

Lutheran Worship Reflects the Theology of the Cross, not the Theology of Glory

It is this truth that all of God's glory for our salvation is hidden in the cross and all that we have to bring Him is our sin and guilt that makes the liturgy so eternally relevant, so rich, so comforting. For in it we despair, since we have nothing good to bring to God as a contribution to our salvation. And in it we rejoice because God gives us everything in the cross by which He won our forgiveness.

A theology of glory is that which imagines that salvation is tied to outward greatness and success or even to outward holiness and virtue. And that is at the heart and core of Luther's anger against the Roman church, that it was drowning in a theology of glory. The works of monks and nuns looked so glorious and holy on the outside. There they were, a collection of people, dressed in drab, under the yoke of self-imposed poverty, celibacy, and obedience. They spent their whole lives in prayer, some locked away from the world completely behind their cloister walls. And with all of that they imagined (and monastic vows to this day assert the same!) that they had chosen a life closest to perfection. They claimed that their vows were of at least as much value as Baptism. They declared that not only would they help to save themselves by their works but that they even had merits left over to help save others. That Jesus never asked anyone to do such things slowed them down not a bit. That the Scriptures condemn and damn such self-righteousness likewise hindered them not in the least.

And then there was the pope himself. He called himself then and calls himself to this day the vicar of Christ on earth and the successor of St. Peter. He is considered and considers himself so close to the heart of God that he alone can interpret the Scriptures. Yes, he can even proclaim doctrines not in the Bible and doctrines contrary to the clear words of the Bible. What could be more glorious, more holy looking than that! Never mind the fact that God has made it clear that His Word alone is sufficient for all doctrine.

All of it, Luther declares, is the devil's spawn, the opposite of the gospel. For all of it turns our eyes away from Christ and His lowliness to man and his imagined glory. It robs Christ of His glory as the only Saviour. It therefore destroys the Christian's only source of hope and comfort; for apart from Christ and His Word all hope and comfort is only a devilish delusion, unsure and insecure. To this day Catholicism has not rid itself of that theology of glory. With crosses everywhere and a crucifix at every turn, the priest at mass nevertheless dares to declare that he is repeating in an unbloody way the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. And the priest has been made worthy to offer such a sacrifice by his holy celibacy and his anointing from the pope or his minions. How horrible! Even the sufferings of the sick and disabled are praised as works which complete, or at the very least participate in, the work of Christ that saves. How monstrous!

Neither is the worship on the opposite side of the theological error spectrum any better, the worship that is designed merely to appeal to the senses – “whoopee worship.” The highly emotional praise song that focuses on God's might and power, the emotion-laden sermon that whips up the crowd to bliss-filled hallelujahs may sound like a heaven on earth. But where is the cross? Whether it is the noise of modern-day tongue speakers, or the drama of a “miracle service” or entertainment central with a cross placed somewhere up front, they all have the one thing in common: They turn people away from the confession of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) or that of the tax collector smiting on his breast in the temple (Luke 18:9-14). They turn the audience away from despair in all that we are or hope to be. They instead titillate the senses with the amusing. They challenge the soul with the trite and the trivial. They encourage a salvation that begins in man's feelings and ends with his own obedience to the law.

It is a worship that misses the depth of our sin and guilt. And missing the totality of our need, people miss as well the totality of the solution to that need in the richness of God's grace in the cross of Christ. It is a theology of glory. It is as much to be abhorred and shunned as its Roman cousin. The joy of the liturgy is the joy of hearing that sin has been forgiven, all of it, in the hidden mercy of the One who reveals Himself in the Word of grace and pardon. It is the joy of the one who sees that his greatest, his only real need, is for relief from the suffering of guilt and death that only Christ could give at the cross. In the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther says:

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... 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 destroyed 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* [emphasis added]. (Luther's Works, vol. 31., p. 53.)