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JACQUELINE BUSSIE

Scarred Epistemologies: What a Theology of the Cross Has to Say about the Gay Marriage Ban

I LIVE IN OHIO WHERE I teach religion and ethics. Ohio is one of the eleven states in the 2004 election that passed constitutional amendments effectively precluding any legal and civil recognition or institution of gay marriage. The passage of this state amendment dubbed colloquially as the “ban on gay marriage” generated much local controversy within my secular community, which has a considerable gay population, and much national controversy within the churches, including my own ELCA tradition. Locally and globally, the issue threatens to divide parish against parish, synod against synod, denomination against denomination, and perhaps most tragically as well as *de facto*, neighbor against neighbor.

In a recent article, fellow Lutheran theologian Robert Benne cites Gilbert Meilander’s claim that “One couldn’t support the revisionist agenda on biblical or confessional grounds; one would have to rely on social science and contemporary experience.” Throughout the article, Benne expresses regret at the loss of what he terms “classical Lutheran teachings.” He references Wolfhart Pannenberg, who similarly opposes “attitudes [that are] oblivious to the gravity of treating the classical tradition as optional [...]” (Benne 12). In response, as a prayerful progressive, I have begun to cast about for potential classical resources within my own tradition to address the issue. Is it accurate to claim that one cannot support gay marriage using resources from within the tradition, but instead one must uniquely use scientific and experiential resources from outside theological tradition? How should Christians view the recent

ban on gay marriage? To answer these questions and respond to Benne and others of like mind, I ask two questions of my own: (1) What does a theology of the cross mean for the twenty-first century, particularly (but not exclusively) for Lutherans for whom it is a core concept? (2) What contributions does a twenty-first century understanding of the theology of the cross make to the contemporary conversation regarding gay marriage and its ban?

It is my contention that a careful reading of Martin Luther’s classical notion of a *theologia crucis*—theology of the cross—provides us with theological support, grounded firmly in tradition and the gospel, for a convicted rejection of the ban on gay marriage. In Christian terms, the Defense of Marriage Act(s) are violations of agape and justice. In secular terms, the bans on gay marriage are selective discrimination, which is unconstitutional as a violation of the fourteenth amendment. Through meditations on three of Luther’s Heidelberg disputation theses, I glean three corollary insights that will help prayerful Christians as they consider where to stand on the issue. Though I seek and use emphases within my own Lutheran tradition, I hope that my comments here will find resonance as well as encounter beyond denominational divides.

First, what does a theology of the cross mean to those of us Christians living today? The *theologia crucis* lies at the heart of both Lutheran theology and the Protestant Reformation. A theology of the cross, a term coined and developed by Martin Luther, reconsiders the importance of the crucified, suffering

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Christ for our understanding of God, and acknowledges that “the crucified Christ is himself a challenge to Christian theology” (Moltmann 3). Luther felt that the Catholicism of his day allowed the triumphalism of the resurrection to eclipse the inscrutable shame and scandal of the cross. By emphasizing the importance of the cross for Christian theology, Luther hoped to correct what he considered an imbalanced, inordinate doctrinal emphasis on the glory of the resurrection. To better understand Luther’s project, imagine a balance, symbolizing both theology and the Christian attitude, with both the crucifixion and resurrection on either side. Luther felt that the preaching and action of the church (and therefore the attitudes of most Christians), tipped the scales fully in the direction of the resurrection. In the glory of Easter Sunday, in other words, the tragedy of Good Friday was lost.

Luther’s theology of the cross applies a corrective to this imbalance. Because the modern reader easily forgets the original historical context, however, the name tends to mislead. The theology of the cross has often been misinterpreted, for example, to mean that Christians should neglect or forget the resurrection and focus exclusively on the crucifixion. As Luther himself would say, by no means! Such a misinterpretation led and still leads to the resurrection-blind results of despair, fatalism, cynicism, theological paralysis, and ethical quietism. Such readings have particularly upset feminists, who interpret Luther to be placing an inordinate emphasis upon redemptive suffering and a subsequent Christian need to accept illegitimate suffering and oppression. While I value these critiques, nonetheless Luther’s theological *telos* was to create a balance between these two crucial christological ideas, not simply to recreate an imbalance in the other direction.

Instead Luther, in my interpretation, urges Christians to leave behind such human either/or thinking and testify to a divine, scriptural “both-and” mode of understanding the gospel. The gospel scriptures assert that Christ was both crucified and resurrected; neither is to be understood without the other. We need to understand both ideas dialectically, an approach that is, incidentally, consistent with much of feminist theory. Christians, therefore, must look at the world with a dual consciousness, holding the paradoxical “both-and” of crucifixion and resurrection before their hearts and minds as they theologize, interpret, and act in the world. For Luther, the Christian view is bifocal. In Luther’s epistemology, we are to understand God in both the scandal of the cross and the glory of the resurrection. However, the resurrection does not negate the cross’s scandal, nor does the cross negate the resurrection’s beauty. To the world (and often even to the church) this paradox has proved a difficult burden to bear, yet God calls us to do so.

Thus, Luther’s theology of the cross should be understood as a methodology, not as a doctrine or dogma. It is a posture of faithfulness before both God and world.

The theology of the cross does indeed help us conceive a response to one of the most important social issues of our day, gay marriage. Specifically, a theology of the cross provides three important insights, prompted by three of Luther’s remarks, which help us in our struggle to discern the will of God in such a difficult and divisive issue.

MEDITATION 1: “A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”

—Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation 53*

First, a theology of the cross reveals a relevant cautionary reminder that human beings, particularly in the collective, possess an ugly and dangerous proclivity toward scapegoating. Human beings tend to call things by the wrong names. By nailing Jesus to the cross, human beings, caught up in their glorious preconceived notion of the messiah as a triumphant hero, effectively label Christ as evil, as a blasphemer and a rebel. Surely the real messiah would have triumphed over his enemies and not allowed himself to be mocked! Thinking thus, the people executed Jesus, calling him a criminal. The theologian of the cross must testify to this truth, but also simultaneously to the truth of the resurrection. The resurrection revealed that Jesus was the son of God, sinless and pure, the quintessence of goodness. Yet human beings, without exception (except for a pagan!), mistakenly called Jesus “evil.” Rather than humiliating human persons with this knowledge, God in an act of radical grace freely chose to allow all human beings to acquire Jesus’s “alien righteousness” as their own, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it” (Luther 41). While the crucifixion reveals human sinfulness, the resurrection reveals God’s gracefulness. A theology of the cross reminds us that instead of acknowledging our own guilt and blame, we human beings tend to deflect our own guilt on to someone else, someone who is innocent of the particular crime with which they are charged.

No doubt many might ask, what can this rhetoric possibly have to do with homosexuals? Homosexuals are sinful, and therefore must in no way be compared to our sinless Lord Jesus Christ! To which I respond yes, homosexuals are sinful, as are all human beings, gay or straight. Calling things by their right names, a theology of the cross reveals that no one is guiltless and proclaims with the apostle Paul, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). While Christ alone was innocent of all charges of sin, human beings are all guilty of

some sin or another in the eyes of God. However, not all human beings are guilty of the particular crime with which they are charged. For example, Jews during the Nazi regime were charged with being “enemies of the state,” in spite of the fact that Jews in no way posed a threat to the state and were indeed less than 2% of the population. The Holocaust is indeed one of the prime historical examples of our horrifying tendency toward unjustified scapegoating. Christians and their antisemitism played an enormous role in this scapegoating. Christians persecuted Jews for centuries in Europe because of their reading of scripture: Jews were Christ-killers, plain and simple. In the wake of the Holocaust, the Lutheran church took responsibility for the church and Luther’s antisemitism and issued a formal apology to our Jewish brothers and sisters. The Roman Catholic Church also issued a formal apology in Vatican II. The urgent question facing us today is: fifty years from now, will the church be ashamed of its current position toward homosexuality and gay marriage, as we have been ashamed before?

Notably, the Third Reich also charged homosexuals with being enemies of the state as they were an assault on the foundation of German society, the family. Over 100,000 homosexuals were persecuted, tortured, and/or murdered during the Holocaust. Does knowledge of historical discrimination against homosexuals make a difference in our minds about contemporary laws concerning homosexuals? Sadly, less than 25% of Americans today are aware of the fact that homosexuals were even victims in any way of the Nazis. If they had known, would it have made a difference at the polls on election day? A definitive answer to this question is not possible, though it should highlight for thoughtful Christians the dreadful potential for condemnation (labeling a group as “evil”) to lead to active persecution. As is well known in the cases of people like Matthew Shepherd, homosexuals in our own country are often the victims of persecution, violence, and hate crimes. In the current American political arena, homosexuals are “charged” with “corrupting or destroying the sanctity of marriage.” According to this logic, laws are needed to protect marriage. Hence in Ohio, our state legislature passed a law called the Defense of Marriage Act, an act whose very name implies that marriage needs to be defended from those who would otherwise destroy it without our preventive measures. The assumption is, of course, that marriage needs to be defended against homosexuals; hence “Issue 1” on the Ohio ballot was referred to by every form of media as “the ban on gay marriage.” Are gays and lesbians indeed guilty as charged?

Here, the theology of the cross as methodology begs me to ask the question, could this accusation against homosexuals be yet another manifestation of the Christian complicity in and

human tendency toward unjustified scapegoating? Could this condemnation of homosexuals as the source of the corruption of marriage be a classic case of the egregiously mistaken human tendency to call the good evil and the evil good, at least in part? Both at the level of intentionality and action, I cannot find any empirical evidence that gay marriage destroys the sanctity of marriage.

And what of scriptural evidence? Though an in-depth biblical study is beyond the scope of this essay, in all seven references to what contemporary readers term homosexuality, the Bible speaks only of same-sex acts, never of sexual orientation let alone gay marriage, a possibility never entertained by the biblical writers. The Bible does speak negatively of same-sex acts, referring to them as unnatural. Is it then the unnaturalness of certain sex-acts that corrupts marriage? What constitutes an unnatural sex-act? Anal sex? What of oral sex? Do American Christians consider these acts are unnatural? Is it then that particular sex-acts corrupt marriage? But what of the gay couples who perform none of these “unnatural” sex-acts (and yes, there are plenty of people who fall into this category)? Aren’t heterosexual couples who engage in “unnatural” sex-acts like oral sex destroying the sanctity of marriage? If so, countless people, including innumerable Christians, stand indicted. Where are the additional laws needed to protect marriage from these sorts of attacks from within? Why can heterosexuals engage in all these “corruptions” of marriage and more, with impunity? Are heterosexual marriages permitted because they are sinless, and homosexual marriages prohibited because they are sinful? What straight Christian could claim before God that their marriage is sinless?

Do heterosexuals bear no blame at all for the crumbling of marriage in America? I fear that the scapegoating of homosexuals for marriage’s corruption can lead American heterosexual Christians down this path of no accountability, to a theology of righteousness which bears no resemblance to a theology of the cross. Jesus, after all, in the book of Matthew, suggests that *divorce*—not homosexuality, which Jesus never condemns—is an assault on the sanctity of marriage. Mark 10:11: “He answered, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery.’” Jesus could not have been more correct in labeling that which indisputably corrupts the sanctity of marriage: marriage’s dissolution. Sanctity means holy or sacred, religiously binding, and inviolable. Christian divorce violates the inviolable, tearing apart with human hands and deeds what God has bound together. Jesus’s assertion has the added flourish of being both rationally and empirically verifiable—surely the tragic death of every marriage is an assault on marriage’s supposed inviolability and sanctity.

As a heterosexual theologian of the cross, I feel compelled to call things by their right names. To use Luther's terms of good and evil, divorce is evil, if by evil we mean that which destroys marriage. The legalization of divorce in this country goes directly against the very words uttered by the lips of our Lord. However, most churches, innumerable Christians, and the American legal system have determined (I think understandably) that divorce is, at times, a *necessary* evil, a last resort. Yet where is the moral outrage over such legalization? Divorce is for many, a regrettable exception to the norm. For many thoughtful Christians, divorce is an exception grounded in the reality and inescapability of human sinfulness. For still others, however, divorce is simply a no-fault agreement. Some heterosexuals marry three, four, even five times in a lifetime, in clear violation of the Ohio state constitutional amendment that states, "Only a union between *one* man and *one* woman may be a marriage valid in or recognized by this state and its political subdivisions." In practice, the state clearly recognizes not one, but multiple successive marriages for heterosexuals as valid. Why aren't Christians concerned about the fact that there is absolutely no limit on the serial monogamy of heterosexuals, who could feasibly be married and remarried twenty times in one lifetime, while living in one state? The "gay marriage ban" isolates homosexuals as the only persons who are both unmarriageable and corruptors of marriage's sanctity.

Divorce, however, fortunately can and never will be prescriptive for Christians. We do not wish for all to be divorced. Similarly, gay marriage can never be prescriptive, in the sense that prayerful progressives do not wish for all marriages to be gay unions. Many prayerful progressives are *not* arguing for homosexuality to become universal behavior—any more than they are pushing for divorce to be universal. Prayerful progressives' arguments must not be summarized with this straw-man fallacy. No, prayerful progressives like myself are pointing to a double standard that may very well rely on a theology of glory—the naïve triumphalism of heterosexual Christians that they have successfully sustained the sanctity of marriage, despite all evidence to the contrary. Prayerful theologians of the cross might ask the question, can the Christian church conceive of homosexuality as a legal exception to the Christian norm, just like divorce? That is, acceptable and even celebrated by some who consider it sinless, regrettable to others who consider it sinful but acceptable as a necessary evil because of the omnipresence of human sinfulness—but however you slice it, perfectly *legal*? No good reason why this compromise is not possible, particularly from the standpoint of justice, has been presented. As things currently stand, many might aptly accuse Christians of inconsistency, pushing

as they have for laws ostensibly honoring one part of the biblical text (homosexuality) while completely conceding to secular values on the other (divorce). The prayerful progressive position advocates with consistency for acceptance of both exceptions.

MEDITATION 2: "Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins....Without the theology of the cross, men misuse the best in the worst manner."

—Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* 43,55

The second insight the theology of the cross grants to the Christian struggling to take a stand on the issue of gay marriage is the notion that our epistemologies are deeply wounded. At our very best, without exception, an authentic consideration of the crucifixion demands that we recognize that we employ scarred epistemologies. What does this mean? To answer, we must also discuss the theological anthropology suggested by a theology of the cross. In effect we must answer two questions here: Who are human beings, and how does this affect what we know?

According to Luther, Christians are embodied paradoxes. That is to say, looking at the world through the bifocal lens of the crucifixion and resurrection shows us that human beings are *simul justus et peccator*. This Latin phrase means that all Christians who truly understand the gospel and the theology of the cross understand themselves in a strange manner—that is, as persons who are simultaneously righteous and sinful. Christians are justified sinners, righteous sinners, rendered righteous not by a single word or deed of their own but instead only through the righteousness of Christ. "It is the sweetest righteousness of God the Father that he does not save imaginary, but rather, real sinners, sustaining us in spite of our sins and accepting our works and our lives which are all deserving of rejection, until he perfects and saves us [...] we [...] escape his judgment through his mercy, not through our righteousness" (Luther 63).

Luther urges us to understand that human beings' existence as *simul justus et peccator* dramatically affects both our knowledge and our actions. This calls for a radical reversal in human thinking, which typically feels more comfortable in a theology of glory, because it permits the fanciful notion that some individuals stand on a pure and moral high ground. Instead, Luther's theology of the cross suggests that neither can be without ambiguity. To make this point abundantly clear, Luther quotes Eccles. 7:20, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins," and Ps. 143:2, "No man living is righteous before thee." No thought, understanding, belief, action, or institution is ever untainted by human sin. Sin permeates all,

even Christians, churches, marriage, and biblical interpretations. Thus in Moltmann's terms, for Luther, Christ "is a scandal even for Christian theology" (Moltmann 3).

In the realm of epistemology, sin's ubiquity suggests that no human being can claim full knowledge of God's will. A theology of the cross simultaneously testifies to our deep intimacy and connectedness with God but also to our radical disconnection and alienation from God. It is not one or the other, but always both. Practically, this means whether I am a progressive or a conservative, indeed whatever my position, a theology of the cross necessitates that I adopt a position of self-critique. Luther reminds us, "Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work" (Luther 48). In shorthand, a theology of the cross urges us to ask about even our noblest enterprises such as ethical decision-making: Could I be wrong? No one can corner the market on God's will and truth. A theology of the cross introduces the scary truth of fallibility, stated scripturally in Romans as "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). On this issue, scripture is surprisingly unambiguous, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (Rom. 11:32).

No doubt many of my fellow Christians will counter that the will of God is clear and unambiguous and is preserved in the word of God. If the Bible were without ambiguity, however, Christians would not be plagued with these discussions. As only one case in point, while the Bible says thou shalt not kill, it also admonishes the chosen people of God to slaughter the Canaanites without mercy in warfare. Such is the basis of our current debates on war. Similarly, though some biblical passages condemn same-sex acts, particularly in the Old Testament, other biblical passages seem potentially to trump this injunction--for example, Gal. 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," to which we could conceivably add "gay and straight." In the midst of this ambiguity, a theology of the cross reminds us of the difficult truth that even biblical interpretation, tainted as it is by human sin like every other human endeavor, is and can be guided by human agendas rather than divine ones.

Vast historical evidence corroborates this insight. Christian pastors and parishioners, for example, used their skewed reading of the Christian Bible as their primary source for supporting slavery. The Bible appears to support slavery, yet no American Christian supports this interpretation today. We consistently reinterpret the Bible in light of our culture, but many act as if we are just doing this for the first time in the case of homosexuality. A more recent and perhaps relevant example occurred in 1998 in South Carolina, where state legislators realized that a law banning interracial marriage was still on the books. At that

time, a Christian senator stood up on the senate floor and stated that based on his Christian beliefs and the Bible, he believed interracial marriages were an abomination to God and man. Our laws obviously once shared this senator's viewpoint that miscegenation was a corruption of marriage's sanctity. However, since 1967, state interracial marriage bans have been declared unconstitutional under the fourteenth amendment. (This raises the question: why does race qualify under the equal protection clause but not sexuality?) A majority of Christians once shared this senator's views as well, though now they no longer do. Clearly these former "Christian" positions were guided by human agendas and not divine ones, but very few people realized this at the time. A theology of the cross, however, reminds us all that such interpretations are likely. Could the same human agendas of prejudice be at stake in the gay marriage debate over reinterpretation of scripture? Given my understanding of our scarred epistemologies, I cannot and do not claim absolute truth for my position. Instead, I respectfully offer it up to thoughtful Christians, especially within the ELCA, for their consideration as a countervoice to the mainstream.

A theology of the cross therefore reminds of our beautiful need of one another, what I term our *dialogical need of the other*. A theology of the cross suggests that human beings need one another, to call one another up short and help us to discern the log in our own eye to which we are blind, busy as we are finding the sty in everyone else's. In our blindness, only God, working through our neighbors and their *agape*, can help. The point of such difficult discussions is not to claim that nothing can be said, but for Christians to enter into dialogue about their interpretations, serving as necessary critics of one another with those on the opposite side of the spectrum.

Sin, therefore, is a great equalizer. But perhaps you are asking, are Christians then completely unable to make absolute truth claims, left with nothing but relativism? A theology of the cross suggests that we can and must still speak, yet we must confess that our claims are provisional. Undoubtedly this thought makes many people uncomfortable, and they would see such a claim as a curse and a sell-out. I can only remind these dialogue partners that on Good Friday, we condemned Christ as a criminal and blasphemer. Even his own disciples betrayed, denied, and abandoned him. Thankfully, however, we have a forgiving God. On the basis of grace, God overturned our judgment of Christ and instead passed his own. God's judgment, importantly, did not resemble our own in the slightest, but instead was its opposite. A theology of the cross reminds me that only God judges (crucifixion) and only God saves and redeems (resurrection). Nothing that human beings do or say or even believe earns them salvation—only a theology of glory would believe such a

thing. Says Luther, “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” (Luther 50).

The concept of being saved by grace lies at the core of Lutheran teaching, and with Luther, I believe it is a relief that I am not saved by my own merit or my own judgments. I therefore interpret the provisionality of human truth claims to be a blessing, and not a curse. Such knowledge of provisionality leaves room for the Holy Spirit to work in the world and for God to be alive and sovereign, working through and in human beings to provide human life with future revelation of Godself. The provisionality of human truth claims, even moral and theological ones, leaves room for the resurrection to happen. If human labels and judgments were definitive, there would be no Resurrection, and no resurrections. In the face of God, I cannot claim absolute knowledge. I can only speak and act as the Spirit guides me, and as a theologian of the cross that means with deep humility and consciousness of my own fallibility.

Even though we will undoubtedly err in our biblical interpretations and subsequent social ethics, my principle of selectivity is the scriptural Christ-given principle of *agape* found in Mark 12:31: “Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” When faced with ambiguity as in the situation of homosexuality, I choose as a theologian of the cross to err on the side of *agape*, understanding that if God’s judgment one day proves me wrong (crucifixion,) we also have a loving and forgiving God (resurrection.) As contemporary Christians, we must confess our principles of selectivity as well as our selective literalism. After all, how many of us stone children to death when they curse their parents, as Exod. 21:17 commands? How many of us do as Christ instructed in Mark 10:21 and sell all that we have and give it to the poor?

Wherever selective literalism is unconfessed and unacknowledged, as it commonly is in contemporary discussions of gay marriage, a theology of the cross cautions that a human prejudicial agenda could be at work. A theology of the cross implies that God’s justice compels me to also act for justice in the world. From the standpoint of justice toward homosexuals, I must ask, on what possible biblical basis can we ban *exclusively* homosexuals from the civil institution of marriage? As things currently stand, they are the only consenting adults not permitted to marry by law. But scripturally, are those who commit same-sex acts the only “sinners”? Surely not! What of murderers? Can they marry? The answer is yes, in every state, even if they are behind bars.¹ What of other biblical sinners of a more sexual nature, such as adulterers, can they marry? Can rapists marry?

Can child molesters and abusers get married, and therefore have children? Can persons convicted of domestic violence against a spouse marry? Clearly adulterers, rapists, child molesters, and spousal-abusers undeniably violate the sanctity of marriage; what sane person would argue otherwise? But can all of these persons (criminals, actually) legally marry? Yes, yes, yes, and yes. As long as one is heterosexual in America and a consenting adult, marriage is yours for the taking, and abusing.

As a theologian of the cross who calls things by their right names, when I look at the current legislation banning same-sex marriage, I can think only of Martin Luther King Jr.’s definition of an unjust law. In the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King defines an unjust law as “a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal” (King 430). Letter for letter, the current gay marriage ban qualifies as an unjust law according to Dr. King. My conscience therefore condemns the gay-marriage ban with my very being, as there is no denying that it is a law passed by a power majority group on a minority group which is not binding for itself. Far be it from

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us as Christians to support injustice, analogous to the way many Americans Christians were blind to the injustice of race relations for decades. As an American citizen, I can only think of our legal system, which deems unconstitutional any and all laws that target only one specific group and deny them equal rights. Both a theology of the cross and the Constitution condemn acts of discrimination. Martin Luther and his namesake Dr. King stand united on this issue. Justice is the concern of theology and of Christians just as surely as it is the concern of every American citizen. I ask myself, how could such a violation of justice have passed, primarily with the support of Christians who claim to seek justice?²

The gay marriage ban therefore does just what it purports to do: exclusively targets homosexuals and stigmatizes them as unworthy of marriage. In supporting such a ban, the Christian churches participate in injustice, albeit perhaps unwittingly and in the very name of justice—but the theology of the cross forewarns us of such irony. By supporting this ban, the churches tacitly ignore other marital issues in which one person would concede that they are hurt by the other—spousal abuse and rape, child molestation, and adultery. (Notably, in gay unions, both parties claim not only to not be hurt, but to flourish.) What kind of message do we send to our young people by isolating our marital laws and our support of such laws to homosexuality? We

send the message that as the body of Christ, we do not condemn rape, adultery, domestic violence, murder and child abuse as *corruptions of marriage*. Only being gay matters; only homosexuality corrupts marital covenants. Have we unreasonably isolated a “sin” that is easy to categorize as “other”—the “sin” of being gay—in order to protect ourselves and our presumed righteousness? Are we afraid to condemn behaviors that are not conveniently isolatable to a group to which most of us do not belong? After all, homosexuality is not a behavior which tempts heterosexuals; behaviors such as anger, mistreatment of our spouse and adultery, on the other hand, are real temptations for all of us. If we condemn these too loudly, are we afraid of condemning ourselves? A theologian of the cross must wonder here if a theology of glory is at work. When will we at last call things by their right names?

MEDITATION 3: “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.”

—Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation 52*

The third and final insight offered by a theology of the cross regards God. Because God cannot be fully known by us, this section is of necessity the shortest of my three sections, yet perhaps most noteworthy. We human beings ask, who is God? And a theology of the cross answers: God is Immanuel, that is, God with us. For Luther, the strangeness of the gospel tale lies primarily in the fact that God was present in such a humiliating place such as the cross. He writes, “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isaiah 45:15 says, “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself” (Luther 52-53).

The incarnation and crucifixion imply, therefore, that God can be found anywhere—absolutely anywhere. This insight, Luther well recognized, is simultaneously scandalous and beautiful. On the one hand, it means that no place is so remote that God is not present. In suffering, death, grief, radical doubt, and even murder, God—Immanuel—is there. On the other hand, this insight means that human beings cannot discern, let alone limit where God’s grace is at work and where it is not. Indeed, a theology of the cross states that the work of God’s grace is invisible to the human eye and therefore can be seen only with the eyes of faith which hopes in things unseen.

A theology of the cross also reveals that God judges and condemns (crucifixion) and saves and redeems (resurrection.) God is both judge and redeemer; human beings are ultimately neither for

they tend to misjudge and have no power to redeem. All human institutions and endeavors thus stand under both God’s judgment and God’s redemption. Because we cannot think the resurrection without the cross, however, we are reminded that the redemption of the world is proleptic and paradoxical. That is, it is already but not yet. Until the *eschaton*, God uses the raw materials of this world, including human beings, as vehicles of his grace and justice.

Who is responsible for sanctifying a marriage? According to Luther and a theology of the cross, God alone sanctifies marriage. Human beings and their actions cannot sanctify or bless their own marriages. This gives new meaning to Matt. 19:6, “What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” A theology of the cross insists that human beings cannot domesticate God and limit God’s sovereignty or workings of grace in any way. Marriage, in the sacramental view of most churches, can function as a vehicle of God’s grace to human beings, should God choose to bless the marriage in this way. That being said, do heterosexual Christians dare to have the audacity to claim that God cannot and will not ever choose to use gay marriage and love to extend his grace to human beings? Who are we to limit God in such a way? Who are we to limit the possibility of grace in advance for other human beings through our laws? Can we say that God cannot join together homosexuals? A theology of the cross cautions against such human domestication of God’s sovereignty, particularly because human beings, given the choice, would certainly have denied that God could use the scandal of a criminal’s execution on the cross to work his grace on the entire world. God’s logic is not our logic. A theology of the cross reveals that considering the two conflatable is pure folly. In the words of C.S. Lewis, God is the great iconoclast. This must not be forgotten.

In conclusion, my essay disproves the claim that one has to rely exclusively on social science and contemporary experience and not the Lutheran tradition in order to argue for the acceptance of gay marriage. Using the theology of the cross, an idea that lies at the heart of the Lutheran tradition, I have shown an alternative interpretation of the issue. Before God, I assert my theology and resulting social ethic with great fear and trembling, in the knowledge that my epistemology is scarred. Before God, I cannot claim to know if my own position is sinful or just, though like all human endeavors according to a theology of the cross, it is probably an admixture of both. If my dialogue partners cannot confess the same of their own positions, have they truly heard the message of the cross? Before human beings, I must confess that my conscience convinces me that anti-homosexuality is the last acceptable prejudice in this country. That homosexuals are humiliated on a daily basis and stigmatized as being the *only* segment of our society unworthy of the blessings of marriage, of this

there is no doubt. While some would argue that this humiliation is well deserved and brought on by choice and by guilt, I cannot avoid considering the alternative possibility that this humiliation is brought on by scapegoating and unconfessed human agendas of political self-interest and spiritual self-righteousness. In this regard I ask to be heard, and invite responses. I close by encouraging my fellow Christians, whatever their views, to remember that the authentic desire to discern God's will for the people of God provides a common ground all Christians, be they "prayerful progressives" or "compassionate conservatives." Where this insight is lost, no authentic dialogue is possible.

Endnotes

1. Notably, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Turner vs Safley* ruled in 1987 that prisoners were allowed to get married, citing marriage as a fundamental civil right (Turner).

2. No doubt at this point many protest that under this reasoning, polygamy, too, should be permitted. For surely the defense of marriage acts also discriminate against those minority groups who seek polygamy. To this rebuttal, I have two brief responses. First, I can only point out that those who seek polygamy have a strong scriptural basis for their actions—i.e. models of the faith such as Abraham had multiple wives. This of course only proves my point that everyone, whether they confess it or not, consistently interpret the Bible selectively according to their own community and standards. Second, however, polygamy is to be rejected by Christians because it is inherently discriminatory and a violation of justice. Polygamy, it should be noted, also qualifies for an unjust law using Dr. King's definition. Those who seek polygamy mean by the term both in concept and in praxis the practice of having multiple wives. At no time do they mean the practice of having multiple husbands (for which there is no scriptural precedent.) While many men would love to have multiple wives, how many of those same men would be willing to share their wife with countless other men? Men who seek polygamy have no intention of sharing such privileges with women. Again I can only quote the Christian minister Dr. King, *this is difference made legal*.

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