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Crux et Vocatio

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Crux et Vocatio

Introduction

Martin Luther is often invoked in support of a theology of the cross. This is not surprising, given his frequent appeals to the cross as the font of theological reflection. Yet there is a undeniable infelicity in Luther's name being attached to certain formulations of a theology of the cross. This is particularly evident in those instances in which a theology of the cross becomes a theological method which occasions a self certain appraisal of theological truth.¹ When a theology of the cross, in abstraction from its narration, becomes an epistemological guarantor, the cross itself has suffered an injurious shame. This occurs most frequently when the cross becomes a cypher for existential anxiety and, as such, the cross becomes a singular instance of a general affirmation of suffering as the locus of God's activity. The cross can and does meaningfully refer to both anxiety and suffering, in general, but as this article will argue, it does so precisely because it is first a concrete event in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and second because it is concretized in the life of the faithful wherein it engages the public as well as the private.

This article will advance by first exploring Luther's explication of a theology of the cross in his *Heidelberg Disputation*. I will underscore the *Disputation* as a pedagogical tool, which forms readers into theologians of the cross. The *Disputation*, then, is not intended to outline a

¹ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, German Eds. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt, Eds. Geoffrey Kelly and John D. Godsey, Trs. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 43: 'Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, as principle, as system. It means the forgiveness of sin as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God.'

method so much as to lead its reader into an encounter with God in Christ.² Theologians of the cross, then, are born by grace through faith into that reign of God from which they are able to construe the significance of the cross for justified life. I next underscore that Luther understands the cross as concretized in *vocatio*, that means by which the Christian lives in God's two reigns of church and world and through which the Christian is cruciformed. In conclusion, I explore the resources inherent in Luther's treatment of *crux et vocatio* for a life of *responsio*, both to the gracious elicitation of new life in Christ and its corresponding vocational engagement in a world obsessed with fadish novelty and oblivious to the renewal of faith.

Crux

The Heidelberg Disputation contains Luther's clearest articulation of a theology of the cross. In this document, Luther writes with a specific purpose in mind, that is, to make theologians of glory into theologians of the cross.³ Luther progresses in this goal by way of careful rhetorical movements.⁴ At its best, theology does not advance by way of deduction from arid principles, but by a lively engagement between dialogue partners. Anyone who has read Luther recognizes

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, German Ed. Hans-Richard Reuter, Ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., Tr. H. Martine Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 131: 'Here, not in its method of thinking, but rather in the obedience of thinking, the scholarly discipline of theology does differ fundamentally from everything profane.'

³ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997), p. 60.

⁴ David S. Cunningham has demonstrates that, theology is, above all else, a task in faithful persuasion. Cf. *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp. 15, 37.

in him a *rhetor* whose aim is not to impart data, but to persuade his or her partner to action.⁵ David S. Yeago has described Luther as ‘a supremely *rhetorical* theologian,’ who writes ‘to move and form consciences, to call forth and nurture faith, hope and love, and to defend the little flock of the faithful against the crafts and assaults of the Tempter.’⁶ In light of this, we can expect that a document which evolved in the context of a theological debate concerning Luther’s new insights, is a carefully crafted piece of rhetoric.

The *Heidelberg Disputation* arose in response to a request by Johann von Staupitz (Luther’s supervisor in the German order of the Augustinians) that Luther participate in a disputation with the Augustinians at Heidelberg on April 26th, 1518. Luther was asked to prepare theses on the topic of sin, free will, and grace in order to acquaint his fellow Augustinians with his new and controversial theology. The *Disputation* consists of 28 theses on theological and 12 theses on philosophical topics, as well as proofs for the theological topics and a longer explication of the theme of grace and the will. Although Luther failed to convince his seniors, his theses were well received by younger theologians, among whom were those involved in spreading the Reformation.⁷

In examining *The Heidelberg Disputation*, the reader discovers a carefully crafted document that aims towards the transformation of the reader by drawing her into a series of arguments that destroy all foundations for a claim of righteousness outside of the presence of Christ who transforms the faithful. As Forde has discerned, the *Disputation* has four key

⁵ Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion*, p. 76.

⁶ David S. Yeago, ‘Ecclesia Sancta, Ecclesia Peccatrix’ in *Pro Ecclesia* IX. No. 3 (Summer, 2000): pp. 331, 332.

⁷ LW-31, pp. 37, 38 from Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1958-86).

movements. Luther discusses, in turn, good works, the will, a theology of the cross in contrast with a theology of glory, and finally the righteousness of faith. Piece by piece, Luther dismantles any claim for self sufficiency. Using St. Paul and St. Augustine, but also carefully constructed logic and rhetorical flourish, Luther demonstrates throughout the *Disputation*, that humans have no claim to righteousness on their own. I will, at this point, elucidate some key features of Luther's argument in this document as a way to clarify Luther's understanding of a theology of the cross.

Luther discusses the problem of works in the first twelve theses. From the outset, Luther crafts the issue of works in relationship to the laws of God. The first two theses demonstrate that if the law, given by God for our good, fails to enable us to do truly good works, how much less can we trust in our own ability in abstraction from God's given laws. Luther then proceeds to use a series of arguments to provide the reader with a view of works from a slightly different perspective. He notes that, in the Bible, the saints themselves plead for mercy, which denies his hearer the certitude by which to affirm her work as good and that seemingly good works can be mortal sins insofar as an outer good work need not correspond with a pure heart, the very concern of God. In so doing, Luther deprives his hearers of the relief of appealing to venial sins, since he asserts, in citing Galatians 3:10, that the sins with which we have to do are mortal insofar as we fail in keeping the law of God, with its unconditional demand. Our inability to know whether, in fact, we have really succeeded in keeping the law places us in the situation in which we know not whether our works, which are seemingly good, are in fact truly good. This curious state of affairs parallels the realization that the works of God, which all too often are far from attractive, are altogether righteous by virtue of their being God's works. How things appear need not reflect the state of affairs. In fact, Luther completely turns a popular notion of

mortal and venial sins on its head by redefining all sins as mortal, yet admitting the possibility that fearing a sin as mortal is the very condition for its being regarded as venial. It is interesting to note throughout the first twelve theses, that deal with the question of good works, how often Luther makes us of ‘how things seem’ and ‘how it appears.’ He aims to provide us with a different vantage point from which to apprehend the notion of good works. He aims to locate our vantage point in Christ.

Luther continues his rhetorical strategy by next addressing the issue of the will in theses 13 through 18. Free will, as is made clear in the *Bondage of the Will*, is a divine name.⁸ This does not preclude the possibility of speaking of a free will in connection with the human, yet Luther does so in a thoroughly paradoxical manner. Luther looks at the human as existing in the mode of patient and agent. Insofar as the human engages the will in the mode of an agent, she fails to act freely, and only succeeds to do evil. It is possible, however, after the Fall, for the free will to ‘do’ good in the mode of patience, or suffering.⁹ Here the human will works well by first being worked through (a theme further treated in the final section of the *Disputation*). In effect, Luther has first deprived his hearer of any self confidence in their ability to do good works, and then of their ability to will well. He aims to drive his audience to a point of desperation, the very condition necessary for the reception of grace.

The next stage, theses 19 through 24 address what Forde calls ‘the great divide’: a theology of the cross in contrast to a theology of glory.¹⁰ In a fashion, this next stage in the

⁸ LW-33, p. 68.

⁹ LW-31, p. 49. Cf. WA-1, p. 360: ‘Liberum arbitrium post peccatum in bonum potentia subiectiva, in malum vero semper activa.’

¹⁰ Forde, *Theologian of the Cross*, p. 69.

Disputation is jarring, and perhaps a little bit unexpected. Luther has first deprived his hearer of the comfort of good works, then of the surety of a well ordered will in order to prepare his hearer to receive the grace of Christ. One would expect the next section to give an account of the indwelling righteousness of Christ, that is grace, and thereby to fulfill von Staupitz's request to address the topics of sin, free will and grace. Luther, instead, carves an opening between the treatment of the will and his treatment of the indwelling of grace in theses 25 through 28. His text 'makes space' for a treatment of the character of a theologian, here dealt with under the categories of being a theologian of glory and a theologian of the cross. Of utmost import, in this moment of suspension, is the manner in which Luther invokes the experience of the reader in which to advance his argument. The previous two sections, concerning good works and free will, call into dispute how the reader normally views matters. The reader, surprised to discover that good works are not so good and God's sometimes seemingly ugly works are, in fact, exceedingly good realizes that she has called good what is in fact evil and evil what is, in fact, good. In the third movement of the disputation, then, the reader finds a self description in Luther's assertion that 'a theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.'¹¹ The reader cannot help but see something of herself in that description. Luther anticipates this. All humans see their work as exceedingly worthy, and thereby demonstrate their identity as theologians of glory. But this very identification is, for Luther, the critical step in his masterful conformation of the reader to a theology of the cross. The reader is caught, as it were, in a trap. The contrary character of Luther's articulation of his theological insight in the first 19 theses is meant to evoke counter arguments. At a fundamental level, the reader identifies with these counter arguments, but then is told that it is the mark of a theologian of glory to identify with what Luther argues against.

¹¹ LW-31, p. 53.

But this self identification as a theologian of glory is the very moment of transformation that makes her into a theologian of a cross. There is an ‘aha’ moment written into the script of the *Disputation*. In seeing myself as a theologian of glory, I begin to be a theologian of the cross. Luther advances a counter intuitive move insofar as he teases the reader into the realization that my self identification as a theologian of glory can only be an instance of an alien work, precisely because of the arresting quality of its truth. If that which is true comes from outside of me, and if my self identification as a theologian of glory is true, then that very moment is itself an instance of grace. The reader is being justified in the give and take of the text’s confrontation. After establishing the event character of this transformation, Luther is prepared to describe what has just happened.

At the heart of the last four theses, articulating the nature of the righteousness of faith, is a description of the life of faith in thesis 27 and its explication:

Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work and our work an accomplished work, and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work. Since Christ lives in us through faith (*Quia dum Christus in nobis habitat per fidem*) so he arouses us to do good works through that living faith in his work, for the works which he does are the fulfilment of the commands of God given us through faith. If we look at them we are moved to imitate them.¹²

¹² LW-31, pp. 56, 57. WA-1, 364 from Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883-1993).

Of considerable import, here, is the notion that Christ lives in us through faith.¹³ We see, then, that the condition for the possibility of our faithful patience is the agency of the indwelling Christ. Justification, as an event, presupposes the presence of Christ who works in us and thereby moves us to imitate his fulfilment of the commands of God. Imitation, for Luther, clearly follows upon our being moved (*movemur*). A sort of dual agency is presumed that follows upon the primary agency of Christ. My acting in imitation is only possible because another has first acted in me. The reader will have just gone through this experience, and is now having her experience explained to her in a manner that includes an imperative nested within an indicative. In Luther's reference to *imitationem*, the reader is reminded of the significance of *looking* upon the works of Christ, which refer the reader to Luther's earlier treatment of a theology of the cross. In that section, Luther turned the reader from the vain posture of presuming to look upon the invisible things of God, to comprehending 'the visible and manifest things of God seen through the cross and suffering.'¹⁴ A shift occurs insofar as the reader no longer attends to the invisible, but to that hidden in suffering.¹⁵ In the *Disputation*, then, Luther advances a theology of the cross by locating the reader in Christ, in whom she has a new *locus* for viewing the world.

¹³ And so Luther will assert that once 'a Christian begins to know Christ as his Lord and Savior, through whom he is redeemed from death and brought into His dominion and inheritance, God completely permeates (*durchgottet*) his heart.' LW-24, p. 87.

¹⁴ LW-31, p. 52.

¹⁵ Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, Tr. R.A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1970), p. 227. And so, for Luther, Christ's cry of despair on the cross evidences the concealment, rather than the absence of God (LW-12, 126).

Many have suggested that Luther's theology of the cross as evidenced in the *Disputation* is an integrating concept throughout all of Luther's work.¹⁶ Others see a theology of the cross as an emphasis of the early Luther. David Yeago resolves this by pointing to a subordination of a theology of the cross into the later Luther's sacramental theology that suggests a continuity of thought in its development.¹⁷ In both Luther's theology of the cross, and sacramental theology, the defining element is a strategy wherein the reader is led to expect things to be different than they first appear and by which idolatry is foreclosed. As Ebeling noted earlier, God under contrariety is a red thread throughout Luther's thought.¹⁸ More generally, this accords with von Loewenlich's characterization of revelation as indirect in the thought of Luther.¹⁹ Accordingly, faith itself, like the cross, is marked by concealment. These themes deny to those, who otherwise mean well, the comfort of seeing the cross as means by which we can predict God's way with self certainty. The cross is not a crystal ball. If one can discern in Luther's treatment of the cross a prognostic moment it is simply this: the cross teaches us that the way of God cannot be presumed and theologians of the cross best be prepared for surprises. In contrast to those theologies wherein a theology of the cross, in the words of Yeago, tends to 'refer to anything [protestants] like',²¹ the cross is never meant to comfort, at least not in a facile manner. The

¹⁶ Walther von Loewenlich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Tr. Herbert J.A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1976), p. 49.

¹⁷ David S. Yeago, 'The Catholic Luther,' in *The Catholicity of the Reformation* Eds. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), p. 27.

¹⁸ Ebeling, *Luther*, p. 236.

¹⁹ von Loewenlich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, pp. 11, 19.

²¹ Yeago, *Catholicity*, p. 20.

cross subverts, and a theologian of the cross is attentive to the transformative experience of exactly that. Moreover, it is absolutely critical, if one wishes to faithfully exposit Luther, to understand that his treatment of the cross cannot be extricated from a solid confidence in resurrection as that event which makes possible any talk at all of a theology of the cross.²² Also to be noted is the denial, inherent in Luther's treatment of the cross, of the possibility of understanding the cross as an abstraction, or in some cases, a more general cypher for a willingness to live with ambiguity. For Luther, language about the cross never refers to a principle, but like justification itself, to an event.²³ As such, reference to a theology of the cross in the life of the faithful ought to be concretized in particular experiences.²⁴ In order to advance our understanding of this, we turn now to *vocatio*, Luther's treatment of the cross *in situ*.

Vocatio

Luther's estimation of vocation as a *doctrine* points to its necessary place in that constellation of doctrines that articulate the theo-logic of the confession that Jesus is Lord.²⁵ Vocation, for

²² Forde, *Theologian*, p. 1, note 1.

²³ Ebeling, *Luther*, pp. 162-4.

²⁴ Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, German Ed. Joachim von Soosten, Ed., Clifford Green, Tr. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 48, 49: 'The person exists always and only in ethical responsibility; the person is recreated again and again in the perpetual flux of life.'

²⁵ Cf. Karlfried Froehlich, 'Luther on Vocation,' in *Harvesting Martin Luther's Reflections on Theology, Ethics, and the Church*. Ed. Timothy J. Wengert. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), p. 121 who notes that the description of vocation as a doctrine is, in and of itself, a surprising appraisal.

Luther, is not a term reserved for clergy. It is an all embracing term that relates to Luther's understanding of both creation and preservation, as well as redemption. Vocation is a critical doctrine for Luther because it serves to narrate the location of the Christian in the world and its consummation. Vocation is, above all else, a consequent of the fact that *Christ's* vocation was to embrace the world on the cross so that it might come to be what it is in the will of God.

Vocation, for the faithful, flows from our participation in Christ's vocation.

Gustaf Wingren wrote the standard treatment on Luther on vocation.²⁶ In this seminal work he carefully relates vocation both to Luther's theology of the cross and to his doctrine of two reigns. In sum, vocation is the means by which God cruciforms the faithful at the intersection of church and world. In order to unpack this summary, some preliminary comments regarding Luther's treatment of the two reigns are first required.

Luther's treatment of the two reigns is his most maligned doctrine. Its most vehement critics generally aim at a caricature of the doctrine that has become determinative for a superficial understanding of Luther's doctrine. This caricature envisions that the world is divided into two socio-political *realms*, the realm of church and the realm of state.²⁷ The division between these realms is sharp, and its consequent is quietism. The realm of the state is the realm of law and the realm of the church is the realm of gospel. Bonhoeffer recognized this caricature as operative among the German Christians and provided a stinging critique of it in his

²⁶ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, Tr. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

²⁷ I use 'realm' here with its spatio-restrictive connotations in distinction from 'reign', which I reserve for Luther's treatment proper.

incomplete *Ethics*.²⁸ Bonhoeffer noted that the original *use* of the doctrine of the two *reigns* in Luther was to assert the unity of two reigns, which are church and world, not church and state, and which exist *Miteinander, Füreinander, and Gegeneinander*.²⁹ This assertion helps us to understand better that the two reigns are, for Luther, coexistent in a fashion that is analogous to the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. It is for this reason that Gerhard Ebeling asserted that the doctrine of the two reigns cannot be represented by a diagram, nor can the distinction be explained, but only preached.³⁰ Gustaf Wingren narrates the theological significance of this doctrine by locating the Christian between the reign of world and church.³¹ In Wingren's portrayal of Luther's thought, the resultant tension is further multiplied by the fact that the Christian simultaneously lives between God and the devil.³² Whereas the *simul* of living under the aegis of God and the devil is characterized by mutual exclusion and its attendant tragedy, the *simul* of living in both reigns is the crisis of cruciformation. This cruciformation is an event and the event occurs by grace of vocation. Vocation is the place where the cross takes form.³³

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, German Eds. Isle Tödt, Heinz Eduard Tödt, Ernst Feil, and Clifford Green, Ed., Clifford J. Green, Tr. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 60.

²⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 393. Althaus also considers the two reigns interdependent. Cf. Paul Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1965), pp. 64, 65.

³⁰ Ebeling, *Luther*, p. 177.

³¹ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 85.

³² Paul Althaus notes that for the very early Luther, the world was Satan's province. Through his development of the doctrine of the two reigns, it quickly becomes apparent that God, not Satan is Lord of both reigns. Cf. Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*, p. 57.

³³ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, pp. 29, 54, 66.

Moreover, this formation takes place at precisely the intersection of the two reigns.³⁴ It is important to note that vocation for the Christian takes on a particular character by virtue of this location. Insofar as the world, as well as the church, is under God's beneficence, the reign of the world is gifted with order. Humans are given a place, or *Stand* in life. These *Stände* are the means by which life in the world advances. For the Christian, however, there is conversion of sorts. In Christ, my *Stand* becomes my *Beruf*.³⁵ The blessed burden that attends living under order, that is ordinary life, becomes the occasion for God's work upon us.³⁶ As Luther states, when God works on us, he hews us into the shape of the cross.³⁷ *Vocatio*, then, is understood baptismally because by our baptism, we understand our *Stand* differently.³⁸ The fact that God works in my vocation is the very reason why vocation itself is an object of faith.³⁹

In order to fully understand Luther's treatment of vocation, it needs to be clarified how sharply Luther intends to contrast it with cloistered existence. Luther writes:

When I was a monk, I wearied myself greatly for almost fifteen years with the daily

³⁴ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 28.

³⁵ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 2. It is important to note that this specifically theological use of *Beruf* is lost in modern German. Bonhoeffer (*Ethics*, p. 289) alerts us to this and provides a fresh reading of *Beruf*, which I will explore below. Cf. LW-13, p. 370, where Luther insists that Christians alone know that their *Stand* is divinely ordered.

³⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, German Eds. Martin Rüter and Isle Tödt, Ed., John W. De Gruchy, Tr. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 99: 'The other person is the limit that God sets for me, the limit that I love and that I will not transgress because of my love.'

³⁷ LW-13, p. 378.

³⁸ LW-24, p. 220.

³⁹ LW-24, p. 394.

sacrifice, tortured myself with fastings, vigils, prayers, and other very rigorous works. ... Even today I recall these torments, but not in such a way as to consider returning to that prison. To speak according to the flesh, it was not a prison, but a soft kind of life, free from all the innumerable annoyances of civil government and domestic affairs. Yet it was a prison to good men who did not think simply of their bellies but longed for salvation.⁴⁰

It is important to see that for Luther, *vocatio* is transformative precisely in the concrete demand it places on us as we engage in the trials and triumphs of domestic and civil affairs. Moreover, insofar as it is a transformative locus, it is so only by the anticipatory power of the resurrection, which is the supposition for the cross concretized in vocation.⁴¹ Vocation for that reason is located at the intersection of church and world and one attends to both law and gospel in vocational response. Wingren's reading of Luther, on that account, is close to Bonhoeffer who insists that both law and gospel operate in both realms.⁴² This is why Wingren insists that God works through the stations of life to save the human by first crucifying him and then giving him faith. Consequently, Wingren can write that the 'freedom of faith does not dissolve vocation. On the contrary, it sustains it and gives it new life.'⁴³ Insofar as baptism ever transforms me, it transforms my *Stand* to become my *Beruf*, or *vocatio*. The reign of heaven

⁴⁰ LW-12, p. 273. Cf. also LW-12, pp. 71-74.

⁴¹ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 58.

⁴² Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 357.

⁴³ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 66.

touches the reign of earth precisely in my *Stand* and occasions its conversion by converting me. Luther is not unaware of the eschatological character of this conversion:

And if I thus remain in Christ, then it is certain that for His sake my vocation, my life, and my works are also acceptable to God and are precious fruits in His sight. And though I myself am still weak in the faith, and though many frailties and sinful lusts still dwell within me and always manifest themselves, this will not be reckoned against me but will be forgiven, provided I do not yield to them.⁴⁴

The gospel is the power that revitalizes vocation in renewing me.⁴⁵ For this reason, in Luther's estimation, it is inadmissible to ponder the possibility of changing my station in life.⁴⁶ This is a correlate, for Luther, of the notion that we cannot choose our own cross.⁴⁷ Moreover, this inadmissibility is of a piece with Luther's assessment that my *Stand* is not only the locus for my cruciformation, but it is also the means by which God meets the needs of my neighbour.⁴⁸

Luther's assessment of the inadmissibility of changing vocations reflects a particular notion of the public that is no longer operative and represents one area in which there is a need to move beyond Luther by way of Luther. In order to advance an alternate treatment of the public,

⁴⁴ LW-24, p. 221.

⁴⁵ Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, pp. 66, 91.

⁴⁶ LW-3, pp. 62, 216-218. Luther will even assert that 'Actually the pope and the bishops should remain in their place; only they should acknowledge this King, humbly bow before Him, and embrace His Word.' LW-12, p. 74.

⁴⁷ Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*, p. 29.

⁴⁸ Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*, p. 47.

I will next sketch the contours of some contemporary notions of our view of both the public and vocation, before revisiting the question of the relationship between cross and vocation for the good of the lives of the faithful today.

Responsio

Bonhoeffer asserted that the *vocatio* of Christ evokes the *responsio* of the disciple; the *Beruf* of the disciple originates in the *Ruf* of Christ.⁴⁹ This is a helpful clarification, insofar as it allows us to consider more carefully the transformative power of the call for the called in her calling. In order to more carefully tease out the significance of this, I will briefly sketch out some contemporary understandings of both vocation and the public in which we exercise our vocation. After doing that, I will explore the manner in which Bonhoeffer's treatment of the ultimate and penultimate can serve to advance Luther's treatment of *vocatio* by way of Luther.

An estimation of the place of *vocatio* in a contemporary theology has to take into account the changed state of affairs. The ancient world, in which the miller's son would be a miller no longer holds. Froehlich asserts that in modernity, we experience vocation as a self-inflected discipline.⁵⁰ Choosing a career is an integral part of the task of self invention that has been placed on our shoulders.⁵¹ Moreover, this task has been laden with expectations that would have been unimaginable for pre-moderns. The heritage of vocational significance that Luther gave to modernity as the affirmation of the ordinary has morphed into the expectation of the extra-

⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 289.

⁵⁰ Froehlich, *Harvesting*, p. 128.

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1991), p. 81.

ordinary.⁵² The status quo is no longer seen as acceptable or to put the matter more sharply, the status quo is now seen as change itself.⁵³ The worker willing to spend his career in the same job is now seen as morally suspect. Risk is the principle virtue, yet unlike risk of old, today's risk is deprived of narrative support.⁵⁴ The once treasured virtue of loyalty is an impossibility insofar as its motivation, delayed gratification, is no longer supported by stable institutions.⁵⁵ The faithful in both pew and pulpit increasingly have no sense of the stability of their vocation. Society continually expects us to re-invent ourselves and thereby betrays, by its obsession with novelty, that 'society' itself is a product of modernity.

Hannah Arendt traces the emergence of 'society' as a determinative concept in the west in *The Human Condition*.⁵⁶ In so doing she notes that the ancients held that the two realms of the private and the public referred to the realms of the family and the polis.⁵⁷ The former was the realm of necessity, labour, and the place in which the *dominus* dominated slaves and family members. For the ancients, the private was a sphere of *deprivation*.⁵⁸ The realm of freedom, by contrast, was the *polis*. Here, free men debated among one another and advanced the great

⁵² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 218.

⁵³ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998) p. 31.

⁵⁴ Sennett, *Corrosion*, p. 83.

⁵⁵ Sennett, *Corrosion*, p. 99.

⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 38.

projects of humankind.⁵⁹ Part and parcel of Arendt's description of this reality is her division of the human life into three principal arenas. At the most fundamental level, humans *labour* for that which they consume (ie. food and necessities). Humans with the freedom to advance beyond this level (such as artisans) *work* for that which can be used and endures beyond the life of the artisan as a reach for immortality (ie. art and use objects). But at the highest level, the citizen *acts* in community to produce in the polis the immemorial projects of politics.

Arendt makes a compelling case that a radical re-ordering of the ancient hierarchy has taken place in modernity. To cite two examples, 'politics' has become a cypher for social sophistry, and moderns now construct use objects that are consumed.⁶⁰ But above all, the reversal of the ancient world's priorities is evident in the modern estimation of the significance of the private. 'Society,' in Arendt's estimation, is the private writ large and the *oikos* is the now the model for economy.⁶¹ Society is run as if it were one large, but dysfunctional family, with economic lords competing to dominate domestic life.⁶² Conformism in the guise of equality replaces the engagement of the individual in the *res publica*.⁶³ In society, the *aporia* of work is that its end becomes meaningless insofar as the *res publica* no longer functions to guide it.⁶⁴ Moreover, the modern attack of the public renders the private as the only possible sphere of meaning with the result that meaning is finally a vacuous concept. Work no longer provides one

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ And so consumers buy portable phones, computers, etc. that are discarded after a time as if they were used up.

⁶¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 33.

⁶² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 39, 40.

⁶³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 41.

⁶⁴ Arendt, p. 154, 155.

with a place in the world, but a function in a society that is replaceable, contingent, and wholly deprived of meaning in an ultimate sense.⁶⁵ In short, those who aim to fulfill the biblical admonition to toil honestly⁶⁶ find themselves at risk, without the support that makes risk meaningful, in a society that has masked necessity as freedom, and working for ends that are vacuous and without meaning. It is given to us to ask if and how Luther's treatment of *crux et vocatio* bear upon this situation in this strange new world.

The first step in reclaiming Luther's treatment of *crux et vocatio* is to clarify his treatment of the public by distinguishing his *phenomenology* of the public, from his *theology* of the public. Luther's phenomenology of the public was relatively simple. By virtue of creation, church and family were the two faces of the public in which humans were engaged. Because of the fall, the threat of tribalism necessitated God's inclusion of government as a way to provide order and safety for church and family.⁶⁷ This three dimensioned public was formally stable in Luther's estimation, although change was clearly a part of this description. The prince might change, but the office of the prince was certain. In Luther's estimation, this three dimensioned public was ordered by God for the good of humans. Of course, calling this a *phenomenology* is anachronistic, and Luther certainly considered his appraisal of the public to be defensible theologically. Yet there is a distinction between this account of the public and his treatment of

⁶⁵ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp. 40, 41.

⁶⁶ Titus 3:14; 1 Thess. 4:11; Eph. 4:28.

⁶⁷ Cf. LW-30, p. 74 where Luther asserts that 'if there were no evil people, one would not need a government.' Elsewhere, he designates all three estates as 'ordained by God.' Cf. LW-41, p. 177. However, 'ordination' in this instance might refer to God's action towards preservation in the absence of peace. Cf. LW-13, p. 45.

the two reigns. The treatment of two reigns is clearly of a piece with his Christology.⁶⁸ This theology of the public serves to locate the place of the cross for the Christian in light of her relationship to Christ's encounter with the world. In fact, this theology of the public admits the possibility of a variety of descriptions of the public *per se*. Luther's *theology* of the public, however, is not necessarily discontinuous with phenomenologies of the public that differ from his own. Luther's theological description of world and church as a Christological correlate remain despite descriptions of the shape of the world that differ from his own three-fold phenomenology. What is of importance, however, for our study is the affirmation that the church also has a vocation in the public. While Luther intimated this point, Christian descriptions of the public today need to assert it.⁶⁹ In the realm of the world, or public, the church itself has a vocation.⁷⁰ The church, like its members, lives in both realms simultaneously and like its members, it has a vocation as a corporate body.⁷¹ At a fundamental level, such an affirmation responds to Arendt's critique of the genesis of society in modernity. Part of reclaiming the significance of vocation for the faithful in their work life, then, includes affirming the vocation of our public institutions. In this sense, then, we go beyond Luther by way of Luther. But what are we to do with Luther's intransigent notion of *Stände*? Can we square

⁶⁸ LW-12, p. 26.

⁶⁹ Cf. Luther's insistence, as a theologian of the church, that the government establish a community chest for the welfare of the poor. Cf. LW-45, pp. 159-194.

⁷⁰ Despite Althaus' assertion that the church has a vocation to preach to the world (Althaus, *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*, p. 152, 155), Luther generally used the term vocation in relationship to individuals.

⁷¹ Cf. Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p. 77 where he refers to the church as a collective person.

Luther's insistence that we cannot choose our own cross and the corollary assumption that the cross is concretized in our vocation with our modern experience of vocational uncertainty?

A way forward may be found in some comments Luther made regarding vocation in his exegesis of Psalm 147. The passage warrants citation in full:

What else is all our work to God - whether in the fields, in the garden, in the city, in the house, in way, or in government - but just such a child's performance, by which He want to give His gifts in the fields, at home, and everywhere else? These are the masks of God, behind which He wants to remain concealed and do all things. Had Gideon done nothing but take the field against Midian, the Midianites would not have been beaten; and God could certainly have beaten them without Gideon. He could give his children without using men and women. But He does not want to do this. Instead, He joins man and woman so that it appears to be the work of man and woman, and yet He does it under the cover of such masks. We have the saying: 'God gives every good thing, but not just by waving a wand.' God gives all good gifts; but you must lend a hand and take the bull by the horn; that is, you must work and thus give God good cause and a mask.⁷²

Two points deserve comment. First, Luther underscores that God works through our working. Humans are the means by which God does his own work. Second, Luther underscores that it is given to us to work in earnest. These two assertions are simultaneously affirmed by Luther and the seeming contradiction is not considered a problem for faith. This treatment of

⁷² LW-14, pp. 114, 115.

vocation and grace is echoed in Bonhoeffer's treatment of the penultimate and ultimate. In the parlance of Bonhoeffer, vocation would be located in the sphere of the penultimate. In discussing the relationship of the ultimate to the penultimate, Bonhoeffer contrasts the two extreme solutions of radicalism and compromise. The former arises from a hatred of what exists and so puts on a facade of pure spirituality while the latter arises from a hatred of the ultimate and exercises pure expediency.⁷³ Bonhoeffer sees the penultimate and ultimate as united in Christ and their relationship is always finally for the sake of Christ:

From this follows now something of decisive importance, that the penultimate must be preserved for the sake of the ultimate. Arbitrary destruction of the penultimate seriously harms the ultimate. ... Given this fact, in addition to proclaiming the ultimate word of God - the justification of the sinner by grace alone - it is necessary to care for the penultimate in order that the ultimate not be hindered by the penultimate's destruction. Those who proclaim the word yet do not do everything possible so that this word may be heard are not true to the word's claim for free passage, for a smooth road. The way for the word must be prepared. The word itself demands it.⁷⁴

Bonhoeffer presses the Christian to take seriously all that precedes the ultimate precisely because the penultimate is the cover for the ultimate: this is taught by the incarnation.⁷⁵ This

⁷³ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 155, 156.

⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 160.

⁷⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 158.

consequent affirmation of the means of our response - the mandates,⁷⁶ or in the parlance of Luther, vocation - points us to the manner in which the gospel advances. Christian life is participation in Christ's encounter with the world.⁷⁷ For Luther and Bonhoeffer both, then, the gospel first announces our passion in the event of salvation, but neither theologians stop at this point. The gospel also propels us as agents. God works through us *in our working*. It is given to us to do something, but can this doing as *responsio* speak to the vocational shifts and the accent on self determination that mark modernity? In speaking to this reality, we first need to address the givenness that persists in even the flux attending vocation today.

Despite modern protests to the contrary, agency as construed in modernity still occurs against the horizon of givenness. However, it is precisely the character of this givenness that has changed in the context of the modern world. In the premodern world, vocation was given in the mode of stability, whereas today it is often given in the mode of instability. For moderns, not only the content, but the form of vocation is a cross. Not only do family, work, *et al* place demands on me, but the very shifting of their shape does so as well. This reflects the fact that in both form and content, there is quality of givenness that cannot be denied. Does this mean that the faithful are simply to acquiesce in what for many has become the crisis of vocation? Not insofar as we take seriously the vocational responsibility of the church within the public we have construed. The church's vocation is to work towards a vision of a just society which provides for

⁷⁶ Bonhoeffer suggested that Christ's relationship to the world is concretized by four mandates: work and culture, marriage, government and church. He also notes that these mandates, as modes of vocation cannot be sources of free conscience insofar as their obligations are manifold and so demand compromise (*Ethics*, p. 292). Consequently, not our *Beruf*, but the *Ruf* of Christ frees us (*Ethics*, p. 292). All of this presupposes an understanding of Bonhoeffer's distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate.

⁷⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 159.

vocational stability while allowing for the possibility of vocational shift in response to God's call. In the interim, however, the crisis of vocation persists. Yet God works even in this crisis. On the one hand, this crisis is one form of the cross used by God to shape the Christian. On the other hand, this crisis is simultaneously the burden given to the church which can only be faithfully borne when the church calls it into question under the aegis of the gospel. The condition for the possibility of doing this lay in a renewed vision of the church's vocation in the public. This vision, however, is attendant upon the narrative of the cross of Christ, the only font for a meaningful narration of the crosses borne by the faithful as witness to the possibility of hope.

Conclusion

A theology of the cross can run amiss in two ways. On the one hand, it can be removed from the contingencies of life and be viewed as a general principle that makes sense of existential anxiety by scripting an internal struggle into the way of faith. Too often, this anxiety itself is deemed the content of faith in abstraction from the narrative of incarnation, cross, resurrection and ascension. On the other hand, even while attending to the concreteness of suffering, an earnest, yet misleading theology of the cross will posit the faulty assertion that suffering *per se* is the locus of revelation. This claim presumes that God can be located in abstraction from Word and Sacrament wherein the risen Christ is present. In this article I have proposed that a faithful apprehension of Luther's treatment of the cross demands that it first be seen as a concrete event in the incarnate Lord, who forms us by the cross concretized in vocation. While affirming the usefulness of Luther's treatment of vocation, I have also suggested that certain aspects of his

treatment of the public and his expression of the intransigence of our vocation need to be revised in light of current realities. In doing, I have proposed that the notion of vocation be applied to the church itself as a corporate partner in the public sphere and have suggested that ecclesial vocation is integral to our task of reclaiming Luther's assertion of human agency in vocation, that means by which we bear the cross that bears us.