

### What does the Theology of the Cross mean for Christian teachers?

Luther said that Christian teaching can be understood as following two paths. The one path he called the **Theology of Glory**. The other the **Theology of the Cross**. The difference is important—especially for teachers. **The Theology of Glory** is attractive and many walk its inviting path. But ultimately the path leads to disappointment and despair. **The Theology of the Cross** is more hidden. But it is the only way that leads to real discipleship.

#### *The Theology of Glory*

The **Theology of Glory** comes at us from everywhere. The teachers of the **Theology of Glory** tell us:

- God invites us to one visit to the cross where we “accept Jesus as our personal Savior” and enter into a special relationship to him.
- God wants the best for us. God has established principles or rules that will lead to a successful, prosperous, happy life, if we follow them.
- God is knowable in the world around us—not only in nature but in God’s activities in every aspect of life. “Reach out and touch God,” they would say.
- God wants the world to obey and Christians can join a great movement to make the kingdom of God a reality by leading the world, the nation, the community back to God.
- Christians acting together can lead people to better lives, lead them away from sinning and establish morally correct and righteous neighborhoods, cities and nations.
- God wants successful churches that are filled with celebrating, growing, active people.

The message of the preachers of the **Theology of Glory** is appealing. Everyone wants to be part of something as worthwhile as establishing the kingdom

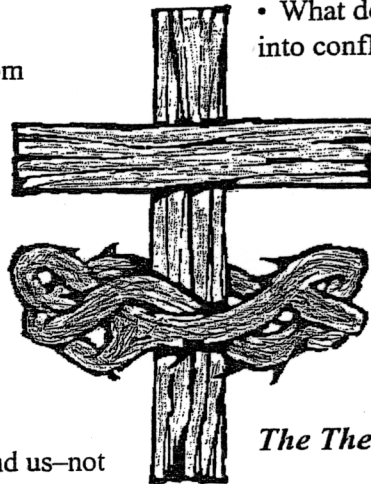
of God on earth and as fulfilling as leading the successful life. And there is an element of truth in what they speak. God is indeed revealed, at least partially, in the world around us; God does promise that “all things work together for good” for us; making communities more moral is a good thing. The problem is, says Luther, that the **Theology of Glory** is false and leads to frustration and failure.

- How well can I know God from the world around me? And what if I can’t find God there?
- How closely do I have to follow the rules to succeed? And what if I fail?
- What happens when sin continues in spite of our best efforts?

• What does it mean when congregations drift into conflict and failure instead of success and prosperity?

- What does it mean when I cannot be the success that I think God wants me to be?

What do I do then? Try harder? Try to believe more? Try to follow the rules better? And when I hit the wall, come to the end of my rope, fall one last time—what then?



#### *The Theology of the Cross*

The **Theology of the Cross** reminds us that God meets us exactly where we fall, fail and come to the end of our rope. We know God best when we encounter God in Christ as the one who fell, failed and came to the end of his rope on the cross. There God revealed both how desperate our sinful condition is and how impossibly great God’s love for us is. “...in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

We know God intimately—not in nature but in the cross of Christ. **The Theology of the Cross** is not a teaching. It is a way of seeing God, ourselves and the world. To know the God who loves us enough to be sin for us, is to see Christ on the cross as the heart of God and the resurrection as the ultimate promise of God.

The **Theology of the Cross** calls us—not to follow the rules so that we can be successful—but to follow Jesus. We are his disciples when we live the way of the cross. We follow the path that he walked in this world—the path of servanthood (“whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant”—Matthew 20:20), the path of love (“by this will all will know you are my disciples, if you love. . .”—John 13:35), the path of sacrifice (“take up the cross and follow me”—Matthew 16:24), the path of justice, healing and suffering (“if we suffer with him”—Romans 8:17). Only in following Jesus do we find true discipleship. Only there do we find fulfillment and the “abundant life” (John 10:10).

**The Theology of the Cross is not a teaching. It is a way of seeing God, ourselves and the world.**

We begin the path at baptism when we become God’s children. We continue the path as we depend on God’s constant grace and return to the cross daily to put to death the sins that continue to plague us

and celebrate again the forgiveness that God has won for us on the cross. We walk in our baptismal promise as we lift up our eyes in hope, our hands in service, our hearts in obedience to God’s will, our voices in praise for what God has done for us in Christ.

We teach the **Theology of the Cross** when we invite ourselves and our students into the way of life that is a kind of dying and a way of dying that is a new kind of living.

### For Reflection or Discussion

1. Read Romans 6:8-11 and think through or talk with someone else about what those verses mean for your faith and faith life.
2. In your teaching, how do you invite yourself and your students into a way of servant living?
3. What does it mean to you to live in your baptismal promise?
4. How can you walk with your students on the way of the cross as you learn together?

### Teachers of the Theology of the Cross:

- Invite learners to a daily dying and rising at the cross of Christ.
- Encourage all to know God by knowing Jesus Christ.
- Offer a way of life that leads to the God’s abundance and not necessarily “success.”
- Urge people to follow the one who lived the perfect life rather than trying harder to live “better” lives.
- Invite learners to return daily to the water of baptism where, by repentance and renewal they are declared “good” by God.
- Seek to comfort sinners with the Good News rather than to teach people how to live righteously.
- Call on learners to depend on the grace of God rather than modeling themselves after biblical heroes.
- Are honest about the seriousness of sin and God’s justice in condemning sin—so that we can offer the Good News of the cross of Christ and the promise of the resurrection.

### A Cross Story

During our moving, our granddaughter picked up a crucifix that we had taken from the wall. It was a stylized representation of Jesus, made of copper, rather artistic. “Look Grandpa,” she said. “It’s Jesus on the cross, but they forgot the nails.” Sometimes the story of Jesus on the cross is easier to take without the nails. But the story of God’s love for us that is revealed on the cross needs the nails so that we can understand the greatness of gift we have received.

### Resources to Continue the Study

Forde, Gerhard. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*. Grand Rapids: Erdmans. 1997.

McGrath, Alister. *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 1990.

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Produced by the Christian Education Team of Division for Congregational Ministries -- 800-638-3522, Ext. 2594

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