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St Louise: Concordia Publishing House. (pp. 55-69).

## the theOlogy of the CROSS

### THE HIDDENNESS OF GOD

It seems strange to think that Christ is actually present in such a saving way in that little styrofoam-like wafer of bread or in the small sip of astringent wine. Or that God speaks to us in a literal book of ink, paper, and binding. Or that the pastor's sermon is used by the Holy Spirit to create faith in our hearts. These are rather spectacular claims for what goes on in an ordinary church service, with its weakly sung hymns, babies crying in the background, and everyday people fidgeting in their pews. It's hardly credible to think that such a mundane and frequently dull setting could be the scene of such high and holy spiritual presences.

One might say the same thing, of course, about the central event in Christianity. God came down from heaven to live as an

itinerant Jewish carpenter, who ends up getting executed by torture! One would think that He would come as a king, accepting the veneration of His people and conquering His enemies. That He came in weakness, humiliation, rejection, and suffering is, to say the least, unexpected.

People today who seek to be spiritual must confess that God sometimes seems far away. The ordinariness of everyday life, the material burdens that one must live through, the routines, and the practical preoccupations of life often smother any sense of transcendence. And then there is the fact of actual suffering. When we face failure or disease or loss of a loved one or the prospect of our own long and lingering death, we raise the agonizing question, where is God now?

The prophet Isaiah—in the midst of national apostasy, political collapse, and divine judgment concludes, “Truly you are a God who hides himself” (Isaiah 45:15). To say God is hidden, of course, does not mean that He is absent. On the contrary, someone who is hidden is actually present, just not seen. The child who is hiding in the room is certainly there. God conceals Himself, often in things that we would least expect—a crucified criminal, a book, water, bread, wine, a gouty pastor, trials and suffering, human beings working and raising their families.

The hiddenness of God is one of the most profound themes in Lutheran spirituality. It is part of what is termed “the theology of the cross,” which might be better thought of as the spirituality of the cross. It has to do with Christ’s work, His presence, and how we draw closer to Him. The theology of the cross also deals with the difficulties and hardships that Christians must live through in an utterly realistic and honest way.

## THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS VS. THE THEOLOGY OF GLORY

In the “spirituality” section of most bookstores, one will find shelves and shelves of titles offering a whole array of techniques and teachings that will solve all problems and bring us to the pinnacle of success. Meditation, the physical disciplines of yoga, pop psychology, principles of positive thinking—all promise empowerment. Not only will they bring personal peace and happiness, if rightly applied, they promise to improve one’s physical health, from losing weight to conquering cancer. Spiritual disciplines are also put forward as methods for career advancement, to the point that business books often seem indistinguishable from spiritual books (what with their positive-thinking mantras to help score big sales and their fire-walking, “imaging” techniques). Some books speak of actualizing the self to the point that the self is spoken of in terms traditionally reserved for God. The self becomes the Creator (“you create your own reality”) and the Lawgiver (“you determine what’s right for you”), eliminating the need for a Redeemer. New Age spirituality affirms that the *Self* is, in fact, God, and that all things, if we could only realize it, share the same divine unity. In much of today’s pop religions, “spirituality” becomes a means to a more worldly end, or to the end of enhancing the self—acquiring power, pleasure, and in some cases self-deification.

What is true of the New Age racks can also be found in Christian bookstores. Today their shelves too are stocked with ways of using God for one’s own health, happiness, and prosperity. There are Christian diet books, titles on the “Management Techniques of Jesus Christ,” and analyses of Christ as the master salesman. Other books deal with more serious concerns, offering solutions for child-raising problems and improving society. Their covers make vast and excited claims, as if by following certain steps family problems will disappear, our bodies will do what we want, our finan-

cial problems will evaporate, we will solve our nation's problems, grow the church, and live happily ever after.

Certainly, the Bible has much to say about how we should live, and its wisdom can shape our family lives and cultural issues in profound ways. In fact, as the next chapter on *vocation* will show, the Christian faith has implications for the apparently secular work of managers, salesmen, and, above all, parents.

But the problem with the way spirituality merges with self-help is that the various panaceas do not really even do what they claim to do. The best Christian families still experience conflicts, intractable problems, and embarrassing failures. The most devout Christian may go bankrupt, or have a mental breakdown, or contract a heartbreaking disease and not be healed.

The books do not really help then, except to accentuate our sense of failure. Even if their step-by-step spiritual principles are valid, given our inability to keep God's Law, we never consistently follow them. The ideal of the "victorious Christian life" proves impossible to attain, though we have to suppress our failures, keep trying harder (and buying more books), and present a more positive front to the world. We thus resort to dishonesty and phoniness.

Luther called this kind of self-aggrandizing, success-centered, power spirituality "the theology of glory." Of course its attraction is understandable. Naturally we want success, victories, and happiness. We will be attracted to any religion that can promise us such things. We want complete and understandable answers, evidence of tangible spiritual power, all conveyed by an impressive, well-run, and effective institution. Instead, God gives us the cross.

I have heard that missionaries sometimes have a hard time explaining Jesus to followers of tribal faiths. "Our god is a great warrior," they sometimes respond. "He would not let himself be killed like your Jesus." The *theology of the cross* cuts against the

grain of all natural religion, all of what we expect and want in a spiritual system. God manifested Himself not as an abstract principle, but He came down from heaven. Not as sheer energy, but as a baby. He was born, in a rather scandalous way, of a poor virgin, not in a king's palace, but in a stable for animals. To be sure, the angels celebrated His coming, but they announced it not to the king, but to shepherds. Throughout His life, the Son of God emptied Himself of glory (Philippians 2:6-8).

To be sure, this Jesus was powerful, healing the sick and ruling nature itself, but He remained unpopular, scorned, homeless ("foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" [Matthew 8:20]). As prophesied,

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (Isaiah 53:2-3)

Strange for the Son of God to come like this. And then this Jesus was arrested, tried, and executed, nailed to a cross. The prophet continues:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

In this chapter of the Old Testament—not the New, as one might expect—Isaiah foresees how Christ's weakness impacts our own weakness. On the cross, He carried not only our transgressions and our iniquity, but "our infirmities" and "our sorrows."

The rest of the story is that Christ rose from the dead. He ascended back into the glory that was His. And, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "He shall come again with glory."<sup>1</sup> And His followers will live in glory. We really will live happily ever after. But in the meantime, while we live on this earth, there is the cross.

"If anyone would come after me," Jesus said, "he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Conversely, "anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). This by no means implies that we have to suffer as Jesus did, much less that suffering is some sort of meritorious act or payment for our sins. Jesus did all of that for us. It does mean that the spiritual life has to do with suffering, defeat, and weakness—not simply with the experience of "glory" as we might like.

It also, however, implies a peculiar way that Jesus relates to us. Coming to faith, as we have seen, involves being broken by the Law, coming to grips with our moral failure. Legalistic religions, in which one saves oneself by one's own efforts, are very specifically *theologies of glory*, optimistically assuming success and glorifying the powers of the successful, virtuous person. But when we realize just how lost we are, then we cling to the cross, trusting Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is saving faith, the *theology of the cross*.

In ordinary life, we still have our problems, but these too are related to Christ. Our crosses are connected to His.

### BEARING THE CROSS

One of the best books on the theology of the cross is by Richard Eyer, who for years served as a hospital chaplain, ministering to the sick and the dying. In *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*, Pastor Eyer tells of a patient, Mr. Wittl, who required kidney dialysis and was

in intensive care following open-heart surgery. Whenever Pastor Eyer would pray with him—asking that God's will would be done—Mr. Wittl, following a common Lutheran custom, would make the sign of the cross.

When his daughter visited him, however, she would be all smiles, bubbling over with reassurances, telling her father not to worry, that God would heal him. "But somehow her father doesn't seem comforted by this," Pastor Eyer recalls, "and turns to me to make the sign of the cross." The daughter believes that having enough faith will lead to healing. "There is no place for weakness and suffering in her understanding of the will of God." But while she is busy trying to get God to surrender to her will, her father has surrendered to the will of God. "He knows that it is the cross that lies at the heart of one's confidence in the Lord."<sup>2</sup>

"As much as parishioners may want to see the hand of God in nature's beautiful sunrises, moving stories of conversion, or success in parish programs," observes Pastor Eyer, "it is in the cross of Christ and in bearing their own crosses that God chooses to reveal his heart to them." With the theology of glory, "we will begin to demand that God justify himself to us in our sufferings by giving us healing and success. We will demand a God who does what we want him to do, and we will reject the way of the cross by which He comes to us. We will become fearful of suffering and preoccupied with its avoidance at the expense of truth and faithfulness."<sup>3</sup>

In the hospital, patients are helpless. They are dependent—on the medical staff, on medication, on machines. Many sick people hate the thought of being dependent on life-support equipment, preferring even death to being "hooked up on some machine." Our culture also draws away from people who are utterly dependent. Those who believe in physician-assisted suicide hold that it is better to die than to suffer or to be dependent. Those who believe in euthanasia maintain that a life of dependence, weakness, and

suffering is not worth living, that at some point it is a kindness for those who are sick to be killed.

Being helpless and utterly dependent, however, is precisely our spiritual condition. We are utterly helpless to save ourselves. We are utterly dependent on God. Saving faith involves giving up on our pretensions of being self-sufficient, strong, and in control. Instead, we are to rest in utter dependence on Jesus Christ. "My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord told St. Paul, "for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

It is natural for us to want to save ourselves, to cultivate a spiritual independence and self-sufficiency, so that we can be in control of our spiritual lives. No wonder we have such a fondness for religions of Law, theologies of glory, which allow us to center on our own achievements, merits, and accomplishments. That we keep failing to achieve, merit, and accomplish what we think we should—however we evade our failures by rationalization or dishonesty—by no means alters the goal of spiritual self-sufficiency. In a truly evangelical spirituality, however, this attitude must be broken, so that we awake to our need and put our trust in Christ rather than in ourselves. In the Gospel, our sense of independence is replaced by a sense of dependence.

It is also natural for us to desire independence, self-sufficiency, and control in our earthly lives, to prefer death to dependence, to judge our own worth and those of others in terms of the capacity to do, as it were, "good works." Such attitudes may have their value, as will be seen, in the secular sphere. Still, even in secular terms, the members of a family are supposed to be dependent on each other, as are the members of a society or of an economic system. The attitude of complete self-sufficiency cannot only undermine faith, it can wreck God's design for human relationships.

Just as such complacency is shattered by the Law, in everyday life such complacency is shattered by bearing the cross—that is, by

failure, frustration, disappointment, difficulties, struggles, and suffering. Both the Law and the cross drive us to an ever-deeper and more-intimate dependence on Jesus Christ, who meets our sin and our sufferings in His cross.

### THE HIDDEN LIFE

It has been said that contemporary Christians lack a theology of suffering. We, understandably, want to avoid it at all costs—and yet it comes, but we do not know what to do with it or what it means.

The fact of suffering is often taken as a sign that there cannot be a God. An all-loving, all-powerful God would not allow suffering to take place, people assume, but would make everyone happy. And since the world does contain so much suffering, God must not exist. Even worse, the fact of suffering is sometimes taken to mean that the sufferer has been rejected by God. The assumption is that Christians will not suffer, that if one has enough faith, God will grant healing, prosperity, and success. Such is our penchant for theologies of glory that whole churches are built today around promises of good health and financial success, not only through following biblical principles but from "name it and claim it" acts of faith. The Lutheran evangelical theology of the cross offers a theology of suffering, but more than that, it offers a practical, realistic, and spiritually-dynamic paradigm for the Christian life.

First, it must be emphasized that the theology of the cross, while it speaks of the spiritual significance of suffering, by no means advocates suffering as a means of spiritual enlightenment. The theology of the cross is not ascetism, the purposeful cultivation of unpleasant experiences so as to gain spiritual merit or some salutary mortification of the flesh. The elaborate mortifications practiced by many in the world's religions—fastings, scourges, self-

torment—may involve suffering, but they are still to be classified in the theology of glory, with their heroic acts of self-denial and self-control. Lutherans, though many practice Lenten disciplines, are almost never ascetic. Our cross, Luther taught, is never self-chosen, never self-imposed. Any crosses we choose for ourselves can hardly have much of an effect. Rather, bearing one's cross has to do precisely with the suffering that we do not choose for ourselves, the trials and difficulties that are imposed on us from the outside, that we have no control over whatsoever.<sup>4</sup>

Nor does cross-bearing necessarily involve the dramatic suffering of the cancer patient or the bereft parent, though it may. Bearing the cross often has to do more with the petty, ordinary obstacles and frustrations of everyday life and, as a later chapter will show, with troubles in one's vocation. Boredom, mild depression, and bad moods can be crosses, no less than physical pain and emotional turmoil.

Whether the problems are dramatic or mundane, they are all "trials." However much we, understandably, try to avoid them, trials are an inevitable part of everyone's life. The theology of the cross teaches how they also play an important role in the life of faith.

It must be emphasized that the theology of the cross does not offer some pat answer for suffering, some new theodicy that offers a new explanation for why God allows bad things to happen. For Luther, struggling with the "why" is at the essence of trial. Luther even speaks of trial as struggling with God. Sometimes it may seem that God is contradicting Himself, as when a pastor finds God seemingly thwarting the very ministry to which he has been called. Luther cites Abraham's struggle with God's seemingly contradictory commands when he was told to sacrifice his son, and observes how Jacob literally wrestled with God.<sup>5</sup>

"The most severe trial," says Walther von Loewenich, quoting Luther, "comes upon a person when he believes he has been forsaken and rejected by God. Such a trial comes only to the 'greatest of saints.'"<sup>6</sup> Ironically, what in many traditions would be a sign of spiritual failure—doubting one's election, feeling God's absence—for Luther is a sign of the greatest sanctity, reserved (thankfully) for the spiritual giants.

"What kind of advice can Luther give in such cases? None other than that one must cling to the Word. And the Word, for Luther, is nothing else than Christ."<sup>7</sup> Over and over in his writings, Luther tells those who are doubting whether they have been saved, those who question whether God loves them, those who think they have committed a sin that God will not forgive, to read God's promises in the Bible and to hold Him to His Word—to remember the objective fact that they have been baptized—to receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion—to cling to the cross of Jesus Christ.

To believe in God's Word of promise, despite one's feelings, is faith. This is why all trials, both major and small, are occasions for the exercise of faith. "We live by faith, and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). In the darkness, when we cannot see, we can only listen for God's voice, whereupon we can draw closer to the hidden God.

Another reason trials can have a salutary spiritual effect is that they drive us to prayer. In moments of desperation—when we know in a panic that we cannot control what is happening, in a car wreck, in a cancer diagnosis, when a loved one is fighting for her life—we turn instinctively to prayer. Even nonbelievers do. For a Christian, those moments of need bring out our utter dependence upon God, a realization at the heart of faith. When we are in desperate need, we pray with an intensity, a heartfelt passion, that is particularly genuine and authentic. "Prayer like this," says

Gustaf Wingren quoting Luther, “can hardly be made by anyone who is not in deep need and desperation. ‘For what sort of prayer would it be if need were not present and pressing upon us?’”<sup>8</sup> Again, crying out to God in the depths of one’s need is an act of faith and an occasion in which the hidden God who answers prayers draws closer.

How this all plays out in ordinary life, how faith and prayer and the hiddenness of God transform day-to-day living, will be the subject of the next chapter. For now, it must be remembered that though God is hidden—that is, He cannot be seen or experienced—in the crosses we bear, He is nevertheless genuinely present, a real presence grasped by faith.

Furthermore, the Christian’s spiritual life is itself hidden. “For you died,” says St. Paul, “and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:3–4). Having been buried with Christ in Baptism and having been joined with His cross in faith, the Christian’s life is “hidden.” At the resurrection of the dead and the eternal life in heaven, there will of course be no crosses, God will be clearly manifest in everything, and then will be the time for glory. But for now, the Christian’s life is hidden with Christ.

So far we have spoken of justification, but said little about sanctification, the process by which a Christian grows in holiness. The next chapter will speak about good works and action in the world. But the relationship between the human being and God is wholly a matter of faith, not human works, and a large part of sanctification is growing in faith. This comes, again, by trial and the cross, in which the struggles of life force us to grow in our dependence on God and thus cause us to grow in our faith. Good works, as will be seen, are a spontaneous result of faith. Those who

need to do more good works need more faith, a deeper apprehension of the Gospel, in order to produce them.

But sanctification, spiritual growth, is no smooth progress. Whether we consider growth in faith or growth in good works, both of which are implicit in the doctrine of sanctification, the holiness of a Christian is not always evident. Failures, hypocrisies, doubts, lack of love, apathy, phoniness, egotistical pride, and secret sins of the flesh are well-documented in Christian churches.

The church, in fact, often seems like a rather weak and attenuated institution. Christians, or churchgoers, often seem little different from their non-Christian neighbors. Individual Christians usually have to admit these charges in their own lives, and in fact they confess them daily. Their relationship with God often seems to vacillate wildly, from times of ecstatic closeness to God to times when He seems absent, from times of spiritual energy to periods of spiritual dryness. Often, little progress is evident, just one failure, followed by a fresh start, followed by another failure. If God is really at work in the lives of Christians, shouldn’t one expect better than this?

Luther speaks much of how our “old man” is in conflict with our “new man.” The baptized, converted sinner is given a new spiritual nature, a new life in Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. But the old sinful nature, inherent in our fallen flesh, remains (see Galatians 5:16–26). These are in conflict, so that the Christian may still succumb to his sinful flesh, which in turn must be disciplined and resisted, while the “new man” is to grow in faith and love. Only at death, when the flesh passes away, will this conflict be resolved, with the regenerated nature attaining full perfection when it enters eternal life.

But in the meantime, the new man is hidden. This is not just a matter—much less an excuse—of Christians failing in their calling. Their true identity and status before God is hidden even to

themselves. Again, God sees Christians through the prism of the cross: Our sins and failures are hidden by the blood of Christ; our ordinary lives are hidden, and we are robed by Christ's righteousness. When God looks at a Christian, He sees Jesus.

As St. Paul says, our lives are hidden "with Christ." Our sins are hidden in the cross. Our righteousness is hidden in His. Our lives are hidden, in effect, from God. They are certainly hidden from ourselves and from the world.

This is the basis for our spiritual security. The Christian's life is safely hidden away. Though Lutherans believe in the Law's message that a Christian refusing to repent of sin and rejecting the faith can fall away, the Gospel banishes all fear.

"The wind blows wherever it pleases," says Jesus Himself. "You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). God's Spirit is at work in the lives of every Christian, mysteriously changing the heart, acting with Word and Sacrament, ministering in trials and tribulations, creating someone who will stand before God in heaven as *holy*. But this process cannot be evident to the naked eye, nor can it be measured and tracked, nor is the Christian himself necessarily conscious of how far he has come.

The average church member may not seem very impressive. His faults are evident. He may lose his temper, be prone to gossip, and have a worldly streak. He may not even seem very spiritual. And yet, his life is hidden with Christ in God. Every Sunday he hears God's Word of judgment and forgiveness. He examines himself and steps up to the altar to receive Christ's body and blood given for him. He may not always be the best husband, but when his wife dies, he cries out in misery to God. Such folks often say little, but then exhibit a startlingly powerful faith when the chips are down.

It is common today to question whether churchgoers are "really Christians" and to dismiss "dead churches" because we expect spir-

itual dynamos. To be sure, church rolls may include nonbelievers, there are churches that no longer preach the Gospel and so are dead (despite their high membership totals), and there are spiritual giants that put the rest of us to shame. Nevertheless, to paraphrase C. S. Lewis, the average man or woman in the pew may, to God, be a blessed saint before whom, if we only knew, we would have the impulse to bow down. We just cannot judge by appearances.

Nor can we judge by appearances when we experience suffering or when God seems distant or rejecting, or not real at all. Nor can we judge by appearances when considering what is happening when water, bread, and wine are used in a church service, or when the pastor reads from a book and proclaims words from a pulpit. If we were to judge from appearances, we would scarcely have thought that this Jewish carpenter is actually God in the flesh. His being tortured to death at Golgotha, judged strictly by appearances, would be repulsive, a meaningless act of cruelty. We would never guess that it was the salvation of the whole world.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In *The Book of Concord*, 18.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard C. Eyer, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1994), 26.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.
- <sup>4</sup> See Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1994), 52-53.
- <sup>5</sup> Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 136-37.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.
- <sup>8</sup> Wingren, 189.