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MARTIN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY: RECONSIDERING THE "HIDDENNESS" AND "ALIEN WORK" OF GOD

by Jonathan King

1. The Problem Described

MARK MATTES observes in his recent book, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal*,[1] that a great deal of scholarship has been given to Luther's appreciation for music, his view of worship and the liturgy, as well as his defense of icons and the visual arts. As Mattes points out, however, the subject of beauty per se in Luther, or more specifically, how significant the theme of beauty is to Luther's theology, is an area of Luther research that up until now has been almost completely overlooked. In an interview with the online magazine *Credo,* Mattes himself says: "nothing in my education would have led me to think that Luther has a theology of beauty. I had been reading Luther for decades but, like most, was oblivious to any sense for his theological aesthetics."[2]

A key area of Luther's approach to beauty concerns Luther's theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) in which Luther distinguishes God "hidden" from God "revealed" and the "alien work" of God from that of his "proper work." Matthew Rosebrock poses the following questions which get right at the heart of the theological aesthetics of Luther's theology of the cross: "What will be our result if we start not with beauty as a concept but with the cross? What will be our result if we let the cross stand for what it is without trying to see through it, behind it, or past it?"[3] Analyzing this same train of thought in Luther, Mark Mattes shows that a theological aesthetic understanding of Luther's theology of the cross develops out of just such a standpoint. I propose a counterargument to Luther's theological aesthetics. But first, I will set out some of the important medieval influences that shaped his theology of the cross and present a brief characterization of it.

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1. Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).

2. Mark Mattes, "The Beauty of Christianity and its Cross," *Credo Magazine* 8, no. 1 (2018), https://credomag.com/article/the-beauty-of-christianity-and-its-cross/.

3. Matthew Rosebrock, "The Heidelberg Disputation and Aesthetics," *Concordia Journal* (Fall 2012): 347–360, here 347.

2. Medieval Influences that Shaped Luther's Theology of the Cross

Particular streams of medieval spirituality greatly influenced Luther, and most critically, in the formation and development of his theology of the cross. I think Mattes gets it exactly right, stating in his book:

> Although beauty as such is not a primary locus of [Luther's] work, it bears on his work throughout because he countered an important aspect of medieval spirituality. Medieval spirituality looked to the human disposition of desiring what is attractive as a basis for understanding human salvation. Because Luther evaluates theology through the lens of law and gospel and draws out the ramifications of that doctrine for all of his thinking, medieval views of beauty are reworked in his theology.[4]

Two of the primary medieval streams that influenced Luther are (1) the writings of the French Cistercian abbot of the twelfth century, Bernard of Clairvaux, and (2) the *via moderna* school of scholasticism following the Occamist stream of nominalism. In reference to Bernard of Clairvaux, the aging Luther noted in his 1539 treatise, "Against the Antinomians":

> To be sure, I did teach and still teach, that sinners shall be stirred to repentance through the preaching or the contemplation of the passion of Christ. . . . This doctrine is not mine, but Saint Bernard's. What, Saint Bernard? It is the preaching of all of Christianity, of all the prophets and apostles.[5]

In the immediate context, the doctrine to which Luther is referring concerns the paramount law-gospel dynamic to the end "that [sinners] might see the enormity of God's wrath over sin, and learn that there is no other remedy for this than the death of God's son."[6] As Luther, in his early spiritual development, drank in deeply the writings of St. Bernard, the theological insightfulness of the Cistercian regarding God's hiddenness began to take root. Bernard's most famous work—a sermon-commentary on the great love poem of the Bible, the Song of Songs—is where we see Bernard drawing out of the scriptural text the idea of the hiddenness of God.[7] In

4. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 187.

5. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia, PA and St. Louis, MO: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1955), 47:110. The critical English translation is hereafter *LW*.

6. *LW* 47:110.

7. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Essential Writings*, ed. Dennis E. Tamburello (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2000), 104. The editor notes here: "Bernard began writing these sermons in 1135 and continued to work on them until his death in 1153. He wrote eighty-six sermons and only made it to the beginning of the third chapter of the Song. It ended up taking two other monks to finish the work that Bernard had begun."

his Sermon on the Canticle (SC) 56 in reference to Song 2:9, which speaks of the lover standing behind the wall, Bernard perceives the deeper meaning as referring to God's hiddenness in Christ, recalling Isaiah 45:15: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior." In what we might refer to as a Christotelic sense, Bernard writes: "His standing behind the wall then means that his prostrate weakness was manifested in the flesh, while that which stood erect in him was as it were hidden behind the flesh: the 'manifest man' and 'the hidden God' are indeed one and the same."[8] For Bernard, the lover behind the wall is allegorical of God as hidden in the crucified Christ. Even though Christ is "broken in body, he stands upright as God by the power of his divinity."[9] Likewise in SC 61 in reference to Song 2:14, which speaks of the beloved in the "clefts of the rock," Bernard explains this as picturing the wounds of Christ and cites Exodus 33:22ff. in drawing the comparison between Moses in the clefts of the rock who was permitted to see the backside of God and Christ being "sweet on the cross."[10] Bernard highlights this same kind of hiddenness once again in SC 62 in which he writes: "Let him place before him Jesus and him crucified, that without effort on his part he may dwell in those clefts of the rock at whose hollowing he has not labored."[11]

The imprint of Bernard's influence on Luther regarding the dialectic between God's own work and God's alien work had already become evident during the time of his first set of lectures on the Psalms, given from 1513–15. Commenting on Psalm 119:45, Luther puts things in a way that would characterize his later writing on the theology of the cross:

> He crucifies and kills, so that he may revive and glorify. Thus he does a work that is foreign to him so that he may do his own work (Isa. 28:21). As blessed Bernard correctly said, the divine consolation is delicate and is not given to those who grant access to an alien one. Therefore you must be . . . found entirely in the cross and judgments on the old man if you want to walk at large according to the new man.[12]

Another aspect of bernardine influence is evidenced in Luther's concern with faith that is not based on an appeal to philosophical reasoning and rationalism, but tied rather to one's experience and qualified above all by the Word of God. In this regard, a historical parallel can be seen between Bernard's battle with his

8. Franz Posset, *Pater Bernhardus: Martin Luther and Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1999), 249.

9. Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, 249.

10. Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, 250.

11. Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, 251. Posset then adds: "A little later in his sermon [Bernard] asked: 'What greater cure for the wounds of conscience and for purifying the mind's acuity [is there] than to persevere in meditation on the wounds of Christ?'"

12. *LW* 11:451.

contemporary, Abelard, while for Luther, it was his aversion to the scholastic-philosophical tradition in theology. In rejecting the scholastic-philosophical tradition in theology, Luther insisted that all theology should be derived from the wellspring of the Scriptures. "It is better to drink directly from the source than to drink from the stream that comes from it," states Luther.[13] All of this was reinforced in young Luther's life as a student at Erfurt University (1501–1505), pursuing his bachelor's and then master's degree in the liberal arts where he received concentrated teaching in the humane letters. Erfurt's curricula included the study of the important works of Aristotle, Lombard's *Sentences*, *studia generalia* taught by mendicant order theology professors, and of particular notoriety, the *via moderna* school of scholasticism following the Occamist stream of nominalism, which arose in the latter half the fourteenth century.[14]

Regarding the nominalist training Luther received, Heiko Oberman notes: "the philosophers in Erfurt's arts faculty had done more than arm him with weapons to defend himself; they had also provided him with concepts that were to become essential to the Reformation."[15] Two ideas that bear importance in Luther's spiritual development merit calling out. The first idea is that "reason" is subordinated to experience. Implicit here is the point that experiential reality takes precedence for the perception of the world over all ideological speculation (*speculatio*). The second idea is that where any matter pertaining to man's salvation is concerned, the revelation of God's Word is the sole foundation. Thus, both reason and experience function only to confirm Scripture and serve in a ministerial capacity, not a magisterial one. "These nominalist principles," Oberman continues, "attained great significance in the context of Reformation theology: God's world, reason, and experience belong together the same way as do God's salvation, Scripture, and faith."[16] Moreover, what nominalism sought to establish is that all claims of reason be validated or qualified by real experience and not simply by natural reasoning powers or philosophical knot-untying. "Just as it rejected metaphysics to establish physics," writes Heiko Oberman, "so nominalism ventured to strip theology of her distorting meta-theological shackles, with the result that the Scriptures and the prior

13. Martin Luther, *Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J.K.F. Knaake and G. Kawerau et al (Weimar: H.H. Böhlau, 1883), 50:520, 3, quoted in Franz Posset, *Luther's Catholic Christology: According to his Johannine Lectures of 1527* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1988), 117. The critical German translation is hereafter *WA*. Posset also cites *WA* 50:657, 1–30.

14. The *via moderna* is often contrasted with the *via antiqua*, with the former generally associated with the nominalism of William of Ockham and Gregory of Rimini, and the latter representative of the realist positions of Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The nominalist view is understood here as a denial of the real (extramental) existence of universals.

15. Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 119–120.

16. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*, 120. See also, Marc Lienhard, "Luther and Beginnings of the Reformation," in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1987), 269–271.

decrees of God were emphasized at the expense of natural theology."[17] Luther later realized that attendant by the real experience of faith and humility, it was the authority of Scripture to which our natural powers and intellectual prowess had to submit. So although Luther, later on, reacted against much of the training he received while at Erfurt—namely, the soteriology of the *via moderna* as regards the nominalist understanding of justification and his critique of late medieval scholasticism—that training still served as the seedbed of certain critical elements that would come to define Luther's theology of the cross.

In coming to repudiate the idea of knowing God by way of philosophical speculations about God, Luther came to see that God is known most truly *not* in the kind of wisdom and power as the world would have God make himself known, but in the way God *actually* chose to make himself known. And how did God actually make himself most truly known? While it beggars belief to natural sensibilities, God makes himself most truly known in the humiliation, suffering, and death of his Son on the cross. Out of this confluence of influences, Luther comes to value certain aspects of the common late medieval practice of meditation on the passion of Christ. For one thing, because the practice of meditation on the passion centers on the cross, Luther sees it as spiritually beneficial because it not only engages the intellect it also arrests one at an emotional affective level as one contemplates the sufferings of Christ. Moreover, meditation on the Passion urges one to believe in faith the gospel promise that Christ's sufferings serve to unshackle us from the bondage of our own sin.[18] "The theology of the cross," submits Graham Tomlin, "can therefore in part be seen as a revolt or protest of popular and monastic piety against the dominant privatized speculative theology of late medieval scholasticism."[19]

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17. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 28.

18. Graham S. Tomlin, "The Medieval Origins of Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 89 (1998): 22–40, here 28–29, writes: "Having seen the effect of his own sin on Christ, the meditator is then to pass from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, and believe not just that 'sin cannot remain on Christ since it is swallowed up by his resurrection,' but also that 'his wounds and sufferings are your sins, to be borne and paid by him.'" Here Tomlin quotes Luther's 1519 *Sermon von der Betrachtung des heyligon leydens Christi* and cites *WA* 2:140, 18–19 and *WA* 2:140, 7–8. Following this, Tomlin nicely summarizes Luther's own attitude to meditation on the passion of Christ in relation to common late medieval practice: "Luther therefore quite clearly shows both continuity and discontinuity (at least by about 1518) from the main strands of meditation on the cross in operation in his time. Luther rejects some elements of the traditional practice. Yet he takes up other aspects of the tradition, namely the need for emotional engagement and a sense of the objectivity of what Christ has achieved on the cross. These however emerge reconfigured and reworked. An emotional response is directed not to sorrow for Christ, but for oneself, and the objective work of Christ leads not to the sacraments but to meditation on and thankfulness for God's love and forgiveness" (p. 29).

19. Tomlin, "The Medieval Origins of Luther's Theology of the Cross," 29.

3. Characterizing Luther's Theology of the Cross

"What is unique about his speaking of God is that it is never theoretical. . . . There is thus an incomparable concreteness and directness about [this]. There is no mere doctrine of God, but a statement of faith in ever-new variations to the effect that God calls to life, that he judges and pardons his creatures, and takes them again to himself."[20] In those remarks, we have Bernhard Lohse's characterization of Luther's theological convictions, and nowhere are these convictions more reified than in the development of his theology of the cross. What must not be overlooked either are the events and circumstances bearing upon Luther's life leading into and following this period that serve as the crucible in which his convictions concerning the theology of the cross became steel-tempered. Quoting Alister McGrath:

> It must never be forgotten that Luther was not speculating about the nature of God in the comfort of a university senior common room: he himself was under threat of death for his theology, and in this very threat he saw a paradigm of the hiddenness of God's self-revelation both in Christ and the Christian life. When Luther speaks of *mors, tribulatio, passio*, and so on, he speaks as one who believed himself to be close to experiencing them in their full terror, and as one who recognized in the grim scene at Calvary the fact that God had worked through such experiences in the past, and would work through them in the future. Thus when Luther insists that faith turns away from outward appearances and clings to God without wavering, the apparent hopelessness and helplessness of his own situation cannot have been far from his mind.[21]

By the time Luther had written his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* of September 4, 1517, he had already condemned in some way or another the entire medieval scholastic tradition. It was the meeting of the Order in Heidelberg in April 1518, however, at which time Luther presented his theology for evaluation by his brethren—what would be subsequently published in August 1518 as his *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*. It was this occasion in which Luther contended for the theology represented in his previous *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*. Throughout the theses that Luther put forward in Heidelberg, the indulgence controversy was clearly in the crosshairs of his attack, and the theology of the cross was the main ammunition he used in offense against it. Germane to our discussion here is the question of how we should understand the theology of the cross in relation to the grand transformation of Luther's theology overall? To this question, Bernhard Lohse provides a necessary perspective: "In the

20. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. by Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 209.

21. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 169.

dispute with Rome, the *theologia crucis* took on sharp profile, particularly in the *Heidelberg Disputation* but also in the *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*. This means that the *theologia crucis* cannot at all be viewed as an early form of Luther's theology, where possible to be dubbed 'pre-Reformation.'"[22] The theology of the cross, in fact, forms the core of Luther's more settled theology, the foundation on which rests so much of his theological development and spiritual maturation. By this period in Luther's life, the soteriological insufficiency of bernardine spirituality had now been thoroughly re-conceived in the theology of the cross.[23]

3.1 Five Signature Traits that Define the Theology of the Cross

Luther's fullest and most cogent exposition of the *theologia crucis* is indeed the *Heidelberg Disputation* presented in May of 1518 in which he sets forth 28 theses.[24] What we also see on this occasion is the critical distinction Luther applies between God's alien work and God's proper work, a distinction that forms essential ingredients in his theology of the cross. Of all of Luther's disputations, this one is the most carefully crafted and ordered. Its lines of argumentation are developed as if between two pillars. Gerhard Forde sets out the through-line of Luther's argument as follows: "So the whole Disputation moves from the question of the law of God to the love of God. The question, we might say, is how we are moved from one to the other. The theology of the cross points out how that comes about. The way from the law of God to the love of God goes through the cross."[25] Starting from the occasion

22. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 220.

23. According to J.E. Vercruysse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation," *Gregorianum* 57, no. 3 (1976): 523–548, here 524, the only ostensive writings besides the *Heidelberg Disputation* and the *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* in which Luther uses the expressions *theologia crucis* and *theologus crucis* are: (1) *The Asterisks of Luther against the Obelisks of Eck*; (2) *Lectures on Hebrews*; and (3) *Commentary on the Psalms*. Vercruysse then notes that the first two texts were also written in the Spring of 1518, just prior to the Heidelberg disputation, and help "delineate the features of Luther's *theologia crucis* at a very definite moment of his evolution." The critical change within Luther, which really began during his first Psalm lectures (*Commentary on the Psalms*, 1513–15) but had by this time become much more defined and confirmed, is best characterized as a progressive shift from a bernardine *spirituality* of the cross perspective to a re-conceived *theology* of the cross perspective. In regard to how much of a factor Bernard's influence plays in its development, we find aspects that Luther does indeed break from, however more relevant for our purposes are those that he clearly retains and incorporates.

24. The *Heidelberg Disputation* is found in *LW* 31:39–70. For the historical background to this disputation, see *LW* 31:37–38; and E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and his Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 326–330.

25. Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 20–21.

of the Heidelberg disputation, Walter von Loewenich analyzes in his book, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*,[26] how the theme of the theology of the cross subsequently develops in Luther's writings. From his study, von Loewenich proposes that, for Luther, the essence of the theology of the cross is qualified by five signature traits. For the discussion following, I appropriate these five signature traits as the critical elements that define the theology of the cross.

1. The theology of the cross is a theology of revelation, as opposed to speculation.

We have already seen how Luther had come to reject the speculative theology of late medieval scholasticism in the scholastic-philosophical tradition. Such speculative philosophical scholasticism is diametrically opposed to the theology of the cross; he refers to it as the theology of glory. In simple terms, then, theology of glory as it relates to this point posits that God's ways can be generally understood by human reason. This negative counterpart to the theology of the cross is evident in Luther's *Lectures on Hebrews*, written in the Spring of 1518. In a margin note on Hebrews 6:13, the Reformer writes: "[I]t is not enough to know God, as a dog knows its master or as the philosophers know the power and the essence of God, as is written in Romans 1. This is, in fact, a sensual, vulgar, and harmful knowledge. It is necessary to know what is God's will and his design."[27] To Luther's mind, scholastic theology represented all reasoning that was man-centered and faithlessly blind, and his contempt for such strongly informed his theology of the cross. Carl Trueman differentiates between the theologian of glory and theologian of the cross as follows: "The 'theologians of glory' . . . are those who build their theology in the light of what they expect God to be like—and, surprise, surprise, they make God to look something like themselves. The 'theologians of the cross,' however, are those who build their theology in the light of God's own revelation of himself in Christ hanging on the cross."[28] Whether a theologian of the cross or a theologian of glory—Luther captures what he means regarding each of these in his memorable remark: "[L]iving, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating."[29]

Again, in Luther's *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses*, specifically in the final portion of his explanation of thesis 58 concerning the merits of the saints and of Christ, a subtle shift in accent occurs as he moves from speaking about the *theology*

26. Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1976).

27. *WA* 57 (III): 185, 15–19 quoted in Vercruysse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation," 541.

28. Carl R. Trueman, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," *New Horizons* (October 2005), https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=2.

29. WA 5:163, 28–29 ("Vivendo, immo moriendo et damnando fit theologus, non intelligendo, legendo aut speculando") quoted in McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 152.

of the cross to speaking about the *theologian* of the cross. His target, unsurprisingly, is that "deceiving" scholastic theology with which he now associates the theology of glory. What difference is claimed? For Luther, indulgences offer the theologian of glory escape *from* the cross, while the theologian of the cross escapes *to* the cross. And that's precisely where the gospel must lead one to—the cross. Moreover, for the theologian of glory, divine grace serves only to augment whatever it is that one can do or accomplish based on their own will, perspicacity, and strength. For this very reason, Oberman states, that in regard to the *via moderna* school of scholasticism and the soteriology it promoted, Luther "assails on the grounds of their shameless teaching that reason without the illumination by the Holy Spirit can love God above everything else and secondly because of their teaching that Christ would have earned for the Christians only the first grace."[30]

2. God's revelation is indirect and concealed.

The second signature trait of the theology of the cross has to do with answering how God operates in his work of justifying human beings and regenerating them from out of their opposite state and status of being under his wrath and judgment.[31] Figuring prominently here is arguably Luther's keenest insight lying at the heart of the theology of the cross, namely, the apparent *sub contrario* or principle of contrariety in perceiving the dialectical way of God's working. In his *Lectures on Hebrews*, Luther perceives this principle of contrariety in the dialectic between painful discipline and the fruit of peace and righteousness expressed in Hebrews 12:11. "'Here we find the Theology of the Cross,'" writes Luther, because the fruit of righteousness is 'hidden' by pain like how salvation is 'hidden' by the cross."[32] Remarking on this signature trait, J. E. Vercruysse writes, "Luther record[s] a frequent dialectical way of speaking in the Scriptures, opposing judgment and justice, wrath and grace, death and life, bad and good. In these antagonistic pairs

30. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 109.

31. See Egil Grislis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God: The Problem of the *Deus Absconditus* in Luther's Treatise *De Servo Arbitrio*," *McCormick Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (November 1967): 81–94, here 87. In contrast to theologians who ascend up a glory route to know God, in thesis 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* Luther cites 1 Corinthians 1:21 and 25 to describe the theologian of the cross as one who perceives here down below the "backside" of God (*visibilia et posteriora Dei*) in God's apparent weakness and folly. His use of "backside" (or "hinder parts") recalls, of course, Exodus 33:18–33, where Moses asks to see God's glory.

32. James G. Kiecker, "Theologia Crucis et Theologia Gloriae: The Development of Luther's Theology of the Cross," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (1995): 179–188, here 182, citing *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 16, *Luther: Early Theological Works*, ed. and trans. by James Atkinson (London: SCM Press, 1962), 233–234.

expressing acceptance within rejection, he discovers 'the great works of the Lord.'"[33] The simple yet perplexing claim insisted by Luther is that God's ways are paradoxical and hidden to human reason, as scripture texts such as 1 Samuel 2:6 and Isaiah 28:21 and 45:15 push us to accept. The Lord's work of killing and bringing to life that 1 Samuel 2:6 talks about, however, needs to be understood in the light of the alien work of the Lord described in Isaiah 28:21. As Vercruysse points out:

> This sequence . . . does not correspond to a strict succession in time, but rather to an intimate connection of law and grace in God's acting, which the believer perceives at once. Experiencing the wrath of God in his despair and powerlessness, he sees at the same time grace and mercy coming up. He knows God only in the crucified Christ: God's proper work is concealed in his alien work.[34]

Luther makes this point plainly in thesis 16 of his *Heidelberg Disputation*: "Thus an action which is alien to God's nature (*opus alienum Dei*) results in a deed belonging to his very nature (*opus proprium Dei*): he makes a person a sinner so that he may make him righteous."[35] In this way, a dialectical action takes place in which God hides himself in his alien work of destroying and annihilating the human condition of self-sufficiency and self-centeredness in order that God may reveal himself in his proper work of justifying and recreating that person.

To be sure, the basis of this dialectic between the alien work of God and his proper work is the event and experience of Christ's own passion and death on the cross and subsequent resurrection from the dead. "To the eyes of unbelief," states Carl Trueman, "the cross is nonsense; it is what it seems to be—the crushing, filthy death of a man cursed by God. This is how the unbelieving mind interprets the cross—foolishness to the Greeks and an offense to Jews, depending on whether your chosen sin is intellectual arrogance or moral self-righteousness."[36] Indeed, already in his first set of lectures on the Psalms, Luther's understanding of how God hides himself in his alien work is evidenced in his lengthy meditation on the word *profunde* in Psalm 92:5. Graham Tomlin comments on Luther's exposition as follows:

> The 'deepness' of God's thoughts refers to their hiddenness *sub aliena specie.* The passage bristles with paradox, and the sense that God's revelation in Christ was hidden under '*confusio, mors, crux, infirmitas, languor, tenebre et vilitas*.' The passage is typical of much of Luther's tone at this stage in the *Dictata*, and significantly, it is to 1 Corinthians 1:21 that

33 . Vercruysse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation," 529.

34 . Vercruysse, "Luther's Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation," 544.

35. *LW* 31:51.

36. Trueman, "Luther's Theology of the Cross," https://opc.org/nh.html?article_id=2.

> Luther turns to express the essence of this paradoxical alien wisdom of God.[37]

The apparent *sub contrario* or principle of contrariety is shown supremely in the cross of Christ. God's hiding himself in his alien work takes place precisely in Jesus dying on the cross in apparent weakness and folly, under God's wrath. "The 'theologian of glory,'" writes Alister McGrath, "expects God to be revealed in strength, glory and majesty, and is simply unable to accept the scene of dereliction on the cross as the self-revelation of God."[38] Thus, for Luther, God's hiding himself in his alien work becomes paradigmatic of how God works to achieve the end purpose of his proper work revealed in justification and new creation. For to the natural mind of the theologian of glory, the cross of Christ demonstrates not God's power or God's wisdom but rather his weakness and his foolishness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21, 25). But God has chosen to operate *sub contrario*, doing the exact opposite of what human beings would expect; he hides himself in weakness and foolishness, and finally, in death itself.

3. This revelation is recognized in suffering, not in works.

The third signature trait of the theology of the cross recognizes that God's revelation in Christ is perceived most fully and deeply in the *crucem et passionem Christi*. The theology of the cross, as we have noted, embraced in part a popular and monastic piety in response against the dominant privatized speculative theology of late medieval scholasticism. It also arose in part as a revolt against the very place where it should have been considered foundational—the medieval penitential system. Whereas Christ's work on the cross should have been the central focus of the penitential system, instead, the focus had become human-centric, that is to say, a matter of what human beings needed to do to procure absolution for their sins. And what qualified someone to receive absolution for sin involved performing such things as acts of contrition, confession, and works of satisfaction. "The cross was diminished still further," writes James Kiecker, "when attrition, a sort of half-hearted sorrow for sin, replaced contrition." Kiecker continues:

> It was said that attrition could be elevated to contrition by confession and absolution. For many thoughtless sinners, the way of salvation came down to attrition (vague sorrow for sin), followed by confession and absolution (which mechanically upgraded attrition to contrition), followed by indulgences (which took care of temporal and even eternal punishments).

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37. Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross; Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal* (Cumbria, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 1999), 177.

38. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 167.

> This system obviously appealed to everything that was worst in man. The indifferent or self-righteous sinner thrived. The concerned and fearful sinner trembled, since the cross had been squeezed out and he had only his own works on which to rely.[39]

What became paramount for Luther was establishing a proper understanding of what purpose the various acts served that made up the penitential system. As he came to grasp it, this meant turning from a basic reliance on works of satisfaction and associated things one had to perform to receive absolution to a total reliance on Christ's perfect satisfaction on the cross. It was because of his supreme concern to rely solely on the cross of Christ and not in any of our own works, then, that Luther set about to purge the penitential system of its spiritually toxic practices, and especially that of indulgences.

With the above-mentioned thinking having already taken root within the young Augustinian friar, Luther came to see that for the theologian of glory, God is pleased by sincere human effort, namely, the whole nominalist concept of *facere quod in se est*—God grants grace to those who "do what is in them." This theology was predicated on humility being an active virtue in which one could, through striving, increase, or develop. In thesis 16 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther overturns this, condoning no place at all for doing 'what is in one':

> God "gives grace to the humble" [1 Pet. 5:5], and "whoever humbles himself will be exalted" [Matt. 23:12]. The law humbles, grace exalts. The law effects fear and wrath, grace effects hope and mercy. "Through the law comes knowledge of sin" [Rom. 3:20], through knowledge of sin, however, comes humility, and through humility grace is acquired. Thus an action which is alien to God's nature results in a deed belonging to his very nature: he makes a person a sinner so that he may make him righteous.[40]

It is also significant theologically that here Luther brings Christ into the center of his argument for the first time in the *Disputation*. Gerhard Forde explains the tactical rationale involved here:

> Yet the theologian of the cross knows that there is nothing to do now but wait upon grace, to recognize that when all the supports have been cut away we can only throw ourselves on the mercy of God in Christ. So . . . the great turn to grace is finally made. . . . When the theologian of glory has finally bottomed out, Christ enters the scene as the bringer of salvation, hope, and resurrection.[41]

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39. Kiecker, "Theologia Crucis et Theologia Gloriae," 181.
40. *LW* 31:50–51. See also Posset, *Pater Bernhardus*, 224–226.
41. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 60.

For the theologian of the cross, then, what truly and fully pleases God is Jesus, who epitomized perfect obedience to the Father in his suffering, death, and subsequent resurrection. This is no simplistic theodicy being put forward. A theodicy is not even what Luther was proposing. What his theology of the cross does have in view is that God's revelation as perceived in the *crucem et passionem Christi* is where God justifies himself, and the resurrection of Christ is where God vindicates himself. "The *theologia crucis* demands realism about what can be known about God in this world of darkness and sin," writes Alister McGrath. He continues:

> Where the unbeliever sees nothing but the helplessness and hopelessness of an abandoned man dying upon a cross, the theologian of the cross (*theologus crucis*) recognizes the veiled—but real!—presence and activity of the 'crucified and hidden God' (*Deus crucifixus et absconditus*), who is not merely present in human suffering, but actively works through it.[42]

In Luther's mind, this meant that we are called not to look straight through the passion and death of Christ on the cross to something else beyond it, but rather to look straight at it.

Luther expresses this train of thought in theses 19–21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*, which are rightly considered the keystone of the whole argumentation.[43] Once again, the issue is not "theology" per se but the theologian. How will the theologian see and respond to God's works? Luther thus forces not a doctrinal but existential consideration:

> 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."
>
> 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.
>
> Thesis 21: A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

The plain matter in theses 19–21 revolves around how theologians of glory operate from completely different assumptions than those with which theologians of the cross operate. Citing Romans 1:20, thesis 19 says that right knowledge of God for the theologian of glory is educed from the examinable things of the world. From

42. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 175 (citing WA 1:613, 23–24).
43. *LW* 31:52–53.

such assumptions and by extension, the way to tell if God is pleased or displeased with you is a function of how well the conditions and circumstances of your life are. If things are going well for you, then God is pleased with you because you have evidently pleased him. On the other hand, if things are not going well for you, then evidently, there are things in your life that God is not pleased about, and you must make efforts to rectify these things to better please him. Todd Wilken puts it like this:

> 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. . . . 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.[44]

From a theology of glory perspective, then, the penitential system predicated on works of satisfaction and associated things one had to perform to receive absolution represents a way for people to avoid truly dying to self with the humility that comes solely from looking to the work of Christ's death on the cross on their behalf. In this view, works of satisfaction and indulgences are the theology of glory's way of short-circuiting having to undergo God's alien work of judgment and destruction and instead go straight to receiving God's proper work of redemption and peace with God. As we saw earlier, however, God's alien work is precisely that through which he accomplishes his proper work. Indeed, we do exactly right to see our own plight before God in just these terms.

4. The God hidden in his revelation is known only by faith.

The fourth signature trait emphasizes the role that faith plays in perceiving the hiddenness of God's self-revelation both in Christ and the Christian life. At the close of our third point, I spoke of the humility that comes solely from looking to the work of Christ's death on the cross on our behalf. Such humility is critical in bringing a person to the point where he recognizes the futility of his own powers to gain God's favor through his own efforts and apprehend the Christ-event through the eyes of our reason alone. Rather, through the eyes of faith, we come to perceive that in the cross of Christ, the God revealed in his proper work first lies hidden beneath his alien work. Alister McGrath remarks: "Luther's doctrine of faith does not concern a

44. Todd Wilken, "The Theology of the Cross: Cross-Shaped Theology," *Issues, Etc. Journal* 2, no. 1 (November 1996), https://www.issuesetcarchive.org/issues_site/resource/journals/v2n1wlkn.htm.

hidden metaphysical realm concealed under that of the senses, but concerns the manner in which God is at work in his world, which is crystallized, and focused on the death of Christ on the cross."[45] For the theologian of the cross, faith is neither a native virtue nor a power within a person's heart and mind. Faith, for the theologian of the cross, is a gift of God by the Spirit of God, and that person comes to perceive the work and nature of God who is hidden in his revelation (*Deus absconditus*), namely, the revelation of God in the passion and death of Christ on the cross. Those who perceive that revelation with unbelieving eyes see only the tragic figure of Christ as a good man who dies an unjust death on the cross. But to those with eyes of faith, Christ's suffering and death on the cross is the just means whereby God removes the weight of their sins in complete forgiveness.

Through faith alone, God's proper work is revealed (*Deus revelatus*) in justification and new creation. In other words, the apparent meaning of the Christ-event (redemption accomplished), and Christ's work ongoing through the Holy Spirit (redemption applied), can only be known in and through faith. The substance of this thinking is evident in Luther's treatise *On the Bondage of the Will*, written in 1525:

> Many things seem, and are, very good to God which seem and are, very bad to us. Thus, afflictions, sorrows, errors, hell, and all God's best works are in the world's eyes very bad and damnable. . . . How things that are bad for us are good in the sight of God is known only to God and to those who see with God's eyes, that is, who have the Spirit.[46]

Luther fully accepts that the dynamic of ongoing salvation necessarily means that the Christian will continue to encounter the hidden God in torments and temptations and even times of deep despair where faith must struggle through to receive the lovingkindness and mercy of God that is revealed in Christ. Reflecting this conviction in *On the Bondage of the Will*, Luther writes:

> [Reason] would certainly understand, where it said of God that He hardens none and damns none, but has mercy on all and saves all, so that hell is destroyed, and the fear of death may be put away, and no future punishment need be dreaded! It is along this line that reason storms and contends, in order to clear God of blame, and to vindicate His justice and goodness! But faith and the Spirit judge otherwise, believing that God is good even though he should destroy all men.[47]

45. McGrath, L*uther's Theology of the Cross,* 168.

46. *WA* 18:708, 37–39; 18:708, 1–3 cited in Grislis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God," 83.

47. *WA* 18:708, 4–9 quoted in Grislis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God," 87–88.

Thus, for Luther, a terrific tension remains in the life of the Christian between the death of the old self and the life of one born anew, being both *justus et peccator*. In the death of the old self, one enters into contention, as it were, with God, experiencing the hiddenness of the strange work of God under which the sinner "suffers" through besetting temptations and torments, powerlessness and despair. But in struggling through such suffering in faith, the person born anew by the Holy Spirit comes to experience the revelation of the proper work of God in the acceptance and love of a merciful God in Christ. We can describe the divine action this way: the eyes of faith are eyes regenerated by the Holy Spirit that enable the theologian of the cross "to struggle through to the acceptance and love of what it cannot comprehend. In doing so, faith will find its way to the revealed God in Christ, yet always by way of the *Deus absconditus*."[48]

5. God is known in the practical thought of suffering the wrath of God.

The fifth signature trait of the theology of the cross is tightly bound up with the third trait previously discussed. Indeed, as all of these signature traits are integral to what characterizes the theology of the cross, there is no ranking of importance between them, nor is there any order of praxis to them. Luther's main concern in all of this was that the theology of the cross would drive one to be a theologian of the cross, and thus his concern was critically of both existential and salvific importance for those who would be truly Christian. For Luther, God's characteristic manner of dealing with people necessarily involves, by God's own design, knowing God in the practical thought of their suffering his wrath. Graham Tomlin provides a helpful exposition of this point:

> Now, this pattern, that God condemns before he saves, *includes* the believer, in that God works in exactly this way to save sinners. Luther, in fact, for the first time introduced the idea of God's proper and alien work in this context. The cross and resurrection are not just the means of salvation, but have become a paradigm of salvation. What God has done to Christ he does to us. The way God treated Christ is the way he treats us. The anguish of the sinner who knows he needs God's help takes on a new significance as the "*crucem et* passionem *Christi*", in other words, it places him at exactly the same point as Christ on the cross, waiting for the deliverance of God. God's salvation works through suffering and death, whether in the cross of Christ or in the crucifixion of the sinner in anguish and despair.[49]

As we established earlier, while what Luther calls God's alien work appears as divine condemnation, it really just serves as essential preparatory work for God's

48. Grislis, "Martin Luther's View of the Hidden God," 88.
49. Tomlin, *The Power of the* Cross, 172.

proper work of saving through Christ and bestowing the benefits of that very salvation in an ongoing way by his Holy Spirit. True to form, then, the revelation of God's nature and pattern of redemption are discernible—descent and ascent, suffering before glory, condemnation before salvation.

Recall from our discussion earlier that although Luther repudiated certain aspects of the common late medieval practice of meditation on the passion of Christ, there are other aspects of it he sees as spiritually beneficial. The aspects of the practice of meditation on the passion that Luther rejects belong to false meditation, the aspects he commends belong to true meditation. Tomlin lays out two key ways that contrast true meditation from false meditation:[50]

1. True meditation on the passion and death of Christ lays the blame for the cross squarely at one's own feet. False meditation seeks to lay the blame for it elsewhere (either on Judas or the Jews).

2. True meditation suffers the pain of knowing that one's own sins have crucified Christ. False meditation seeks to avoid suffering by carrying the cross as a charm; simply generates fruitless pity for Christ or thinks it enough to hear mass.

This practice of meditation on the passion contributed to the development of Luther's thinking that God is known in the practical thought of suffering the wrath of God. It is not hard to see where these two strands of theological thinking converge. For the theologian of the cross, the sorrow that true meditation brings one to experience is a sorrow for oneself, not a sorrow for Christ. Likewise, true meditation on Christ's passion and death leads to and evokes deep gratitude for God's merciful lovingkindness, not to a self-centric or nominal performance of the sacraments according to the medieval penitential system.

Throughout his career, Luther continued to value both true meditation and knowing God in the practical thought of suffering his wrath. As time went on, however, the practice of meditation on the passion of Christ in the form of monastic piety matured into calling for meditation on the Word of God. Likewise, knowing God in the practical thought of suffering his wrath matured into knowing the comforting power of God's Word in the midst of the inevitable suffering experienced in the life of the Christian. Such maturation is plainly seen in the *Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings*,[51] written in 1539, in which Luther sets out three "rules" for the proper way of studying theology. The proper way to begin any theological reflection is with *oratio* (prayer) in conjunction

50. Tomlin, "The Medieval Origins of Luther's Theology of the Cross," 28. Here Tomlin cites *WA* 2:136, 3–10; *WA* 2:136, 15–20; and *WA* 2:136, 21–137:9.

51. *LW* 34:280–288.

with the Holy Scriptures. From this starting point, one moves to *meditatio* (spiritual reflection), which involves meditation on the words of Scripture. And when all this has done its proper work on the would-be theologian, that person encounters and experiences *tentatio* (spiritual trials or assaults—*Anfechtung*). The valuing of both true meditation and knowing God in the practical thought of suffering his wrath is apparent, albeit theologically reworked, in the *Preface*. Relevant for our purposes here are Luther's statements on the second and third above-mentioned rules—*meditatio* and *tentatio*:

> Secondly, you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is haft ripe. Thus you see in this same Psalm how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, of nothing except God's Word and commandments. God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly was not given in vain. Thirdly, there is *tentatio*, *Anfechtung*. This is the touchstone that teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God's Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.[52]

We must remember that in Luther's view, God himself is the ultimate source of *Anfechtung*, for *Anfechtung* is integral to the design of how God works to save sinners and continues at work in those whom he loves—he condemns to humble sinners before he justifies to save them and sanctify them. Remarking on the idea of *Anfechtung*, Luther states: "in so far as it takes everything away from us, leaves us nothing but God: it cannot take God away from us, and actually brings him closer to us."[53] Alister McGrath summarizes its significance for Luther's theology of the cross as follows:

> Most significantly of all . . . God himself must be recognized as the ultimate source of *Anfechtung*: it is his *opus alienum*, which is intended 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

52. *LW* 34:286–287.
53. *WA* 5:165, 39–166:1, quoted in McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 152.

> all the obstacles to justification which formerly existed. The believer, recognizing the merciful intention which underlies *Anfechtung*, rejoice in such assaults, seeing in them the means by which God indirectly effects and ensures his salvation.[54]

By the time Luther presented his exposition of the *theologia crucis* at the Heidelberg disputation, his understanding of the telos of God's merciful intention verges on lyrical as he concludes the *Disputation* with thesis 28, which makes the full transition to God's love: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it." The love born of the cross, says Luther, "flows forth and bestows good. Therefore sinners are 'attractive' because they are loved; they are not loved because they are 'attractive.'"[55] To Luther's point, Mark Mattes writes: "Human love needs an object of beauty to spark it. God's love, in contrast, is inherently creative; it needs no such object. Out of the nothingness of human sin and death, God creates new men and women in Christ, who trust in God's mercy alone. God deems sinners beautiful for Jesus' sake."[56] Out of *this* love, it is sinners, evil persons, fools, and weaklings who are made righteous, good, wise, and strong. Coming to see our sufficiency in Christ is thus something amazingly new—like the beauty of "finding love."

4. Luther's Theology of the Cross: A Theological Aesthetic Characterization

Since Luther comes to his understanding of the theology of the cross—really all his theology—through the prism of law and gospel, it radically revised how he understood the nature of beauty. As a consequence of how Luther radically re-conceives his view of the nature of beauty, there emerges in his thinking two fundamentally different kinds of aesthetics in the order of the divine economy: (1) the aesthetics constituting God's work of creation fashioned into the cosmos—what Mark Mattes refers to as "creation beauty"—and (2) the aesthetics constituting God's work of redemption—what Mattes refers to as "gospel beauty."[57]

54. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 170–71.

55. *LW* 31:57.

56. Mark Mattes, "The Aesthetic Beauty of the Gospel," https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/aesthetic-beauty-of-gospel.

57. The discussion following on creation beauty and gospel beauty draws from Mattes' work in *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*.

4.1. Creation Beauty

Mattes' exploration of Luther's theology ranges widely, and he persuasively shows that "Luther agrees with his medieval forebears that beauty is an attribute of God, appropriated by the Son, and that creation reflects God's beauty."[58] At the same time, Luther's adverse reaction to medieval metaphysics as being a true way to understand the ontology of created reality amounts to his rejecting that the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty apply to the structure of *all* reality. As Mattes' puts it,

> For Luther, the chief problem in this way of thinking is that matters like divine goodness and beauty cannot be established on purely metaphysical grounds, independently of Scripture, because outside of Christ they are not certain. . . . Undoubtedly, for Luther goodness and beauty are metaphysically real—God is the most real of all realities—but metaphysics is unable to establish decisively God's goodness and beauty.[59]

This led Luther eventually to reject the notion of *pancalism*, which claimed that all created things to one degree or another are beautiful.[60] On the one hand, Luther affirmed that beauty is an attribute of God, and as such, the beauty of God is reflected in creation itself. On the other hand, he eschews the medieval metaphysical worldview because metaphysics cannot establish decisively God's goodness and beauty. So what Luther rejects is not the medieval metaphysical view of beauty in and of itself.[61] The criteria of beauty formalized by Thomas Aquinas, namely, proportion, clarity, and perfection with completeness, was criteria Luther accepted in reference to the world, that is, creation beauty, but not in reference to gospel beauty,

58. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 70.

59. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 71.

60. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 78–80. Relevant to the point here, Mattes writes in the Introduction that Luther's radically revised view of the nature of beauty, namely, the aesthetics constituting God's work of redemption, "will put Luther at odds with the stance known as 'pancalism'—meaning that *all things* (pan-) to one degree or another are beautiful (*kalos* in Greek)—maintained by many medieval thinkers. We can find hints of such pancalism in Luther at the earliest stage of his career, but as he matures, this view is increasingly challenged. It aids and abets the notion that humans could have something to offer God, but that is nothing other than an illusion. It feeds a cruelty that hammers at people, crushing them with its demands" (p. 11).

61. From the patristic era through to the Middle Ages, we find that beauty was on the whole considered a transcendental quality of being, along with truth, goodness, and oneness. This presupposition was commonly held by the ancient and medieval church Fathers and Schoolmen, both Eastern and Western, which they found to be consistent with the Scriptures. Medieval church Fathers and theologians who espoused these qualifications for beauty include Robert Grosseteste (ca. 1175–1253), Bonaventure (1221–74), and Thomas Aquinas; their legacy of theological aesthetics is representative of the kind advanced in the late medieval period, with Aquinas' contribution generally considered the acme of its development.

which has to do with Christ's identifying himself with sinners in his passion and death on the cross and with God's evaluation of sinful humans. "By no means did Luther reject these three criteria for beauty," writes Mattes, "at least when beauty is seen not with respect to God's evaluation of sinful humans, but instead with respect to the evaluation of beauty as it exists in the world (*coram mundo*)."[62] Given this metaphysical disconnect between creation beauty and gospel beauty, it means that in Luther's view, creation beauty can be said to apply to Adam and Eve before the fall but not after the fall. In point of fact, "these criteria are integral to the Reformer's view of the first humans' original righteousness (*iusticiae originalis*) as he portrayed it in his late *Lectures on Genesis*" (1535–1545).[63] Therefore, before the fall, a theology of glory can be properly said to apply since our primal parents' original state of integrity meant that they had no flaws, no defects, no deformity—in short, no ugliness of any kind. But after the fall, all of what constitutes the image of God in human beings has become radically affected and infected by a condition of depravity, and so the standards by which to assess beauty *coram mundo* no longer apply for they are no longer valid. From a theological aesthetic perspective, then, the theology of glory means no imperfections and the avoidance and eschewing of that which is ugly or entails suffering. All such things representative of the theology of glory comprise the inherent beauty of creation or beauty *coram mundo*. *Not* avoiding or eschewing that which is ugly or entails suffering is representative of the theology of the cross and comprises the beauty of the gospel or beauty *coram Deo*.

4.2. Gospel Beauty

It is the theology of the cross that for Luther now validates gospel beauty, that is, beauty *coram Deo*. "That God has an alien work," writes Mattes, "indeed that God is even *deus absconditus*, as we see in the mature Luther's work—is not incompatible with the assertion that God in his nature is beautiful or good."[64] But beauty *coram Deo* is a hidden beauty and is best understood paradoxically only in virtue of God's revelation as perceived in the *crucem et passionem Christi*. The beauty of God's hiddenness is found in his alien work of bringing sinners to despair of themselves and come to the acute realization that on their own, they truly have nothing to offer God. Mattes frames the point here nicely:

> Christ who is beauty itself became ugly by identifying with sinners so that humans made ugly through sin might become beautiful in God's eyes. Thus the theme of beauty is critical if want to understand Luther's conviction that

62. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 91.

63. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 91. Here Mattes cites *LW* 1:164 (*WA* 42:123, 37).

64. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 90.

> justification entails God's alien work (*opus alienum*) of reducing sinners to nothing just so that he might do his proper work (*opus proprium*) of reestablishing them as new creations through faith.[65]

That the alien work of God is a beautiful work even though an alien work is because it brings sinners to relinquish their own self-righteousness and apprehend God's goodness and beauty by faith alone in Christ alone so they may have forgiveness and eternal life. Indeed, only the repentant sinner does not claim any beauty for himself and perceives that it is Christ and Christ alone who is truly beautiful, that becomes justified *coram Deo* and thus beautiful *coram Deo* by a beauty imputed to him by Christ. Yet as we discussed above in the fourth signature trait used to qualify the theology of the cross, Luther would also insist that it is only through the Holy Spirit's enlightenment that sinners can perceive themselves and perceive Christ, respectively, in this way. Moreover, the beauty of Christ is not to be found in his natural, physical human form, that is, in the outward human form that our natural eyes see. According to the portrait of the Servant of the Lord given in Isaiah 53:2, identified with the person of Christ, Luther readily acknowledged that Christ's outward human form was either visually ugly in appearance or that unrepentant sinners can only see him as such.[66] Luther captures the overall idea here in his Commentary on Psalm 45 (1532), stating,

> It could perhaps be that some were fairer in form than Christ, for we do not read that the Jews especially admired His form. We are not concerned here with His natural and essential form, but with His spiritual form. That is such that He is simply the fairest in form among the sons of men, so that finally He alone is finely formed [*solus formosus*] and beautiful. All the rest are disfigured, defiled, and corrupted by an evil will, by weakness in their resistance to sin, and by other vices that cling to us by nature. This ugliness of man [*turpitudines*] is not apparent to the eyes; it makes no impression on the eyes, just as spiritual beauty makes no visual impression. Since we are flesh and blood, we are moved only by the substantial form and beauty that the eyes see. If we had spiritual eyes, we could see what a great disgrace it is that man's will should be turned from God.[67]

For Luther, it is fair to say, the beauty of God is an expression of his righteousness since, in gospel beauty, God's justification of the sinner—the imputation of God's righteousness—amounts to being adorned in the imputed beauty

65. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 91.

66. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 94. Referencing Luther's Commentary on Psalm 45, Mattes cites *LW* 12:208 (*WA* 40/2:487, 9).

67. *LW* 12:207 (*WA* 40/2:485, 5–11), quoted in Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 96.

of God, the ground and source of which is Christ himself.[68] This recalls how Luther encapsulates thesis 28 of the *Heidelberg Disputation*: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. . . . Therefore sinners are 'attractive' because they are loved; they are not loved because they are 'attractive.'"[69]

What this construal of Luther's theological aesthetic amounts to, then, is that gospel beauty operates at the spiritual level upon sinners and, as such, involves God in his hiddenness doing an alien work upon the sinner. This distinguishes gospel beauty from creation beauty. Unrepentant sinners, however, do not perceive Christ's beauty precisely because they are offended by his embrace of sinners in their ugliness and by the ugliness of the cross itself, which is marked by deformity, darkness, and death.[70] It is these iconic trademarks of the cross of Christ that qualify it as a strange and alien work of God. Only on the basis of Christ and Scripture's witness to Christ can the proper ground of God's goodness and beauty be established. Gospel beauty is thus perceived under the "sign of the opposite" (*sub contrario*), which has nothing to do with how one understands the nature of beauty at the mundane level. As Mattes explains: "In aligning himself with sinners of all sorts, Christ associates with the disproportionate, the dark, and the imperfect, and he himself becomes all this ugliness. Hence, Christ's beauty is one which is 'hidden

68. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 94, writes: "Christians are in no position to claim beauty for themselves; rather, they can claim beauty only as it is *imputed* to them by Christ. These themes are set forth and expanded in the mature Luther's commentaries on various psalms in the 1530s and 1540s. Most importantly, righteousness by faith, in the Reformer's judgment, is simply an expression of God's beauty. God's beauty is an expression of his righteousness. *Coram deo*, justification is beauty and God's imputed beauty (Christ himself) is justification."

69. *LW* 31:57. To our point here, Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 99, states: "Defined not by law but by Christ, sinners are deemed beautiful. Perhaps to be consistent, we must say they are simultaneously beautiful and ugly, just as they are *simul iustus et peccator* (simultaneously just and sinful)."

70. Relevant to our point here, Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 98, quotes the following portion of Luther's Commentary on Psalm 45, on which Luther expounds in relation to the gospel beauty of Christ and condemned sinners in need of mercy: "The King is hidden under the opposite appearance: in spirit He is more beautiful [*pulcher*] than the sons of men; but in the flesh all the sons of men are more beautiful than He, and only this King is ugly, as He is described in Isaiah 53:2, 3. . . . Therefore we see that delightful and pleasant things are stated of this King in the Psalm, but they are enveloped and overshadowed by the external form of the cross. The world does not possess or admire these gifts; rather it persecutes them because it does not believe. These things are spoken to us, however, to let us know that we have such a king. All men are damned. Their beauty [*pulchritudinem*] is nothing in God's eyes. Their righteousness is sin. Their strength is nothing either. All we do, think, and say by ourselves is damnable and deserving of eternal death. We must be conformed to the image of this King." Mattes cites *LW* 12:208–9 (*WA* 40/2:487, 26–39).

under the opposite appearance' (*sub contraria specie*)."[71] What exactly Luther meant by Christ's beauty being a spiritual beauty has everything to do with his identifying and becoming one with "despicable and miserable sinners," and in divine love and mercy for them, dying for them to rescue them out of their sin and misery.[72] Repentant sinners are ashamed of their own ugliness but unreservedly unashamed of the ugliness of the cross, which they recognize as a display of beauty nonpareil and the means by which God beautifies them, so to speak—the beauty of God's grace, the proper work of God.[73] For this reason, writes Mattes: "[R]epentant sinners glory in Christ's beauty, which is his compassion, because they are hungry, even desperate, for God's forgiveness and mercy. Repentant sinners are adorned in Christ's beauty as a gift given externally to them."[74]

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71. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 96. Referencing once again Luther's Commentary on Psalm 45, Mattes cites *LW* 12:208 (*WA* 40/2:487, 26). Later in his book, Mattes writes: "God hidden under the 'sign of the opposite' is a strange and oddly beautiful matter because it is a generosity that absorbs the worst that sinners can bring so that sin can be buried in a tomb where no one—especially God—can ever find it. God's beauty precisely is his fidelity and commitment to those enslaved by sin and harassed by the law" (p.164).

72. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 96, poses and addresses the following questions in reference to Christ's beauty being a spiritual beauty: "But what makes up Christ's beauty? Is it that, unlike sinners, he is truly righteous on the basis of the law? The Reformer does not indicate this. On the contrary, he claims that Christ's beauty is his identifying and becoming one with sinners, all for the sake of helping and saving them. Christ 'did not keep company with the holy, powerful, and wise, but with the despicable and miserable sinners, with those ruined by misfortune, with men weighed down by painful and incurable diseases; these He healed, comforted, raised up, helped. And at last he even died for sinners.'" Mattes quotes Luther's Commentary on Psalm 45 and cites *LW* 12:208 (*WA* 40/2:486, 11–12).

73. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 98, quotes the following portion of Luther's Commentary on Psalm 45, on which Luther expounds how being justified by faith is to be made beautiful: "Our beauty [*pulchritudinem*] does not consist in our own virtues nor even in the gifts we have received from God, by which we exercise our virtues and do everything that pertains to the life of the Law. It consists in this, that if we apprehend Christ [*Christum apprehendamus*] and believe in Him, we are truly lovely [*vere formosi*], and Christ looks at that beauty [*decorum*] alone and at nothing besides. Therefore it is nothing to teach that we should try to be beautiful by our own chosen religiousness and our own righteousness. To be sure, among men and at the courts of the wise these things are brilliant, but in God's courts we must have another beauty [*aliam pulchritudinem*]. There this is the one and only beauty [*sola pulchritudo*]—to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ." Mattes cites *LW* 12:280 (*WA* 40/2:583, 19–27).

74. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 92. Later in his book, Mattes writes: "It is the beauty of grace, the same beauty that the waiting Father gave his prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) or that Christ gave the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2–11), a beauty based on God claiming sinners as his own, enduring the penalty of death in order to grant sinners new, eternal life, a beauty grounded not in what is lovely or desirable but in the forgiving and rescuing generosity of the one who loves. The outcome of both the prodigal's and the adulteress's desire led to their being crushed. But these sinners are granted pardon and a relationship with their Lord, which reawakens a new hunger, a resituated desire: to hear again and again that they are forgiven and that a new path in life is opened to them ("Go and sin not

5. The Beauty of the Theology of the Cross: Re-conceived from the "Hidden" and "Alien" Work of God to a "Theodramatically Fitting" and "Revealed" Work

"Clearly those who are seeking a well-refined theory of the theological aesthetics in Luther will be disappointed," writes Mark Mattes." The Reformer's work in aesthetics tends to be an offshoot of his primary work in Christian doctrine. . . . In spite of its lack of comprehensiveness, there are sufficient family resemblances among the threads of Luther's thought about beauty from which we can feel and see its texture"[75] The basic problem as regards the theological aesthetic conception of Luther's theology of the cross, however, is more than that a well-refined theory of Luther's theological aesthetic is not proposed, but that a biblically-grounded concept of beauty itself is not adequately identified. I will set forth elements of Luther's theology of the cross from a theological aesthetic point of view. In light of that, I will present a brief case for a biblically-grounded concept of beauty, which I will reference in applying aesthetic criticism to Luther's theology of the cross, pointing out elements in his view that I take issue with and ones that I am in concord with.

While it is true that the Scriptures, for their part, nowhere either explicitly justify beauty or explain the principles of beauty, it is nonetheless necessary to set out key definitions and concepts concerning beauty in the development or explanation of a theological aesthetic. More formally put, theological aesthetics derives from biblical- and systematic theological work concerning or pertaining to the aesthetic dimension as integral to and as apprehended throughout the canon of Scripture. As I outlined in my book *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics*,[76] the objective reality of beauty comes from its correspondence to the attributes of God, and it is solely this correspondence that grounds a metaphysical realist view of beauty. The basic position of theological aesthetics, which is that beauty is a communicated property of the external works of God, means that the existence of beautiful things requires, if you will, the existence of a Beautifier. So far, Luther and I are on the same page, at least concerning the beauty of God, as is reflected in creation itself. What becomes problematic theologically is that Luther accepts a parochial concept of beauty stemming out of Thomistic metaphysics (and late medieval generally), which he sees as valid only for the economy of creation but not for the economy of redemption, that is, from the standpoint of the cross. In other words, what Luther grants with his left hand as a valid metaphysical basis for

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more"). It is a beauty that confirms their place and status in this world, in spite of the pharisaical quest for purity, or the condemnation of the adversary. It is a beauty that secures the gift of being at home in this world" (p. 164).

75. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty*, 189.

76. Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018). The remaining discussion that follows draws from this work.

creation beauty, he takes away with his right hand in pronouncing it as invalid for gospel beauty. This will not do. Why should a cohesive aesthetics fall apart between the economy of creation and that of redemption viewed in light of the cross? To pose the problem another way, if, as Luther himself affirmed, beauty is an attribute of God among all his other attributes, why indict beauty singularly as being metaphysically disparate between the orders of nature (creation) and grace (redemption) and not indict other attributes in this way? With all that in mind, the question posed by that inimitable Swiss Roman Catholic theologian of the 20th century Hans Urs von Balthasar is germane to this proposal: "May it not be that we have a real and inescapable obligation to probe the possibility of there being a genuine relationship between theological beauty and the beauty of the world?"[77]

Although explicit biblical references to the "beauty" of God (or otherwise identifying God specifically in terms of his beauty) are few, verses such as Psalm 27:4; 96:6; 145:5,12; Isaiah 28:5; and 33:17 link directly images of a crown, a diadem, kingdom, and the sanctuary of the Lord to God's beauty. From these texts, a connection is evident between divine beauty and the majesty and glory, the kingship and sovereignty of God. Of consequence here, Bernard Ramm suggests that the royal motif aptly captures the displayed character of God's glory: "If there is a bridge which connects the visible glory of the Lord with his essential being, it is that of the kingship. . . . The royal kingship becomes one of the richest sources of analogies in the OT for the doctrine of God. The *kābôd* of the earthly king becomes the analogue for the *kābôd* of the Lord" (cf. Pss. 22:28; 24:7–10).[78] Terms in Scripture expressive of "beauty," moreover, are also used in a parallel relationship with "glory" (e.g., Ex. 28:2). In short, the beauty of God is most basically associated in Scripture with God's glory. As I argue for in *The Beauty of the Lord*, God's glory refers not so much to a specific attribute of God but is the term, that when theologically considered, comprehends all of God's attributes. God's glory, as such, includes beauty as being one of those attributes. God's extrinsic beauty—his beauty *ad extra*—is thus a communicable perfection expressed in his outward works. The theological relation between God's glory and beauty translates as follows: the beauty of God manifested economically is expressed and perceivable *as a quality of* the glory of God inherent in his work of creation, redemption, and consummation. The display of God's glory is thus always beautiful, always entails an aesthetic dimension to it.[79] Contra Luther's view, I submit that the metaphysical basis of both creation beauty and gospel beauty, then, is the glory of God.

77. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*. Volume I. Seeing the Form. eds. by Joseph Fessio, S. J. and John Riches, trans. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1982), 80.

78. Bernard Ramm, *Them He Glorified: A Systematic Study of the Doctrine of Glorification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 19.

79. See *The Beauty of the Lord*, chapter 2, under the discussions in Beauty—A Divine Attribute?; The Relation Between Beauty and God's Glory; and Defining the Relation Between Beauty and God's Glory (pp. 39–52).

As I stated earlier, it is necessary to set out key definitions and concepts concerning beauty in the articulation and advocacy of a cohesive theological aesthetic. I submit that the distinct conceptual content of beauty that applies to the beauty expressed in God's outward works is consonant with a classicist theory of beauty, summarized as follows: Beauty is an intrinsic quality of things that, when perceived, pleases the mind by displaying a certain kind of fittingness. Thus, a realist view of beauty is postulated in which the unique nature of beauty implies objective properties—with such properties themselves able to serve from an *a posteriori* perspective as objective aesthetic criteria. That is to say, beauty is discerned via objective properties such as proportion, unity, variety, symmetry, harmony, intricacy, delicacy, simplicity, or suggestiveness. The recognition of such properties serving from an *a posteriori* perspective as objective aesthetic criteria is beyond enumeration, of course. A judgment of fittingness implies a judgment about the degree to which a thing exhibits beauty and vice versa. As I am applying the term, then, fittingness functions as an overarching term expressive of the full range of aesthetic properties that identify any and all objective characteristics of beauty. Given that beauty is integral to God's essential nature, however, that reality in and of itself does not require that God conform his self-revelation to our this-worldly norms and notions of the beautiful. Keeping that in mind, fundamental to our theological aesthetic is the premise that everything God does is perfectly fitting—and hence beautiful in its God-glorifying nature.[80]

The idea of gospel beauty as derived from Luther's theology of the cross involves a dialectical way of God's working in the fulcrum of Christ and his cross. The dialectic of gospel beauty is between God's alien work in the event and experience of Christ's own passion and death on the cross and God's proper work in Christ's resurrection from the dead and subsequent exaltation. The former represents a hidden beauty because Christ's holy righteousness is "hidden" by the cross; the latter represents a beauty openly revealed because the resurrection of Christ is where God vindicates himself. What I am challenging is the idea that Christ's passion and death on the cross should be considered an alien work of God to be understood from a theological aesthetic perspective as beauty concealed. Rather, I wish to argue that the beauty of Christ's identity—and namely here in the event of Christ crucified— is better described in terms of theodramatic fittingness, and thus as beauty openly revealed. What I mean by "theodramatic fittingness" is Christ's identity in his being and doing as displayed predominantly in his obedient relationship to the Father demonstrated through the experiences of his earthly life.[81] My argument entails that as the incarnate image of God, Christ is the full measure of the image in which

80. See *The Beauty of the Lord*, Chapter 1, under the discussion in A Classicist Theory of Beauty (pp. 9–17).

81. See *The Beauty of the Lord*, Chapter 2, under the discussion in The Theodramatic Fittingness of the Son as Incarnate Redeemer (pp. 74–83).

humans are created, and thus the full measure of the image-bearing glory inherent in and expressed through his human form. The self-revelatory nature of God's actions in Christ means that the essential nature of God—and thus the glory of God in its beauty—is, in fact, revealed. Christopher Holmes challenges the idea of God's hiddenness, similarly:

> If God's glory and majestic splendor is equated with God's propensity for self-giving, then what positive work is left for an account of divine hiddenness? Would it not be better to forsake categories of veiling and unveiling, primary hiddenness and secondary hiddenness, in favor of the glory of God which bespeaks God's propensity for self-giving, for giving himself as he is, a self-giving which includes humanity as the place where God presents himself thus.[82]

It is because the form and content of God's self-revelation in Christ—that is, the character of the Son within the human form of Christ—are perfectly united, that the essential nature of God, and thus the glory of God in its beauty, is truly and fittingly revealed. God's glory in Christ is best appreciated not as hidden by his humanity but as revealed in and through his humanity, "which God includes in himself as the very form of his own self-witness."[83] Therefore, the beauty of Christ is qualified by the theodramatic fittingness that corresponds to the human form his life takes during his earthly career.[84] That human form was in the form of a slave. Christ crucified takes the revelation of his glory to a whole other level because, in this event, the form of his humanity on the cross was literally cruciform—the form that was most fitting as the Sin-bearer of the world. The cruciform of Christ on the cross, perhaps better said, dramatizes the fullness of God's self-giving love and thus magnifies the fullness of his beautiful glory.[85]

6. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, then, a biblically-sound and robust theological aesthetic, as I am arguing the case, starts with beauty as being an attribute of the essential nature of God and expressed as a quality of the glory of God. The glory of God in Christ finds its supreme expression in the event of Christ's atoning work on the cross, dramatizing the fullness of God's self-giving love and thus magnifying the fullness of his beautiful glory. In my proposal, there *are not* two fundamentally different

82. Christopher R. J. Holmes, "Disclosure without Reservation: Re-evaluating Divine Hiddenness," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 48, no. 3 (2006): 367–80, here 377.

83. Holmes, "Disclosure without Reservation," 376.

84. See *The Beauty of the Lord*, Chapter 4, under Christ the Form of a Slave, esp. the discussion in The Revealing and Concealing Dialectic of Christ's Glory (pp. 165–72).

85. See *The Beauty of the Lord*, Chapter 5, under The Depth of Beauty in the Form of the Cross, esp. the discussion in Christ's Kingly Glory on the Cross (pp. 220–25).

kinds of aesthetics in the order of the divine economy—one being the aesthetics constituting God's creational work and the other being the aesthetics constituting God's redemptive work in Christ. In contrast to Luther's bifurcation of divine beauty in terms of so-called creation beauty and gospel beauty, I argue that the external works of God in creation and in redemption are a consistent and unitive expression of the one and the same glory of God according to the outworking of this eternal plan, and as such are a consistent and unitive expression of the one and the same beauty of God. It is theologically incongruous, therefore, to make a distinction between an alien work of God (*opus alienum Dei*) and a proper work of God (*opus proprium Dei*) since, in my view, every work of God is a perfectly fitting expression and revelation of that one and same glory of God. In relation to Luther's theology of the cross, rather than understanding the event of Christ crucified as an alien work of God whose beauty is hidden (*pulchritudo absconditus*), it is better to see the event of Christ crucified as a theodramatically fitting work of God (*opus conveniens*) whose glorious beauty is openly revealed (*pulchritudo revelatus*).

6.1. The Dialectic Reconsidered

This begs the question, though, that if the glorious beauty of Christ crucified was indeed openly revealed, how is it that not everyone perceived it rightly? Scripture's answer to this question is that, indeed, there is a dialectic at work, but it is strictly a pneumatological dialectic, that is, a dialectic of the work of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Luther thought, the dialectic at work is not between that of God doing an alien and concealed work in Christ crucified, and that of God doing a proper and revealed work in Christ's resurrection from the dead and subsequent exaltation. Rather, the glory of God's actions in the event of the cross was glory revealed, not glory concealed. The glory was always openly displayed, just not always perceived by everyone, for that glory is perceived in a dialectic of revealing and concealing. It was the optics given through faith alone that determined whether or not someone rightly perceived Christ in the form of his humanity for who he truly is—Lord and Savior over all (cf. John 9:35–41; Acts 9:1–20). As Hans Urs von Balthasar explains: "If one fails to see the form of Jesus it is not because the objective evidence is insufficient, but because of the guilt of a 'darkness' which does not see, recognize, or receive the Light. . . . Thus the guilt is not excused by the hiddenness; rather, the latter becomes the judgment of guilt. The hiddenness is the objective proof that the guilty have not wanted to see."[86] So while I offer the above-mentioned criticism and my own proposal as a corrective to the theological aesthetics of Luther's theology, I hasten to add that Luther likewise affirmed that the optics given through faith alone determined whether or not someone rightly perceived Christ in the form of his humanity for who he truly is—Lord and Savior over all. As I am arguing, though,

86. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, Volume I, 522.

the dialectic of revealing and concealing is strictly a pneumatological dialectic that rests solely on the Spirit's work of revealing Christ in concert with the faith of the sinner in Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit as such was required during Christ's earthly career just as it has been ever since to impart such optics to those who would "perceive" rightly the glorious beauty of Christ crucified. On this last point regarding the work of the Holy Spirit, Luther would unquestionably chime in with a hearty "Amen and Amen!"