



A FORGOTTEN PARADIGM: THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

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Offering new paradigms seems to be the rage today in the church. In the interest of being "relevant" I will therefore throw my hat into the ring by using this precious opportunity to present and suggest a new paradigm for the Texas District to consider. Actually, I must confess it isn't "new", but it has so long been neglected in our fellowship that it may appear new and innovative. A paradigm, we are told, is a whole new way of perceiving and evaluating the

world or our ministry in the world, not merely another program or strategy. Luther's theology of the cross is a paradigm, for it is a much wider concept than the mere affirmation that Jesus died on the cross to take away our sins. The blood atonement of Christ is at the heart of the matter, of course, but the cross cannot be compartmentalized and limited to the doctrine of atonement. The concept of Christ-crucified pervades all of theology. Indeed, it permeates and defines how the Christian looks at and evaluates the world, the church, and the whole Christian life. The cross of Christ is a paradox that shapes our world-view. The paradox is this, that God, the Mighty King, redeemed us by what appears to be an utter and complete defeat. He conquered death and bestowed life by dying. He made known His strength through weakness. God has made Himself known to us behind the veil of humility. The cross is a paradigm for the way God has always worked and always will work in the world. The theologian of the cross knows and understands this paradox. He seeks God in humble garments today also. He finds God where the world still cannot see Him, and still despises Him. The theologian of glory does not understand this paradox and He looks for God and His presence where He is not to be found, in visible manifestations of glory, power, wisdom, and strength. These two theologies are incompatible and irreconcilable. They are complete opposites, and lead to contradictory conclusions about almost everything. Luther said, in fact, that the theologian of glory calls evil good, and good evil, and that he inevitably comes to persecute the theologian of the cross.

I will suggest in this paper that the Missouri Synod, and particularly the Texas District, is dangerously close to embracing the theology of glory. I am sure the present flirtation is done unwittingly under the sincere intention to serve God and to build His church. A conflict is brewing and it is becoming very difficult and frustrating for both sides to define the battle lines. Skirmishes over particular worship styles or evangelism methods often seem insignificant and trite. Many sincerely believe that we are debating matters of adiaphora and that one side advocates freedom and the other is bound legalistically to tradition. A few on the "conservative side" (i.e., those resistant to change) undoubtedly *are* traditionalists and legalistic in their approach to the issues, just as a few on the "liberal side" (i.e., those advocating change) are unruly and revolutionary in spirit, advocating change for change's sake. I believe, however, that the majority on each side does not fit neatly into these simple, easily refuted categories. I do not believe that most conservatives are motivated by a legalistic spirit or that most liberals defy

authority or despise our heritage. Yet I believe that we are profoundly divided in ways that are not really evident in our arguments over practical matters. I believe that the gulf exists on the deeper level of assumptions or presuppositions. Much of the tension and conflict in the Missouri Synod and Texas District today is over a conflict of presuppositions. Because we are not actually identifying, evaluating or speaking our assumptions, we do not always realize where these lines are drawn. I humbly suggest, as an hypothesis for discussion, that we are now engaged in a battle between the theology of the cross and the theology of glory.

In order to demonstrate this, I propose to set forth as concisely and simply as I can the paradigm of the theology of the cross as taught in Scripture, and especially as it is so eloquently explained and defined in the writings of Martin Luther. I will then attempt to evaluate, on the basis of this paradigm, the current direction and apparent presuppositions of the Texas District.

Let me preface my remarks by saying that people have written *books* on Luther's theology of the cross without exhausting the subject. I am obviously not even going to pierce the surface in this paper. Furthermore, I am not qualified to deal adequately with it. I am hardly more than a beginner myself, but I am an eager student. I will simply give you a taste of Scripture's and Luther's "cross thinking". If this whets your appetite I suggest you obtain an article by Robert Kelly in the January 1986 issue of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (CTQ) entitled: *The Suffering Church: A Study of Luther's Theologia Crucis*. This article, and especially its list of references, was helpful to me in the preparation of this paper.

I.

The cross of Jesus is prominent not only in the passion accounts of the four Gospels, but in all the teachings of Christ, especially those concerning the Christian life and walk in this world. Christian discipleship is described by Christ as a cross bearing life. I strongly suspect that Christ's call to bear the cross sounded as harsh and unappealing to the people of His day as it does to us. We know, for example, that the cross was highly offensive to Peter. After Peter's great confession of Christ as the "Son of the Living God," Jesus began teaching the disciples about His future sufferings and death on the cross. Peter, of course, would have none of *that* kind of defeatist, negative talk. He took Jesus aside and gave him a fatherly rebuke, for Jesus' plans did not at fit into his conception of the glorious Messianic Kingdom. Jesus' response to Peter's well-intended rebuke is remarkable. Matthew records the words:

23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

First, He indicated that Peter's desire to spare Jesus from the cross was Satanic. Imagine that! Peter's desire to see Jesus "succeed" and enter into glory rather than suffer and die was not prompted by God, but by the devil. Jesus' rebuke reminds us of the words He spoke directly to Satan in the wilderness when he was tempted with all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. Satan simply used Peter's mouth to tempt Jesus again. Secondly, Jesus revealed to Peter that his interest in delivering Jesus from suffering and death conflicted mightily with God's. It was God's will that Jesus drink this cup. At that point Jesus began to teach His disciples that their calling was not only to witness these sufferings but to **share** in them:

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. 25 "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.

Here, the paradox of the cross is set before us. The way to life is not by chasing after it, grasping it or clinging to it, but in fact, by denying it, losing it, and renouncing it altogether for Christ's sake. Those who seek to save and keep their own life will surely lose it. Only those who renounce their lives will keep them.

Consider Jesus' teaching on leadership and greatness. Who is great in God's Kingdom? Who is qualified to be a leader in God's kingdom? Not, as it is among the Gentiles, those who have power and exercise dominion, but the complete opposite - those who serve:

Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Once again we see how the cross event shapes the whole attitude regarding greatness and leadership.

Consider what Jesus says about spiritual insight and wisdom. John records the story of the healing of the man born blind. His testimony before the Council was absolutely rejected even though the facts of the miracle were clearly established. What was Jesus' judgment?

39 And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind."

In God's Kingdom it is the blind who see, and those who can see are blind. Jesus expressed this same paradox when He thanked God for hiding the truth from the wise and prudent and revealing it to babes.

Perhaps the most thorough expression of this "theology of the cross" is found in the beatitudes, which introduce the Sermon on the Mount. There Jesus pronounced His blessing upon those who are regarded as cursed in this world, the "poor in spirit," the "mourners", the "meek," the "hungry and thirsty," and those "persecuted and slandered" for righteousness' sake. In what has been called the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-26), Jesus went further by cursing those the world considers blessed, the rich, the well-fed, the happy, and the popular.

This "backwards" thinking of Jesus is clearly taken up and carried forward by St. Paul, who considered himself rich when he was poor, strong when he was weak, wise when he was foolish, and who gloried only in the cross of Jesus. St. Paul urges us in his writings to look at things not seen and to turn away from things seen, and to consider ourselves more than conquerors in our sufferings. Furthermore, he so much as says that when he was "righteous" he was a sinner, and when he lost his "righteousness" and became the chief of sinners he became righteous. He gained only when he lost. (Phil 3:8) Peter, likewise, considered it blessed to suffer for doing good and James calls us to "count it all joy" to suffer temptation.

These quotes and references from Scripture are representative of the whole theology of the Scriptures. The truth presented to us in the Bible is completely backwards from the natural way we see and judge things. What natural man considers great and wonderful, God condemns and despises. What God calls great and wonderful, man rejects and despises. In the Kingdom of God everything is upside-down. The rich are poor, the poor are rich, the wise are foolish and the foolish wise, the strong are weak and the weak strong, the righteous are sinners and the sinners are justified, the blessed are cursed, and the cursed are blessed.

But the mind has the capacity to filter out things that don't make sense, and to ignore things that do not fit preconceptions. We see this in Scripture. From the mount of transfiguration to

the gates of Jerusalem, Jesus drilled the teaching of the cross into the minds of His disciples. He told them again and again and again that He must go to Jerusalem, be rejected by the chief priests and elders, be spit upon, be crucified and on the third day He must rise again. And to what effect? The disciples responded to all these events as if they never heard a word He said. They were absolutely devastated when Jesus was crucified and they had not so much as a spark of hope for a resurrection on the third day. Only when they were prompted by the angel at the empty tomb did they "remember what the Lord had said." In all that time of instruction, they really had *not heard* what Jesus was saying. He may as well have spoken to them in a foreign language. His words simply did not fit into their presuppositions and what they could not make sense of just went in one ear and out the other. I believe that the same thing is happening today. People are reading the Bible with the presuppositions of this world, with the mindset Luther calls a "theology of glory", and all of this "nonsense" and "foolishness" is simply filtered out. Like the evolutionists today, people tend to keep what fits and ignore what doesn't. I don't believe that this a consciously wicked rejection of truth. It is a part of the "blindness that is in us" and darkness of our "foolish hearts" (Eph. 4:18). It never occurs to us that our natural instrumentation is mis-calibrated; namely, that we are 180 degrees wrong in our judgments.

II.

Luther was one person blessed by God's Holy Spirit who heard this word of the cross and took it seriously. Instead of trying to fit Scripture into his natural mindset, he submitted his own mind to Scripture. The result is a well developed theology of the cross which confounded Rome and sparked the Reformation. Luther spoke the same "crazy" language as Jesus and the Apostles! The theology of the cross was not some later development of Luther's thought. It appeared in his sermons even before he nailed the 95 theses to the door. In some lesser-known theses for debate written in 1518, the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther clearly set forth the theology of the cross against the theology of glory. In the Heidelberg Disputation he condemned those who derive their theology from things which are "visible". Such "theologians" become fools, he said. He then set forth, in Thesis 20, the character of a true theologian. He wrote:

He deserves to be called a theologian who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. (LW Vol 31:52)

"The visible things of God", he wrote "are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness." Luther clearly understood that as God "hid himself" in the humility of Christ, so He deals with us. He goes on:

Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. (LW, Vol 31:52-53)

Those who do not recognize that God hides himself under the humble form of the cross and suffering, and who seek God in visible glory and power, Luther called theologians of glory. All their judgments about God and His truth and presence are exactly wrong, he said. Thus, in Thesis 21 he wrote:

A Theologian of Glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is (LW Vol 31:53).

What did Luther mean by this? Did he mean that these theologians were exalting wickedness such as sexual immorality or stealing as virtuous and good? No. These theologians of glory

may, like the Pharisees, be externally decent and moral people from the perspective of civil righteousness. Luther explained his meaning:

He (i.e. the theologian of glory) prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls 'enemies of the cross of Christ' (Phil 3:18), for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works... Thus they call the good of the cross evil and the evil of a deed good. God can be found only in suffering and the cross, as has already been said. Therefore the friends of the cross say that the cross is good and works are evil, for through the cross works are destroyed and the old Adam, who is especially edified by works, is crucified. (LW Vol 31:53)

It is not surprising, therefore, that Luther had a very skeptical view of external success and prosperity of the church. Such success he saw as the church's greatest temptation to evil. He wrote:

Just as there is no greater iniquity than the highest equity, no greater justice than the highest justice, no greater loss than the highest gain, so there is no greater adversity than prosperity, no greater danger than no danger at all...nothing is safe where everything is safe, nothing so sick as when everything is healthy. (LW Vol 10:361)

Luther considered those who identified external success with God's favor to be deluded. Such an identification is an obstacle to faith, an obstacle which Jesus sought to remove in His Sermon on the Mount. In his commentary on the beatitudes Luther wrote:

The Jews were firmly persuaded that if a man was successful, this was a sign that he had a gracious God, and vice-versa.... At the outset therefore it was necessary for His sermon to overthrow this delusion and to tear it out of their hearts as one of the greatest obstacles to faith and a great support for the idol mammon in their heart. Such a doctrine could have no other consequence than to make people greedy, so that everyone would be interested only in amassing plenty and in have a good time, without need or trouble. And everyone would have to conclude: 'If that man is blessed who succeeds and has plenty, I must see to it that I do not fall behind.' (LW Vol 21:11)

One of the problems created by the external success of the church is that it tempts pastors and teachers to become cowards in their confessional duty. Luther again:

It is because of our unbelief that we do not see God's Word, the truth, and the right defeated and wrong triumph and yet remain silent, do not rebuke, speak out, or prevent it, but let things go as they will. Why? We are afraid that we, too, might be attacked and made poor and might then perish of hunger and be forever laid low. (LW Vol 21:347)

Luther believed that persecution **inevitably** followed the pure preaching and teaching of the Gospel. In his commentary on the book of Galatians he wrote:

...it is unavoidable that when the Gospel flourishes, the stumbling block of the cross will follow; otherwise it is a sure sign that the devil has not really been attacked but has only been gently caressed. If he is really attacked, he does not remain quiet but begins to raise a terrible disturbance and to create havoc everywhere.... Therefore, may the stumbling block of the cross never be taken away, which is what would happen if we were to preach what the ruler of this world and his members would like to hear, namely the righteousness of works; then we would have the devil friendly to us, the world on our side, and the pope and princes kindly disposed toward us. (LW Vol 27:45)

Since this is so, Luther listed persecution and cross as one of the signs of the Holy Christian Church.

... the holy Christian people are externally recognized by the holy possession of the sacred cross. They must endure every misfortune and persecution, all kinds of trials and evil from the devil, the world, and the flesh (as the Lord's Prayer indicates) by inward sadness, timidity, fear, outward poverty, contempt, illness, and weakness, in order to become like their head, Christ. (LW Vol 41:164)

In this context it was understood by Luther that lack of persecution, that is, external prosperity and success, is a sign that the Word has been forsaken and silenced. He claimed to have learned this from St. Paul.

Paul regards it as a sign that what is being preached is not the Gospel if the preaching goes on without its peace being disturbed. On the other hand, the world regards it as a sure sign that the Gospel is a heretical and seditious doctrine when it sees that the preaching of the Gospel is followed by great upheavals, disturbances, offenses, sects, etc. Thus God wears the mask of the devil, and the devil wears the mask of God. God wants to be recognized under the mask of the devil, and He wants the devil to be condemned under the mask of God." (LW Vol 27:43)

Luther well understood that things aren't what they seem to be. As humility and the cross hid the glory of Jesus, so it hides the glory of God's true church in this world.

III.

Having set forth in a cursory way the Biblical and Lutheran theology of the cross, let us consider some current trends and practices in the Missouri Synod, specifically those in the Texas District, since this is the District with which we are most familiar. I suspect that some of the problems identified in this paper are prevalent in many other Districts of Synod also.

I will identify some general tendencies and presuppositions which seem to be obvious. I assume that few on either side of the argument today will deny that these are, indeed, the tendencies. I may be wrong on that assumption. Some may strongly object to my observations of what is actually happening among us. If so, I would welcome that debate. Certainly we ought to be in basic agreement with what the tendencies *are* before we debate them. With that preface, let me begin with:

TREND #1: Identifying the blessing of God with outward, temporal, measurable signs of institutional success.

Literature sent out by the Texas District, as well as speeches and reports given by District officials, clearly assumes that institutional success and prosperity (i.e., impressive statistical growth) represents success of the Kingdom of God. One of many examples of this is found in the recent Facilitator Letter which gives a "top ten" list of congregations measured by adult confirmations. When one realizes how widely the standards for adult confirmation differ from congregation to congregation, these figures are practically meaningless. For example, one congregation may require very little catechesis (a Saturday seminar), while another requires as many as sixteen one and one-half hour sessions of study. One congregation may be satisfied with a very shallow and generic confession of faith, while another requires the new member to

confess that the teachings of the Lutheran Church are true and correct and to commit to remain steadfast in this confession until death. One congregation may simply evade touchy issues such as Biblical inerrancy, six-day creation, women's ordination, and abortion, while another clearly sets forth the congregation's Biblical stance on such controversial matters. Is the first congregation more "successful" in God's sight simply because it brings in more members than the second? Is the first one successful at all? Is the second one a failure because many inquirers are offended by its "hard sayings?" I am not at all suggesting that the congregations listed in the Facilitator Letter are unfaithful. They may all be very faithful, but one cannot discern that by these statistics alone. The statistics mean little or nothing. District officials, however, seem to assume they mean a great deal because outward, measurable success is everything.

The tremendous importance the District places upon outward, measurable "success" is revealed in the Strategic Plan adopted by the Texas District. The plan predictably ties monetary decisions to statistical growth. District proposes to:

Incorporate outcomes and results into the evaluation process used to assess missions and ministry and funding decisions within the district. (Strategy 4.6)

This strongly implies that District money (mission money) is going to flow to those ministries which show impressive statistical growth. This is a formula for sapping the church of its spiritual vitality and robbing it of its integrity, though I am certain that the authors do not intend that effect. Subsidizing superficial results does not foster the goal of bringing the church up to a "mature man," to the "fullness of the stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). It promotes more superficiality!

Some conservatives have reminded officials that God expects pastors and congregations to be faithful, not "successful". The response to this argument usually involves some kind of appeal to *effectiveness*. The conservative is reminded that God expects pastors and churches to administer the Gospel **effectively**. Behind this adverb lies the unstated but crystal-clear assumption that effectiveness is measured by some form of outward prosperity. But why should we assume that this is so? Would it not be reasonable to assume the opposite? When the Gospel is *effectively* preached it divides as well as gathers (Matt 10:34). It is a "fragrance of death" just as it is a "fragrance of life" (2 Cor 2:16). Effective preaching does not remove the offense of the cross, but intensifies it! That is why some of the most effective preachers of the Word through history were not "successful" in their day. They were hated and driven into the wilderness (Noah, Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, Luther). Jesus clearly taught the Apostles to expect and rejoice in the world's rejection and scorn rather than to expect a warm welcome (Matt 10:22). This is not because He did not expect them to be effective, but precisely because He knew that they would be! The sign of true effectiveness is the cross - not worldly glory. That is why Luther included persecution and cross as one sign of the presence of the true church, and expressed doubt upon the ministry which enjoys abundant success in the world.

Does this mean that outward, institutional success is a necessary sign of unfaithfulness? No, not any more than wealth is a sign of unbelief or unfaithfulness in a Christian's life. The Christian who is outwardly wealthy is, nevertheless, "poor in spirit." He does not depend upon his wealth or consider it a sign of God's favor. Indeed, in his heart he renounces ownership to his wealth and "possesses as if he had it not" (1 Cor 7:30-31). So it is with the faithful pastor or congregation enjoying outward prosperity and success. No theologian of the cross expects outward success to be a necessary fruit of his faithful labors in the Word. He knows very well that the outward results may well have been just the opposite. He knows that the Spirit works faith "when and where He wills in those who hear the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession, Article V).

The humble theologian of the cross knows how foolish it is to compare one ministry of the Word with another, as if the results depended upon the preachers (2 Cor 10:12), and he recoils at the thought of being regarded as faithful simply because he has impressive stats. In fact, outward success may cause a faithful pastor to do a soul searching evaluation of his ministry! He may well ask himself such questions as: Am I watering down or compromising the Word in order to be liked? Am I calling all people to repentance or am I preaching a cheap grace? Am I dealing with the specific sins of my people or am I dealing with the world's sin or only with sin in general? Am I preaching the whole counsel of God's Word or am I evading difficult doctrines which may cause me problems? Am I holding high the *cross* of Jesus Christ? Am I "caressing the devil"? Outward success is unusual for those who preach the cross of Christ.

TREND #2: *Defining the pastor as a manager of an institution rather than a steward of the mysteries of God.*

Redefinition of the pastoral office and work is a major component of the Texas District Strategic Plan. Concept #3 is entitled *Church Professionals as Equippers-Leaders*. The goal of this concept is stated in these words:

Church professionals understand, demonstrate skills and equip the congregation's members, individually and collectively, for the work of mission and ministry and provide effective leadership in guiding their efforts.

What is described here is a corporate manager who is responsible to recruit, equip, motivate, organize and lead his assigned employees to accomplish corporate goals. That this "corporation" is a religious volunteer organization is merely accidental and does not change the essence of the "professional's" job description. The implementation steps of the Plan are ominous. They include a District "continuing education" process with "incentives" to reorient church professionals toward this new definition of ministry (Steps 3.1, 3.2). Congregational vacancies will be used to reorient congregations to seek these institutional managers (Step 3.3, 3.4). Prospective pastors will be recruited or filtered out by their managerial skills (Step 3.5). New pastors in the Texas District will, through a revised orientation process, be "helped" to understand the District's values and to develop such skills (Step 3.6), and additional worker grants (from mission offerings) will target the recruitment and placement of these skilled institutional managers into existing congregations which are sympathetic to the District's values (Step 3.7). A whole paper could be written to evaluate the Strategic Plan - Concept # 3 by the benchmark of Article V of the Augsburg Confession, but that is beyond my scope here. My purpose is merely to show that the attempt to change the focus of the divinely instituted pastoral office from managing the "mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1-2) to the management of the external institution manifests and flows from a theology of glory - not a theology of the cross. Furthermore, it will inevitably destroy the true pastoral office which is intimately and inseparably united with the cross (1 Cor 2:2).

Am I overstating the danger of this new definition of pastoral ministry? Let's think it through on the basis of the paradigm of the cross. Institutional managers are employed to produce institutional success and are rewarded accordingly. Their every decision and action is made with a keen understanding of the importance of "the bottom line." They are measured by such criteria as how happy and motivated their employees are, how efficient their department is, and, of course, how much profit they have produced for the company. It should be obvious that when a faithful steward of the mysteries is placed in this kind of environment and tested by such criteria, he is *bound to fail*. Why? Because no faithful pastor has managerial skills? Absolutely

not, but rather because managing the mysteries of God is a very different and contrary thing to managing an external institution. A faithful pastor is ultimately concerned that the Word is rightly divided, uncompromisingly confessed and applied to every soul without respect to persons or to the effect that the Word so applied may have on the institution. The faithful steward of the mysteries of God may have to make decisions and do things that harm the stability and welfare of the external institution. John Stephenson speaks of the trials of a faithful pastor even in the Missouri Synod in an article on the Lord's Supper printed in the Concordia Theological Quarterly:

Let no one underestimate the pressures to which many parish pastors are subject. Applied to the church, American democratic theory is apt to reduce the office of the holy ministry to a servant of the voters' assembly. The pastor is expected to administer the holy sacrament in accordance with his congregation's wishes. And pressure comes not only in the shape of lay usurpation of the office of the keys. As the end of the church year looms in sight, statistics must be collated. Officialdom smiles on growth, but frowns on stagnation. A pastor is tempted to cut corners and stimulate growth by admitting Reformed prospects instantly to the Sacrament of the Altar. The polite request that potential converts first receive instruction in the Six Parts and then come to the altar is apt to be taken amiss; there is an unmistakable tension between sticking to principle and achieving the maximum growth. (CTQ 53:1-2, page 41)

A faithful pastor may disturb the external peace of his congregation and be considered a failure by the administration simply by remaining loyal to his call. Luther was chided by Erasmus on such grounds. Erasmus condemned Lutheran for disturbing the peace of the church with His doctrine. Luther replied:

I hold that a solemn and vital truth, of eternal consequence, is at stake in the discussion; one so crucial and fundamental that it ought to be maintained and defended even at the cost of life, though as a result the whole world should be, not just thrown into turmoil and uproar, but shattered in chaos and reduced to nothingness.

These are the words and convictions of a faithful steward of the mysteries of God. They are an absurdity to those whose task it is to promote and preserve the external stability and success of the institution. A theology of glory will produce an entirely different kind of ministry than a theology of the cross. Pastors will be replaced by institutional "professionals".

TREND #3: *Appealing to the unbeliever through fleshly desires rather than through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the Name of Christ.*

The church today is being "marketed" to the world, and the Texas District has thoroughly embraced this concept of "evangelism." Marketing seems to be primarily concerned with public image and perception which may have little or nothing to do with substance. Marketing is concerned, not so much with *accurate* or clear communication, but with *winsome* and *persuasive* communication. Thus "negatives" (even if they are true) are avoided like the plague, and "positives" are embroidered and enhanced beyond recognition. **Image** is everything. Winning the world to Christ through marketing means packaging Christianity in socially acceptable and appealing forms. This process involves targeting and understanding the audience, learning what they "need" (i.e. what they "want"), and providing it. This inevitably means appealing to fleshly desires and appetites, because the unbeliever has no other kind. Theoretically, of course, the church would never appeal to the baser appetites such as greed or sexual lust, but only to the more noble appetites such as the desire for self-esteem, the desire for group acceptance, and the desire for emotional stimulation - often identified directly with

"spirituality". In this context, the purpose of the worship service is to create a "positive experience" for the worshipper. In many cases this includes entertainment, because people like to have fun. The sermon is focused on "relevant" topics that meet the felt needs of the hearer and enable him to "feel good". Visible trappings of glory and success are important because people like to be involved in successful organizations. Success breeds success. Congregational emphasis is placed upon "friendliness" because people are looking for a place to belong, a place where everyone knows your name. For this reason the Lord's Supper is "generously" offered to most guests who wish to partake. Controversial doctrines are often evaded or compromised so that the church can be more inclusive of all opinions. This whole attitude was evident in our recent Texas District Convention when a proposed resolution criticized the "Christianity is Fun" notions of the Christian life in an appeal to prepare our youth to bear the cross. I understand that the response was strong and surprising. No one objected to the language of the resolution on the grounds that it misrepresents what is presently being instilled in our youth. Quite the contrary! Many rose to the *defense* of the notion that "Christianity is Fun," and implied by their arguments that this is exactly the way the Christian life should be presented to our youth. Though the resolution was finally rescued by excising this unpopular criticism, the unfortunate debate is symptomatic of the fact that a theology of glory permeates our fellowship.

Self-styled Christian "entrepreneurs" usually defend their unconventional methods by arguing that we must communicate with people today in language that they can understand, and that marketing proves itself by producing results. It "works". Let us consider, for a moment, this communication argument. It certainly cannot be denied that we must communicate the message of the Gospel in the language that people understand. That is one reason why even most ardent conservatives use some other Bible version than King James to read on Sunday mornings. It is why we do not object to, but in fact strongly support, the publishing of literature that re-tells Bible stories on a child's level. It is why we fully support the translation of the Bible and the Book of Concord into English, Russian, Chinese, and every other language in the world. We do however, balk at the practice of changing the message under the pretense of translating the Word into another culture or language. For example, consider this translation of Article X of the Augsburg Confession: "It is taught among us that the *symbolical* body and blood of Christ are *represented* in the Supper of our Lord under the form of bread and wine." I assume that our rejection of such a translation would be vehement because it obviously substantially changes the meaning. In fact it actually **denies** the original confession of the real presence. Suppose the translator now scorned and ridiculed us for our rejection of his translation, arguing that we are stuck in the rut of Latin and German and are opposed to translating into English because we do not consider English to be an "orthodox" language. The whole argument would all be rubbish, of course, but those who do not know what Lutherans actually confess might be confused by it. Some may even be alienated against us for our supposed resistance to progress. The same thing is now happening on a wider level by those who avidly market Christianity. It should be self-evident that Christ's call to self-denial and cross-bearing is **not** translated accurately by the modern notion that "Christianity is fun". The intentional projection of success, worldly glory, and pride are **not** the modern equivalent of the humble stable in Bethlehem or the cross of Calvary. The modern appeal, however subtle, to the fleshly appetites of man is **not** a true reflection of Christ's call to "mortify the flesh with its affections and lusts." The modern attempt to design worship to stimulate good feelings in the worshipper is **not** equivalent to the traditional Lutheran focus on maintaining the centrality of Word and Sacrament. The theology of glory is **not** the modern equivalent of the Biblical theology of the cross. They have always been, are now, and always will be, opposites. One destroys the church under the pretense of building it up. The other builds the church under the appearance of destroying and dividing it.

How shall we answer the pragmatic argument that applied theology of glory "works"? We should agree that it does, at least externally. It always has in history! Jesus had no trouble gathering adherents by distributing "bread that perishes" (John 6:27). He could have been crowned king and obtained a glorious man-made throne if He had wanted it. He had to run away from the people to avoid this scenario, and He firmly rebuked the crowds for desiring such a Messiah. Of course the theology of glory "works"! Luther observed the same thing in his day. He noted that the masses go groping after impressive signs and wonders the false teachers offer:

The source of this is the shameful curiosity and boredom of our flesh and blood, as well as the devil himself, so that signs and wonders, especially the false ones, always get more of a following than the genuine ones. (LW 21:280)

In the paradigm of the cross, the church recognizes that only God can gather believers, and that He does so only through the word of Christ-crucified which is, and ever shall be, foolishness to the world. The theologian of the cross knows that if the Gospel is clothed in words of human wisdom the cross of Christ will be "emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17). The true evangelist knows that though the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, it is the power of God to those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18), and that it is God's wisdom to save sinners precisely through His foolishness (1 Cor 1:21). God is not served and the church is not really built when we try to make the Gospel palatable or appealing to natural man. We know from Scripture that natural man cannot accept or understand the things of the Spirit, but that these things are foolishness to him (1 Cor 2:14). Only those whose eyes the Spirit opens can see and believe the Gospel, as Jesus testifies to the unbelievers who rejected Him: "No one can come to me accept the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). The theologian of the cross humbly accepts the truth that the Spirit works faith where and when he wills through the Gospel. True saving faith is divinely wrought, a miracle that lies completely beyond our control. We can plant and water but only God can give the increase (1 Cor 3:6).

Furthermore, the theologian of the cross knows that the wise, prudent, proud and noble of the world cannot see or believe the Gospel because they are "full" and must be sent away empty. There is, therefore, an "alien work" that must precede and prepare for the preaching of the Gospel. The world must be called to repentance. This is exactly the opposite of any attempt to appeal to and lure the unbeliever through the desires of the flesh. The call to repentance condemns the flesh, even in its most glorious forms. This call is never welcomed or embraced by the flesh. It is, and always will be, hated and despised, ridiculed and scorned by the world. Building the church through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness is entirely the opposite to all attempts to win the world through appeals to the flesh. The methods of the theology of the cross and the theology of glory are as contradictory as heaven and hell.

Concluding Thoughts

If it is true, as Luther says, that God wants to be recognized under the "mask of the devil," why do we so deplore and hate that "mask" and avoid wearing it? The false assumptions of a theology of glory seem to be manifesting themselves everywhere in our District, and probably throughout our Synod. We conservatives have not been as successful escaping such a theology as we think. True, we have the infirmities and weaknesses that mark the Gospel proclamation. But it must be acknowledged that some of these sufferings have resulted from the offensiveness of the person, rather than the offense of the Gospel. Christ does not sanctify

all suffering. Some of it is well deserved. Only innocent suffering for Christ's sake is commended. Some pastors seem to be engaged in competition to see who can anger the most people by arrogant, thoughtless, tactless or foolish behavior. Such competition is just a very confused theology of glory. Yet there are many who do suffer innocently. Our confession of the truth often causes us to suffer the loss of prestige, honor, peace, and the praise of men. Faithful pastoral practice has caused some pastors to be scorned and even driven out of their congregations. Many have become a "spectacle," even in the church. Confessional pastors are often considered to be divisive and unloving, virtual "troublers of Israel". They tend get "stuck" in small, "insignificant" congregations (the world's estimation) and are denied access to the "prestigious" pulpits and positions. Usually, outspoken confessional pastors have little or no chance of being elected to a District office. We complain about these experiences as if we *expect* the Gospel to be welcomed warmly. Sometimes we even try to accomplish reforms on a political level by seeking to elect silent confessionals, as if there could be such an animal. Such efforts usually fail miserably. All these sufferings are mere superficial scratches. Why do we complain about them when Christ calls us to share not only His scratches, but His **wounds** in our body, and to rejoice when we do? One who bitterly, and grudgingly concedes to wear the humble rags God has placed on him is not yet worthy to be called a theologian of the cross.

Do we really want God to dress us in glory here below? How, then, will the elect find us and recognize us as true servants of the Word? For God points His elect to the sign of humility. "This shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." If the stinking stable is where God places His Son and where He guides the elect through the Word, let us also be found there, not begrudging what we have lost, but rejoicing in what we have been given by Grace. *Therefore, may the stumbling block of the cross never be taken away!*