



On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

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While there is increasing interest in the "theology of the cross," few people have specific knowledge of what makes it different from other kinds of theology. In *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Gerhard O. Forde provides an introduction to this theological perspective through an analysis of Luther's Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, the classic text of the theology of the cross. The book first clarifies the difference between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross and explains how each perspective shapes the very nature of being a theologian. The main body of the book provides commentary on the Heidelberg Disputation-the only complete analysis of this document currently available. Underlying Forde's exposition is the contention that one ought not to speak of the theology of the cross merely as another item among a host of theological options; instead, one must pursue what it means to be a theologian of the cross and to look at all things through suffering and the cross.

On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 Details

Date : Published August 1st 1997 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (first published July 31st 1997)
ISBN : 9780802843456
Author : Gerhard O. Forde , Martin Luther
Format : Paperback 121 pages
Genre : Religion, Theology, Christian, Nonfiction, Christianity

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From Reader Review On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518 for online ebook

Joe says

This is an incredible exploration into Luther's understanding of our relationship with God. However, like most of Forde's stuff, it's not intended for normal people, rather, it's written that only freakishly intellectual theologians will be able to appreciate it (thus 4 stars instead of 5).

Bryan says

Simply one of the most profound books I have ever read: the profound act of the Cross of Christ; the profound biblical texts thereof; the profound Luther as biblical expositor; the profound Gerhard Forde as translator of such truths.

Joshua says

This was closer to a 4.5-star work; it was superb through to about the last chapter where there were some minor points Forde made about works that I did not believe to be entirely in line with Scripture or that he could have been a bit more complete on for the sake of clarity (I also know that he rejects the 'Third Use of the Law' from the Lutheran Confessions so that may have played into my view of his commentary on Theses 26 & 27; his view on the 'Third Use' is also one reason why I cannot recommend any of Forde's other range of works).

BUT, that said: this is the best I have read of the topic of 'theology of the cross vs. theology of glory' and I highly recommend the work to every Christian. Really, the contrast of these theologies is Christianity 101 level stuff -- because at its heart is justification in Christ, which is what the Lutheran reformers hung the entire Reformation upon.

Also, SO many churches on the Evangelical (i.e. 'pop culture Christianity') landscape are wholly invested in the egregious 'theology of glory' and folks need to dig into WHY it is such a poisonous spiritual worldview.

Jamie says

Amazing.

8 pages of quotes were highlighted - here's a few of the best....

"the soul's insatiable "thirst for glory" is not ended by satisfying it but rather by extinguishing it"

..."when we have no fear of the Lord and we instead presume to come before the Lord bustling with self-confidence in our own accomplishments, enjoying ourselves in our works, as Luther puts it, our works are deadly sins even if we think they are done with the help of grace. For then our works stand between us and God; they usurp the honor belonging only to God. This is a transgression of the first commandment. The self sets itself as an idol. Piety is no protection. "

"They see God working exactly through the horror of the cross. God's hidden and alien working in the cross is such that it reflects back on us and exposes our own lives. Thus the works do not become the occasion for pride, but rather humility and despair. We are led therefore not to credit our own account but to judge ourselves and to confess. The human works that once seemed attractive and good now have no form or beauty and are the cause of sorrow and despair."

"The law says, "do this," and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this," and everything is already done."

Alexis Neal says

An excellent and challenging read. Forde summarizes and explains, well, Luther's Heidelberg Disputation. Specifically, he explores the tension between being a theologian of glory (works) and a theologian of the cross (grace/faith) and the merits and risks of each position. Forde is definitely a little denser than many modern Christian writers--some of the passages need to be re-read a few times to really 'get' his points. Still, I've no doubt he's a much easier read than the original Disputation, so I'm not complaining. I'm still wrapping my head around some of Luther's theological positions (as a recovering theologian of glory, some of this stuff is still really counter-intuitive), and many of Forde's/Luther's statements seem rather hyperbolic. I suspect this means I am not yet fully a theologian of the cross.

This is definitely a book that would, I imagine, improve upon re-reading (and re-re-reading, for that matter). There's a lot in here, especially for such a short book, and since I know I am constantly being tempted to embrace the theology of glory, I will need to revisit Forde often.

Jean-Daniel Veer says

Though it is not explicitly portrayed as such, I definitely saw the theology of the Cross as a hermeneutical tool for interpretation. It sheds a very different, powerful, vibrant light on common passages of the Bible.

The focus here is the theologian of glory in me, in us. The one that wants to eclipse the responsibility of God in our suffering and dismiss the goodness of suffering. The suffering talked about here is the suffering of the patient whose operation is done/inflicted by the surgeon. Calling this suffering bad is calling the Cross bad. Let us not despise the Cross by trying to work ourselves up, but let us embrace the Cross as it is, an attack on the best we can offer, and hold dear the faith that says : "EVERYTHING is finished".

Rick Davis says

Having been an evangelical Christian my entire life you wouldn't think that a book about the gospel could be such a bolt from the blue. But *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* is potentially paradigm shifting. Working

through Martin Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, Gerhard O. Forde presents the gospel starkly and biblically. Both theological liberals and conservatives, for very different reasons, are likely to be challenged by Luther's theology of the cross. It has really made me want to reevaluate the way I practically think about my faith and salvation; I know that I'll be chewing on it for quite some time. And all this in only 115 pages. It packs a punch.

A couple things I learned:

-I have often heard people disparage the "theology of the cross" as being too focused on the crucifixion and not proceeding to the resurrection. However this book taught me that "the cross" in the theology of the cross is shorthand for the entire narrative of the crucified and risen Jesus. It includes the Old Testament preparation, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and his exaltation.

-I also have been shown a new way to look at the book of Job that I never have before, and it's going to take me some time to work through my thoughts on it.

Some great quotes:

"Theologians of the cross attack the way of glory, the way of law, human works, and free will, because the way of glory simply operates as a defense mechanism against the cross."

"The hallmark of a theology of glory is that...it will always, in the end, hold out for some free will."

"... as fallen creatures and not creators we will always be threatened by God, who is hidden by the masks of divine majesty."

"We depend upon and glory in our works, and we call these self-serving deeds good. Suffering, we insist, is bad. If it comes upon us we immediately begin to wonder if we have failed somehow in our works..."

Luis Dizon says

Gerhard O. Forde's "On Being a Theologian of the Cross" is an illuminating exposition of Martin Luther's Heidelberg Disputation (1518). He unpacks the meaning of the 28 theological theses that Luther presented before the Augustinian order, and how these theses provide the foundation of Protestant soteriology when it comes to the contrast between Law and Gospel, the bondage of the will, and absolute sufficiency of God's grace when it comes to salvation.

All of this is presented in terms of a contrast between what are called the "Theology of Glory" and the "Theology of the Cross." The "Theology of Glory" is used as a catch-all for sorts of theologies that look at God and salvation from the lens of human merit and human achievement. By contrast, the "Theology of the Cross" is the type of theology that sees everything from the lens of the work of Christ on the cross. Under this theology, human works or human will give way to God's grace as displayed on the cross, or as Paul puts it, "it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (Romans 9:16).

The book is divided into four chapters, each of which corresponds to a section of the Heidelberg Disputation. Chapter one, "The Problem of Good Works," focuses on theses 1-12. Its aim is to show how we cannot attain God's favour by any works that we do. Forde points out that while we recognize the problem of bad deeds, a more subtle danger arises in the form of good deeds that we think are meritorious before God. Such deeds

turn out to be deadly sins if we glory in them or rely on them for our salvation. Contrasted with such human works are the works of God, which consist in humbling ourselves before God and relying on His grace.

Chapter two, "The Problem of Will," focuses on theses 13-18. Here, Forde discusses a common error that theologians of glory fall into, which is to ascribe salvation to an act of will. Against this such a theology is the classic Augustinian notion of the bondage of the will, which Luther brings up and defends. His point is that our will, as long as it is in bondage to sin, can only choose what is earthly, not spiritual goods (cf. Romans 8:5-8). Forde thus states that the cross itself "is the evidence that we did not choose him but that he, nevertheless, chose us (John 15:16)."

Chapter three, "The Great Divide: The Way of Glory versus the Way of the Cross" focuses on theses 19-24. Here is where Luther first explicitly uses the term "theologian of glory" and "theologian of the cross." He argues that any proper theology must be a theology of the cross. The contrast between the two is that a theologian of glory "calls evil good and good evil," whereas a theologian of the cross "says what a thing is." This entails resisting any tendency to shrink back from the absolute dependence on God entailed by the Gospel and to return to some form of self-effort.

Finally, chapter four "God's Work in Us: The Righteousness of Faith," focuses on theses 25-28. Here is where Luther brings his discussion into full circle. Having eliminated all works and willpower as conditions for salvation, he lays out how it is our faith alone that puts us right before God. By faith, he teaches, God's love reaches into us and creates what is lovely in His sight (contrasted with human love, which merely seeks what is already there that is lovely). Such individuals He counts as righteous, and they can, by grace, boast that everything has already been done for them in Christ.

The Heidelberg Disputation can be a confusing read for those who are unfamiliar with the historical background of Luther and the Reformation, and Forde does a good job of clarifying the central points of his theology as found in the document. He takes Luther's points and shows how they are still applicable to our understanding of God and salvation today. I highly recommend this book as an introduction to Luther's thought, and to broader Protestant theology in general.

Ken says

This book was a mixed bag. First the good. Forde does a better job in this book than I've ever read anywhere of defining what the theology of glory is. You can find a number of books that do a good job of defining the theology of the Cross; but they usually give that definition with something along the line of "as opposed to a theology of glory, which is bad." Forde really goes into it thoroughly.

I have some reservations. Forde refers critically to LCMS as being extreme in affirming the Formula of Concord on the same level as the Augsburg Confession. My response is that the Formula of Concord is part of the Book of Concord which must be taken as a whole. We affirm all of it. Therefore, both, as component parts of that whole, do have to be taken that way.

Forde also undervalues Scripture in his effort to affirm preaching. He says, in his final chapter, that the Bible is the record of God's acts in the past, but that only preaching says in the present, "This is for you now!" To be sure, there are parts of the Bible that are principally records of past acts. There is little direct communication to us as we read that Menahem was an evil king who did not forsake the ways of Jeroboam. But there are also many parts that speak very directly to the reader today as surely as to the people to whom

they were originally written, most obviously the Epistles, which speak directly to every reader in whom the Holy Spirit works faith (AC V; FCSD II.50).

Julie says

Reread this book twice. I am sure I will read it again. The Heidelberg Disputation has enough to keep one thinking for a lifetime.

Tim says

This is a great overview of the Theology of the Cross. It provides insight on Martin Luther's views and why the grace of God isn't always attractive to Christians.

Jay Winters says

Book Closing: Forde's concise book of reflections on the Hiedelberg Disputation that become the foundation for the Lutheran concept of "Theology of the Cross" is a short read that is relatively easy to read, given the complexity of the document that it seeks to unpack (the Hiedelberg Disputation).

In in, Forde separates Luther's 29 Theses into manageable chunks that then form systematic boxes to understand each of the unique points made by each thesis. Forde does a good job of structuring his book to allow entry into the complex and often counter intuitive thinking of the Theology of the Cross.

I'd recommend this book to anyone who was seeking to gain entry into understanding the concepts of the Theology of the Cross, anyone who wanted a refresher course before diving deeper, or anyone who wanted to use it as a devotional guide.

Book Opening: It is with a little trepidation that I'm opening this book again after years of putting it away at the seminary, but I'm working on a body of work that looks at generations and the theology of the cross and seeing what the two have to say to one another.

For those of you that are not Luther-dorks, the Theology of the Cross is a Lutheran theological lens through which we see what is happening in the work of Christ and our own lives. Essentially it boils down to this: We sin. God works His good work in us. The End.

A "Theology of Glory", the antithesis of "Theology of the Cross", puts stuff into the mix of that three sentence approach: We sin. [Well, sorta, but not really, at least not as much as that guy.] God works His good work in us [after we show we're worthy by doing some work on our own], [and then He applauds us for a job well done, something He couldn't or wouldn't do on His own.] [etc] [etc].

So, to get my motor running before I jump into bigger books on the topic, I'm reading Forde's quick little reflections. Here we go.

Matthew Richard says

Forde's book titled, "On Being a Theologian of the Cross" is definitely a small shot of espresso. It only pushes past 100 pages but is a rich explanation of the heart of Martin Luther's 1518 Heidelberg Disputation. He divides the 28 Theses of Luther into 4 digestible sections that are explained below.

The Problem with Good Works: Theses 1-12

Forde shares the dangers and problems with works in connection to salvation by grace through faith. Works become seductive when one is tempted into believing and/or depending on them as a basis for one's worth or value eternally speaking. As a result one becomes addicted to their spiritual projects so as to acquire one more nature of works righteousness. Furthermore, works are a problem because they are 'good' on the outside but when done apart from faith they are in essence evil.

The Problem with the Will: Theses 13-18

Forde expounds on the problem of mankind's will. It is bound due to the fall and becomes aggressive of the thought of having someone over top of it. Forde goes on to explain that the will is free to only do good in a 'passive voice' context yet free to do evil in an 'active voice' context.

The Great Divide: The Way of Glory versus the Way of the Cross: Theses 19-24

In theses 19-24 Forde lays out that a Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross can be thought of as two completely different theologies. From here the theses flesh out the implications of these two theologies in expressing that a supporter of Glory Theology consciously or subconsciously actually destroys and obstructs the cross of Christ. One of the ways that this happens is through a Glory Theologian's rejection of suffering and reality in the context of their theology.

God's Work in Us: The Righteousness of Faith: Theses 25-28

The final portions of Forde's book focuses on the flow of righteousness. Does righteousness flow to faith or from faith. Furthermore Forde spends time on talking about the motivation of the Gospel.

Evaluation: In my humble opinion Forde's book is one of the best and most important books that one could read in understanding the difference between Glory and Cross Theology. From Forde it is evident that one must analyze and understand their theological presuppositions when approaching scripture. The reason being, the lens of Glory Theology can subconsciously twist, impede and warp one's reading of the Bible. Does man ascend to God or does God descend to mankind? Is righteousness obtained through active works or is it received in the passive voice as a gift. In other words, the two main exegetical presuppositions of Glory Theology (i.e. ascent theology and active righteousness) become a problem when these presuppositions are not addressed or realized when one approaches scripture. For when one approaches scripture with a lens of glory theology, the scriptures are read by putting the starting point and spiritual burden on mankind.

Alexandra says

"On Being a Theologian of the Cross", which I read at college for Christian Doctrine, walks through Luther's Heidelberg Disputation. Forde breaks each point down and explains it clearly. The book, of course, talks a

lot about grace, faith, works, and what it means to truly be a 'Theologian of the Cross' rather than a 'Theologian of Glory'.

Kris says

A text that every Lutheran should read -- that every Christian should read. This book is on the list of books that every confirmand should be handed for their classes.

Quotes:

It's not that we want to fulfill the law and can't, it's that we don't even want to:

"It is commonplace among evangelical Christians to believe that we can't perfectly fulfill the law, but we often try to because we assume that *if we only could* we would do it. So we believe that we must try to do something at least, and then, it is assumed, Christ will make up for our "shortcomings." But here is the bombshell: doing the law does not advance the cause of righteousness one whit. It only makes matters worse." pg. 24

"The law says, 'do this,' and it is never done. Grace says, 'believe in this,' and everything is already done." pg. 107

"Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive." pg. 113
