

the new Issues, Etc. Journal - Vol. 2, No. 1

The Theology of the Cross: Cross-Shaped Theology

by Todd Wilken

What Shape is Your Theology?

"I'm no theologian." Oh, yes you are.

Everyone is a theologian. Are you human? Then you are a theologian. Every one of us is a natural-born theologian. This accounts for the tremendous variety of religions among us. From Animism to Zen, from Zoroastrianism to Atheism — everyone is a theologian.

Theology is nothing more than ideas about God. Everyone has ideas about God. Everyone is a theologian.

But that doesn't mean that everyone is a good theologian. In fact, by nature, we are all lousy theologians. St. Paul puts it this way in the first chapter of Romans:

What may be known about God is plain to [all men], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

We are natural-born theologians. But we are fallen people; and so our theology is fallen too. Paul continues: *Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.* Man-shaped, bird-shaped, animal-shaped, reptile-shaped theologies; this is the shape of our fallen theology.

And what do all those theologies have in common? Paul says, *they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him...* [but they] *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images.*

Paul is saying that instead of giving Glory to God as God, fallen man seeks that glory for himself. It began in the Garden of Eden. *You will not surely die,"the serpent said to the woman. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God...*"In all of his fallen theologizing, man seeks but one thing for himself: the glory that belongs to God alone. This is the Theology of Glory.

The Theologian of Glory vs. the Theologian of the Cross.

Scripture says, *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.* The way that seems right to a man is the theology of Glory. We are all natural-born theologians of Glory. A theologian of Glory believes that:

1. *God's ways can be generally understood by human reason;*
2. *God's favor is manifested in the circumstances of life, in particular, life's successes and victories;*

3. *God is pleased by sincere human effort.*

All the religions of the world, except for Christianity, are theologies of Glory. Whether it manifests itself as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism or some strange cult, it is all essentially the same theology and it is all the theology of Glory. The theology of Glory is the way that leads to death.

But Christian theology is fundamentally different. Christianity is not a theology of Glory, but a theology of the Cross. This is how Paul contrasts the two:

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

In complete contrast to the theologian of Glory, the theologian of the Cross believes that:

1. *God's ways are paradoxical and hidden to human reason;*
2. *God's favor is manifested in Jesus, in particular, His suffering, death and resurrection;*
3. *God is pleased only by Jesus.*

The theology of Glory and the theology of the Cross are mutually exclusive. They are two completely different ways of understanding God. One is false, the other is true. One leads to death, the other to life.

The God Who Hides Himself.

Regarding the theologian of Glory, Martin Luther wrote:

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.

What are the "invisible things of God"? This question brings us back to the first chapter of Romans:

What may be known about God is plain to [all men], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

Virtually every religion acknowledges that their gods possess certain characteristics: life, wisdom and power. Many further speculate that their gods possess qualities like justice, love and mercy. However, God's true disposition remains completely hidden from them.

How is God disposed toward me? Is he pleased or displeased? To answer this question the theologian of Glory must speculate based upon his own life's circumstances. If things are going well in his life he concludes that God is pleased with him.

Why is God pleased with me? The theologian of Glory speculates further and draws the only conclusion that his theology will allow:

God is pleased with me because I have pleased Him.

But if things are not going well, God must not be pleased, and more effort to please Him is required.

Isaiah writes, *Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.* God's gracious disposition toward us is not revealed in the visible things God has made—it remains hidden—leaving the theologian of Glory to speculate. The theologian of Glory wrongly believes that he can discern God's disposition from the world around him. The god he invents is a god whose disposition can be manipulated with human works.

But if God is really a God Who hides Himself, then why does God hide Himself? The answer is a paradox. God hides Himself in order to reveal Himself.

Where does God hide Himself? The answer is another paradox. God, Who is all-powerful, hides Himself in weakness. God, Who is all wise, hides Himself in foolishness. God, Who is living, hides Himself in death.

Here is where the theologian of Glory begins to object. *God is not weak, foolish or dead!* And here the theologian of Glory shows his true colors. Luther rightly diagnosed the problem:

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.

To know Jesus Christ is to know God hidden in weakness, foolishness and death. Luther writes: *He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the Cross.*

Rather than looking to the circumstances of his life to decipher God's disposition, the theologian of the Cross looks to the suffering and death of Jesus to know God's disposition. Rather than speculating that God must be pleased by human effort, the theologian of the Cross sees in Christ crucified the One who has pleased God once and for all. Life's circumstances, whatever they might be, are now comprehended in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The theologian of Glory defines God according to human concepts of power, wisdom and reason. The theologian of the Cross allows God to define Himself, regardless of how paradoxical, weak and foolish it may appear.

The Cross is Our Theology

Here I must sadly note that Christians are not immune to the theology of Glory. The glory of works outshines the shame of the Cross in many churches today. Pulpits free of paradox proclaim the Christian rather than the Christ. God is presented as easily understandable and easily pleased. This is a god who does not require a Cross or a dead Jesus.

In short, the Church seems anxious to exchange the shame, weakness and foolishness of the Cross for human glory, strength and wisdom. To a group of Christians who seemed anxious to do the same Paul wrote, *God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

What is Paul saying? He is saying that the Cross isn't just a part of our theology; the Cross *IS* our theology. The Cross permits no speculation about God or His disposition. There, written in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus His Son, is God's final word.

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