Reformation ABCs

# T is for theology of the cross

“The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.” This was Luther’s challenge to the leading theology of the day. There is nothing we can do, Luther believed, to earn salvation.

It’s all been done for us at the cross. He first spoke of this early in his ministry in Heidelberg in 1518.

Luther loved paradox. He worshiped a God who expressed majesty in weakness, and glory in assuming the mantle of humanity and dying a hideous death on the cross. God in Christ has done this for us. We did nothing to merit it. This is the theology of the cross.

Luther contrasted this to the theology of glory—the belief that we could somehow merit God’s grace, that by our work, by our daily diligence we could become better Christians. This was foolishness. Simul justus et peccator. Always saved/ made righteous, always a sinner.

I heard a sermon last year by a former pastor who had remarried after the death of his beloved first wife and who had hoped that he would now become a better husband. It wasn’t to be. He told us he only learned how to argue better. Luther’s point indeed.

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# T is for Trent, Council of

There was a brief period after the posting of the 95 Theses when Martin Luther would welcome (he demanded) a General Council of the Church to wrestle with reform, but the reigning pope wouldn’t. Twenty years later there was a time when the pope might and Luther might, but each on conditions unacceptable to both. In 1540-41 humanist Catholic leaders held preliminary meetings with Melanchthon, Bucer and others to explore grounds for unity. Yet when the Council finally convened in Trent (Trento, Italy) in December 1545, Luther, just months away from death, couldn’t support it. Protestant theologians and princes stayed away.

Trent’s agenda and voting method had been arranged to keep the Papal party in control, and the decisions of the first period (1545-47) showed there was no intention to compromise. In two more periods (1551-52; 1562-63), the last with Jesuits in control, Trent reaffirmed or strengthened many of the late medieval church’s doctrines on scripture, the sacraments, justification, original sin and authority.

So, Trent was a general council in name only: it did not serve the ends of unity between Catholic and Protestant. But what it did do was to normalize renewal efforts begun over the previous two generations—lifting the morality of priests and bishops, enlarging education and mission, introducing local and provincial synods, and redirecting the old “Western Church” so that it became in effect a “denomination”: the Roman Catholic Church. No longer the universal expression of Latin Christianity, it was now a global church sending missionaries to India, Asia and the Americas; it was as distinct from its medieval identity as the new Lutheran and Reformed churches were. Like them, it became “confessional,” with an emphasis on individual believers making a Christ-centered “Confession of Faith.”

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