

“Living with the Cross -Its Light and Shadow”

Presentation to the Northern Conference Convention
of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories, ELCIC
October 18-19, 2002
Edmonton, AB

1. Introduction

I saw an ad in a “Christian magazine” probably at least 20 years ago now. But that ad still shocks me to this day. It was a full page ad, and in big, bold letters, the caption proclaimed, “How to Pray Your Way to a Million Dollars.” The article went on to basically say that if you are a faithful Christian, and if you believe enough, then God will reward you. You can have huge mansions to live in, and luxury cars to drive. It all depends, they said, on how much faith you had. And if you prayed in the right way, God would be guaranteed to make you rich and successful. After all, God wants nothing but the best for the children of God. It’s that simple.

Well, drooling over this ad, I quickly wrote down the address so that I could get the packet with more information in it. After all, I didn’t want to be left out! This was like money in the bank! Who said working in the church meant getting drastically underpaid? All we had to do was to “claim this promise in faith!”

Actually, what really struck me was that an image of Christianity was being used to appeal to people’s greed. And what it promised was radically different from what Jesus promised his disciples. In fact, the gospels were very clear in refuting any such notions. When some of the disciples were fighting over who would be at Jesus’ right and left hands, in the positions of honour, Jesus simply says, “You don’t have a clue what I’m talking about, do you.” The disciples, especially in Mark’s Gospel, are always clamouring for some glory. And when Jesus suggests that being the Messiah, the ‘Anointed One,’ means suffering and death in Jerusalem, Peter blurts out, “No way!” A messiah is glorious! You should be successful! Like Bill Gates or the owners of Wal-Mart! Right! But what does Jesus do? He rebukes Peter, calling him Satan. And immediately he talks about what the Son of Man will encounter, and what any followers will encounter. “Take up your cross, and follow me,” says Jesus. Sure doesn’t sound like “How to pray your way to a million dollars!”

It’s likely that all of you have encountered similar types of stories; from those who claim that if one is truly faithful to God, then they will be rewarded with wealth or success or even a trouble-free life. If you are sick, or have a disease, all you have to do is pray in the right way, and have enough faith, and God will cure you. And if your aren’t cured, it’s simply because you don’t have enough faith, or didn’t pray the right way. Financial troubles? Get more faith. Broken marriages or relationships? No problem, if you just believe enough. And for 12 simple payments of \$99.99, there will be some holy person willing to teach you how to do it right.

We hear the same rationale in society. If Christian nations like Canada and the United States would simply trust in God, and if they converted everyone to the “free market economy” - er, I mean the Gospel, then there would be no war. Peace, after all, is a sign of faithfulness. Wealthy nations are a sign of God rewarding the faithful. It’s that simple. And if it isn’t that way, it’s

because of unbelief. If people are faithful, then the economy will be good, there will be no political scandals, Ireland and the mid-east and the Balkans will be at peace, and everyone is happy. The solution is so simple: just believe God. Troubles are simply a sign of faithlessness.

But what if you believe most sincerely, and yet still are not healed, or cured, or rescued from bankruptcy? What does it mean if your marriage breaks up, or your family breaks up? What then do we make of the events of 9/11, the bankruptcy of churches paying off huge legal debts as the result of residential schools, or about the drought we are in the midst of? What does it say about the conflict in Ireland? What does it say about Christian Churches and synods who are not financially flush? Are they simply not faithful? To push this line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, if success is a measure of one's faithfulness, then I have to conclude that the 12 disciples, the myriads of martyrs, and even Jesus himself must not have had enough faith. If they had enough faith, they wouldn't have had any conflict, they would never have died, and they would have moved into a mansion in some idyllic, lush, and serene setting somewhere, and lived forever.

We could call this approach, this theology which suggests that believing in God is the sure guarantee or insurance from problems, a theology of glory, or perhaps even better, a theology of triumphalism. It suggests that success is a measure of one's faith. It suggests that God promises Christians success, for Christ has triumphed over sin, death and the devil. We are then called to claim that victory and live in the same way. It's very, very appealing to many people; akin to winning the lottery! It's even better, in fact, for both heaven and success now are virtually guaranteed. No luck is needed.

The trouble is, the people I encountered in the parishes I served, at least, have not been like that. They have struggles, even when they are faithful to God. They have financial problems — perhaps even bankruptcy. Good Christian farmers are devastated by a drought. People have problems in relationships: with their spouses, with their children. Things don't always go right. Sometimes they have doubts; sometimes they have trouble 'believing' or wonder if they have faith. Sometimes they even feel betrayed by God; expecting, praying, wanting God to "do something" to prove that God exists, and God doesn't come through like they expected. The battered spouse, who isn't delivered from the abuse, despite her prayers. The drought stricken farmer, who prayed for rain, but none came. How does a person minister to them?

Or sometimes people may be convinced that God is calling them to do something specific, and then feel as if God has left them hanging, or has abandoned them. Others — perhaps naively — think that if they work full time in the church, all the people will like them and welcome them with open arms. What do we do, when there is conflict, when the "ideal" is never reached?

These are the kind of people I encountered in the parishes I have served, and I suspect you encounter them in your ministry as well.

So how do we deal with such times, when we encounter them ourselves? And how can we deal with these things when they happen to people in the congregation, parish, at home or at work? What do we have to offer? What resources are there for us to turn to, to deal with these crises in people's lives?

I would like to explore, with you, what I would consider an excellent theological and practical resource for dealing with the realities of life which we encounter. It is not a new resource. It has been around for a long time. But a fellow by the name of Martin Luther gave this resource a name, and developed it in response to the needs he saw in his context of ministry. He nicknamed this resource a theology of the cross.

The phrase, “the theology of the cross,” has been used in many ways; but it is a theology which deals with how we understand God and ourselves. The theology of the cross is also a methodology: a way of doing ministry: in other words, it is a way of thinking and a way of doing things in our world. In short, it is a way of living. Daniel Erlander, in his book, “Baptized, We Live,” talks about this in a most wonderful way.¹

The trouble is, this ‘way of living’ by a theology of the cross involves our whole being. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian, suggested that a theology of glory considers it enough to admire Christ, (and often, that can be done at a distance!). On the other hand, one cannot talk about a theology of the cross. One can only be a theologian of the cross. A theologian of the cross follows Christ, on Christ Jesus’ terms. And the reality is, we know, from the gospels, where following Jesus led to: a cross.

The difference between a theology of glory and a theologian of the cross is that a theologian of glory can admire and worship Christ from a distance, but a theologian of the cross realizes that Christ is intent on ‘getting in our face,” and being involved in every aspect of our lives and calls us to be involved the lives of our neighbours. The theology of the cross is not a spectator theology or lifestyle.

Another way to put it is that a theologian of the cross is involved in life; it is to live out one’s faith in the shadow and light of the cross. We cannot escape into an artificially lit environment. You can’t admire it from a distance! Luther noted this very well when he said, “it is not by reading and speculating, but by but living, dying and being damned that one becomes a theologian.”²

A theology of the cross calls us to get involved in life. Otherwise, we are only spewing out platitudes that do no one any good. Thus Luther declared, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Truth of God except that little point where the world and the devil are at 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 fight and disgrace if one flinches at that point.”³

So what does it mean to be a theologian of the cross? What does it mean to be involved in this way of life, ‘where the rubber hits the road?’ What does it mean to live in the light and shadow of the cross? I want to explore these questions with you, and explore what being a theologian of the cross means for us. Of course, we can only begin the task; to get our feet wet, to begin the journey with the two sessions today. Living a theology of the cross is not always easy. That’s why Luther commented, near the end of his life, that while it may take 5-10 years to learn to be a farmer, doctor, lawyer or musician, after 40 years he was only beginning to learn what it meant to be a theologian of the cross.

¹Daniel Erlander, Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life. (Chelan, Washington: Holden Village, 1981)

² WA 5:163.28

³ WA 3:81ff

2. Discovering (again) the theology of the cross.

We begin by defining the gospel. Luther summed it up as a theology of the cross. “The cross tests everything,” he said.⁴ He added, “The cross alone is our theology.”⁵ In other words, when you remove the stumbling block of the cross (1 Cor 1:18-25) from Christianity, you have nothing left. Jesus says it just as bluntly, or even more so: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). As Luther understood it, then, the gospel could be defined as a theology of the cross. But what did he mean by a theology of the cross? What is it?

First, a theology of the cross is a shorthand way of saying something about God. ‘The study of God’ (theology) takes place at the cross. Luther stressed again and again that if you want to know what God is like, then quit looking up to heaven, and look to Jesus.⁶ But Luther didn't stop there. For even in his time, too many people had come to view Jesus as the one sitting at the right hand of God, all glorious and shining. So Luther insisted that if you wanted to know what God was like, you had to look at that person on the cross: the Rejected and Suffering One. That is how God wants to be known.

The trouble is, the cross has always been a stumbling block to people looking for God. It has always caused a scandal in one form or another. If you are bluntly honest, the world has always preferred its gods to be distant, up in the heavens, with unlimited power. The world has never really appreciated God outside of the heavens or outside the walls of the church, actually interfering or being involved with everyday life! The world has always insisted on separating the spiritual world (i.e. ‘heaven, where God is’) from the secular world (where we are).

As a result, Christianity has been turned into something that focuses almost exclusively on ‘heavenly rewards:’ on escaping from this secular and ‘evil’ world by climbing up into heaven and getting on ‘God's side.’ Christianity becomes the ‘ladder’ that the church has held up to help Christians climb out of this ‘evil world,’ so that we can finally get to know God ‘face to face.’ Luther played with this ‘ladder’ imagery when he wrote, “If you see such a young saint clambering heavenward and planting one foot in heaven, pull him down posthaste, before he can set his other foot up there too and then plunge down head over heels.”⁷ If we were to listen closely to our society, however, we might be surprised to discover that more and more people have no time for a God hidden in the heavens, isolated from life. Many more people are

⁴ WA 5:179.31. Commentary on Psalm 5:12, Second Psalms Lectures, 1519-1521.

⁵ WA 5:176.32-3. Ibid.

⁶ For example, Luther states, “[God] did not bid you soar heavenward on your own and gape to see what God is doing in heaven with the angels. No, this is his command (Matt. 7:12): ‘This is my beloved Son, listen to Him.’ These I descend to you on earth, so that you can see, hear and touch Me. There and nowhere else is the place for those who encounter and find Me who desire Me and who would like to be delivered from their sin and be saved.” (LW 24:65; WA 45:520.30-35. Commentary on John, 1537). In a similar vein, in his Lecture on Psalm 121, of 1532-1533, he comments; “Some through their speculations ascend into heaven and speculate about God the creator, etc. Do not get mixed up with this God. Whoever wishes to be saved should leave the majestic God alone —for He and the human creatures are enemies. Rather, grasp that God whom David {Psalm 51} also grasps. He is the God who is clothed in his promises — God as he is present in Christ . . . This is the God you need. (WA 40/III:56.10-11).

⁷ LW 24:67; WA 45:520.23-25 (Commentary on John, 1536).

suggesting that if God is not interested in dealing with us here and now, in the midst of all our struggles, then why should they be interested in such a God?

Another result of this focus on worshipping a God up in the heavens has been the discovery that it is easier, much easier, to agree with other religions when the attention stays focussed on God in heaven. It is easier to relate to and agree upon ideals, whether it about the ideal good, or how to live a good life, and so on, when you put aside the image of a God actively involved in humanity. These ideals of goodness and so forth, are based on human images of what God is like in heaven, and on the images we have about what heaven is like. But again, one must ask, is this irrelevant to life here and now, the life with its struggles, as we know it?

The image of Christ on the Cross shatters all those illusions and heresies. Central to the theology of the cross is the idea that God does not want to be known as a God 'up there!' God wants — and in fact insists on! — being known as a God who is with us in the person of Christ, a God who is here, where we are at in life!

That is really the Christmas story! But there is a problem that many people have with the Christmas story. It really fouls up this heavenly image of God. I suspect that in the back of their minds, a lot of people may secretly think that King Herod did the right thing in trying to prevent or end the Christmas event. For Herod knew it would blur the distinction — and not just blur, but destroy this artificial distinction — between the heavens and the earth, the spiritual and the secular. His desire to get rid of the infant Jesus was the desperate attempt to keep God up in the heavens and out of his hair (and throne room!)

The story of God with us is also the story of the cross. Who would believe that the person on the cross was God? At the time of Christ, hardly anyone believed that. The disciples fled, for they felt they had been misled. Peter felt he had misread the situation; that he was mistaken when he confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 8:29). His confession had not involved a cross in the picture. Surely Jesus could not be God after all, for he ended up hanging on a cross, cursed by everyone.

But there have been people who insist on reminding us of another possibility. Peter himself does an about face after the resurrection, and later dares to preach to the people about their role in crucifying the Messiah of God. Luther and Moltmann have both scandalized the world by talking about 'the Crucified God!'⁸ In alarm, the world responds by saying, "But God doesn't suffer! God doesn't die! God is in heaven! God is all powerful! God is immune to suffering!" When we declare that, however, we are basically saying that Jesus can't be God! We reject this Trinitarian theology of the cross. We back away from any thought that the cross affects God, or even worse, that the cross affects the internal relationship between the 'persons' of God.

Luther insisted, however, that the person hanging on the cross tells us what God is like. In the person of Jesus, God is revealed in the way God has chosen to be known by us. The Holy Spirit calls us to see God hanging on the cross. It is this God, this triune God, who enters into human suffering. This God takes human suffering on himself. God enters the world — yes, God is in the world already, where there is suffering! God isn't content to stay at a distance, up in the heavens! Bette Middler's song, therefore, is wrong! God is not "watching us from a distance,"⁹

⁸Luther used the phrase, "crucified and hidden God" in his *Explanation to the 95 Theses* (LW 31:225; WA 1:614.17), and Jürgen Moltmann used this term as the title of his book, *The Crucified God*, translated by R.A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁹"From a Distance." Written by Julie Gold, and sung by Bette Middler, in her album, *Some People's Lives*

where things are safe and where there is the illusion that everything is okay, as long as we don't look too closely at the world. Instead, God has chosen to be with us! And that is how God wants to be known: as a God who enters into the struggling and suffering lives of people. God is not revolted by that suffering and those struggles. Instead, God can fully relate to them. For God in Christ has gone through the same thing — and then some.

Now this is where faith enters the picture. For Luther understood faith primarily as a trust in God. Faith isn't about believing in certain facts about God, but rather, of trusting in God. And it is only by trusting in God, or having faith, that people can see or recognize God hidden among the struggling lives of people. And it is not even "our" faith — for then we would boast about it, and trust in our faith, rather than trust in God. This faith, this trust, is a gift from God. We have nothing to brag about.

What we can never overlook, then, is that the message of the gospel is concentrated, or most clearly revealed to us, on the cross. The focus is totally on what God has done and is doing, rather than on what we are doing. It reminds us of the first commandment, that we are not gods. Only God can handle being God. It brings to focus God's actions to save us. And how does God do that? In two ways: By acting for us, doing what we could not do, and by being with a sinful humanity in their suffering.

First, God saves by acting for us. On the cross, this 'intruding-into-our-world God' does what we cannot do: saves us. There are all kinds of theories about what happens on the cross. The trouble with many of these theories is that they are worked out in heaven, by a God in the heavens, safely away from the cross. For example, one of the earliest theories stated that God won salvation for us by making a deal with the devil. But if so, why did Jesus have to suffer on the cross? It doesn't take the cross seriously as a place where God suffers! It is important to remember that on the cross, God acts to save us. It is only by God's power that we can be delivered from our struggles. We are not saved by our works, or by our holiness, or piety, or anything else. We are saved because of what Christ does on cross.

Second, God saves by being with us. On the cross, God reveals that God is with us in our suffering. God has entered into our suffering, as people! God is present in the struggles of this world, for this world is God's dwelling place, and God isn't content with the way it is! The important word here is 'relationship.'

From this perspective, we can understand justification. Justification is about being put in a right relationship to God because of what Christ has done. It is about God acting for us. It is free. Absolutely free. There is absolutely nothing we can do to earn it. Lutherans have traditionally focussed on this aspect of justification. And this has come to be called 'forensic justification.' It paints the picture of us standing before the judge, as guilty as all get out, and hearing the judge declare us innocent because someone else has taken the blame for us. That is justification. It is a wonderful gift of grace!

But there is more to it than that. What Lutherans sometimes conveniently forget, when they look at justification apart from the theology of the cross, is the notion of "God with us." Yes, God's grace is free. But it is not cheap (Bonhoeffer). It cost Jesus his life! And it demands our lives too! We can never earn it, but by grace we are set free to live it. The other aspect of justification is that it involves a death and resurrection.¹⁰ That is what baptism is really all about,

(Atlantic Recording Corporation, 1990).

¹⁰ Gerhard O. Forde does an excellent job of discussing this in *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and*

isn't it? (Romans 6:3-11; Gal. 2:20). In baptism we have died to being apart from God or from Christ, and that we have been raised 'in Christ,' or with Christ! Justification is not just a declaration of innocence. It is also a power that puts us to death and then raises us to life! It affects us to the core of our being! Only in this way are we 'set free' by grace to live fully in this world.

As a result of this understanding of justification, Luther could insist that being a Christian isn't a matter of imitating Christ.¹¹ One can do that from a distance, and without dying. In fact, most people try to imitate Christ, hoping that by doing so, they won't have to die. It's like saying, "if I copy Christ, and act like Christ, then God in heaven will see me as a good person, and won't drag me to the cross and all that sort of stuff." Daring to be Lutheran is not about daring to imitate Christ. Instead, it is about being conformed to Christ: to be actually 'shaped with' Christ. And being conformed to Christ only happens when our old self quits kicking and screaming! (i.e. dies)

The theology of the cross is about being made right with God; but this Triune God has chosen to be hidden in Christ — the very one who appeared to be the very opposite of everything the God stands for. We perceive salvation to come from a God in the heavens, from a God who is powerful and strong. Instead, salvation comes through a condemned man, hanging powerless on the cross. And it is only with eyes of faith that we can see God hidden in that suffering One on the cross. The question then becomes, how do we live the theology of the cross? How can we dare to be Lutherans, how can we live a theology of the cross in our world today? In the next presentation, I will give some proposals to help us be theologians of the cross, living in its light and shadow.

3. Daring to live a theology of the cross.

I am sure you can figure out some ideas about what it means to live in the light and the shadow of the cross. But it perhaps easier if we first describe the opposite of a theology of the cross: a theology of glory. The theology of glory is a theology of a corrupted gospel. It is a theology of triumphalism. Or it can be defined in two unique ways (following the lead of Regin Prenter):¹²

First, a theology of glory is a theology of the Word without the Cross. This is the kind of theology we see all around us today, which basically says, "Jesus loves you, and has died for you, so you can now do what you want." Kierkegaard called it admiring Christ without following Christ.¹³ It is cheap grace, a powerless grace which changes nothing. It is any religion which

Life (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

¹¹ Dietmar Lage notes, "for Luther, the desire to be as God (*homo deificatus*) is the root of all sin" and a desire to imitate Christ always leaves one open to that temptation. On the other hand, notes Lage, "*Conformitas Christi* is not the result of human preparatory activity, but is granted to us *sola gratia*." Lage, *Martin Luther's Christology and Ethics* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 81. Elsewhere he states, "In the place of the imitation of Christ, Luther placed the pre-eminence of faith. . . . For Luther, faith in Christ and *conformitas Christi* had become interchangeable terms." (p. 85)

¹² Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Facet Books Historical Series - 17, Charles Anderson, editor (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

¹³ As noted in Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Chelan, Washington: Holden Village, 1981), p. 22.

offers salvation apart from death and resurrection. It is rejecting God with us, in favour of a God who is content to only act for us once, and then stay out of the way. This way rejects the idea of God entering into solidarity with those who suffer, while calling us to join this Christ.

Second, a theology of glory is a theology of the Cross without the Word. This type of theology of glory was popular with the mystics in Luther's time, and is often popular in near-eastern religions and cults today. It says that people can become more godlike if they reject the pleasures of the world. It holds up the saying, 'Salvation through suffering;' which figures that if you suffer enough, you can prove to God that you are worthy of God's love. This image of a Christian is of someone who walks around "glorying in their suffering" (making them humble, which makes them proud to be humble, which . . . well, you know the story!). These are 'martyr-complex' Christians, like the Spartans or the monks of Luther's time. They focus on the image of God with them in suffering: but they have no conception, no idea that God has acted decisively for us! They are stuck in Good Friday, and haven't yet heard about Easter. The definitive good Word of promise and life goes unheard! They are forever left to wonder, "have I suffered enough to earn God's love?" It is a theology of glory because it glorifies the sufferings of the individual, rather than God.

Now if we were to borrow Luther's phrase, "What is this for us?" from the *Small Catechism*, what would we come up with? What does this imply for us for our daily lives? I would like to propose seven different possibilities for our lives.

First, in the Christian life, daring to live a theology of the cross involves not trying to keep God 'safely chained up in heaven.' This means that we put an end to all the false distinction between spiritual world and the secular world. The cross is a 'this world' event. It tells us that God is willing to be with us at every stage in life, no matter how good or how bad it may be. When we have that distinction between a spiritual world and a secular world, we miss so much of what God is doing in the world! We miss seeing where God is present already! We spend all our time trying to climb up into heaven looking for God, while Christ calls us, just as he called Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), to 'come down,' before we break our necks.

Second, daring to live a theology of the cross means recognizing that God is with people in suffering. Luther stressed again and again that if you wanted to find God, don't look into the heavens. All that will come of such attempts are broken necks suffered in the fall. Instead, Luther proposed instead that "If you wish to serve Christ and to wait on him, very well, you have your sick neighbour close at hand. Go to him and serve him, and you will sure find Christ in him, not outwardly, but in his word. If you do not wish or care to serve your neighbour you can be sure that if Christ lay there instead you would not do so either and would let him lie there. Those are nothing but blind illusions ... that you would really serve Christ if he were there in person."¹⁴ To put it another way, as Luke does, "Jesus has come to seek out and save those who are lost" (Luke 19:10). What better place to look for the lost than those who are struggling with life, those who feel like they have lost the struggle to be God's people, or even to be people! They can relate to Jesus on the cross. That's where they feel they are. Our wonderful gospel proclamation opportunity is to let them know that it is not just the human, Jesus, on the cross; it is God on the cross with them. God has chosen to be hidden on the cross and in the struggles of life. That is where God wants to be known.

¹⁴ LW 43:130-31 ("Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague," 1527)

This image, this good news of a 'God-with-us' is one of the best things we can offer to our world—especially when people are facing so many daily struggles in life. This understanding of God in the midst of our suffering and struggles is one of the most powerful evangelism tools that we have as a Christian community! It does not demand that people become 'successful' and 'righteous' before they join the church. No, instead, it calls the church to move out into the world, away from the safe confines of the church community, and enter a world of struggling and pain. It calls us to enter the real world. We won't have time to go around looking for some sort of 'religious' cross to carry. Instead, it will be dumped in our laps by a God who is already active and involved in the struggles within our communities.

Let me give a couple of examples of what this may mean for us as members of the Christian community. First of all, as we look ahead, trying to understand where society is going, and what role the church should be playing in the next few years, it is becoming more and more obvious that people are going to be facing even greater struggles over who they are. Personal questions about self-esteem and self identity are going to skyrocket. For ages, our society has placed an emphasis on defining ourselves by our occupations: by what we do to 'earn money.' For example, when you are introduced to someone, how long does it take before one of you asks, "So, what do you do?" or "Where do you work?" But if the trends of the next few years are correct, more and more people are going to be laid off because of cutbacks and new technologies. As a result, we are going to be faced with a society with ever higher rates of unemployment and underemployment. People are going to become cut off from the pleasure of defining themselves according to the jobs they do. How can you brag about being unemployed, perpetually looking for work? And what will that say to people about who they are?

Let's go a step further. We already know that life is a struggle for adults when they have been laid off, when they can't find a job. But it also puts a huge stress on the family of which that person is a member. If both parents in a family are unemployed or underemployed, think about what it does to the family dynamics. Relationships are stressed, often to the breaking point. So much of self-esteem, even in relationships, is anchored in what we do. Take that away and the results are catastrophic. And it affects the church, too. People are embarrassed about coming to church, for they feel like a failure for not having a job. They are embarrassed because they cannot put money into the offering plate (our time of measuring status?). It commonly happens that they also withdraw from the community. Life is not made easy for them. It is dehumanizing. It is a reality of a theology of consumerism, a theology of glory, which defines people by what we do for a living and by our purchasing and consuming power.

A second example, which is connected with the first point, is that people are also struggling with relationships. In many cases, the full effects of the breakdown of the nuclear family — and the role that small rural communities played in nurturing people — is only being felt now. The natural support networks have disappeared. Probably all of us have experienced the painful effects which a divorce have caused, for ourselves, someone in our family, or some close friend. People all around us (and perhaps we ourselves) are hurting. That is part of the reality of life today. It is not hard to identify crosses around us. What an opportunity, however, to proclaim the God of the cross — the God who has chosen to enter into people's struggles!

I suspect that our society can relate to a God who, on the cross, seems to have 'struck out on life' as well. The image of God with those who struggle is a powerful image. And so is the image of a God who has promised to overcome the struggles which they know they cannot overcome themselves.

Third, daring to live a theology of the cross will affect how we approach evangelism. So often we are intent on 'bringing God to the world.' And the 'God' we are 'bringing' to the world is often

a God in the heavens. Could it be, though, that perhaps God is already with them? Perhaps it is us that are late on the scene! When we recognize God with people already, in their struggles in life, it will change the way we approach evangelism.

How many evangelism programs are based on the idea that Christians have fewer problems in life? They intimate, "Accept Christ, and your problems will fade away." Or, "If you become a Christian, you will get eternal life!" Of course, that is true. But do we invite people to come to Jesus only for what they can get out of the Lord? If so, aren't we appealing to the coveting nature of humans? The assumption is that if we can get people to covet heaven or some sort of spiritual recognition then they will convert. And so we evangelize by appealing to their desire to covet. But isn't that breaking the 9th and 10th commandments? It cries out, "Look at the heavenly reward program that God offers!" That is basically the 'selling point' of some evangelism programs. It's crass marketing! It should cause us to ask, "What 'hooks' do we use in evangelism? Are they supportive of a theology of the cross, or a theology of glory?"

But what is the alternative? I have hardly ever heard people evangelizing by saying, "If you become a Christian, I want to be sure you understand that you will be called to bear a cross, and don't be surprised if you will face a lot of struggles. You will be despised, rejected, acquainted with sorrow. You will be led to the crosses of life. You will most likely be crucified with Christ. And most surprisingly, God will be with you in the midst of all that!" We are hesitant to say that, though. And yet, that is precisely what Christ told his disciples to expect. It is precisely what Jesus has told us to expect as Christians. Luther himself stated that one of the signs of the true church would be the cross: suffering and struggles. That is where God has chosen to be revealed. But we are afraid that this message will scare people away! But will it? I think that often, it has the opposite effect. Many of our youth leave the church precisely because we have been afraid to challenge them with the gospel's call! Perhaps they are merely rejecting our theology of glory, and looking for something more authentic, a theology that more honestly addresses the realities of this life!

One of the most under-used tools we have for evangelism is precisely found in the theology of the cross. If we dare to be so bold to proclaim that God is with us in our suffering, we have opened the door to conversation with nearly everyone in our neighbourhood! They can relate to struggles. Rather than being ashamed of their struggles, seeing them as signs of failure in their Christian life, we can help them to see that God dwells with all of us precisely in our struggles; that Christ himself chose the way of struggles. It is a powerful evangelism tool to boldly proclaim that God is not ashamed of — or embarrassed by — struggles. Instead, that is where God chooses to be!"

Daring to live a theology of the cross means daring to let people know the cost of discipleship, as a central focus of our witness. Evangelizing can't take place under false pretences. We must be honest. We must trust that God's Holy Spirit does indeed "call, gather, enlighten and sanctify," even if the message seems foolishness. That has always been the stumbling block of the cross. But it is a stumbling block that we dare not remove. If people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, let it be because they heard the message of the gospel that is rooted in the cross, not a watered down and distorted message that avoids the cross. Let's let the Holy Spirit get on with the job of calling and gathering the church, without acting as if we doubt that the Spirit can do the job! Our job is to do the proclaiming.

Fourth, daring to live a theology of the cross may also change the way we approach worship. Perhaps worship is not to provide us with a brief escape from the world. Instead, perhaps our worship of Christ takes place in the world, just like it was for the disciples. So we cannot isolate

worship from the world. It is not meant to be an 'Isolated heaven' on earth. It is to be a place where people are healed and touched at the foot of the cross.

Perhaps it is good to ask some questions at this juncture. Why do we worship? What kind of God do we worship? Are the images of God in our worship determined by Christ on the cross? Or apart from the Christ on the cross? For example, what does the image of an empty cross at the fronts of our church imply? That there is no more suffering? Or that God has faced suffering and death head on, and yet not been defeated? What is the place of the theology of the cross in worship? Does our worship focus only on God in heaven, the victorious God who has acted for us? Or is there something in our worship that talks about the God with us, the God who enters into our struggles? It seems to me that a large portion of our actual liturgy is about the final victory of God, but very little about the God with us now. So is the liturgy irrelevant? Is it a theology of glory?

Consider also the hymns we sing. Can you think of any hymns which may tend to reflect a theology of glory rather than a theology of the cross? Are there hymns which talk about our victories apart from the cross? Or are there hymns which talk about our suffering, without a word of promise? In our worship, do we dare to face up to and deal with our struggles as a community? Do we dare mention the struggles of our members in prayer, in sermons, or in recognition of their struggles? Or do we give the impression that these struggles are something that are best left unspoken, for fear of making them feel like 'failures' or because the "issues" that people are dealing with in their lives are "controversial," better "hidden" under the bed or carpets of "official pronouncements? Can we structure our prayers and worship and sermons in such a way that the people who are struggling can be welcomed and reassured of God's presence with them? Isn't that what the gospel is!?

Fifth, daring to live a theology of the cross will affect the way we understand personal devotions, and especially spirituality. For example, why do we have personal devotions? And why do we encourage others to have devotions? Do we have devotions to help us get into a 'heavenly' frame of mind? If that is the case, perhaps that is why people have so much trouble keeping a devotional schedule! It is just too hard (and too speculative!) to get into a heavenly frame of mind. Besides, that is not the place where God wants to talk with us anyway! That can avoid the cross, the incarnation! We are called to have "Christ's mind among us," not a "God-in-heaven" mind among us. You see, spirituality that helps us to escape the walk with God in this world, or to escape from the struggles of this world is a false spirituality. As Luther said, "the Cross tests everything."¹⁵ Our devotional time might be more effective if we focussed more on becoming aware of the ways God has chosen. Our devotional time might be more effective if we focussed more on talking to God about our struggles on earth and the struggles of our family and friends, and asking God to show us how Christ has been present in those struggles.

Sixth, daring to live a theology of the cross involves recognizing God's commitment to the world. God's being 'with us' is a call for us to be 'with' God in the world. It is daring to see for ourselves, and helping others to see God walking with them. It involves discovering people of the cross in the crosses of life. If the church will not take God's presence in the world seriously, can we expect non-Christians to take a God in the heavens seriously?

¹⁵WA 5:179.31. Commentary on Psalm 5:12, Second Psalms Lectures, 1519-1521.

Seventh, daring to live a theology of the cross involves being willing to deal honestly with ourselves and with our world. It means ‘calling a spade a spade.’¹⁶ What do I mean? Well, for one thing, perhaps it means that we can offer a great service to our society by being willing to talk about the way things are going to be changing in the next few years, instead of hoping that somehow the problems will just disappear. Many people who are outside of the church right now might find it a more welcoming place if they knew that our churches were willing to confront and deal with the problems affecting them and the rest of our society.

How can we call a spade a spade? For one thing, it means that we need to face up to the fact that the Christian church is no longer the “official religion of an officially optimistic society,” as Douglas John Hall reminds us.¹⁷ It means that we as a small church in Canada need to quit trying to delude ourselves with our importance in society. I think it means that we as a church need to let go of being a church of primarily Scandinavians and Germans. And I'm sure you can come up with lots of other examples.

4. Conclusion

I can live with a church that doesn't grow because it faithfully proclaims and seeks to live the gospel. But I cannot live with a church that alters the gospel and the call to discipleship because it is afraid that the true gospel, or the cross of Christ, will drive people away. I do not want to be a part of a church that moves so far from the cross that its shadow — and light! — never falls upon it. On the other hand, when people are captured God's grace, captured by the gospel, then the cross will not drive them away. Rather, it will have the opposite effect. It will empower all of us to face up to the realities of life, without having to try hide anything, content with the certainty that God is with us. It will set us free to live in the world as people who are crucified with Christ, a people who will also share a resurrection with him. And that is enough for me.

¹⁶In thesis 21 of the *Heidelberg Disputation* written in 1518, Luther said it this way: “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.” LW 31:52; WA 1:362.21-2.

¹⁷Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 73.