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The Theology of the Cross and Experiencing God

[When Bible passages are quoted, the segments in italics are excluded from public reading for the sake of brevity and clarity. Much of the material in the indented paragraphs is not meant for preaching but further research and information.]

“I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). With these words, **Paul reminded the people in Corinth of his first and only message among them – Jesus Christ and him crucified. Paul kept holding up the cross before them because they kept struggling with its meaning. In their experience, the cross was causing offense but that was precisely God’s intention. Paul wrote to them:**

1 Corinthians 1:18-31: *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*

Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Are you offended at the foolishness of the cross? Most of us would not go that far but maybe – at times – there can be the feeling of embarrassment. It would be so nice to sound reasonably intelligent when we talk to people but – instead – God makes us look foolish by making us tell about Jesus – God who has become human, born of a virgin, God and man at the same time, one with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit but a separate person, a Galilean peasant but Saviour of the world, a king that was a preacher, miracles like walking on water – and especially the cross of Jesus – God died, Jesus rose from the dead, one person atoned for the sin of all, no other way of salvation, the cruelty of divine judgement. Can anyone preach Jesus and him crucified and make the cross plausible to the human mind? The answer is always “no” (according to Paul) because, from the beginning, God set out to destroy the wisdom of the wise and frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent.

This is a humbling experience for the preacher and the listeners. (All glory to God!) **There is no knowledge of God unless God helps us to put our faith in Jesus Christ and him crucified** – unless he opens up to us the meaning of the cross for our salvation.

[Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16: *We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived” – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.]

Some people do not struggle so much with the apparent foolishness of the cross. Their issue is its weakness. How can Jesus be the Saviour when he is suffocating on the cross and bleeding to death? How can the crown of the king be a crown of thorns which makes a mockery of the whole concept? Our natural inclination is that we want something more attractive and impacting than a beaten up human body nailed to a cross – even now among us. The Christian faith has to look good – successful and marketable.

Yet, **Paul disagrees:**

1 Corinthians 2:22-25: *Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.*

Paul did not make it easy for his listeners. When he was in Corinth, he not only preached to them Jesus Christ and him crucified – thereby denying any human expectations of plausible wisdom and power – **he demonstrated the message in his own person because he himself was neither wise** (in his delivery) **nor strong. Listen to his own words:**

1 Corinthians 2:2-4: I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words ... [Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:17: . Christ did . send me ... to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.]

Even today, **we do not really like our preachers to come with great fear and trembling** – (we like them to be confident and cool) – **and we do not really like them to be plain and boring** (have neither wise nor persuasive words) – (we like sermons that grab our attention and imagination with new insights and compelling arguments). **Paul had to defend himself against his converts in Corinth:**

2 Corinthians 11:6: I may indeed be untrained as a speaker ... / 2 Corinthians 10:1: By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” toward you when away!

Paul had resolved to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified because humans keep resisting God who comes in weakness and foolishness. What is your relationship to the cross of Jesus Christ?

Martin Luther – almost like no other – **aligned himself with the apostle Paul and said:** “The cross alone is our theology” (quoted in Gerhard Forde: On Being a Theologian of the Cross, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997, p3). **He further explained and explored that people are always being tempted to be “theologians of glory”** (people that speak about God in terms of human wisdom, power and achievements) **rather than “theologians of the cross”** (people that speak about God in terms of apparent foolishness, weakness and failure) **but you can only be either one or the other and the cross dictates the latter.**

In 1518, **Luther put forward the following theses** (Heidelberg Disputation):

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.
11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.
16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.
17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.
18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.
19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the “invisible” things of God as though they were clearly “perceptible in those things which have actually happened” (Rom. 1:20; cf. 1 Cor 1:21-25),
20. he deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The “law brings the wrath” of God (Rom. 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.
24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.
25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
26. The law says, “do this”, and it is never done. Grace says, “believe in this”, and everything is already done.
28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

These theses sound complex but the following quote (to a large extent) **explains what Luther means:**

This is clear: 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. These are the people whom the Apostle calls “enemies of the cross of Christ” [Phil. 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works. Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through

the cross works are dethroned and the Old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. It is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's.

(Using this quote,) **I draw attention to three key insights of Luther:** 1) "...through the cross works are dethroned and the Old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified." – **The cross not only opposes human wisdom and strength but also human effort** – (good works). [In 1 Corinthians, the apostle Paul challenged human wisdom and power with the apparent foolishness and weakness of the cross but Luther – as Paul in his other writings – (most prominently) challenged human works – the glory and pride of human works – (even good works) – as being opposed to the cross. Luther maintained with the Bible that people like to be proud of their good works but the cross nullifies all human attempts of earning merit before God.] **Human corruption was and is of such magnitude that nothing but Jesus' sacrifice on the cross sufficed for salvation; therefore you must accept salvation as a free gift which contradicts all human boasting:**

Wolfgang Pannenberg: *A Theology of the Cross*, in *Word & World* 8/2 (1988), p163-164: "This is the core of what Luther rejected as *theologia gloriae*, the self-glorification of works righteousness."

Martin Luther: Heidelberg Disputation: Because people do not know the cross and hate it, they necessarily love the opposite, namely, wisdom, glory, power, and so on. Therefore they become increasingly blinded and hardened by such love, for desire cannot be satisfied by the acquisition of those things that it desires ... the love of money grows in proportion to the increase of money itself ... This holds true of all desires ...

Ephesians 2:8-9: For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.

Romans 3:21-27: *But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.* There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. *He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded ...

Galatians 5:2-5: Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. / Galatians 5:11: Brothers and sisters, if I am still preaching circumcision [the good work of performing circumcision], why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been abolished. / Galatians 6:13-14: Not even those who are circumcised keep the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your circumcision in the flesh. May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Galatians 2:20-21: I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

2) "God can be found only in suffering and the cross ..." – **God can only be found in suffering and the cross – first in Jesus' suffering and cross and then our own. First, it was the suffering of Jesus that dethroned human works and achievement** – establishing that righteousness is a free gift of grace – **then, our own suffering dethrones human works and achievements because** – in the words of Luther – "it is impossible for a person not to be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's". (First) **Jesus' suffering and** (then) **our own** – confirming our utter dependence on God – **put a stop to all human self-reliance and self-will before God:**

Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971: The deep truth of Luther's theology of the cross is that it views the cross on Golgotha and the cross which is laid upon us as one and the same.

Martin Luther quoted in Gerhard Forde: *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997, p88: For since the Word of Christ is the Word not in the flesh but in the spirit, it must suppress and cast out the salvation, peace, life and grace of the flesh. When it does this, it appears to the flesh harder and more cruel than iron itself. For whenever a carnal person is touched in a wholesome way by the Word of God, one thing is felt, but another actually happens. Thus it is written [1 Samuel 2:6-7]: "The Lord kills and brings to life; He brings down to hell and raises up; He brings low, He also exalts." Isaiah also beautifully portrays this allegorical working of God when he says [28:21], "He does his work – strange is His deed; and He works His work – alien is His work!" It is as if he were saying: "Although He is the God of life and salvation and this is His proper work, yet, in order to accomplish this, he kills and destroys. These works are alien to Him, but through them He accomplishes His proper work. For He kills our will that His may be established in us. He subdues the flesh and its lusts that the spirit and its desires come to life.

Martin Luther quoted in Gerhard Forde: *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997, p86-7: Other virtues may be perfected by doing; but faith, hope, and love, only by suffering, by suffering I say, that is, by being passive under the divine operation ... The soul is taken hold of [by the pure Word of God] and does not take hold of anything itself; that is, it is stripped of its own garments, of its shoes, of all its possessions, and of all its imaginations, and is taken away by the Word ... into the wilderness ... to invisible things, into the vineyard, and into the marriage chamber. But this leading, this taking away, and this stripping, miserably tortures [the soul]. For it is a hard path to walk in, and a straight and narrow way, to leave all visible things, to be stripped of all natural senses and ideas, and to be led out of all those things to which we have been accustomed; this, indeed, is to die, and to descend into hell.

Martin Luther quoted in Gerhard Forde: *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997, p90: Outwardly ... grace seems to be nothing but wrath, so deeply is it buried under two thick hides or pelts. Our opponents and the world condemn and avoid it like the plague or God's wrath, and our own feeling about it is no different. Peter says truthfully [2 Peter 1:19] that the Word is like a lamp shining in a dark place. Most certainly it is a dark place! God's faithfulness and truth always must first become a great lie before it becomes truth. The world calls this truth heresy. And we too are constantly tempted to believe that God would abandon us and not keep his Word; and in our hearts he begins to become a liar.

In short, God cannot be God unless he first becomes a devil. All that God speaks and does the devil has to speak and do first. And our flesh agrees. Therefore it is actually the Spirit who enlightens and teaches us the Word to believe differently. By the same token the lies of this world cannot become lies without first having become truth. The godless do not go to hell without first having gone to heaven. They do not become the devil's children until they have first been the children of God.

Romans 4:18-21: Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

2 Corinthians 1:5-9: For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ ... We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10: ... Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Hebrews 5:7-10: During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ... / Luke 9:23: Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."

Hebrews 12:7: Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children ...

3) "He who does not know Christ [and him crucified] does not know God hidden in suffering" – **God hides himself in suffering which means that human success** – however you define it – human achievements, wisdom and power – **cannot show you the way to God. Many a time, what looks glitzy and prosperous** – even super-spiritual – **is far removed from God:**

Matthew 7:22-23: Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

1 Corinthians 13:1-3: If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

James G. Kiecker: *Theologia Crucis et Theologia Glorae: The Development of Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Western Michigan University 1994: As far as I can tell, Luther uses the phrase "theology of the cross" for the first time in his *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517-1518). Commenting on Hebrews 12:11 ("For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness"), Luther draws the contrast between discipline as an alien work of God – God sending pain – and a proper work of God – the pain is for our benefit. "Here we find the Theology of the

Cross,” says Luther, because the fruit of righteousness is “hidden” by pain, just as salvation is “hidden” by the cross. The complementary phrase, theology of glory, however, does not yet appear.

Joe Strelan: *Theologia Crucis, Theologia Gloriam*, in *Lutheran Theological Journal*, Vol 23 No3, December 1989, p99: Furthermore, when the theology of the cross speaks of God, it speaks of him as *Deus crucifixus* and *absconditus* (crucified and hidden). The concept of *absconditus sub contrario* is an essential feature of the theology of the cross. God’s righteousness, his glory, his wisdom, his strength, and his salvation are all revealed ‘hidden under their opposites’ – revealed and yet hidden under the opposites: the injustice, the shame, the weakness, the folly, and the condemnation of the cross. ^[1]

Exodus 33:20, along with Isaiah 45:14 and 1 Timothy 6:26, form the Scriptural basis for Luther’s teaching on the hidden God.

If we understand – truly understand – Jesus Christ and him crucified, then we know about the love of God for us – grace – which is undeserved – not dependent on our human wisdom, power and effort – and we know how to be resilient in suffering – not falling away from the faith but clinging to God who is busy deflating our pride. I repeat the three points from Luther:

1. The cross not only opposes human wisdom and strength but also human effort (good works) because nothing but Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross sufficed for salvation.
2. God can only be found (first) in Jesus’ suffering and cross and (then) our own. (First) Jesus’ suffering and (then) our own – confirming our utter dependence on God – put a stop to all human self-reliance and self-will before God.
3. God hides himself in suffering which means that human success (human achievements, wisdom and power) cannot show you the way to God.

Martin Luther had great insight. He understood what Paul wrote in the Bible but there is a (common) misreading of him and the Bible which has proved disastrous to Christians across the denominations. The cross of Jesus became the excuse and justification for preaching salvation without any experience of God. (This is how people argue:) Since Jesus suffered on the cross, suffering and nothing but suffering is our lot as Christians which means that there must be no experience of God – no joy, no communication, no relationship, no power. The word “experience” – especially when it involves any kind of positive emotions (such as joy or being in love with God) – immediately causes suspicions which question the doctrinal soundness of the person. Too much passion or fervour seem unhealthy and unwarranted – (many of us get uncomfortable) – therefore we label and dismiss people as “Schwaermer”, “enthusiasts” or “theologians of glory”. Misreading Luther, some of us say: “The cross alone is our theology and the cross was and is not a nice experience but pain and abandonment.”

What happened to us that we judge experiences of God, instead of expecting them? Luther said that God hides himself in suffering – (in Jesus’ cross and our own suffering) – which clearly identified suffering as God’s hiding place (an alien work), not his true glory and love toward us. The flesh wounds of Jesus on the cross – the jeering crowd – the demonic onslaught (see Luke 22:53) – were not what God ultimately wanted – (the cross was not ever to be a permanent experience of his presence for his people) – but provided an outcome whereby “having disarmed the powers and authorities, Jesus made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

Likewise, **God gave the apostle Paul a “thorn in the flesh” – a painful cross to bear – but the goal was not agony and abandonment – (the goal was not a theology of the cross whereby the cross is the only reality that can ever be experienced) – but ongoing experiences of God’s glory (which included a visit to heaven whether in the body or out of the body he did not know). Paul knew the theology of the cross in his own body and this is what he wrote:**

2 Corinthians 12:7-10: I have received such wonderful revelations from God. So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul’s thorn was sent by God but was not the true nature of God. In Paul’s own words, the thorn was a “messenger from Satan” – dark and demonic – at best God’s hiding place – but it served to keep Paul humble and continue experiences of wonderful revelations from God. For Paul (and we may learn from him), the outcome of the theology of the cross was not only pain (as the normative state of existence) but positive experiences of God.

Luther himself experienced the same as Paul. He suffered many “thorns” of spiritual and physical anguish but they served to keep him humble – they made him despair of his own good works – so that he dared to replace works with faith and thus experienced the grace of God in emotions which he expressed in these words: “I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.”

[His theology of the cross – the entire Reformation of the church in the 16th century – came out of Luther’s faith experiences.]

Luther as quoted in Hans J. Hillerbrand: *Christendom Divided*, Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1971, p29-30: I did not learn my theology all at once. I had to brood and ponder over it with increasing depth. My temptations have led me to my theology, for one learns only by experience. ^[2]

Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings of 1545: I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the

Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would appease Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him.

Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul’s became to me a gate to heaven . . .

In this tower, in which there was a special place for the monks, I once meditated on these words: “The just lives by faith” (Hab. 2:4), and “the righteousness of God” (Rom. 1:17). Then it suddenly came to my mind: If we are to live righteously because of righteousness by faith, and this righteousness of God is intended to save everyone who believes, it follows that righteousness is by faith, and life by righteousness. And my conscience and spirit were lifted up, and I was made certain that it is the righteousness of God which justifies and saves us. And immediately these words became sweet and delightful words to me. These things the Holy Spirit taught me in this tower . . .

Martin Luther’s Interpretation of the Magnificat (1521): Therefore, to God alone belongs that sort of seeing that looks into the depths with their need and misery, and is nigh unto all that are in the depths; as St. Peter says, “God resisteth the proud, but to the humble he giveth grace.” And this is the source of men’s love and praise of God. For no one can praise God without first loving Him. No one can love Him unless He makes Himself known to him in the most lovable and intimate fashion. And He can make Himself known only through those works of His which He reveals in us, and which we feel and experience within ourselves. But where there is this experience, namely, that He is a God who looks into the depths and helps only the poor, despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken, and those who are naught, there a hearty love for Him is born, the heart o’erflows with gladness, and goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God. There the Holy Spirit is present and has taught us in a trice such exceeding great knowledge and gladness through this experience . . .

So much for the occasion of Mary’s canticle, which let us now consider in detail. “My Soul doth Magnify the Lord” These words express the strong ardour and exuberant joy whereby all her mind and life are inwardly exalted in the Spirit. Wherefore she does not say, “I exalt the Lord,” but, “My soul doth exalt Him.” It is as though she said, “My life and all my senses float in the love and praise of God and in lofty pleasures, so that I am no longer mistress of myself; I am exalted, more than I exalt myself, to praise the Lord.” That is the experience of all those through whom the divine sweetness and Spirit are poured; they cannot find words to utter what they feel. For to praise the Lord with gladness is not a work of man; it is rather a joyful suffering, and the work of God alone. It cannot be taught in words, but must be learned in one’s own experience. Even as David says, in Psalm 34:8, “O taste and see that the Lord is sweet: blessed is the man that trusteth in Him.” He puts tasting before seeing, because this sweetness cannot be known unless one has experienced and felt it for oneself; and no one can attain to such experience unless he trusts in God with his whole heart, when he is in the depths and in sore straits. Therefore David makes haste to add, “Blessed is the man that trusteth in God.” Such a one will experience the work of God within himself, and will thus come to feel His sweetness, and thereby attain to all knowledge and understanding . . .

But here we find two kinds of false spirits that cannot sing the Magnificat aright. First, there are those who will not praise Him unless He does well to them; as David says, “He will praise thee when thou shalt do well to him.” These seem indeed to be greatly praising God; but because they are unwilling to suffer oppression and to be in the depths, they can never experience the proper works of God, and therefore can never truly love nor praise Him. The whole world is nowadays filled with praise and service to God, with singing and preaching, with organs and trumpets, and the Magnificat is magnificently sung; but alackaday! that this precious canticle should be rendered by us so utterly without salt or savour. For we sing only when it fares well with us; as soon as it fares ill, we have done with singing and no longer esteem God highly, but suppose He can or will do nothing for us. Then the Magnificat also must languish.

[In times of spiritual and physical anguish, the Bible encourages us not to forget past experiences with God and keep trusting his promises. Remembering is an important biblical concept.]

When we return to our opening Bible passage – Paul’s reminder of his ministry among the people of Corinth – we also learn that a theology of the cross and Christian experience are by no means mutually exclusive. They cannot be. Without any experience, you cannot be a Christian. Here is the entire paragraph from Paul:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5: And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.

Paul preached nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified and – instead of arguing people into believing his message with wise and persuasive words – he gave them an experience of God’s power – a demonstration by the Spirit of God.

2 Corinthians 12:12: I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.

Romans 15:18-19: ... what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

Demonstrations of the Spirit's power – signs, wonders and miracles – **could be misinterpreted or opposed** (as they were even when Jesus performed them, see John 9; 11:45-53) **and they were not always unique** (Mark 13:22; Acts 8:9-11; Revelation 13:13-15) – they did not explain the message of the cross – **but they provided an experience which encouraged the listeners to pay attention to Jesus Christ and him crucified.** (In the ministry of our church, why would we resist working with this Biblical model of experiencing God's power?)

Furthermore, **Paul not only relied on the Holy Spirit for demonstrations of God's power but** (in the same Bible chapter) **also explained that it was the Holy Spirit who made people understand the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. It is always the Holy Spirit who convicts people of the truth and makes them experience the words of God which become meaningful to them** – bring them to faith and trust in Jesus.

1 Corinthians 2:6-16: *We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived" – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"

But we have the mind of Christ.

In short – according to Paul in the Bible and Martin Luther – **the theology of the cross cannot work without the Holy Spirit and the experiences** – (conviction, revelation, power demonstrations) – **which he gives.** [Regin Prenter: Spiritus Creator, trans. John M. Jensen, Philadelphia: Fortress 1953, p111: "Wherever in theology the Holy Spirit is taken seriously into account, we are not dealing with the theology of glory but with the theology of the cross."] Here, **I may finally touch on the deeper reason why even many Lutherans misread the theology of the cross and argue for a Christian life devoid of faith experiences** – (apart from suffering and pain). **My understanding is that the word** – the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified – **has become separated from the Holy Spirit.**

Lutherans insist with the Bible that the word of God and the Spirit of God always work together. You cannot have one without the other. According to the Bible, **the word is the sword of the Spirit** (Ephesians 6:17) **which means that the word is the means for the Spirit to wield power. Right from the beginning, the word of God was spoken into an atmosphere of the Holy Spirit which caused the creation of this world and all of life** – Genesis 1:1-3: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light."

Regin Prenter: The Word and the Spirit, Minneapolis: Augsburg 1965, p1: The Word and the Spirit – these words circumscribe the very heart of the Christian faith ... These two entities, the Word and the Spirit, are connected with an "and," a conjunction which indicates that these two cannot and must not be separated.

The word of God and the Spirit of God always belong together and there are consequences for separating them. If you are only interested in the Holy Spirit – spiritual gifts, signs, wonders & miracles, prophetic visions and healings – **and neglect the word of God as recorded in the Bible** – (if you ignore the written account of people's past experiences with God) – **you become "flaky" and lose your handle on the truth because neither visions nor manifestations of power are sure-fire signs of God's approval. Everything needs to be tested and measured against the standard of the Scriptures. Furthermore, unless there is the preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified, no one will know how to be saved. No one will come to repentance and faith.**

On the other hand, if you are only interested in the word of God but neglect the Holy Spirit, you end up with something that has no life. Without the Holy Spirit and his revelation, the word of God is again at the mercy of what humans think to be wise and plausible. And this is the irony. Even Lutherans cannot maintain a theology of the cross without the Holy Spirit and experiencing God through him because, without the Holy Spirit, the word of Jesus Christ and him crucified becomes mere head-knowledge, institutional teaching and tradition – even a proud heritage – **which** (on its own apart from the Spirit) **is once again a theology of glory** – a proud human construct which does not require any experiences of God.

Regin Prenter: The Word and the Spirit, Minneapolis: Augsburg 1965, p7: If the Bible, understood as a collection of inerrant truths placed at our disposal, is identified with the Word, the Word is no longer inextricably bound to the Spirit who gathers the church of Christ ... p9: The Word is the living Jesus Christ himself. The Bible is the witness of the prophets and apostles, which sheds light upon the regenerating and quickening word of Baptism and the Eucharist. And preaching is the message which with the light of the Bible calls and draws men to Jesus Christ as their Regenerator and Redeemer in Baptism and the Eucharist ...

Regin Prenter: The Word and the Spirit, Minneapolis: Augsburg 1965, p14: We have characterized two tendencies

which are abroad in contemporary theology and church-life which lead to unbiblical thinking and speaking about the Word and the Spirit: Biblicism, which separates the Word from the Spirit, and spiritualism, which separates the Spirit from the Word. Were we to trace the ideological roots of these two tendencies, we would find Lutheran Orthodoxy behind Biblicism and the Reformation Enthusiasts ... behind ... spiritualism ...

Three Foundational Statements

1. The Word has no power without the Spirit.

- Luke 24:45-49: "... repentance and forgiveness will be preached in his name to all nations ... but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."
- Acts 1:4-8: "... Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised ... in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit ... But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; [then] you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
- 2 Timothy 3:5: "... having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them." Zechariah 4:4: "... 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty." 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6: "... our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction ... you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit."

2. The Spirit does nothing without the Word.

- Genesis 1:1-25: "... And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light ... " 2 Peter 3:5: "... by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed ... " Hebrews 1:3: "... sustaining all things by his powerful word ... " John 6:63: "... The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."
- Ephesians 6:17: "... the sword of the Spirit . is the word of God." Revelations 19:11-16: "I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True ... his name is the Word of God ... Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations ... " Hebrews 4:12: "... the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword ... judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Acts 10:44: "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message."
- Isaiah 55:10-11: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."
- Matthew 16:19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." John 20:22-23: "And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'"
- 1 Peter 1:23-25: "... you have been born ... through the living and enduring word of God ... " James 1:18: "God chose to give us birth through the word of truth ... "
- Luke 8:4-15: "... This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God ... But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." Colossians 1:6: "... this gospel is bearing fruit and growing ... " Acts 6:7: "So the word of God spread ... " Acts 12:24: "But the word of God continued to increase and spread." Acts 19:20: "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."
- Titus 1:3: "... he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me ... " Philippians 2:15-16: "... in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life ... "
- Ephesians 5:26: "... cleansing . by the washing with water through the word ... " 1 Timothy 4:5: "... it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."
- 1 Thessalonians 1:13: "... the word of God . is at work in you who believe."
- Timothy 4:1-2: "... in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction."
- Matthew 8:8: "... just say the word and my servant will be healed ... " Matthew 8:16: "... he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick." Mark 7:33-35: "... Jesus put his fingers into the deaf man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, Ephphatha! (which means, 'Be opened!'). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly." Psalm 107:20: "He sent forth his word and healed them ... "

3. The Spirit confirms the Word with power.

- John 10:38: "... even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." John 14:11: "... believe on the evidence of the miracles ..." Acts 2:22: "... listen to this: Jesus ... was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know." John 14:12: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father." 1 Corinthians 4:20: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power."
- Mark 16:20: "Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it." Hebrews 2:3-4: "... This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord ... God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit ..." Acts 4:29-30: "Now Lord, ... enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness by stretching out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." Acts 14:3: "... the Lord ... confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders." Acts 8:6: "When the crowd heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said."
- 1 Corinthians 2:1-5: "... My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power." Romans 15:18-19: "... what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit ... I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." Galatians 3:5: "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"

Charles Finney: Power From God, New Kensington: Whitaker House 1996, p48-49: I find many people trying to grasp with their intellect, and settle as theory, questions of pure experience. They are puzzling themselves by trying to comprehend with the mind what is to be received as a conscious experience through faith.

Charles Finney: Power From God, New Kensington: Whitaker House 1996, p51: Students are pressed almost beyond endurance with study and developing the intellect, while scarcely an hour in a day is given to instruction in Christian experience ... But religion is an experience. It is a consciousness. Personal fellowship with God is the secret of the whole of it ... real heart-union with God ...

Charles Finney: Power From God, New Kensington: Whitaker House 1996, p140: I have met with this erroneous notion of the nature of Christian faith almost everywhere since I was first licensed to preach. Especially in my early ministry I found that great stress was laid on believing 'the articles of faith,' and it was held that faith consisted in believing with an unwavering conviction the doctrines about Christ.

Hence, an acceptance of the doctrines, the doctrines, the DOCTRINES of the Gospel was very much insisted upon as constituting faith. [But] these doctrines I had been brought to accept intellectually and firmly before I was converted. And, when told to believe, I replied that I did believe, and no argument or assertion could convince me that I did not believe the Gospel. And up to the very moment of my conversion I was not and could not be convinced of my error.

At the moment of my conversion, or when I first exercised faith, I saw my ruinous error. I found that faith consisted not in an intellectual conviction that the things affirmed in the Bible about Christ are true, but in the heart's trust in the person of Christ. I learned that God's testimony concerning Christ was designed to lead me to trust Christ, to confide in His person as my Saviour; that to stop short in merely believing about Christ was a fatal mistake and inevitably left me in my sins ...

Charles Finney: Power From God, New Kensington: Whitaker House 1996, p143-145: From personal conversation with hundreds and I may say thousands of Christian people, I have been struck [that] ... they stopped short in the Scriptures ... They read and perhaps search the Scriptures to learn their duty and to learn about Christ. They intellectually believe all that they understand the Scriptures to say about Him; but when Christ is thus commended to their confidence, they do not by an act of personal loving trust in and committal to Him so join their souls to Him as to receive from Him the influx of His life, and light and love. They do not by a simple act of personal loving trust in His person receive the current of His divine life and power into their own souls. They do not thus take hold of His strength and interlock their being with His. In other words, they do not truly believe. Hence, they are not saved ...

You may quote the Bible and say that according to 2 Corinthians 5:7: "We live by faith, not by sight" – but two verses earlier the same Bible passage confirms that we do indeed experience God – 2 Corinthians 5:5: "... God ... has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." There is much that we do not yet understand – there is much that we do not yet see (not by sight) – and there is plenty of frustration in our mortal bodies – there is the cross of discipleship – but – as Christians – we are not without an experience of God. We experience the deposit of the Holy Spirit who is guaranteeing what is to come – Romans 8:14: "... those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God." Romans 8:16: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Galatians 4:6: "... God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' ..." 1 John 4:24: "... this is how we know that Jesus Christ lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us."

I come to a close. If you are caught up in a frame of mind – a theology – which keeps you from experiencing God and experiencing faith which is practical, life-giving and joyful, then reconsider the foundations – Jesus Christ and him crucified. Do not settle for human wisdom, human strength, human pride but humble yourself and listen again to a theology of the cross which is resilient in suffering but breaks through into hope and joy. Let God strip you of everything – if this is what it takes to deflate your proud self – and then (by the Spirit of God) share Luther’s experience: “I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.” Faith is the conviction of a wonderful truth. God is merciful to you. He loves you. He has grace for you.

I sum up the various teaching points:

1. The cross not only opposes human wisdom and strength but also human effort (good works) because nothing but Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross sufficed for salvation.
2. God can only be found (first) in Jesus’ suffering and cross and (then) our own. (First) Jesus’ suffering and (then) our own – confirming our utter dependence on God – put a stop to all human self-reliance and self-will before God.
3. God hides himself in suffering which means that human success (human achievements, wisdom and power) cannot show you the way to God.
4. Misreading the message of the cross, some people make suffering the norm and downplay any other Christian experiences.
5. However, suffering is God’s hiding place, not his true glory and love toward us. The goal of “thorns” in the flesh and crosses are not agony but experiences of wonderful revelations and victory in humble dependence on God.
6. Without any experience, you cannot be a Christian because the preaching of Jesus Christ and him crucified does not come with wise and persuasive words but a demonstration of the Spirit’s power and his work of revelation in our hearts and minds.
7. Whenever Christians downplay experiences of God (and show no need for them), a separation of the word from the Spirit has occurred because there is no need for experiencing God when the word, without the Spirit, becomes mere head-knowledge which gives rise to proud human traditions.

Even this morning, **God speaks to you and his message is Jesus Christ and him crucified. God offered you his Son on a cross because you cannot save yourself. This may sound foolish (and humbling) but it is God’s foolishness and have times of suffering not taught us how little we know and can do? Why not take the risk and trust the message? You will experience God. Have faith in Jesus. Amen.**

[1] James G. Kiecker: *Theologia Crucis et Theologia Glorae*: The philosopher-theologians attempted to discern the invisible things of God, such as “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth” (LW 31:52) by looking at creation. But Paul rightly called such people fools (Romans 1:22). Even if they learned such things about God it did not make them “worthy or wise” (LW 31:52). For “it is not sufficient... to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless [one] recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross” (LW 31:52,53). When Philip wanted to see the invisible Father, Jesus pointed to himself, the humble and soon to be crucified one. Luther concluded that the wisdom “which sees the invisible things of God in works... is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened” (LW 31:53). Focusing on God’s work in creation, the philosopher-theologians found the wrong wisdom. He needed the true wisdom which came from focusing on God’s work through Christ on the cross.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/luther/#SH2d>: Another fundamental aspect of Luther’s theology is his understanding of God. In rejecting much of scholastic thought Luther rejected the scholastic belief in continuity between revelation and perception. Luther notes that revelation must be indirect and concealed. Luther’s theology is based in the Word of God (thus his phrase *sola scriptura* – scripture alone) it is based not in speculation or philosophical principles, but in revelation.

Because of humanity’s fallen condition, one can neither understand the redemptive word nor can one see God face to face. Here Luther’s exposition on number twenty of his *Heidelberg Disputation* is important. It is an allusion to Exodus 33, where Moses seeks to see the Glory of the Lord but instead sees only the backside. No one can see God face to face and live, so God reveals himself on the backside, that is to say, where it seems he should not be. For Luther this meant in the human nature of Christ, in his weakness, his suffering, and his foolishness.

Thus revelation is seen in the suffering of Christ rather than in moral activity or created order and is addressed to faith. The *Deus Absconditus* is actually quite simple. It is a rejection of philosophy as the starting point for theology. Why? Because if one begins with philosophical categories for God one begins with the attributes of God: i.e., omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, impassible, etc. For Luther, it was impossible to begin there and by using syllogisms or other logical means to end up with a God who suffers on the cross on behalf of humanity. It simply does not work. The God revealed in and through the cross is not the God of philosophy but the God of revelation. Only faith can understand and appreciate this, logic and reason – to quote St. Paul become a stumbling block to belief instead of a helpmate.

Paul Avis: Luther’s Theology of the Church, www.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_097_2_Avis.pdf Luther’s view of the church reflects his concept of God. For Luther, God was the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) of Isaiah [Isaiah 45:15], inaccessible in his ultimate mystery, veiled by impenetrable darkness; yet who, in the baby of Bethlehem and the man on the cross, had made himself known to the eyes of faith in a way that was utterly human and down to earth, in terms of material reality – “the flesh”. “He, who would see God, let him come to the crib.” Luther would know no God but him who had been made flesh.

In a strikingly similar way, Luther affirms the paradox of a church that is ultimately a mystery hidden with Christ in God and yet manifests itself on earth, taking the form of sinful humanity and communicating itself in the elemental signs of water, bread and wine. “It is a high, deep hidden thing, the church, that you cannot perceive or see, but must grasp only by faith through baptism, sacrament and word” (WA, 51, p.507).

[2] Laura Welker: *The God Who Hides From His Saints: Luther's Deus Absconditus*, Briercrst Seminary 2006: Luther's mental and emotional duress during his early years is well known, for it was one of the factors that drove him to his Reformation theology. He suffered periodic attacks of terror, which he called *Anfechtungen*, or "spiritual temptations" [David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1995), 1]. In Luther's own words, these terrors were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them. . . . In such a situation, God appears terribly angry, along with all creation. At such a time, there is no flight, no comfort—inside or out—only accusation of everything. . . . All that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but [the soul] does not know where to turn for help. . . . Nor is every corner in the soul not filled with the greatest bitterness, with dread, trembling, and sorrow [Timothy J. Wengert, "'Peace, Peace . . . Cross, Cross': Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering" *Theology Today* 59 (Summer, 2002), 195, quoting Luther, *LW* 31:129-130].

During his monastic years, the misery of these terrors caused Luther to practice extreme asceticism in order to pacify this God of wrath and darkness [E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation From a New Perspective*, (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 150ff]. Yet while Luther's comprehension of the gospel of grace and faith removed the need for such discipline and offered an intellectual assurance of salvation, the startling thing is that Luther continued to experience these dreadful depressions for the rest of his life [Steinmetz, *Luther in Context*, 1-2]. Luther's friend and fellow Reformer Philip Melancthon often watched him retreat to his room under a terror of God so great that he was often at the point of death [ibid., 1]. In these times Luther still believed the withdrawn, wrathful person he experienced was God, but God now hidden "under the form of the worst devil" [Carter Lindberg, ed., *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002), 59; *LW* 7:7 (1545); cf. 6:259 (1543); 47:209 (1543)].

Along with spiritual anguish, Martin Luther was no stranger to physical suffering. He witnessed the Black Death decimate Wittenberg in the late 1520s and again in 1542 [Ronald Rittgers, "The Reformation of Suffering" *Crux* 38:4 (Winter, 2002): 17]. His extreme physical discipline during his monastic years so crippled his health that he suffered the rest of his life, with a severe gall bladder attack in 1537 [Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 580]. The premature death of three of his children in 1528, 1542, and 1546 nearly shattered his faith [ibid., 599; Rittgers, "The Reformation of Suffering," 17]. Finally, Luther experienced persecution from the papists for much of his life. After his excommunication at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was threatened with death and hidden at Wartburg castle, where he had his most severe *Anfechtungen* [Hillerbrand, *Christendom Divided*, 29-30]. Though Luther was not imprisoned or martyred like some of his fellow Reformationists, his freedom was tenuous and society around him tumultuous [Hillerbrand, *The Reformation*, 377]. His sermon on suffering in 1530 and his commentary on Genesis in 1542 make mention of persecution from papists and the threat of invasion from the Turks, and address the fears of Luther and his followers that God had hidden himself and abandoned them [*LW* 51:203 (1530); 6:146 (1542)]. It is during the midst of these trials, from the mid-1530s until Luther's death in 1546, that his theology of the hidden God moves almost exclusively from a theology of an incomprehensible God and an incarnate God to a God who hides himself from the believer in both senses and suffering.