the proper devotion. This need, however, that ought to concern us—ours and everyone else’s—is something you will find richly enough in the Lord’s Prayer. Therefore, it may serve to remind us and impress upon our hearts that we not neglect to pray. For we are all lacking plenty of things: all that is missing is that we do not feel or see them. God therefore wants you to lament and express your needs and concerns, not because he is unaware of them, but in order that you may kindle your hearts
to stronger and greater desires and open and spread your cloak wide to receive many things.\(^3\)

It is not that the theology of the cross blesses suffering. Far from it! Instead, it is the sufferer who, driven by suffering, comes to the realization, the *revelatio sub contrario specie*, of our true neediness.\(^3\) In this way, he or she now experiences true prayer, true cross, true faith, true God, true humanity. In such a situation, the theologian’s job is simply to stand in awe and proclaim good news: God hears you; God suffers with and for you; God is faithful to you; God is here with you; God will raise you. This is simply the Easter proclamation: Christ crucified is risen!

This means that all we have for the sufferer is a word, a weak word, of promise. There will come that “great gettin’ up day.” We have God’s word—that is, God’s cross and resurrection—on it. Although we must also proclaim the good news that this world and its very real blessings are also God’s very own, we dare not guarantee results or blessings in this world—let alone trust them—but simply “spread our cloak wide” to receive them. Any guarantee of blessings in this life will always disappoint, always lead to glory. For this world stands under the judgment of death, infected with sin, and in the clutches of the devil. But our God will not let this world go. God is greater than this world’s evil, sin, or the devil—and, yes, greater than our doubts. We cling to and proclaim this God alone and, in the midst of our suffering, await blessing from God’s cross.\(^3\)

**ABSTRACT**

This article explores Luther’s theology of the cross, based on his often overlooked comments in *Explanations of the Disputes concerning the Power of Indulgences* from 1518, Luther’s defense of the Ninety-Five Theses. The article dismisses approaches that reduce this topic to one theology among many or claim more for it than theology can deliver. In explaining Thesis 15, Luther grounds theology of the cross in human experience of suffering and abandonment. In Thesis 58, he derives this theology from God’s alien and proper work and contrasts it to the “illusory theology” of Aristotelian scholastics. The theology of the cross does not bless suffering but proclaims the God who declares the nothingness of suffering and death to be life and grace. The Christian lives and prays under suffering and cross and yet possesses ears filled with promises of resurrection in Christ.

\(^3\) *The Book of Concord*, Large Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 26–7.

\(^3\) In English: “The revelation [of God] under the appearance of the opposite.” This is Luther’s traditional definition of the theology of the cross; it is finding God in the last place we would reasonably look.

\(^3\) Special thanks are due my colleagues John Hoffmeyer and Nelson Rivera for their suggestions and encouragement regarding this article.