

# Whither Glory?

## *Martin Luther's Theologia Crucis*

Martin Luther's theology of the cross has proved to be fertile ground for creative theological reflection in recent years. It has been used to address a variety of contexts and issues, while the inversions central to it have been mobilized to challenge hierarchy and power imbalances. Indeed, part of the creative appeal of the *theologia crucis* rests in its capacity as a doctrinal nexus. Included within any articulation of a theology of the cross are formulations of the nature of God, humanity, faith, suffering, ethics, and revelation. In this chapter, I will lay out the basic contours of Luther's *theologia crucis* in order to bring to light the theological and ethical stakes in the competing theological interpretations of this aspect of Luther's thought. To do this, I will first review some key terms and concepts in Luther's thought more generally before turning to several specific texts, most importantly the Heidelberg Disputation and "On the Bondage of the Will," where Luther puts forth different aspects that fall under the umbrella term of *theologia crucis*. From this historical backdrop it will then be possible to understand the theological tensions stemming from Luther's different writings and the tactics employed by contemporary theologians who are engaging Luther to address these tensions.

I would suggest that the best way to understand the issue that Luther was tackling in what is known as his theology of the cross is the question of where to find God's glory. In his early searching, I will argue, he was keenly aware of the lack of discernable divine glory in the world. His insight at this time was that divine glory is not the same as typical human understandings of glory, where the term describes amassing strength and hierarchical power; rather, divine glory is expressed through being with those suffering and in need. Thus his formulation of a theology of the cross in the Heidelberg Disputation,

the articulation most often intended when his *theologia crucis* is referenced, is a critique of human pretensions to glory and a presentation of an alternate view of how to recognize divine glory. In “On the Bondage of the Will,” meanwhile, “glory” takes on a different, more eschatological, meaning. Here he uses the term to denote a space beyond time where apparent tensions within the divine are resolved. In this, “glory” serves as a way for him to throw up his hands and evade difficult questions raised by his insight about the darkness of God’s hiddenness. Indeed, his talk of divine glory at this later time employs a logic of fulfillment in a way that foreshadows a pattern we will see in later theologians to move glory out of this world. To get at Luther’s later intuitions about the darkness of the hidden God, let us first look at his experience of being impossibly disconnected from God, and thus left longing for a taste of God’s glory.

#### AN EXPERIENCE OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

Before we can turn to talk of a theology of the cross, we must first dwell for a moment in Luther’s experience of suffering, which he calls *Anfechtung* in German and *tentatio* in Latin. It is the despair found in this experience that sets up Luther’s theological moves. This is not to say that he necessarily put it first chronologically, as for Luther *Anfechtung* cannot be overcome in this life but, rather, haunts each of us each day. Instead, in both his theological exposition and his own life *Anfechtung* marks the descriptive starting point. Indeed, Luther’s life and his theology cannot be easily separated. As venerable Luther scholar Gerhard Ebeling has noted, “[It] is simply a fact that the study of Luther’s theology involves us to a greater degree than in the case of almost any other theologian with his person.”<sup>1</sup> His description and experience of spiritual despair in the face of a God who appears as wrathful mark the underpinning of his theological approach.

*Anfechtung* is an infamously difficult word to render into English. It has been variously translated as “temptation,” “trial,” “affliction,” “tribulation,” and “suffering”; yet each of these translations only develops one facet of the term.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps better understood as a theological concept that incorporates all of these dimensions. Reformation scholar Roland Bainton, for example, defines the concept as “all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and

1. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 32.

2. David P. Scaer, “The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther’s Thought,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (January 1983): 15.

desperation which invades the [human] spirit.”<sup>3</sup> The word comes, in fact, from a middle-high German word for “bodily-struggle,” with its root, *fechten*, even having a connotation of “attack” or “combat.”<sup>4</sup> *Anfechtung*, then, is a kind of gut-wrenching attack on a person’s very being.

I suggest that we understand an element of Luther’s sense of despair as a perception of the apparent lack of divine glory in the world. That is, we might frame Luther’s underlying question in the experience of *Anfechtung* thusly: “If God is glorious, why is there so much misery in the world, and, more personally, why do I feel excluded from that glory no matter how hard I try to live worthily of it?” To be clear, Luther does not explicitly talk about God’s glory and *Anfechtung* together in this way, but based on other of his writings I believe it is fair to frame *Anfechtung* in this way. As such, *Anfechtung* is both an experience of hellish suffering and separation from God as well as a longing for God’s embrace. It is the impossible situation from which theology and, more importantly, faith may arise.

*Anfechtung* is crucial to Luther’s thought from the opening salvos of the Reformation debates. Indeed, he talks about his own experience of suffering and its relationship to the cross as early as the explanation to Thesis 15 of his Ninety-Five Theses. There he writes, “I also ‘knew a person’ [2 Cor 12:2] who asserted that he had very often suffered these punishments—to be sure over a very brief period of time.” The reference to 2 Corinthians is presumably a reference to Paul’s speaking of himself in that passage by saying he “knew a person.” Thus Luther is emphasizing that he is speaking of his own experience. He says that these experiences of suffering “were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and no inexperienced person could believe them. . . . In such a situation, God appears terribly angry . . .” The sense of despair emanating from this experience is so great that “the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed.” The soul is in such agony in this experience that “[it] is stretched out with Christ so that all of its bones may be counted [Ps 22:17]. Nor is any corner of the soul not filled with the greatest bitterness, with dread, trembling, and sorrow—and all only in an eternal way.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, early on, Luther paints a picture of an intense personal experience of agony that is foundational to his theology. It is into this agony

3. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), 42.

4. C. Warren Hovland, “*Anfechtung* in Luther’s Biblical Exegesis,” in *Reformation Studies: Sixteen Essays in Honor of Roland H. Bainton*, ed. Franklin H. Littell (Richmond: John Knox, 1962), 46.

5. Martin Luther, “Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses,” in *Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther’s Works* (hereafter LW), vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 129–30.

and longing for relief that God's grace can be most profoundly experienced. It is through such an experience of both *Anfechtung* and grace, for Luther, that a Christian is formed. As Reformation scholar Timothy Wengert points out, "For Luther, the theology of the cross is strictly a matter of experience." Yet, he hastens to add, "It is not any old experience that makes a theologian, but precisely the experience of having been stretched out on Christ's cross."<sup>6</sup> There is a cycle, then, of suffering and grace. For Luther, both were never-ending realities of Christian life.

In the soul-crushing experience of hell, the impossibility of justification before God becomes clear. In this moment, for Luther, a theologian is born. As Luther famously wrote in what comes across as fractured English, "It is in living—no rather dying and facing damnation, not thinking, reading and speculating that makes a theologian."<sup>7</sup> In coming through the experience of God being so utterly hidden, and thus being laid out to receive the grace of the cross, one becomes armed with the experiential tools to become a theologian. This is, in a nutshell, Luther's hermeneutic of the cross. The hidden God, faith, and the cross are interwoven components of his *theologia crucis*, or "theology of the cross." Together, I contend, they speak of an experience of impossibility that is broken open by God to reveal new possibility.

Luther reads all of Scripture through the lens of the cycle of *Anfechtung* and grace, seeing each story as one of the figures working through various forms of *Anfechtung*. Religion historian C. Warren Hovland contends that "In seeking to understand his own spiritual problems Luther came to see the Bible as a collection of biographies of those who were suffering *Anfechtung* and a record of how God permitted the pious to fall into this state and how [God] helped them out again."<sup>8</sup> Luther himself confessed, "I find in the Scriptures that Christ, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Job, David and countless others have tasted of hell even in this life."<sup>9</sup> Different figures experienced *Anfechtung* in different ways, or different types of *Anfechtung*, even. Luther projected his spiritual struggles into his reading of the biblical narratives and so found a litany of souls hanging on to faith in the midst of hellish struggles.

Luther's encounters with *Anfechtung* persisted throughout his life. Luther struggled with the onslaught of doubt besieging faith and with his

6. Timothy J. Wengert, "Peace, Peace, . . . Cross, Cross: Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering," *Theology Today* 59, no. 2 (July 2002): 196.

7. Found in *Weimarer Ausgabe* (hereafter WA) 5:163, quoted in Hovland, "Anfechtung," 60, among other places.

8. Hovland, "Anfechtung," 48–49.

9. Luther, WA 7:450, quoted in *ibid.*, 49.

understanding of his vocation. While some have framed Luther as overcoming the *Anfechtung* of his youth through an awakening of faith in 1513, as the explanation to Thesis 15 of the Ninety-Five Theses that we have already encountered might be read to indicate, it seems clear that *Anfechtung* was a necessary and continuing aspect of the experience of faith throughout life for Luther.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, during one of his table discussions, the mature Luther said: “If I should live a little while longer, I would like to write a book about *Anfechtung*. Without it no man can rightly understand the Holy Scriptures or know what the fear and love of God is all about. In fact, without *Anfechtung* one does not really know what the spiritual life is.”<sup>11</sup> This experience of struggle thus continued to be essential to Luther’s theological enterprise. As long as *Anfechtung* was a key part of his theological understanding, so too must his *theologia crucis* be.

While it is tempting to understand *Anfechtung* as a psychological issue that Luther was working through, Hovland is adamant that for Luther *Anfechtung* was not a psychological issue but, rather, a theological one: How do I stand before God? All experiences of *Anfechtung* deal directly with God.<sup>12</sup> It is an experience of despair in the face of the impossibility of standing righteously before God. For Luther, everything is at stake in this encounter: “The soul hangs precariously on a thin thread dangling between eternal life and eternal damnation.”<sup>13</sup> With so much on the line, the soul is ferociously attacked, whether by an uneasy conscience or by Satan in the form of doubt, and brought to despair through the encounter with the wrathful and, as we shall see later, mysteriously arbitrary God.

Tellingly, Hovland gives his own definition of *Anfechtung* as “the terror the individual feels in the moment he is confronted with some dark aspect of God.”<sup>14</sup> It is the encounter with the darkness of God that gives *Anfechtung* its painful depth. *Anfechtung* is always related to God being hidden. God in these times is experienced as absent, wrathful, capricious, or even pernicious, and in the throes of *Anfechtung* evidence to the contrary is scant. Yet at the same time this hiddenness allows room for faith.

10. Hovland is particularly critical of Erik Erikson’s reading of Luther in *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958), which sees Luther replacing the stern father of his childhood with a gracious God in his mature faith, thus overcoming his experience of *Anfechtung*.

11. Luther, *Tischreden* [Table Talk], WA, TR 4:4777, quoted in Hovland, “*Anfechtung*,” 46.

12. Hovland, “*Anfechtung*,” 48.

13. WA 19:218, quoted in *ibid.*, 48.

14. *Ibid.*, 48.

Luther's conception of faith contains an interesting combination of certainty haunted by ambiguity. Faith, for Luther, could be described as a trust in the hidden God. On the one hand, Luther speaks of faith as certitude. For example, in his "Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans" in his 1522 German Bible, he holds, "Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it."<sup>15</sup> Faith here is a trust so bold as to be certain. Indeed, the question of whether one can be certain of one's own salvation in this life was a point of dispute between Luther and the theologians of Louvain, with Luther insisting that such certainty is possible.<sup>16</sup> Thus Luther argues for the capacity for certainty about one's own salvation in both popular and academic writings. Yet might we sense a shadow side to this stout sense of faith? Might Luther feel the need to argue for this kind of certainty in trusting God because of his recognition of the ambiguity of the human experience of God? Indeed, part of the attraction of Luther's bold faith is its acknowledgment of a murkiness to the divine. Such faith springs from clutching to God's trustworthiness against the backdrop of a world that can appear devoid of divine goodness because it is riddled with injustice and evil deeds and an experience of God who can appear cruel and uncaring. God's hiddenness in the world leaves uncertain the true nature of the divine. Only through an experience of grace, then, can one come to understand God as life giving. Mary M. Solberg holds that for Luther, "trust is experienced, can be experienced, only in relation to what cannot be seen or grasped by human understanding—that is, God—at the point at which one becomes utterly clear about one's own incapacity to 'have' God on one's own terms or one's own merits."<sup>17</sup> Such a moment of clarity can only occur when, in the grips of *Anfechtung*, one looks to the cross and finds that just as God was hidden in suffering there God is hidden in the suffering of *Anfechtung*. Yet there is no objective knowledge about this hidden God but, rather, a hopeful reliance on the trustworthiness of the promise of grace through Christ.

God, then, becomes the author of *Anfechtung* as a method of reaching through the deforming layers of human sin. Luther refers to God's work in breaking us open and laying us bare as *destructio*.<sup>18</sup> In this action God seems

15. "Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," Project Wittenberg, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/luther-faith.txt>.

16. See Luther, "Against the Thirty-Two Articles of the Louvain Theologians," in *Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Lewis William Spitz, LW 34 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 345–60, esp. article 9 of the Louvain theologians, 348.

17. Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A Feminist Proposal for an Epistemology of the Cross* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 72.

horrible, but it is not God's preferred approach. It is, in fact, God's *opus alienum*, or alien work. Due to human sinfulness, it is a necessary strategy. Alistair McGrath writes that in Luther's understanding God "intend[s] to destroy man's self-confidence and complacency, and reduce him to a state of utter despair and humiliation, in order that he may finally turn to God, devoid of all the obstacles to justification which formerly existed."<sup>19</sup> By going through God's *opus alienum* a person may be moved to God's *opus proprium* (proper work), which is grace. Wengert further points out that Luther was not attempting to speak prescriptively and glorify suffering but, rather, understood himself to be giving an accurate description of the human experience of *Anfechtung* and receiving God's grace through the cross.<sup>20</sup>

Here Luther's understanding of "the cross" has caused confusion. For example, Lutheran feminist theologian Anna Mercedes points out that Graham Ward understands Luther to be speaking only of the physical cross upon which Jesus was hung. Thus he criticizes Luther, saying that for him, "the crucifixion becomes *the* defining theological moment, separated from time and creation, fixed eternally." Ward then sides instead with the patristic understanding that the incarnation "was not an event to be isolated for forensic theological analysis, ripped atomistically from the fabric of history."<sup>21</sup> Ward further opines that in Luther's atemporalization of the cross he succumbed to his culture's obsession and fear of death. Yet, as Mercedes points out, this drastically diminishes Luther's concept of the cross. The cross, for Luther, encompasses the entirety of human suffering brought to Christ. McGrath, likewise, argues for Luther's insistence that "God is particularly known through suffering" in such a manner that ". . . the 'theologian of the cross' regards . . . suffering as his most precious treasure, for revealed and yet hidden in precisely such sufferings is none other than the living God, working out the salvation of those whom he loves."<sup>22</sup> Thus Mercedes argues that instead of participating in a culture of death, the theology of the cross is, rather, a remedy to that culture in its own language. Thus she

18. See Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 45.

19. Alistair McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 170.

20. Wengert, "Peace, Peace," 200.

21. Graham Ward, "Kenosis: Death, Discourse, and Resurrection," in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, 27, quoted in Anna Mercedes, "Effluit Nobis: Luther and Melancthon on the Benefits of the Cross," in *Stand Boldly: Lutheran Theology Faces the Postmodern World*, ed. Eric Trozzo (Berkeley: Three Trees, 2009), 90.

22. McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, 150–51.

argues, “The functional piece of this theology is not the cross itself or death itself but the *pro nobis* nature of the participation of God in the cross and in death, speaking a word directly to the people of the time.”<sup>23</sup> That is, in the midst of *Anfechtung*, it is the realization that Jesus’ death is “for us [*pro nobis*]” that salvifically effects God’s grace and allows the hidden God to be seen. As Deanna Thompson demonstrates, Luther was not interested in how this grace works. She notes his comment that in the face of *Anfechtung*, “atonement theories do little good.”<sup>24</sup> The point, rather, is the joyful trust that is inspired by such a personal encounter with God.

Here in the *pro nobis* we come back to the experiential key to Luther’s theological approach. The *Anfechtung* experience of God’s total hiddenness is the horrible experience of the impossibility of a loving God. Yet in encountering the *pro nobis* of the cross and experiencing that God’s suffering on the cross is done “for us,” new possibilities beyond the impossible open up. It is the surprising and joyful impossibility of a God who lies beyond the hidden God. Yet, in so gladly latching onto the cross as an act that proves God’s graciousness toward us, does Luther too firmly close the door on the haunting volatility of the divine intuited in his experience of *Anfechtung*? Is he so blissful to have found a remedy for his inner turmoil that he neglects to sufficiently acknowledge the potential that the terror was indeed well founded and God may indeed be absent, wrathful, or simply capricious? There is a difference between a faith that is unwavering certainty and a faith that is willing to heartily embrace the potential of God’s graciousness; a faith that is willing to wager one’s whole life or, indeed, a thousand lives. The latter seems implicit in Luther’s definition of faith, even if his emphasis falls so heavily on the strength of the conviction as to ignore the restless underside of such trust. For Luther, faith is trust in a gracious promise from Christ, and even while such a promise can be trusted confidently the very nature of a promise requires that there be a possibility that the promise might be broken or empty. This is the difference between certainty and faith.

Might we detect a resonance between Luther’s experience of suffering and an encounter with impossibility, or indeed the im-possible? Might we in fact understand the profundity of Luther’s discovery of God’s grace as an experience of new possibility breaking into an impossible situation? Specifically, Luther’s quest was for certainty of his own justification before God. In the face of an

23. Mercedes, “*Effluit Nobis*,” 90.

24. Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 25.



experience of a wrathful and hidden God who demanded perfection, nothing that he could do could produce that certainty. To attempt to earn one's own salvation was futile, he came to believe, because it was simply not possible. His great turning-point insight was that faith is a trust that the cross represents God making a new possibility beyond impossibility. Recall, for example, his words from "The Freedom of a Christian": "That which is *impossible* for you to accomplish by trying to fulfill all the works of the law—many and useless as they all are—you will accomplish quickly and easily through faith."<sup>25</sup> That is, through faith inspired by continued experiences of God's hiddenness in the cross and Jesus' gracious and personal love, God makes the impossibility of our justification before God a possibility that can be trusted fervently. Moreover, the wrathful and mysterious God who cannot be known is revealed as a caring and merciful God. At the heart of this drama of unfolding possibility, however, is an experience of God's impossibility.

#### KEY TEXTS FOR LUTHER'S *THEOLOGIA CRUCIS*

Now that we have a sense of the general experience of despair and grace that functions as the backdrop to Luther's *theologia crucis*, let us turn in greater detail to some of the texts where Luther most specifically develops his theology of the cross to see how he builds his argument. Recall that while Luther's explicit discussion of the *theologia crucis* is limited to his early works, it was Walther von Loewenich's contention that the theme was central to Luther's thought throughout his career. To support this position, Loewenich examined the Heidelberg Disputation, "On the Bondage of the Will," and Luther's lectures on Genesis to represent the early, middle, and late thought of Luther, respectively. Others have since pointed to other texts to supply important subtleties of meaning for Luther's theology of the cross. Timothy Wengert, for instance, holds that the explanation to Thesis 58 of the Ninety-Five Theses was a more important early example, while Anna Madsen holds up Luther's lectures on Hebrews, to name but a few. While these other texts do help to expand the nuances of his thought, for the purposes of this chapter Loewenich's three selections work well. The Heidelberg Disputation gives a clear and concise account of the "classic" theology of the cross, while "On the Bondage of the Will," one of Luther's favorites among his own works, introduces new, darker, and more troubling aspects to Luther's discussion of the hidden God. The

25. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of A Christian," in *Three Treatises*, trans. W. A. Lambert, rev. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 283 (italics added).

lectures on Genesis, meanwhile, show the continuing importance of the hidden God—and therefore the *theologia crucis*—for Luther late into his career.

#### *THE HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION*

Theses 19 through 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation are the central articulation of Luther's *theologia crucis*, and so have received a great deal of scholarly attention (though, of course, they must be understood within the context of the whole Disputation). This Disputation has been called the most theologically influential of Luther's disputations, even though the Ninety-Five Theses generated more political and ecclesial heat. In his commentary on the Heidelberg Disputation, Gerhard O. Forde points to the presence of at least six future reformers at the Disputation as an indication of its theological importance.<sup>26</sup> The Disputation dates from 1518, in the midst of the first reverberations of the Reformation. Johannes von Staupitz invited Luther to preside over a public disputation of the Augustinians, warning him to avoid the topic of indulgences that was engulfing Luther in much controversy. He was, rather, to speak about sin, grace, and free will. The central theses read as follows:

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.

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 theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.<sup>27</sup>

In these theses Luther outlines a theological hermeneutic that challenged notions of how to see God.

Several biblical passages lay behind these theses. One is Exodus 33:17-23, where Moses asks to see God's glory and is permitted to see the back but not the front of God. Another is Romans 1:20, where Paul holds that God's eternal

26. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 20. Forde also references Heinrich Bornkamm on the influence of the Heidelberg Disputation.

27. Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," LW 31:40-41. Unless otherwise noted, all further citations of LW 31 refer to the Heidelberg Disputation.

power and divine nature are invisible. From each of these passages Luther draws a sense of God as hidden. Those that look for God in manifestations of power and wonder in the world start with preconceived notions of the divine. Rather, Luther advocates a radical following of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 2:2, where he declares, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Knowing nothing except Christ, Luther argues, is the appropriate starting place in looking for God.

We find in these theses Luther setting up a contrasting dyad of the "theologian of the cross" and the "theologian of glory." In this contrast between ways of doing theology, Luther launches a scathing critique on the basic assumptions of his understanding of late medieval Scholastic theology and the *via moderna* in which he received his theological training.<sup>28</sup> His argument is that those he calls "theologians of glory" have misunderstood what glory is, making it about manifestations of power. That is, the theologian of glory starts with the assumption that God must be glorious, corresponding to human understanding of glory as opulence and strength. Luther sees this assumption as a vain glorification of human reason and its ability to speculate about the nature of the divine. The theologian of glory, for Luther, believes that philosophical speculation about who God is can give insight into the ineffable mystery of God. Indeed, the theologian of glory, says Luther, believes one can look around and perceive the invisible God.

It is worth noting Luther's verb usage in Latin here. There is an alternation between the verbs *conspicio* and *intellego*, "seeing" and "understanding," respectively, in Theses 19 and 20 that does not come through in the English translation. Luther reverses their positions from Thesis 19 to Thesis 20. Mercedes helpfully rephrases these theses while noting the play on the verbs: "A person may fully understand (*intellego*) all of creation, and in so doing look at (*conspicio*) the aspects of God revealed in creation, as with the medieval method of analogical theology. But, claims Luther, a person may actually reach full understanding (*intellego*) of the hidden things of God by looking at (*conspicio*) suffering and the cross."<sup>29</sup> That is, it is not through looking at the way the world

28. The *via moderna*, which Luther would have encountered during his studies at Erfurt, drew upon the work of William of Ockham and epistemological nominalism, which rejects the notion of universal forms, whether in a Platonic or Aristotelian variety. This is contrasted by the epistemological realism of the *via antiqua* of the Thomist and Scotist schools of Scholastic theology. While these latter schools of thought had many differences between them, they were united in their use of Aristotelianism and in their opposition to Ockham and nominalism. Wittenberg was committed to the *via antiqua* when Luther arrived there. See McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, esp. ch. 2, for a detailed investigation into Luther's formation and relationship to various medieval intellectual influences, especially the *via moderna*.

is that one comes to an understanding of who God is. Rather, one must look to suffering and the cross in order to understand the divine. Indeed, at root in this turnabout is Luther's contention that theologians of glory have misplaced glory. Worldly definitions of glory are not divine glory, Luther insists. Rather, divine glory is found in the midst of suffering and weakness. Divine glory works inversely to the human expectations of it, a point to which we will return in greater detail. The inversion of the verbs echoes the divine inversion of glory.

In other words, Luther's contention is that philosophical metaphysics determines theological understandings about God for the theologian of glory. He understood such speculation to be the underlying assumption of the Scholastic project, and Luther would have none of this kind of knowledge because it did not have the depth of an experience of *Anfechtung* behind it. Leading off with speculation will not make someone a theologian, Luther cries, but, rather, only leads to a metaphysical idolatry that causes one to miss (indeed to "mis-take") God's true nature. A theologian of the cross is born only through the trials of *Anfechtung* that allow for a radical experience of grace. Such a theologian does not come from the contemplation of Plato and Aristotle, as the theologian of glory does. Luther's contrast between the two ways of being a theologian, then, is about how one becomes a theologian and knows something of God.

Luther is out to subvert the ideal that he was taught of the relationship between philosophy and theology. Indeed, contemporary Lutheran theologian Vitor Westhelle suggests the exercise of reading the Heidelberg Disputation backward, starting with the twelve philosophical theses that conclude the work and moving then to the twenty-eight theological ones. This practice makes Luther's subversion clear. "Contrary to the Scholastic practice of starting with philosophical axioms to support the theological assertions that follow," Westhelle notes, "the Disputation concludes with philosophical theses as if they were an afterthought, a mere supplement."<sup>30</sup> In fact, Luther did not even add commentary to his philosophical theses, as he did for the theological ones. Westhelle further observes that all twelve of the philosophical theses either directly or indirectly challenge the use of Aristotle for theological purposes. Westhelle, then, offers that it is a "plausible hypothesis that the name Aristotle stood for what the Reformer regarded as the dominant mode of reasoning, really any mode of reasoning that would norm the theological discourse apart from faith."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Aristotle himself was not the problem, as Luther gave him

29. Mercedes, "Effluit Nobis," 89–90.

30. Vitor Westhelle, *The Scandalous God: The Use and Abuse of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 49.

accolades as late as 1540.<sup>32</sup> The problem was assuming that any philosophical reasoning could be the basis for theology.

A key term for Luther in relation to the theology of the cross is *destructio*. It is not strictly equivalent to the English “destruction,” so I will retain the Latin. According to Benjamin D. Crowe, the term has two distinct but complementary functions for Luther. The first use, as we have seen, is as a description of God’s action in the divine *opus alienum* of inflicting *Anfechtung* on a person. A secondary function, however, is to describe the task of the theologian of the cross. It is the work of theological reflection to expose the wisdom of the wise as foolishness, to point to the error of a theologian of glory. Crowe argues that the second sense of *destructio* functions as “a way of doing theology that participates in God’s ‘alien work’ by castigating the hedonistic longing for quietude and by denouncing the false theology that is more or less complicit in it.”<sup>33</sup> In both senses, *destructio* is a work of cracking through human intellectual pride and revealing the emptiness and misconception that hides behind its attempts to reach God.

It is no surprise that, given such a hermeneutic of inversion, Luther’s theology of the cross was influential in Martin Heidegger’s challenge to the tradition of ontotheology. Heidegger’s employment of the term *Destruktion* seems to have been a Germanization of *destructio* in order to capture the spirit of Luther’s hermeneutical agenda.<sup>34</sup> Crowe devotes an entire chapter of his *Heidegger’s Religious Origins* to Luther’s *theologia crucis* and the role of *destructio*. Crowe notes that through the second use of *destructio*, there is an anticipation of Heidegger’s critique of what he called “ontotheology.” He describes ontotheology as “a justification for human pride and presumption, a kind of clandestine self-congratulation. ‘God’ serves, in an onto-theological scheme, to ground an all-embracing explanation of reality, a project which has little to do with proclaiming an experience of salvation.”<sup>35</sup> Luther understood theologians of glory to be touting ontotheological principles, to read the term back into Luther’s work, in that they put their faith in metaphysical systems rather than an encounter with God through *Anfechtung* and grace. It is not that Luther opposed philosophy outright but, rather, he opposed the delusion that

31. *Ibid.*, 50.

32. Martin Luther, “Admonition to Pastors to Preach against Usury,” WA 51:321–53, noted in *ibid.*, 51.

33. Crowe, *Heidegger’s Religious Origins*, 45.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 49.

metaphysics could give an all-embracing account of reality that was anything other than a projection of the sinful human self.

Looking more closely at the twelve philosophical theses of the Heidelberg Disputation, it is apparent that for Luther philosophical debate is possible only from the point of view of a theologian of the cross. In fact, Thesis 30 states, “Just as a person does not use the evil of passion well unless he is a married man, so no person philosophizes well unless he is a fool, that is, a Christian.” We can dismiss the first part of the thesis as typical of his time and focus our attention on the more radical second part. Luther makes this claim that a good philosopher must be a Christian first because for him it is only as a theologian of the cross that it is possible to look at the world sufficiently humbly to avoid self-aggrandizing speculation. This point is further illustrated when we consider that in Thesis 36 Luther charges that Aristotle “wrongly finds fault with and derides the ideas of Plato, which actually are better than his own.” Yet, as we shall see below, Luther is critical of Christian thought that becomes overly dependent on Platonic categories as well. In Luther’s thought, then, we see that philosophy must be subservient to a theology of the cross, because it is subservient to God’s *destructio*. *Destructio* breaks through every metaphysical claim. Yet because Luther so closely—and for his time inevitably—links philosophy with classical metaphysics, it seems to me an open question whether his critique of philosophy applies to deconstructive philosophies that challenge all-embracing metaphysical systems.

Having made his epistemological critique of the *via moderna*, Luther sets out his vision of being a theologian of the cross in Theses 19 through 21. The emphasis on the “theologian” rather than a “theology” is worth noting. Forde in particular argues that “the issue [in the Heidelberg Disputation] is not the more abstract one of talking or writing *about theology* but the more difficult and concrete matter of *being theologians*.”<sup>36</sup> He sees Luther making an appeal that not only spoke to his immediate audience but also emphasizes how our experiences of the cross today make us into theologians of the cross in doing theology now. Certainly we have already seen the importance of an experience of the cross for Luther’s theology.<sup>37</sup> Anna Madsen, on the other hand, contextually tempers Luther’s use of the term “theologian of the cross” rather than “theology of the cross” in the Heidelberg Disputation by suggesting that his choice of terms and emphasis reflected an awareness that his audience was a gathering

36. Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 11.

37. We can note that Forde’s strong insistence on the personal reading of Luther’s use of the term *theologian* serves to support his proclamation school of Luther interpretation without minimizing the importance of Luther’s choice of terms.

of Augustinian and Dominican *theologians*.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, it seems clear that Luther is not interested in a theology characterized by abstract thought but, rather, in becoming a theologian energized by a dynamic, experiential knowledge of God.

Whatever the reason behind his choice of terms, Luther makes a sharp contrast between the theologian of the cross and the theologian of glory. The theologian of glory looks to the outward appearance and human works such as reason and institutions to find God. A theologian of the cross, however, has experienced that God is hidden in what the world considers to be weak and abhorrent. The theologian of glory revels in human constructions mistaken for divine realities, be they speculations about a mighty God or triumphal visions of the power of the church or fantasies about human goodness. The theologian of the cross, however, has no illusions of grandeur in any of these constructions. The cross deconstructs them all as human projections.

Indeed, for Luther, because of the limitations of human sinfulness, human constructions can only deceive. The theologian of glory has not had an authentic encounter with the divine, according to Luther's overly dramatized but still useful contrast, but has created idols, and so is not a true theologian but, rather, a false one. Recall his statement from Thesis 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." In other words, the theologian of glory decides on criteria for discerning divine presence and being and then points out the visible manifestations of that presence. The problem for Luther is that human reason and speculation thus falsely define the divine, and human speculation inevitably looks to the wrong criteria for perceiving God. It substitutes human understandings of glory for divine glory.

The promise of the gospel, Luther says, is that God is to be found exactly where humans would not expect God to be; God is hidden where God appears to be absent. Humans are repulsed by such places, most specifically in the shame and humiliation of the cross. As Madsen argues, "[According to Luther], God is found only in death and abandonment, just as one finds Jesus on the cross."<sup>39</sup> While a theology of glory offers comforting explanations that sidestep

38. Anna M. Madsen, *The Theology of the Cross in Historical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2007), 76. Her point on this issue is that Luther was speaking of a way of being a theologian because he was addressing a room of academic theologians. Thus the term need not be read as prescriptively suggesting that all Christians need become theologians of the cross but, rather, that all Christian theologians should become theologians of the cross.

39. Madsen, *Theology of the Cross*, 77.

the misery of *Anfechtung*, it actually leads to further alienation from God because it allows for a false sense of trust in the human capacity to speak of things divine. The theologian of the cross, however, having endured the abyss of *Anfechtung*, does not trust in human abilities but, rather, in the graciousness of the hidden God. Thus Luther argues in Thesis 21, which bears repeating, “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.” We again see, then, the crucial role that an experience of *Anfechtung* plays in being a theologian of the cross. In the terror of meeting this dark aspect of God, God is cloaked in our lives just as God is cloaked in Jesus’ cross. Yet in this dark place of suffering God meets us. Paul Althaus describes the meaning of the cross for Luther thusly: “God meets us in death, in the death of Christ, but only when we experience Christ’s death as our own death.”<sup>40</sup> As such, a theologian of the cross has an experiential knowledge of God, while a theologian of glory relies on intellectual knowledge.

Obviously, a key theme here is Luther’s understanding of the hidden God (*deus absconditus*). As we shall see, this theme becomes even more important and controversial in “On the Bondage of the Will,” but let us first examine its function in Luther’s earlier work. In the Heidelberg Disputation the hidden God is strictly connected to the theology of the cross as a theology of revelation. Here Luther holds that, while in a pre-fall situation humans would have been able to see God and God’s works directly through observing the world, sin has so deformed human perception that such direct observance is impossible. Therefore, says Luther, “Because [human beings] misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of the wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifest in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering.”<sup>41</sup> God, then, can now only be seen by looking at the cross, where there is “nothing else to be seen than disgrace, poverty, death, and everything that is shown us in the suffering Christ.”<sup>42</sup> As Loewenich contends, “These are all things that in our opinion have nothing divine in them but rather point to man’s trouble, misery, and weakness. There especially no one would of himself look for God’s revelation.”<sup>43</sup> But God enters especially into such places of wretchedness in order to be seen, thus

40. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 28.

41. LW 31:52. Luther uses here the term *menschen*, which is a gender-inclusive term for human beings.

42. W.A. 5:108, quoted in Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 28.

43. Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 28–29.



making these places of God's concealment in actuality places that God is made visible. To recognize this is to be a theologian of the cross, as Luther says in Thesis 20: "He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." It is, again, an experience of the despair of *Anfechtung* and then of being met by a gracious God through that suffering that forms one into a theologian capable of such comprehension. Thus, Loewenich argues, the theologian of the cross "does not, like the theologian of glory, flee sufferings but regards them as the most precious treasure." Indeed, he continues, "To all that is humble and lowly he turns in love."<sup>44</sup> For the theologian of the cross, knowledge comes only through suffering and the cross, because God's revelation is concealed in that which humans abhor, such as the weakness and suffering of Jesus on the cross.<sup>45</sup>

It is important to note that Luther's argument in the Heidelberg Disputation hinges on having faith that the hidden God *is* the revealed God. That is, God concealed in the cross is in fact God's method of self-revelation. What cannot be said of God concealed in the cross is mere speculation about God, and the cross contradicts all speculation about the divine. Grounded by the cross, the theologian of the cross dares not reach to see God's face but, rather, like Moses is content to see God's backside (Exod 33:18-23). In fact, Forde points out that the Latin word translated "manifest" in Thesis 20 ("visible and manifest things of God") is *posteriora*—the "back" or "hinder parts."<sup>46</sup> Thus, for Luther, the theologian of the cross is content that in the cross we see all of God that we need to see, and such a God is enough for us. As McGrath notes, this makes the *theologia crucis* a worldly theology, not concerned with what any other realm may be like, but, rather, focused on the nature of God's work in the world.<sup>47</sup>

Yet for all its concreteness for us today, does this theology of the cross not reduce Jesus' concreteness to an abstraction of suffering? That is, the fleshly reality of Jesus on this earth is largely irrelevant to Luther's *theologia crucis*. Jesus' importance is confined to the cross so that he may act as a theological metaphor for spaces where God is least likely to be. Because Luther reads Scripture through the lens of *Anfechtung* broken through by grace, Jesus' function is primarily to overcome the *Anfechtung* of crucifixion via a glorious resurrection.

44. *Ibid.*, 22.

45. See also such passages in Luther that hold that the "works of God are always unattractive" (LW 31:39), and appear "under the opposite form" (*Lectures on Romans*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, LW 25 [St. Louis: Concordia, 1972], 366), among others.

46. Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 78.

47. McGrath, *Luther's Theology*, 168.

Jesus' quotidian existence and proclamation of the kingdom of God are practically beside the point. Indeed, even for a theologian of the cross, it would seem, the glory of the resurrection outshines all other aspects of Jesus' experience. Indeed, might a presumption of glory predetermined by Luther's taking the resurrection to be an act of power be slipping into Luther's *theologia crucis* and causing it to deemphasize Jesus' life for the sake of giving us comfort in our contemporary suffering?

#### “ON THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL”

While the theology of the cross Luther presents in the Heidelberg Disputation is his best-known discussion of the hidden God, “On the Bondage of the Will” is undoubtedly the most controversial. Philip Ruge-Jones, in his effort to give a contextualized reading of Luther's work, argues that “The relationship that an interpreter assumes toward [“On the Bondage of the Will”] often indicates structural keys to the larger picture that he or she presents of Luther.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, this work from 1525 is among the most difficult of all of Luther's writings, as he wrestled with nettlesome questions about the nature of God and the issue of predestination. In fact, a new understanding of God's hiddenness is added here that many interpreters see as marking a distinct change in Luther's thought, a change that some take to be a betrayal of the early Luther's *theologia crucis* and mark him as having become a theologian of glory.

“On the Bondage of the Will” (or *De servo arbitrio*) was published in December 1525 in response to Erasmus of Rotterdam's September 1524 “A Diatribe or Discourse concerning Free Choice.” The interval between the two is notable, as Luther himself admits in the text's opening lines, because Luther tended to give quick response to his critics. In the case of Erasmus's critique, however, he took longer to produce a rebuttal, in part because he was stung by Erasmus's decision not to stand with him.

Early on in the Reformation controversies, many had thought Erasmus might support Luther. After all, Erasmus was the most respected scholar in Europe and was known for his calls for ecclesial reform. In addition, Luther himself had used Erasmus's edition of the Greek New Testament and appealed to him via letter for support in 1519. Yet Erasmus was committed to neutrality. He wanted to remain faithful to his program of humanism rather than reformation, but at the same time did not want to appear reactionary.

48. Philip Ruge-Jones, *Cross in Tensions: Luther's Theology of the Cross as Theologico-social Critique* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 13.

Yet there was mounting pressure on Erasmus to pick a side, and when Luther turned his attack from abuses in the church to attacking the Roman Church itself, Erasmus turned against Luther. Erasmus picked the topic of free will as a place where he could challenge Luther without appearing closed to the need for reform. This theme was, in fact, a point of division between Luther and some of the more humanistically inclined reformers. Ruge-Jones notes that Martin Bucer, while generally persuaded by hearing the Heidelberg Disputation, found Luther's insistence on a bound will to be a curiosity.<sup>49</sup> In his "Diatribe," then, Erasmus reviews the various answers to the problem of the relationship between grace and freedom and indicates what he thinks is most probable. He did not attack Luther personally, but did speak strongly against his ideas, as well as those of some of his fellow reformers.

While Melancthon read Erasmus's treatise somewhat sympathetically, Luther considered it rubbish and not worthy of response. Eventually, the work gained wide circulation and acclaim, however, and so required a response. In "On the Bondage of the Will," Luther counters Erasmus point by point in a work nearly four times the length of the original. Erasmus was offended by what he considered to be a personal attack. Luther appears to have half-apologized, through a now lost letter in early 1526, for the strength of his tone in "On the Bondage of the Will." Erasmus went on to write a defense of his work, but Luther did not reply to it.<sup>50</sup>

In "On the Bondage of the Will," Luther argues that humanity is bound to sin, and so cannot do any works of worth. Thus, while not explicitly naming a *theologia crucis*, Timothy Lull holds that "It is the negative implication of the theology of the cross. Luther feels that lurking behind Erasmus' concern for freedom, merit, and good works is human pride—a desire to have something to offer God that will blunt the enormity of our need for grace."<sup>51</sup>

Again, faith is a key component in Luther's argument. In his review of Erasmus's preface, he specifically invokes Hebrews 11:1, "faith is the evidence of things not seen." Again, for Luther, faith is best understood as a trust in the God who acts in reversals and contrary to appearances. If God were visible, for Luther, faith would be unnecessary. He then goes on to speak of the hidden God in the same manner that we have seen in the Heidelberg Disputation: God works through opposites, and so "God hides his eternal mercy and kindness

49. *Ibid.*, 92.

50. For more of the history, see the introduction to "On the Bondage of the Will" in *Career of the Reformer III*, ed. Philip S. Watson, LW 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 5–14.

51. Timothy F. Lull, "Introduction to 'The Bondage of the Will,'" in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 152.

beneath eternal anger, righteousness beneath injustice.”<sup>52</sup> The hidden God here is the God revealed in the cross. He does not give a full account of his doctrine of the hidden God because he feels that it is already well known.

Yet as Luther unfolds his argument, he soon moves to a different, more mysterious understanding of the hidden God.<sup>53</sup> This hidden God is outside of the revelation of the cross, and so is not God as known to us in Christ, but is, rather, a God of wrath. Luther remarks, “That in God there are many things hidden, of which we are ignorant, no one doubts.”<sup>54</sup> Luther distinguishes this hidden God from the God who is known in Christ, and holds that we must speak differently about this God. He writes: “We have to argue in one way about God or the will of God as preached, revealed, offered, and worshiped, and in another way about God as he is not preached, not revealed, not offered, not worshiped. To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours.”<sup>55</sup> He then goes on to cite 2 Thessalonians 2:4 as support for this distinction. It is specifically in this section of “On the Bondage of the Will” that Luther uses the term “hidden God.”

There has been much consternation among Luther interpreters over what to make of the binary of the hidden God and the revealed God in this treatise. After all, Luther holds here, in contrast to the assumption in the Heidelberg Disputation, that the hidden God is the revealed God, that we must speak differently about the two, and that the unrevealed God is a mystery that does not wish to be known to us. In an influential article, Reformation historian B. A. Gerrish holds that it is easy to categorize Luther interpreters into three groups: those that see the hidden and revealed Gods to be antithetical, those that see them as identical, and those that hold they are both.<sup>56</sup> Gerhard Ebeling, of the proclamation school that seeks to hold contrasts in paradoxical tension, for instance, seeks to harmonize the two by seeing the distinction as a means of retaining the tension between an omnipotent God while also having a God known in weakness on the cross. The two are the same but must be spoken of differently in this reading. Yet, this reading glosses over a real disconnect

52. LW 33:62.

53. Although the phrase *deus absconditus* only appears twice in the treatise, the concept is found throughout.

54. LW 33:25.

55. LW 33:139.

56. B. A. Gerrish, “To An Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” in *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 133. Gerrish includes Theodosius Harnack, Albrecht Ritschls, Reinhold Seeburg, Emanuel Hirsch, Werner Elert, and Karl Holl in the first group, Ferdinand Kattenbusch and Eric Seeburg in the second, and Paul Althaus, Karl Heim, and Walther von Loewenich in the third.

between what Luther argues in the Heidelberg Disputation and what he argues in “On the Bondage of the Will.”<sup>57</sup>

Loewenich, on the other hand, picks up on Luther’s image of God being clothed in Christ. We cannot bear an encounter with God unclothed and so God’s word is wrapped in Christ for us. “While we are dealing with the revealed God,” he writes, “we dare not forget about the hidden God. God has indeed revealed himself in his word, but God is greater than his word.”<sup>58</sup> Yet this does not lead to two Gods, he argues, because God must be greater than God’s word in order for Luther’s conception of faith to work. He avers, “Concealment is an essential characteristic of the objects of faith. This, however, demands the conclusion that God, too, must be hidden if faith is to be directed toward him. Thus Luther does in fact demand that the divine righteousness has to be incomprehensible, if it is to be called divine.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, for the revealed God to be an object of faith, it must also be an incomprehensible hidden God. Thus through faith, and not otherwise, can the hidden God and revealed God be said to be the same. Yet even so, Loewenich admits that Luther also sets up an antithetical relationship between the hidden God and the revealed God. He suggests that reason can only establish a dualism between the two, but that faith “presses through the revealed God to the hidden God, and yet does not meet a second God behind or beside the former.”<sup>60</sup> Faith, then, trusts that the hidden God and the revealed God are indeed the same, even though such a position may seem rationally impossible because the two are experienced so differently.

Gerrish helpfully tracks the type of divine hiddenness in Luther’s earlier works as compared to the type introduced in “On the Bondage of the Will.” He names them, rather straightforwardly, “Hiddenness I” and “Hiddenness II,” respectively. The majority of more recent Luther scholarship has subsequently followed these designations. Hiddenness I is the classic hidden God of the *theologia crucis* found in the Heidelberg Disputation, where God is found in precisely the places where God is not to be expected. Hiddenness II is the terrifying and impenetrable God. As Gerrish demonstrates, the heart of the problem opened up by Luther’s move to Hiddenness II is the question of predestination. Luther argues that because of humanity’s bound will, if a person is saved it can only be because God has directed that person’s will toward salvation. As to why some are saved and some are not, Luther maintains that we cannot know. It is the capricious and “awful will of God whereby he ordains

57. Ebeling, *Luther*, 240.

58. Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology*, 34.

59. *Ibid.*, 36.

60. *Ibid.*, 38.

by his own counsel which and what sort of persons he wills to be recipients and partakers of his preached and offered mercy.”<sup>61</sup> Luther says that this distinction between the horrible hidden God and the gracious revealed God is not in God but in our understanding and that all will be resolved “by the light of glory.”<sup>62</sup> Until then, all we can do is trust in the grace of the revealed God.

Yet in this move to the predestining hidden God, does Luther endanger his entire theological project? As he acknowledges, “This is the highest degree of faith to believe that he is merciful who saves so few and damns so many . . .”<sup>63</sup> The premise that God is fundamentally gracious is put in question by this admittance of the fickleness of the unrevealed God. Moreover, Luther’s famous dictum, “The cross alone is our theology,” a slogan against speculations about the divine beyond what can be seen in the cross, is contradicted by these conjectures about the unrevealed God. Certainly many have pointed to “On the Bondage of the Will” as a betrayal of the Reformation message. Karl Barth famously dismisses Luther’s notion of this sort of hidden God, a point to which we will return in chapter 3.<sup>64</sup> Ruge-Jones holds that “This move on Luther’s part threatens to undo the whole promise of the gospel. What has Luther discovered if not that God is as good as God’s word and that word is Jesus?”<sup>65</sup> Certainly, Hiddenness II does not fit easily into the theological system of reversals Luther put forth in his earlier articulations of the *theologia crucis*.

Yet we have also seen that the *theologia crucis* is more than an intellectual system. It is an experientially based knowledge, and those who intellectually critique Luther’s theological move perhaps brush too quickly past the experience that lay behind it, an experience suggested by his descriptions of *Anfechtung*. This brushing past is not such an unreasonable thing to do, as Luther himself urges leaving the experience of the terrifying hidden God alone

61. LW 33:139.

62. WA 785:29, quoted in Gerrish, “To An Unknown God,” 136.

63. *Ibid.*, 137.

64. Eberhard Jungel, in “The Revelation of the Hiddenness of God: A Contribution to the Protestant Understanding of the Hiddenness of Divine Action” (in his *Theological Essays II* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995], 120–44), echoes the Barthian repugnance at the idea of a hidden God not inimical to Christ. He argues that there is no darkness in God and so if God is hidden it is in God’s own light. Therefore, he argues that Luther “cannot . . . mean that in this particular hiddenness God contradicts himself, but rather must mean that God *corresponds* to himself in this hiddenness” (130, author’s italics). Thus Jungel prefers to speak of the hiddenness of God’s activity rather than of God. Yet I suggest that Jungel, like others that will be discussed in chapter 3, is norming his thought with an assumption of divine unity that causes him to dismiss what Luther is actually suggesting. Indeed, might we understand this philosophical assumption on Jungel’s part as creeping assumptions of a theologian of glory?

65. Ruge-Jones, *Cross in Tensions*, 154.

and flying quickly to the cross, where the revealed God lies. Yet, as Gerrish notes, “it is impossible to read him and not to recognize that there was a terror in his encounter with the hidden, predestinating God and that the emotional, religious, or spiritual content of the experience burst the limits of the merely rational and conceptual.”<sup>66</sup> If an experience of *Anfechtung* is an integral aspect of a *theologia crucis*, this experience of Luther’s cannot be ignored. Gerrish points out that it seems clear that Luther’s experience “brought him right up to the rim of the abyss, where the naked and unknown God waited and threatened.”<sup>67</sup> This shattering, unmediated experience of the divine showed God to be beyond anything as simple as “good” or “reasonable.” This unmasked God is odious and offensive to human sensibilities. Luther queries about the indecency of the vision of God, “who would not be offended? I myself was offended more than once, and brought to the very depth and abyss of despair, so that I wished I had never been created a man . . .”<sup>68</sup> Yet faith is the trust to turn from the abyss and find comfort in the cross, that the God hidden in the terrifying abyss is the same God hidden in the horror of the cross. Such trust cannot be inspired by the abyss but, rather, only by the *pro nobis* experience that calls us back from the abyss. Faced with this abysmal God there can never be certainty, but faith is clinging to a trust that despite the uncertainty God is poured out “for us.”

For constructive theological use, I contend that the more problematic aspect of Luther’s Hiddenness II is not the introduction of an abysmal aspect of the divine but, rather, Luther’s misuse of glory to smooth over the disruptive character of the abyss. Indeed, as we shall see, I find Luther’s intuition about there being depths of the divine that surpass the *pro nobis* of Christ to be on track. It is, rather, Luther’s projections of glory, both implicitly and explicitly, onto the abyss here that is so distasteful. Implicitly, it is Luther’s imposition of images of divine might as God’s glory onto the abyss that give it its most terrifying aspects. The motifs of omnipotence and predestination work to close down any openness of the future under the tyrannical and terrible depiction of a horribly overbearing glory with which Luther describes the God of Hiddenness II. This is a far cry from the God whose glory is known in weakness rather than strength. Rather, the description is more like a fantasy of unlimited power gone awry. Indeed, is this not the glory of a theologian of glory taken to extremes?

Then, more explicitly, Luther turns to an abstracted and other-worldly glory to make this grotesque glory more palatable. Recall his turn to the argument that the contradiction between the naked God and the God known

66. Gerrish, “To An Unknown God,” 137.

67. *Ibid.*

68. LW 33:190.

in Christ will be resolved “by the light of glory.” Glory here becomes an eschatological way out of the conundrum that he has created. He cannot bear the possibility of God elusively beyond knowledge, and so projects gruesome glory onto the abyss before turning to glory as a way of saying that such darkness is not really part of God. Such glory has no worldly grounding or transformative potential but, rather, prematurely defends divine goodness without first resting in the tensions. To be sure, some might argue that this sense of glory protects the divine mystery by recognizing the limits of human knowledge, but it does so by approaching the divine with the a priori assumption of divine simplicity. Further, such a conception of glory leads us away from the sensibility of *kabod* as glory that adds a holy depth to the ordinary.

#### LECTURES ON GENESIS

Luther’s lectures on Genesis come from the last years of his life and are interspersed with his late reflections on the entirety of his reforming and theological career. Thoughts on the hiddenness of God are mixed into his discourses regularly. While there are a few passages worth examining for their continued fleshing out of themes already noted, there is little substantive development in Luther’s ideas on the subject here. Rather, these passages are useful to note because they demonstrate his later reflections on earlier ideas and because they arise in a classroom setting rather than in the heat of debate.

In his comments on Genesis 25:22, Luther discusses the importance of faith in the hidden God. The verse speaks of Rebecca’s despair as the twins in her womb struggled together. For Rebecca, Luther says, God appears to be absent:

He withdraws His hand and hides His face, so that she no longer sees God’s work of conception but sees some mockery of Satan. She has no other thought than that she has been cast aside and rejected. But He does not delay or keep aloof forever. Indeed, He manages all things in such a manner that the Word seems to be altogether of no account and nothing. But out of this nothing and out of what is of no account He makes everything through a very great and amazing change, so that what previously appeared to be *everything* perishes and is reduced to nothing.<sup>69</sup>



Thus we see Luther's classic sense of reversal at play, in that God's promise seemed to be "of no account and nothing," but then out of this nothing God impossibly reduces "everything" into "nothing" and opens a space for a new "everything." In the commentary on this verse, Luther further urges that while God remains hidden in the world, we cling in trust and hope. Indeed, the hope in the invisible working of God is essential to faith. He comments, on the one hand, ". . . nothing in the world seems more uncertain than the Word of God and faith, nothing more delusive than hope in the promise."<sup>70</sup> Yet, on the other hand, he maintains, "For if one could see [God's presence] now before one's eyes, there would be no need of faith."<sup>71</sup> Thus again we see that in Luther's thought God must be hidden in order for there to be a space for faith.

Luther's commentary on Genesis 35:9-10, meanwhile, which is when Jacob was given the name Israel, includes a discussion on the proper and improper uses of speculation. "The true speculation . . ." he says, "is the mortification of all the powers which belong to our senses and reason and clinging in faith alone and in the expectation of the promise. The true use of these speculations is seen in the agony of death, for then we are conscious of no advice and no help."<sup>72</sup> Here we see the hallmarks of the *theologia crucis* and *destructio* in the face of human wisdom. By way of contrast, he argues, "Other speculations of the monks are imaginings, cold, dead, and dangerous because they proceed from their own will and reason, without the Word and the promise."<sup>73</sup> Philosophy and speculation, then, are good and acceptable provided that they proceed from trust in God's promise. If they attempt to describe the divine by other means, they can only deceive.

Perhaps the most interesting passage in the lectures on Genesis in regard to the hidden God comes in Luther's comments on Genesis 26:9, from the encounter between Isaac and Abimelech. In it, Luther makes an excursus on the issue of predestination. He holds that questions of predestination that some were using as a rationale for avoiding living out a Christian life (something to the effect of, "If I am predestined it doesn't matter what I do, so why bother?") are delusions sent by Satan to sow doubt and which must be counteracted by a "true and firm knowledge of Christ."<sup>74</sup> The point of faith, he says, is to be

69. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 21–25*, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, LW 4 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 358–59.

70. LW 4:355.

71. LW 4:357.

72. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 31–37*, ed. Jaroslav J. Pelikan, LW 6 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969), 262.

73. LW 6:260.