

ST215 – Dr. Robert Pyne  
Luther's Theology of the Cross  
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Is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ good? This question is at the heart of Martin Luther's Theology of the Cross. The uttermost expression of God's love is at the same time the complete satisfaction of His wrath. Justice and mercy (which is normally an injustice) cohabit the cross. The impassible God demonstrates His infinite compassion. Life participates in death and in doing so imparts life. In short, Luther proposed, the cross is the beginning point of the knowledge of God because at the cross God is revealing himself in a way that is only accessible by faith. The cross cannot be figured out—no human would have thought to propose it and no human can claim to understand it. But on the cross, we are confronted with the bare reality of the person of God—powerful and powerless—and the only appropriate response is that all our fuses should be blown.

The essence of Luther's point is that we don't get anywhere in theology (or in Christianity) unless we first blow all the fuses of natural theology and human philosophy. We must realize our spiritual poverty, and that necessitates coming to grips with the limitations of our intellect. On this point, Luther stands against the historical tide of humanism. In the cross, Luther sees God as the great reverser, elevating those who have nothing and destroying those who bring something of their own to the table. So the essence of Christianity is not progress, but regress—of constantly emptying oneself, so as to make room for grace. This will involve "the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead," (Php. 3:10-11) or as Jesus put it, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to

save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it."  
(Luke 9:23-24).

In light of all of this, it strikes me that American evangelical presentations of the gospel are utter failures. We gloss over the cross, and consequently leave spiritual poverty unmentioned. We almost always present the Christian life as "the good life" more fully realized. In other words, we tell people that there is something they want, something they already think of as good, that can be found in a "personal relationship with Jesus." Luther begins with the assertion that human beings don't know "good" when they see it. Does the gruesome execution of Christ look like the good life more fully realized? People need to know that our deliverance involves crushing us—that the cross solves all of our problems...by killing us. Should we announce to people that sort of "good news"—what they need to hear but cannot accept as "good"? Are there any Christians in America who demonstrate the image of God by being happily crushed—who for the joy set before them endure the cross? Or should we just try to get people "saved" first and tell them the bad gospel later?

Other observations and questions (kind of random):

Can one love the giver and maintain any love for the gift? Are these really separable or opposed? Can Christians love God in an unmediated way? In other words, if we are not able to see God and live, are we not bound to the mediation of his gifts? Is our salvation good in and of itself, or is it only to lead us to the goodness of its giver?

In my estimation, self-interest cannot be removed from human existence, and there has to be a way in which self-interest and divine interest come to coincide.

Human wisdom makes no real contribution. Epistemology is subject to metaphysics. Correct epistemology places revelation over reason. I(We) know because I(we) have been told, not because I(we) can figure it out.

Given this, what is the place of natural revelation?

Is God lovable?

Why are evangelists smiling?