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MARTIN LUTHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON MENTAL ILLNESS IS STILL USEFUL

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ACL National Free Conference
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Objectives

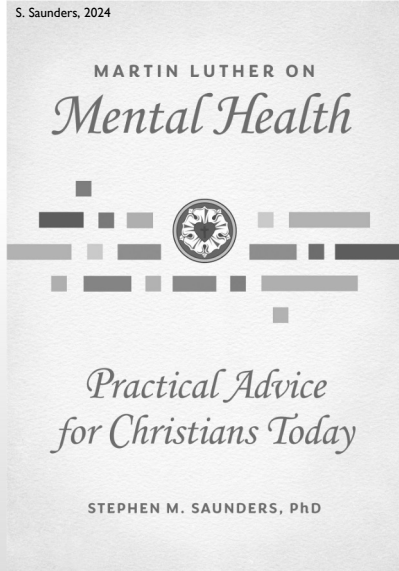
1. Define mental health problems and mental illness
2. Show that Luther had a lot of personal and professional experience with mental health problems
3. Show that Luther's understanding of persons afflicted by mental illness is very similar to our modern understanding



Sola scriptura
Sola fide
Sola gratia

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**BASED ON
OCTOBER 2023
CPH BOOK.**

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BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

- What is it?
- How common is it?
- How bad is it?

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DEFINING MENTAL ILLNESS

- A person *feels* badly, and/or is not in control of his *actions*, and/or *thinks* unrealistically

AND

- As a result, the person experiences a lot of distress
- As a result, the person fails in her *obligations* to others and/or has impaired *relationships*

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HOW COMMON OR PREVALENT IS MENTAL ILLNESS?

- Epidemiological surveys
 - Logos = study
 - Epidemic = a disease within a population
 - Door-to-door, face-to-face, 90 minute interviews
 - Consistent results across all surveys

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Best Estimate of 1-year Prevalence Rates of Mental Illness Based on ECA and NCS Results (Adults age 18–54)

7	ECA Prevalence (%)	NCS Prevalence (%)	Best Estimate (%)
Any Disorder	19.5	23.4	21.0
Any Anxiety Disorder	13.1	18.7	16.4
Simple Phobia	8.3	8.6	8.3
Agoraphobia	4.9	3.7	4.9
Panic Disorder	1.6	2.2	1.6
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder	2.4	NA	2.4
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder	NA	3.6	3.6
Any Mood Disorder	7.1	11.1	7.1
Major Depression	6.5	10.1	6.5
Bipolar Disorder I or II	1.7	1.5	1.7
Alcohol or Drug Use Disorder	9.5	NA	NA
Schizophrenia	1.3	NA	1.3
Severe Cognitive Impairment	1.2	NA	1.2

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WHAT DO THE NUMBERS INDICATE?

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YOU KNOW MANY PEOPLE WITH A MENTAL ILLNESS AND THEY ARE SUFFERING.

- In a church with 500 members
 - In any year, 100 will experience a mental illness in any given year
 - About 200 will experience mental illness at some point in their lifetime

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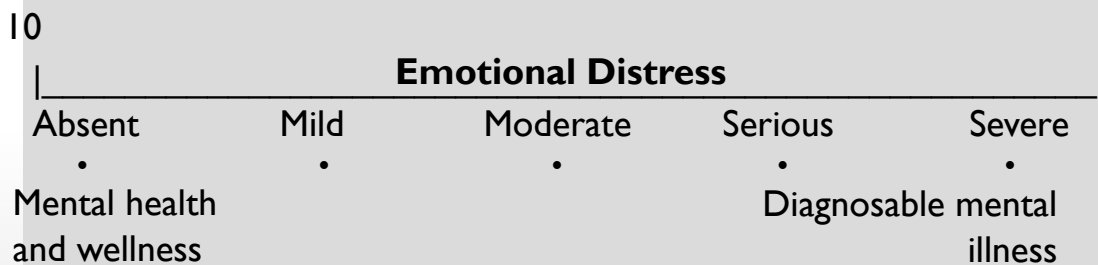
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MENTAL ILLNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

- Mental health exists on a continuum
- Diagnosable mental illness is the "clinical" extreme of mental health problems
- Many more persons experience "mental health problems"

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- Many who are not "diagnosable" will experience distress related to a recent issue or challenging situation.
- Not diagnosable; but would benefit from help.

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THE COST OF MENTAL ILLNESS

- **Personal Distress**
- **Distress to the Family and Loved Ones**
- **Impairment at Work**
- **Relationship Impairment**
- **Exacerbation of Medical Problems**
- **Hopelessness (thoughts or actions of suicide)**
- **Doubt about God's love; abandonment of faith**

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MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS ARE NOT MODERN

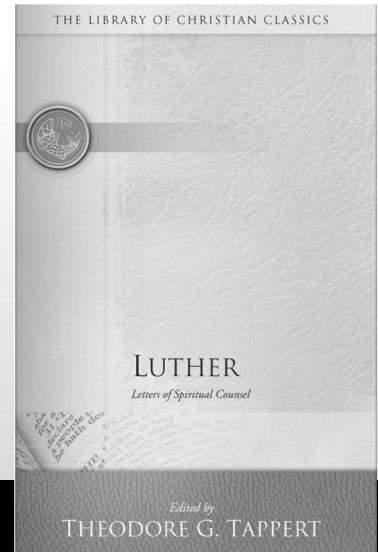
- **Worse today, especially for youth**
- **But have always been with us**
- **Luther knew them both personally and professionally**

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13 LUTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

- We know his perspective from his letters
 - We have thousands of letters
 - Also "Table Talk"



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14 LUTHER AND MENTAL ILLNESS

- Medieval "medicine"
- Luther's personal experience
- Luther's pastoral perspective

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LUTHER AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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-
- **Medieval "medicine"**
 - Luther's personal experience
 - Luther's pastoral perspective

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MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

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Martin Luther 1483-1546

The Renaissance followed Dark Ages or Medieval Period
(but was still fairly dark)

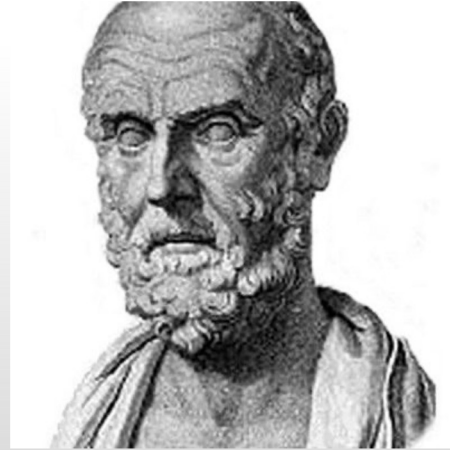
- Approximately 14th century through 16th century
- Revival (i.e., rediscovery) of classical (Greco-Roman) art, architecture, literature, and learning
- Marks the transition from medieval to modern times

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17 MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

- Hippocrates (460-370 B.C.E.)
 - Humoral theory
 - Black bile (malankolia)
 - Yellow bile (kholera)
 - Blood (sanguineus)
 - Phlegm (phlegma)



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18 MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

- Claudius Galen (A.D. 131-200)
 - Surgeon to gladiators
 - Public demonstrations
 - Physician to emperors
 - Wrote prolifically

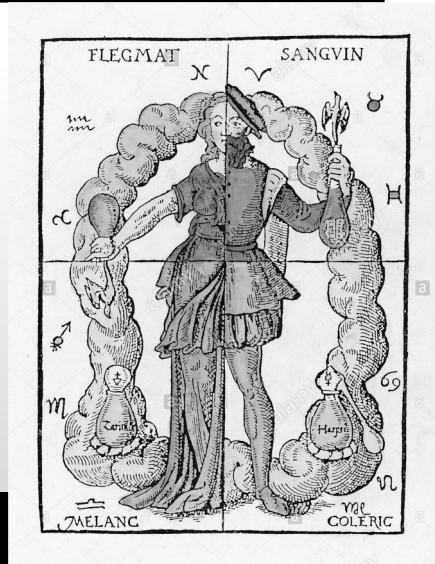


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1 MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

- Formalized humoral theory
 - Phlegmatic
 - Melancholic
 - Bilious/Choleric
 - Sanguine
- Galen's influence endured **1500** years (!)



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2 MEDIEVAL MEDICINE



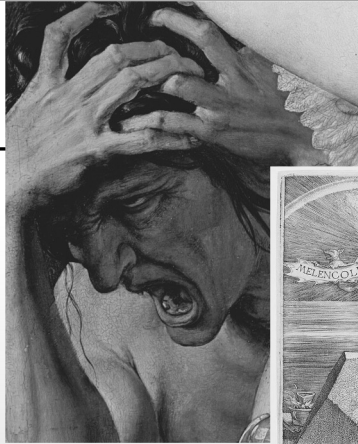
- Causes led to corresponding treatments: bloodletting; purgatives; emetics

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MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

- What was "insanity"?
- Obvious, florid cases (psychosis, mania)
- But an increased focus on "melancholia" during Luther's era



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LUTHER AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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- Medieval "medicine"
- **Luther's personal experience**
- Luther's pastoral perspective

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LUTHER'S MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

- Luther openly acknowledged struggles with emotional turmoil
 - To Jerome Weller, 1530, “When I first entered the monastery it came to pass that I was sad and downcast, nor could I lay aside my melancholy”
 - To Prince Joachim, 1534, “I myself, who have spent a good part of my life in sorrow and gloom ...”
- Much of his emotional turmoil due to severe physical ailments



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LUTHER'S PHYSICAL AILMENTS

- In 1521 (age 38), wrote Melanchthon, “The Lord has visited me with great bodily suffering. ... Pray for me”
- Pain seems like it was nearly constant
 - stomach pain, severe chest pain (angina pectoris)
 - gout; chronic constipation
 - bleeding hemorrhoids; kidney stones
 - decade-long open sore or ulcer on his left leg
 - tinnitus caused dizzy spells and severe headaches



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LUTHER'S PHYSICAL AILMENTS

- Some wonder that Luther was a bit cranky, had a “tendency” toward emotional outbursts and irritability.



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LUTHER'S MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES

- August 1527, age 44, he wrote to Melanchthon,
 - For the last week I have been cast into death and hell ... I had almost lost Christ, and was thrown into the billows and buffeted by storms of despair so that I was tempted to blaspheme against God.
- In fact, he was experiencing sudden and extreme physical discomfort, believed he was dying
 - During episode, he told Katie to be steadfast should he die, said goodbye to his son
 - “Then he sobbed and shed copious tears.”



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LUTHER'S AND MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

- Luther knew that all illness was the work of Satan, but he recommended physicians
 - Table Talk, “Physic has not its descent and origin out of books; God revealed it ... Therefore we may justly use corporal physic, as God's creature.”
 - “Our burgomaster here at Wittenberg lately asked me, if it were against God's will to use physic?" (Carlstad has preached that the sick should rely only on God.) "I asked him: Did he eat when he was hungry?"

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LUTHER'S AND MEDIEVAL MEDICINE

- Did not always like what they did to him, but taught that God had provided them
 - “When I was ill ... the physicians made me take as much medicine as though I had been a great bull”
 - But Luther never advised humoural-based treatments for mental illness



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LUTHER AND MENTAL ILLNESS

- Medieval "medicine"
- Luther's personal experience
- **Luther's pastoral perspective (of mental illness)**

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LUTHER AND MENTAL ILLNESS

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- Luther did not blame mental illness on weak faith. He argued vehemently against this.
- Luther clearly distinguished Anfechtung and mental illness
 - Anfechtung is inevitable and salubrious
 - Mental illness is neither

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ANFECHTUNG

- To Melanchthon, May, 1521, “Do not be anxious about me, for I am very well, but my weak faith still torments me”
 - Called it his Anfechtung
 - Doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation” (Bainton 1950, 42)
 - “(A) one-word theological concept” (Scaer 1983, 15).

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ANFECHTUNG

- Luther said Anfechtung was essential to faith (even though emotionally distressing)
 - “I would like to write a book about Anfechtung. Without it no man can rightly understand the Holy Scriptures or know what the fear and love of God is all about. In fact, without Anfechtung one does not really know what the spiritual life is.”
 - “God both loves and hates our afflictions. He loves them when they provoke us to prayer. He hates them when we are driven to despair by them.”

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ANFECHTUNG

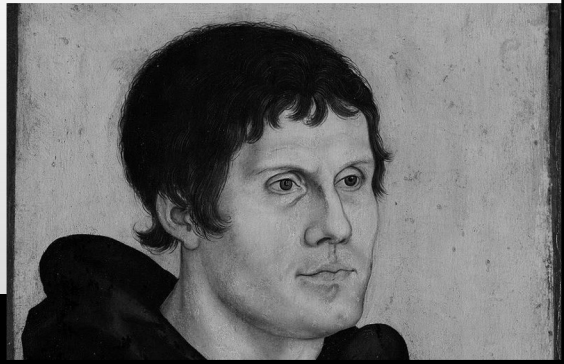
- Anfechtung is inevitable and salutary.
 - Anfechtung (hopefully) has the salubrious effect of driving us to Christ's cross to pray that the Holy Spirit will strengthen our faith.
 - "I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24)

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ANFECHTUNG

- Luther and the double-edged sword of doubt
 - Christians assaulted by ...
 - ... overwhelming guilt about their sin
 - ... overwhelming joy at salvation
 - Luther: Both are hard to believe



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ANFECHTUNG

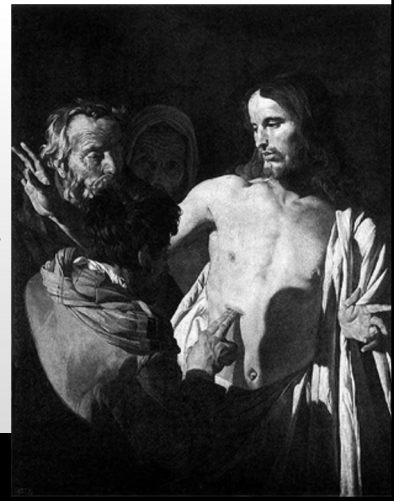
- Christians continually sin
- “The whole life of the Christian is a life of repentance”
 - “You will not entirely sweep out of your heart all this rubbish, because we are still flesh and blood. ... outward wicked deeds can be prevented and carnal, shameful words and works avoided ... but it will never come to pass here that you are free from lust and evil inclination. ... This now is the first work of God, that we know ourselves, how condemned, miserable, weak and sickly we are.”
 - Of course, many reject this entirely

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ANFECHTUNG

- Believing in salvation is perhaps *more* difficult
 - From Luther’s sermons on Christ’s appearances after the Resurrection (John 20)
 - “At first their faith was hampered by fear and dreadful thoughts; **now their joy hampers their faith**, a joy which even is far greater than at first their terror was. ... This, too, is one of the Christian’s afflictions ... that grace is entirely too great and glorious a thing when we look upon our littleness and unworthiness in comparison with Christ”



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ANFECHTUNG

- From Luther on Luke 24 (road to Emmaus)
- “From this we learn, in the first place, that even in those who have become true Christians, weakness and frailties remain, especially in the deeper matters of doctrine and faith, they being unable to understand them or to grasp them as firmly and strongly as they ought. For faith is not so light or easy a matter as ignorant and inexperienced people fancy”

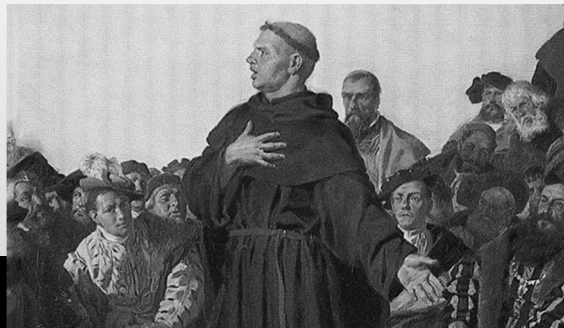


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ANFECHTUNG

- Returned time and again, both in theology and in consolation to those suffering, to the fact that Christians find it difficult to believe that their sins are forgiven
 - Hence, his advice, over and over, "Sin boldly"

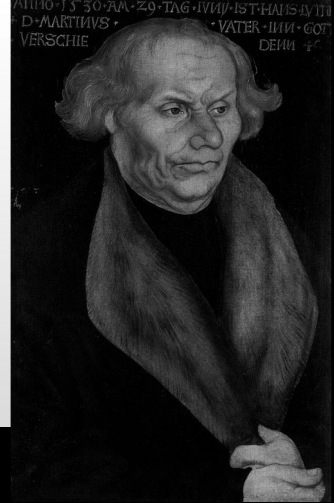


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FAITH DOES NOT PRECLUDE SADNESS

- Two *seemingly* contradictory statements--always within the same letter--to the sick and the dying To John Luther (d. 1530), his father
 - “I am very anxious about you ... your age and the inclemency of the weather give me disquieting thoughts”
 - “Receive with joy and thanksgiving the blessed teaching”

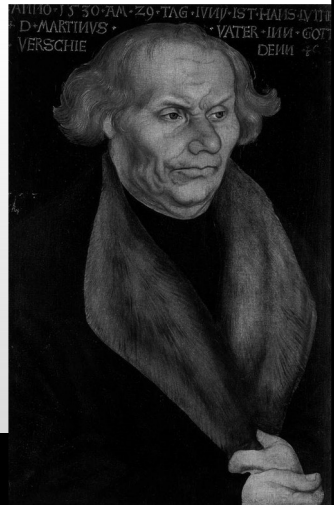


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FAITH DOES NOT PRECLUDE SADNESS

- He simultaneously encouraged joy because of salvation and recognized immense sorrow “in this troubled and unhappy vale of tears”
 - After his father’s death, he wrote that he was glad his father died in the faith, but “his kindness and the memory of his pleasant conversation have caused so deep a wound in my heart that I have scarcely ever held death in such low esteem.”

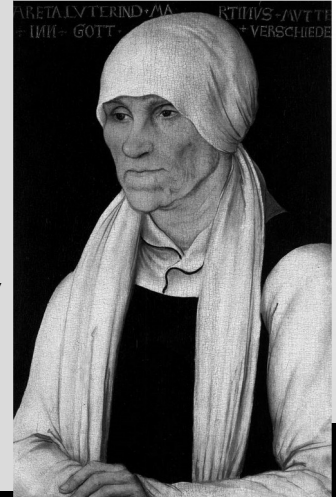


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FAITH DOES NOT PRECLUDE SADNESS

- He was not ashamed of his own grief and that of his wife Katie and their children
- To his mother, Margaret Luther (d 1531)
 - He began with “I have received my brother James's letter with its account of your illness. It grieves me deeply.”
 - He then admonished good cheer based on the reality of her salvation
 - He ended the letter with, “Some weep. Others say when they eat, ‘Grandmother is very sick.’”



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FAITH DOES NOT PRECLUDE MENTAL ILLNESS

- He gave the exact advice to those with melancholia
 - “I hear that the evil one is assailing you with melancholy. O my dear woman, do not let him terrify you ... Christ also suffered all this, and so did many holy prophets and apostles, as the Psalter sufficiently shows. Be of good cheer, therefore, and willingly endure this rod of your Father.”
 - **That is, "Don't be ashamed of your depression."**

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THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

- Luther was speaking against a theology of glory
- He was commending sufferers to the theology of the cross
- Luther seemingly first used the phrase “theologian of glory” at the Heidelberg Disputation

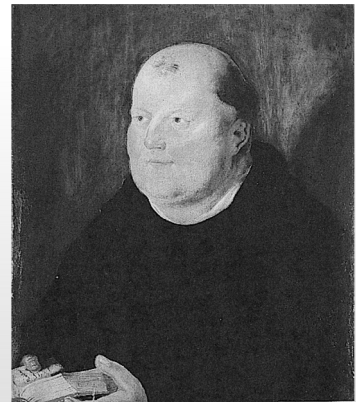


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THE HEIDELBERG DISPUTATION (APRIL, 1518)

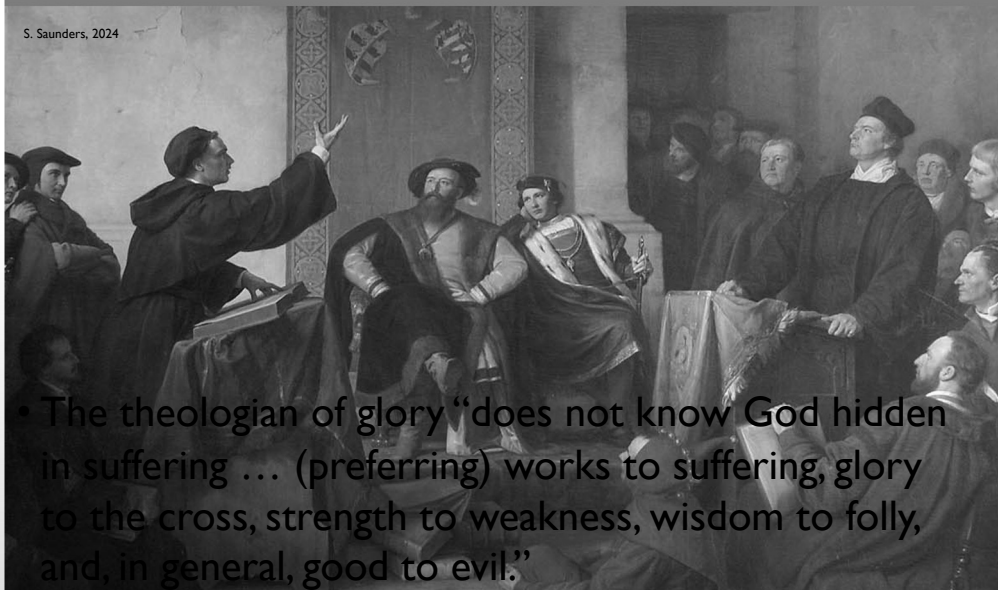
- A formalized debate to dispute indulgences
 - Luther was of the Augustinian Order
 - The Vicar General, Johannes Staupitz, organized the event (which had been proposed by Luther)
 - At the meeting, he condemned "theologians of glory"



Johannes Staupitz

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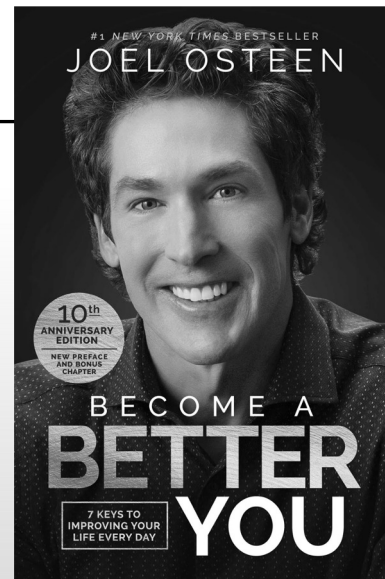
- The theologian of glory “does not know God hidden in suffering ... (preferring) works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.”
- Elsewhere, he noted, “It is the supreme art of the devil that he can make the law out of the gospel.”

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THE THEOLOGY OF GLORY

- Theologians of glory turn faith into work that can be felt as happiness and can be seen by others in the prosperity of our bodies and our minds.
- Prosperity preachers have prospered
 - Joel Osteen: “(God) wants us to live our lives happy. He wants us not to endure them, but to enjoy them”



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THE THEOLOGY OF GLORY

- Theologians of glory say that proper faith will lead to wealth, prosperity, and joy
 - The stronger one's faith, the better one's life
- Gives to Christians who fall prey to this false teaching a special burden of shame w.r.t. mental illness

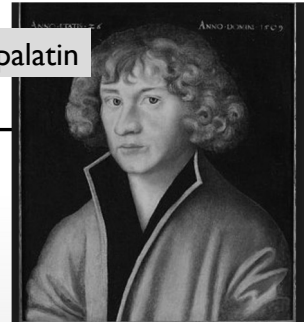
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THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

- Luther warned those with melancholia in particular to cling to the theology of the cross
- Luther to George Spalatin, reminded him that only real sinners needed a real savior.
 - “It must be that, until now, you have been only a trifling sinner, ... I beg you, join us great and hard-boiled sinners so that you do not diminish Christ for us, who is not a savior for imaginary or trivial sins but rather for real sins.”

George Spalatin



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APPLYING THIS TODAY

- Persons in emotional distress may doubt God loves them, which is an objective reality
- May mistakenly believe that the idea of salvation and God's love should always cause them joy.
 - May condemn themselves for not feeling the joy of salvation.
 - Then may avoid doing things good for their spiritual life
- Thus is the theology of the cross is a comfort to those in emotional distress!

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USE THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS TO COMFORT

- Point out: "Your emotions are irrelevant to your faith."
- Luther says emotions are "obstacles to faith"
 - Our sinful nature brings terror, which is difficult to reconcile with the joy of God's forgiveness
- Robert D. Preus, "The troubled sinner (ought) not look inwardly to feelings, experiences or quality of faith to gain assurance that he or she is right with God ... justified sinners feel joy and at peace with God, but these emotions are the results, not the criteria, of their justification"

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USE THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS TO COMFORT

- Point out that mental health problems happen to men and women of faith
 - The patriarchs, prophets, and disciples, including Abraham, Elijah, Job, Jonah, Moses, Paul and Peter, often “found life unendurable, cried out in their agony for death, and even cursed the day on which they were born.”

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USE THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS TO COMFORT

- Quote Luther directly:
 - "My weak faith still torments me."
 - (To someone severely depressed): “I trust that Your Grace will have no doubts or perplexities about the creed or the gospel inasmuch as Your Grace has now been well instructed ... We must be weak, and are willing to be, in order that Christ's strength may dwell in us.”

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SUMMARY

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- Ask or even assume that the person in distress is a victim of the theology of glory
- Address this, assume they feel bad about feeling depressed
- Remind them of the theology of the cross, that Christ says to us, "Pick up your cross and follow me."
- Comfort those with mental illness, either in themselves or a loved one, that their faith is not the issue

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SUMMARY

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- Anfechtung is inevitable, but it is not the cause of mental illness
 - Luther distinguished Anfechtung and mental illness
 - But he knew they influenced each other
 - Luther began every letter to those in emotional distress by addressing faith (as Anfechtung is inevitable)
 - But he then moved on to advice about thoughts and behaviors
- That advice is covered in the next talk

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THANK YOU!