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## SUFFERING, CREATION, AND LUTHER'S *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS*

DANIEL L. BRUNNER

Since 1995 I have taught at a Wesleyan-Holiness, Quaker university, and yet I am a prenatal Lutheran. Despite my birthright claims to all things Lutheran, what keeps me in the fold, more than anything else, is Martin Luther's theology of the cross, *theologia crucis*. Since I first encountered it in seminary I have been captured by the idea of God's concealed self-revelation, of our Western fixation on a theology of glory, and of unearthing God in suffering, weakness, and foolishness. At the same time I am convinced that the world's ecological crisis is indeed the next "great work" facing humanity, demanding that Christians confront ecotheological issues we have had the privilege to ignore for decades.<sup>1</sup>

At the outset we must acknowledge that Luther's ecological legacy—in spite of the anachronism of calling it such—is at best "ambiguous." Like other reformers he was gripped by "soteriological-anthropocentric themes"; it would be unfair to expect otherwise.<sup>2</sup> Yet, many scholars, including Lutheran and non-Lutheran, women and men, feminist and Minjung, are discovering a resource for ecotheology in *theologia crucis*.<sup>3</sup> Beyond scholarship, though, I am motivated personally. One of our former students, someone who committed hours to helping craft the Christian Earthkeeping program at our seminary, decided on leaving seminary to go to Mozambique to live and work alongside the poor, instead of pursuing doctoral studies. In a recent email he said:

I struggle for the poor and forgotten here in Mozambique. I have spent the last days with people dying from famine due to climate change. Some days I feel that I have chosen wrongly [by not going into academics]. I stand with the poor, but the world could care less. Money goes to the places with the most people dying. Since we only have hundreds dying we do not count. We have no voice.<sup>4</sup>

Nathan knows the theology of the cross; he has studied it; he is living it.

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Walther von Loewenich wrote, “For Luther the cross is not only the subject of theology; it is the distinctive mark of all theology.”<sup>5</sup> Luther himself declared: *Crux sola est nostra theologia*, or “the cross alone is our theology.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, as Mary Solberg emphasizes, “[T] here is a kind of restlessness in Luther’s theology.”<sup>7</sup> Centuries before Kierkegaard, Luther was an existentialist, someone whose writing defies systematization because it arose primarily out of his lived experience. That is its wonder and its hell. Our goal then is not to schematize Luther, but to draw ecotheological ramifications from three of the 28 theses in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518.<sup>8</sup> In this early, groundbreaking defense at an Augustinian monastery, Luther presents the heartbeat of *theologia crucis*.

## A THEOLOGY OF REALITY

First, the theology of the cross is a theology of reality. In Thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation Luther states: “A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose own life was an exposition on *theologia crucis*, was only too aware of how evil could “masquerade” as good and “appear in the form of light, good deeds, historical necessity, [or] social justice.”<sup>10</sup>

Scientists and climatologists, ethicists and humanitarians, poets and artists, the marginalized and the Earth itself are all pleading with the developed world to see reality, to see what actually is. In the words of Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, we in the minority (first) world have become “uncreators,” destroying the ecosystems of this planet and “building a soul-shattering gap between the rich and the impoverished.”<sup>11</sup> The World Meteorological Organization warns that humanity is “conducting an unintended, uncontrolled, globally pervasive experiment,” by which “Earth’s atmosphere is being changed at an unprecedented rate.”<sup>12</sup> Bill McKibben calls global warming “the deepest problem that human beings have ever faced.”<sup>13</sup>

The “reality” is that we, the economically privileged, are disproportionately responsible for climate change, from which we disproportionately benefit and are disproportionately protected, and from which the underprivileged disproportionately suffer. The ecocrisis and worldwide economic inequality are inseparably connected. Methodist Bishop Bernardino Mandlate of Mozambique,

when speaking of the debt of impoverished nations, declared, "African children die so that North American children may overeat."<sup>14</sup>

Luther once stated, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ."<sup>15</sup> What might it mean, then, to confess Christ in the midst of our ecological and economic tragedy, that place where the world and the devil are at this moment attacking? It can only start by entering reality, by fighting against the denial of our own participation in the sinful structures of our world.<sup>16</sup> By resisting denial, we move beyond numbness only to confront the disillusionment and pain that inevitably result from coming to know how things actually are.<sup>17</sup> It opens the door to grief and lament. Facing reality begins to break down detachment. We experience Creation's groaning, and are driven to the cross. In his *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer summarized a theology of reality: "What matters is *participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today*, and doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God."<sup>18</sup>

## A THEOLOGY OF DESCENT

Secondly, *theologia crucis* is a theology of descent. Luther makes this proposal in Thesis 20: "One deserves to be called a theologian...who comprehends the visible and the 'back' of God [*posteriora Dei*] seen through suffering and the cross."<sup>19</sup> The perspective that the Christian life is about leaving this world and climbing a ladder is a dominant theme, if not *the* dominant theme, in the history of Christian spirituality. Paul Santmire calls it a "metaphor of ascent."<sup>20</sup> Luther, however, in his cross theology polemicizes against any dualistic separation of the spiritual from the material and disavows "the great chain of being."<sup>21</sup> He stresses that in the Incarnation God descended the ladder to this Earth.<sup>22</sup> The fullness of God's divinity is embodied in the humanity of Jesus.<sup>23</sup>

Luther insisted that the finite carries the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*), that the transcendent is wholly immanent. His is an incarnational theology of descent, earthbound and bodily. Rasmussen states that Luther is "boldly pan-*en*-theistic," citing this passage from Luther:

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For how can reason tolerate it that the Divine majesty is so small that it can be substantially present in a grain, on a grain, over a grain, through a grain, within and without, and that, although it is a single Majesty, it nevertheless is entirely in each grain separately, no matter how immeasurable numerous these grains may be?<sup>24</sup>

This theme is often overlooked in Luther, that God became incarnate as *both* a human being *and* a created being. Elsewhere, he wrote that the power of God “must be essentially present at all places, even in the tiniest leaf.”<sup>25</sup> Korean theologian Paul Chung states that we need to revitalize Luther’s doctrine of ubiquity, so contentious in the sixteenth century, to cope with the ecological crisis.<sup>26</sup> Luther wrote, “God is substantially present everywhere, in and through all creatures, in all their part and places, so that the world is full of God and He fills all, but without His being encompassed and surrounded by it.”<sup>27</sup> The transcendent is indeed immanent.

Much more controversial is Luther’s conviction that a theology of the cross unavoidably involved suffering, that “the ‘back’ of God [is] seen through suffering and the cross.” Luther underscored *Deus absconditus*, that God was hidden in suffering. This preoccupation with the necessity of suffering—that being a Christian is to *have* to suffer—has caused numerous feminists to reject the whole idea of the theology of the cross, since it seemingly fails to recognize the systemic nature of sin.<sup>28</sup> Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel remarked: “a religion that glorifies suffering will always find someone to suffer.”<sup>29</sup> Luther indeed seemed fixated on the psychological suffering of *Anfechtungen*, to the exclusion of structural oppression, as illustrated in his response to the peasant revolt. Yet, many feminists and ecotheologians alike argue that the answer is not to reject all discourse about suffering. Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung remarks, “Asian women cannot define humanity apart from their suffering.”<sup>30</sup> She emphasizes that to be human is both to suffer and to resist oppression that causes suffering, although she acknowledges that trying to find meaning in suffering is thorny, because it “can be both a seed for liberation and an opium for...oppression.”<sup>31</sup>

Larry Rasmussen observes that not all suffering is negative, because some suffering is part of what it means to be finite and to struggle as creatures in the process of becoming. The cross, however, opposes any disintegrative suffering “that negates life and destroys the realization of creation.”<sup>32</sup> The cross, rooted in reality, neither justifies

suffering nor denies it. But where the cross “finds suffering caused by the culture of death, it willingly enters into it for the sake of life. ... [R]edeeming the planet...means going to the places of suffering to find God and God's power there.”<sup>33</sup>

## A THEOLOGY OF ENGAGED HOPE

Finally, a theology of the cross is a theology of engaged hope. Luther's last thesis says, “God's Love does not find, but creates, that which is lovable to it. Human Love comes into being through that which is lovable to it.”<sup>34</sup> Here, at the end of his defense, Luther lifts up hope rooted in God's love. This resurrection hope is not to be found in eschatological escapism; it arises out of clear-eyed reality and incarnational descent.

Luther wrote in explanation of Thesis 28, “Therefore sinners are beautiful because they are loved; they are not loved because they are beautiful.”<sup>35</sup> God is not *primarily* a receiver of love, but a giver of a love that creates love. It is, in the words of Tuomo Mannermaa, “a characteristic of God to create something out of nothing.”<sup>36</sup> It is the work of God to engage that which is wrecked by sin, both personal and structural, and then to create that which is loved and good and beautiful. Of course, we do see God's presence in Creation's beauty: the world is indeed “charged with the grandeur of God.”<sup>37</sup> But what do we do with pain and degradation? How are we to understand the ‘suffering’ of rainforests and mountaintops as they surrender to the bulldozers of human greed? It is precisely here that Luther's theology of the cross speaks boldly. When the Creation—human or other-than-human—suffers any kind of degradation, God suffers. God enters the negation of suffering, and in suffering we meet God. Douglas John Hall affirms that Luther's *theologia crucis* “is not the good news of *deliverance from* the experience of negation so much as it is the permission and command to enter into that experience with hope.”<sup>38</sup>

Luther's theology of the cross speaks to an engaged hope that arises out of love. Rasmussen stresses that “only those who love the earth fiercely, *in* its distress, will effect whatever redemption it might know.”<sup>39</sup> This fierce love knows that God is present—and we also are to be present—in a Creation that is often “blighted and disgraced,” because if we were “present only in a redeeming way to creation's beauty and not in its plunder and rape, then broken creation would

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never be healed.”<sup>40</sup> This love calls us as human beings to solidarity with everyone and everything suffering from exclusion and marginalization. When Bonhoeffer was faced with the rise of fascism and anti-Semitism in 1932, when the world was suffering, he wrote these words: “The hour in which we pray today for God’s kingdom is the hour of the most profound solidarity with the world, an hour of clenched teeth and trembling fists.”<sup>41</sup>

Martin Luther’s theology of cross challenges us to face daringly into the reality of the Earth’s crisis. It reminds us of Jesus whose incarnate descent immersed him in the wonder and suffering of humanity and Creation. And it invites us to an engaged hope that loves fiercely all that God loves fiercely, in solidarity and even in suffering. In the smallest of responsive action is the hope of Creation’s restoration and renewal. Luther said that divinity could be present in a grain. Chung Hyun Kyung cites a poem from an anonymous Indian woman who, in her famine stricken area, also encounters Jesus Christ in the grain that makes her gruel:

Every noon at twelve  
In the blazing heat  
God comes to me  
in the form of  
Two hundred grams of gruel.

I know Him in every grain  
I taste Him in every lick.  
I commune with Him as I gulp  
For He keeps me alive, with  
Two hundred grams of gruel.

I wait till next noon  
and now know He’d come:  
I can hope to live one day more  
For you made God to come to me as  
Two hundred grams of gruel.

I know now that God loves me—  
Not until you made it possible.  
Now I know what you’re speaking about  
For God so loves this world  
That He gives His beloved Son  
Every noon through You.<sup>42</sup>

ENDNOTES

1. See Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).
2. H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1985), 132f.
3. See, for example, Paul S. Chung, "Discovering the Relevance of Martin Luther for Asian Theology," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 44, no.1 (Spring 2005), 38-49; Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in our Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003); Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "A Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators'" in *Cross Examinations*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 181-195; Larry Rasmussen, "Returning to Our Senses: The Theology of the Cross as a Theology for Eco-Justice" in *After Nature's Revolt*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1992), 40-56.
4. Email. Used by permission.
5. Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1976), 18.
6. *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883-), 5, 176, 32-33, hereafter *WA*, cited in Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 68.
7. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge*, 13.
8. Rasmussen, "Returning to Our Senses," 41, notes that to apply *theologia crucis* to eco-justice and the ecological crisis is also to respond to the challenge that James Cone, *For My People* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1984), 182, issued to Lutheran churches "to extend Luther's theology of the cross to society."
9. Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," trans. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther's Works*, hereafter *LW* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1957), 31:53.
10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Lisa E. Dahill, Isabel Best, Reinhard Krauss, and Nancy Lukens, ed. John W. de Grucy (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 38.
11. Moe-Lobeda, "A Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators'," 183.
12. Statement by World Meteorological Organization, United Nations Environmental Programme, and Environment Canada at "The Changing Atmosphere: Implications for Global Security" conference, Toronto, Canada, June 1988, cited in Moe-Lobeda, "A Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators'," 183.
13. Bill McKibben, "Do the Math" Seminar, Portland, Oregon, November 8, 2012.
14. Bernardino Mandlate, in a presentation to the United Nations PrepCom for the World Summit on Social Development Plus Ten, New York, February 1999, cited in Moe-Lobeda, "A Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators'," 184.
15. Martin Luther cited in Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), vi.
16. Moe-Lobeda, "A Theology of the Cross for the 'Uncreators'," 186f.
17. Mary M. Solberg, "All That Matters: What an Epistemology of the Cross Is Good For," in *Cross Examinations*, 150.
18. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Kraus, Douglas W. Stott, and Charles C. West, ed. Clifford Green (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 55.

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19. Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:52. The translation used here is from Tuomo Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, trans. and ed., Kirsi I. Stjerna (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 28. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1985), 148, translates *posteriora Dei* as "rearward parts of God." Both McGrath's and Mannermaa's translations are better than Harold J. Grimm's "manifest things of God" (*LW* 31:51).
20. Santmire, *The Travail of Nature*, 18f.
21. Rasmussen, "Returning to Our Senses," 189n22.
22. Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1972), 8.
23. Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 282.
24. Luther, *WA* 32.134.34-136.36, cited in Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 273.
25. Luther, "That These Words of Christ, 'This is My Body,' etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics," trans. Robert H. Fischer, *LW* 37:57.
26. Paul S. Chung, "Discovering the Relevance of Martin Luther for Asian Theology," 44.
27. Luther, *WA*, 23: 134. 34-23. 136.36, cited in Paul S. Chung, "Discovering the Relevance of Martin Luther for Asian Theology," 44.
28. Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 112f.
29. Cited in Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*, 128.
30. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 39.
31. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 54.
32. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 289.
33. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 290.
34. Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:57. The translation used here is from Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, 1, and his translator.
35. Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," *LW* 31:57. The translation used here is from Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, 3, and his translator.
36. Mannermaa, *Two Kinds of Love*, 51.
37. Gerald Manley Hopkins, *God's Grandeur and Other Poems* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1995), 15.
38. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976), 123.
39. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 304.
40. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 287f.
41. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932-1933*, trans. Isabel Best, David Higgins, and Douglas W. Stott, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 269; cf. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, 304.
42. Anonymous, "From Jaini Bi—With Love," in *Voices of Women* (Singapore: Asian Christian Women's Conference, 1978), 11, cited in Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 72f.