

Set Four – God’s Work In Us – The Righteousness of Faith (Theses 25-28)

Luther does allow for some talk of good works in the human life, but he is careful to couch all good works in the realm of “faith” rather than the realm of “works.” He says that we should consider the work of Christ as the “acting work” in our lives, and that our work is the “accomplished work.”

This concept may be illustrated by a machine that is designed to run in a certain fashion. When the machine breaks down, the “acting work” is fixing the machine. The “accomplished work” is the machine running as it should. When the “acting work” of the Cross happens, there is no reason for us to even be surprised that we find ourselves doing His work – we’ve been fixed.

“Faith” in the case of good works is simply faith to trust in the way that God has been using us. Sometimes God may use us in ways that are unfamiliar to us, but that is only because we are so familiar with our sinful ways. Faith is knowing and trusting God well enough to allow ourselves to do what He has “fixed” us to do.

- *The Lutheran reformers were always quick to say “Good works are necessary.” Does “the righteousness of faith” explain the statement “Good works are necessary”?*

Next Time: Two Realms of God’s Action



UNIVERSITY LUTHERAN
Church & Student Center
A Jesus-Centered Community of Scripture, Faith, and Grace.

www.universitylutheranchurch.org

Please don't throw this away. Take it home and use it devotionally or leave it for others to use.



Theology of the Cross

Having a “theology of the cross” may not initially strike you as anything distinctively Lutheran in nature. After all, other conceptions of Christianity look to the cross, have crosses in their buildings, and understand that Jesus died upon a cross. The term “theology of the cross”, however, was a term coined in Martin Luther’s “Heidelberg Disputation” in 1518 – and it had some very clear teachings that remain distinctive Lutheran teachings today.

Right after the Reformation had truly gotten under way, Martin Luther was given an occasion to present his theological understanding and teachings to the members of his religious order, the Augustinians. This disputation ended up being a large success for Luther as we was able to win over many of his Roman Catholic monk and priest friends from his order.

The Heidelberg Disputation largely dealt with the issue of good works and their place in God’s presence. In it, Luther presented 28 theses about the state of man’s works before God especially as they were concerned with salvation. Luther’s overall point was that outside of clinging to the cross, no good work man can do means anything for salvation.

A Starting Definition

The Theology of the Cross can be a tough concept to grapple with in its intricacy. However, boiled down to its easiest to handle form the Theology of the Cross simply says, “We know God and ourselves best when we see Christ on the cross.”

28 Theses – 4 Sets

The 28 Theses of the Heidelberg disputation actually come in four sets:

- The Problem of Good Works (Theses 1-12)
- The Problem of the Will (Theses 13-18)
- The Great Divide – The Way of Glory versus the Way of the Cross (Theses 19-24)
- God’s Work In Us – The Righteousness of Faith (Theses 25-28)

Set One – The Problem of Good Works (Theses 1-12)

The joke that one of my Roman Catholic friends has after reading the Heidelberg Disputation is that only a Lutheran would ever frame “Good Works” as a “Problem”. It’s a funny joke because it is somewhat true. (Although Luther uses “problem” here more in the sense of “algebra problem”).

If there is a “problem” with good works, it is not that they are done, but rather that we assume that they carry with them some sort of merit for our salvation. Luther explains that even if some work that we do appears “good” to other humans, and even if it is completely sinless (because it is God’s work done through us) it is infused with our sin and is therefore worthless for salvation.

Within the framework of the theology of the cross, good works are not done to merit salvation, or even as “a response to” salvation, but rather good works that are truly good are the sole responsibility of God. We are tools, hammers and screwdrivers of His using.

- *What might be wrong with saying that we do good works to merit salvation? To say “thank you to God”?*

Set Two – The Problem of the Will (Theses 13-17)

This is likely the “problem” within the Theology of the Cross that is the most counter-cultural in the setting of the United States. The stereotype of the American mindset is someone who “pulls themselves up by their own bootstraps.” While that may work as a pragmatist capacity concerning how we live in this world, it has no bearing on our salvation. We cannot “will” ourselves to heaven.

The conception of the “will” under the Theology of the Cross is not a “free” will but rather a “bound” will. You are “bound” to sin just like an object is “bound” to gravity. The concept of “free will,” Luther says, exists in name only after the Fall into sin. At that point, a mutation developed amongst us called “sin” and we are bound to it as the child of a mother addicted to drugs is bound to the addiction of its mother.

- Under the bound will motif, we are helpless invalids who need God’s help. Under the free will motif, we are schmucks who constantly drop the ball. What’s the difference?

Set Three – The Great Divide – The Way of Glory versus the Way of the Cross (Theses 19-24)

There are two ways of coming to an understanding of God. We can imagine what God is like and assume Him to be so, or we can look at places where we literally see God and understand Him through that. Luther says that since there are these two different ways of understanding God, there are two kinds of “ways” or “theologies” – A Theology of Glory and a Theology of the Cross.

A theology of glory takes what it assumes about God from imagination, speculation, logic, and other human capabilities. A theology of glory leads to three major errors in thinking about God:

- Humans have the ability to do good that lies within us.
- There remains, after the Fall, some ability to choose goodness and truth
- Humans cannot be saved unless they are somehow participating with the righteousness of God, and therefore add to God’s righteousness.

A theology of the cross, to the contrary, deals with the reality of God where we see Him. We see God’s face most clearly in Jesus, and Luther argues that we see Jesus most clearly when He is on the cross. For Luther, the cross was the zenith of Jesus’ work on earth. This theology leads us to the ideas that:

- Humans have no ability to do good, otherwise Christ wouldn’t have had to die, He could have just taught us better how to harness our ability.
- There is no ability in us to choose good, otherwise Christ wouldn’t have had to die, He could have just laid out the logical ends of our actions and we could have chosen ourselves.
- We cannot add to God’s righteousness since God’s righteousness ended in His death – completely using up His righteousness to save us. To say we can add to that is to say that God is somehow too weak to completely save us by His righteousness alone.

Discuss these examples of a theology of glory or a theology of the cross:

- *Jesus wants you to use what you have.*
- *Jesus wants you to use what you have been given.*