

The Risk of Living A Theology of the Cross In the 21st Century

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I. Introduction

I wonder if we actually want to live in the 21st century. To abuse an old proverb, “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,” we could paraphrase it to say, “at least there is a certain security from living in the present, despite its problems. With the future, who knows what we will get?” It is much easier to drag the present into the future, even if we constantly complain about the present.

II. To get to the future, we must know where we are in the present.

Do we really want to take the present with us into the year 2000, though? If we look at it closely, I am not so sure. If I had to describe the last 20 years, from the time I came fresh out of high school and felt that the possibilities were endless, to the present time, I would propose that there are three themes which are constantly surfacing today: a sense of despair and malaise, a sense of cynicism, and a growing sense of passivism. This is despite all the technological advances we have experienced, and our high standard of living, compared to the rest of the world.

A. A Despairing Society

Much of the despair in our society stems from what it perceives as a loss of capable leadership, people whom we trust, and who can inspire us. Last week, for example, I picked up the *Edmonton Journal*, and in the sports section, read about the demise of Canadian hockey.¹ Coaches have fallen from their pedestals. And worst of all, says this reporter, now that Mario Lemeiux is retiring at the end of this season, there will be no more great young Canadian hockey players. The heroes like the Greztkys, Messiers, Howes, Richards, etc. have disappeared. Even worse, we lost the World Cup of Hockey last fall to the United States, of all places! We despair, because our heroes have disappeared.

According to surveys done by Reginald Bibby, a sociologist from Lethbridge, people in Canada no longer trust their leaders— whether religious, political, business, financial.² Douglas John Hall, following the lead of Ernest Becker, suggests that in our society, the heroes — the trusted leaders — have disappeared.³ When that happens, the development of new leadership suffers. There is the sense that potential leaders will face the same fate as the present leaders. As Becker states, “The crisis of modern society is precisely that the youth no longer feel heroic in the plan for action that their culture has set up.”⁴ He goes on to say, “The crisis

¹ *The Edmonton Journal*. January 28, 1997

² Reginald Bibby, *The Bibby Report: Social Trends Canadian Style* (Toronto: Stoddart Books, 1995), p. 110ff.

³ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), pp. 180-81, 192. See also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), pp. 4-7.

⁴ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, p. 6.

of society is, of course, the crisis of organized religion too; religion is no longer valid as a hero system.”⁵ That is a cause for despair for many in the church, especially those who still dream of a new Constantinian era of the church, where the church as an institution was on the highest pedestal in society.

There is also despair over jobs. Jobs are not secure. Loyalty between employee and employers has disappeared. Many people feel that their jobs are not secure, regardless of how long they have worked for a company. Combined with this, society seems to have resigned itself to a national unemployment rate around ten percent. There are ways we have tried to ease this despair, but we cannot forget that people without work are not comforted by receiving Employment Insurance rather than Unemployment Insurance. The change in titles for the same reality does not do anything for those standing in line looking for work. Nor does it hide the sense of despair as they line up in ‘Employment’ offices.

B. A Cynical Society

Despite the technology, there is also the prevailing sense of cynicism. Some of this cynicism comes from the doubts and despair over the direction our society has taken. We feel like a passenger in a runaway train, helpless to do anything about it. More specifically, much of the cynicism is fostered by our mistrust of leaders, something I have already mentioned. I sit down with pastors, and hear their cynicism about the church; whether it be the leadership, the membership, the church schools, or the seminaries. I encounter people on the same committee who do not trust each other. I come into contact with people in my parish who have everything technology can offer, but are full of despair. Something in life is missing. Their gut reaction is that something is wrong, but they cannot name it or identify exactly what it is. The tendency is to just give up in despair. I sit down and visit with parishioners, and hear their cynicism over politics, business, and the church.

The same is the case in the workforce. People, once loyal to the company they worked for, are now cynical about their employers. Some of this can be attributed, no doubt, to the many recent cutbacks by both government and the private sector. ‘Downsizing to save costs for the corporations’ has all too often become ‘downsizing at great cost to society.’ Many people live in a sort of perpetual fear that their job will be the next to go. With the loss of loyalty between employer and employee, there is a corresponding loss of loyalty between employee and employer. The mood seems to be, everyone is out to get everyone else.

This cynicism is found in the perceptions Canadians have about reality. In 1985, 54% of Canadians felt that Canada has been changing for the worse, whereas in 1995, 74% shared that view.⁶ I have to admit that this surprised me, since I had thought that with the achievement of balanced budgets in our province and the popularity of our present premier, people would feel that our society is changing for the better. But cynicism is present, even when things are going well. There is a wait and see attitude present in our society and in our province.

This cynicism is also present in the church — not just in terms of questioning leadership and church structures, but also in terms of those doctrines and dogmas which are held up as central to the faith. In the last few years, various issues of *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Alberta Report* and *Macleans*, for example, have carried articles around the time of Easter and Christmas, questioning various traditional beliefs.⁷

C. A Passive Society

The third ‘blight’ upon the rosy technological horizon has been a growing passivity among people. One example: the increased time adults are spending in the passive activity of watching television. Bibby reports that in 1995, more than 80% of Canadians watch more than 5 hours of television a week.⁸ This has increased

⁵ Becker, *The Denial of Death*, p. 7.

⁶ Bibby, *The Bibby Report*, pp. 26-7.

⁷ For example, the *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *Macleans* magazines in 1996 or 1997 all had articles around Easter time which raised questions about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

⁸ Bibby, *The Bibby Report*, p. 19. While Bibby states that 80% of adults watch more than 5 hours of TV

steadily since 1975. People prefer to sit back and relax when they are off work. When I have asked people about this, the most often heard complaint is that they have more responsibilities at work, they are having to do more, and when they get home, all they want to do is 'crash'. The theme is, "I am tired. Let somebody else do it."

I am not sure, but I wonder if this mentality has also carried over to the church. The current flow of funds between local congregations and the synods, for example, suggests that congregations are keeping more of the money in their own communities. One explanation could be that there is a 'retrenchment' going on. Others would suggest that this is a result of the mistrust of leadership in the church, while still another group would put a positive spin on it, and suggest that more ministry is being done on a local level. Perhaps local ministry is happening more. I hope it is. But I wonder if the church is also being encouraged, both by its own members, and by society as a whole, to be more passive. Society would like the church to be the "pacifiers and alleviators of the little pains of existence;" to provide morals and values, but to stay out of anything controversial.⁹ Let the church preach "peace, peace, when there is no peace," as Jeremiah 6:14 and 8:11 states, and then keep the peace. The idea of a reforming, challenging church is not something those in power want to have. They prefer a passive church. Faced with this pressure, it is easy to retreat into a shell, claiming that since we are a small church presence in Canada, we must have a small voice as well. If we raise our voices, perhaps they will take away our tax benefits which we presently enjoy.

The desire for a passive church is also the preference, I suspect, among the majority of church goers. We become very civil at our meetings, even if controversial issues are discussed. Instead of reacting strongly to anything, we sit passively, vote quietly, and then go home and complain about all the decisions they [that synod, national church, etc.] made. I wonder if this passive/aggressive behaviour is a Scandinavian trait, or a trait of the times? The ability to distance oneself from the decisions made also reflect this passivity. One of the disturbing side-effects is that people are increasingly viewing the church in terms of an 'us versus them' mentality. It has become 'the synod,' not 'our synod.' In any case, a person can sit through a convention and wonder if the church is passionate about anything anymore. A former Missouri Synod Pastor commented that he actually missed the heavy, passionate theological fights on the floor of convention. In our quest to keep things quiet, and 'under control,' have we quenched the spirit of God?

And yet, beneath all of this despair, cynicism and passivity, there are also signs of hope. There are still potential signs and longed for hopes of a resurrection for the church. There is still, deep below the surface cynicism and despair, glimpses of hope for the church. Not everyone has given up on the church, or on the future. There are people who are attempting to rise up to meet the challenge in front of them.

III. Proposals for entering the future from where we are at.

The problem with the future is that we do not know how it turns out. But the other side of the coin is that there are many possibilities before us. In that sense, and following Tillich's definitions, we are in one of those 'kairoi,' times, even if not *the* 'kairos' time in history.¹⁰ In the midst of the crisis before us, we have an opportunity. We are in the time when something can be done. How will we enter the next century? I propose that there are at least 4 options open to us; a) a retreat into isolation and sectarianism; b) a move towards 'survivalism,' through mergers and alliances with other churches based on an acceptance of the least common denominator; c) an attempt to return to the golden era of the Constantinian church; d) daring to risk the life of the church for the sake of the gospel.

per day, it would appear from the rest of the survey material that he meant that Canadian Adults watched more than 5 hours of TV per week. In either case, however, the trend remains the same: adults are watching more TV than ever before.

⁹ Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, p. 170.

¹⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 369-372.

A. A Retreat into Isolation and Sectarianism

The first response is really a non-response. It is to do nothing, when confronted with the future. Some may see this as a 'faith-filled' response, similar to simply placing everything in God's hands, and letting God worry about it while we get on with our business. The question quickly comes, however: is faith an excuse for passivity, or is faith something that is active in love? A passive faith is something Luther talks about in terms of justification. We are given salvation. It is not earned. But that is not an excuse-faith. An excuse-faith smells of death. It says, 'let things go on as they are until they fall apart and die.' On the other hand, a faith active in love is passive toward God in terms of salvation, but actively bears fruit, as Paul describes it in Galatians. This faith is a life-giving faith.

A retreat into isolation is a prescription for death, and it is a denial of the gospel. It smacks of determinism. Nevertheless, some will see it as the most valid option for the church for the 21st century. Misusing Paul's words, their motto may be, "We have fought the good fight, we lost, and so now we will pack up all our marbles and go home. Let's forget about this world and escape into heaven."

This approach does act on the feelings of cynicism in this day and time, however. The solution is to escape from the source of this cynicism — this evil world, and flee into heaven. Why bother trying to keep the church alive if that society does not trust it? It also feeds on the sense of despair and hopelessness. Why bother putting energy into an institution that will die? Heaven is our home. Why attempt to reach out to the world, when the sinful world is not interested in listening, anyway?

Another name for this approach may be the 'religious Luddite option.' The mentality is, the church will continue on its merry way, doing what it has always done. The concerns and world views of the present generation are labelled ungodly; if they are ignored, they will eventually go away. Proponents of this view would suggest that the church stick to religious matters, and that it quit meddling in politics. It proposes that religion is a private affair between God and the individual. Douglas Hall, for example, has this to say about the reaction a church gets when it makes public statements on unemployment, poverty, sexual harassment, warfare, and the environment:

Invariably such statements are met with scorn from the public sector. How could bishops understand the intricacies of economics or international relations? What do church councils know about the job market? What these scornful declamations really mean is that the religious community has, in the view of its critics, stepped out of line. It is not abiding by the long-standing rules of the cultural establishment. The church's task is not to criticize the other institutions of the established order, but to provide them with whatever transcendental sanctioning is still viable.¹¹

Leadership, according to this option, is a 'play it safe' style of leadership. 'Touchy issues' are not discussed.¹² If they are brought up on the floor of conventions, however, they are quickly shuffled off to a subcommittee of some sort for 'further study.' Where is the challenge? Where is the prophetic ministry here? In hoping that the issues 'fade away,' perhaps the church also 'fades away.'

¹¹ Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 296.

¹² Here Hall comments: "Clergy and laity alike, on the whole would be far more comfortable if their leadership were to refrain entirely from discussing 'touchy' issues, even when these issues have grown to such proportions that they affect everyone. That the churches should even dare to address the reality of homosexuality, let alone inquire in their courts whether gay men and women should be allowed to exercise ordered ministry: this seems to many — I suspect to the majority — wholly uncalled for. . . . Certainly the church may comfort the individuals who are afflicted by AIDS — that falls within the pastoral office. But to enter the public arena telling the truth about governments and pharmaceutical concerns and organized crime and public passivity and all the other factors that actually contribute to the spread of that disease — for instance, to call for public education in the whole areas of sexual practice: this is to go beyond the bounds of ecclesiastical propriety." *Professing the Faith*, p. 296.

The reality is, however, that a journey along this path will lead to the demise of the Lutheran church in Canada, and if the church does not expire, it will become nothing more than a small sect. Jürgen Moltmann, for example, suggests that a church which retreats from the changed circumstances of society becomes “ossified and dies. It becomes an insignificant sect on the margin of a society undergoing rapid social change.”¹³ The move towards becoming a sect will not be a giant leap to make, especially for a church of less than 200,00 members in a nation of over 28 million. Perhaps the Lutheran church is already viewed by society as a sect, but just has not bothered to inform us. The whispering over the death bed is going on, however.

B) A Move Towards ‘Survivalism:’ Including Mergers and Alliances With Other Churches Based on an Acceptance of the Least Common Denominator of our theology.

Those who desire to label things would like to call this approach a neo-liberal model. The primal urge here is to survive. One of the tempting ways of surviving is through mergers or alliances with other churches. What is important to note in this model, however, is that the priority is placed on survival, rather than mission. The goal is to cut losses, rather than “going forth into all the world. . .”. (Matthew 28:19-20)

The problem with this approach comes when the cost of survival is spelled out. Like the crew on a sinking ship, all excess baggage is tossed overboard. Any doctrines or teachings which seem incompatible with society or with other potential church mates are tossed aside. Anything peculiar to the Lutheran tradition is also tossed aside if it does not please the other party. The desire, and even the need to hold hands with society or a ‘sacred partner’ provides the rationale to adapt to whatever society or the other church party wants. This is clearly not a case of ecumenical dialogue with dignity!

Notice that in this approach there is a desire to be “relevant” to society, unlike the first approach, where there is no interest in relevance. The price of being relevant, however, is often the loss of identity.¹⁴ Such ‘marriages,’ however, as we know from parish life, are very open to abusiveness. The party in control tends to reject the ‘generic, identity-less’ partner after a short while. Something that is ‘nameless’ can easily be discarded.

In this model, two of the first pieces of baggage to be tossed aside to appease the gods of survival are sin and the cross. Sin, after all, is an embarrassment in this mindset — even more of an embarrassment, according to Hall, than the church’s oft-ridiculed cosmology.¹⁵ Here Hall echoes Paul Tillich, who had this to say about sin:

Nothing is more precarious today than the mention of [sin] among Christians, as well as among non-Christians, for in everyone there is a tremendous resistance to it. It is a word that has fallen into disrepute. To some of us it sounds almost ridiculous and is apt to provoke laughter rather than serious consideration. To others, who take it more seriously, it implies an attack on their human dignity. And again, to others — those who have suffered from it — it means the threatening countenance of the disciplinarian, who forbids them to do what they would like and demands of them what they hate. . . . We try to avoid [using this word] or to substitute another word for it.¹⁶

If sin cannot be discarded — something very difficult considering the very language of theology and it is worship! — then the attempt is made to at least reduce it to immorality. Sin is merely something which is

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. R.A. Wilson and John Bowden, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), p. 12.

¹⁴ Moltmann discusses the crises of relevance and of identity in *The Crucified God*, pp. 7-28.

¹⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Lighten our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 99.

¹⁶ Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), pp. 50-51.

naughty. As Hall says, sin has become “domesticated.”¹⁷ That way, the churches would not step on the toes of society by challenging its very structures and priorities. The church’s job in society is to “cure the souls” of individuals, but to stay away from raising questions about sin’s radical nature. In this approach, therefore, people are generally considered to be ‘good.’ Luther’s radical understanding of original sin and the unfree will do not easily fit into this approach.

The cross is either discarded, or its significance is watered down. The cross is offensive to our senses, something that a V-chip in today’s televisions would filter out. The cross portrays a tragic death of a person who really tried to be good, one who tried to set a good example for us. The cross then loses its soteriological significance. Along with that goes the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Not wanting to offend anyone, Jesus becomes one of many ways to God; one of many truths; and merely one option for a spiritual life (Cf. John 14:6).

Another weakness of this approach is that in the quest to become welcomed by the “mainstream of society,” the voices of the marginalized are not heard.¹⁸ When the primal urge is on survival, the natural reaction is to join with a powerful group, rather than a group which may drag you down with them. When the voices of the marginalized are heard, it is often because that particular ‘cause’ is the currency needed to be accepted by the group with power. It gives a new slant to the term, ‘tokenism.’

C. An Attempt at Returning to the Golden Era of the Constantinian Church

A third approach which the church could take in moving into the 21st century would be to try to recreate the church of the 1950’s. In many ways, this was the golden era of the church. Church attendance swelled. New churches were built. After the horrors of the second world war, the peacefulness of the church was a major attraction to nearly all segments of society. The church had a strong voice in society. Suddenly, the realm of God seemed attainable. Preachers boldly rallied against the sins of society. Morality was central to many a Sunday morning sermon. This was not a time of despair, or meaninglessness or passivity. It was a time of hope, of boundless optimism.

Proponents of this approach, however, are finding it difficult to recapture this golden era. Partly, this is due to changing demographics. The golden era was the time of the ‘baby boom.’ With the explosion of young families came the general trend of flocking towards the churches for baptisms and Sunday School and so forth. This baby boom which partly fuelled the golden era of the church, however, is not easily recreated today.

On a deeper level, this golden era in the 1950’s was really the high point of the Constantinian model of the church where Christianity was the official religion of society.¹⁹ As the official religion, the prophetic role of the church was muffled in favour of the role as religious sanctifier of the world’s powers and supporter of the status quo. It is a very basic trait of human nature to give support to whatever gives you power. Sin became defined as breeches of the morality of the state.

In this Constantinian era, the cross became a sign of victory. No longer was the cross a scandal, or foolishness to anyone. After all, under the symbol of the cross, Constantine was able to defeat another challenger to the throne of Rome. The cross took on a new significance: now it symbolized success. That was quite a turnaround for society — in which the cross had stood for many years as the sign of failure and the means used for punishing traitors and the most offensive of criminals!

This is a popular model today. Great effort is made to recapture the power the church had in the 1950’s. There is a strong desire for the church to be the ‘official religion of an ‘officially optimistic society,’ as Hall defined it in his work, *Lighten our Darkness*.²⁰ The trouble is, Christendom is no longer the official religion

¹⁷ Hall, *Lighten our Darkness*, p. 100.

¹⁸ Hall comments on this in *Thinking the Faith*, p. 114.

¹⁹ See here Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, pp. 200ff.

²⁰ Hall, *Lighten our Darkness*, pp. 43ff.

of society. One even wonders if it ever was. In any case, it has been replaced by the religion of the economy, or for the philosophers and ethicists, the religion of relativity.

1. *The Agenda of this approach:*

What must be done, then, is to recapture their 'official religion' status. To do that, this approach requires two things.

a) *Regaining the Church's Authority.* First of all, the church needs to gain back its authority over society. The question is, how? We used to do it by being the moral prophets of society. In one sense, that is still a part of our role. The problem is, how do we gain back the church's moral authority in today's society? The real issue becomes one of sin. Let me explain.

Gail Ramshaw proposes that in American culture, people see themselves as essentially good, and sin has become an obsolete category. She has been visiting Lutheran congregations this past year, exploring if and how the liturgy and sermons deal with sin. I am told that she will be presenting a report on her findings at the next Lutheran meeting of *Societas Liturgica* in Finland in the summer of 1997. Her premise has been that people no longer consider themselves sinners. It appears to be an archaic term. People today are more likely to view themselves as victims of society and of corporate decisions.

Is Ramshaw right in her assessment? Have people lost their sense of sin? Perhaps so. We do not sing "Just as I am, without one plea" every Sunday anymore, or before partaking of the Eucharist, as we did when I was growing up. I have a hunch that Ramshaw is right. When I asked my confirmation students if they felt that they were really sinful, they said no. They were quick to add that they were not saints, either, but they certainly were not terrible sinners.

Ramshaw, of course, was not the first to suggest this theme. As early as 1973, Karl Menninger published his book, *"Whatever Became of Sin?"*²¹ But the questionable role of sin in our contemporary theology was raised earlier than that. As Ramshaw goes to Finland to give her report on sin, she will be returning to the country where, in 1963, the LWF made the following statement:

The man [sic] of today no longer asks, 'how can I find a gracious God?' His question is more radical, more elementary: he asks about God as such, 'where is God?' He suffers not from God's wrath, but from the impression of his absence; not from sin, but from the meaninglessness of his own existence; he asks not about a gracious God, but whether God really exists.²²

The main question plaguing the world, suggested the Lutherans gathered in Helsinki, was not one's own sinfulness and God's corresponding wrath and anger over that sin. Rather, it was a question of meaninglessness. Here, of course, we hear echoes of Paul Tillich, who argued that there were three types of anxiety: the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, and the anxiety of meaninglessness and despair.²³ Tillich's argument was that the anxiety of guilt and condemnation — an anxiety arising out of a sense of one's own sin — was not an anxiety of our day and age. The Helsinki meeting of the LWF bought into Tillich's analysis of society.

Douglas John Hall echoes this same sense, at least in the United States. He comments, "The History of the United States of America, whose most significant religious component, historically speaking, has been Calvinism, is hardly the history of a people weighed down with a sense of degeneracy, shame, and guilt."²⁴

²¹ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

²² As quoted by Carl Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 38.

²³ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

²⁴ Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), p. 270.

I would have to say, grudgingly, that Canada's attitude is not much different from that of our American neighbours. Sin is not something most of us worry about.

If we accept this version of events, however, what will become of the church? Do we not enter on a slippery slope here? Surely, if we do away with sin, the next step is to do away with the need for forgiveness from sin, and that will lead to doing away with the need for the cross. If we do not need the cross, then we do not need the One who died on the cross. After all, if we proclaim Jesus as the one who died for our sins, but at the same time we feel that we really do not have any sins to worry about, has Christ and the Church become irrelevant? What a spot to be in at the turn of the century, the turn of the millennium! How will we enter the 21st Century, this third millennium, which lies just around the corner?

This third approach proposes that in order for the church to once again its central place in the lives of people, it must preach about sin. The church must cut through the mentality that says nothing is intrinsically right or wrong. The church must once again stand up for what is universally true and right. Like the prophets of old, the must preach out strongly against the sins of society, from gambling to alcoholism to disrespect for one's elders. In doing so, it is reasoned, the problems in society will fade away.

Make sure people know their sinfulness! That is the first stage, the required prelude to the preaching of the gospel, after all. And it seems to work. In an article published last summer, one of our institutional chaplains noted that many of our elderly are 'consumed' by their sins. They have learned their lessons well.

I wonder, though, if this model of the church becomes guilty of manipulation. When does preaching about sin go from providing a seedbed for the gospel to a manipulation of people, making people feel guilty because they do not feel guilty? Douglas John Hall has this to say:

...in a society like that of North America today, the guilt that becomes the prelude to the acceptance of this form of gospel is almost always artificially stimulated by evangelical preaching aimed precisely at such an effect, and the identification of sin with largely personal guilt deflects the religious community from the awareness of societal guilt and hides the fact that there are other anxieties at work among us that are not addressed by this particular soteriological tradition. . . . So long as we can believe that our real problem is personal guilt, we do not have to confront either the great social evils perpetuated, in part by our own corporate lifestyle or the underlying apathy of spirit that feeds the lifestyle.²⁵

According to this approach, in a world where sin and guilt are no longer our major concerns, the cross of Christ is often trivialized. The gospel message that Jesus died for our sins does not make much of an impression on people who do not feel they have any sins that were serious enough for Jesus to die for. In order, then, for the gospel to be effective and the cross of Christ to mean something, the sense of sin must be recaptured.

b). The Cross as Success Symbol. The second thing needed for this approach to work is that the cross of Jesus must be portrayed in terms of victory and success. But when sin and guilt are no longer our major concerns, the cross of Christ is often trivialized. The gospel message that Jesus died for our sins does not make much of an impression on people who do not feel they have any sins that were serious enough for Jesus to die for. In order, then, for the gospel to be effective, the sense of sin must be recaptured. Otherwise, the cross is stripped of its power.

2. The Flaws in this Approach

I would propose that there are two main flaws in this model, flaws which will prevent it from being a church which can have any impact on our society entering the 21st century.

a) the understanding of sin. The first problem has to do with the understanding of sin. In truth, it is not sin that is rallied against, but sins. The plural use, sins, refers to specific actions or behaviours. They are the sins of greed, of selfishness, of lust, and so forth. They are wrong. But to preach against sins, and then offering gospel, without getting to the root of the problem, is to fail to properly preach either the law or the gospel! For example, in the classic work on *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* by Walther, he

²⁵ Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 428.

states in Thesis XVI that "... the Word of God is not rightly divided [between Law and Gospel] when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted as soon as they have become rid of certain vices and engage in certain works of piety and virtuous practices."²⁶ To properly preach the law would be to preach, not against sins, but about sin. Sins are 'vices' and wrongful actions, whereas sin is that attitude that is turned against God and is against God. Sin was what Luther described as being 'curved in on oneself.'²⁷ It is that basis desire to be God. In a 1530 letter to George Spalatin, Luther gives this advice for Philip Melanchthon:

. . . continually admonish Philip not to become like God, but to fight that innate ambition to be like God, which was planted in us in paradise by the devil. This [ambition] does not do us any good. It drove Adam from paradise, and it alone also drives us away, and drives peace away from us. *In summary: we are to be human and not God; it will not be otherwise.* . . .²⁸

The thing to note here is that this desire to be God is defined as sin, rather than one of the sins. It is clear that Luther was talking here about original sin — that sin which drove Adam and Eve from the Garden. In the Augsburg Confession, Melanchthon defined original sin as being "without fear of God . . . [or] without trust in God . . ."²⁹ Original sin is to trust only in ourselves.³⁰ It is this original sin which leads to the committing of sins. From Luther's writings, we discover that if we could only keep the first commandment, the keeping of the other commandments would be easy. Sin, therefore, is radically rebellious in nature. Luther states it this way; "The natural man cannot will God to be God. Rather, he wants himself to be God, and God not to be."³¹ It is this sin which the churches so often fail to address, caught up as they are to condemning particular sins. To preach against sin is too close to the heart of individuals and society. It would create too much upset. It would be to challenge the rampant goal of individuals and society to build a nation, a utopia based on an image of themselves as the creators. The heart of sin is not a matter of morals, but of the original challenge by humans to be God in God's place. "Early in the history of the church, sin became associated with immorality, immoderation, intemperance, excess, and similar concepts, all of which could denote deviation from the desired norm" (Hence sin as *'harmartia,'* 'missing the mark').³²

Luther the monk experienced the problem of focussing on sins, rather than sin, in the monastery. He drove his confessor, Staupitz, crazy with his long and detailed confessions of specific sins. One day, Staupitz finally interrupted Luther, and told him, enough, already! Don't come back until you have something serious to

²⁶ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), p. 3. In Thesis XXIII, Walther states, "...the Word of God is not rightly divided when an attempt is made by means of the demands or the threats or the promises of the Law to induce the unregenerate to put away their sins and engage in good works and thus become godly..." (p. 4).

²⁷ This phrase, *incurvatus in se, curvas est in se ipsos*, or other, similar versions, are often used by Luther to describe the character of sin. See LW 10:241; WA 3:292.18 (Psalm 51:10, First Psalms Lectures, 1513-1515); see also LW 25: 245, 291, 313, 345, 513; WA 56: 258.10, 304.26, 325.9, 356.5-7, 518.6 (1515-1516 Romans Commentary); and LW 33:175-6; WA 18: 709.14-15 (Bondage of the Will, 1525).

²⁸ LW 49:337; WABr 5:415.41-6 (Letter of June 30, 1530). Interestingly, this letter is written only 5 days after Melanchthon's version of the Augsburg Confession was presented to the Emperor.

²⁹ *Augsburg Confession*, Article II.1 Taken from: *The Book of Concord*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 29.

³⁰ Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 270.

³¹ LW 31:10; WA 1:225.1-2 (Thesis 17, Disputation Against Scholastic Theology, 1517).

³² Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 222.

confess.³³ That serious confession that Staupitz sought, I suspect, involved Luther's confession of sin, rather than a recitation of his sins or failed morals.

What, then, are we to do about morals? Ignore them? Cast them off? No. They need to be approached from the proper perspective, however. In Luther's thought, the role of the church and theology was to prevent people from trying to be more than human. The church and theology was to insure that people did not try to become gods in the place of God. The role of the government, on the other hand, was to prevent people from being treated as less than humans. If that is indeed the case, then morals, which are primarily meant to keep people from being treated as less than human, are the responsibility primarily of the civil realm.

For example, in the Peasants' disputes (*The Twelve Articles*) presented to Luther in 1524, Luther argues that the issues are important, but they are matters for the princes, not the church.³⁴ What Luther does address, then, is the issue of sin. That was the role he saw for himself.

Back to the twentieth century. As Ramshaw studies how sin is dealt with in preaching and liturgy, I would like to refer her to the brief order of confession and forgiveness. In this service on page 56 of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, note how, in the beginning we confess that we are in bondage to sin. This refers, and rightly so, to our very nature and desire to be gods. But notice further, that in the absolution, we are absolved, not of this sin basic in our very nature. Rather, the pastor declares that our sins are forgiven. In one simple, short service, we have gone from the root of the problem to dealing with the manifestations of the problem. Of course, it must be remembered that Luther wrote that original sin remained after baptism, even though the *guilt* of original sin is removed. Concupiscence remains.³⁵ In other words, this sin of wanting to be god in God's place will remain until death. It is not forgiven, but can only be put to death. Sins, on the other hand, even as manifestations of sin, still need to be dealt with in order to foster and nurture relationships.

As long as we preach against sins, rather than confronting sin, we will have an impotent message for the world. It is like doctors trying to treat the symptoms of a disease, rather than the cause. If we do not address original sin, then all the patchwork solutions for our sins will only be ineffective band-aid solutions.

b) *The role of the cross.* The second problem with this option has to do with the cross. When it stands primarily for victory over sins and offers a person success, many contemporary people see no real need for the cross. Most people are fairly adept at keeping a check on their 'sins,' or as they would euphemistically call them, 'flaws.' If they fail, there are always enough laws present in our system to keep those 'flaws' in check. So why resort to the church? To counterbalance this, and to regain members, the church has offered the cross as the 'solution' for personal success. As the symbol of victory over sin, it is not very difficult to re-frame it as the guarantor of success. In the process, Christianity becomes not much more than a prescription formula for success. What happens, though, when the guaranteed success does not happen? People have three options. First, people may reject Christianity, accusing it of false advertising. Second, they may feel that somehow, they have not believed enough or had enough faith. To fix this dilemma, the natural tendency is to work on getting rid of their particular sins, which are perceived as the impediments to success. Third, people may be moved to understand that the success of the cross will only be realized in heaven — an escape from an impossible and doomed situation.³⁶

One question must be asked at this point. What is meant by success? Hall puts the question in this way:

Does the triumph of God in [on the cross, through] Jesus as the Christ mean that the God of the *living community* of Israel and the Manitou of the "Indian" peoples must be reduced to failure and shame, and their worshippers destroyed, physically or spiritually? Is this what the

³³ James A. Kittleson suggests this approach in his work, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 84.

³⁴ LW 46: 8-16.

³⁵ *Apology to the Augsburg Confession, Art. II, para. 35.*

³⁶ Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, p. 218.

Easter triumph of the Christ means? If not, what can it mean? The question is: What do Christians mean by Christ's "triumph"?³⁷

D. Daring to Risk the Life of the Church for the Sake of the Gospel.

If people do not consider themselves sinful, and the preaching against their sins on the one hand and offering the carrot stick of the success of the cross does not work, is there any option for the church as we enter the next millennium? Is there any option which will take seriously the context in which we live, in which we are called to minister, while being faithful to the Gospel? I think there is. This option is to risk the life of the church for the sake of the gospel. We may know this option by another name, the theology of cross.

1. Entering into life's struggles.

One of the strengths of a theology of the cross is that it takes the risk of entering into the struggles and pain of society. It does not attempt to gloss over or ignore the world, as the Luddite and neo-liberal options do. Nor does it try to force society into a different framework so that ready-made solutions can be applied, as the return to the golden era of religion tries to do. Instead, a theology of the cross calls us, as church, to face these realities and enter into the realities of life. It is on these front lines, these places where life is lived, that the Christian is called to be. As Luther stated,

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest expositions every portion of the Truth of God except that little point where the world and devil in that moment contending, then I may be professing the faith but I shall not be confessing it. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is tested, and to be faithful on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if one flinches at that point.³⁸

This principle is central to a theology of the cross. What are its implications for today? First, it involves the church entering into the realities, the battlefields of life, rather than observing safely from the sidelines. It means daring to risk the reputation of the church for the sake of the gospel. Hall is very clear on this point: "Unless the disciple community *itself* exposes itself to that which is endangering the life of its world, it will be incapable of confessing the faith. It will be imprisoned in the professional mode."³⁹ What does this mean for the church? In simple terms, unless we risk the church for the sake of the gospel, we will, and should die. A theology of the cross calls us to leave the safety of church buildings, and comforting dogmas, and our comfortable middle class mentality, and enter into the struggles of this world. I hope that the church I am a part of will enter the 21st century by entering into the lives of the marginalized and suffering all around us. It means that instead of waiting for others to adapt to our lifestyles and customs, on our terms, and where we have ready-made solutions, that we will leave our comfortable pews and management plans to listen to the cries of the victims of those experiencing the cross in this world. To not do this is to deny the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection. It means going beyond looking at the marginalized in society with sympathy for the problems they got themselves in because of their sins, and instead see the sin of our attempts to be gods over them, controlling and dictating what 'charity' they should have from us.

2. Dealing honestly with society.

The second implication for living a theology of the cross where life is at is to take seriously where society is at in terms of anxiety. If Tillich and others are right in suggesting that the main anxiety of this age is not the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, but rather the anxiety of meaninglessness and despair, then we must hear those anxieties, and address them, rather than convincing people that their anxieties are misplaced. Or, if the main anxiety is one of fate and death, then we must address that.

The protest against doing this is that if we do not address the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, then the traditional understanding of justification by grace through faith becomes no longer relevant. If guilt and sin

³⁷ Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, p. 212.

³⁸ WABr 3:81ff.

³⁹ Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 109.

are not the issue, then justification cannot be the solution. How do we address this protest? There are two points to be made:

a) justification addresses not sin only, but sin, death, and the devil. The first involves revisiting Luther's small catechism. There, in the explanation on baptism, we are told that in baptism "God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what God has promised."⁴⁰ Note that it does not just include the forgiveness of sin. It also involves deliverance from death, and deliverance from the devil. To see justification only in terms of forgiveness of sin is a narrow interpretation. Justification also sets us free from death and the devil. Revisiting Tillich's three anxieties, note that there is a correspondence with these three points from the catechism. The anxiety of guilt and condemnation is addressed by the forgiveness of sin. The anxiety of fate and death is addressed by deliverance from death. The anxiety of meaninglessness and despair is an anxiety often felt by those who feel helpless in the face of evil and all that is subsumed under the realm of the devil. In every case, we have taught as Lutherans that salvation, this overcoming of these three things, is solely a gift from God, done by God alone, in the cross event. That is the heart of what justification means. We are justified, we are made righteous in God's eyes because God alone sets us free from sin and the guilt of our sin. God alone delivers us from death and our anxiety over death. God alone delivers us from the realm of the devil, with its hopelessness and despair. The theology of the cross, which takes the whole context of society seriously, can thus, from its very tradition, see justification as much more than the declaration of the forgiveness of sins.

b) justification addresses the true depth of sin, death and evil.

i) sin. The theology of the cross moves beyond the problem of sins, to the real problem of sin, our curved in on ourselves nature. This radical nature of sin has already been discussed. Justification only becomes good news, radically good news, when it declares to us that through Christ's death on the cross, our sin is forgiven (not sins, note!). Only Christ alone can deal with our nature which wants to be god, and God not to be God. The false solution would be to forgive our sins, so that we might be more pure and holy, more like God. That is climbing the ladder to heaven. Instead, the radical nature of sin requires a radical solution; that God become human, to come to us, to defeat this radical sin where it dwells: in the human. Only when we address sin honestly and properly, will we be able to speak honest words of forgiveness. To live a theology of the cross means to address sin honestly and truthfully, rather than sticking to one's sins. That is where the Christ of the cross and resurrection encounters our world.

ii) death. The theology of the cross takes death seriously, and is not afraid to name the agents of death, wherever they are. As Luther states, "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."⁴¹ If the church will have anything of relevance to say to society in the 21st century, it must begin by naming the agents of death, not only among individuals, but in society. Does it dare begin with itself? If so, this means that the church cannot any longer be the official religion of an optimistic society. Instead of speaking out against morality, perhaps it is time to speak out against the false gods of society, gods which promise success and utopias while silencing and covering up its victims. When we are told that on the cross Jesus defeated death ("Oh death, where is thy sting," 1 Corinthians 15), it is not just an individual's death that is defeated. It must, and should include death in all its forms. Does the church dare to address death, and not just bury the dead? It will need to, if it does not want to preside over its own funeral in the next few decades. Only if we dare to proclaim death in honesty, will the resurrection have any significance. Apart from actually dying to our desires be gods, we will never experience a resurrection; it will merely be a recussitation, a delivery from death. To live a theology of the cross means beginning in those places where death is happening and where death is caused. That is also where the Christ of the cross and the resurrection is to be found.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism In Contemporary English with Lutheran Book of Worship Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, and Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p. 23.

⁴¹ LW 31:53; WA 1:362.21-22 (Thesis 21, Heidelberg Disputation, 1518).

iii) the devil. Third, the theology of the cross takes evil and the devil seriously. The cross is a symbol of the evil that exists in our world, and which people do to each other. It stands for the evil that hangs an innocent man upon the cross — in God's name! It stands for the evil which continues to be done to people — in God's name. To see the cross only as victory, and success over evil, death, and the devil, is to deny the scandal it represents.

As a symbol of evil, the cross applies to more than Christ's unfair death. It stands also for the evil which arises from human desires to be gods. It is in this sense, for example, that the statue of the Crucified Woman at Emmanuel College in Toronto should be perceived.⁴² The victims of society and the scapegoats of society are nailed on the cross. It is much easier than addressing the evil that occasioned the making of victims and scapegoats.

Part of the incipient evil in our society is the despair and passivity present. There is the mentality that we are hopeless to do anything against it. But again, if in Christ's death and resurrection we are delivered from this evil and the devil are, then the church does have a message for society entering the 21st century. To confront evil is not the same as confronting people's sins. It goes much deeper than that. To speak out against it may lead to the crucifixion of the church on the altars of evil inspired by individuals and societies who have sought to become gods in God's place. To live a theology of the cross means entering those places where evil is happening, and where evil is being perpetuated. That is where Christ of the cross and resurrection is to be found.

In each of these three aspects — sin, death, and evil — it quickly becomes clear that sin plays a central role. But this is far different than specific sins playing a central role. That is where the theology of the cross radically departs from conventional theology. It calls the church to take risks; to risk death for the sake of the gospel. Repenting of one's sins does not require the gospel. It merely takes willpower. Denying death does not require the gospel. It merely requires a concentration on life's pleasure and the invention of ever newer medicines and health technologies. Denying evil does not require the gospel. It merely requires escaping from, or moving away from the places where the evils we name take place. Like the three monkeys, we see, hear, and speak of no sin, death or evil. But then both the gospel and society are betrayed.

3. *The Cross as a scandal.*

On one level, the cross of Jesus Christ is no longer a scandal to those with eyes of faith. In this case, God's proper work of salvation, health and wholeness can be seen in the apparent weakness of the cross. With eyes of faith, one sees not the defeat of God, but the triumph of God, God's proper work hidden under God's alien works of weakness and suffering. In this sense, we can truly sing, '*In the Cross of Christ I glory.*' On the other hand, without the eyes of faith, the cross remains a stumbling block. How can a mighty, powerful God die on the cross? Tertullian, Luther, and Moltmann capture the idea of this scandal well when they refer to the Crucified God.⁴³ The idea of a crucified God is a scandal to a success oriented society.

On a deeper level, the cross is, and ought to always be, a scandal to those with eyes of faith. This scandal, or stumbling block, comes about through the fact that the cross of Christ is always calling Christians into scandalous situations. In fact, as Hall notes, "Scripture assumes that the initial, spontaneous, and honest response of human beings to the approach of God will be one of rejection and deep offence."⁴⁴ Furthermore, a theology of the cross calls the disciple community to enter into all those places where there are crosses

⁴² A discussion of this is found in Doris Jean Dyke, *Crucified Woman* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1991). This book recounts the controversy over, and the impact of, the statue of the crucified woman, which is now in a garden at Emmanuel College in Toronto.

⁴³ Tertullian uses this phrase in "On the Flesh of Christ," Chapter 5.1, *The Christological Controversy*. Richard A. Norris, Jr., trans. and ed.; Sources of Early Christian Thought, William G. Rusch, series editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 69; Luther uses this same phrase in his 1518 Treatise, *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses*, LW 31:225; and Moltmann, of course in his seminal work, *The Crucified God*.

⁴⁴ Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 286.

today. "The scandal of the cross is not simply an offence to the intelligence, but rather the fact that it touches too closely upon the essential stuff of our lives."⁴⁵ The ironic thing is that in the crosses of people around us, we encounter once again the cross of Christ. It is scandalous to realize that Christ is already present in those crosses, in the sufferings of people. It is scandalous to suggest that we good Christians do not bring Christ to these situations, but Christ is already present in any possible situation present. The life of Christ models this fact: the incarnation is a scandal of the highest order. The cross re-affirms this choice by God, for the scandalized. Why does Christ so offend the religious leaders of his time? Because Jesus the Christ is always in the midst of people of scandalous character, according to the rankings of people's sins.

Here we encounter the difference between false scandals and the authentic scandal of the cross. The false scandals are the scandals associated with particular sins, which are deemed stumbling blocks to a relationship with God. In this way, they distract from the authentic scandal of the cross. Some false scandals might be the controversy over inclusive language, worship styles, and the ordination of women. They are important issues; but when they replace the true scandal of the cross, there is a problem. People can be so wrapped up with these that the true scandal of the cross is overlooked. Authentic scandals, on the other hand, confront us with the cross, which tests and challenges every aspect of our lives, a *'metanoia'* of not just our morals, but of society and our whole being.⁴⁶ It is from the true scandal of the cross that the false scandals must be addressed.

The cross of Christ scandalizes the disciple community today whenever we build church walls to keep sinners out. The scandal of the cross is that it tears down the walls of the church and pushes the church into the world God in Christ has already entered. The cross of Christ offends the disciple community which is not willing to risk their denomination and their faith for the sake of the gospel. Who today is willing to go as far as Paul is, giving up his faith if it would mean that others might believe? (Romans 9:3). Whoever stumbles over that question is confronted with the ongoing, constant scandal of the cross which is always calling the disciple community to die in order to live.

IV. Conclusion

Living a theology of the cross will mean that we as individuals and the church, as a disciple community, will be constantly confronted with the stumbling block of the cross. The cross will always scandalize our visions of success theology and our innate desires to be gods. The cross will always scandalize our desires to withdraw from the struggles of life, seeking God in other places instead.

And yet, I believe that living a theology of the cross, daring to risk the life of the disciple community for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, is the only viable approach the church has open to it, if it is to be faithful to the Christ and our society. If we remain distracted by moral scandals, and are content to preach against sins rather than the Christ who calls us to die in order to live, we will become more and more irrelevant, and unnoticed in society. If we avoid the cross, we will abandon both our faith and the multitudes who experience the daily crosses of life.

The theology of the cross addresses more than sins. It addresses our human context. It speaks to people confronted with the anxieties of death, hopelessness, the anxieties of meaninglessness and despair. The theology of the cross confronts our context as it is lived and experienced. It recognises the true radical nature of God's grace, and holds high the redeemed nature of humanity. We are simultaneously sinner and saint, because of God's grace. And that means that we face, and live life honestly. If we dare to live a theology of the cross as we enter into the 21st century, we may not succeed. We may get hoisted on a few crosses. But we will not deny the gospel. Do we dare to be crucified with Christ in our attempts to be gods, and live in the light of the cross in the future? I do not know. We shall see, as we enter that future ourselves.

⁴⁵ Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, p. 343.

⁴⁶ Hall makes these same points in *Thinking the Faith*, 344-45.