

Why a Lutheran School?

Education and Theology in Dialogue

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[Excerpt p 45-48]

In the cross, Jesus Christ reveals his glory

In Jesus Christ, God suffers for human sin and evil

Article III of the *Augsburg Confession* begins (Tappert 1959: 27-28):

It is also taught among us that God the Son became man, born of the virgin Mary, and that the two natures, divine and human, are so inseparably united in one person that there is one Christ, true God and true man, who was truly born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried in order to be a sacrifice not only for original sin but also for all other sins and to propitiate God's wrath.

The focus in this article dealing with the person and work of Jesus Christ, is on the suffering and death of Christ. The Lutheran Confessions, drawing on the biblical witness, see Jesus Christ as the 'suffering servant' who came 'not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Matt 20:28). On the cross the result of human sin and evil is seen as God dies, identifying with the alienation, the vulnerability, the pain and the suffering of God's creation. Theology of the cross shows 'God's abiding commitment to the world' (Hall 1989: 25).

Throughout his ministry, already immediately following his baptism when he was tested by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), Jesus had to withstand the temptation to abandon this path of servanthood and suffering. Even his disciple Peter attempted to turn him from that road and earned the rebuke, 'Get behind me,

Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things' (Matt 16:23). On the cross itself, the taunts continued as Jesus was urged to 'save yourself, and come down from the cross' (Mark 15:30). The temptation for Jesus was to follow a path of 'glory', to assume the role of the expected Messiah as a popular military and political figure, to ignore 'the brokenness of the human spirit and the human community' (Hall 1989: 28).

On the cross, Jesus Christ has overcome sin, death and the power of Satan

Jesus' cry on the cross, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30) signalled his conviction that he had completed what he had come to do. The Lutheran Confessions see this as the inevitable end of the incarnation: the cross and the manger belong together. Jesus had been 'obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8). Sin and Satan had been defeated, and by his rising again, Jesus Christ also showed his victory over death. Lutheran theology affirms that on the cross Christ identified totally with the suffering not only of all people but of the whole world (John 3:16). The cross is therefore seen as God's answer to the brokenness of God's creation (Rom 8:19-22).

As Schlink points out (1961: 84-87), the Lutheran Confessions use a number of different expressions to portray this work of Christ on the cross. Christ is the 'reconciler', the 'innocent Lamb of God', the 'sacrifice' the 'high priest', the 'mediator', the 'intercessor', the 'propitiation', the 'advocate', the 'expiation', the 'forfeit', the 'price', the 'ransom', the 'redeemer' who 'has made satisfaction for our sins'. Schlink concludes (1961: 85-86):

But no matter which terms are used to designate the atonement, all have this common denominator that they acknowledge the obedient death of Jesus Christ to be a *substitutionary* death. He bore *our* punishment and he paid *our* debt. He bore the punishment which God inflicts on us sinners. He took upon himself the debt which we owe God and he paid it.

Christ's glory on the cross can be seen only by faith

The paradox of the cross is that defeat is victory. St Paul develops this clearly in the so-called 'Christ hymn' in his letter to the Philippians (2:6-11). Jesus Christ who is God, 'emptied himself', took on 'the form of a slave', became a human

being and 'humbled himself . . . to the point of death - even death on a cross'. 'Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'

The Gospel of John also emphasises this paradox when it speaks of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection as his 'glorification' (John 12:23-33; 7:39; 12:16; 13:31; 17:1). The Lutheran Confessions are concerned that nothing should 'obscure the glory and blessings of Christ' (Tappert 1959: 107), or 'rob Christ of his honor as our mediator and propitiator' (Tappert 1959: 128).

Schlink provides a valuable summary of the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions on this point (1961: 87-88):

The glory of Christ consists in this - that the only obedience rendered to God by the human race is the obedience of the incarnate Son of God, that the only death that was not well-merited punishment for the dying person is and remains his death, and that his obedience and death is the only merit of all mankind. Christ's honor, however, is not a uniqueness which he preserves in and for himself, but it is the very uniqueness of his self-surrender and his sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. It is his glory that he, as the only one, truly sacrificed himself and that with his completed sacrifice he *offers* himself to all sinners for forgiveness and eternal life. To acknowledge Christ's glory, therefore, means to receive Christ, to eat and drink him. Thus understood, the glory of Christ is the theme of all Lutheran Confessions. In the focus of all statements is not the glory which Christ has for himself, but the glory of Christ which manifests itself in his sacrifice for men and in his self-giving. The only permissible *theologia gloriae* is, therefore, the *theologia gloriae Christi*, i.e., the *theologia crucis*.

Only faith can grasp this revelation. Only by faith can the cross be seen as victory. Sasse argues (1984: 50): 'The cross and faith belong together. Cross-theology is always faith-

theology. The cross demands faith *contrary to what our eyes see*.' This is particularly so because God's revelation of himself on the cross 'is also the place where God's revelation is most repugnant to our reason.'

4. The cross calls the followers of Jesus Christ to a discipleship of service and suffering

Each disciple of Christ is called to a response of service

Luther summarised his understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ in his profound but simply stated explanation to the second article of the *Apostles' Creed* in his *Small Catechism*. Here Luther becomes particularly personal (Tappert 1959: 345):

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

This passage relates theology of the cross directly to the life of believers. Faith, given through the working of the Holy Spirit, recognises Jesus Christ as God hidden in the incarnation and in the cross. Faith accepts what Jesus Christ has done in his life, death and resurrection. Faith confesses Jesus Christ as Lord. And because Jesus is Lord, Lutheran theology stresses that his disciples are called to live in service to him through service to others. Each disciple is challenged with living for others (*theologia crucis*) rather than living for self (*theologia gloriae*).

Lutheran theology sees each disciple of Christ identifying with the suffering of Christ

However, theology of the cross means more for the disciple of Christ than living a life of humility and service in imitation of Christ. We cannot (Prenter 1959: 226) 'turn the acceptance of

suffering and the daily cross into a form of work-righteousness'. Sasse (1984: 52) argues:

To believe in the cross always means also to carry the cross. A yes to the cross of Christ is also a yes to my cross. If this is not so, we are only playing games. It is not by chance that whenever Jesus spoke of His cross to His disciples He also thought of the cross which they would have to bear in following Him [Matt. 16:24-26].

Prenter (1959: 225-226) extends this argument:

when faith in the cross of Christ no longer involves the willingness to carry one's own cross, then the Crucifixion is no longer taken seriously as that event by which Christ bore the punishment for our sins. For if I do not want to acknowledge my own sins and God's judgment over them in that I accept the cross and suffering which is laid upon me in my life without bitterness and in a spirit of faith, as something which I have justly earned, how, then, can I acknowledge Jesus Christ as he who took upon himself the punishment for these very sins of mine and thereby has become my one and only claim to righteousness before God?

Luther, in fact, also included 'the holy possession of the sacred cross' (LW 41: 164) as one of the seven marks of the church. He urges Christians to show that 'they steadfastly adhere to Christ and God's word' by enduring 'for the sake of Christ' 'every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh' and so 'become like their head, Christ'. In the *Large Catechism* (Tappert 1959: 429), Luther warns Christians that they must 'count on' being inflicted with 'every possible misfortune and grief . . . For where God's Word is preached, accepted or believed, and bears fruit, there the blessed holy cross will not be far away'.

This cross, this suffering for the sake of Christ, is not something which the Christian chooses for himself or herself: it is something which is placed onto the disciple by God (cf. SD XI: 49) who continues to be revealed through suffering. It is a cross which disciples of Christ 'take up' as they follow Christ (Matt 16:24). While the death of

Christ on the cross was a unique historical event, never to be repeated (Heb 9:25-28; 10:14), the Lutheran Confessions affirm that the disciple of Christ shares in the suffering which Christ still continues to bear wherever there is suffering. Theology of the cross means, then, that the disciple of Christ identifies with the suffering Christ in the world and participates in the struggle against evil and sin in whatever form that may occur. The Christian life is not seen in terms of a theology of glory as all conquering and triumphant living, but its glory is lived under the cross, hidden under the opposite, in suffering, humility, grief, disgrace, pain, death.

*Excerpt from
Why a Lutheran School, Bartsch, M p 45-48*