

Theologia Infirmittatis Dei: On Being a Theologian of the Right Kind of Glory

The vast majority of scholarly periodical articles are quite ephemeral; of their few initial readers, a tiny fraction will submit published reviews, and even these will have forgotten much of their contents in a matter of weeks. But among those brief theological works which American Lutherans have produced in recent times, one stands far above all others in enjoying re-quotation and recommendation almost fifty years after its initial composition: Heino Kadai's article concerning "Luther's Theology of the Cross," which was originally part of a collection entitled Accents in Luther's Theology.¹ Its author, late professor of church history at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana (prior to 1976, Springfield, Illinois), was posthumously honored by the re-publication of this work in his school's official theological journal.² Just recently, in a seemingly unrelated online discussion of the role of women in the church, it was suggested by a nationally prominent Lutheran deaconess that ideas promoted in Kadai's work might provide the key for resolving this divisive issue.³

Much of Kadai's initial research involved a reasonably uncontroversial examination of the role of crosses in Christian artwork and architecture.⁴ Far more important, however, was his assessment of whether the concept known as theologia crucis is in fact a valid lens through which the Scriptures should be read, especially in view of the apparent lack of this idea in the theology of the ancient church and the absence of this phrase in the later writings of Luther himself.

¹ Accents in Luther's Theology: Essays in Commemoration of the 450th Anniversary of the Reformation, Heino O. Kadai, ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967). Kadai's essay, which concludes the collection, is on pp. 230-272.

² Heino O. Kadai, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," Concordia Theological Quarterly, vol. 63, no. 3 (July 1999), pp. 169-204. All subsequent citations of Kadai's work will be from this source.

³ Marie Meyer, comment on "A Call for Discussion," ALPB Forum Online, reply #185, August 24, 2015, which concluded, "Is my repeated suggestion of beginning the discussion of man and woman with radical Lutheran theology such as presented by Kadai in *Accents of Luther Theology* [sic] ... and other recognized [sic] Luther scholars so radical that it falls on deaf ears?"

⁴ Kadai, CTQ, pp. 171-175.

“Cross Focused” Theology in Relation to Luther's Later Writings

Prior to the publication of the first official summaries of the Reformation faith (the two catechisms of Martin Luther in 1529, and the Augsburg Confession edited by Philipp Melanchthon in 1530), Luther's writings featured repeated references to the notion that Jesus' crucifixion should play a central role in Christian theology. Kadai cited one of these from an especially celebrated work of this period, On the Bondage of the Will (1525): “We teach nothing save Christ crucified.”⁵ The original source for Luther's “theology of the cross,” the “Theses for the Heidelberg Disputation” (1518), received even more extensive quotation, most significantly theses 20 and 21:

He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.⁶

Kadai correctly noted that Moses' beholding of the Lord's back rather than his face (Ex. 33:17-23) is an excellent illustration of the principle, widely attested throughout Scripture, that God consistently works to benefit mankind through seemingly small, weak, and uncredentialed means.⁷ Other even more familiar examples would include David's victory over Goliath (1 Sam. 17:50), the “still small voice” heard by Elijah on Horeb (1 Kgs. 19:12 KJV), and the miracles of Jesus performed in private on behalf of anonymous recipients (such as Jairus' daughter, Mark 5:37-43). These and many similar events are well summarized by the apostle Paul's quote of the Lord's admonition that “power is completed in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). But in labeling what should have thus been called “the principle of divine weakness” as “the theology of the cross,” Luther introduced into this concept a level of negativity foreign to its biblical presentation, for many

⁵ Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, eds. (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), p. 107, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, p. 169. The misreading of 1 Cor. 2:2 as “I determined to *teach* nothing *among all the churches of the saints* except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is ubiquitous among modern Lutherans.

⁶ Luther's Works (American Edition), vol. 31:40, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, pp. 178-179.

⁷ Kadai, CTQ, p. 179. See also pp. 191-192, where he cited Luther's Works, vol. 8:74, as evidence that Luther himself utilized Exodus 33 to this effect.

instances of the hiddenness of divine power in Scripture have nothing to do with “suffering and the cross.” For example, Abraham and David weren't experiencing anything comparable to crosses when God chose these men of modest stature to be the earthly administrators of his work (Gen. 12:1-3; 1 Sam. 16:10-13). The use of such ordinary substances as water (Mark 1:8), olive oil (Mark 6:13), and bread and wine (Mark 14:22-25) as sacramental and miraculous instruments in the New Testament is similarly unrelated to any idea of suffering. Indeed, the contrast in the Lord's revelation to Moses in the Exodus 33 text was not between glory and the cross, but between two different kinds of glory.

Kadai concurred with Gerhard Ebeling that “Luther in his later work did not use the phrase theologia crucis frequently – quite the opposite is true,”⁸ yet he maintained that Luther continued to employ the concept so titled without significant amendment to the end of his life. Kadai's defense of this assessment must be regarded as incomplete. He offered no explanation for why Luther should have subsequently abandoned this phrase, and appears to have simply assumed that references to the cross could be interpolated into such statements as “Take Christ from the Scriptures – and what more will you find in them?”⁹ Nevertheless, in his extensive examination of Luther's commentary on the Magnificat, written in 1521, and Luther's lectures on Genesis, begun in 1535, specifically his commentary on the Joseph narrative in Genesis 45, Kadai provided evidence of Luther's consistent tendency to exaggerate the negativity of weak and humble circumstances in the lives of the biblical saints.

With regard to the commentary on the Magnificat, Kadai asserted that Luther's “theologia crucis underlay the whole exposition.”¹⁰ Indeed, Luther augmented Mary's references to humility (Luke 1:48, 52) and hunger (Luke 1:53) with such phrases as “worthless, despised, wretched, and dying” and “despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken.”¹¹ Unfortunately, Kadai failed to question whether this sort of alteration was valid. The virgin Mary in fact was experiencing no suffering or cross in Luke 1, nor does her canticle contain any reference to such concepts as being despised or forsaken. Humility is a very different category than suffering, and being hungry is hardly to be equated with the agonies of crucifixion.

Kadai also assumed that “theology of the cross” could be equated with the

⁸ Kadai, CTQ, pp. 183-184, based on Gerhard Ebeling, Luther: Einführung in sein Denken (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964), p. 259.

⁹ Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 71, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, p. 169.

¹⁰ Kadai, CTQ, p. 184.

¹¹ Luther's Works, vol. 21:299 and 21:300, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, p. 185.

phrase “theology of the Gospel”¹² from Luther's lectures on Genesis. Luther apparently thought that Joseph's enslavement in Egypt could be described as an occasion when God “conducts Himself as a tyrant and judge who wants to torture and destroy us,”¹³ but the actual text of Genesis contains no evidence that Joseph himself had ever transferred the blame for the sins of his brothers or Potiphar's wife onto God. The casual reader might not even notice that the specific chapter of Genesis which occasioned such comments of Luther, as when he claimed that in his dealings with men God frequently “offers Himself to us as the God of wrath, death, and hell,”¹⁴ did not in fact portray any suffering on Joseph's part, but rather his reception of glory at the Pharaoh's right hand (Gen. 45:8-9) and his sharing of that glory with his repentant brothers (Gen. 45:10-11).

It must be conceded that Kadai for the most part has correctly reproduced the thought of Luther on the subject of God's hiddenness. The defects in his presentation remain the failure to criticize Luther's fusing of hiddenness and humility with suffering and the cross, and to consider the possibility that Luther, by his later abandonment of the phrase “theology of the cross,” already himself perceived that his earlier analysis of this subject might be inadequate. In any case, Kadai has not made a convincing case that modern Christians are well advised to regard “Luther's theology of the cross” as a helpful insight, much less a foundational principle for theology and daily life.

“Cross Focused” Theology in Relation to Pre-Reformation Approaches

In his previously noted assessment of Christian artwork, Kadai connected the apparent lack of emphasis on the cross prior to the fourth century to “the theology of the period,” which he regarded as defective. After summarizing 20th century Jesuit historian Jean Daniélou's opinion that “early Christian theology saw in the symbolism of the cross the expression of Christ's irresistible power and divine efficacy,”¹⁵ Kadai concluded,

The lowly, suffering Jesus of the Passion story simply did not fit into the scheme of patristic Christology. The Greek Fathers were more impressed by

¹² Luther's Works, vol. 8:30, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, p. 169.

¹³ Luther's Works, vol. 8:4-5, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, pp. 190-191.

¹⁴ Luther's Works, vol. 8:31, as cited by Kadai, CTQ, p. 192.

¹⁵ Kadai, CTQ, p. 172, based on Jean Daniélou and Henri Marrou, The First Six Hundred Years, vol. I of The Christian Centuries (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 78-79.

the doctrine of the Incarnation than the Vicarious Atonement.¹⁶

This critique would suggest that the earliest Christian theologians did not have a correct understanding of the person and work of Christ or the nature of the Gospel, and that even the Nicene Creed's connection of "our salvation" to the fact that Christ "was made man" rather than simply "was crucified" is at best an inadequate presentation of the subject. Indeed, after quoting Irenaeus of Lyons in affirming that Christ became "what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself,"¹⁷ Kadai approved the verdict of Hermann Sasse that the ancient church's emphasis on the incarnation rather than the cross was misplaced, and even intimated that this constitutes an instance of the very "theology of glory" which Luther disparaged:

Here the doctrine of the cross is contained in the doctrine of Incarnation, but it has lost its independent status. For the ancient church as well as the later Eastern church the reality of the cross tended to become hidden in the glory of Christmas and Easter. The cross was outshone by the divine glory of Christ incarnate and the risen Lord.¹⁸

A major factor in this analysis is the failure to notice the radical difference between the hidden glory of the manger and empty tomb and the worldly glory which alone is disparaged in Scripture (most famously, that of the world's kingdoms, Luke 4:5-6).

Kadai concluded his assessment of the early church with the accusation that its allegedly faulty emphasis on the incarnation was the result of Pelagianism:

The lack of a truly biblical understanding of the serious nature of sin helped prevent the early and the Byzantine churches from reaching the full significance of the cross. Thus they remained short of a true theologia crucis.¹⁹

It is unfortunate that Kadai did not consider that the reverse might be the case,

¹⁶ Kadai, CTQ, p. 172.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, Against Heresies, preface to book V, in vol. I of The Ante-Nicene Fathers, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 526.

¹⁸ Kadai, CTQ, p. 172, based on Hermann Sasse, "Theologia crucis," Briefe an lutherische Pastoren, no. 18 (April 15, 1951), p. 3.

¹⁹ Kadai, CTQ, p. 173.

namely, that it was rather the unbiblical exaggeration of the nature of sin in the subsequent Middle Ages which spawned such distortions of Christianity as the penance and purgatory system of Roman Catholicism and the “sinful nature” anthropology of Calvinism and modern Lutheranism.²⁰ Indeed, Kadai again invoked Sasse, who “contends that theologia crucis belongs to the Western church”²¹ and approved Anselm of Canterbury’s medieval innovation of the “vicarious satisfaction” theory of atonement²² as “the only doctrine of the Middle Ages which eventually found general assent,”²³ resulting in Kadai’s conclusion that “Anselm made a lasting contribution to the theology of the cross.”²⁴ This observation is especially remarkable in view of the fact that no evidence is provided that Luther ever employed the phrase “theology of the cross” in connection with any discussion of atonement theories. The phrase in the Heidelberg Disputation theses solely named an epistemological rather than a soteriological concept, how God reveals himself to believers rather than how God saves sinners.

“Cross Focused” Theology in Relation to Other Christian Doctrines

The two basic errors of “the theology of the cross,” the medieval exaggeration of Christ’s death over his incarnation and Luther’s own exaggeration of sin and suffering over any hope of success in this life, leave no aspect of Christianity unaffected. Kadai rightly noted, though of course in praise rather than rebuke, “Not to recognize the implications of theologia crucis in the several aspects of his theology is to a large extent to miss what makes Luther’s theology Lutheran.”²⁵ It comes as no surprise that the modern Lutheran truncation of the Gospel as the

²⁰ Even though FC SD I:44 (Tappert, p. 516) rebuked the notion that human nature is essentially sinful, many modern Lutherans have embraced this error, even to the point of attempting to rehabilitate its original perpetrator, Matthias Flacius. See Oliver K. Olson, Matthias Flacius and the Survival of Luther’s Reform (Minneapolis: Lutheran Press, 2011).

²¹ Kadai, CTQ, p. 173, based on Sasse, “Theologia crucis,” p. 4.

²² Anselm presumed that the statement, “it would be fitting for God to forgive sins by mercy alone, without any payment of man’s debt,” is false. He later reasoned that, because of this debt’s enormity, only a “God-Man” could make such a payment. See “Why God Became Man,” in A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham (New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 120 and 151.

²³ Sasse, “Theologia crucis,” p. 5.

²⁴ Kadai, CTQ, p. 176.

²⁵ Kadai, CTQ, p. 200.

forgiveness of sins alone,²⁶ with all other benefits postponed until an afterlife, should have been thought of by Kadai as both compatible with Luther's theology and a correct presentation of Christian theology:

A Christian ... knows that, through the gospel of forgiveness, hell is closed, heaven opened, faith bolstered, and consolation made to sound sweeter than ever. This is as far as a Christian can go in this life. In eternity God will pour Himself out completely on His children. But meanwhile only a glimpse of His real face is visible in His promises. This to Luther was the theology of the gospel.²⁷

This contrasts radically with the many scriptural accounts of saints receiving no message of forgiveness at all, and not merely promises of future outpourings of blessing, but actual experiences of glory, however muted. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Joshua, Hannah, Samuel, Elisha, Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea – which of these portray a need for “the forgiveness of sins”? Which of their stories are rightly viewed through a lens of “suffering and the cross”? Even those who suffered significant worldly injustice (Abel, Elijah, Daniel, John the Baptist, Stephen) needed and received no forgiveness for their actions, and they displayed glory already in this life in addition to great but nevertheless brief tragedies. Johann Gerhard, widely regarded as the greatest post-Reformation Lutheran theologian, was apparently following Luther's theology of the cross when he asserted, even after repeatedly claiming to be a believer, “I dare not compare myself to any of Thy saints, nor even to any repentant sinner, unless perchance to the penitent thief upon the cross.”²⁸ When Christians do the opposite, in other words, when they cease turning away from the mirror of the true Gospel (Jas. 1:23-25) and instead see themselves reflected in the hidden glory of the saints and their transfigured, crucified, and resurrected Lord, the correct pattern for their faith and life will have finally been established.

Michael R. Totten
Beheading of John the Baptist, 2015

²⁶ Hermann Sasse, Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), p. 119.

²⁷ Kadai, CTQ, pp. 193-194.

²⁸ Johann Gerhard, Sacred Meditations, C. W. Heisler, trans. (Decatur, Illinois: Repristination Press, 1998), p. 60.