

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

# Cross Now, Glory Then

*A Response to Christopher Jackson*

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*A condensed version of a full-length response currently under review at Pro Ecclesia. This essay summarizes the argument for a general audience; the scholarly article, with full documentation, will be linked here if accepted.*

Christopher D. Jackson, a Lutheran parish pastor, recently published an essay in *Pro Ecclesia* with an arresting claim: that much (if not almost all) of the contemporary use of Luther's distinction between the theologian of the cross and the theologian of glory has been mistaken, and that the distinction should be laid aside. He argues that its textual basis in Luther is thin, that the theological tradition ignored it until the twentieth century, that it casts the biblical vocabulary of glory in a negative light, and that a "theology of glory" is actually necessary for Christian discipleship.

Having written a scholarly response to that essay, I want to sketch its argument here: first conceding what should be conceded, then explaining where I believe Jackson's critique overreaches, and closing with a constructive proposal for how the distinction might actually serve the church.

## What Jackson gets right

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Jackson's corrective instincts are sound, and a fair response has to begin there.

First, **theology by catchphrase is real**. "Theology of glory" is routinely used to dismiss an exhortation a preacher dislikes, a program of catechesis, or any appeal to the order of creation. When a distinction can be applied to everything, it ceases to distinguish anything. The Heidelberg theses are not a franchise to be stamped on whatever target happens to be in view.

Second, **Gerhard Forde's account of the Law is genuinely defective**, and Jackson's exposure of it is the most valuable part of his essay. When Forde writes that the Law can do its work through a bolt of lightning or the rustle of a dry leaf, the Law has been detached from the will of God and reduced to whatever produces existential dread. That is hard to reconcile with the Formula of Concord, and it sits comfortably with Forde's well-known reticence about the third use of the Law. But the decisive point is *who* has made this criticism: Jack Kilcrease's confessional critique of Forde comes from a theologian who affirms the theology of the cross. The criticism of Forde has been mounted from inside the camp Jackson wishes to dissolve, which suggests the distinction does not entail Forde's account of the Law.

Third, the worry about a **meta-confession** deserves a straight answer. If any teacher has made adherence to the cross/glory distinction a test of orthodoxy over and above subscription to the Book of Concord, that is a fault, and it should be named. No hermeneutical slogan can be added to confessional subscription as a further condition of fellowship.

Fourth, the **crisis in discipleship formation** is genuine. A great deal of twentieth-century Lutheran theology struggled to articulate a Christian life distinguishable from the moral currents of its time.

Each of these concerns, however, attaches to a particular *use* of the distinction (a misuse, a separable position, an overreach) rather than to the distinction itself. Jackson needs each failure to be intrinsic to it. None of them is.

## The textual basis: phrase and concept

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Jackson measures the distinction by the frequency of its explicit formula, which appears in detail only in the Heidelberg Disputation of April 1518. But the method largely decides the outcome. That Luther rarely repeated the slogan tells us about his rhetorical habits; it tells us much less about whether the thought it expresses kept governing his theology.

And even on frequency, the record is incomplete in a way that matters. The explicit formula appears in **two public texts of 1518, not one**. In the *Explanations of the Ninety-five Theses* (Luther's printed defense of the theses, dedicated to Leo X), the explanation of Thesis 58 sets the theologian of glory against the theologian of the cross, glosses the latter as one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God, and says such a theologian teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the church's most precious treasure. This was no one-time device for an Augustinian chapter meeting; it was part of Luther's public, printed polemic. It places the distinction squarely in the indulgence controversy, its native context. And it binds together, in a single phrase, the two things Jackson wants to hold apart: the theology of the cross and the hidden God.

The formula also outlives 1518. In the *Operationes in Psalmos* (1519–21) Luther writes that the cross alone is our theology; in the 1532/33 lectures on the Psalms of Ascent he repeats it almost verbatim. The label is rare. The concept (that God makes himself known in weakness and under contraries, and that human attempts to reach him through visible power and merit end in self-deception) runs from 1518 to the 1540s.

## Reception and silence

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The tradition's silence about the formula is real: it is absent from the Book of Concord and from Melancthon, Chemnitz, Gerhard, and the nineteenth-century confessional revival. But here the access argument must be made carefully. The older collected editions did contain the *Explanations* and the *Operationes*, so Loehe and Walther's silence is better explained by genre and polemic than by lack of access. What those theologians genuinely could not read were the **lectures on Romans** (published only in 1908), whose scholia on Romans 1:20 are decisive for interpreting Thesis 19, and the **philosophical proofs of the Heidelberg Disputation**, not edited until the second half of the twentieth century. Jackson's own best evidence against the contemporary reading was unavailable to the theo-

gians whose silence he treats as a verdict. The twentieth-century recovery of the distinction, through Karl Holl and then Loewenich, is not best explained as a fashion; it is what happens when a corpus is recovered and read.

And a gap in reception is not a gap in validity. Lutheran orthodoxy fought on different fronts and wrote in a different genre; a formula born in a disputation on merit would not naturally find a place in a locus-by-locus dogmatics. The tradition was not silent about the *concept*: Lutheran orthodoxy distinguished the theology of pilgrims from the theology of the blessed, and the Formula of Concord itself directs troubled consciences away from the hidden abyss of predestination and to Christ in the gospel. The content of the theology of the cross is confessed in so many words in a confessional text, just under other words.

## Glory in the biblical witness

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Jackson's argument that the distinction casts "glory" in a negative light rests on a category confusion. In the Heidelberg theses, "theology of glory" does not name the glory of God. It names a *way of seeking God*: an ascent from visible power and works to the invisible God. The theologian of the cross does not deny that God is glorious. He denies that God's glory is found where the theologian of glory looks for it.

And Jackson's own biblical evidence turns in the other direction. In John's Gospel, the hour of glory is the hour of the cross: "Now the Son of Man is glorified" (John 13:31). In 2 Corinthians, the glory is "in the face of Jesus Christ," held in clay jars (4:6–7), and the sufferings of the present time produce "an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (4:17). Paul says the rulers of this age crucified "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). The crucified one *is* the Lord of glory, the theology of the cross in Paul's own phrase. The distinction does not insult the biblical word "glory"; it guards it from a counterfeit and insists that God's glory in the New Testament has a shape (the cross) and a time (the day of Christ).

## The constructive proposal: cross now, glory then

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If the distinction survives the critique (not as a slogan, and not in Forde's version), what remains? A distinction best read as a **pedagogy of eschatological glory**: God is known now under the cross, and his glory is given then, at the revelation of Christ. The New Testament speaks of glory almost always as promised and future, received through suffering. The theologian of glory errs not because he wants glory but because he wants it *now*, on his own terms, by a road he has chosen. The theologian of the cross wants the same glory, and receives it as promise rather than achieving it as method.

This reading answers Jackson's pastoral concern directly. Christian formation is real and progressive, and Luther gave it its classic form in the Small Catechism: baptism signifies that the old Adam is to be drowned through daily contrition and repentance, and a new person is daily to come forth and rise. This is a doctrine of growth, and unmistakably a theology of the cross. The old creature does not improve; it dies. The new creature does

not climb; it rises. Formation happens by death and resurrection, not by ascent. The pastor who preaches the imperatives of Romans 12 within this frame has the daily return to baptism, in which the Law guides and the gospel gives what the Law requires.

The distinction, so understood, guards against two failures at once. Against despair, it teaches that the Christian's weakness and affliction are not evidence of God's absence but the very place where he is at work, hidden under his opposite. Against self-confidence, it forbids reading one's progress as a ladder to God. A theology of glory without the cross has no defense against the second failure; a theology of the cross without a doctrine of growth has little to say against the first. The distinction as Luther drew it, and as the Catechism teaches it, holds both.

Jackson has not shown that the church should lay aside the distinction. He has shown that she should lay aside her clichés about it. The theologian of the cross, Luther says, calls the thing what it actually is. That holds for this debate as well.

## For further reading

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- Christopher D. Jackson, "Luther's Theologian of the Cross and Theologian of Glory Distinction Reconsidered," *Pro Ecclesia* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1063851220914005>
- Timothy J. Wengert, "Peace, Peace ... Cross, Cross': Reflections on How Martin Luther Relates the Theology of the Cross to Suffering," *Theology Today* 59, no. 2 (2002): 190–205, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057360205900203>
- Eric G. Phillips, "Luther's Heidelberg Disputation Revisited in Light of the Philosophical Proofs," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 82, nos. 3–4 (2018): 235–45, <https://ctsfwmedia.s3.amazonaws.com/CTQ/CTQ%2082-3,4.pdf>
- Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2002): 443–66
- Jack Kilcrease, "Gerhard Forde's Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 75, nos. 1–2 (2011): 151–79, <https://ctsfwmedia.s3.amazonaws.com/CTQ/CTQ%2075-1,2.pdf>