

## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Background Research

As says the Lord God, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” (Rev. 1:8a), Christ is the beginning and the end, the center of history.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the history of the Christian church, the crucial questions have been Christological.<sup>3</sup> The Church advances in history under the grace of God, oscillating away from, and returning to Christ. There are two strands of theologies that have greatly influenced the Christian churches in the past hundred years, one is the liberal theology which downplays the divinity of Christ with human rational thoughts; the other is the charismatic theology which over-emphasizes the humanity of Christ with subjective experience. The latter also risks neglecting the divinity of Christ. Liberalism objects to the supernatural acts in Scripture and regards Jesus only as an example and guide instead of a Savior who performed miracles.<sup>4</sup> These strip off the glory of Christ, which has shaken the foundation of the Christian faith. After the wind of liberalism blew through western society, there were many beautiful church buildings left empty. In responding to this western wind of liberalism, there was another wind of charismatics arising from North American which quickly spread to the whole world with the help of modern social media in the twentieth century. It seemed to bring revival to Christian church in the beginning, since many people were attracted to the church by the supernatural power of speaking in tongues, healing, and other miraculous experiences, reported as “fantastic encounters with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.”<sup>5</sup> However, many

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 2001, 15

<sup>3</sup> Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 2001, 30

<sup>4</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, 1924, 94-116

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, *The Charismatics: A Doctrinal Perspective*, 1978, 11-15

problems have developed in the charismatic movement due to basing faith on religious experience, instead of biblical truth — a fatal flaw at its center in spite of all the good it has done. The influence of both liberals and charismatics extends to the church of the twenty-first century today. There is a significant need, suggested by the latest survey in the United States at the beginning of COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, for Christians to be taught Christology especially the doctrine of the deity of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

While western churches influenced by liberals and charismatics, are facing increasing challenges of secularization and pluralization losing the exclusivity of Christ,<sup>7</sup> eastern churches are also facing increasing persecutions from Muslims and communist governments through religious and political threats. The Chinese government enacted stricter regulations on religions since the start of 2018 and will create more restrictions in March 2022, directing the Christian faith of the government-registered churches and seminaries to Sinicization (indigenization of Christian religion in Chinese culture, society and state political policy) and closing many nonregistered house churches. In fact, liberalism, charismaticism, and Sinicization are all trapped by their human-centeredness, away from Christ-centeredness. The glory of Christ has been largely blurred in the contemporary church of this highly secularized postmodern world.

Just like the Christian church today, the church in Luther's time was also facing dramatic challenges common in the late medieval period. The need for reform and renewal

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<sup>6</sup> Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research, <https://thestateoftheology.com/> (accessed March 24, 2021). *Ligonier Ministries' State of Theology survey* in "What do Americans think about Jesus Christ, the Bible, truth, and ethics?" in March 2020. This survey (conducted every two years since 2014) reveals that almost a third of evangelicals agree that Jesus was merely a great teacher, but He was not God. A substantial minority of evangelicals deny the deity of Jesus Christ in America. The results suggest "an urgent need for clear biblical teaching on the person of Christ, the gospel of grace, and the way that the truth of God informs our ethical decisions in everyday life."

<sup>7</sup> Wellum, *Christ Alone – The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior*, 2017, 275-279

in the institutions, practices and ideas of the western church was so obvious that it could no longer be ignored.<sup>8</sup> The church's legal system and ecclesiastical bureaucracy had become notoriously inefficient and corrupt.<sup>9</sup> During the Renaissance, the popes and the clergy, fell into secularization and extravagance, and the contemporary intellectuals also followed suit.<sup>10</sup> The church had departed from Christ and His Word through many practices such as the church's hierarchy, penances, indulgences, icon worship, monasticism, and merits of saints. The expansion of universities and schools of theology in Europe resulted in the rise of doctrinal pluralism. The diversification of theologies could not provide people with a clear solution for salvation. "The sad state of the church in the early sixteenth century was simply a symptom of a more radical disease — a deviation from the distinctive ideas of the Christian faith, a loss of intellectual identity, a failure to grasp what Christianity really was,"<sup>11</sup> — the state of the church was filled with the glory of the popes and Rome, but lost the life and the glory of Christ. Therefore, the late medieval church called for, not only the vitality and the freshness of the Christian faith, but also a reformation of Christian doctrine, of theology and of religious ideas. Echoing the cry of the humanists: "back to the sources" (*ad fontes*), it was time for the church to go back to the "Golden Age of the Apostolic Church" in order to regain its lifeblood.<sup>12</sup> There was also a fundamental shift in the power of the pope to the secular European governments; and the development of printing technology from Germany to Italy and England, made the production of the

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<sup>8</sup> McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 1994, 7; *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 1999, 2

<sup>9</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 1999, 2

<sup>10</sup> Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, 2002, 21-22

<sup>11</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 1999, 3-4

<sup>12</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 1999, 39-45

propaganda cheap and quick. All these factors contributed to the birth of the Reformation at this critical point of history.

When God's timing came, a humble Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, was pushed to the center of the stage of history and shouldered the battle of the Reformation Movement. What Luther did more than 500 years ago, through reformation of the doctrine and the church towards a Christ-centered biblical base: Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*), Christ alone (*solus Christus*), grace alone (*sola gratia*), and faith alone (*sola fide*), lifting up the glory of Christ for the glory of God alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*), brought the church back to God's will and profoundly changed the world. Luther's Christology gave him dramatic courage to reform the church of Christ and to face all the dangers of challenging the biggest religious institution in the world with a history of one thousand and five hundred years.<sup>13</sup> The thoughts of Luther on the glory of Christ, like a pearl in the treasure of theology, can speak to God's people about the truth and inspire His church to stand firm when at risk of secularization or persecution, to closely follow Christ today. Jesus Christ who "breathed heart and soul the glory of the Father,"<sup>14</sup> is the greatest expression of God's glory. Seeing the glory of Christ has become especially significant in the modern times for people who have been inundated with abundant information from the world, but are still very unsatisfied in their souls. The more we behold the glory of Christ, the more we are transformed into His likeness, the more we are dead to the world and dead to self, and the more we have love and faith in God to witness His glory and to glorify Him.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Yeung, *The Study of Martin Luther's Theology*, 2002, 136

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), 2000, OS 1, 46

<sup>15</sup> Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, 2009, 27-41

Luther had gone through an incredible change in his thought of Christ from a terrifying vision as a Lawgiver and Judge to a comforting and reassuring vision of God. It was through preparing his lectures on the Psalms and on Paul's epistles that he intensively studied Scripture and rediscovered the true Gospel of justification by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone, which gives glory to Christ alone.<sup>16</sup> In the preface to his lectures on the Epistle to the Galatians (1531), Luther stated just how significant Christ was in his theology:

There reigns in my heart a single fact: faith in Christ (*fides Christi*). It is from there that all my theological meditation flows; it is through there that this meditation goes to and fro, flowing in and out day and night like the tides; without this fact, from so high, so broad and so deep a wisdom, I would not have managed to seize more than a few delicate and meagre beginnings of crumbs.<sup>17</sup>

Christ-centeredness is the most unique character of Luther's hermeneutics. For Luther the entire Bible has one focus, that is Christ. "If Christ is lost sight of, everything is over."<sup>18</sup> Bayer commented, "For him, the issue is always about the honor of Christ."<sup>19</sup> Luther was concerned about the glory of Christ more than his life. However, the glory of Christ in Luther's thought has not been systematically examined. This study aims to bridge this gap through a comparison between the glory of Christ in Luther's thought and the loss of the glory of Christ in the late medieval thought. For quite a while, far more studies have focused on Luther's theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*), a pearl in Luther's works. Though Luther proposed the theology of the cross against the theology of glory (*theologus*

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<sup>16</sup> Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 2001, 99. "In every generation, therefore, the church needs to re-recover the doctrine of justification. Paul called it 'the gospel of God's grace' (Acts 20:24; cf. Gal 1:6), and grace is the unmerited, unsolicited love of God. It was seen in its fullest splendor on the cross. It offers salvation to sinners as an absolutely free gift. It therefore leaves no room for human boasting. It gives glory to Jesus Christ alone—to Jesus Christ our gracious Saviour."

<sup>17</sup> WA 40.1.33, 7-11

<sup>18</sup> Luther, *Luther's works*, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, 1999, 356

<sup>19</sup> Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, 2008, 333

*gloriae*), his understanding of the cross did not obliterate the idea of glory itself, but the theology of glory,<sup>20</sup> a term that Luther defined the current speculative, scholastic theology. Luther deepens and enriches the Word of the cross to a theological level, while other theologians usually stress the meaning and the virtue of the cross.<sup>21</sup> The awesome glory of God must be seen through the humility of the cross,<sup>22</sup> and Christ Himself was called the glory of God in Luther's thought.<sup>23</sup>

## 1.2 Research Questions

This study will answer three questions concerning the glory of Christ in Luther's thought in comparison to that in the late medieval thought. First, how did Luther exalt the glory of Christ in his sources and methods in comparison to the loss of the glory of Christ in the sources and methods in the late medieval thought? Second, how did Luther illustrate the glory of Christ in His person and His work in comparison to the loss of the glory of Christ in His person and His work in the late medieval thought? Third, how was the glory of Christ manifested in Luther's theology of the cross in comparison to the loss of glory of Christ in the theology of late medieval scholasticism?

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<sup>20</sup> Kristanto, *Sola Dei Gloria – The Glory of God in the Thought of John Calvin*, 2011, 34-35

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, ICR II, xvi. How Christ Has Fulfilled the Function of Redeemer to Acquire Salvation for Us; III. viii. Bearing the Cross, a Part of Self-denial.

<sup>22</sup> Vandrunen, *God's glory alone – The Majestic Heart of Christian faith and Life*, 2015, 16-18

<sup>23</sup> Luther, "Die dedicationis temple sermo," In WA 4. 670/24. f

### 1.3 Thesis Statement

The glory of Christ plays a central role in Luther's theology, in comparison to the loss of the glory of Christ in the late medieval thought from the perspectives of the sources and methods, Christ in His person, in His work and in the cross.

### 1.4 Research Methods and the Limitations

This study aims to historically and systematically investigate the glory of Christ in Luther's thought in comparison to the loss of it in the late medieval thought, which primarily involves literary research into Luther's works and the works of late medieval thought. Luther wrote a library of works in a variety of genres. Therefore, I will limit this study to an extent by choosing some of his representative works in different periods of his life, which are closely related to this study as follows: Luther's lectures on Genesis (1535-1545), on Isaiah (1544), on Psalms (1513-1515 and 1519-1521), on Gospel of John (1537), on Romans (1515-1517), on Galatians (1516-1517) and on Hebrews (1517-1518), and *the Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (1517), *the Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), *the Disputation of Heidelberg* (1518), the Small and Large Catechisms (1529), his treatises on *the Freedom of the Christian* (1520), *the Bondage of the Will* (1526) and some of his sermons, etc. In order to answer the questions about how Luther manifested the glory of Christ in the sources and methods, in His person and His work, and in the cross, this study will carry out a systematic investigation into these selected works. For medieval thought, Lombard's *Sentences*, Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and the works about medieval theology and the Reformation are selected.

In Chapter Two, a brief investigation in general on the thought of the late Middle Ages which fell short of Christ's glory and its impact on church from the Protestant view, will be performed from the perspectives of the sources and methods, Christ in His person and in His work, and the theology of glory (scholastic theology). This will contribute to the negative aspect that works as a background and comparison to the significance of the glory of Christ in Luther's thought.

In Chapter Three, first, the research on Luther's sources and hermeneutic principles, their profound impacts on the glory of Christ in Luther's thought will be addressed. Second, the glory of Christ in His person as the Word, the King, and the High Priest, will be discussed. Third, the glory of Christ in His work in respect to the incarnation, the salvation, and the return of Christ, will be examined. Luther's important concepts of "justification by faith," "active righteousness and passive righteousness," and "Law and Gospel," will be investigated. Fourth, Luther's theology of the cross will be examined. The glory of Christ paradoxically revealed through the ugliness, the foolishness and the suffering of the cross and its implication how "the cross story becomes our story,"<sup>24</sup> will be explored. Luther's ideas of "God hidden and God revealed," and of "theologian of the cross and theologian of glory," will be analyzed.

In Chapter Four, the significance of the glory of Christ in Luther's thought from the perspective of the late medieval thought, will be discussed.

In Chapter Five, I will draw conclusions from all the investigations in this study and indicate the significance of this study to the believers and the churches today.

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<sup>24</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1997, 8