

Theology of the cross and experience

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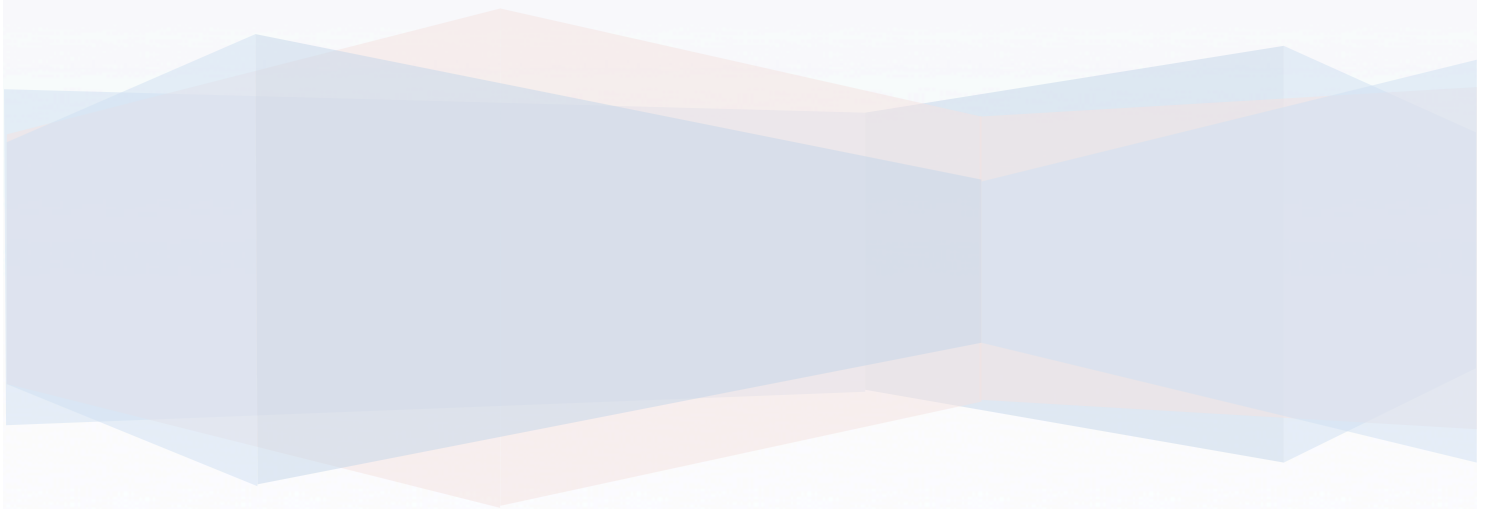


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Theology of the cross and experience

Introduction

The Problem

The relationship between faith and experience has always been a significant theme amongst theologians. What you think of your experiences, and how you interpret them will have a profound impact on your theology. Martin Luther took notice of this tension between the doctrines of Christianity as objective truth on the one hand and the everyday experiences as subjective observations on the other. Facing a theology of glory¹, he wanted to ensure that the theology became the frame in which every experience was to be interpreted – and not the other way around. Luther classifies this as *Theologia Crucis*: the theology of the cross². Luther even goes so far as to say ‘Crux sola est nostra theologia’, that the cross alone is our theology (Mcgrath 1985, 152). Thus, the theology of the cross is not only a part of Luther’s many viewpoints; rather it is the very foundation from which he develops his whole theology.

The reformation, begun by Martin Luther, reached Denmark as early as 1536, and Denmark has a substantial Lutheran tradition and inheritance. Denmark, even though being a widely secularized country, has a Lutheran Peoples Church with no less than 75,9% of the population as its members³. This is a quite peculiar situation considering most of the population only attends church services when going to a wedding, baptism or funeral. It should be rather straightforward preaching to a nation with such strong ties to the church. Nevertheless, there are no indications that church service participation is increasing.

What I would like to suggest is, that we as Lutheran Christians have left an important part of the theology of the cross behind. Being a part of a Lutheran tradition we have a strong bulwark against the theology of glory, and a theology

¹ Here understood as the idea that we can know God from our experiences, so our theology to some extent can be characterized as empirical.

² That God is hidden, and has foremost revealed himself in the suffering Christ on the cross, and that we have no direct knowledge of God, but always see God from the back.

³ These numbers are provided by the Danish ministry of ecclesiastical affairs and are last updated on January first, 2017. Found on the website <http://www.km.dk/folkekirken/kirkestatistik/folkekirken-medlemstal/>

which teaches that we are justified by our own efforts, namely good deeds. But this emphasis on the Lutheran mottos “Sola Fide” and “Sola Gratia” has left us somewhat wordless when it comes to addressing how to deal with experience. When articulating his view on the matter in the Heidelberg theses, Martin Luther develops a theology in contrast to his theological opponents, which causes the theology of the cross to be negatively phrased. Luther aims at the comfort and peace of the Christian by stressing that God is near even when you do not feel or experience his presence and that you should not despair in your sinfulness but rather find comfort in the faith in Christ. But if this is all there is to say, then what is to make of the experience? In Lutheran pastoral care and preaching it is often simply stated that you should not reflect too much on your experiences and that they are not important. And while the fundamentals of Christian doctrine; e.g. that you are created by God, the transformation in baptism, that you are justified by faith, and that your sins are forgiven, cannot be experienced, experiences still matter a great deal to most people. In other words: I find it a vague, neglecting and unfulfilling way to address the experiences if we are unable to communicate a positive way to interpret our experiences.

Alistair E. McGrath addresses this in his writings on Luther’s theology of the cross and claims that: “For Luther, experience can only stand in contradiction to faith, in that revealed truth must be revealed under its opposite form.” (McGrath 1985, 169). The problem with such a concise way of addressing the matter is that even though you have faith, you have experiences nonetheless. And all experience is interpreted in a certain framework. If the Lutheran church is not addressing and unfolding this framework from a Lutheran stance, people will simply use another. The situation in Denmark, as pointed out prior in the text, positions the church where it can reach a large number of people, who have been educated in neither the church nor a Christian family. If the church does not take seriously the tension between the doctrines and peoples experiences, it disregards its responsibility and calling. Lutheran theologians must contemplate this in order to preach to today’s culture.

When people attend church they compare their own worldview and reasoning with what they hear from the pulpit and what they experience in taking part

in the liturgy. Therefore it is of utmost importance that pastors simultaneously stay loyal to the scripture as well as to the congregation. The theology of the cross is, as shed light upon above, as well a bulwark as a comforting theology. At the same time though, if not addresses with care, it makes the gospel irrelevant to people. In most, if not all, other aspects of life your experiences hold an essential position. For the gospel to be trustworthy, this topic must be addressed. The church cannot leave people to think that becoming a Christian will solve all your problems, or that your everyday life and your experiences are of no importance whatsoever. If that is the impression they get, they will soon enough leave the church. It must become clear, what the Bible actually promises, and at the same time how to deal with the fact that oftentimes it does not appear to live up to those promises. E.g. when Jesus says, “seek and you will find”, he obviously does not mean that you will find whatever you want, but if that has never been explained, why would you think otherwise? The theology of glory and the secularized society have that in common, that to some extent what they see, feel and experience is what they make of God. On that basis what we face today is similar to that which Martin Luther was up against when he developed his theology of the cross. Luther’s theology of the cross represents a theology insistently speaking up against a natural religiosity in man saying “quid pro quo”. If this is true, the theology of the cross is relevant at any time.

Given the relationship between faith and experience, which can be characterized as disintegrated, the question in this project is whether we are able to find a positively phrased theology of experience in the theology of the cross. If indeed such a theology exists how can it contribute to a more coherent and relevant preaching from which people will be equipped to handle the diversity of experiences life exposes them to?

The Material

Considering this projects emphasis on Luther’s theology of the cross and my thesis that we need a positively phrased theology of experience founded on this theology, it is relevant to see how other readers of Luther have understood this specific theme. A large number of books have been written, and naturally, I have to narrow the material down. In this regard several handbooks point towards Alister E.

McGrath's "Luther's theology of the cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough" and Walther von Loewenich's "Luther's Theology of the cross"⁴. Besides being recommended, I find Alister E. McGrath relevant due to his Anglican inheritance, which might shed some light on elements, where a Lutheran theologian might have blind spots. Furthermore, his book is published in 1985 and therefore qualifies as one of the more recently published books on the theology of the cross. Loewenich being a German Lutheran theologian and furthermore being a professor of theology, is a competent expositor of the theology of the cross as viewed from a Lutheran stance.

Naturally, it is significant to bring Luther's own writing into the discussion as well. Luther's work being as comprehensive as is the case, it is far from possible to include everything he has written on the subject. First I will include the Heidelberg Disputation. These Theses compose the first encounter with the distinction between the theology of glory and theology of the cross in Luther's work. Secondly, I will turn to "Operationes in Psalmos", namely Luther's treatment of Psalms 2 and 5. Luther's "Operationes in Psalmos" is written in the aftermath of the Heidelberg Disputation and unfolds his stance on the subject at hand.

Besides this, I have chosen various literature in order to engage in the discussion on experience as a source to theology. I have already used the term *experience* several times in this introductory passage, and in order to get a clear understanding of how I use it, I will expound on this before turning to Luther.

The Method

Theology is in some way stretched out between a deep respect and dependency on the tradition and constantly re-evaluating that very same tradition. In the context of a Lutheran confession, tradition does not in itself have an absolute authority. One of Luther's sola principles was 'Sola Scriptura', which states that the Bible is our true authority. For at Lutheran theologian it is natural to ask questions to a certain tradi-

⁴ There are references to these books in "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology", "Das Luther-Lexicon" and "The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology." See the reference list for further information.

tion. In this project, my question is; whether we need to take a renewed look at Luther's theology of the cross in order to contextualize it to our present time.

Following my discussion of the question of experience as a source to theology, I will apply a hermeneutical-analytical reading through which I will disclose in how respectively Loewenich and McGrath present the theology of the cross and speak of experience. Following this, I will evaluate my findings using Martin Luther's own writings as the criteria. Simultaneously, I will read Luther with focus on his stance regarding experiences. Lastly, I will apply a synthetic-constructive method by which I aim to contribute to a pragmatic theology of experiences that can be applied in preaching in the Lutheran church. This will incorporate Loewenich, McGrath, and Luther as a starting point, but will not necessarily be limited to their arguments and positions.

The Ambition

This project revolves around the tension between faith and experience. The Lutheran theology of the cross serves as a profound bulwark against the theology of glory and as an underlying foundation for Lutheran theology. At the same time it seems Lutheran theology has left a significant part of the theology of the cross behind; namely what to make of experiences. Facing people with little knowledge of Christian doctrines, who are nevertheless largely members of the Danish Peoples Church, facilitates an opportunity to reach numerous people with the gospel. Naturally, there are several elements that hinder a fruitful meeting between the secularized Dane and the gospel, but I find that in particular, the disintegration between peoples experiences elsewhere and what they hear from the church is a major obstacle. My ambition with this project is to strengthen and widen the language for experience, so that people attending church, there will find the tools necessary to grasp the Christian faith and still be allowed to be subjective, experiencing human beings – able to cope with their experiences.

Experience

On my very first day as a theology student, a rather discouraging assertion was made by one of our professors: *You will never be able to read the Bible as it is*. Though discouraging, this has become increasingly evident, as my studies have progressed. No one has access to the Bible let alone theological studies without being profoundly influenced by one's tradition, experiences, upbringing, reason, political environment, and of course how this is all interpreted. There is no escape from this fundamental truth, however, being aware of it is a crucial precondition for doing theology at all.

Dealing with experiences and theology is, to some extent, dealing with the question of sources to theology and how to approach and make use of these sources. Before describing how I have chosen to understand and use the term *experience* in this paper, I will make a somewhat brief remark on the discussion of experience as a source to theology. To this end, I have chosen to give a few examples, by involving Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth in particular. In "Theology and the end of doctrine" Christine Helmer offers, what she terms, three paradigmatic moments of profound reorientation in the history of Westerns theology. These are encapsulated in Martin Luther, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Barth respectively. Schleiermacher is widely regarded as the father of modern theology, and one of the most influential theologians of the nineteenth century. Barth is, by many, regarded as the most important theologian of the twentieth century (McGrath 2013, 193–94) (Helmer 2014, 2;12).

Sources to theology

In Alister McGrath's publication on historical theology, he offers a definition of theology. Theology, when speaking of the Christian God, is, simply put, *a reflection upon the God of the Christians*. In McGrath's introductory passage, presenting a brief review of the development of theology, he writes: "Theology was thus understood as systematic analysis of the nature, purposes, and activity of God." (McGrath 2013, 2). Although at this point (early Middle Ages) theology was solely about the doctrine of God, later it was widened to include other aspects as well. Still, the question at hand is how one may approach a systematic analysis of God

and the world seen through a Christian lens. McGrath believes “systematic theology” to have two diverse meanings; organized for the concern of presenting a coherent theology and organized on the basis of presuppositions about method. The latter, i.e. the question of method has become crucial in theological work, as the paper at hand serves to illustrate (McGrath 2013, 1–6). It is by no means a new issue but has to some extent existed since the beginning of church history. Early on, the church experienced the problem of interpreting scripture and defining Christianity. Facing Gnosticism and its alleged misinterpretation of scripture, church leaders turned to tradition as a benchmark for correct exegesis. Tradition was understood as “a traditional interpretation of Scripture...” (McGrath 2013, 29). Tradition was seen as the legacy handed over from the Apostles, and this method of doing theology was seen as a safeguard against Christianity becoming something of an arbitrary and ambiguous character (McGrath 2013, 28–29). Tradition hereon played a significant role as a source to theology.

Renaissance Humanism gave rise to a new perspective on theology; a striving towards the sources of Christian theology. This is regularly referred to as “Ad Fontes”, which literally means “to the fountains”, and in particular the New Testament was significant in this regard. Martin Luther was not advocating for recanting tradition, but instead, he argued that tradition had to be corrected. The Roman Catholic Church, in their reliance on tradition, had gone astray and needed to return to Scripture as the primary source to theology, according to Luther. Hence we have the Lutheran slogan; *Sola Scriptura*. It was important to Luther, that elements of theology that had no entitlement in Scripture were abandoned. Here we discern an aspect of Luther's theology that leads to the *theologia crucis* (McGrath 2013, 96; 140). Tradition and scripture; those were considered the main sources to theology throughout much of the church history. Alongside we find the question of natural theology, on which I will give a brief comment below. First, we will look to the nineteenth century and Friedrich Schleiermacher.

Many in the nineteenth century believed that scripture and tradition were unable to be the foundation of doctrine. The present experience was regarded the most important source of theology. Inspired by Kantian philosophy, Friedrich Schleiermacher made a new approach to systematic theology with experience, not

merely as a component, but as its very matrix. Schleiermacher consequently writes: "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech." (Gunton 1997, 50). Schleiermacher equates the feeling of total dependency with a relationship with God (Gunton 1997, 48–51). It can be said, that Schleiermacher made the methodological presupposition, that theology concerns human experience. His aim was to make Christianity relevant by appealing to a universal human experience of dependency. According to Schleiermacher, human experience demonstrates an awareness of God, and theology hence is the articulation of the experience of God mediated by Jesus Christ. This fundamental feeling of dependency resembles what St. Augustine wrote approximately 1400 years earlier: "...you made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds rest in you." (Augustine and Blaiklock 1997, 15). But did Schleiermacher make Christianity pay too high a price in striving for relevance? He did not argue against the modern way of perceiving Jesus or the modern worldview. Modernity replaced God with Man, in that it put reason in a dominant position. But is there, in fact, a universal reason? Or must not all experience, all feelings, and all reason be interpreted? If we brush aside both scripture and tradition, on what grounds do we then make systematic theology? Karl Barth seems to believe the price of Liberal Theology is too high, and I will proceed by looking at his stance on the matter (Gunton 1997, 17–18; 41–43) (McGrath 2013, 187–189; 193; 195–199).

Barth is considered the founder of neo-orthodoxy, and he opposes the views of Schleiermacher. Where Schleiermacher places Man as the focal point of existence and our understanding of life, Barth places God in his own reality and in his otherness. Barth's theology is dialectic, emphasizing the difference between man and God, and between human reason and the reason of God. To Barth, God's revelation, rather than Man's searching, is the proper source to theology. Barth rejects both reason, experience, and natural theology as sources to theology (McGrath 2013, 193–194; 196–201). According to Barth, Christianity was stripped of content when theologians tried to defend it and make it relevant. Not to say, that Barth was insensitive towards context as long as context did not dictate theology. Helmer describes this pressure on theology when writing: "Only by fundamentally changing what is understood to be its core *métier* will theology satisfactorily conform in the

eyes of its contemporary despisers to the spirit of free intellectual inquiry. In other words theology must stop being theology in order to obtain its visa into the academy.” (Helmer 2014, 5).

As mentioned earlier, the question of Natural Theology has been dealt with throughout church history. In “Re-imagining Nature”, Alister McGrath offers a review of six different approaches to Natural Theology and gives a comprehensive introduction to Natural Theology. The specifics of that publication is not relevant for this paper, however, McGrath's fundamental premise is based on the assumption that it is impossible to have a so-called “view from nowhere”, but that every view on nature and life is inevitably a “view from somewhere”. As I have pointed out above, experience must be interpreted. At multiple times, McGrath emphasises that observation is never neutral and that it is impossible to grasp reality by naturalistic, scientific efforts. He argues: "The meaning of nature must be unlocked using a key which nature itself does not supply." (Mcgrath 2017, 33). This key McGrath speaks of, is the Christian *Imaginarium*, a Christian lens, which enables us to understand reality. Another point, repeatedly accentuated throughout the book, is that nature speaks ambiguously of God (e.g. Mcgrath 2017, 73). This constitutes a criticism of Schleiermacher, in saying that reason and the awe-striking feeling nature offers, does not lead one to believe in the God of the Christians. One might just as easily become atheist as theist from reflecting on nature. Therefore, Christian tradition and community, as well as Scripture, must assist the process of grasping reality and understanding nature. McGrath speaks of the Christian community as: “...*engendering* and *sustaining* a corporate interpretant, offering paradigmatic theological, aesthetic, and moral responses to the natural world.” (Mcgrath 2017, 96). As will be evident later in the paper at hand, this resembles what we find in Luther's theology (McGrath 2017, 2; 18-25; 35-56).

The final stance on this matter, I will include in this discussion, is that of Stephan Bevans. He too argues, that experience must be included in theological work by pointing to the contextualization of theology. Bevans argues, that doing contextual theology is not an option, but is an unavoidable part of theology: “The contextualization of theology... is really a theological imperative.” (Bevans 1992, 1). It is not possible, as some would suggest, to view theology as an objective sci-

ence of faith. Rather, according to Bevans, Theologians need to recognize the present human experience as a valid locus of theology. Contextual theology realizes that contemporary culture, political landscape etc. has a significant role to play when doing theology. Bevans offers a few examples by determining Schleiermacher's theology as a response to Romanticism, The Catholic counter-reformation as a response to, among others, Luther and so forth. Much like McGrath, he argues, that reality is not directly accessible but is constructed through subjective, culturally- and time-bound location. Hence our experiences influence our understanding of God. Christine Helmer also accentuates this attitude towards doing theology: "Personal biography, political context, and relationship with the church and the Christian community all contribute to the shape of the questions a theologian asks... As a theologian grows and changes, her ideas over time are continuously inflected by her personal, religious, and cultural circumstances." (Helmer 2014, 1). Bevans points to the fact that certain ways of phrasing doctrine in western culture are greatly misunderstood in Asian or African culture. Contextualisation is by far a new phenomenon in theology, but the recognition hereof is however somewhat new, according to Bevans (Bevans 1992, 1–11).

My use of "experience"

As we have seen in my account of the question of sources to theology above, the term *experience* contains multiple aspects. Both reason, feelings, viewing nature, science, political environment and other elements come into play when dealing with experience. In this paper, what I mean by experience is the sum of this. How these components interact with and contribute to a systematic theology, that is the question. Moreover, what is the key to unlocking the interpretation of both experience and scripture from a Lutheran standpoint? Experience is what I might think, feel, see, ponder, experiencing joy and agony, my impressions and my reason.

CRUX sola est nostra theologia!

Luther's impact on theology cannot be overstated. On a large variety of theological issues, he deviated from his Roman Catholic inheritance. The character of his

thoughts was not just that of renewal, but of a shift in mindset altogether. The reason for this is, that it was the very foundation upon which theology was made, that was redefined by Luther. Although the years of 1517 and 1519 are often regarded the most significant concerning the works of Martin Luther, due to respectively the posting of theses in Wittenberg and the Leipzig disputation, 1518 is just as important, according to McGrath. In 1518 Luther adds a new term to the theological domain; the theology of the cross. This is introduced during the Heidelberg assembly and becomes a fundamental part of Luther's theology. Luther argues that one must make a decision; either seek God elsewhere, e.g. in feelings, nature, experiences, philosophy etc., or let the cross be the premise of all understanding of God. The reasoning is, that: "If God *is* present in the cross, then he is a God whose presence is hidden from us." (McGrath 1985, 2). The headline of this passage is the bold statement of Martin Luther (McGrath 1985, 169). As is seen in the above quote, Luther builds his entire theology upon the cross of Christ. In this passage we shall see, how Alister McGrath understands and unfolds this theology (McGrath 1985, 1–3).

A matter of justification

Indeed Luther did not come up with his *theologia crucis* from one day to another. His theological education and work were situated in a particular context, in which Luther gradually developed his theology. To Luther, the core issue was that of being saved. McGrath writes: "For Luther, the entire gospel could be encapsulated in the Christian article of justification..." (McGrath 1985, 20–21). The entire first chapter of McGrath's book is about this issue. Also, in order to catch a glimpse of the role of justification, it is worth mentioning, that McGrath does not write directly about the content of the theology of the cross until page 148. Until then he writes of justification and the theological schools influencing and debating Luther. The matter of justification was the source of great conflict between Luther and his theological adversaries (McGrath 1985, 7–26). This might explain some of Luther's condemnation of experience as a source to theology since justification is rarely experienced. We will have to engage Luther's thoughts on justification to understand his theology of the cross.

Luther found himself in despair, in constant fear of the wrath of God. Although, being a monk putting great effort into works and good deeds, his conscience was thoroughly troubled. Luther was unable to love God; in fact, he hated the righteous God and was angry with him. McGrath quotes Luther on the subject: “For I had hated that phrase ‘the righteousness of God’ which, according to the use and custom of all the doctors, I had been taught to understand philosophically, in the sense of the formal or active righteousness (as they termed it), by which God is righteous, and punished unrighteous sinners.” (McGrath 1985, 96). God was, so to speak, unreachable. As Luther meditated on the meaning of righteousness, he began to understand the righteousness of God in new terms. He writes: “...I began to understand that ‘righteousness of God’ as that by which the righteous lives by the gift of God, namely by faith, and this sentence, ‘the righteousness of God is revealed’, to refer to a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘the righteous lives by faith’.” (McGrath 1985, 96–97). This is important with regard to this paper because this is the point of departure for Luther's theological breakthrough. Luther feels as born again because of this new understanding. From this point forward he began thinking, writing and lecturing differently on the matter of justification. McGrath writes: “The formulation of the *theologia crucis* took place over a period of several years, and was catalysed by Luther's initial difficulties concerning the question of what was meant by the ‘righteousness of God,..’” (McGrath 1985, 99). Luther's entire theology had to be worked through all over because of this new axiom. The process begun here was what led to the theology of the cross. From this, we see, that the question of justification was the very launch pad for Luther. This reorientation paid new and greater attention to the crucified Christ (McGrath 1985, 95–99). By thinking differently about the concept of ‘the righteousness of God’, Luther defines God in a new way. When addressing the question of who God is, Luther at one point replies: “...the God who deals with sinful man in this astonishing way is none other than the ‘crucified and hidden God’.” (McGrath 1985, 147).

The Heidelberg Theses

As already mentioned, Luther's *theologia crucis* was introduced during his disputation at Heidelberg, which took place in April 1518. Here he offered a series of theses, among which thesis 19 and 20 are the most important ones to our investigation. Luther writes:

- Thesis 19) "The man who looks upon the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian." (McGrath 1985, 148)
- Thesis 20) "The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian." (McGrath 1985, 148)

When speaking of the rearward parts of God, Luther is referencing to the story of Moses. Like Moses, we are denied a clear and upfront view of God, but can only see God from behind. There is no direct knowledge of God. The problem with the theology of glory is, that they demand to see God directly, meaning; they will only recognize him in his glory. Luther opposes this thought and claims that the cross reveals God, albeit in an indirect way. McGrath writes: "For Luther, the sole authentic *locus* of man's knowledge of God is the cross of Christ, in which God is to be found revealed, and yet paradoxically hidden in that revelation." (McGrath 1985, 149). What man regards as an antithesis of deity; weakness, humility, and foolishness, God reveals himself through. When watching Christ on the cross, the natural man will see him as humiliated in a total defeat. But what God is actually doing is both glorious and victorious. McGrath offers five features of the *theologia crucis*:

1. It is a theology of revelation in sharp contrast to speculation. Since God has chosen to reveal himself through *passiones et crucem*, it is futile to speculate on preconceived notions of God.
2. This revelation is indirect and concealed. God is revealed but is not recognized as God. If you expect a direct revelation, you will not be able to see God at all.

3. The revelation is limited to the sufferings on the cross and of Christ. There is no revelation of God in human moral activity or the created order. The cross shatters human illusions concerning the capacity of human reason to discern God from such things.
4. It is a matter of faith. Only faith recognizes the glory behind the humility. Luther refers to Jesus saying, that whoever has seen him, has seen the father (John 14.9). When Philip asks to see the father (John 14.8), he is regarded a theologian of glory, from Luther's perspective.
5. God makes himself known through suffering. Suffering is used by God, in order to let man become aware, that he is a sinner so that he will humble himself, and thereby may be saved.

As we see from this, there is little room for other sources to theology. Luther takes the stance that the Gospel contradicts our natural capacity to understand reality. McGrath writes: "Human wisdom takes offence at the cross of Christ, which stands in contradiction to accepted human standards of wisdom." (McGrath 1985, 152). (McGrath 1985, 149–52).

Anfechtung

I set out to disclose what McGrath says about experience, which up until now has not been much. However, there is room for one kind of experience in Luther's *theologia crucis*. Ironically, Luther's change of view on the righteousness of God is generally referred to as the *turmerlebnis* (Tower Experience)⁵. Luther found himself under God's judgement, experiencing the wrath of God. This, Luther, refers to as *anfechtung*. This *anfechtung* did not pass, but was, in fact, a continuous experience throughout the life of Luther, hence the theology of the cross is not a mere entry point for theology, but theology itself. *Anfechtung* is death, devil, the world and hell in a combined assault on man. This will leave man in despair without hope, without merits to boast of, and without joy. When pride has left man altogether and has been replaced by humility, then, and only then, can God justify man. God is the

⁵ See Das Luther-Lexikon pages 589-592

source of this *anfechtung*, wanting man to seek the cross of Christ. This is indeed talk of an experience. When being humbled by God, the Gospel (good news) is found in the fact that Christ suffered the same *anfechtung* for our sake. By looking at Christ on the cross, man begins to realize what judgment he deserves. This is why the cross alone is our theology, according to Luther. McGrath presents the following quote: “living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating.” (McGrath 1985, 152). This experience of God’s wrath is a condition for doing theology. Paradoxically, it is through God’s wrath that his mercy can operate. I will elaborate on the relationship between God’s proper work and God’s alien work in a later passage.

Man’s preconception of God is like a broken bone, which has set incorrectly and therefore must be broken before it can heal properly. Our reason confuses us and makes us come to wrong conclusions about God. How God works, what his motives are and what his reality looks like, is not available to us aside from in the cross and suffering of Christ. McGrath writes: “Any attempt to seek God elsewhere than in the cross of Christ is to be rejected out of hand as idle speculation...” (McGrath 1985, 161). This leaves the Christian life in a tension between faith and experience. According to Luther, faith contradicts experience given that God reveals his truth in its opposite form. Therefore all experience must be interpreted in the light of the cross, as McGrath writes: “All responsible Christian discourse about God must be based upon the cross, and must be subject to criticism upon this basis.” (McGrath 1985, 159).

We will leave McGrath for now, and turn towards the book of Walther von Loewenich on the subject. In my exposition of his book, I will focus on what addition he offers and, to some extent, leave out the sections which overlap McGrath (McGrath 1985, 152–73).

The cross puts everything to the test. Blessed is he who understands.

The above headline is a quote by Martin Luther, which to some extent frames Loewenich’s discussion of Luther’s theology of the cross (Loewenich 1976, 167). Comparing experiences to the revelation of the cross is imperative for any theologian, according to Loewenich. As an introductory remark, Loewenich writes on the

subject of dialectical theology. According to Loewenich, Luther was largely a dialectical theologian. The cross puts everything to the test. While some might argue that Protestant theology, namely Lutheran theology, miss out on the fullness of the gospel, Loewenich asks if it is possible at all to grasp the message of the New Testament bypassing the cross. In 1 Cor 1:18 Paul labelled the message entrusted to him as the word of the cross. The cross taught him, that God's wisdom appears as foolishness and his strength as weakness. This is the way of God's revelation; that his revelation is in concealment. Consequently, direct knowledge of God is impossible to obtain. Loewenich argues, that Paul was the first theologian of the cross. Luther saw himself in alignment with Paul, arguing that the Roman Catholic Church had broken its relationship to Paul. Luther was on a quest for humility, facing a church that had become secure and proud. From Luther's point of view, it was impossible to do theology without constant awareness of the cross. Loewenich calls it a principle in, and a characteristic of, Luther's whole theology. It is a principle, that, although not always mentioned, underlies all of Luther's writings, according to Loewenich (Loewenich 1976, 10–13).

The Hidden God

The dialectic of Luther's theology becomes evident in his view on revelation. True theology is based only on the revelation and wisdom of the cross. God has shown himself in Christ, and therefore we know where to look in order to know God and speak of him and his reality. The revelation is an indirect revelation since we only see God from the rear. Religious speculation, seeking God through experiences, and linking holiness with good works, are consequences of a desire for a direct communion with God. But this is a theology of glory, and as that Luther denounces it. It is claimed that neither speculation/reasoning nor metaphysics can lead to a true knowledge of God. All religious speculation is, in fact, to be regarded as a theology of glory, according to Luther. The visible things of God are human nature, weakness, and foolishness. These are counterparts to God, and God has revealed himself in this. Therefore Luther equates wisdom of the cross with true doctrine, demanding that all theological statements rest on this point of departure. Regarding the wisdom of the cross, Loewenich writes: "Where it is no longer understood, the

Bible, too, remains a closed book, for the cross of Christ is the only key to it.” (Loewenich 1976, 23).

In many regards, God is hidden. However, he has revealed himself in his saving act on the cross. The only way of reconciling with God is through Christ, namely through the death and blood of Him. This event is so crucially important, that the cross is not merely a matter of importance; is the distinctive mark of all theology. And just as Christ carried his cross, so the Christian has a cross to bear. This cross is, among other aspects, that God is hidden and inaccessible to our natural deductive tools. This demands faith, and, according to Luther, faith can only be faith when the object of faith is hidden. Therefore God has concealed himself. The concealment is an “alien work” that is performed in order to reveal his “proper work”. A theologian of the cross is thus a theologian who speaks of the hidden and crucified God, who is one and the same. Luther characterizes it “flighty thought”, whenever a so-called theologian seeks God anywhere else than in the cross of Christ. In fact, doubts and afflictions are a part of faith to such a degree, that no one has experienced God if not through these, Luther stresses (Loewenich 1976, 17–30; 38–41). Paradoxically these doubts are preconditional for having faith. Loewenich writes: “God hides himself under the appearance of the opposite.” (Loewenich 1976, 50)

Faith and reason

Given that God, as an object of faith, is hidden, one must ask how we might arrive at positive statements concerning living a life of faith in relationship with God. Loewenich picks up on this, and asks: "If the concept of faith can only be defined negatively, how do we escape the danger of religious nihilism?" (Loewenich 1976, 51). He argues, that without positive statements theology cease to be theology. It is, although not exclusively, a matter of proportions and hierarchy. Luther's stance is, that natural man does not have inner qualities that enable him to know God. In order to know God, one must become nothing through cross and suffering. Original sin has corrupted man, therefore only grace can renew and heal him. Understanding of the invisible is possible only where there is faith. It is possible though. The precondition for understanding is revelation. Understanding is, therefore, neither

attained by external senses nor mental ability, but only through faith in the revealed.

Let's take philosophy as an example. Luther was not advocating anti-intellectualism, but his clash with philosophy was due to his position; that in philosophy the secondary had become the primary and vice versa. Luther is quoted for writing the following about faith: "For philosophy always speaks about what is visible and apparent, or at least what is deduced from the apparent, whereas faith is not a matter of appearances nor of things deduced from the apparent. Indeed it is from heaven..." (Loewenich 1976, 60–61). It is in the nature of philosophy and reason to be offended by the reality of God – by the cross. Philosophy insists on dealing with things as they are, instead of dealing with them according to their final purpose. Loewenich writes: "The statements of faith are rooted in supra-logical bases. To reason they appear unreasonable." (Loewenich 1976, 71). The gospel is not simply an addition to our understanding; it is a transformation of everything we find reasonable. In the realm of faith everything is backwards; God is weak, bread and wine becomes the flesh and blood of Jesus, water washes off sin, death becomes a victory, the child is the wise, when I am weak, I am actually strong etc⁶. Again, it is not anti-intellectualism, but an approach that puts reason under advice. Nature can indeed speak of *a god* – but not of *God* as he really is. This is why the cross puts everything to the test, and why reason, experience, contemplation, and philosophy are in themselves insufficient – and even fatal. When viewing man's actual situation all human assumptions are reversed. (Loewenich 1976, 52–75).

Faith and experience

The first step of faith is that of despair and admission of guilt. A total devastation of man's own glory is a precondition for experiencing God. In that way, faith initially experiences God's remoteness to the end of experiencing his nearness and comfort. As we have seen, faith and experience can be mutually exclusive to Luther. However, it is more accurate to say, that faith is what defines meaning in experience. Faith continuously comes to insights, which are absurd to other methods of knowing. Therefore faith and the word is the interpreting key to experience. Lu-

⁶ These examples are borrowed from Leif Andersen's "Kroppen og Ånden", 2015, page 58.

ther's definition of faith is derived from Hebrews 11:1 where it states that faith is about hope in the invisible.

It must be considered a temptation from Satan, whenever man makes judgement on basis of his inner feelings. Faith evolves and teaches man to think eschatologically rather than momentarily. Sometimes, what is at first contrary to experience, only accessible by faith, later turns out to substantiate experience (Loewenich 1976, 77–89).

Faith cannot exclude experience altogether since faith is a subjective reality and not trans-subjective. Luther can even speak of a feeling of God's grace. Luther calls experiences in a Christian life the school of the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, nothing true can be learned. Loewenich boldly writes: "Where there is genuine personal faith, there experience must follow. Experience practically becomes the criterion for faith." (Loewenich 1976, 94). Here Luther opposes those who have made faith a matter of the mind, of reason. When praying, one should experience some of God's love, which is connected to the experience of God's wrath. So, faith is indeed something positive; it produces experience and creates possession. It may take a while before experience manifests, but it will not fail the person who perseveres. This has to do with faith being hope, and that faith looks at things in accordance with their final purpose, and not as they are momentary. Hope is indeed an experience. Another important aspect of faith is that of trust. The subjective element of faith demonstrates itself as trust. In trust, we have the point at which faith and experience intersect. The Holy Spirit teaches us to trust instead of speculating. There is no unbroken experience of faith. On the other hand, there is no faith that is not related to experience. The experience of faith is always in some tension with the natural experience. Loewenich sums it up as follows: "Faith *is* not experience, but it *is experienced*." (Loewenich 1976, 97). Experience flows from faith and flows back into faith. Faith is directed towards the Word, and the Word gives strength to have faith contrary to experience. The experience of God's love is kindled by the word.

When Luther speaks of faith it is always closely linked to Christ. Christ is not merely a subject of faith but is both content and part of faith itself. What more is, Christ is closely linked to the cross. Loewenich writes: "When Luther speaks of Christ, he is thinking of the cross." (Loewenich 1976, 107). This line of thought

must be kept in mind, in order to understand this passage on faith and experience (Loewenich 1976, 93–107).

The two definitions of experience

At this point, it might seem rather paradoxically, that Luther can speak of experience as opposed to faith and other places of experience as closely linked to faith. To understand this, we must take a look at his two definitions of experience. Experience understood as man's natural capability to understand reality is in sharp contrast to faith. To this extent, the contrast between experience and faith is justified. On the other hand, experience can be qualified by faith. Experience is a consequence of faith, not a gateway to faith. This form of experience is in opposition to the idea of "unformed faith." Faith is existential and subjective; since one must be able to say, "I believe" in order to have faith. These two approaches to experience create a delimitation against all empirical causality and against a theology that leaves faith trans-subjective (Loewenich 1976, 107-111).

The Christian life

Loewenich claims that this theology is very practical. Just as God is hidden from our perception of things, so is the Christian life. The cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian belong together. The theologian of the cross is drawn into the event at Golgotha. There is a contrast between perception and reality, not only in the reality of God but also in the life of a Christian. His life is hidden because faith determines his life and faith unites him with the hidden God in the crucified Christ. This assertion should infuse hope into the Christian. For instance, the Christian is righteous, but it does not appear to be so. The hope thus points to a different reality than the one perceptible. That the righteousness of Christ, which becomes the righteousness of the Christian, is stronger than the reality of sin is a hidden reality. This is a concrete application of Luther's theology of the cross. Man sees only flesh and sinfulness, but is, in fact, spirit and sinless. A Christian too is revealed under his contrast.

Furthermore, The Christian life is a life of suffering. Not self-chosen suffering – in that God finds no joy. Rather it is laid onto the Christian life because

Christians are to be like their master: the suffering Christ. Loewenich writes: “Being crucified with Christ takes place in two ways: inwardly through mortification, and outwardly through enmity of the world.” (Loewenich 1976, 121). Theology of the cross is not moralistic, in the sense that you should seek to suffer. It is not about seeking the cross, instead, faith gives us the cross. Seeing the cross as man's way to God is regarded mysticism and rejected by Luther. A theologian of the cross cannot boast of his cross or suffering, but solely of the grace of God. Humility is a part of faith as well as a way of life. The world's enmity is a sign of true gospel because the gospel itself is an offense to people. Thus the Christian suffers in the flesh but glories in the spirit. And also we suffer by renouncing our own glory, honour, pride, and wisdom. Christ wanted his church to be this kind of suffering church. However, the Christian life is also accompanied by gifts of peace and joy. Peace is hidden under the cross, and only visible to faith. Joy is based on God's promise and is eschatological rather than contingent on current events.

Believing the Word of God contrary to our experience is living a life as a theologian of the cross. A theologian of the cross does experience despair, humility, hope, and joy. From this, we have seen that the interpretation of these experiences is unlocked with the cross as its key (Loewenich 1976, 112–28).

Luther's Heidelberg Theses and Exposition on Psalms

Heidelberg Theses

Both McGrath and Loewenich emphasise the matter of Justification in their respective expositions on Luther's theology of the cross. This grasps the fundamental aim of Luther's theology; that it becomes possible to find hope in the cross. Also, they time and again characterize the cross as that, which everything else must be interpreted and understood in relation to. McGrath seems to stay on the crux of the matter, while Loewenich broadens his exposition. Loewenich is a skilled reader of Luther and makes reference to a large variety of Luther's writings, which enables him to include numerous aspects. Reading through Luther's Heidelberg theses, I find that neither McGrath nor Loewenich misrepresents Luther. Though, as we have seen, Loewenich expands the positive element of experience more than McGrath.

When reading the Heidelberg theses it is soon evident, that Luther indeed has nothing but distrust in man's own skills of deduction. His preliminary remarks opens: "Distrusting completely our own wisdom..." (Luther et al. 1957, 39). Theses three and four speak of seemingly good works as actual sin, and seemingly evil works as actual merits. The decisive factor, to Luther, is whether a man has humility. Humility makes every act an act of merit, while pride makes every act an act of sin⁷. The most relevant theses to this paper are 19 and 20⁸. By now it should be clear, that man can only see God from the back, according to Luther. He refers to Isa 45:15, which says: "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself." (Luther et al. 1957, 53). The human nature of Christ, his weakness, and foolishness is what God hides behind. Jesus himself is clear on the matter when he tells Philip; that whoever has seen him has seen the Father. Therefore true knowledge of God is found in the crucified Christ. This we saw plentiful in the writings of Loewenich and McGrath. Then, in thesis 21, Luther writes: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." (Luther et al. 1957, 40). One might get the impression, that Luther carries his argument to the extremes, but to Luther, it has paramount consequences. Luther writes: "He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil." (Luther et al. 1957, 53). Since these are the ramifications of not being a theologian of the cross, it becomes a matter of justification. Truly, the question of justification underlies Luther's entire disputation, just as both McGrath and Loewenich point out. The main message is, that we cannot deduce from our experiences to the reality of God. When doing so, we think that the best we can obtain, the good and the beautiful, must be in continuity with God's reality. Since this is not the case, according to Luther, we will essentially be drawn away from God if we follow this path. This is why Luther in thesis 22 writes: "That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened." (Luther et al. 1957, 40–41). If you do not let your theology originate from the cross, you will not use the law correctly, and consequently,

⁷ This is an important element in Luther's theology, which I cannot expound on in this limited paper. For further reading on this subject read Luther's commentary on Galatians.

⁸ See page 15

you will become proud of your efforts to (seemingly) fulfil God's law. An analogy can be helpful here: It is as the sun. Trying to understand it by looking straight at it will only leave you blinded. Instead, we understand everything by its illumination. So it is with God: We know him indirectly, through his actions in this world, namely through his actions in cross and humiliation (Luther et al. 1957, 39–70).

There are not a lot of positively phrased sentences in Luther's Heidelberg Disputation. The apparent reason for this is, that Luther is defending his position in a direct discussion with his adversaries. Later on in Luther's work, he develops a more positively phrased theology, but always with the essence from the Heidelberg Theses substantiating it.

Exposition on Psalm 2

In Luther's exposition on Psalms 2 and 5, we find a more comprehensive exposition on his theology of the cross. Naturally, it resembles what we found in the writings of McGrath and Loewenich. In this section, I will make an account of Luther's own arguments and positions, while continuously comparing it to McGrath and Loewenich.

The theology of the cross originates from the historical event of Jesus Christ being crucified. Fundamentally, the meaning of this event is incomprehensible to the natural deductive tools of man. The prosperity of Christ is neither carnal nor worldly, but spiritual. Luther argues, that while Christ was suffering, everyone would assume, that he was the lowest of men and the farthest from being a king of all. Consequently, if this is true about the occurrence upon which theology is founded, it naturally brings all experience into question. Luther makes his understanding of the events at Golgotha an axiom for God's entire reality. Therefore faith and hope are necessary in order to understand the works of God. The work of God is always accomplished contrary to all human sense and apprehension, as a hidden path.

While especially McGrath seems to believe it is never accomplishable to see this path of God's, Luther, somewhat surprisingly, says otherwise. Luther does write that man attempt vain things, believing them to be the most firmly established. He also writes that if you are pleased with your own works, it is impossible

to be pleased with the works of God. However, Luther makes the argument, that even though we are changeable and dependent on various factors, while God sits unmoved in heaven, it is possible for man to rise up and reach God as if one was in heaven with him. This is possible through faith and hope. Faith teaches us to understand that God is triumphant on the cross. Loewenich was more inclined to involve this aspect.

As noted earlier, the theology of the cross opposed the thought of justification through works and merits. This is why faith becomes such an important part of Luther's theology. Faith is, according to Luther, the fulfilment of all laws, the righteousness that endures forever and victory over the world and hell. Here we get a glimpse of Luther's pastoral care. He aimed to ease the worried soul, to offer comfort to the person in despair. As we have seen in the exposition on Loewenich, this is the positive concern in Luther's theology of the cross: That even though you do not feel righteous, you are wholly righteous through faith. This is the work of the Word of God; it humbles the proud, comforts the weak and helpless, terrifies the presumptuous, makes the wise fools, and drives out acidity. This we have seen extensively at McGrath and Loewenich; that man must renounce his own will, pride, desire, and reason. Not that he is no longer to have these – instead they are replaced by the will of God, pride in Christ, desires of the Spirit, and a reason transformed and shaped by the cross. It is not merely a matter of thinking in different trains of thought; it is a matter of dying and being born anew. Without this renewal, any attempt to grasp reality is futile. Luther writes: “Das Gefühl sträubt sich stark dawider, die Vernunft hat einen Abscheu dagegen, der Brauch redet dawider, ein Exempel dafür gibt es nicht...” (Luther 1880, 289–290). Sense, reason, and experience resist acknowledging Christ as king, and therefore faith is needed. Faith, however, does not free man from the cross. On the contrary; the cross, the hatred of the world, hunger, thirst, and all evils of this world cannot be avoided. For this is how the King himself was made a fool to the world. And the King and his people are closely connected. This intimate relationship between Christ and a Christian, Loewenich accounts for adequately, while McGrath does not seem to take notice thereof. Faith, Luther argues, enables one to see things for what they are, both in times of prosperity and adversity. For faith unites the soul to the invisible, ineffable, un-

nameable, unimaginable, eternal world of God, and at the same time separates it from all things visible (Luther 1880, 253-265; 273-295).

Exposition on Psalm 5

To some extent, I believe the substance of Luther's theology of the cross has been accounted for by now. Still, I will include Luther's exposition on the fifth psalm, and let this be both an extension and a summary, before engaging the discussion of how the *theologia crucis* can underpin contemporary theology and pastoral care in a Danish Lutheran context. Up until now, I would not go so far as to say that McGrath and Loewenich miss the point of Luther's theology of glory. Far from it. However, Luther's positive concerns are under-represented in their writings on the matter. Indeed, it is no simple project to outline the theology of the cross. An important component is contemplating the two definitions of experience, as they are mentioned above⁹.

Luther speaks of having experienced joy, hope, and God's glory. Certainly, this is possible according to Luther. However, just as patience that is only exercised in prosperity is not patience at all; so the hope that is exercised in merits is no hope at all. The nature of patience is to be exercised only in adversity, and hope only under sin. All our good works are but sins before God, Luther argues. Also, the glory of God must be sought at the cross, never in glorious circumstances in our lives. Christ must first be apprehended as Man before he is apprehended as God: the cross of his humanity must be sought after and known before we can know the glory of his divinity. When we have laid hold of Christ as Man, that will soon bring with it the knowledge of him as God. For a man becomes a theologian by living, or rather, by experiencing death and condemnation: not by mere understanding, reading and speculation. In other words, Luther speaks positively of experience only when it is an experience of sin, despair and God's wrath. This is not the only experience possible, but it is the only real experience, on which we can surely rely. Hence this experience becomes the foundation upon which we can experience joy, hope and God's glory. It is vital that this foundation is forever steadfast, and not merely a

⁹ See page 22

point of departure. Luther asks the question of what we think on our deathbed. Do we hope, that we did good? Then we most certainly did not, and indeed have no hope. If we, on the other hand, recognize, that we have no merits to show for, then and only then, we have a real hope in God. Let's keep in mind, that to Luther pride is the cardinal sin. That is why Luther refers to 1 Cor 3:18 where Paul writes that you must become a fool in order to be wise. Luther expounds on this by writing: "Dieser Ausspruch, sage ich, steht fest, weil solches der Wille im Himmel ist, der sich vorgesetzt hat, durch Thorheit Weise, durch Bosheit Gute, durch Sünde Gerechte, durch Verkehrtheit Rechtschaffene, durch Unverstand Verständige, durch Ketzerei Rechtgläubige, durch Unglauben Christen, durch teuflische Gestalt Gottförmige zu machen." (Luther 1880, 513). What Luther aim at is, that before you can be righteous, a child of God and what else you would like to be, you must first find yourself being a sinner, mad, perverse, of the devil etc. This is truly who you are, and grasping this reality, you become humble, and then you can receive the grace of God. It is not a matter of Luther trying to find the best way to live a Christian life; it is, according to Luther, the only way to do so. This is his positive agenda; that weary souls might find peace in realising that nothing we think, say or do can help us access the reality of God. And this is why Luther in his expositions on Psalms writes: "Allein das Kreuz ist unsere Theologie." (Luther 1880, 478) (Luther 1880, 388-391; 426-519).

Where do we go from here?

Where does this exposition on Luther's theology of the cross leave us? At first glance, it might not look as though we found the positively phrased theology of experience, that we initially set out to discover. What Luther intends to offer is a bulwark against a theology that, in one way or another, keeps one from relying solely on the grace and love of Christ. The *theologia crucis* is closely linked with Luther's sola principles. When contemplating Luther's view on the reliability on subjective experience as a source to theology, his writings on the total depravity of humankind, and his consistent pointing towards Christ as the only truth and way to salvation, it resonates with Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, and Soli Deo Gloria. These five Solas are in some way summed up in the pivot of

the theology of the cross. I find, that these fundamentals are in fact very helpful and worth assenting. Still, we are left with the question of how to address experiences, both religious and otherwise. Luther himself is more concerned with the guiding principle than with particular experiences. One might criticise Luther on this basis; however, Luther never suggested that his theology was complete in every aspect. Luther was very much concerned with experiences as such; the *theologia crucis* is exactly a theology of experience, first and foremost the experience of despair. Lutheran theology can benefit from the foundational principles, and go further than Luther himself did. With the heritage from Luther in mind, Lutheran theologians must always ask “*How does this work and look in our contemporary context?*”

There is precedence in the Lutheran tradition for going beyond what Luther himself expressed through his writings. For instance, it is greatly debated whether Luther had a theology of mission at all. It is difficult, if not impossible, to track down Luther’s view on foreign mission. Obviously, that should not leave the Lutheran tradition unwilling or unobligated to engage missionary work. What I would like to suggest is, that the Danish Lutheran Peoples Church should insist on its Lutheran heritage and at the same time insist on articulating a theology of experience that takes seriously the individuals in their context. The theology of the cross, when understood and used correctly, is, in fact, a theology of experience. It is concerned with the matter of experiencing God, for good or bad; his absence, his presence, his grace, and his anger. To experience God absent is exactly that: an experience. That God is hidden, is not a non-experience but indeed a painful experience of abandonment. How to evaluate and cope with that experience – that is the question. In Alister McGrath’s *A Passion for Truth*, he refers to two classical approaches to this matter. One is to believe that experience unaided provides foundational resource for Christian theology, while the other believes Christian theology to provide an interpretative framework by which experience is to be interpreted. If choosing between these, I find the latter the only passable way. McGrath involves Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck and quotes him for writing: “...the possibility of religious experience is shaped by religious expectation, so that ‘religious experience’ is conceptually derivative, if not vacuous.” (McGrath 1997, 74). This is a bold statement and yet it does seem to offer some truth. When people assume that if

God were real he would X, one might ask them how they came to this conclusion. Lindbeck argues, that experience cannot be used to interpret reality, in that it must itself be interpreted. McGrath argues, that Christian experience does hold theological significance, but this is articulated at the communal, not the individual level (McGrath 1997, 72–75).

At this point, maybe it would be helpful to turn the argument around. If, say, two theologians engaged in a debate over the topic of baptism. One holds the position that through baptism, a person is born anew thus becoming a child of God. To make his argument, this theologian draws on church history, early church councils, and Scripture. His adversary responds to all this by simply stating, that according to his feelings, baptism is nothing more than a symbolic act. Would the former theologian accept this line of reasoning (or the lack of it)? Obviously, this illustration is a bit caricatured, nevertheless, baptism composes a mystery where one must acknowledge what experience cannot substantiate. Luther speaks of the kingdom of God as an inverse kingdom, where man's natural deductive tools are insufficient. I would like to argue, that the natural response to sickness, failure, and pain is to think that I have done something wrong. When believing in a certain god or gods, this line of thought leads you to think, that you have upset the divine, and therefore get what you deserve. The same basic thought is found in Buddhism's theory of karma. All this to say, that if the natural human thought of the link between actions and circumstances is that what goes around, comes around, the theology of the cross offers a significant and even vital corrective.

However, the discrepancy between experience and doctrine is a stumbling block – that we must acknowledge. In a certain way, Luther seems to be insensitive about this aspect. He, provocatively, suggests that one should welcome the hurtful experience of God's absence since this is a crucial premise for knowing God at all. Luther suggesting such a seemingly preposterous response to real agony must not give the impression, that Luther was himself unaware or unaffected of the difficulty associated hereby. Let's keep in mind that Luther himself suffered continuously of, what he calls *anfechtung*. Claiming that something is of vital necessary is by no means saying that it is easily done. There is indeed no naivety to trace in Luther's theology. Christine Helmer points out the importance of theology en-

gaging this difficult relationship between doctrine and experience. She writes: “When doctrine speaks its truth, it speaks of experience. For this is what is at stake in this work and in the fate of doctrine. How do we understand the relationship between experience and knowledge? In particular, how do we understand the relationship between the human experience of God and human knowledge of God?” (Helmer 2014, 7). Luther offers an interpretative framework, as should be adequately expounded on by now. But how should Lutherans today make use of the *theologia crucis* in practice, facing a jumble of experiences, both good and bad? I will now make some concluding remarks, in which I will make a suggestion on how the Danish Lutheran Peoples Church might navigate in this question.

Conclusion

To draw a conclusion by this point is by no means to conclude on Luther’s theology of the cross as such, for that this paper is too limited. Although Loewenich refers to the Heidelberg Disputation as the: “... basic document of the theology of the cross.” (Loewenich 1976, 30), all is not said and done with that. It would demand a considerably larger amount of reading to account fully for Luther's theology of the cross. Also, it would require a far lengthier paper. I consider the paper at hand a contribution, and I believe some fundamental mainstays have been established.

Reasoning, philosophical reflection, and contemplation of created reality cannot unveil who God is. There is a sharp contrast between man’s attempt to know God on his own terms, and God’s terms. It is not a matter of mere knowledge, in fact, Luther writes: “When I became a doctor, I did not yet know that we cannot make satisfaction for our sins.” (McGrath 1985, 119). It is, in other words, possible even to become a doctor in theology without realising the paramount importance of God’s grace. Human capacity to understand is unable to know God directly and must receive a key to understanding God in his reality. The key is Christ since God must be sought where he has chosen to reveal himself, which is exactly in the person Jesus Christ. Luther makes Christ, in the moment of crucifixion, the epicentre of all meaning and understanding. The cross has come to be identified with Christianity. The heart of the Christian faith is summed up in the cross of Jesus Christ, which is also why John 3:16 is the verse regarded the Gospel in a nutshell. The

event on Golgotha teaches us, that we cannot see God directly, and that his reality is seen backwards to us. Golgotha seems to be the final defeat for a religious fanatic; a conclusive loss to superior powers. But in fact, God was conquering the forces of evil and saving humanity through the triumph that the crucifixion was. This is an important insight, and the theology of the cross becomes a code for the inversion that characterizes the kingdom of God, and the way in which we can encounter him.

The theology of the cross is a great comfort for those in despair as well as reassurance for those doubting their salvation. Theology of the cross insists on the fact that your sins are forgiven even though you do not feel it, that God is indeed present when he seems absent, and that there is hope even in the midst of the darkest hours. In this regard, the doctrine becomes life for the one who has got nothing else to cling to. Simultaneously, this theology is a stumbling block to the proud and self-righteous. The cross of Christ helps the Christian maintain a humble spirit, by pointing to the fact that mankind's principal problem is not something you necessarily feel, and not something you can resolve yourself; that we are not at peace with God, and that all our merits combined do not help.

In this way the theology of the cross comes into play on two fronts; on behalf of those thinking they are unworthy and unloved, and against those who consider themselves worthy and loved on account of merits. While this is the fundamental approach, true and sound *theologia crucis* works in the area of tension between faith and experience, between the objective and the subjective. It does not allow experience to dictate theology but it shows solicitude towards and embraces experience. The dogma and experience must be in dialogue, and if indeed the underlying theology is in place, there is no need to fear experiences. Theology of the cross is about believing what you cannot see, feel or understand. However, that does not mean that you are blind, insensitive and dumb. Everything you experience is not God, and God is not everything you experience. In today's spiritualism, there is a tendency to make God everything. Theology of the cross helps maintain a biblical image of God. Still, this specific theology should leave Christians free to experience just as it leaves Christians free from the need of experience.

Jesus was God and did in fact die. Nevertheless, death did not get the final word. Jesus rose from the grave and is alive in heaven today. This is worth remembering and considering, not least in a Lutheran context. Golgotha is not the only place God revealed himself in Christ. What I would like to suggest for the Danish Lutheran Peoples Church, is to speak frankly on the matter of experiences. When the cross is a constant reference point, there is no need to fear experiences of various kinds. It can be compared to the relationship between a man and his son. Say the son did something remarkable and told his father about it. Should the father tell his son how proud he is? Naturally, he does not want his son to think, that he is only proud when the son succeeds. Still, of course, he should tell him that he is proud. In order for the son not to misinterpret his father's pride and satisfaction with him, the father must tell his son that he is proud of him often and under various circumstances. If the Lutheran Church in Denmark is to be relevant it must address the territory of experiences. If it is afraid people might get the wrong idea and end up in a theology of glory, the church simply needs to preach the grace and love of God intensively. I find that the theology of the cross is of great value, but it must not leave us speechless when it comes to experiences. *Theologia crucis* helps answer the important question: *Why do I experience this?* If you experience joy, it is not because you earned it. If you are experiencing discomfort and hopelessness, it is not because God has left or abandoned you.

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