

Luther's "Theology of the Cross"

In the previous lesson I described how Luther came to a firm conviction of the authority of Scripture alone. He stated that dramatically at the council of Worms when he said, "My conscience is held captive to the Word of God." Luther made another important discovery, which I will explain. Before I do that, however, let us join in prayer. Luther made many helpful statements about prayer, but the prayer I will use is from Luther's colleague, Philip Melancthon. He was the author of the Augsburg Confession, which I will also talk about today. Let us pray together.

"Almighty and Holy Spirit, the comforter, pure, living, true, illumine, govern, sanctify me, and confirm my heart and mind in the faith and in all genuine consolation. Preserve and rule over me so that, dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, I may behold the Lord and praise Him with a joyful spirit and in union with all the heavenly church. Amen."

Martin Luther wrote, "By the one solid rock we call the doctrine of justification by faith alone, we mean that we are redeemed from sin, death and the devil, and are made partakers of life eternal, not by self-help but by outside help, namely by the work of the only begotten Son of God, Jesus Christ alone." In the previous lesson I described Luther's commitment to Scripture alone—*sola Scriptura*. In this quotation, Luther speaks of faith alone—*sola fide*—which in Luther's mind was the same as grace alone—*sola gratia*. He also talked about all of it coming by the work of Christ alone—*sola Christus*. Someone has characterized Luther as the great theologian of reduction. He disregards many things and focuses on the essential points: Scripture, faith, grace, and Christ.

It took Luther a long time, however, to arrive at that understanding of what the Christian religion is all about. Luther's search for that true understanding of the Gospel focused for quite a while on only one text. It was a text that puzzled, troubled, and agitated Luther for years. The text was Romans 1:17, which says, "For in it [that is, in the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed." Luther repeatedly considered that verse, which was written by Paul. He thought that it meant that, in the Gospel, God's righteousness—meaning, God's righteous requirement—was revealed, which told him what he needed to do. That would make the Gospel the same thing as the law. The Gospel would be what God insists on in our lives.

Luther had of course grown up in the Catholic faith and he had been told all his life, "Do the best you can, and God will see you through." That is a rather popular way that Catholic theology was summarized, even by Catholics in the sixteenth century. "Do the best that is in you," would be what a priest would tell a young man like Luther who was trying to get into heaven. The thought was, you do your part and God will do His part. "Your part," of course, was to do what the church told you to do. Luther tried to do that, but he never felt he knew when he had done his best. He would ask questions like if I am to do the best I can, how much do I need to do? How can I be sure that I have done all I need to do?

There were several crises in Luther's life as he came to a true understanding of Romans 1:17. The first was in a thunderstorm. Luther was walking along in the German countryside when a great storm broke out. He was returning home from his first term at law school. Luther had wanted to be a lawyer. Actually, Luther's father had wanted him to be a lawyer. It was in 1505, when Luther was 21, and he was on his way home from studying law that a tremendous thunderstorm broke out. Being terrified of the storm, Luther said, "Saint Anne, help me. I will become a monk." Saint Anne was the patron saint of miners, and Luther's father was a miner, so Saint Anne was the family saint. In moments of great need

Luther and his family would call upon Saint Anne. As Roland Bainton said in the film, *Where Luther Walked*, “And she did. And he did.” So Luther became a monk.

Luther became a monk; it was his attempt to do the best that he could. In Roman Catholic understanding, there were two levels of Christian living. There was the ordinary level at which most people in the world lived. That is where Luther would have been if he went into law. There was also a higher level called the “religious” level, which was for those who committed themselves more seriously to the search for salvation. That level was lived out at the monastery. Luther became a monk in order to try to find salvation. He became a very good monk. He tried to make the system work. Luther said once, “If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I.” Whatever Luther was told to do, he did it and he did more. He was supposed to confess, and he did confess, but he confessed for hours. Then he would remember something later and he would go back and wake up his confessor, saying, “I have something else to confess.” He did that so much that he wore out his confessor, who said, “Go out and do something really bad, like kill your father, and then come and confess that.” Luther was not satisfied with that view of things. If one was supposed to confess, then one should confess everything. One should not only confess murder, but also anger and those very thoughts that are in our minds and hearts.

The second crisis in Luther’s life on his search for heaven occurred when he was ordained as a priest. It happened that he was supposed to officiate at his first Mass. Luther had a breakdown during the Mass. It was time for the elevation of the host. Luther was supposed to say the words “*hoc est corpus meum*,” which means, “this is my body,” and which was the moment when the bread was supposed to turn into the actual body of Christ, and Luther almost dropped the bread. Luther felt like fleeing from the church. He was overwhelmed by what he was doing. Luther was not only nervous, as anybody might be nervous at their first Mass, but he was also frightened by God. God was not the answer for Luther. It was almost as though God was the problem. Today people experience the problem of the absence of God. God does not seem to be here, to be with them. For Luther, however, he experienced the problem of the presence of God. God was too close, too frightening, and too demanding. Luther wanted to flee from God’s terrifying nearness and His impossible requirements. Sometime later Luther said to a friend, who was trying to help him, “I do not love God. I hate God.” Saying that only made him feel worse, because he had added blasphemy to his other sins.

Gradually Luther began to read Romans 1:17 differently. He became a teacher at the University of Wittenberg. He lectured on Scripture. Between 1513 and 1517 he taught on the books of Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. As he studied the Scripture while preparing for his lectures, he struggled with the question of what Paul meant when he said, “In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.” Luther’s answer to that question did not come in the monastery, nor the confessional, but rather in his study. It came before his open Bible as he prepared to lecture on the Scripture. There in that study Luther tells us, with troubled conscience he “beat importunately upon Paul at that place [Romans 1:17], most ardently desiring to know what Saint Paul wanted.” He really wanted to know what God wanted. As we read Luther’s writings from that time, one historian described them this way: “His writings are like the sky in springtime, filled with clouds but through which the sun shines from time to time.”

Finally, the third and greatest crisis of Luther’s religious life is called “the tower experience.” The tower was the study room in the former Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg where Luther lived. In that room the light finally dawned for Luther. He realized that “the righteousness of God revealed in the Gospel” is not the righteousness that God requires, but rather the righteousness that God gives. Salvation is not an achievement. It is a gift. Salvation is not what we are able to do. It is what God provides for us, by grace

alone, through faith alone. Luther said, “Thereupon I felt that I had been born again and entered paradise through wide-open doors.”

Luther thought about that truth for a long time. He wrote about it. He preached about it. He lived it out. It was his life from that time forward. The whole face of Scripture appeared different to him. He said, “As much as I had previously hated the expression ‘righteousness of God,’ I now loved it and treasured it as that righteousness through which we are made righteous.

Luther changed the language of theology in that experience. In the Roman Catholic scholastic method, the language was “if you do this, then you will receive that.” In Luther’s understanding of the Gospel, it became “because you have received this, therefore you will do that.” Kurt Aland, a German historian, wrote, “The entire world broke apart because of an exegetical discovery.” Luther learned how to understand Romans 1:17, and everything then changed.

In his lectures on Galatians, Luther wrote, “There is a clear and present danger that the devil may take away from us the pure doctrine of faith and may substitute for it the doctrines of works and of human traditions. Those who try to obtain God’s favor by doing good works are like the dry earth that tries to produce rain.” Rain comes from the sky, from above. Just as grace comes from God, so the foundation of Luther’s theology is justification by faith alone. For Luther, that meant that everything comes from God.

The foundation of Luther’s theology is God’s grace. That is the one main point in Luther’s theology, and everything else is just different ways of saying that. There is also a center, or focus, to the theology of Luther that is important for us to notice. It is what theology calls “the theology of the cross.” In one of his writings, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, he compared the theology that he had been taught in the schools, the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages, with the theology that he finally learned to love and appreciate from his study of the Bible. He said, “It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good, to recognize God in His glory and majesty unless he recognizes Him in the humility and shame of the cross.”

The theology of glory, to Luther, was the scholastic system. It wanted to climb up to heaven and get into the secrets of God and answer all the questions that could possibly be asked. It wanted to pry into the very essence of God. Luther said, “That theology which seeks for God in His glory and majesty is to be replaced by a theology of the cross, which is satisfied with knowing God as He has given Himself to us in His shame and humiliation.” The scholastic theology, the theology of glory, was speculative, philosophical, and proud. It was like Philip, in John 14, asking, “Show us the Father.” In the place of that, Luther wanted a theology of the cross in which the shame and humility of the cross was the focus of his theology. Luther wanted a theology that was Christ-centered, biblical, humble. Remember that Jesus said to Philip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” Luther said that should satisfy us. Luther’s theology moved out of the realm of philosophical, speculative theology into the realm of biblical, Christ-centered, cross-centered theology that is willing to take that place beneath the cross of Jesus.

Luther also had a particular theological method. Grace was the foundation. Christ and the cross were the center and focus. Luther describes in one of his writings, taken from Psalm 119, the correct way of studying theology. For Luther there were three points. First was prayer. The place of the theologian is on his or her knees—beginning with prayer, continuing with prayer, and ending with prayer. Then second was study and meditation, which is the hard work of understanding what is in Scripture, thinking about it and reflecting on it. We can concede those two points. We must pray and we must work in order to be

good students of the Bible and good theologians. Luther's third point was very important to him, and I also think it is essential to good theology. His third point was testing, *tentatio* in Latin, *anfechtung* in German. What Luther meant by that was that everything that happens to us teaches us to be a good theologian. All the doubts, turmoil, pangs, terror, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation that invade our lives help us to exegete the Bible. They help us to understand what God is saying. It is those experiences that enable us to become real theologians. Luther's famous saying was, "It is living, dying, and even being condemned that makes a theologian, not reading, speculating, and understanding." He said, "It is no wonder David was such a good theologian because of all he went through. He suffered so much that he could write the psalms."

Luther did not write a systematic theology like John Calvin did. His theology is found in all of his writings, in his many sermons, in his treatises, and in the various documents he produced in response to problems or issues that arose during the Reformation. His theology is found in his greatly beloved *Small Catechism*, which he wrote for the common people in order to instruct them in the essentials of the Christian faith. His theology also appears in the Augsburg Confession of 1530. Luther did not write the Augsburg Confession. It was rather Philip Melancthon, Luther's close friend and associate, who wrote it and condensed Luther's theology into that most important of the Lutheran doctrinal standards.

That point will allow me to transition to talking about Melancthon, Luther's colleague at Wittenberg. Melancthon was a scholarly teacher. He was almost the epitome of an academic scholar. He became professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg when he was 21. He spent the rest of his career teaching there. He was not a priest or a minister. He was never ordained. He had not been a monk. He was a layman. He came alongside of Luther and assisted Luther in the work of the German Reformation.

Whereas Luther was boisterous, Melancthon was very irenic. He was the opposite of Luther in temperament. Luther recognized that, saying, "I am rough and boisterous, stormy and altogether warlike. Philip came along softly and gently." Luther also said, "I have my work to do, which is to remove stumps and stones and cut away thistles and thorns and clear the wild forest. But Philip comes along sowing and watering with joy, according to the gifts, which God has abundantly bestowed upon him." It was a wonderful partnership between the older man and the younger man, as each saw the gifts that God had given to the other, even though those gifts were quite different. Melancthon's irenic character was demonstrated in that he was able to maintain a friendship with Erasmus even after the great clash with Luther. Melancthon did not talk about that much, at least when Luther was around, but he still admired Erasmus. He was also a close friend with John Calvin. Luther worried about that too. Yet Melancthon was able to reach out to the humanist and the Calvinist and still maintain a warm relationship with his beloved Martin Luther.

Melancthon had a timid and fearful personality. He was often worrying that things were going to go wrong. He worried that the pope or emperor was going to do something. Luther tried to bolster him and bring a little more confidence to Melancthon. Melancthon was often worried that he was not going to do things just right. One day Luther said, "The trouble with you is that you do not sin enough." That was when Luther said, "Sin boldly." You have to understand that Luther does not always mean things in exactly the way he says them. By telling Melancthon to "sin boldly" he meant that his friend should relax more and enjoy the grace of God. He was saying something like, "When you sin you can ask for forgiveness and be forgiven." That might sound like an antinomian view, and some people believe that can be traced in Lutheran theology. As we learn more about Lutheran history we will have to assess that more later on in the course. I do not think Luther was interested in having Melancthon sin. He was interested in having Melancthon trust God more fully and not be so uptight about everything. If there was any theologian who was not uptight it was Martin Luther.

Melanchthon was, however, a skillful theologian. Luther recognized that. Luther wrote to Staupitz in 1519, “Philip’s answers are miracles. If Christ deign, he will make many Luthers and a most powerful enemy of scholastic theology, for he knows both their folly and Christ’s rock.” The first Protestant systematic theology came from the pen of Philip Melanchthon. The *Loci Communes* was written in 1521. The title means “The Common Places” or it can be translated “Basic Themes.” Melanchthon was 24 when he produced that work. Luther was ecstatic about it. He said, “It should be included in the canon.” Luther had a somewhat problematic view about the canon. He was not sure that the Epistle of James belonged in there, but he thought that perhaps the *Loci Communes* could qualify. Luther was again exaggerating. He later said, “No one will boast that Philip is superior or equal to Paul. It is enough that he is next to Paul.” One of the reasons Luther liked Philip’s work so much is that it was Luther’s own theology that had been compressed very skillfully by Melanchthon. Melanchthon later altered his *Loci Communes*. He continued revising it through the years, and eventually some significant changes took place that I will describe.

In 1530 the Augsburg Confession was drawn up by Melanchthon, presented to the Emperor Charles V, and signed by Lutheran leaders such as the Elector John of Saxony, called John the Constant. The church historian Philip Schaff described the Augsburg Confession as “the most churchly, the most Catholic, and the most conservative creed of Protestantism.”

There were two directions in which Melanchthon’s theology shifted throughout his life. On one level he shifted toward Erasmus. On another level he shifted toward Calvin. It is difficult to imagine someone moving in both of those directions at the same time, because they are somewhat opposite. Yet Melanchthon was able to do so. In the 1530s he began to deemphasize the strict monergism of Luther—grace alone and faith alone. Melanchthon developed a synergistic theology in which the human will, with the Word and the Spirit, is the cause of salvation. God does draw us, but he draws those who are willing. Melanchthon also began to distance himself from the doctrine of predestination, which had been so clearly taught by Luther in *The Bondage of the Will*. Melanchthon said, “The cause must be in man that Saul is cast away and David accepted.” That shift produced major controversy in later Lutheran theology, and it finally led to *The Book of Concord*, which I will describe in a later lesson.

As Melanchthon moved toward Erasmus in the doctrine of the will, he moved toward Calvin in the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Melanchthon could say, “Christ is not present for the sake of the bread but for the sake of man.” That is not necessarily an anti-Lutheran concept, but people began to be suspicious that Melanchthon was really a crypto-Calvinist on that point. There were probably good grounds for that suspicion.

Luther died in 1546. Melanchthon lived another 14 years. Those were years of bitter theological controversy in the Lutheran Reformation. Most of the controversy swirled around Melanchthon, who had taken Luther’s mantle. On the evening of April 19, 1560, Melanchthon, who was then 63, went to be with the Lord. Two days before that he had asked that friends take him into his study. He could not walk, so he had to be carried. He was put in a bed in the study, and there he spent some time looking at all of his books, the wonderful books that he had loved and studied throughout his life. Then he asked for a piece of paper. His friends brought him some paper. With trembling fingers he wrote on it the reasons why he was glad to depart his life and go to be with God. On one side he wrote, “You will be done with sin and you will be free from trouble and vexations and from the fury of the theologians.” He had made many theological enemies. He thought that if he could get to heaven then he would be rid of the theologians. On the other side of the paper he continued writing, “You shall come into the light. You shall see God. You shall behold the Son of God. You shall learn the secret mysteries, which in this life

you cannot understand—why we are created as we are, and what is the character of the union of the two natures of Christ.” Melanchthon once said that every day for 14 years he had thought about how to understand what Chalcedon teaches about Christ being one person in two natures.

It has been asked what happened to the Augsburg Confession when it was presented to the emperor. The emperor received it, but he hoped that the Lutherans could be suppressed. Charles V was constantly trying to pacify the Lutherans in order to get their support. The Ottoman Turks would have been more of a threat if the empire began to break up, so it was important to the emperor to keep it together. Keeping the empire together meant pacifying the Lutherans, who made up a third to a half of the Holy Roman Empire at that time. So politically, he tried to play both sides. He would have preferred to suppress the Lutherans and be done with them. Occasionally, when he thought he could, he would move toward suppression.

Another question that arises is where the power of the Roman Catholic Church came from, which made these issues so important. If these issues were being raised today, they would not be very important on the world scene. They would not make the headlines. In the sixteenth century, however, these were very important issues. The reason they were so important is that religion, spiritual things, eternal things, and matters of heaven and hell were the things that were the most central part of culture. Everybody was concerned about them. It was not until the Enlightenment that a different outlook became common. In the sixteenth century, there might have been a few people who did not believe in God, but they never said so. Nobody wanted to confess that anything was more important than the question of how to be right with God. We do not have any issue that is as important to our culture today as the religious question was to those of the sixteenth century. The sixteenth century was a time when religion was the determining factor in everything—how the state is organized, how the church is run, how culture is viewed, or anything else. The Roman Catholic Church was the church that stood for all of that. There was not another church. From the early days of the Roman Catholic Church through the medieval period, the power of the Roman Catholic Church had been increasing. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church had lost something. The questions were still being asked, but the answers that were provided by the church were increasingly unsatisfactory.

The question of why Melanchthon moved away from Luther’s theology is a difficult one to answer. Melanchthon was a thinker, a scholar, and he had that irenic character. He could see good in Erasmus. I also see good in Erasmus. So, when I lecture on Erasmus, I try to point out those good things. I do not go along with Melanchthon’s interpretation of what is good in Erasmus. For Luther, since he viewed Erasmus as being wrong about the most important thing, Erasmus was wrong about everything.

In the other direction, Melanchthon may have been drawn to Calvin as a fellow younger man with whom he was compatible personally. Calvin never met Luther. It was probably fortunate that they did not meet. Although, while Luther quite disliked Zwingli, he had the feeling that Calvin might not have been so bad. When Calvin and Melanchthon corresponded and met, however, they liked each other. There was something about the two of them, in the way they thought, that allowed them to be compatible. They were both careful and precise. They wanted to get everything right. Luther was always willing to simply say things as bluntly as he could and let the results follow as they may. Along with personality and scholarship, Melanchthon may have been drawn to Calvin as someone with whom he could join in the struggle to understand the question, if salvation is all of God, do we not do anything? That is the question that continually arises throughout the history of the doctrine of grace.

Luther died before most of Melanchthon’s changes in view, which may have been fortunate. If he had been alive, who knows what may have happened. Luther did try to bolster Melanchthon. Luther told him

to be stronger, to not give way, and to stand firm. Luther wrote letters to encourage Melanchthon along those lines. So Melanchthon did have that help from Luther for a while. Luther probably did not know the full extent of Melanchthon's changes in view. In his letters to Luther, Calvin was very respectful to him, calling him "my father in God" and saying that we owe everything to Luther. Yet sometimes Melanchthon would intercept those letters and not allow Luther to see them. On one occasion, Calvin wrote a letter to Luther and later asked Melanchthon how it was received. Melanchthon told Calvin that Luther never received it because Luther was in such a foul mood when it arrived that Melanchthon thought Luther would go into a rage if he received a letter from Geneva. That shows that Melanchthon was able to hide things that would trouble Luther.

Another common question is how Luther responded to the third use of the law. Technically, Luther did not recognize a third use of the law. He did not want the law to come in. The law to Luther was always bad, because he defined it that way. The law signified salvation by works, the way of the monastery. Gospel and law were always separate for Luther and never related in any positive way. Yet his *Small Catechism* had a fine section on the Ten Commandments. Luther also wrote on the importance of Christian obedience. He constantly insisted that people must obey God. He knew that Christian obedience could be called "law," but he did not want to call it "law" because he thought it would bring works in through the back door. In order to keep that door closed, he did not use the word "law." He rather talked about obedience. The way he usually phrased it was, because we have been redeemed, therefore we will obey God, out of gratitude and out of a loving heart. The law is in the background there, and he does not say to ignore the law. He will not say, however, that the law now serves as a guide and requirement for the Christian, which is the third use of the law.

A final question about Melanchthon is whether he tried to heal the breach with Rome. He did try repeatedly. He even began to get Calvin interested at one time. There were colloquies and other meetings seeking that end. Of all the Protestants, Melanchthon is the one who yearned most for healing the breach with Rome. On one occasion, when Melanchthon was negotiating with the Romans, Luther wrote him a letter, saying, "Play the man." Luther wanted him to stand up and not give anything away. There were times when Melanchthon almost gave it away.

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God shall stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).