Dialogue in *Dialog*

A Theology of the Cross and Ministry in Our Time: How Do You Call a Thing What It Is When You Don't Know What the Thing Is?

By Andrew Root

Abstract: This article explores our cultural context and the issues it raises for ministry and theology in our time, especially as it relates to a theology of the cross. By drawing on the work of Jean Baudrillard the article asserts that we live in a time of hyper-reality, when nihilism is ever-present under the thin crust of our entertainment and information-saturated society. In responding to this world, it is argued that a theology of the cross has too often been misappropriated to serve as justification for taking on either the style of a postmodern aesthetic, which provides people a brand in new, hip forms of ministry, or adopting a fundamentalist stance, which provides people with a foundation in a world where it seems there is nowhere stable to stand. By returning to Luther's Heidelberg disputation, it is argued that "calling a thing what it is" in thesis 21 is not a style or foundation, but the invitation to enter (and do theology and ministry) in the nihilism of despair. Therefore, ministry and theology in our time should begin in the nihilism (the nihilism of the crucified Christ).

Key Terms: theology of the cross, nihilism, Baudrillard, fundamentalism, postmodernism

Calling a Thing What it is

In my short time teaching at a Lutheran seminary I have noticed a curious division between students on my campus. Its full complexity eludes me, but at least part of the split concerns what is meant by "calling a thing what it is" in a theology of the cross. For some students to "call a thing what it is" means recognizing the great changes in our cultural situation now confronting the church, and taking on new paradigms of being and doing church. "Calling a thing what it is" involves doing church and theology in accents of cultural relevance. For others to "call a thing what it is" means not

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morphing the message into new relevant forms, but recovering its purity. Instead of trying to make the gospel relevant in new contexts, they seek to proclaim the pure word that will save us from the evils of this context.

I personally find neither approach very helpful, for both seem to skip over the underlying question, what is the *thing*? In late modernity, in a time of radical doubt where no one perspective can be given *a priori* authority, how do you know what the *thing* is? And what gives anyone the right to call it anything? And if you can't know what the thing is (without doubt) how can you speak the truth to it? Calling a thing what it is has become jumping to a conclusion, and proceeding with a plan of action without ever articulating the problem.

What is the contemporary human condition, and what is God's action within it? This seems to me to be the real question and issue we face, one with which all Christians, and especially those preparing to lead faith communities, must wrestle. So how do you call a thing what it is when you don't know what the thing is? Or to state it another way: How can a theology of the cross mobilize us for ministry in a world of radical doubt and radical freedom?

Embracing Nihilism

This article seeks to explore a theology of the cross for ministry, which sees the *theologia crucis* as an invitation for theological engagement in a nihilistic world of radical doubt and radical freedom. Nihilism is often a word we use to disparage another's position or perspective ("you have a very nihilistic [meaning 'bleak'] outlook on things"). Nihilism has become a bad word. But here I use it not as a bad word, but as a word of description of our context. The *Ethics Toolkit* states, "... nihilism [is] commonly taken to imply ... (a) that there is no truth; (b) that there is no right and wrong ...; (c) that life has no meaning; and even (d) that it's not possible to communicate meaningfully with one another."[1] In the shadow of globalization, pluralism, mass media, and hyper-consumerism, social theorists like David Lyon have argued that most would agree with at least a few of those descriptions. Therefore, Lyon argues that our present cultural ethos exhibits nihilistic tendencies: "This means," he states, "that reality is blurred and that establishing truth is not as straightforward as it once seemed. It does not ... mean that people believe in nothing ..."[2]

I will assert that a theology of the cross is the invitation not to hipper models of ministry or more intense assertions about the truth of the faith. Rather it is an invitation to face the nihilism of our time, and to find God in the nothingness of our existence. I will argue that the 'thing' to which Luther is referring in thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation is the despair of nihilism, which links Luther's time with our own, making a theology of the cross a lens into ministerial action in our context. The way of ministry in our time, following Luther, is not to fortify a battered tradition through rigid confessionalism or to seek a missional style born from a postmodern aesthetic, both of which never address the 'thing.' Rather, ministry that calls a thing what it is embraces the nihilism (suffering) of late modernity, seeking God's presence in the emptiness and confusion of human existence.

The Thing in a Hyper-real World

Before late modernity, it was easier to call a thing what it was; there was larger agreement on what it meant to be human beings in society. But French philosopher Jean Baudrillard asserts (sometimes more dramatically than is helpful) that we now live in a world of "hyper-reality."[3] We make meaning and formulate identity in this world no longer through production or duty, but through a myriad of images and electronic stimulants. In a hyper-real world the wave of entertainment and information that crashes upon us twenty-four seven blurs reality. The world mediated to us through our digital devices and entertainment hubs becomes more real (more engaging) than our physical, corporeal lives. Entertainment and information replace tradition and authority as those norms that set the terms for people's thoughts and behaviors. With

tradition and authority drowning in web pages and TV channels, identity (who we are) is free from any *a priori* limits. We are completely unconstrained (at least in our minds) to be who and what we want to be (even in different moments or places). Standing in the blur of information and entertainment, attempts to assert what is true or right continue to slip through our fingers as we are bombarded by other perspectives, thoughts, or distractions that disorient us.

Meaning and Meaninglessness

According to Baudrillard the blur of hyper-reality means in effect that there is no reality—that reality has been sucked into a swirl of images and electronic symbols; we use the simulations of the unreal screen to make meaning in our real world, and this makes our reality tenuous at best (e.g. both when the Berlin Wall came down, and when the police chased O.J. Simpson, it has been documented that people went to the sites with handheld television sets, so they could see themselves in the onscreen images in news clips as it was happening. People needed to see themselves on TV to verify that they truly were part of a historical event). While Baudrillard may overstate this, what his argument does point to is a nihilistic impulse that exists within our contemporary context.[4] If we are making meaning from the unreal as opposed to the real, then our reality itself is a shadow and meaning can quickly become meaningless. This nihilistic impulse does not assert that there is no meaning, but rather that there is too much meaning; meaning is cut loose from its foundations and is now free to morph and shift as it pleases.

Without tradition and authority, meaning and belonging must be individually negotiated, and everyone must manage her/his own radical freedom independently. There is simply no foundation to stand on—it has been washed out from our feet by the wave of hyper-reality. With tradition and authority shattered, we come up against nothingness; no one can tell us who we are and where we belong. To find answers to these questions we must turn to the unreal, to the images we see on the screen. With so much free-floating and freely negotiated meaning, there becomes none.

Responses to the Hyper-real World

In our time there have been two *broad* responses (each of which has a myriad of derivatives) to the nothingness of hyper-reality. One response is to avoid the nothingness by surfing from one experience to another, collecting experiences like a child might gather insects in a jar. With multiple meanings floating freely untethered to any tradition or authority (foundation), some stylistically surf from one distinct experience to another. They live with no unified narrative (because in a hyper-real world there is none), substituting instead dispersed and distinctive narratives in whatever temporary world they find themselves experiencing at the moment. This postmodern aesthetic exalts style over substance, because with so much excess there simply is no substance. If we dig under the crust of day-to-day existence there is nothing; so the way one dresses, the music one listens to, and the image one gives off becomes one's identity and defines one's belonging.

The second broad response to the nothingness is to insist that there 'is' a foundation where there is none. Since meaning is splintered and free-floating, a foundationalist response seeks to wrestle meaning back into its place, loudly asserting that this or that perspective is the true and right position, and therefore can provide adherents with a solid meaning upon which to stand. Those uncomfortable with a postmodern aesthetic and fearful of nothingness find comfort in an individual or group telling them what to think and believe in a world of surplus meaning.[5]

In Search of the Thing: A Theology of the Cross in a Hyper-real World

Both a postmodern aesthetic and foundationalism are ways to protect ourselves from a nihilistic

hyper-real world. A misuse of a theology of the cross easily can become a part of each of these coping strategies. On the one hand, the postmodern aesthetic elevates style and relevance to such highs that suffering and despair can be ignored through brand loyalty. Instead of helping people and communities face nihilism (the blur of our hyper-real world) we seek to provide people with music, sermons, and worship experience that feels like their lives in the hyper-real world. While these things are not bad in and of themselves, if we are not careful a theology of the cross ("calling a thing what it is") simply becomes a springboard to allow people to join a brand and take on a style that avoids despair.[6]

On the other hand, the foundationalist response avoids nihilism by fabricating solid ground where there is none, thereby protecting one from nothingness. The foundationalist approach forecloses on a perspective or position and fights for its legitimacy, feeling justified in attacking others, because "we're just calling a thing what it is."[7] In this way, both perspectives use a theology of the cross as a device, either as a springboard or as a foundation, to avoid and protect them from nihilism.

But the Heidelberg Disputation is not a foundation for Luther, and a theology of the cross is not a style. Rather, Luther's theology, and the Heidelberg Disputation itself, is a richly existential journey into the hell of despair. The Heidelberg Disputation is not a foundation but a plea; it is not a style but a breakthrough into the meaning of God's action in a meaningless world. In Luther's own theocentric cultural context, in a time before modernity, when an understanding of divine providence set the norms for human existence, it was with significant bravery and a great sense of desperation that Luther was willing to ask the question, "Is this God good?" This question took him into the heart of nihilism, as he realized that no matter how hard he tried, he could not please this God, who seemed terrible to Luther, and not 'good' at all. In the time since Luther's theo-centric, providence-based cultural context we have guarded ourselves from the despair Luther articulated with ideology, science, and progress. But now in the hyper-real world, that protection is eroding. A return to Luther and the Heidelberg Disputation may help us imagine a way to do theology and ministry in a world where the protective cover from meaninglessness is becoming ever so thin.

A Theology out of Despair

In the Heidelberg Disputation Luther seems to be constructing a theology out of nihilism that therefore gives an answer to the nothingness of existence.[8] Instead of avoiding the despair of nothingness, he begins by confronting the despair. (Thesis 18: *It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.*).

For Luther, the despair came in the inescapable reality that all people, no matter what they did (what works), are sinful and unable to please God. This led Luther to question the goodness of this God. Living in a world that revolved around deference to divine providence,[9] Luther broke with this system of meaning-making and bravely began to doubt the goodness of God. This thrust Luther into nihilism. If God could not be trusted then there was only the despair of nothingness. Luther knew this despair in his own being (it was an existential experience), and he found himself (not theoretically, but actually) in the dark pit of nihilism.

A theology of the cross does not provide us a style to surf around nihilism, or a hammer to rebuild a lost foundation; instead it is an invitation to acknowledge the nihilism, to recognize our despair and call it what it is. After all, few things may be more nihilistic than believing that the fullness of God was revealed in a poor peasant whose greatest act was to be gruesomely executed. There is, no doubt more than a hint of nihilism in such a perspective. For a theology of the cross to be a theology of the *cross*, it must see the cross not as a logo or foundation but as the culmination, the finality, of darkness and despair. It is the horror of the genuine terror of God, it is the death of all hope in the death of God, it is the worst dream come to life, it is the victory of nothingness.

Luther desires for us to begin our conceptions of God, world, and self in this place, the

place of suffering despair. A theology of the cross leads us into nothingness, freeing us from being experience-hoarding postmodern tourists or foundationalist warriors fighting a war long lost. A theology of the cross demands instead that we stare into the eyes of the impossibility of nihilism, confessing our despair, admitting that there is no meaning here.

Thus, the 'thing' that Luther refers to in Thesis 21 is the impossibility, the nihilism of the dark pit. "Calling a thing what it is" is not foreclosing on a tradition or stylistically engaging the culture, but recognizing that we are in the pit, even if its walls are covered with the bright lights of video billboards. The "thing" that Luther is referring to is for him the very impossibility of pleasing God; for us it is the impossibility of finding a place for ourselves.

A Ministry out of Despair

If the 'thing' is the despair of human impossibility then our ministerial actions in the hyper-real world should lead us into the dark pit of others' despair as we recognize our own. A theology of the cross is the call to suffer existence, one's own and one's neighbors. It is the call to minister one to another out of our shared impossibility. We are *all* broken people, people who cannot by our own efforts please God (Luther's problem), and people who cannot by our own power overcome the frighteningly lonely feeling of having nowhere *a priori* to belong and to be safe (our problem).

It is into the nihilism of impossibility that the church must tread; it is into the despair of the *shared* dark pit that a theology of the cross leads us. "Calling a thing what it is" points the church to the despair that cannot be escaped. Instead of ministry being about avoiding the 'thing' through technique—either style or tradition—what if ministry would actually name and dwell in the 'thing,' the despair?[10] Though sounding counterintuitive, it may be that only by bravely walking into the despair of nihilism can we free ourselves from the unreal world of information and entertainment in which we live.[11]

The church does not need a greater missional postmodern aesthetic style in our communities (guitars, video projectors, Starbucks kiosks, more relevant models of ministry) nor are we in need of recovering a lost traditionalism through the authority of a personality or position that leads us into fist-waving confessions. Rather, what we need is the bravery to speak and live in the nihilism, to admit that this is it, that there is only nothingness, a nothingness that crushes our fragile hearts that yearn so deeply for something more. The church needs the voice of those brave enough to admit that they and all are impossibly stuck. This is "calling a thing what it is."

Asserting Hope in the Face of Despair

If the 'thing' is nihilism and despair, Luther paradoxically finds some hope in despair and some meaning in nihilism. Nihilism and despair can never be denied, they are our location. But this is not all there is to say. For Luther, God is present right in the middle of the nihilism of despair. And it is this, this defiant confidence in the presence of God, even when all signs point to God's absence, that must be the starting point of all theological reflection. We must seek God's activity in the context of our nihilism, for in the impossibility of death and the nihilism of the crucifixion God unveils Godself most fully (completely) in the world (thesis 20: *He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross*).

Rather than starting with the glorified God or the wonders of creation, Luther begins his theology with the despair of the crucifixion, the nihilism of the death of God. Thus it is in suffering, hiddenness, and opposite that God is found. God is found first beaten, despised, and weak. If God is life, love, and wholeness God can be found unveiled in death, despair, and brokenness—not because God is masochistic, but because this is the 'thing;' nihilism is the state of our world, and despair the

state of our humanity. God saves the world by suffering nihilism and despair, by taking nothingness so fully unto Godself that it seems to overcome God. However, by taking the fullness of death and despair upon Godself, who is opposite of it, God transforms death and despair. In this way, instead of life leading to death, out of death comes life; instead of meaning disappearing into nihilism, meaning (salvation) is found in the nihilism. By suffering nihilism, God in Jesus overcomes nihilism, making it the place of God's presence, making it the place where we can encounter hope and promise in the beaten and weak person of Jesus Christ.

The Power of Weakness

The 'thing' is the nihilism of despair, but it is a nihilism claimed by God. This *does not* mean it is no longer nihilism; it is still the void of death, the depth of despair, the haunting cackle of meaninglessness. But in this hell of lonely brokenness God is present and active. God overcomes nihilism by immersing Godself in nihilism, by being fully present in despair. The paradox of God's victory over nihilism comes in the fact that God uses the only weapon that can combat nihilism, the only weapon that does not feed it—that is, weakness and suffering. Power and force only strengthens nihilism by destroying others (whether in authoritarian traditionalism or stylistic avoidance). By contrast, weakness sympathizes with nihilism, whispering to it like one would to a tantruming child that it is right, that it has reason to feel as it does, offering presence in despair. This weakness of presence overcomes nihilism, and shared pain creates love that floods us with meaning and hope. "The only power that can address suffering humanity is the power of love, and that is a power 'made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12:9)."[12]

This then is how we approach our hyper-real world—not in the power of authority or the power of style but in the weakness of presence. Rather than claiming that we possess the truth, or trying vigorously to mold ourselves into something hip and trendy, we should engage the world in humble weakness. Not because we believe the message of Jesus to be shameful or embarrassing, but because this is the way of the crucified God, who overcomes nihilism by embracing it and holding it near to God. In encountering people suffering the effects of living in the nihilism of a hyper-real world only those weak enough to serve them in the love of shared despair can offer meaning in the narrative of a crucified God.

And this is our message to the world! Through our own brokenness, through our own experiences with the nihilism of failed marriages, sick children, lost jobs, and meaningless accidents we claim the hope of God's future, we claim the presence of God in our despair. We profess that God is near to our wounds, that the 'thing' is now taken up and transformed into the location of the presence of God in suffering who, by living in the nihilism, offers us love in the community of God's person.

The 'thing' is still the dread of nihilism, but in suffering this dread we are accompanied by God and God's people. We must still live with a surplus of meaning, but love has created a place for us, neither a foundation nor a style, but a community that exists not on an unbreakable foundation or aesthetic style but on calling a thing what it is.

Endnotes

1. *Julian Baggini and Peter S. Fosl, eds. The Ethics Toolkit: A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods* (Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA, 2007), 225.

2. *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

3. See *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

4. David Lyon in his book *Postmodernity* has laid out a historical progression of consciousness from the medieval times to our own. Lyon asserts that we have moved from our existence resting on providence, to progress post enlightenment, to our present day existence which rests on nihilism. He explains, "[Our present] mood exhibits nihilistic tendencies . . . this means that reality is blurred and that establishing truth is not as straightforward as it once seemed. It does not necessarily mean that people believe in nothing or that they are paralyzed by the senselessness of existence." *Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 9.

5. See Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash. *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994) and Anthony Giddens, *Runaway*

World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives (New York: Routledge, 2003).

6. This argument is similar to Zygmunt Bauman's position that our context makes people into tourists, seeking to harvest experiences as they continually move from one world to the next. See *Globalization*: *The Human Consequences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997).

7. See Gidden's discussion of fundamentalism in *Runaway World* chapter 3.

8. In Michael Gillespie's book *Nihilism Before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) he argues that Luther was responding to nihilism.

9. See Lyon's argument in note 2.

10. We have seen a new cultural obsession with masochism, from teenagers cutting themselves to hit movies like *Jackass* and *Jackass 2*. It may be argued that such masochistic acts are a way to feel something in the unreal world of the hyper-real. The masochistic act is the plunge into nihilism, that ironically is more real than anything else for these young people in our world.

11. Douglas John Hall says it this way, "The task of Christian theology in our time and place must be to help people enter into that darkness . . . The task is not to offer a refuge from the darkness . . . " *Lighten Our Darkness,* xxiii.

12. Douglas John Hall, *God & Human Suffering* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 107. Moltmann adds to this perspective, "It is not the idealistic principle of nonviolence that is consonant with the gospel, but the responsible action of love. Love is divine power-in-weakness (2 Cor 12:9)." *The Experiment Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 175), 143.