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I Ate and Drank With These Teachers: Martin Luther and Pilgram Marpeck on Being ‘Theologians of the Cross’

Walter Klaassen¹

My title could create the impression that it refers to an event in Auerbach’s Keller in Leipzig, or at least to Martin Luther and his students at table talk in Wittenberg. In fact, it does not refer to a scene at all but to a metaphorical reminiscence of Pilgram Marpeck in 1531 of what had happened to him a decade earlier. Marpeck was commenting on his excitement at learning the truth of the gospel from Lutheran teachers in the early 1520s. The words are found in a tract he wrote in 1531, which was a sharp critique against his former teachers.²

He does not tell us who these teachers were, but we know two of them by name. One was Jacob Strauss, a former Dominican who, in 1521, taught and preached in Hall near Innsbruck. In less than a year the Bishop of Brixen had expelled him, but Strauss left behind a number of published *Flugschriften* on subjects popular with the reformers. Marpeck, who lived a day’s journey from Hall in Rattenberg, was without doubt acquainted with the work of Strauss. The other teacher was Stefan Castenbaur, who came to Rattenberg as prior of the Augustinian community there. Because of his eloquent preaching he was chosen as preacher at Marpeck’s parish church where he preached the gospel of salvation by grace. Other teachers taught the young Marpeck through their writings, one of whom was Martin Luther himself.

Marpeck is clear about what they did for him. He wrote: “I came to the truth partly through their writing, teaching, and preaching . . . Where before I had been bound and had suffered in conscience, I was now free . . . [I] thought they preached a splendid Christ.” But these teachers, he continues, said nothing about the mystery of the cross of Christ.³ That, of course, cannot apply to Luther. Marpeck’s writings attest that at this critical point, as well as at others, he was all his life indebted to Luther.

¹ *Walter Klaassen* is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan. His research interests include church history, particularly the radical movements such as Anabaptism. This paper was based on a lecture given at the 2013 Spring Study Conference hosted by Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon, to commemorate the dedication of the Walter and Ruth Klaassen Mennonite Collection to the Otto Olson Library at LTS. Dr. Klaassen holds graduate degrees from McMaster University, McMaster Divinity College, and Oxford University. He has taught at Bethel College, Conrad Grebel University College, and Okanagan University College. Retired, he is currently adjunct faculty in the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan. In his opening remarks, Klaassen remarked, “Part of what I intend to do here now is like carrying coals to Newcastle, that is, talking to Lutherans about Luther. But only partly; the rest of the story is about the Anabaptist lay theologian Pilgram Marpeck, whose life and work has occupied me for many years. It is also somewhat impressionistic, begging for more research. However, I hope you will agree that it is not entirely without substance.”

² Walter Klaassen, ed., *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and his Circle. Volume 1: The Exposé, a Dialogue, and Marpeck's Response to Caspar Schwenckfeld*. Anabaptist Texts in Translation, Walter Klaassen; Werner O Packull; John D Rempel, gen. eds. (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1999), 28.

³ Klaassen, *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck*, 2.

Recently, while reading Douglas J. Hall's essay "The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past,"⁴ I became more aware than ever that here was the point of greatest similarity between Luther and Marpeck, the theology of the cross.

I want now to hazard some reflections on what this theology was and where it might have come from, for Luther and especially for Marpeck. For both of them the medieval mystical work called the *Theologia Deutsch* was very important. Luther had discovered it in 1516 and published the full text in 1518 with a preface. In that preface he wrote that he had learned more from it than from any other book except the Bible and the works of St. Augustine. Was it an accident that Luther's use of the *Theologia* in the 1518 Heidelberg Theses came during the year in which he published it?

Marpeck knew the *Theologia Deutsch* and cited it frequently. It appears that he was introduced to it by a couple of Anabaptist missionaries in Tyrol late in 1527. They all used the text edited and published by Luther since it was the only printed version available. Luther's Heidelberg Theses and Marpeck's writings both reflect the teaching of the *Theologia* that God speaks only through the weak suffering Christ, the exact opposite of the theology of the royal majesty and power of God. So these two, who never personally met nor ever corresponded, shared an important theological insight.

Luther first articulated that theology in his theses for the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. The relevant parts read:

[Thesis 20]: [That person is a theologian] however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

[Thesis 21]: A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

[Thesis 24]: "Without a theology of the cross, man misuses the best in the worst manner."⁵

I understand Luther's theses to say: the theology of glory exalts that in God which is invisible, that is, God's power and transcendence. It is an intellectual theology, put forward as true and irrefutable doctrine, universal in nature, and is therefore appealed to for the suppression of dissenting views. This is calling the bad good. The theology of the cross elevates what is visible of God, that which the world can see, the suffering of the cross. There is revealed the true nature of God; it can be seen. This is the good which the theologian of glory calls bad. As Luther notes in his proofs for Thesis 20: "It is not enough for anyone to know God in his glory and majesty without at the same time knowing God in his humility and disgrace in his cross."⁶ Again, in his proofs for Thesis 24, Luther comments: "Whoever has not surrendered and been made nothing through cross and suffering attributes works and wisdom to himself and not to God."⁷

⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant "Establishment"* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 76–92.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*. 79 vols. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann and Christopher Boyd Brown, gen. eds., (Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–), Volume 31:40–41. (Hereafter cited LW); Martin Luther: *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. [Schriften.]* 65 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), Volume 1:354, lines 21–28. (Hereafter cited WA).

⁶ Karl Gerhard Steck, ed., *Ausgewählte Werke: Martin Luther Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei, 1970), 46, 47. (Hereafter, *Ausgewählte Werke*); author's translation. See also LW 31:52–3; WA 1:362.11–13.

⁷ *Ausgewählte Werke*, 46, 47; author's translation. See also LW 31:55; WA 1.363.31–33.

The context of Luther's formulation of the theology of the cross was his criticism of the official Aristotelianism of the church's theology, by which it was condemning Luther's emergent theology of grace. It represented the theology of glory. The context of Pilgram Marpeck's first articulation of the theology of the cross was, ironically, the decision of the Lutheran princes to form the League of Schmalcald, which Marpeck interpreted as rebellion against divinely ordained government. It was a return to the theology of glory, and Marpeck made his judgement on the Lutheran action on the basis of his theology of the cross.

The Schmalcald League was formed in 1531, a Protestant military alliance to resist the Emperor's determination to restore religious unity by military force. The League was formed "to the praise of Almighty God, to the spreading and growth of the free, holy gospel, to the awakening and promotion of a united Christian condition of peace in the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation . . . but solely for defensive purposes."⁸ Luther and Melancthon were suspicious of the whole thing because, especially to Luther, it looked like rebellion, a refusal of obedience to divinely ordained earthly authority. But eventually the Saxon jurists persuaded him, not by Scripture, but by what we would today call political theory, arguing that "authority" in Romans no longer meant in 1531 what it had meant to St. Paul when he first wrote it. The emperor, they concluded, is not a supreme monarch, and therefore there was no rebellion against divinely instituted authority.

Pilgram Marpeck was not a trained theologian; hence the formulation of his theology of the cross is not as precise as Luther's. But the basic elements are there: the theology of glory emphasising God's power and transcendence, and the theology of the cross, underscoring the visibility of the suffering of the cross. His treatment appears in two of his tracts, the first with the provocative title – provocative today, but not then – "The Exposé of the Babylonian Whore," written in 1531, the year of the formation of the Schmalcald League, and the second, "The Lowliness of Christ," written immediately after the end of the Schmalcald War.

Before I summarise Marpeck's theologies of glory and cross, I need to say: it appears to me that when Marpeck attacks what he calls the "so-called evangelicals," he is not attacking Luther so much as the Protestant princes and perhaps some of Luther's theological followers. In all of the thousands of pages of Marpeck's writings, there are no more than perhaps half a dozen statements specifically critical of Luther, so unlike many other Anabaptists writers of the time. Nor does he condemn his followers outright. In his 1531 tract he says several times that they do speak the truth about Christ and "point to the true way like a wooden hand at the fork in the road."⁹ The problem, he says again and again, is that they don't want to go through the narrow gate; they don't want Christ's cross of patience.¹⁰ They want a king, but not a preposterous king like the suffering Christ.¹¹ They are, in other words, not prepared to be cross-bearers themselves. Luther's theology of the cross was not popular with some of his followers.

Marpeck rejected the juristic argument that reduced the Emperor to an ordinary aristocrat. "I know," he wrote, "of no other Authority specifically appointed by God than the

⁸ H. J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, Volume 4, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13.

⁹ Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 28.

¹⁰ Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 28, 29.

¹¹ Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 39.

Emperor.”¹² He continues to say that they reject imperial law not from Christian conviction but really out of concern for their own position and reputation.¹³ But, Marpeck assures the reader, governments and the people are not to blame for this but rather some unnamed ones, whom he refers to as “those who are evil.” I suspect he refers here to the Lutheran jurists. He continues: Luther and his followers – and this is the only instance in which he implicates Luther himself – have induced the princes, the nobility, and the cities to resist the Emperor.”¹⁴ They have all resorted to the sword to defend the gospel. It is this abandonment of the patience of Christ on the cross, and the readiness to resort to armed coercion “under the semblance of the gospel,” that represents Marpeck’s articulation of their theology of glory. “Their teachings in and of themselves are not wrong,” Marpeck reiterates. It was the ethical expression that was absent. Many centuries later the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer “complained about the Lutheranism that nurtured the theology of justification because it did not find its inherent goal in just action but rested in the security of a doctrinalised grace.”¹⁵

Jacques Ellul wrote in *The Subversion of Christianity*,¹⁶ that a fundamental aspect of the subversion of Christianity was the transition from history to philosophy. For Marpeck as for Luther the theology of the cross was firmly rooted in history. What then, was Marpeck’s theology of the cross? All of God’s treasures and gifts, begins Marpeck, were “hidden and locked up in the human body of Jesus.”¹⁷ The mystery of the relation of the Father and the Son in glory “has been revealed and learned through the incarnation of Christ, in the depth and humiliation of Christ through his holy humanity.”¹⁸ The decent into hell (1 Peter 3:19), he explained, was the completion of the humiliation of the cross. Contrary to official theology, wrote Marpeck, the descent was not a triumph, but the lowest point of his humiliation. “He dwelled with the condemned, with those imprisoned in perdition, and those held by death,”¹⁹ and brought them the comfort of the gospel. Marpeck insisted that “whoever does not grasp that he must be condemned with and in Christ in the depths, can never understand or achieve the height of Christ.”²⁰ “He who looks elsewhere than under the cross in patience will not find him . . . It is itself the way from which truth comes and is the truth from which life comes.”²¹ The cross of Christ knows nothing of the triumphant exercise of coercive power, nor any defense of the gospel with the sword. “Christ, the highest Lord, did not come to dominate, coerce, condemn, nor rule. He will allow no one to be accused before him, and himself accuses no one. Rather, he was himself a servant, and allowed himself to be dominated, violated, accused, condemned and cursed, and to suffer injustice.”²² That is, at some length, and in his own words, Marpeck’s theology of the cross. That, to use Luther’s words, is saying “what a thing is,” what God is. This is no abstraction; it is the particularity of history and not the universal of philosophy.

¹² Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 27.

¹³ Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 37.

¹⁴ Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 26.

¹⁵ Hall, *Waiting for Gospel*, 88.

¹⁶ J. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 23.

¹⁷ J.D. Rempel, ed., “The Lowliness of Christ,” *Jörg Malers Kunstbuch: Writings of the Marpeck Circle*, Classics of the radical Reformation, Volume 12 (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2010), 577.

¹⁸ Rempel, ed., “The Lowliness of Christ,” 581.

¹⁹ Rempel, ed., “The Lowliness of Christ,” 577.

²⁰ Rempel, ed., “The Lowliness of Christ,” 580.

²¹ Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 29.

²² Klaassen, ed., *The Exposé*, 32.

Marpeck commented also on the evangelical defeat in the Schmalcald War in 1547. “They are destroyed by the human violence and protection under which they built their edifice. Through the deceit and error of human teaching, they fall and are overcome by the debris. Whoever has ears should hear, and whoever has eyes should see what has happened everywhere to these who call themselves Christians, but who have only the semblance of the gospel,” that is, the theology of glory.²³

²³ Rempel, “The Lowliness of Christ,” 599.