

The Heidelberg Disputation of 1518

Section 1: Theses 1-12; Of Works and Man

[The first twelve deal with the nature and value of good works and the sinfulness of man.]

1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.
2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.
3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.
4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.
5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.
6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.
7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.
8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.
9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.
10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.
11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.
12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.

Section 2: Theses 13-18; The Bondage of the Will

[To what extent (if any) can people overcome sin by their own power? Can people make themselves better? Luther argues the human will is not able to overcome sin.]

13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.
14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.

15. Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity (subiectiva potentia).

16. 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.

17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.

Section 3: Theses 19-24; Theology of Glory vs Theology of the Cross

[Here Luther contrasts two theological systems. A theology of glory and a theology of the cross represent two entirely different methods of understanding God's works and will. We might call them two different "world views". The simplest description might be "You Can vs. You Can't"]

19. 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"

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.

23. The "law brings the wrath" of God (Rom. 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.

24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.

Section 4: Theses 25-28; Righteousness by Faith

[The last set of theses (25-28) turn to the righteousness that is ours by faith.]

25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.

26. The law says, "do this", and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this", and everything is already done.

27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work (operans) and our work an accomplished work (operatum), and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.

28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.