

# On being a theologian of the cross

by Gerhard Forde

**W**E FIND OURSELVES in a situation in which there is increasing talk about the theology of the cross but little specific knowledge of what exactly it is. In the absence of clear understanding, the theology of the cross tends to become sentimentalized, especially in an age that is so concerned about victimization. Jesus is spoken of as the one who “identifies with us in our suffering,” or the one who “enters into solidarity with us” in our misery. “The suffering of God,” or the “vulnerability of God,” and such platitudes become the stock-in-trade of preachers and theologians who want to stroke the psyche of today’s religionists. But this results in rather blatant and suffocating sentimentality. God is supposed to be more attractive to us because he identifies with us in our pain and suffering. “Misery loves company” becomes the unspoken motif of such theology.

A theology of the cross, however, is not sentimentalism. To be sure, it speaks much about suffering. A theologian of the cross, Luther says, looks at all things through suffering and the cross. It is also certainly true that in Christ God enters into our suffering and death. But in a theology of the cross it is soon apparent that we cannot ignore the fact that suffering comes about because we are at odds with God and are trying to rush headlong into some sort of cozy identification with him. God and his Christ, Luther is concerned to point out, are the *operators* in the matter, not the ones operated upon (thesis 27, Heidelberg Disputation). In the Gospel of John, Jesus is concerned to point out that no one takes his life from him but that he lays it down of his own accord (John 10:18). In the end, Jesus suffers and dies because *nobody* identified with him. The people cried, “Crucify him!” One of his disciples betrayed him, another denied him, the rest forsook him and fled. He died alone, forsaken even by God.

Now we in turn *suffer* the absolute and unconditional working of God upon us. It is a suffering because as old beings we cannot abide such working. We are rendered *passive* by the divine activity. “Passive,” it should be remembered here, comes from the same root as “passion,” which is, of course, “to suffer.” And so we look on the world anew in the light of Christ’s Passion, “through suffering and the cross” (thesis 20), as ones who suffer the sovereign working of God. A sentimentalized theology gives the impression that God in Christ comes to join us in our battle

against some unknown enemy, is victimized, and suffers just like us. Like the daughters of Jerusalem we sympathize with him. A true theology of the cross places radical question marks over against sentimentality of that sort. “Weep not for me,” Jesus said, “but for yourselves and for your children.”

It is evident that there is a serious erosion or slippage in the language of theology today. Sentimentality leads to a shift in focus, and the language slips out of place. To take a common example, we apparently are no longer sinners, but rather victims, oppressed by sinister victimizers whom we relentlessly seek to track down and accuse. Of course, there are indeed victims and victimizers in our culture—all too many of them. But the kind of collective paranoia that allows us to become preoccupied with such a picture of our plight cannot help but nudge the language just enough to cause it to slip and fall out of place. The slippage is often very slight and subtle and hardly noticeable; that is what makes it so deceptive.

We no longer live in a guilt culture but have been thrown into meaninglessness—so we are told. Then the language slips out of place. Guilt puts the blame on us as sinners, but who is responsible for meaninglessness? Surely not we! Sin, if it enters our consciousness at all, is generally something that “they” did to us. As Alan Jones, dean of the Episcopal Cathedral of San Francisco, put it once, “We live in an age in which everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven.”

**S**INCE WE are victims and not really sinners, what we need is affirmation and support, and so on. The language slips and falls out of place. It becomes therapeutic rather than evangelical. It must be trimmed more and more so as not to give offense. In thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation Luther says that a theologian of the cross “says what a thing is,” whereas a theologian of glory calls the bad good and the good bad. This stakes out the claim that language and its proper use in matters theological is a fundamental concern of the theologian of the cross. Luther’s words suggest that the misuse or slippage of language in this regard has a theolog-

**The “suffering of God” has become a sentimental platitude that has little to do with the theology of the cross.**

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ical root. When we operate on the assumption that our language must constantly be trimmed so as not to give offense, to stroke the psyche rather than to place it under attack, it will of course gradually decline to the level of greeting-card sentimentality. The language of sin, law, accusation, repentance, judgment, wrath, punishment, perishing, death, devil, damnation and even the cross itself—virtually one-half of the vocabulary—simply disappears. It has lost its theological legitimacy and therefore its viability as communication.

A theologian of the cross says what a thing is. In modern parlance: a theologian of the cross calls a spade a spade. One who “looks on all things through suffering and the cross” is constrained to speak the truth. The theology of the cross, that is to say, provides the theological courage and the conceptual framework to hold the language in place. It will, no doubt, also involve critical appraisal of the language and its use. It will recognize indeed that the half of the vocabulary that has disappeared can be frightening and offensive. But it will see precisely that the cross and the resurrection itself is the only answer to that problem, not erasure or neglect.

It is curious that in spite of attempts to avoid offense, matters don't actually seem to improve. We seek affirmation, but we seem to experience less and less of it. We look for support, but others are too busy looking for it themselves to pay us much mind. Preachers try to prop up our self-esteem with optimistic blandishments, but more and more people seem to suffer from a deteriorating sense of self-worth. Perhaps a return to calling a spade a spade has its place.

**T**HIS IS not to say, however, that the language of affirmation, comfort, support, building self-esteem, and so forth does not have its place. On the level of human relations it can be quite necessary and beneficial. It has its place, however, among that which is penultimate, in caring for the well-being of persons *in this age*. The danger and misuse comes when such language displaces or obscures the ultimate. It would be as though an alcoholic were to confuse breaking the habit with salvation. Penultimate cures are mistaken for ultimate redemption. When that happens the church becomes predominantly a support group rather than the gathering of the body of Christ where the word of the cross and resurrection is proclaimed and heard.

What is, after all, the subject matter of a theology of the cross? Is it simply a repetition of the Passion story? Hardly. Is it then perhaps just another treatment of the doctrine of atonement? Not really. Is it just an account of an unusual sort of religious experience, a kind of spirituality, as we might say today? That may be closer to the truth, but still

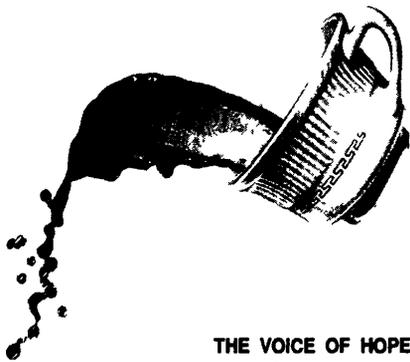
not exactly. It is rather a particular perception of the world and our destiny, what Luther came to call looking at all things through suffering and the cross. It has to do with what he referred to often as the question of *usus*, the way the cross is put to use in our lives.

It might well be asked whether there is need or place for theologians of the cross today. They cannot but appear very critical and negative over against the optimism of a theology of glory. Is it not cruel to attack what little optimism we are able to muster these days? Would not the attack already be too late? Luther's attack in the Heidelberg Disputation begins by ruthlessly shredding all ideas of the place of good works in the scheme of salvation. Yet, as is often remarked, who is trying to do good works any more? Is the theology of the cross a magnificent attack on a nonexistent enemy, a marvelous cure for a disease that no one has? Could it be perhaps, as with smallpox vaccine, that finally the vaccination causes more illness than the disease? Is a theologian of the cross a curious historical relic spreading pessimism where desperate people are hanging on by their fingertips?

Anyone who gets some glimpse of what it means to be a theologian of the cross immediately realizes that the bane of a theology of glory never vanishes. It is the perennial theology of the fallen race. We have to persist in a theology of the cross in order precisely to expose that fact. I have come to wonder if the very theology of glory is not in a state of severe crisis. If it is true that no one is trying anymore, what does that portend? Does it mean, as a postmodernist might say, that the “Holy Words” no longer signify a meaningful destiny? Have we lost the thread of the story? Is the “official optimism of North America,” as theologian Douglas John Hall spoke of it, finally running off into sand? Could that be one of the reasons for the despair and chaos in our homes and in our streets? Has the thirst for glory finally issued in the despair that Luther foresaw?

My suspicion is that the malaise of the theology of glory is the ultimate source of contemporary despair. My assumption is that a theology of the cross brings hope—indeed, the only ultimate hope. ■

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