

THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

The Trouble with "Some"

A question about other people's errors, answered honestly

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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A question came across my feed this week from a Lutheran theology group: *In what ways do some Christians misunderstand God?*

Eleven comments in two hours. I did not need to read them to know the shape of the thread, and neither do you. The question is built to produce a particular kind of answer, because of one word sitting in the middle of it.

Some.

That word does all the work. It quietly seats every reader on the right side of the room and then hands out clipboards. The Baptists have it wrong about baptism. The Calvinists have it wrong about the will. The megachurch has it wrong about everything. The person three comments up has it wrong about the sacrament, and here is a paragraph explaining why. Nobody in the thread is *some*. *Some* is always elsewhere.

I do not say this to sneer at the question. It is a real question, and there are real errors, and naming them is part of what teachers are for. I have written whole books naming them. But asked this way, the question tends to produce a catalog of other people's mistakes rather than an account of the actual problem, and the actual problem is not a doctrinal position held by a demographic. It is a direction of looking. It is mine and it is yours.

The problem is not that we know too little about God

We assume our trouble with God is a shortage of information, and that the fix is a better catalog. But Scripture does not present the difficulty that way.

But he added, "You cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live." (Exodus 33:20)

That is not a data problem. God in his naked majesty is not obscure; he is unsurvivable. Where he is not clothed in a promise, he is not a comfort but a consuming fire, and everything we learn about him from the raw material of the world — the tsunami, the tumor, the child's funeral, the sheer indifference of the weather — is true and gives no consolation whatsoever. Luther called this the hidden God, and his counsel was not to speculate about him but to flee him, and to flee him to a specific address.

That is what the Heidelberg Disputation is getting at when it says the theologian of glory reads the invisible things of God off the visible course of events, while the theologian of the cross reads God where he has actually made himself visible: in suffering and in the cross. The two are not two schools of thought. They are two directions of the eyes, and the second one has to be forced on us, over and over, because the first one is native.

So when someone asks in what ways Christians misunderstand God, the deepest answer is not a list of propositions. It is this: we go looking for him in his majesty, in his providence, in our circumstances, in the intensity of our own experience — anywhere but the place he told us to look.

No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known. (John 1:18)

The person who has seen me has seen the Father! (John 14:9)

Whatever you conclude about God apart from Christ crucified, you have not learned about God. You have learned about yourself, or about the weather.

What that looks like on a Tuesday

Abstractions are easy to nod at. Here is what the misunderstanding actually looks like in the life of a believer, including this one.

We read God's disposition toward us off our circumstances. The quarter goes well and God is pleased with us. The scan comes back bad and he has turned his face away. This is the oldest and most respectable heresy in the church, and it is practiced by people who would pass any doctrinal exam you gave them. Jesus dismantled it directly when people brought him the news about the tower in Siloam: the eighteen who died were not worse offenders than everyone else in Jerusalem. He refused to let the rubble be read as a verdict. Your circumstances are not a message from God about his heart toward you. They are weather. The message is elsewhere, and it has a body and wounds.

We collapse the law and the gospel. Squeeze them into one thing and God comes out as one of two monsters. Either he is pure demand, a father who can never quite be satisfied, and the Christian life becomes a treadmill run in the hope that the running is what makes him kind. Or he is pure indulgence, a benign old man with no particular expectations, and Christ's death becomes an extravagant gesture in response to nothing much. The first misunderstanding produces despair; the second produces boredom. Both misunderstand God, and both are held by people who love him.

We look inward for what only ever comes from outside. This is the one I find hardest to shake. We are told the Spirit is at work in us, so we go rummaging around in our own interior for evidence of him — a warmth, a certainty, a felt sense of being loved — and we take the presence or absence of that feeling as the true report on our standing. Then a flat week arrives, or a depression, or simple fatigue, and the instruments read zero, and we conclude that God has withdrawn.

The Augsburg Confession's fifth article stands squarely against this, and it is one of the most pastorally useful sentences in the book: the Holy Spirit is given through the Word and the sacraments, as through means. Not alongside them. Through them. And the Smalcald Articles say the bluntest thing in all the Confessions on the subject, that this itch to have God apart from the external Word is not a modern problem but the old problem, clinging to Adam and his children from the beginning of the world to the end. It is not a sect. It is a reflex.

The correction is not a better idea. It is an address.

Notice that none of these are fixed by acquiring the correct opinion. You cannot think your way out of a direction of looking; you can only be turned. And God has arranged the turning in a way that is almost insultingly ordinary.

For since in the wisdom of God the world by its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching. (1 Corinthians 1:21)

The one who listens to you listens to me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects the one who sent me. (Luke 10:16)

The living God has bound himself, freely and by promise, to a manger and a cross, and then to the places where that cross is delivered: a word preached by a man with a cold, water poured over a squalling infant, bread and the cup put into your hand, an absolution spoken to your face by someone who knows your sins and says them forgiven anyway. That is where he is *for you*. Not because he is unable to work elsewhere, but because he has told you where to look so that you would stop being tormented by the search.

This is why Paul, who could have written about anything, narrowed the field on purpose:

For I decided to be concerned about nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:2)

Back to the thread

So — in what ways do some Christians misunderstand God?

In the same ways I do. Every time I take my temperature instead of taking the sacrament. Every time I treat a bad month as a verdict. Every time I go looking for the Father somewhere other than the Son, or for the Son somewhere other than the places he promised to be.

If I answered the post honestly, I would not have anything to contribute to a list of other people's errors. I would only have the thing I keep needing said to me: *look away from yourself*. Look to the crucified one. And when you cannot manage even that, go where he is handed out, and let it be done to you.

That answer will not get eleven comments. It does not give anyone anything to argue with, which is precisely its trouble and precisely its mercy.

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