

LEE UNIVERSITY

THE TRUE NUMINOUS HAPPENS AT THE CROSS

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THEO 594 — PENTECOSTAL TRIUMPHALISM
AND LUTHER'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE CONFLICT

Western society is built upon strong Christian principles and has proved its superiority compared to other cultures over the past two millennia. Diving into the variety of Christian denominations, the Pentecostal movement is one of the fastest-growing movements, and great works of God are visible on every continent: Muslim refugees in Europe have visions of Christ, unreached people groups in Africa are being transformed by the gospel, exponential growth of underground churches in the Middle East, and many other things are visible for those who want to see.

But parallel to these miraculous appearances is a different side that stirs the Pentecostal world strongly. It creates division, confusion, and disorder. It is an issue of faith that finds its way into politics, the local church, cell groups, and even into the private faith of believers. It is Triumphalism that finds a resounding echo in the empty-growing church benches of the West and its welcomed embracement in African revival.

The empty-growing benches of the West should be received as an indicator of the failure of Triumphalism and warn the African churches in their theological development. But how does Triumphalism influence certain aspects of Pentecostal Theology? This paper will briefly look at 'Revivalism' and 'Miraculous Manifestation' as means of Triumphalism and what this implies for the believer but also the theological understanding that comes with it. It will deal with the complicated conflict a believer faces with the distorted ideas that are communicated by the Triumphalistic ideas. To give a Pentecostal approach that respects a holistic approach of the costs at the cross, *theologia crucis* will bring a Christ-centered perspective. Through this, the reader can expect to receive in the end a Pentecostal application of the *theologia crucis* relating 'Revivalism' and 'Miraculous Manifestation'.

CHAPTER TWO

JESUS TAUGHT TRIUMPHALISM?

Triumphalism is a phenomenon that arises in different movements, which carry a strong narrative that expresses a certain victorious doctrine. In Pentecostalism, Triumphalism is a major concern that can be seen in different aspects. Two of them, which often go together, are 'Revivalism' and 'Miraculous Manifestation'. The humble and Christ-focused theologian and believer will surely read these lines very critically, for these aspects are an important part of Pentecostal history, furthermore in the whole Christian history, even before the end of the 19th century with its beginnings of Pentecostal movements. Did not even Jesus Christ choose these aspects of revelation of his coming Kingdom in Matthew 10:5-8 (NIV)?:

“These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions:

‘Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, ***proclaim this message***: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’

Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have ***leprosy***, ***drive out demons***. Freely you have received; freely give.”

How can the manifestation of miracles, which will lead to the proclamation of the coming kingdom of God, not lead to something positive? The question is justified. But the following analysis will reveal the reason for the concern of Triumphalism in Pentecostal teachings. It is not addressed to the Christ-focused believer with the intention to doubt the possibility, importance, and necessity of these aspects. Rather, it will point out false teachings that lure their way into Western churches, distorting the theology of many.

2.1. Critical Analysis

The passage above pointed to a biblical understanding of 'Revivalism' and 'Miraculous Manifestation', a command that Christ gave to his disciples who were just elected in the passage before. It was their very first mission they received from their

rabbi. Triumphalism will possibly use this passage to prove its point, 'see, it is biblical!'. But Triumphalism does not stop at the command or the faithful obedience of the disciples; it is overzealous. Because in the area of Miraculous Manifestation, it will not just celebrate the revelation of God's Kingdom and the received metaphysical sign of God. But in the same breath as it asks 'why?' If the sign does not appear, it will offer an explanation. The overzealousness might seem righteous in the first moment, might appear very devout and serious about the 'things of God'. But unfortunately, it seems to rather focus on the 'things' instead of God himself. The Miraculous Manifestation is a gift of God, but Triumphalism makes it a centerpiece of faith itself.

And while not a lot of the believers who produce triumphalist Pentecostalism in their daily life or in communication with others will actually present themselves as agents of Triumphalism, they will use its arguments. Another passage that will be used by such representatives is Matthew 13:58 (NIV): "And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith." This passage is in a very specific context that points out that the people of Jesus' hometown couldn't see beyond the human aspect of Jesus, which made them unable to believe in him as the Christ who would reveal the kingdom of God. And yet, it brings 'faith' and the actual 'appearance of miracles' in direct correlation. But Triumphalism does not fail in its rational comprehension of how faith and miracles correlate, but in its focus. The focus is not a 'clean' hermeneutical understanding of the biblical text, but the continuance of hushing after the mere act of a miracle. Not the giver of the miracle himself is the emulated aspect, but the greed for the act is revealed. Later exploration will reveal this analysis.

In the case of 'Revivalism', the word speaks for itself. Revival is not a process that has its root in Christ, is asked from Christ, and ultimately left in Christ's decision if it happens, but it is the very focal point of its followers. The mere act is in the center. Revival and Miraculous Manifestation are in the realm of Triumphalism almost indivisible, as they focus on the same: 'metaphysical acts' or acts that appear to be metaphysical.¹

¹ The differentiation is important, because the deeper one looks into triumphalist movements, the more often false healings appear or other actions that were acted out or forced by the ministers.

2.2. Exploration of Triumphalistic Appearances

A major critique from non-Pentecostal Christians is the prevalence of false healings, which are increasingly promoted through the media output of Triumphalistic movements on the 'spectrum' of Pentecostalism. False healings are still considered harmless, despite their bad reputation and the lies associated with them. Unfortunately, stories of people being coerced into certain actions by ministers at 'healing conferences' are becoming more and more public. These individuals often suffer serious consequences and require medical treatment. For example, people are forced to stand up from their wheelchairs and walk despite severe pain, or they receive the 'divine proclamation' that a disease has been healed and that they should stop taking medicine if they have enough faith.

In the case of Revivalism, believers are often instructed to cultivate a particular personal disposition to 'create an atmosphere of faith', to become 'drunk with the Holy Spirit', or to perform ritualistic acts that will manifest outward signs to attract the Holy Spirit's activity within them. For example, people may be required to bow into a honey barrel to receive the 'sweetness of God', walk through a 'fire tunnel' to experience a greater filling of the Holy Spirit, or exhibit outward signs of spiritual gifts in their lives. If a specific gift, such as glossolalia/xenolalia, is not visibly present in a believer, the 'logical' conclusion drawn by Revivalism is often that the believer has not received the Holy Spirit. Other aspects such as deliverance often play a part in Revivalism but may be seen as subordinate forms that simply support its primary goals.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The harmful expression of triumphalist theology undoubtedly comes with a cost, as hopefully made clear by the few examples mentioned before. What theological implications does Triumphalism carry in the analyzed aspects? Theologically, it carries the bitter taste of 'cheap grace'. Bonhoeffer described in his work 'The Cost of Discipleship' the rich young ruler who came to Jesus already knowing that he would not follow him. Triumphalism resembles the rich young ruler, enamored with the idea of the Christian faith but unwilling to relinquish its pride. The theology of the *theologia crucis* cannot cling to pride, for its pride is shame in the presence of the naked God on the cross. Triumphalism behaves like the unwise crucified criminal who, in the same situation as the God who chose to be crucified, asks for a miracle to be freed from the cross. Triumphalism fails to grasp the depth of implication that *theologia crucis* presents to the humble, who recognizes the honorable God in the naked Christ on the cross. It does not recognize the offered grace, as the wise crucified criminal did, who did not seek physical relief and supernatural escape from the current situation, but a humble approach to the Son of Man, asking to be remembered in the kingdom. Cheap grace blinds its doctrine, cloaking it in the 'king's finest garments', oblivious to the fact that it embarrasses itself in the presence of the glorious God who chose to die such a shameful death to bear the shame of all who would recognize their own shame.

Is there a 'Theology' of Triumphalism? Certainly not in the understanding of biblical theology, in the light of the *theologia crucis*, for it reduces God Almighty to a puppet that can be manipulated for personal agendas, gaining influence by showcasing (false) healings. It does not recognize the sick, weak, and needy for what they are — instead, it exploits their pain and promises the divine, 'if only...'. Triumphalism imposes conditions on people, firstly to receive money and fame, and secondly to excuse deferred miracles with 'lack of faith'. But it also imposes conditions on God himself, as it treats everything with 'cause and effect'. It formulates certain ideas that, if certain

'holy actions' are performed, God will — and must — move. There is a teaching about the concept of a god, which would rather be labeled as *idolum* — ideology. With this, all kinds of ethical implications arise because the foundation for interaction and decision-making is not the theological understanding of God and humans, but whatever aligns with the Triumphal doctrine that needs to assert itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

PENTECOSTALISM AND THEOLOGIA CRUCIS

In the light of Luther's *theologia crucis*, a Pentecostal approach is needed to provide a faithful understanding of the important aspects of miracles and revival. The difference is clear in the simplest form: the choice of grammatical expression. It is not Revivalism, but Christ bringing revival. It is not Miraculous Manifestation, but Christ, the manifested miracle of salvation. But it is more than that, which draws a clear line to Triumphalism. It means that God understands God-forsakenness, but only on the cross. Triumphalism becomes too caught up in maintaining its honor to understand its own forsakenness, while *theologia crucis* prompts one to pause, ponder, and experience a moment of numinous revelation. The triune God knows God-forsakenness, and the God-forsaken knows that God understands what that is. This very point of forsakenness in Christ becomes the meeting point between humans and God. Not healing, not charisma, not deliverance, not resurrection are the chosen points of meeting 'on eye-level' between God and humanity, but rather suffering in pain, Christ's dispatching of the Spirit back to the Father, becoming Sin himself, and finally death.

How does this fit into the narrative of Pentecostal theology? Moltmann wrote: "[T]he story of the suffering of the messianic Son of God is the story of the suffering of God's Spirit too."² The implication for Pentecostal theology points clearly to the *theologia crucis* through the Spirit of God himself. It is the Spirit of God who initiated the meeting in the first place. God was God-forsaken at the cross, but not forsaken by humanity, because this was the meeting point between the horizontal and the vertical, the ultimate and the penultimate, arguably between the beginning and the end. The Spirit was the agent that brought death to the wicked, as described in Isaiah 11:4, and brought life to the dead, as described in Ezekiel 37:5-9. It is the Spirit who brings the humble conviction that not the penultimate influences the ultimate, but the ultimate changes everything for the penultimate.³

² (Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 64.)

³ (Bonhoeffer *Ethics*, 160.)

CHAPTER FIVE

PENTECOSTAL APPLICATION

For the Pentecostal endeavor to maintain a Christ-centered theology, the *theologia crucis* offers a framework that unifies the importance of the Holy Spirit with the suffering of Christ. Pentecostal Theology emphasizes the ongoing and active work of the Spirit of God in the process of salvation, sanctification, and discipleship. It does not prioritize miraculous manifestations that may have opened the sinner's heart to the reality of God. Pentecostal Theology acknowledges and appreciates divine work, but it does not elevate supernatural acts of God above natural ones. Both are seen as the work of the Holy Spirit, operating within the lives of believers and reaching out to unbelievers. Pentecostal Theology does teach cause-and-effect, but only in one instance, which is closely intertwined with the *theologia crucis*: the process of genuine repentance of a sinner. God will always respond to the repenting sinner with forgiveness.

The Pentecostal *theologia crucis* is a focused expression of faith in the crucified God, who rose back to life by the power of the Holy Spirit, now working in various ways in and through the followers of Christ. Unlike Triumphalism, it does not belong to the 'Schwärmer', who become lost in the frenzy of 'numinous addiction'. Pentecostal Theology centers on Christ's Cross, which highlights the cost of redemption and prompts believers to reflect on this great sacrifice with eternal gratitude to God. Pentecostal Theology eagerly awaits the move of God, fixated on the cross.