

## Looking at Resources Through a Lutheran Lens

A presentation by the Rev. Theodore W. Schroeder  
to "Lutheran Day" at the Ecumenical Resource  
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### Session 3

#### The Theology of the Cross

Okay – What do you think of this? I pulled this right off the Internet (APPENDIX G). This one, interestingly, is titled "Your Right to Answered Prayer." You don't have to beg God to hear and answer your prayers. You have a right to stand in his presence and get all the answers you need. God for sale at \$5.95? You have a divine inheritance of good health, wealth and total prosperity. Says so right here.

Q: You know what I find is most scary about this, is we find ELCA churches that make this stuff available. They find it in the Old Testament and claim its biblical – completely out of context.

Part of the work I did last year for stewardship was on accountability. But it was marked invention that God's covenant in the Old Testament promised blessings that began to be understood as a contract. And what the contract implied was, "If I do this, God will do that." That's a contract, and in my understanding that's a misunderstanding of the covenant, which is gift-based, to which I respond in obedience. So, if you take those sections out of Scripture, where that promise has started to move to a contractual thing – "Blessed is the man who ..." and so on; it's in the Psalms and other places – you can make the Scriptures say this.

Q: And Jesus always said something against this.

Yes. Well, Jesus just turns this whole thing on its head, totally upside-down, and that's another thing.

Q: Apart from a concern that God will give you good things if you believe and that kind of stuff, I think also from a Lutheran standpoint, this is total violation of our belief in the calling of someone. This is trying to tell everybody "Your calling is to be an entrepreneur." Everybody's calling is to be an entrepreneur. So, you know, what if your calling is something else?

Q: My favorite one here is you can have an impact on the world in the short span of three years, and my question is, "How does it end?"

That's exactly the issue. We are ready to follow Jesus to full power and success, as they define success, but not to the cross. And, you know, what do you expect if you follow Jesus? Well, one of the things you can expect is to get crucified.

Q: This is a wonderful, fantastic, extreme example, with all kinds of radio and TV ads you

can pull off and show. I mean, you can't write this stuff. I would never have gone this far to create a talk about gifts about – you are talking confirmation. This is fantastic stuff!

Q: Touch the screen right now and send in \$9.95 for bread and wine.

Yes. Oh – you saw my program?

Q: You don't have to see it, you can just give it to him.

Yes. People will know because it's so over-the-top. Now, that one lesson – the lesson on Samson – I wrote that myself, but this is even better.

Q: People's neighbors are talking like this. And so, they want to know, what do I say? Am I a bad person because I don't know how to proof-text like this, or I don't know what to say to them.

Q: Well, I'm a very good Christian because I don't believe that.

The way that we ordinarily talk about this – the difference between this and what we would consider to be true discipleship – comes from Luther; it's the theology of glory and the theology of grace. Now, this piece that you're reading there is an extreme example of what's called the theology of glory, and basically what the theology of glory says is that God has all this stuff for you, and all you have to do is receive it and take it, and God wants you to be healthy and God wants you to be wealthy, and so on.

Now, this is a little piece (APPENDIX F) that I wrote a couple years ago to try and discern, especially for educators, what the difference between the theology of glory and the theology of grace is. I just want to point out a couple of things on here, and you're perfectly welcome to copy this if you ever want to. If you haven't read the Heidelberg Debates and those things, they are really interesting and insightful, and there are a couple of other resources listed here you might want to read, but it becomes more and more important for us to understand this discernment, because this isn't just happening in the religious community, it's happening in the culture. Part of the culture says, "If you are good enough and work hard enough, you will be rewarded." And who does the rewarding? Well, somebody out there.

So it's going back to that – again, it's the same kind of situation Luther was dealing with, where the understanding was that if you lived the right way you got the rewards. And if you couldn't live the right way, you made a payment. So it's the same thing. And that's what Luther was contending with. Those are the kinds of things that the theology of glory (at least, as I was trying to understand it) says: God invites us to one visit to the cross, and not a very bright one, where we accept Jesus as our personal savior and enter into this personal relationship. Now, you don't hear much real cross talk in this, because that's too "disgusting."

The second one, "God wants the best for us." God has established principles or rules that will lead to successful, prosperous, happy lives if we follow them. Now, that's a basic understanding, and, again, it's based on this reward business. If you do the right thing you will be rewarded. Now, you can hear a lot of preachers who go on at great length about the things

you need to do to succeed, and those are based on scriptural principles, according to them.

The third one, "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. And this is what we were hearing, remember, in the video? God is there, kind of surrounding everything that happens. Luther says -- and his important contribution and the part we forget, is -- Luther says "God is hidden." You can discern evidences of God there, but God is really hidden, and God manifests God's self first of all in Jesus Christ and the cross. And that's what Jesus says: "If you would know the Father, know me." God reveals God in Jesus Christ and in his people. Not in nature, not in trees and sunshine.

The next one, "God wants the world to obey, and Christians can join a movement to make the Kingdom of God a reality by leading the world, the nation and the community back to God." Now, you hear that all the time, and that was really strong in the political thing that you heard this year – that somehow we're going to moralize the world. I have an interesting piece that I refer to sometimes, titled "The Brink of Heresy." And the brink of heresy is understanding the mission of the church as moralizing the world. We are not in the business of making sinners better sinners. We are in the business of calling people to repentance in Jesus Christ.

Q: So, Ted, help us to know how it is that we invite people to come and die; help us to know how we deal with the huge congregations in our synod that are popular places because they're very successful, and the places that are little and struggling, and trying to talk about issues of justice and getting us off our duffs out into the streets to really make a difference. People don't want to hear that, and so always we ought to be this holy remnant, and it's not the American way.

But I think, first of all, we need to be faithful remnants, and the concept of the remnant certainly isn't new. I mean, the prophets were outcasts, because they were a remnant of those who were holding on to the faith in a culture that had abandoned it. They were the crazy people – the nutty people. John the Baptist was considered insane because he was calling people back to repentance. The concept of a remnant certainly isn't new. You could say one of the worst things that ever happened to Christianity was Constantine, because as soon as it became state religion, which it is now in some fashion – at least kind of a religiosity – it completely loses that character of being a remnant. And what we're living now – and a lot of people talk about post-Constantinian or post-Christian, or whatever it is – whatever it is, I think our call is to be a faithful remnant.

Now, part of our discerning is to understand what does that mean, because if we're the remnant who hide in a hut somewhere and nobody can find us and nobody cares about us, that isn't good either. See, we're supposed to be a catalyst in the world, agents in the world, taking a prophetic stance, speaking a prophetic voice, calling people back to repentance like John the Baptist did. We are to be turning the world on its head the way Jesus did. Everything he took, he turned upside down. You know – the whole culture, the way people understood themselves and other things. So, that's what it means to be a remnant, and it's not an easy task.

Q: The reason the early church grew 40 percent a decade was because of this counter-cultural aspect, of their care for women who were outcasts, and for children who were outcasts. The Romans didn't have anything to do with that, and it was this living

faithfully and making a difference in people that was the reason it grew. And one has to be careful that you don't retreat, as you said, to a hermit outcome – without mentioning any specific branch of Lutheranism – taking the attitude that we are justified because of right doctrine, whether congregations are disintegrating or falling apart or not, because we are faithful to right doctrine.

Q See, that's a fatal flaw, that you become righteously isolated and irrelevant – that we become fortresses from community rather than well-springs called to serve community.

Let me read this, because I think this says what I wanted to say:

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 – down a little farther – 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 – which the theology of glory tends to dampen – and how impossibly great God's love for us. That's the theology of the cross.

Now, the theology of the cross is not preaching the cross all the time, but the understanding that God reveals God's self most completely in the cross, and our understanding of who we are and what we're about is based on that revelation.

Up on top, that little box ("Teachers of the Theology of the Cross") I think that, for me, says what we do differently from "Creflo Dollar":

- We "invite learners into a daily dying and rising at the cross of Christ," which is what I was trying to draw on the board – the dying and rising thing, the baptismal thing.
- We "encourage all to know God by knowing Jesus Christ."
- We "offer a way of life that leads to God's abundance, and not necessarily 'success.'"

- We "urge people to follow the one who lived the perfect life rather than trying harder to live 'better' lives."
- We "invite learners to return daily to the water of baptism where, by repentance and renewal they are declared 'good' by God."
- We "seek to comfort sinners with the Good News rather than to teach people how to live righteously."
- We "call on learners to depend on the grace of God rather than modeling themselves after biblical heroes."
- We "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."

And that's the theology of the cross. We are calling people to suffering (sometimes) servanthood. And what we put on the front of our churches on the sign is, "Don't come here unless you're serious." I think calling people to a servant discipleship that may end in suffering is what some people – young people especially – want to hear! They want to hear something worthwhile. They don't want to know how to make more junk. They don't want to know how to get a bigger bank account. They want to know how to make a difference. They want to know how to change the world. You're not going to change the world by being a better entrepreneur.

Q: But that doesn't need to be joyless.

No! I don't think so. The disciples were not joyless.

Q: I was just talking with someone, and I said the best book I've read this year is "The Practice of Passion in Youth Ministry" by a Methodist at Princeton. Exactly what you just said: young people are looking, and what we fail to do is to take them deep into the passion of Jesus – a God who gives it all and wants it all. If this Jesus isn't worth dying for, then this Jesus isn't worth living for. That's where young people are today, and what we presented in the 20th century is Jesus as our good buddy.

The message there is heresy. It's not as bad as false doctrine, but it's not helpful. Heresy was "What would Jesus do?" If you finish that question, this is 20th century youth ministry at its best. "What would Jesus do if he were here?" We presented a God who is not here; that's heresy. The question is, what will we do because Jesus is here and we are the Body of Christ?" Yes. He's within us; he's right within us. And that's the sense of the presence of God that we seem to have lost. Somehow, we're working really hard to please God, who's up there somewhere keeping score.

Where's that coming from? Yes. From a distance. From the sense that God is – the reason I like the clerical collar, and I wear it usually when I make proclamations, is because of that (white tab) right there. That's the only thing that's pure here, that comes from my mouth, and it comes because the Spirit inhabits me – because I speak the Word – because it comes from Christ indwelling me. And it purifies my broken, stumbling, faltering speech into God's Word. And that helps me a lot.

You know, when I think, if I start to think about whether I'm doing all right, if I think about what I am doing, it works; it happens. That's part of being a remnant, I think, is that understanding

that here I embody in Christ – that the incarnation didn't stop; it's here – Christ in us, Christ with us. That's biblical, it's scriptural and everything else, and it seems to be we have such good things to say to families and to communities.

The thing that almost broke my heart was when I was on sabbatical; I went and visited congregations. The thing that really troubled me the most was that many of these smaller congregations, where I talked with the pastor and the leadership, were apologetic. "We're just a small congregation; we used to be bigger, but now we're just a few people left, and we're just doing the best we can, and we're not like that church down the street that has a new parking lot. We're just a little church ..." Where did that come from? What's wrong with being the faithful?

Q: It's the whole American way of life. It's to the contrary to all that we hold up as valued. And even, I think, we fall into that with "We'd better become multicultural or we'll die, or we'd better do this and build a lot of churches. That's that syndrome again; we just fall into that.

I think that we've done a job on ourselves when we set the goal as growth. What we should do is set the goal as faithfulness, and being a witness; not faithfulness for ourselves – not Missouri Synod style where "we've got it right and if you want to join us you can come over here, but if you don't we don't care" kind of attitude. But being at mission in the world – being the catalyst and agent in the community that's changing things, not in order to add people to the list. But, if we do it right, if we are "successful," I think we can call people to a kind of discipleship that really has meaning. I live a couple miles from Willow Creek, and there are 10,000 people every Sunday that go there. That's a big business, and it's a big operation. And I'm not saying everything there is bad. They have a Wednesday night service for "the faithful" that's pretty good; it's Christ-centered and it talks a lot about servant discipleship, and there's some good stuff going on there. But a lot of it is this kind of pan-American religion, interestingly.

Q: Part of what goes on, I think, in a lot of the theology of glory believing as well, is the concept of claiming God's gifts for you, that then if what you claim doesn't come to be, the question is what went wrong. Recently my ex-husband passed away from cancer, and we have a 21-year-old son. He was in the hospital after having major surgery and he, having grown up Presbyterian, has become a member of a more fundamentalist congregation, with this whole theology of glory. So, here's the man – we know he's dying, he's terminally ill – and his pastor comes into the hospital room and the prayer is not "Lord, deliver him from his pain and be with him as he passes through this world." It's "We need you to be well. We need to claim your healing." And so, the whole emphasis is on "You've got to be healed because you are a worker for the Lord and we need you to stay here and do this." So, what happens then, when he dies. Does that mean his faith was not strong enough that he was not able to claim that healing? So I was curious to see how my son perceived this, and we talked about it later, after his father died, and my son brought it up. He said, "Mom, how did you see this whole theology in the church that Dad was involved in, in terms of this idea of claiming things?" And they called it the doctrine of prosperity there. He said, "How do you match that with my belief system?" I said, "You know, I think that Dad dying without a lot of people having the opportunity to say good-bye to him – who may have wanted to say good-bye but couldn't because if they admitted he was dying and said good-bye, yes, then where is their belief? – I think it's very sad." And I think it's pervasive, and I think that's part of

what we battle. You know, we have the word Christian in our society, and there are so many pieces of that, and everyone wants to think they're on the same page, and there are some basic, fundamental things that are very different. I think you've nailed it as you've looked at the theology of glory and the theology of the cross.

Q: One of the things I struggle with, and you touched on it last night is the danger of becoming too proud of being Lutherans, and we're so glad we know the right way, because, you know, it's painful that people I know and love feel that way (theology of glory) – you know, my neighbors and people who go to Lutheran churches often feel that way, which is wrong, and it's sad. And so, I do believe the right way! How to value these people – I want to say, "You poor soul!"

That was going to be my next question. "So what do we do about this? And you're putting your finger exactly on the issue: When we're surrounded by these folks, how do we deal with it? How do we respond? Certainly, standing on our soapbox and lecturing them is not going to do it, so what do we do? I'm serious. How do we respond?"

Q: I think the theology of the cross is greatly subversive, because it frees you to be a failure, to have pain in your life, to be broken. I went to Wheaton College. I have a group of friends with whom I am in touch by e-mail, and recently we have been discussing the election. We make sure we respect each others' positions, and try not to say "Well, we're right and you're wrong," but at the same time being totally honest – totally authentic. There's also a smaller discussion list on the side of those of us who think the same way, and it's even harder to keep that even-keel attitude in that group because we need to celebrate that our theology is a subversive, freeing thing in that group.

Q: I think one of the things we need to do every day is remember that we don't know it all, and when someone makes a statement like this man in that particular instance, you know, it's to try to maybe understand why they believe what they believe, and then take that understanding and make them understand why you believe what you believe, and then try to find some point that's a common ground. Not for the purpose of doing anything initially, except to build relationship, because if I come up to Dick and I say, "I really want to know more about you," and then at the end say, "You've got it all wrong," he's going to think, "Okay, that kook is out." If at that point I say, "I'd like to know more, and let's kind of grow together on this," there's time for one-on-one discipleship to happen. I don't think you can do this one-to-a-hundred; we're going to do this one-on-one. If people understand that you don't want them to be what you are because it counts for you; you want them to understand where God fits into their life and how important it is that they have the right relationship with God. Whether our relationship falls apart or not, that the relationships between people and God are what's important.

I agree with Kate; I think that works for both of you. The one thing we have going with us is the theology of glory is awfully hard work; I mean, you really have to work hard at doing the right stuff and working it. You constantly ask the questions about whether you are doing enough, are you working hard enough, are you believing enough, and when things go bad you have to step back and start over. It's really hard work!

And there's a certain inauthenticity about it because in a sense you know you're fooling yourself – you're kidding yourself. So, I liked what you said about being authentic and celebrating the fact that God meets us at those places where we go nose-first. That's where God is reaching us and touching us.

And the other thing I think we have to say to these people is, it's already done! You don't have to do all this; it's already done. All you have to do is walk the way. It's already finished.

Q: In light of this conversation, too, to get rid of all of the "I" stuff and all the personalized things. Well, not all of it; I know we're talking about a relationship with God that is personal, but we have so individualized and made it about "me and Jesus" that we really ignore the Body. And I think that reflects on this story and on the stories all of us have of being with others who see it differently, who are part of the Body of Christ. So how is it that we be that Body together?

Good question. And I want us to struggle a little bit with one more question as we continue this talk: What does all this have to do with your job as resource center folk? That's an important question. I can't answer that for you, but all of what we're talking about in terms of how resources are formed, shaped and used is part of this discussion. So what difference does all this make? Does it make you choose differently? Does it make you attempt to be a different kind of a resource person? Does it give you confidence or is it scary?

Q: All of the above.

All of the above.

Q: Being an ELCA resource center in a strong Bible belt area, I realize the primary reason that resource center is in that place is because of the need to lift up resources that are theologically consistent with the Lutheran faith. That is a real struggle in terms of being able to identify those quickly and provide a variety so that congregations will consistently come and ask first, rather than asking for some fundamental piece, and you don't have it and they will call another church or go down to the Bible book store and pick it up.

Well, it seems to be that it's easier if you are clearly identified as a Lutheran resource center, and the understanding is that everything here is in some fashion or other Lutheran. That makes the job easier. I think many are somewhere around that but not that specific, and so it gets more challenging, I'm sure.

Q: I get uncomfortable with looking at other people of faith and looking at them as in a manner having a deficit, because I do think they bring certain gifts to us. I think we also need to look at ourselves in terms of our assets, and one of the assets I think we do bring is a theology that makes sense in a complex world. There are lots of folks who will construct a theological world for themselves that will work for a while, and then it comes crashing down; then what? Lutherans have a gift to bring, and I don't think we should be intimidated by the people who quote Scripture, because I think when we study Scripture well we don't need to use it as a weapon, but we can bring it as a gift because we understand the broader sense of Scripture and Luther's understanding of how Scripture interprets Scripture. So here we have a wealth of stuff to bring. And actually,



even when we accumulate resources, it seems to me there are lots of things most Lutheran resource centers actually also have – lots of resources from other folks, too, that are pretty darned good in various areas. We celebrate particularly the gifts we have to offer for the whole person, with all humility, and yet celebrate those as our contribution to the whole.

Our job is to help people connect with this – wherever they come from. I think at some place in their minds they understand that people aren't good just because you tell them to be, and they don't perfect themselves by trying harder. I think people know that and connect.

Q: I wanted to respond to that. It's important because I direct an ecumenical center. I know the difference between good theology and bad theology, and I know what it's appropriate for me to direct Lutherans toward in terms of the resources. I worked for 11 years before that with the Virginia Council of Churches, and Lutherans had a very strong presence in everything that happened in Virginia. What I felt as you talked about the theology of glory was, as you moved toward the heart of your faith as Lutherans, the more I resonated with what was at the heart of my faith as a United Methodist, because, at the heart, we are far closer, and the threat to all of us is that other theology that's out there. And whatever denominational resource center we are, or whether we're ecumenical, the struggle is the same for the authenticity of the faith. I also don't want this session to come to a close without my having had the opportunity to say to you that I think you modeled something very important. When you talked about pride and there was a lot of passion in what you said – there was some pain, but there was passion there – and when you look at where did we lose it along the way, all of us, I think it's when you stop being able to testify with authenticity and with passion. And this is what you just did. If we're working with patrons in our resource centers we need to do that.

Q: Let me go back to what you said a little bit ago about the whole of faithfulness. I truly believe that. We are in the most unchurched area in the country, and it's nice to say that the goal is not growth, but when you're down to 50 people and you have about 90 percent of those over 65 and no Sunday school, word gets out and the conversation is about growth. And any time you talk about goals, "We've got to have a Sunday school." How can we have a Sunday school when there's a Lutheran church three miles away that has 120 kids and a congregation of young families. So, I think it should be faithfulness too, and I talk about that all the time. We have megachurches out there, and Willow Creeks like Overland Christian all over the Pacific Northwest. Right across the street there are 1,500 people in Antioch Bible. I think it's a real problem.

Well, I'd like to go to one thing that Craig said, "We have something to learn from others." Another thing that Julie was implying was to be a remnant does not mean to be irrelevant, does not mean to be a useless, hanging appendage that could just as well be cut off. That's not what it means to be a remnant. To be a remnant means to be faithful, but if we can learn strategies, ways of working, ways of witnessing, ways of reaching community, ways of changing people's hearts, ways of encountering – if we can learn from others, then we're foolish if we don't. There's no reason we can't learn techniques, tools, approaches, using the media – whatever it is – to be a faithful remnant. But to be a remnant means we don't sell out. We stay faithful to our core, to our teaching and to what we are about, but we constantly ask the questions: "Can we do this in a way that's more effective?" "Can we reach more people?"

"Can we touch more hearts?" "Can we make this thing 'grow' if that's not the goal?"

What I meant is, if you set out and say "Our goal is growth," then you're probably going to flub the thing. But if "Our goal is to be effective, faithful and challenging in our community," then you may be able to change some things that will really make a difference.

We're running out of time, and I feel like I need to wrap this up. I would like to keep this discussion going, and certainly among you in the association you can keep the discussion going about what it means to be Lutheran, but if we've scratched the surface and stirred up the waters a little bit, I guess that's a good thing.

I really wish you God's blessings in your ministry as you go about your tasks. You've got an important job that will become increasingly more important as you go on. Go to it!