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On the cover: the cover artwork is adapted from the signature image used to illustrate the theme of Concordia Seminary's 2018 Theological Symposium, "The Cross Alone Is Our Theology!"

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Editorials

Editor's Note

To any student of the Reformation it will come as no surprise that, since 2017, we are in for a decade of 500th anniversaries culminating in the anniversaries of Luther's Catechisms in 1529 and the Augsburg Confession in 2030! To be sure, every event or publication between 1517 and 1530 may not be of the same importance in its impact upon the church down to the present day. Others, however, are of seminal importance for the way they shaped the church's theology and the way in which the church does theology. One of those texts came to us a year after Luther's 95 theses when he was asked by his Augustinian order to give an account of his "new theology" by way of a disputation in Heidelberg in 1518.

In preparation for that event, Martin Luther composed a series of 28 theological theses and 12 philosophical theses for debate. In large part, the theses took aim at theological method from the time of Thomas Aquinas and the philosophical use of Aristotelian logic for deriving theological truth from the Scriptures and from creation. Dennis Bielfeldt writes,

> In many ways, Luther in this disputation sets out on a path discontinuous with the tradition. Here and elsewhere Luther discards the Scholastic philosophical categories in favor of a biblical proclamation of the *theology of the cross*. He argues that human grasping after God is spiritual hubris supported by Aristotle's philosophical categories. With his critique of a *theology of glory*, he criticizes the way in which traditional theology had been understood and practiced.[1]

Over and against the syllogistic logic of scholasticism, Luther sent forth a method that has come to be known as the theology of the cross. Theses 19 and 20 give perhaps the best known definition of Luther's method:

> 19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who perceives [*conspicit*] the invisible things of God as understandable [*intellecta*] on the basis of those things which have been made.
>
> 20. The person deserves to be called a theologian, however, who understands the visible and the "backside" [*posterioria*] of God [Ex 33:23] seen through suffering and the cross.[2]

The contrast between the two methods has been variously described. For example, my colleague Dr. Timothy Dost suggests that Luther develops a number

of paradoxical couplets that contrast apparent truth based on externals versus actual truth based in the reality of God's word. The best, although not only example of this real truth, is the cross. Another way of putting it is to say that it is a contrast between judging by the world's eyes versus judging by the cross. Dr. Erik Herrmann has suggested that Luther draws a contrast between a "therefore" (*ergo*) theology versus a "nevertheless" (*dennoch*) theology. In other words, we may consider appearances and how things go with the things that are "made" and thus conclude, "*therefore* . . . God must be like this . . ." But Luther contrasts appearances with a nevertheless theology defined by the word of the cross. To take these two insights, Luther develops this distinction of "It looks like this . . . Nevertheless we know that this is the reality . . ."

This all plays out in the pinnacle of Thesis 28 with one of the most beautiful testaments to the creative love of God. Luther writes:

> 28. God's love does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing [*diligibile*] to it. Human love comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.[3]

It is little wonder that a year later, Luther would write, "The cross of Christ is the only way of instruction in the Word of God, and the only true theology."[4]

Given the importance of these theses for Luther's theology as well as ours, we centered our 2018 Theological Symposium on the theme, "The Cross Alone is Our Theology." The description of the theme read as follows:

The cross has always stood at the center of the Christian faith, but what does it really mean to have a cross-centered theology, cross-centered pastoral care, or a cross-centered life? Neither a morbid obsession with death nor a dispirited resignation to suffering, to preach "nothing but Christ crucified" (St. Paul) or to be a "theologian of the cross" (Luther) is to set forth the central vision and lens by which we see our life and witness in the world. Through Christ's death and by the strength of his resurrection, we are placed into a new relationship to both our sin and our piety, to God and our neighbor, to blessings and sufferings, to hope, happiness, joy and peace.

This issue of the *Concordia Journal* includes the plenary papers from the 2018 Theological Symposium by Jeffrey Kloha, Kent Burreson, and Joel Okamoto. You will notice that the sequence runs from considering the cross in the Scriptures to its role within the worship life of the church to its value in thinking through the questions we face in the twenty-first century.

Charles P. Arand
Dean of Theological Research and Publication

1 Dennis Bielfeldt, ed., *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 69.
2 Ibid., 83–84.
3 Ibid., 85.
4 Martin Luther, 1519. Operationes (Ps 6:11): WA 5:217, 2–3.

Earthrise

"As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven'" (Acts 1:9–11). Can you imagine being there and seeing a man physically rise off the earth and continue up until a cloud covered him? Wow! That was the Ascension, Jesus rose from earth and our eyes haven't seen him since. Two thousand years later, our daily lives have become so dominated by science and technology that we must ask, "Is Jesus out of our sight and out of our minds?" "No," we answer, and true enough, you wouldn't have come from all over Iowa and Nebraska to Mission Central to observe Ascension if Jesus were out of sight and out of mind. Today you and I still believe these truths, that Jesus physically rose from earth and will visibly come back at the end of times, but many people in America don't share our faith. Jesus physically rises from earth? "Normal people," as missionary Gary likes to call them, assume such things aren't natural.

A retired Seminary professor tells a story about his grandchild. They were in the garden when the grandchild said, "Grandpa, what's that?" He answered, "It's a tomato." "Grandpa, I know it's a tomato, but what's that thing it's on?" It's on a tomato vine; who doesn't know that? With more and more of our population concentrated in metropolitan areas, I venture to say there are many young people who don't know that tomatoes grow on vines, that milk comes from cows, meat comes from cattle and hogs, much of our clothing comes from cotton plants, and almost everything comes from soy beans. The question about the tomato gave Grandpa an opportunity to teach the child about the world of nature. But if children don't learn about nature, how will they learn about the God who created nature? Many of you grew up on the farm or had relatives on the farm. During the week you had firsthand experience with the creation, you lived in nature, and from church and Christian parents you learned about the Creator who sent his Son into our natural world to redeem us. As believers in God and our incarnate Lord Jesus, both the natural and the supernatural fit together, more or less. But today many Americans do not look at creation as the work of God and are

Editor's note

President Meyer developed this sermon from a sermon he preached Ascension Day, May 30, 2019, at Mission Central in Iowa.

less inclined to spend time with the supernatural truths that Scripture teaches and the church proclaims. If they don't know the God who created and is over nature, why would they believe in the Savior's ascension and return?

You were probably surprised by the child's question about the tomato; so was I, but let's think about ourselves. Honestly, don't we also sometimes live more by sight than by faith, more by the natural than the supernatural? For example, when you're sick, you pray to God for healing, but where do you go? To the doctor and hospital. And afterwards, whose word do you share? The doctor's or God's? Another example: Where do you turn when you are short of money? You pray to God for help but your natural solution is to go to the bank and ask for a loan. Again, when you need information, do you pray and search the Scriptures or do you google your question or turn to the work of some scholar? One final example, relevant to tomatoes and things that grow, back in medieval times *rogation days* came every spring. Priests and people came together for special services praying God's blessing upon the new crops. To whom do we turn to know how the crops are going to be? To agricultural technology and science, to commodities reports, and with this spring's serious flooding, to weather forecasters and the Army Corps of Engineers. And so it goes. God created us physical beings and placed us in community. So we do go to others for practical help, but we're always tempted to pay mere lip service to God and actually put more trust in humans and modern science and technology. Is the mastery of nature by modern science and technology leading us subtly to let Jesus slip out of sight and practically out of mind? A modern commentator named Os Guinness says it most pointedly:

> The modern world quite literally "manages" without God. We can do so much so well by ourselves that there is no need for God, even in his church. Thus we modern people can be profoundly secular in the midst of explicitly religious activities. Which explains why so many modern Christian believers are atheists unawares. Professing to be believers in supernatural realities, they are virtual atheists; whatever they say they believe, they show in practice that they function without practical recourse to the supernatural.[1]

Ascension reminds us churchgoers that someone supernatural looms over all things. There is a supernatural reason for the natural things of life: that tomatoes grow on vines, that science and technology can discover and affect the amazing things of the natural world and universe. What's more, with dissension and partisanship everywhere we turn in contemporary society, Ascension reminds us that this someone has all things in an eternal order and all things in our lives do fit together. Ascension calls us to stand in awe of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ.

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth,

> visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col 1:15–20)

Before he was conceived and born to the Virgin Mary, the Son of God existed from all eternity. "He was in the beginning with God, all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (Jn 1:2–3). The food that grows for us to eat, the wood and stones and elements of nature that are put together to make homes and offices, highways and every mode of transportation, Earth in its dependable orbit around the Sun, the Milky Way in the universe . . . "Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name; by the greatness of his might and because he is strong in power, not one of them is missing" (Is 40:26). We look up to our ascended Lord Jesus. We read in the Bible about his pre-existence, we read the miracles where the incarnate Christ showed his lordship over nature, and take to heart the message of the angels that he who ascended, physically rose from Earth, will come again for us all to see. The God-Man holds all things together, natural and supernatural. This is the cosmic confession of the church that we hold so dear this Ascension Day, mysterious and full of unknowns as it is, that all things hold together in Jesus Christ. "And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."

Moments before the cosmic Christ ascended, he put us under his lordly orders, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). Like the grandpa with the tomato, let's teach our children to see the things of nature as gifts of the Lord of Creation, the ascended and returning Jesus. And beyond family, let's witness to our communities that we are truly dependent upon the Lord of Creation for our physical life. We can confess to friends and neighbors through conversations, community gardens, churches showing care for creation, and perhaps even having services in spring for planting and in fall for the harvest. So go to the next generation, interact with your communities, and through our missionaries to people overseas. Because of your love for Mission Central, you follow what the missionaries you sponsor are doing. Have you noticed how much of overseas missions has to do with helping people with their physical needs in order to build a bridge to tell them about Jesus? Here's a truth: the world of nature is where we, as missionary Gary calls us, "not-normal" people

can meet normal people and share with them our belief in the risen and ascended Lord of all Creation, Jesus Christ. In agriculture and medicine, in outdoor parks and recreation, and in science and technology, we have countless places in the natural world where we can meet people where they are and tell them about Jesus, the Lord of all.

You and I are blessed to live in amazing times. This past July we celebrated the liftoff that put man on the Moon, the mission of Apollo 11 fifty years ago. There was another fiftieth anniversary, probably less noticed, that happened December 24, 2018. The mission of Apollo 8 was to circle the Moon, not land, but circle the Moon. As Apollo 8 circled the Moon on Christmas Eve, the astronauts were awed to see planet Earth rising above the Moon, much as we who are on Earth see the Sun rise over the Earth's horizon. Earth rose above the Moon, a beautiful blue, green, and white globe in the vastness of dark, cold space. Astronaut William Anders moved as quickly as he could to take pictures; the result is the spectacular photo called "Earthrise." I know you have that photo in your mind, Earth rising. With that photo in mind, consider this: we had never before seen from space the wondrous place that the Lord of Creation made for us and put us to live. Everything else in the photo "Earthrise" is gray and dark, foreboding, but not the home God made for us. And now think about the love of our Creator. When we sinned, when we transgressed his ways of life because we thought we knew better how to order our lives than he who made us, as we creatures still sin and continue to fall short of the glory of our Creator, our Maker didn't look at planet Earth and destroy us but sent his Son to bear our sins, to rise, ascend, pour out his Spirit and give us new, recreated lives. See "Earthrise" in your mind and hear, "For God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:66). This Lord Jesus shines in your hearts through faith and you will see your ascended Lord return visibly to Earth to judge all people and take his followers, his "not-normal people" into eternity to be forever with him. "In him all things hold together." Amen.

Dale A. Meyer
President

1 Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 149.

Articles

"Carry On"
The Cross in the New Testament

Jeffrey Kloha

Jeffrey Kloha is Chief Curatorial Officer at Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, where he manages the museum's education, exhibition, research, collections, and outreach programs. Previously he was provost and professor of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he served from 1999–2017.

Today I hope to provide a reading of the biblical text itself—which I think is the primary work of pastors—to make the case that the New Testament makes an inextricable and undeniable connection between the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross and the suffering and death of his followers. That is, how does the New Testament describe the cross—the physical act of dying in the manner that he did—and how does that shape and inform how the life of the follower of Jesus is shaped by Jesus's death and resurrection?

I don't recall exactly why I was asked to speak on this topic—Jeff Gibbs and Mark Seifrid are both far more competent to speak to the theology of the cross in Matthew and in 2 Corinthians, respectively. But Chuck Arand asked me to talk about theology of the cross in the New Testament, so you all are stuck today. And, what I started doing, I think naturally, was rereading the New Testament with eyes open for the words *stauros* and *stauroō*. When does cross occur? In what contexts is it found? Who gets crucified, and for what reasons? And, what happens as a result of the cross?

As I read and compiled notes and listed vocabulary and did concordance searches, I started to notice a pattern that surprised me: cross and crucifixion language

Editor's note

This essay was first presented at the 2018 Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

is not unique to, nor even focused on, the salvific work of Jesus on the cross. To be sure, the passion narratives in the four gospels use the word *cross* dozens of times. But the first time the gospel writers use the word cross is not at the culmination of the accounts, nor even in one of the passion predictions. No, the first time the word is used it is applied to those who follow Jesus, using Matthew as the narrative (10:38): "whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Now, please let this sink in: Jesus tells the Twelve, as he is sending them out for the first time, that each will need to "take (*lambanō*) his cross" before Jesus says anything at all about Jesus himself going to the cross. They have no frame of reference, certainly narratively, for understanding what on earth that might even mean. And even more than the lack of anything theological for the disciples to hang Jesus's comment on, keep in mind that in extant Roman or Hellenistic literature up to this point, there is no reference to the cross being described in metaphorical terms in any way that could be viewed as positive, or as a model, or as something to which one should aspire. The cross is always and only shame. It is always to be avoided. Yet this is what Jesus calls his disciples to carry—even before they had any way to understand Jesus's own cross.

So if Jesus begins his discussion of the cross with the disciples, certainly it must be the case that any discussion of the theology of the cross in the New Testament must include a discussion not only of soteriology, but also, and I will argue today especially, it must include the cross in the life of the follower.

My approach today will be to look at the cross from a biblical theology perspective. I will assume a canonical unity, while recognizing that different writings will take the core christocentric themes and communicate them in ways that are unique to their setting, audience, and genre. In other words, Paul's theology of the cross will have a connection to the theology of the cross in, say, Matthew. Each voice in the canon makes a contribution to the harmony of the choir. This essay will not rely on secondary literature. The hearer can determine if that is for good or for ill. But I believe that at least on some occasions, a reading of the New Testament with one's thoughts unencumbered by thoughts of others may yield some fresh insights.

Cross and Context

Martin Franzmann begins *The Word of the Lord Grows* with this phrase:

> If, then, we are to hear the divine word of our New Testament on its own terms (and that is the whole task and function of interpretation), we must study it historically. We must learn to see it as the growing and working divine word, as God Himself, active in history. We must come to know it and comprehend it as a word that has its point of origin (as divine word) in human history, as word that is essentially history, and as a word that has history-making power, as a dynamic and creative personal power of God at work among men.[1]

Among the earliest Christian depictions of the cross, the staurogram superimposed the Greek letters tau *and* rho *to pictographically represent a crucified figure in the Greek words* stauros *and* stauroō. *The highlighted staurogram comes from Luke 14:27 in the Papyrus Bodmer XIV (2nd century) (Image: Wikimedia Commons).*

So, a New Testament theology of the cross must take into account what the cross was in the first-century Roman world. Martin Hengel's brief but magisterial 1977 book, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* should be familiar to all of you. If it is not, order a copy now. Hengel lays out in gruesome detail the purpose and method of Roman crucifixion. For the original readers of the New Testament writings, each person would almost certainly have witnessed first-hand an execution; certainly, the disciples in the first part of the first century in Roman Judea would have seen a crucifixion. But for us at least some reminder is necessary, to recall the impact of cross language on the original hearers. Cicero described crucifixion as "the supreme penalty," one that surpassed cremation (that is, burning to death) and decapitation in its gruesomeness. Get that—it was considered worse to be crucified than to be burned to death. The theologian Origen, some 200 years after the church began preaching the cross, still described crucifixion as "the utterly vile death."

To publicly shame and humiliate the condemned was the goal for the Romans, not merely to put to death. Death could have been accomplished with a mere slice of the throat. But crucifixion took effort and was used intentionally. Maximum effort was put into the shaming process. A scourging precedes the crucifixion itself. Then the condemned is made to carry the cross-beam (the *patibulum*) through the streets, paraded as an example of the power of Rome and the shame to which those who were deemed to challenge that power would bear. The place of execution was always on a public road, outside the city walls, so that everyone coming and going could see the victim, and quake in fear. Nails are pounded into the wrists, and the body, hanging on the *patibulum*, is raised on the upright pole, the *stipes*, and the victim is lifted up for all to see.

The mechanism of death on a cross was likewise designed for maximum cruelty.

The crucified person hangs by the arms, so that the chest muscles are contracted, thus preventing breath from being exhaled except by extreme effort. The person hanging on the cross must prop himself up to breathe, an action which only increases the pain and suffering. The person therefore endures loss of control of bodily function (imagine the smell), feasting insects, unquenchable thirst, muscle cramps, pain from the nails and scourging, a back roughened from rubbing against the beams, the verbal abuse of those nearby. The causes of death could be several: asphyxiation, shock, loss of blood, exhaustion, or a combination of all of these.

A New Testament theology of the cross must take into account what the cross was in the first-century Roman world.

And to people who have seen that, Jesus says, "Take up your cross." Now, I know that Dr. Voelz delights in mocking the buffoonery of the disciples in Mark, and Dr. Gibbs notes the lack of understanding of the disciples in Matthew, but perhaps we should cut them a little bit of slack. Should there be any wonder that they cannot understand? Carrying their cross could not possibly have made any sense to them.

Theology of the Cross in the Gospels

To set the table for this section, I'll state the obvious at the outset: The cross is the focal point, the pinnacle of the gospel narratives. In theme and in explicit lexical usage, the cross dominates the gospels. Matthew 23 and Mark 15 in particular are replete with references to cross and crucifixion as Jesus fulfills what he said would happen to him. Towering above both of these, however, is John 19. In the Gospel of John, the cross is mentioned only in John 19. There are no predictions of a death on a cross, and in the post-resurrection appearances the cross is not mentioned specifically, though of course Thomas is invited to touch the hands and feet of the risen Jesus. John, in contrast to the synoptic gospels, prefers a theology focused on the incarnation and the revealing of the Son of God in the flesh. Although John records Jesus as predicting that those who believe in him will be cast out of the synagogue, and that just as Jesus was hated all people will hate his followers, none of that is connected to the cross, as it is in the synoptic gospels. But, to emphasize again, all of the gospel writers drive their narrative to the death of Jesus on the cross.

The post-resurrection narratives also refer back to the cross. Jesus is consistently described as the one "who was crucified" (Mt 28:5; Mk 16:6; Lk 24:7) but is no longer in the tomb. What is not described explicitly in the gospels is what that accomplishes—what is the "level 2" significance of the fact that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. What does that mean for those who are reading or hearing the gospels? This has invited much discussion, of course.

Not only is the first reference to the cross in the gospels a reference to the followers of Jesus carrying his or her own cross, the second reference to the cross ties together, inextricably, Jesus's death with the cross-carrying by those who follow after him. The account is, of course, very familiar to you. Jesus predicts, for the first time, that he will be rejected, suffer, and be killed (the word cross is not used, notably), and on the third day rise. Peter rebukes him, Jesus turns his back on Peter and rejects him with those stinging words: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." Immediately then, without response from Peter and without a break, Jesus explicitly connects his rejection, suffering, and death with the cross-carrying that is expected of everyone. He addresses the crowds, no less; it is not limited to the disciples this time: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

This may seem obvious, but sometimes the obvious is worth underlining. The first time that Jesus mentions his own suffering and death, he *does not* talk about how his death will atone for sins, or how it will bring eternal life, or how this accomplishes justification. All that is connected with the cross, of course, elsewhere in the New Testament. But not here—the first time Jesus talks about his own suffering and death, he tells everyone who would follow after him that they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. In other words, Jesus's own assertion about the impact of the cross on the life of those who follow him is not focused on justification, but on sanctification. It is not life, but death. He goes on, of course, to point out that those who lose their lives will save it—but they will lose it first. And they will forfeit themselves (their *souls* in the KJV). They will be put into circumstances where they will suffer shame because they are carrying the cross. In Luke it is even more challenging, for there the word *daily* is part of carrying the cross—it is not a single, one-and-done event. Every day the follower of Jesus will endure the cross. It is inevitable, it is inseparable from the life that has been given. The cross of Jesus results in a cross for every one of his followers—every one.

And even this is not the end of cross-bearing in the gospels. And once again, the cross of Jesus and the cross of the follower are inextricably connected after Jesus's predictions are fulfilled—"just as he told you" is the Marcan refrain—and he goes to Jerusalem. And he is rejected, and he is betrayed, and he is whipped, and he does take up his cross—and even then the cross is laid upon the follower: Simon of Cyrene. It is just a passing reference—one verse only in each of the synoptic gospels.

Of course, the narrative includes this episode because it happened. But why is that account included? Why did Matthew, Mark, and Luke all single out that episode for recording, and mention the person by name: Simon of Cyrene? No doubt many people interacted with Jesus from the whipping and mocking to the ringing of the nails. Yet Simon is singled out and named and recorded: "And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross" (Mk 15:21). "They," in this context, are

the soldiers—Roman soldiers—they mocked Jesus, they put a purple robe on him, they led him out to crucify him, and they compelled (even "requisitioned") Simon to carry the cross. Did the episode happen? Of course—but that is not the relevant question here. If I could revert to Voelzian terminology, this is where distinguishing level 1 signifiers and level 2 signifiers is important. On level 1, the sense of the text, yes, Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the cross. That's exactly what it says. He is specifically named, apparently assuming that the hearers of the gospel knew, somehow, Simon of Cyrene. And in Mark we also hear the names of his sons, Alexander and Rufus. Why would that be recorded if Mark's readers did not know these individuals? If they were not part of the community of followers of Jesus? But the more important question, or at least the question that I want to ask, is this: what is the *significance of the fact that* Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry the cross. That is, to use the terminology of Voelz's *What Does This Mean?,* a "Level 2 Signifier" question. Notice that he is *compelled*—by Roman soldiers. Notice that the verb used is *airō*—take up, exactly the same verb used in Mark 8, where anyone who would follow after Jesus must take up—*airō*—his cross. And, as we already saw, Jesus connects his cross immediately and inexorably with the cross that must be carried by those who follow him. Simon is the first of the "any ones" who would follow after Jesus. And now it is worth highlighting a few details that help us understand what cross-carrying looks like. Simon carried his cross under compulsion, he did not ask for it. He carried that cross unexpectedly. He did not wake up that morning with the goal of carrying Jesus's cross, or seeking to get his name written into the gospels. He was simply going about his life, literally following Jesus on a road. And, he did it without protesting or complaining or demanding his rights. Keep those traits in mind, we will see them again. Simon is the first to carry his cross, just as Jesus had said.

Jesus's own assertion about the impact of the cross on the life of those who follow him is not focused on justification, but on sanctification.

Theology of the Cross in the Acts

Acts, perhaps not surprisingly, shows little interest in the cross. Where the gospels describe events and shape the readers to draw significance from the events—Mark, for example, never says exactly what Jesus accomplishes on the cross—Acts and the Pauline Epistles make explicit what the gospels make implicit. Two observations are particularly striking in Acts. First, the crucifixion is explicitly mentioned in the apostolic preaching *only in Jewish contexts*—it is never mentioned when the gospel is preached among the gentiles. Peter's sermon on Pentecost twice mentions Jesus—in fact, "this Jesus, whom you crucified"—speaking to the crowds in Jerusalem.

Likewise, in chapters 4 and 5, as Peter and John are hauled before the elders and the high priest and the Sadducees, Jesus is the one whom you crucified, or "whom you hanged on a tree" (echoing Dt 21). And, at Cornelius the God-fearer's house in Joppa, Jesus is preached as one who rose from the dead after being hanged on a tree.

But after Joppa, the cross is not verbalized in the apostle's preaching. The resurrection certainly is preached—and in Athens discussion of what exactly this anastasis nekrōn could actually mean causes quite a response. But the cross is not mentioned there, nor in Philippi to the jailer, nor to the governor Felix in Acts 24. In fact, to Felix Paul explains, "It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day." Nothing about the cross. Only resurrection.

What can account for this? Is there a reticence to preach the cross in a culture that does not have the background of the cross as a curse? Is there a shame in the cross, or something that could not be grasped in the Roman world about the concept of the cross, that the apostles changed their strategy? That would seem to belie Paul's strong insistence on proclaiming the cross that is foolishness to the Gentiles in 1 Corinthians 1. Now, to be sure, the resurrection is always a part of the preaching. And Jesus is described as one who died—that death is simply not explicitly connected to the cross. Why?

On one level, of course, it would be easy to say that the accounts and descriptions of the preaching in Acts are a summary, and that the apostles must have used the word *cross* or *crucifixion* even when the word *die* is used explicitly in the text. Well, maybe. However, the complete shift from *cross* and *crucify* and *hang on a tree* language before Joppa to its absence after Joppa in chapter 10 is both striking and invariable. Is there something else at work?

I would suggest that the cross is present not necessarily in the vocabulary of the apostolic preaching, but rather the cross is embodied in the actions—the cross is visible, if not verbalized, in the apostles. The lives of the apostles demonstrate the cross—it is a word of the cross in deed that gives shape and definition to the preaching of death and resurrection—the death is a cruciform death, demonstrated in the cruciform lives of the apostles.

We see this in Acts 7, where the martyrdom of Stephen is drawn in close parallel to the crucifixion of Jesus. In 7:52–53, Stephen gives the final condemnation of those in Jerusalem: "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." And at this point, the point of death, both the description of what occurs and Stephen's own words become cruciform: Just like Jesus, Stephen, calls out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And just like Jesus, "he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Stephen carries the cross, even to the point of death.

As the word goes out through Paul and Silas, especially after Acts 15, the apostles

are regularly and consistently beaten, imprisoned, slandered, struck with rods, even about to be flogged as a precursor to death, likely by crucifixion, at the hands of the centurion in Acts 22. Paul makes this connection between his suffering and Jesus's suffering explicit throughout his letters, perhaps most graphically, writing with his own hand in Galatians 6:17: "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus."

The preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus is made explicitly cruciform—the lives and sufferings of the apostles take the shape of the suffering and death of Jesus, so that the cross is made clear with their suffering, even as it is verbalized with word.

Co-crucified with Christ

The connection between the cross of Jesus Christ and the cross of those who belong to him is not merely a theological concept in the New Testament, it is a lexical fact, embedded in a word, a vocable: *sustauroō*; "co-crucified"; "crucified with Christ." In a single word, what is implicit in the narratives of the gospels and Acts becomes explicit in the letters.

Matthew, Luke, and John use the verb *sustauroō* with reference to the two "robbers" who were crucified with him (Mt 27:44; Mk 15:32; Jn 19:32). But twice in Paul the verb is used of those who are in Christ now "co-crucified" with him (Rom 6:6; Gal 2:19). In both passages, the context is describing both the means of salvation and the life lived by those who have been saved: "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom 6:6).

At first blush, we might assume that "no longer enslaved to sin" means that the baptized is free from the point being made in Romans 6; however, the new person who rises to life after having been baptized into Christ now rises as a person who lives a life that is free of sin—being "set free from sin" is described not only as eternal life, but explicitly as freedom from bondage to sin in the mortal bodies that we still have, which now become instruments of righteousness: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness" (Rom 6:12–13).

All this is quite uncomfortable for us, of course, because sin still exists (and that problem is dealt with in Romans 7). But for our purposes, for understanding the cross, our co-crucifixion with Christ results in a different way of living in the world, as people who were crucified but even now are alive, though alive in an entirely new way. That new way needs to be described further.

We see the same themes of co-crucifixion and new life in Galatians 2. Like Romans, we typically read Galatians to understand what "justification by faith"

is—and well we should because it is explicit in the text, over and against the "works of the law." But again, looking at the specific language of the cross, we see that "co-crucifixion" is connected to a new way of life in the world: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:18–19). Notice that just as in Romans 6, "life in the flesh" is what is impacted and changed by being co-crucified with Christ. "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."

This passage explicitly describes the crucifixion of Jesus as an act of love—"the Son of God who loved me and gave his life for me." Keep a finger there, because *cross* and *love* will be connected again later in our discussion.

Carrying On in the Epistles

It is in the Pauline Epistles that *carrying on* becomes most evident. What is suggestive and evocative in the gospels becomes concrete and defined in the epistles. It is in the epistles, in lives of people and apostles and congregations, where the theology of the cross becomes real.

I'll look at only two sections of the epistles today, but I'm convinced that you will find these themes in all of the letters. First, Philippians 2. This famous passage is one of the most commented on passages in the early church and continues to be a rich source for theology in modern discussions, including in our catechism—"who being in very nature God did not regard the being equal with God a thing to be grasped" is golden for discussions of the pre-incarnate deity of Christ and his "state of humiliation." The "every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" gives both creedal framework (e.g., "I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord.") and evangelistic zeal for the eschatological day, where every tongue confess. And the fulcrum of all this is the cross—even death on a cross.

As a seminary student, one of my courses was, essentially, discussion of this passage. For an entire quarter. We focused on when, precisely, the state of humiliation started and when it ended. We discussed when the glorification of Christ occurred. But above all we learned to make a distinction: This was back in the days when "What Would Jesus Do" was a thing—rubber wrists bands, necklaces, and everything. We learned that we needed to make distinction between Jesus as active agent and us as passive, and Jesus as example. In other words, we should not talk about "What would Jesus do," but solely talk about "What Jesus did." His incarnation and sacrificial death on the cross were the focus, we were not.

But I remained unconvinced, and still am unconvinced today. If my thesis so far is correct, that carrying one's cross is inextricably connected to Jesus carrying his cross, why would this passage be any different? If Simon could carry Jesus's cross on the way to Golgotha, why would we not carry Jesus's humiliating cross in Philippians?

The passage, Philippians 2:5–11, is introduced by a series of exhortations to the church at Philippi: "complete my joy," Paul writes, "so that you may think the same thing, having the same love for one another, harmonious, thinking the same way,

It is in the epistles, in lives of people and apostles and congregations, where the theology of the cross becomes real.

nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit." But the exhortations are not finished yet: "rather in humility regard others as surpassing yourself" and "each of you looking not to your own things, rather each to the things of the others." In humility regard others as surpassing yourself. Look not to your things, but to the things of the other. Is there a more difficult command in all the New Testament? Love one another? Of course we know that is hard, but loving another person at least has the possibility of me being on the same level as the other person, if not above them. But to consider others as surpassing yourself? To always be in the inferior position? To always be the humble one? To always look to the needs of others, not your own? That is a challenge.

And this is where we meet Jesus. "Think this" Paul says, think love, think harmonious, think unity, think humility, think others surpass you, think the needs of the others, think this way, Paul says, and then the hinge that swings us to Jesus: "Which also in Christ Jesus." Granted, this is an elided phrase, something is missing in the second clause, a verb? An object? "As also in Christ Jesus" is an incomplete clause. But what is clear enough is that the thinking that Paul is encouraging among the church at Philippi *has already been demonstrated in Christ Jesus*.

What does "nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit" look like? It looks like one who was equal to God not regarding the act of being equal as a thing to be clung to. What does looking to the interest of others look like? It looks like "taking the form of a slave." What does "in humility regard others as surpassing yourself" look like? It looks like "humbling himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death of the cross" (2:3). Even the verbal correspondences make the link: t*ē tapeinophrōsunē*—in humility is the noun equivalent to the verb *etapeinōsin* (2:8)—he humiliated himself. Hanging on a cross, "the utterly vile death" of the cross.

It seems, therefore, that the text is both about the work of Jesus and about the life of the believer. Just as we saw in the gospels. Just as we saw in Acts. Just as we saw in the language of being co-crucified. Jesus's death is our death. We are buried with him in baptism, in order that just as he was raised from the dead, we too may walk in a new manner of life. We are in Christ.

But Philippians 2 does not stop there. "It is God who works among you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (2:13). Just as Jesus's death and resurrection gave glory to the Father, our lives are now God's action, to will and to work *for his good pleasure*. This is why it is possible to act in humility, to put the needs of others before our own: because it is God working among us, for his good pleasure. But Philippians 2 continues. Lest the Philippians think that this is all just theologizing,

this theology of the cross, Paul reminds them that he has already demonstrated this cross-carrying for them. He has already held out for them the word of life. He is in chains even as he writes the letter, as he points out in v. 17, he is in that very moment being "poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith." He is considering the Philippians as surpassing himself, he is looking not to his own needs, but to the needs of the church at Philippi.

But the end of the chapter is where we learn fully what carrying one's cross looks like. I can imagine that the Philippians were just as skeptical as you and I are about all this humility and self-sacrifice and love and putting the needs of others before ourselves. You can follow Paul's argument: He starts with these exhortations, then he shows them one who did it perfectly: Jesus. That's all fine and good, the Philippians may have thought—that's Jesus, not us. So Paul next uses himself as a living example, through his own imprisonment. But again, the skeptical Philippians were thinking: you're an apostle, it is easy for you.

Paul next introduces people they know. First, Timothy, his coworker. Timothy is described as doing exactly what Paul had instructed the Philippians to do in vv. 1–4: He is "genuinely concerned for your welfare," and not his own. And, the link to the earlier material is even more explicit with 2:19–24: Timothy *edouleusen* just as Jesus became a *doulos*. Timothy "slaved with me in the gospel," just as Jesus became a slave on the cross. And again in 2:21; "Everyone else seeks their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ." But Timothy, the genuine brother, does not seek his own interests. Just like Paul. Just like Jesus. This cross-carrying is not only for Jesus, or an apostle, it is for a brother, who is already demonstrating that life of love to them.

And finally, lest the Philippians think that all this cross-carrying is fine for Jesus, fine for an apostle like Paul, fine for a pastor like Timothy, but not fine for them, Paul closes by describing one from their own congregation: Epaphroditos. Epaphroditos is one of those guys that you never heard of, apparently just an everyday, run of the mill part of the church at Philippi. He was the one who brought the gift of support from the church to Paul, so that Paul could be sustained in his chains. Paul calls this a "fragrant offering," this gift from Philippi delivered by Epaphroditos. But something happened to Epaphroditos while he was delivering this gift, he became sick, even up to the point of death (*mechri thanatou*). The language here is again identical to that used of Jesus, who became obedient unto death (*mechri thanatou*). Epaphroditos did it, Paul says, "because of the work of Christ." Jesus's work on the cross for the sake of humanity becomes Epaphroditos's work of carrying the cross for the sake of Paul. Jesus, Paul, Timothy, even normal guy Epaphroditos, all carried their cross.

And so the Philippians—and we—are called to, in humility, regard others as surpassing ourselves. The Philippians, and we, are called to look not to our own needs, but to the needs of others. In other words, to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

I am convinced that you could run this theme through every one of Paul's letters,

this cross carrying. Every letter is, of course, addressed to the baptized, not to the unconverted. He is writing to people who have been purchased and won, not with gold or silver but with the precious blood of Christ. And to what end? That they may be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. To live under him in his kingdom is, ultimately, the topic of every letter of the New Testament. And every letter picks up themes of cross and sacrifice and love. The cross of Jesus becomes the cross of the follower.

We see this even in 1 Corinthians, with its soaring and powerful rhetoric of the foolishness of the cross over and against sign-seeking and wisdom. To Corinthians who wanted to play identity politics: "I follow Cephas! I follow Apollos! Paul in his sarcasm asks, "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" Identity is to be found only in the cross of Christ.

And this carries through the rest of the letter. The "foolishness of the cross" and the "stumbling block of the cross" does indeed entail God's action in that "utterly vile death" of shame and humiliation. But the "foolishness of the cross" includes also a way of being in the world that demonstrates the foolishness of the cross every day in the life of the church. "God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, to shame the strong." These low-born, poor, powerless people are made powerful in the cross. Notice: They do not stop being low-born, or poor, or powerless. They are still all those things. But in the wisdom of God he chose the low things to demonstrate his power.

The rest of the letter describes what cross-carrying looks like in situation after situation. Paul's own preaching has as its content the cross, but it also embodied the weakness of the cross: "I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling" (2:3). In chapter 4 he turns dripingly sarcastic on the Corinthians, who saw the message of the gospel as a means of power, rather than as a life of carrying the cross: "Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute."

And then the cross. What is it to take up one's cross and follow? "To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (4:11–13).

This cross carrying demonstrates itself in love. In chapter 6, rather than having lawsuits against one another Paul criticizes everyone—"why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you wrong and you defraud, and this to your brothers and sisters." Under the cross, "winning is irrelevant," in fact, worse than irrelevant, it is not the kingdom of God.

In chapter 8, he takes away the theologizing of the Corinthians that led to them

going to the pagan temple dining rooms, an action that destroyed the faith of the new believers among them, "these brothers," Paul says, "for whom Christ died." Under the cross, one's rights are completely irrelevant. Rather, in humility they are called to serve one another.

In chapter 9 Paul takes even more rights away—he could have made all kinds of demands: salary, an expense account for his family to travel with him. Instead, he gave up his rights. He made himself slave to everyone, in order that he might save some.

In chapter 10 the question of meat sacrificed to idols is raised, and again cross-carrying becomes the answer to every question: "No one should seek their own good," Paul writes, "but the good of others" (10:24).

In chapter 11 their celebration of the Lord's Supper had devolved into self-serving separation: one person goes hungry, while another gets drunk. The wealthy in Corinth are "shaming those who have nothing." He calls them back to unity, back to service, back to love: "when you gather together, eat together." One body.

In chapter 12 they're boasting about gifts, the answer to which is, of course, chapter 13 and love. Love which is patient, kind, no envy, no boasting, not self-seeking, not easily angered, no keeping of records of wrongs, no delighting in evil of any kind but delighting in truth.

In chapter 14, all things are to be for the upbuilding. And even in chapter 15, the great resurrection chapter, the resurrection reshapes the present life that is now lived with confident hope: "Every hour we are facing danger. Every day I am dying" Paul writes. Which is possible only because of the cross and the resurrection, because he has been crucified with Christ.

I could continue. These themes run through all of Paul's letters just as they do through the gospels: Jesus's cross is our cross. And jumping to 2 Corinthians, these themes are applied to the apostolic message, "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body." One more time: "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body."

The Power of the Cross

This life is not a race to the bottom. The person who is best at carrying the cross is not the one who is most beaten, abused, mocked. There are times when we bring that on ourselves, and it is not heaped on us because we are carrying our cross. The call to carry the cross does not create, in Franzmann's words, an "army of ascetics" or "An Order of Mutilated Martyrs."[2] "The renunciation which Jesus demands does not degenerate into an ascetic exercise, into a sort of religious calisthenics on par with the renunciations of self-centered religiosity. The renunciation which [Jesus] claims is the renunciation of the man who 'in his joy' sells all that he has to buy the one field which contains the unexampled treasure" (Mt 13:44; with apologies to Jeff Gibbs, I'm going with Franzmann's interpretation of the parable here). Franzmann continues, "It

is man's turning to the royally working grace of God which fills the hungry with good things, a turning so complete that it turns a man's back on everything else. . . . It is a leap into the arms of the Father who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds. In other words," concludes Franzmann, "the call of Jesus in asking renunciation and making men capable of it *creates faith in the disciple*."[3]

That is, the one who calls us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him is the one who daily and richly supplies us with all that we need to support this body and life. We are freed from our self-serving, power hungry, twisted self-absorption and freed to live by the power of the one who conquered death, who has overcome the world, who has defined a new people whose lives are now fully and completely one of love. Even in the midst of suffering. Even at the hands of those who hate us most.

Carrying the Cross amidst Hatred

We lack a theology of persecution—we need to learn from our sister churches around the world (Copts in Egypt, the Syrian church, Christians in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, Afghanistan) and from the past what it means to be out of power, to not always have Supreme Court justices who align with our interests. It is easy to become inured from the emotional effect of martyrs and the persecuted. But it is happening.

We are freed from our self-serving, power hungry, twisted self-absorption and freed to live by the power of the one who conquered death.

One of the most searing images of this for me was the video released by ISIL on February 15, 2015. On our TV screens and computer monitors we watched twenty-one men, all wearing orange jumpsuits, kneeling on a beach in Libya. They were in Libya to work construction, and were seized by ISIL for their propaganda. Swords flashed, and we saw twenty-one Coptic Christians beheaded. For no other reason than that they were Christian. A caption on the video labelled the men as "people of the cross." Indeed, that is precisely the correct description—better than the label Egyptian, Christian, or Coptic, they are "people of the cross."

Two months later, another video was released showing the slaughter of thirty Ethiopian Christians. Bus bombings, church bombings happen with frequency, but almost never making it to our twitter-clogged newsfeeds.

We have a few martyrs in our liturgical calendar. All the feast days, perhaps rightly so, focus on long-dead saints. The commemorations are much more flexible—and unique to our narrow tradition. Yet the absence of martyrs is noticeable. While we have Walther, Wyneken, and Loehe, all from our tiny window of the

church, and we have Cranach and Dürer to represent the artists, among the martyrs commemorated we find only the saints of old—Ignatius and Cyprian, Valentine and Lucia, all very dim and long ago. The most recent martyr is Robert Barnes, an Englishman killed in 1540 in the midst of the political and ecclesial upheaval of the English Reformation. A Christian martyred by other Christians. But there are no relatively contemporary martyrs commemorated. No Gudina Tumsa, general secretary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesu, martyred in July 1979 at the hands of the Communist Derg. No day commemorating Son Jong-nam, killed in North Korea in 2008 for, among other things, "disseminating anti-state literature"—that is, Bibles. We have given our congregations no opportunity to reflect on cross-carrying, except as metaphor. No day set aside for prayer for those imprisoned for their faith, for the families of those who have been killed for carrying their cross. We have avoided seeking to learn from others who are just like us, yet have fought the good fight and finished the race.

Carrying the Cross: Life Together

So how do we as those who have been called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified live daily under the cross?

I will make two passing observations which can only be tentative and not definitive, for we are now moving from text to our world. For each day there is the call to carry the cross, and each day it may look different. But our twenty-first-century Western context presents us with particular and unique challenges.

First is the political freedom of "rights" that we enjoy as citizens of this country. We, individually, have rights that cannot be taken from us. And we have the power, physically and politically to make use of those rights. We have the power to vote people in to office who will give us the power that we want, who can make our lives less cross-like. We can get laws passed to support our positions. We can take away the burdens that would make it difficult to live faithfully. Nothing wrong with that; good government is a gift of God by which he reigns through the political estate. But have we considered that we may actually be called to suffer as the church? If page after page after page of the New Testament connects the life of the followers of Jesus so closely with the suffering and death of Jesus, why do we invest so much time and energy and resources and perhaps reputation to avoid suffering, to make it easier to be church? The gospel has proven again and again throughout the history of the church that no persecution is able to prevail against it. Even the mightiest of empires could not squash it, not Rome, not the Soviet Union, not Nazi Germany, not modern-day China. Why do we seem so eager to flee the suffering of the cross?

Second, the political power and rights that we enjoy can be brought to bear within the body of Christ. Rather than reflecting service and love, rather than "in humility consider others as surpassing yourself," we bite and devour one another. The information age has unleashed technologies and ways of relating to one another

We in the church have jumped into this digital age without ever asking if this is helpful for the building up of the body, or considered what picking up our cross and following Jesus even looks like on the internet.

that have never been tested. We have no idea what the digital age does to humans cognitively, socially, morally, or politically. We have absolutely no idea where this social experiment will go. We do know that it is easily abused, that it is used to hurt, harm, lie, deceive. It is too easy to hide behind the digital cloak, and every week it seems there is another senate hearing or data breach or something raised about our digital world. Yet we in the church have jumped into this digital age without ever asking if this is helpful for the building up of the body, or considered what picking up our cross and following Jesus even looks like on the internet. That we haven't even asked the question is frightening. You who grew up in this world, you twenty-somethings, you have to help us think through a theology of the internet in light of the cross.

Yet our prayer remains the same: That by the Spirit, through daily contrition and repentance the old Adam be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. Holy Cross Day was observed on September 14 (a few days before this symposium), the day on which Helena, mother of Constantine, found the True Cross in a garbage dump in Jerusalem. The collect for that feast is a prayer that can be prayed daily:

> Almighty God, whose Son our Savior Jesus Christ was lifted high upon the cross that he might draw the whole world unto himself: Mercifully grant that we, who glory in the mystery of our redemption, may have grace to take up our cross and follow him; who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Endnotes

1 Martin Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), 2.
2 Martin Franzmann, "Studies in Discipleship," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31 (1960): 610.
3 Ibid. (Emphasis added).

Ad Fontem in Crucem
The Formative Function of the Cross as Artistic and Ritual Sign

Kent J. Burreson

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In Galatians 4:14, Paul says, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." For Paul the cross is substantially more than a sign. It is the way of life for those who live under the rule and reign of the crucified and risen one. The cross never should degenerate into mere sign. As an effective symbol it should do something to those who receive it. It should form the lives of those upon whom it has been inscribed, as it did for Paul. In this essay, I will trace the formative power of the cross as a visual, auditory, physical, and ritual symbol, shaping the lives of Christian disciples from the New Testament to the present era. In a world in which crosses abound as detached signs, often in cheap and kitschy ways, I will seek to answer the question: How can the cross as symbol, inscribed upon the eyes, ears, mouth, and body, continue to form disciples of the crucified one today?

Inscribing the Cross as a Way of Life: Ritual and the Senses

Ad fontem in crucem: to the source of the cross. Following Jesus's death and resurrection of Christ, the cross—the cruel instrument of capital punishment—

Editor's note

This essay was first presented at the 2018 Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

became in the witness of the apostles the most formative symbol in the life of the nascent church. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For the *word of the cross* is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:18, 24). For Paul, the cross is not an artistic sign or a ritual act, but the powerful work of God, an event and a way of being that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, works in his creatures. The cross is, for the people of God, through faith by grace, participation in the power and wisdom of God, and thus a way of life. The New Testament preaching of the cross was intended to inscribe this word of the cross upon the lives of those who heard it. Martin Luther reflects this intent in one of his prayers,

> Eternal God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give us your Holy Spirit who *writes the preached Word into our hearts*. May we receive and believe it and be cheered and comforted by it in all eternity. Glorify your Word in our hearts and make it so bright and warm that we may find pleasure in it, through your Holy Spirit think what is right, and by your power fulfill the Word, for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.[1]

The church has inscribed the cross in many ways. How has the church sought through ritual and all the senses to inscribe the cross to shape a cruciform way of life?

Figure 01 (Artwork: Nigel Groom, "Anointed," artgiftedbygod.co.uk)

For example, how do we perceive a cruciform way of life being inscribed upon Mary as she anoints Jesus's feet and with her hair in this painting by Nigel Groom? *(Figure 01)* A cruciform life means that one serves the other in love, as Mary does. In the words of Christopher Irvine, "to begin to perceive how our view of the cross commits us in terms of the choices we make and the actions we undertake"[2] only then is the cross fully inscribed.

The Cross as Formative Symbol

In order for the cross to inscribe a cruciform way of life it must function as God's wisdom that forms his people.

It is not just a sign. Signs are univocal forms of communication. Their range of meaning is intended to be fixed, determined, and obligatory within a certain context. When people blatantly run a red light, I am reminded that that red light is intended to be univocal: stop moving your vehicle. There is no ambiguity. Symbols, on the other hand, are complex signifiers. Unlike signs which push toward one-to-one meaning, symbols thrive intentionally on polysemy (multiplicity of meaning). They are by nature ambiguous, flexible, and rich in referential possibilities.

Figure 02 (Photo: Author)

The cross is probably the richest and most polyvalent symbol in the biblical story of salvation. It functions most effectively as a symbol when it inscribes the story of God's crucified and risen Son upon our lives. Yet, because of the cross's pervasiveness in Western society and culture, the cross can take on a variety of meanings outside of the biblical narrative. Such meanings include those which don't intend to inscribe the biblical story, at least not intentionally or obviously. Symbols and images of the cross in culture raise serious questions regarding its meaning while experiencing it in these contexts.

Figure 03 (Photo: blurmark.com)

The Effingham Cross, the United States' largest roadside cross along interstates 70 and 57 in southern Illinois, is a good example. (*Figure 02)* It is clearly intended to communicate something given its prominent position alongside a major interstate route, juxtaposed to the US flag. But what is the meaning of the cross in this context? Does it seek to inscribe a cruciform way of life? Similar, but less prominent, are body piercings and tattoos. The following cross is still potentially a

public symbol, seen by others, but is more personal in nature.

The same ambiguity as with the Effingham Cross surfaces for this tattoo. (*Figure 03)* Is it bearing witness that the kingdom, which the cross of Christ brings, is coterminous with US society? That is one possible reading. But does this represent the inscribing of a cruciform way of life?[3] In both cases, the symbol's meaning clearly goes beyond inscribing a cruciform way of life. Other narratives and frames of meaning are entailed.

As is clear from these examples, the narratives and contexts of use, which surround a symbol and infuse it with meaning, determine how a symbol functions. These narratives and contexts are not inherent to the symbol itself but must be interpreted, remembered, and rehearsed. This is true of the cross no less than any other symbol. The cross's initial context was that of a cruel and humiliating form of capital punishment, one intended to impose the all-encompassing power of the Roman government upon "inferior" peoples. Cursed indeed appeared to be anyone who died on a tree. Yet, as Robin Jensen notes in her magisterial study of the symbol of the cross:

> The humiliating and agonizing death of their proclaimed Messiah and Savior God presented a challenge to early Christians, who had to explain it to Jews and Gentiles alike—if not also to themselves. In spite—or perhaps because—of this, Christians duly identified pre-Christian scriptures that prophesied the crucifixion, sought to comprehend its divine purpose, and found significance and meaning in what was at least initially a confounding historical event. . . . Despite their unwavering trust that the crucifixion had some divine purpose, early Christians found themselves trying to explain an almost incomprehensible paradox. For that reason, some [who found themselves outside of Christian orthodoxy] denied that it actually happened, at least to the Savior. . . . In the end, the cross—rather than the empty tomb—became the universal symbol of the Christian faith. Yet, while this figure remained inextricably linked to the story of Jesus' death by crucifixion with its potentially scandalous

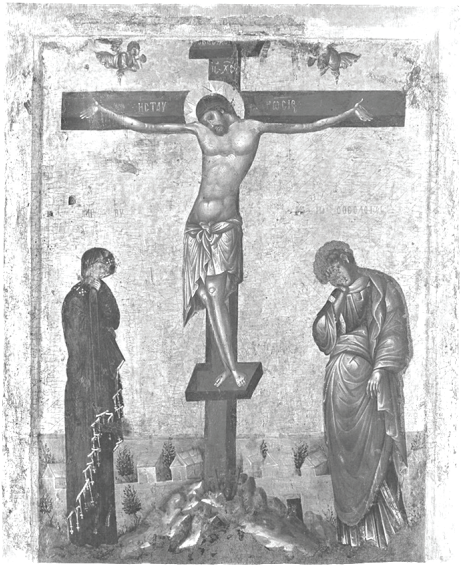


Figure 04 (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

> associations, it was gradually reimagined and transformed into a providential symbol of redemption to be embraced and celebrated instead of a reminder of an unfortunate scandal to be either rationalized or rejected. In this way, it became both a figure of sacrifice and triumph.[4]

It is that biblically rich narrative and context which we are called to remember when we visualize, ritually employ, and experience with all our senses the inscribing of the cross upon our hearts, minds, bodies, and lives.

Given this rich symbolic context, clearly the cross is not a static symbol. (*Figure 04*) To say that the cross is our theology is to affirm that it is at the very center of Christian theological reflection and forms the pattern of human life. We can think of many ways in which this is true in Lutheran theological reflection, preaching, and teaching. But it is also apparent in other traditions. Byzantine Orthodox iconography is understood to be a scripted, written visual art. Icons are not painted but written by the iconographer. As written or inscribed forms of the incarnate and proclaimed word every icon is an icon of Christ and of the Father's re-creative, saving work through his Son and in his Spirit. Thus, at the center of every icon is the heart and core of the story of the new creation through the cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Whether the icon is one of any facet of Christ's life or of a saint, the cross is always the centerpiece of the icon's impact on the worshipper. Obviously, the cross is the central theme in this fourteenth-century icon. But the icon also demonstrates that the death of the Son of God is at the center God's epiphany (indicated by the angels appearing in the corners of the icon above the cross) to the world. The cross is the very expression of God's heart, the Father's mercy and love. The cross is at the center of the believer's relationship with the God who manifests himself at the cross, the believers represented by Mary and John's position in relationship to the cross. The believer is called by the icon to respond in like manner through faith.

Figure 05 (Photo: Author)

Yet, this icon of Mary, the Theotokos or God-bearer, is no different. *(Figure 05)* The iconographer, in a variety of ways, has inscribed the word of the cross at the icon's center. The Son of God, represented in adult form in the arms of his mother, makes the sign of blessing toward Mary, positioned over her heart, with her right hand reaching out to receive this gesture of mercy and grace, the forgiving word. At the meeting of both hands lies the cross, the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, for the life of the world: the meeting point of the relationship between God and humanity—faith in the one who was crucified for us.

Figure 06 (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Every formative symbol inscribes different aspects of the story of salvation upon us. Contrast the prior icon of the crucifixion with this thirteenth-century icon by Berlinghieri. *(Figure 06)* The previous icon focused on the suffering of the crucified one and the sorrow and repentance of the believer over what one's sin has wrought. Here Berlinghieri depicts Christ, following earlier traditions, not as dead but as fully living, directing his gaze upon the worshipper. While John laments Jesus's death with his hand to his face, Mary points her hand, and thus leads the viewer, to consider the one who has destroyed death and its power through his own death on the cross. Christ's gaze depicts his crucifixion as being for your good. It is the event which establishes the rule and reign of God, the spring from which flows the renewal and restoration of creation and the making right (justifying) of the world. The inscribing of the cross forms us to live according to that story of God the Creator and Lord.

Inscribing the Rule and Reign of God through Christ Jesus's Death and Resurrection (Cosmic)

There are many ways in which the symbol of the cross inscribes the story upon our hearts and minds. As we examine the story of the cross as artistic and ritual sign see how the cross has been inscribed upon us in three ways: through God's rule and reign in Christ's death and resurrection, through the restoration of creation through the tree of death and life, and through the justification of the rebel human through the word of the cross. Different aspects of the cross story, different meanings of the polyvalent symbol of the cross.

In 1 Corinthians Paul says to the people of God at Corinth,

> Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. . . . For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (15:1–4, 21–28)

Here, for Paul, Christ's crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection—the event of the cross—is the means by which the Father will destroy all the enemies of his creation and his creatures and establish his reign over all things. While all things might seem to be arrayed against God's Son, bent on destroying him, yet the cross is the very act of God's victory, the wisdom and power of God. In this way God will be all in all.[5]

Massacio reveals this victory through an image of the Father upholding his Son on the cross established over the tomb of the human. *(Figure 07)* Death is swallowed up in victory and that victory is the victory of God the Father through his Son's crucifixion. Through God's victory in Christ heaven and earth are reunited and God will reign in heaven and on the earth, throughout the entire cosmos.

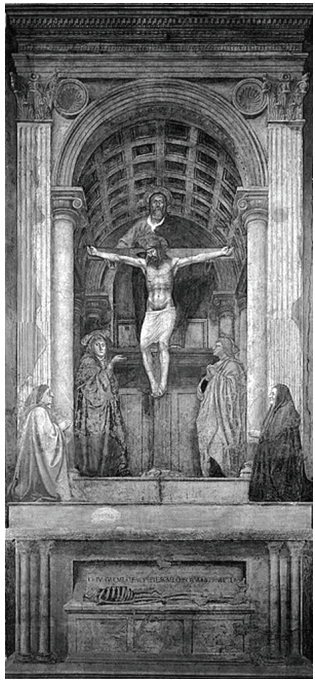


Figure 07 (Wikimedia Commons)

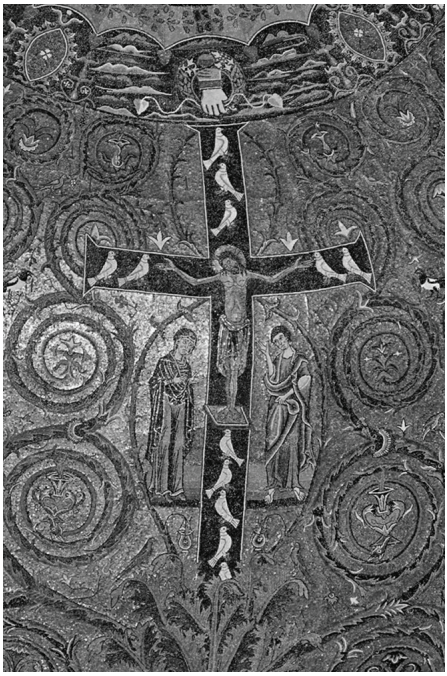


Figure 08 (Wikimedia Commons)

Inscribing the Restoration and Renewal of Creation through the Tree of Death and Life

The victory of God through Jesus's cross entails life for the entire cosmos. As Paul proclaims to the Galatians in chapter 6, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God." The only thing that counts is a new creation. As the cross is inscribed upon the body and life of the believer—crucifying the believer to the world and the world to the believer, and witnessing to the hope for victorious life for the believer—the restoration and renewal of all creation is inscribed upon the bodily life of the believer. Thus, early on, the church symbolized the cross as the tree of death and life, a life-giving tree through the death of the word made flesh upon it.

So it is with the apse of the church of San Clemente in Rome, where life-giving vines flow from the foot of the cross, the source of life in the new creation. *(Figure 08)* Here the new Israel, represented by the twelve doves on the cross, dwells with the temple of God, the incarnate Son of God, having descended to rule upon the renewed and re-created earth. The cross as the tree of death and life inscribed upon us, is the image of the new Man, the crucified and risen one, in whom we are created anew. "According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pt 3:13) with the tree of life of the crucified Lord at its center.

Inscribing the Justification of the Rebel Human through the Word of the Cross

Here is the inscribing with which Lutherans resonate easily: the inscription of the justification of sinners through the word of the cross. As Paul proclaims to the Romans:

> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from

> the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. (3:21–25a)

The Father's justification of the unrighteous comes through the blood that Jesus willingly shed at the hand of a rebellious humanity, pouring out mercy and love upon rebels (a propitiation by his blood). This justifying grace of God, hung and impaled on the cross, is received by faith and so inscribed on the heart, mind, and spirit of believers. It is a justification that is heard and believed. "How are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" (Rom 10:14).

Yet it is also a justification in the mercy of God that can be painted and seen as in Pink Crucifixion from the British artist Craigie Aitchison. *(Figure 09)*

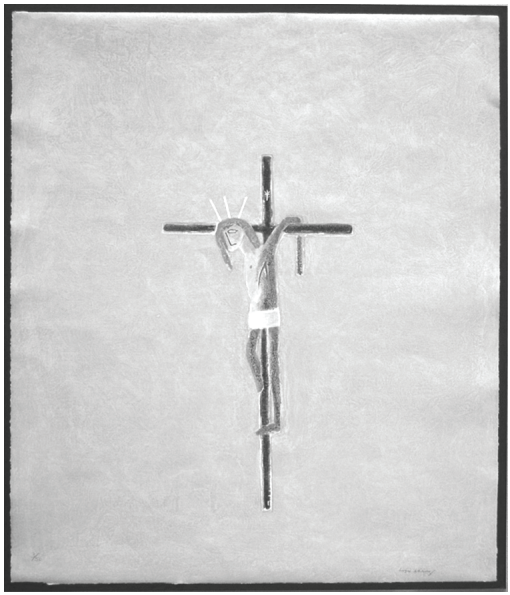


Figure 09 (Photo: The Methodist Church, United Kingdom)

The simplicity of the image is the Christ whose three-rayed crown depicts victory and whose primary characteristic is the spear wound in his side with blood flowing from it. As Christopher Irvine notes, the "subtle detail, the vibrant colouring and the very fullness of the figure painted against the narrow cross suggest a kind of sacrificial blood-letting, a sort of release. Indeed, the simple visual language here speaks more of a passing on than a draining away of life, some life-force is being released, is being given over."[6] The bad blood of humanity is washed away by the blood willingly and lovingly shed by Jesus on the cross. In that blood is our justification, inscribed as "often as we drink this cup" (1 Cor 11:25), the blood of Christ shed for us for the forgiveness of our sins.

Through the proclaimed word in these three ways—the rule and reign of God, the restoration and renewal of creation, and the justification of the God-killing rebels—and in a host of other ways, the symbol of the cross is inscribed upon us.

(Figure 10. Author Photo: St. Anne Roman Catholic Parish, Pleasant Prairie, WI)

Inscribing the Scandalous Cross

Now that we have given consideration to some of the ways in which the cross is inscribed upon us through the proclaimed word, we turn to the ways in which the church has inscribed the cross as a visual, physical, and ritual symbol upon believers. In particular, how did the cross go from being an instrument of torture and a humiliating form of capital punishment, to a symbol that can inscribe the formative activity of the Father through his Son by his Spirit visibly, physically, and ritually upon the people of God?

As we noted earlier, for nearly 500 years the cross was a scandal, especially as a visual symbol. Crucifixion didn't cease as a form of capital punishment in the Roman world until the Christian Emperor Theodosius II outlawed it in 382. Pagans considered the image of the cross as a means of salvation scandalous and worthy of derision.[7] One can see why Christians avoided visual representation of the cross until the fifth century, almost a hundred years after the last crucifixion would have taken place. By then the memory of the scandal and offense of the cross would have released its hold.

Yet, this doesn't mean that the church didn't inscribe the cross upon the lives, bodies, and minds of believers. Particularly through the use of ritual in the second through fourth centuries the cross functioned as a living symbol in the lives of God's people. One such instance is in the church father Ambrose's mystagogical catecheses in which he teaches the catechumens the significance of the sacraments and the rituals that surrounded them, as the church initiated them into Christ *(Figure 10).*

He connects the immersion into the waters of baptism with the cross of Christ through the language of Romans 6:

> So the apostle exclaims, as you have just heard in the reading, "Whoever is baptized, is baptized in the death of Jesus." What does "in the death" mean? It means that just as Christ died, so you will taste death; that just as Christ died to sin and lives to

> God, so through the sacrament of baptism you are dead to the old enticements of sin and have risen again through the grace of Christ. This is a death then, not in the reality of bodily death, but in likeness. When you are immersed, you receive the likeness of death and burial, you receive the sacrament of his cross; because Christ hung upon the cross and his body was fastened to it by nails. So you are crucified with him, you are fastened to Christ, you are fastened by the nails of our Lord Jesus Christ lest the devil pull you away. May Christ's nail continue to hold you, for human weakness seeks to pull you away.[8]

Through the ritual of baptismal immersion in the Triune confession and the teaching which the neophytes heard they received the inscription of the cross. Their lives of faith now were lived in the hope of the death and resurrection of their Savior as the firstfruits of those risen from the dead. Their lives were now conformed to a death and resurrection pattern: dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. The cross as symbol was primarily something experienced and "seen" in the rituals of baptism. In ritual inscription the scandal of the cross was muted.

The Crux Invicta: The Cross of Victory

Following the Constantinian legitimization of the church, the symbol of the cross engaged culture more fully and openly. While the cross continued to function as an audibly and ritually inscribed symbol, it also appeared in architectural representation and visual art. It increasingly lost its scandalous stature as the church inscribed it in ways that boasted in the power of God manifest in the Son's crucifixion.

The cross was still a ritually invoked symbol. The baptismal ritual continued to stress a death and resurrection in symbol, by a trifold immersion/submersion in the confession of the creedal name of God, a participation in Christ's actual death and resurrection. For instance, the cross is inscribed on the neophytes' (newly baptized) olfactory sense through anointing following baptism with sweet-smelling chrism. The neophytes participate in the smell of the crucified and risen one who through his cross has overwhelmed the stench of death. Aidan Kavanagh describes the smell of the cross in this way,

> When all have been done [anointed] in this same manner . . . the clergy strike up the Easter hymn, "Christ is risen from the dead, he has crushed death by his death and bestowed life on those who lay in the tomb." To this constantly repeated melody interspersed with the psalm verse, "Let God arise and smite his enemies," the whole baptismal party—tired, damp, thrilled and oily—walk out into the blaze of Easter morning and go next door to the church led by

(Figure 11. Photo: Wikimedia Commons / Eitan f)

the bishop. There he bangs on the closed doors with his cane: They are flung open, the endless vigil is halted and the baptismal party enters as all take up the hymn "Christ is risen" which is all but drowned out by the ovations that greet Christ truly risen in his newly born ones. As they enter, the *fragrance of chrism fills the church: It is the Easter smell, God's grace olfactorally incarnate.* The pious struggle to get near the newly baptized to touch their chrismed hair and rub its fragrance on their own faces.[9]

The oil poured upon them and traced in the sign of the cross is the sign of death and new life: the feel and smell of the cross inscribed in oil.

Construction of baptismal fonts mirrored the actual symbolic submersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus *(Figure 11).*

Fonts were constructed in various cruciform shapes, some of the first publicly displayed images of the cross as an unambiguously victorious symbol.[10]

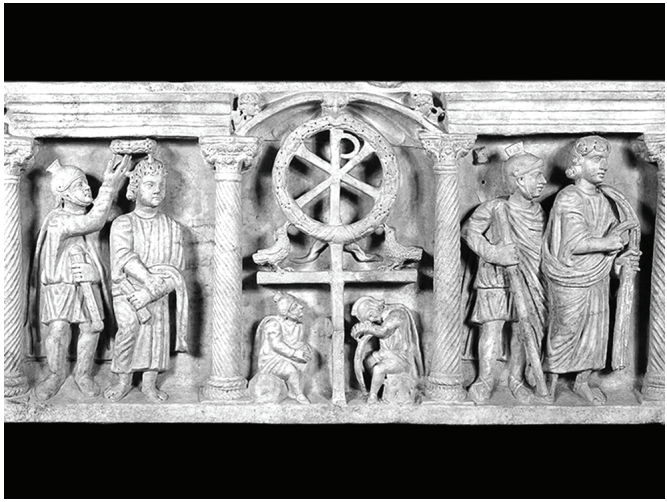
If Christians were hesitant to depict the horrific nature of crucifixion visually, one of the earliest ways, beyond the fonts, was to depict the saving reality of the cross through a crucifixion pictogram.

Staurograms were forms of the word *stauros* in which the tau and the rho were written in the same way as you see in this ceramic oil lamp of the fourth century. *(Figure 12)* As Robin Jensen observes, "The Greek letter tau and rho were combined in order to represent the visual image of a crucified man, as the loop at the top of the rho suggests a head set on the upright of a cross." Thus, the church continued to

(Figure 12. Photo: earlychurchhistory.org)

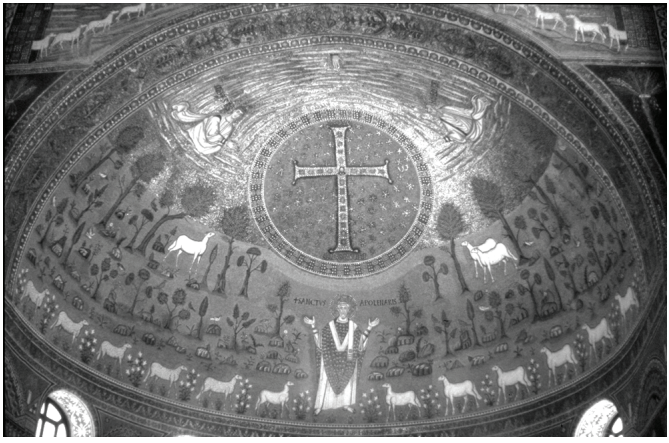
represent the power of the cross visually in subtle ways.

Since the cross symbolically encompassed both the death and resurrection of Christ, it is not surprising that some of the first appearances of symbolic representation would be on vessels for holding the bodies of the dead, sarcophagi.



(Figure 13. Photo: Vatican Museums)

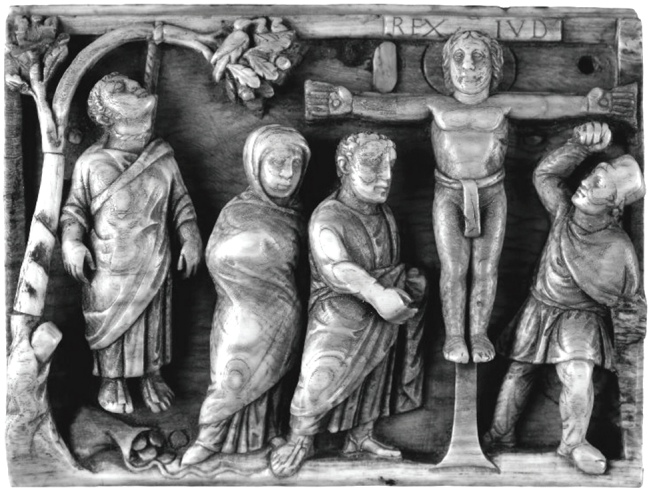
This scene from a fourth-century sarcophagus in the Vatican Museums in Rome represents elements from the passion of Jesus. *(Figure 13)* The crucifixion itself is represented by a cross topped by a Chi-Rho, the first two letters of Christ which forms a victory wreath at the top of the cross. As Jensen indicates, "These are among the earliest depictions of episodes from the trial and death of Jesus and, undoubtedly, they deemphasize his suffering and clearly avoid showing his actual death on the cross. Rather, the empty cross—a perch for doves and framework for a victory wreath—anticipates the image of a crucifix."[11] The emphasis is not on the suffering of Christ, the cross itself being empty, but the cross as a symbol of victory, a victory that also belongs to the one whose body rests in the sarcophagus.



(Figure 14. Photo: University of Michigan Library)

When visual images of the cross appeared in spaces of worship, they followed the same pattern as the sarcophagi. *(Figure 14)* Gemmed crosses appear in basilicas throughout the early Christian world, especially in the fifth- and sixth centuries as here in the Basilica of

Saint Apollinare in Classe.[12] The gemmed cross symbolizes the establishment of the rule and reign of God and of the rebirth and restoration of creation in the new heaven and the new earth through Christ's death. As Jensen contends, these gemmed crosses are also a "symbol of the Lord's triumphant return at the end of the age." The crucified one will come to establish his eternal kingdom: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rv 5:12).



(Figure 15. Photo: The British Museum)

When the first crosses with the corpus (body) of Christ appeared, they continued to portray the cross as a symbol of victory and power and did not manifest any realism regarding the actual crucifixion. They are not crucifixes in the traditional sense. The fifth-century Maskell casket *(Figure 15)*——shows Jesus in the strength of his humanity, not as a suffering and deformed figure near death.[13] He is clearly in control of his crucifixion. It is a visual representation of Paul's words in Philippians,

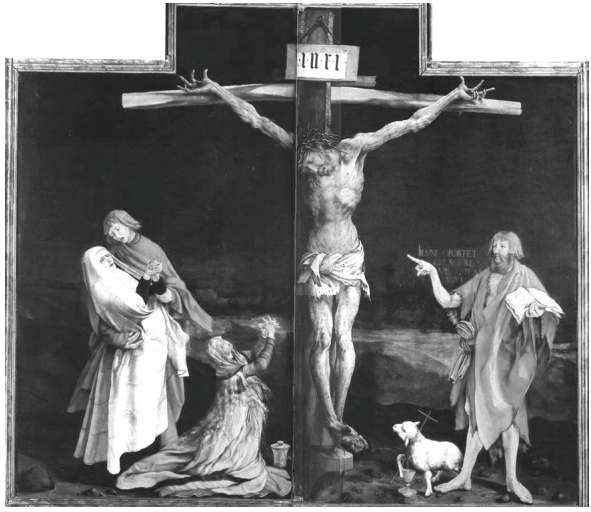
> Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. (2:6–9)

In this image one perceives the cross as the symbol of Christ's cosmic rule through suffering, shame, and death. And the church is inscribing this on believers through ritual, auditory, tactile, and visual means so that the believer knows and lives in the confession of St. Paul: "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been *crucified* to me, and I to the world" (Gal 6:14).

The Crucifix Invicta and the Remembrance of the Cross: Proclaiming the Lord's Death

The eighth century and afterward represent the complete loss of the scandalous nature of the cross as a symbol of capital punishment. As Robin Jensen notes,

> The depictions of Christ's triumph over death began to shift toward a visual representation of the suffering man-God, or *Christus patiens*. Evolving theological reflection on the significance of Christ's death, the growing emphasis on the purpose and value of Jesus's physical agony, and the development of guided meditation on Christ's Passion within certain early monastic communities all contributed to this transition . . . Despite this emphasis on the Savior's bodily suffering, medieval devotees did not regard the crucifix as evidence of defeat or humiliation but rather as an affective depiction of Christ's redemptive and sacrificial love. Such divine love came to be understood as the source of human salvation as much as his heroic conquest of Satan and death.[14]



(Figure 16. Photo: Web Gallery of Art)

Thus, the crucifix was born. It was an age which inculturated the cross by seeking to identify with a Christ who truly suffered in his humanity and whose suffering was redemptive and indicated that God had not abandoned humanity in its suffering. Here is a faithful high priest who suffered and is able to come to the aid of those who suffer as well, evoking the language of the writer to the Hebrews: "But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). The cross is propitiation for sin and redemption through the blood of the Lamb, a symbol that suffering humanity is not abandoned by God.

The Isenheim Altarpiece manifests this shift in symbolic meaning most dramatically. *(Figure 16)* Note the stark differences from earlier gemmed and victory crosses. As Jensen argues:

> Understanding what prompted the change from a glorious and victorious depiction of Christ's Passion to a representation of his human torment and death is a subject of much debate, but it must have been rooted at least partially in the desire for (or belief in) a compassionate and merciful deity who comprehends and even experiences human physical pain. The example of the Isenheim Altarpiece is a case in point. Painted to adorn the chapel of a hospital that served those suffering from a deadly illness that cause their bodies to break out in excruciating sores, the artist chose to show Christ suffering from a similar outbreak. As the inmates of the hospital gazed upon the figure of Christ with his rib cage jutting out over a sunken belly and his hand and face contorted in pain, they may have been consoled by the assurance that God was not oblivious to their misery . . . although the image of Christ as co-sufferer might not have alleviated the patients' physical and mental anguish, it could have assured the patients and their caregivers alike that they were not alone, nor had they been abandoned by a loving God who had himself undergone similar torments.[15]

The church would have reinforced this emphasis upon God's identification with suffering humanity through the cross by means of ritual and in the priest's celebration of the mass. As Christopher Irvine observes regarding the posture of Mary Magdalene in the Isenheim Altarpiece,

> What I am suggesting is that the way the figure of Mary Magdalene is painted is an answering pose to the indicative declaration of the Baptist, and that the gestural language of her raised hands is a gesture of supplication. Specifically, the visual pose strikes the supplicatory cry of Agnus Dei at the Eucharist: Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on me. The painted figure of the kneeling Magdalene, in other words, shows the viewer, whether it is the Brother of the Order of St. Antony or a hospital patient worshipping in the church, how they are to respond to the declaratory witness of the Baptist as a worshipper at the Mass. The viewer is the worshipper who is here being invited to worship the paschal Lamb who was slain and yet who lives forever, and who wipes away every tear of suffering.[16]

The crucifix, whether showing Christ as Lord and conqueror over sin, death, and hell, or as the one who suffered so that God's mercy might be proclaimed and revealed, is a symbol laden with layers of meaning and significance. The cross is the mystery of God indeed.

Inscribing the Victorious Cross (Again)

The Lutheran reformers appreciated the symbolic mystery of the cross. In contrast to the primarily ritually visualized inscribing of the cross during the medieval period, the Reformation period returned to earlier forms of inscription. The cross, which the church inscribed in the earliest centuries primarily in non-visual ways especially through the experience and hearing of ritual, now returned as a ritual experience united to the hearing of the word. The rebirth of congregational song allowed the assembly of believers to inscribe the cross through poetry set to music that captivated the hearts and emotions of believers. Paul Gerhardt's "Upon the Cross Extended" (LSB 453) extols for the believer the personal inscription of the justification of the cross upon the life of the believer:

> Your soul in griefs unbounded,
> Your head with thorns surrounded,
> You died to ransom me.
> The cross for me enduring,
> The crown for me securing,
> You healed my wounds and set me free.

Redemption of the suffering ones through him who suffered is united to the cross as a symbol of victory.

This victorious cross revealed itself in ritual experience in the context of art in addition to music. The Reformers constituted the Lord's Supper as a ritual experience through which the crucified and risen body of the incarnate Son of God was received as forgiveness, life, and salvation because of the word of the cross that Jesus himself attached to it: "Take, eat, this is my body. Take, drink, this is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). Eating Christ's body and blood is to participate, by virtue of the word of Jesus, in the fruits of the cross. Central among those fruits is victory over death.

In this painting *(Figure 17)* Lucas Cranach the Elder draws us into this victory by placing himself, looking the worshipper square in the face, between John the Baptist and

(Figure 17. Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

(Figure 18. Photo: Museo Nacional de Arte)

Martin Luther. And the blood of Christ that most often pours into a cup, pours directly on Cranach's head. Christ's blood, which we consume in the Supper, cleanses us from all sin. Through it we participate in Christ's victory, represented through the slaying of the dragon and the trampling of death. In Paul's words, "as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." We proclaim his death, his cross, as the basis for his rule and reign that is coming.

The Inculturated Cross

The church has inscribed the symbol of the cross upon the baptized for centuries in ritual, visual, proclaimed, and tactile ways. In various ways all of the senses have been involved. Through such multisensory means the church has inscribed upon the baptized the power of the cross as a symbol of God's way of faith and life. For the cross to continue to exercise its formative symbolic power in our own day we must continue to inculturate it into symbolic representations that facilitate people's experience of it as the way by which we are at peace with God. Modern non-Western artistic representations of the cross manifest the wisdom and power of God in new ways that communicate in cultural forms familiar to those of other places and cultures.

For example, this painting of Jesus at the pillar by Mexican muralist painter David Siqueiros reveals a Jesus strong and purposeful, even in the midst of great suffering and anguish inflicted by human beings *(Figure 18)*. His tightly linked hands extend his strength and unity of purpose within the circle of God's love to the participant viewing this piece of art. We experience the wisdom and power of the cross in multicultural fresh avenues.

Christians must continue to make use of formative rituals that inscribe the cross through as many of the senses as possible including touch, smell, and taste. One ancient ritual that engages a number of the senses is the rite of anointing in baptism and for healing. Here the cross as the life-giving victory of Christ is experienced as the renewal of the body through oil that refreshes and that smells fragrant and restorative. The physical experience of the cross inscribed through oil is surrounded by the stories of the anointing of Jesus for burial. The anointed one is the one who died and was raised to new life, the scent of the resurrection now seeping into the bodies of the baptized.

While the symbol of the cross will continue to be polyvalent without restraint in its use in society writ large, there is a rich symbolic matrix of meaning within the context of the church's use.

This is true even for the cross tattooed or inscribed on the wrists *(Figure 19)*. In this case, the arms are those of Coptic Christians. As one article notes,

> Yet for Egypt's embattled Coptic Christian minority, tattoos aren't a fashion statement but rather an indelible, and defiant, mark of their faith. In effect, the small black cross tattoo that virtually every Copt wears is a visible reminder that in an overwhelmingly Muslim society, they represent the "other." They're not just a symbol, but also a form of ID. For safety reasons, many churches station security personnel at their doors to check that those entering have the tattoo as a guarantee that they are in fact, Christians. The tattoos are an especially bold sign in a country where Copts and other Christians routinely complain of persecution and harassment both from radical Islamic movements and also elements within the police and security forces.[17]

The symbol of the cross tattooed becomes the very way of Christian life.

As Robin Jensen concludes, "So long as Christians continue to ponder the meaning of Christ's crucifixion and to sing about it, wear images of it, or install it in their worship environments, the cross will never become irrelevant or trivial. Rather, the cross will continue to project significant valence, both positive and negative depending on where or when it turns up, how it is used, what it looks like and who sees it."[18]

I guess we shouldn't be surprised for it is of the cross of Christ that Paul proclaimed, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

(Figure 19. Photo: copticorphans.org)

Endnotes

1 Herbert Brokering, ed., *Luther's Prayers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), 65–66.
2 Christopher Irvine, *The Cross and Creation in Christian Liturgy and Art,* Alcuin Club Collections 88 (London: SPCK, 2013), xvii.
3 Online the reader can access three additional cross images—two body piercings and a full back tattoo—which are even more ambiguous. With these there is the potential that the bearer is trying to communicate to her/himself and others that they are living a cruciform way of life. The words of Isaiah may be their confession: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." Yet, outside of any clear contextual parameters that is only one of many possibilities. The full back tattoo is, in many ways, an inscribed icon. While there is significant ambiguity, much of it due to the nature of the lack of definition in a tattoo, including its movement on the human body, the central image is unmistakable: the crucified Jesus and a representation of the narrative of judgment and salvation that issues from his crucifixion. Also online are three very public symbols, ubiquitous on American roads, makeshift memorials marking the site where someone was killed in a traffic accident. Usually the memorial contains a cross surrounded by various remembrances and symbols of the mourning of family and friends. The second image even appears like a gravesite, although the person's body presumably is not there. The last one is unique because it symbolizes not only the memorial of the person's death, but the way they died and the profound loss, lament, and probably anger of those who lost their only child at the hands of a drunk driver. And here the cross is part of a message that is intended to curb deadly behavior. With all of these slides the context clearly indicates that the cross has something to do with the reasons for and the consequences of death and how those who mourn attend to the death of a loved one. Yet, even here the story in which the experience of death is encountered is not transparent. The symbol retains a significant amount of ambiguity.
4 Robin Jensen, *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 23–24.
5 See Jacopo Tintoretto's living and powerful Jesus, with light emanating from his cross in the images on concordiatheology.org.
6 Irvine, 72.
7 See the image on concordiatheology.org of the graffiti of a Christian worshipping a donkey nailed to a cross, probably dated to the second century. Jews and pagans accused Christians of worshipping a donkey god. Such was the derision attached by non-Christians to the worship of a crucified Savior.
8 Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 119.
9 Aidan Kavanagh, "A Rite of Passage" in Gabe Huck, *The Three Days: Parish Prayer in the Paschal Triduum* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 175. Emphasis author.
10 See additional images of early baptismal pools at concordiatheology.org.
11 Jensen, 69.
12 See also other images from St. Apollinare and from the Basilica of Saint Pudenziana, Rome, at concordiatheology.org.
13 See also similar images from the fifth-century wooden panel from the door of Rome's Saint Sabina church and the sixth-century Gospel book from Rabbula on concordiatheology.org.
14 Jensen, 151.
15 Jensen, 177–178.
16 Irvine, 20.
17 https://cruxnow.com/faith/2015/06/27/tattoos-arent-just-a-fashion-statement-for-egypts-copts/
18 Jensen, 221.

The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything

Joel P. Okamoto

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The "word of the cross" has become a catchphrase for talking about how and why Jesus Christ died. It often means the message about Christ's death reconciling God and sinners.

But his death matters to more than understanding and appreciating atonement. It matters to how we understand and appreciate Christ's identity and mission. Since God sent Christ to establish his everlasting kingdom over all things, his death on the cross matters to how we understand God and creation, that is, everything.

Recognizing this matters because today Christians must answer questions and objections they didn't have to take seriously when Christians had secure positions in society and culture. These questions and objections can touch on core matters, like the identity of God and the truth of the Christian message and teaching. Once we begin to respond, it becomes clear that we need to do more than defend the usual answers and positions. We need to think once again about the entire Christian existence, and then learn to live accordingly.

When we think again, we should subject everything to examination. This does not mean assuming the worst about Christian life, witness, and theology, but it does mean not taking anything for granted. This includes our account of Jesus' death, that is, the word of the cross. What does his death look like and mean when we think in terms of witnessing to God and his creation, that is, in terms of the "Christian story of everything"?

Editor's note

This essay was first presented at the 2018 Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis.

As you read

Thinking about the "Christian story of everything" or the "Bible's account of God and his creation" does not come naturally to most Christians. Why? Because they already have some idea of the Christian story of everything, and they make use of it all the time. For instance, in a sermon on Revelation a preacher said, "And then we will go up to the New Jerusalem." At this, one of my kids picked himself off of the floor (he had been drawing) and whispered, "Dad! Dad!" I told him to be quiet, but he insisted. So I asked him what he wanted to say. "The pastor—he's wrong. We don't go up to the New Jerusalem. It comes down to us, right?" He had some idea of the Christian story of everything, and when he heard something that contradicted that story, he noticed. All Christians are like that. They already have a story of everything they think *with*. So it is unnatural to think *about* one's own story of everything.

For some time I have tried to talk about the Christian story of everything, and to consider theology in view of a story of everything. It is a new idea for most Christians, so I haven't worried too much about misunderstandings or indifference. But recently I realized that I am frequently misunderstood. Some think that I am proposing that we frame our preaching, teaching, and theology in a larger story. I am, but the Christian story of everything isn't just any story. Others think that the story should contain themes that we want in it—teachings and values that we want to highlight. The accent falls in the wrong place. The story contains themes that *we should want* in it, because it is the Christian story of everything. A few have concluded that I want to substitute this story for the Scriptures as rule and norm. This is simply wrong. I argue that the Scriptures as rule and norm lead us to conclude that this story in the Scriptures is the true account of God and his creation.

As I said, I have realized this only recently. My experience was a little like that of Eric Mazur, a professor of physics at Harvard. He had begun his career teaching as he had been taught, with lectures and demonstrations. It seemed to be working well, because his students rewarded him with high marks on their evaluations.[1] Then Mazur came across articles arguing that college students learned little from their physics courses.[2] They concluded this from results of a test that checked students' understanding of basic physics concepts. Mazur tried the test on his own students. As the test began, a student raised her hand and asked, "How should I answer these questions—according to what you taught me, or how I usually think about these things?"[3] Her question made Mazur suspect that *his* students were not learning any physics (and the test results proved that), because physics is not about what a teacher or a student *thinks* the world is like but about what the world *is* like.

I don't want you to make this kind of mistake about the Christian story of everything. This doesn't mean that my proposal is necessarily right. Take it for what it is—a proposal about the true account of God and his creation. To help with this, remember these two points as you read:

1. This is not about you or me. This is about everything.
   "Everything" does not mean we will discuss literally every last thing, it means we will discuss how we should talk about everything. So this is not about you or me. So, as you read, ask yourself, "Is *this* right?" Don't dwell on any particular feature, but consider whether the whole thing makes sense.
2. This is not about you or me. This is about all of us.
   I am proposing a version of the Christian story of everything. *I* am proposing it, but I am proposing it on behalf of all of us. This is not merely Okamoto's idea. I am proposing it as *ours*. This is something public, something catholic, and something objective. So, as you read, ask yourself, "What do *we* do now?" Don't ask, "What should Okamoto do?" or "What should *I* do?" Ask about what this means for *all* of us. Perhaps you will think, "This whole thing is wrong." Then you should suggest how we rethink the whole thing. Perhaps you will think, "This seems right." Then you should suggest a course of action for all of us to take. In any case, as you think about this, try to think for and on behalf of all of us.

This is about everything. But everything is up for grabs.

Why is thinking about the Christian story of everything important? The contemporary situation requires it. We need to consider our account of everything, because we live in times when everything is up for grabs.

To say "everything is up for grabs" means more than that all sorts of things are up for grabs, as common and as unsettling as this is. In our churches, pastors and congregants increasingly wonder, "Who is a 'regular member'?" In the past, a "regular member" was someone who attended worship services almost every week. But those members are becoming fewer and fewer. The idea of "regular membership" is up for grabs, along with everything in church life that assumes regular participation. In our society, marriage, sexual identity, and civil discourse are only a few of the notions that are discussed and debated today. All sorts of things are up for grabs.

When I say "everything is up for grabs," however, I mean that there are different accounts of everything that we all face and we all have to deal with. Accounts of everything include different religions—Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism—and different philosophies—idealism, materialism and scientism. For example, Vedantic Hindus propose: "Reality is one. It is invisible, immaterial, infinite, and spiritual. The world of ordinary experience, of you and me, of time and space, of change and decay, of life and death, of matter and energy, is ultimately illusory." This is an account of everything. Christians have a different account of everything: "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." That is an account of everything, too. We live in a situation where we not only know about other accounts of everything, but they are alive and well and they matter to us. Perhaps they matter to us personally, because we know a Buddhist or we

know someone contemplating Hinduism. But in any event, ours is a situation where people live according to different accounts of everything. With Hinduism, Buddhism, idealism, materialism, scientism, and so on, everything is up for grabs. Each of them offers a distinct account of everything—including how to explain away Christianity and Christians.

Until recently, Christians have not had to account for everything. We could acknowledge the existence of other religions and philosophies, but they did not matter for everyday life. They did not matter for evangelism or catechesis, for preaching or the administration of the sacraments or pastoral care. But now they do. They did not matter for Christian identity—what it means to be a Christian. But now they do.

So how might we proceed? What kind of approach should we take? Our comparison of Hindu and Christian accounts of everything has already shown the way. This approach is in line with William Willimon:

> A Christian and a Buddhist differ, not because one is sincere and the other is not, nor because one is necessarily a "better person" than the other. We differ because we have listened to different stories, lived our lives by different words. While there may be certain similarities among people of different religions, they will be different because their sacred writings are different, because they have attended to different accounts of the way the world is put together.[4]

If we want to take seriously the notion that there are "different accounts of the way the world is put together," then we should ask ourselves honestly and unsentimentally: What does it mean for Christians to account for the way the world is put together? To move toward a faithful answer, we will take up three questions:

1. What is the Christian story of everything?
2. What justifies this rendering?
3. What does it imply for Christian life and witness, especially for preaching Christ crucified?

The Christian story of everything

Once again, keep in mind the two points made earlier:

> This is not about you or me. This is about everything.
> This is not about you or me. This is about all of us.

To the first point, "everything" here means "God and creation." And thinking about everything means we have should be willing to seek honest, straightforward answers for every question. This includes those for which there seem to be settled answers, like "Who is God?" and "Why did Jesus die?"

To the second point, the account given here is meant to be public not private; catholic not sectarian; objective not subjective. This account is something to propose to another person, "This is why *you* should be a Christian," or "This is how *you* should see things," not merely how *I* see things. But to be "public" or "objective" means listening to the Bible. To be "public" or "objective" means looking for how the Bible conveys its own story.

You can see how the Bible conveys its own *story from places where it conveys* its *stories.*

Looking for how the Bible conveys its own story is not entirely straightforward. There is no passage that begins: "The Bible's story is . . ." We want to try to take the Bible on its own terms. However, this means reckoning with the fact that we could construct several stories from the stories and motifs given in the Old and New Testaments (to say nothing of the many interests and values of readers). The story of Jesus Christ alone comes in four distinct accounts. In view of this diversity, some will even say that the Bible does not convey a single overarching story. But what does the church tell us? The church's life and witness tells us there is such a story. For example, the ecumenical Creeds show that the church lives according to a certain story. That story begins with God making all things. It continues with Jesus Christ bringing redemption and the kingdom of God. He was born of Mary, crucified, raised from the dead, and ascended into heaven. The church's story looks forward to a glorious end when Christ comes again, with the resurrection of the dead, everlasting life, and the kingdom that has no end. Evangelism and apologetics, catechesis and dogmatics, worship and pastoral care through the ages have always worked with a similar account of the universe.

But the Creeds do not tell the Bible's story of everything as much as give us key features of this story. Anyone who has read the Bible knows that the Creeds leave out a great deal. We are left with this fundamental question: How does the Bible convey its own story?

The answer turns out to be surprisingly simple: "By doing it." You can see how the Bible conveys its *own* story from places where it conveys *its* stories. This is a matter of Scripture interpreting Scripture. There are passages where the Scriptures are interpreting themselves. They include:

> Psalm 105; Psalm 106; Psalm 136; 2 Kings 17; Nehemiah 9
> Matthew 1–2, 4, 11, 13, 21–22, 27–28
> Luke 1–2, 4, 20, 23–24
> Acts 2, 3, 4, 10, 13, 17

I first realized this with the preaching in Acts. What Peter does on Pentecost, in the temple, and before the rulers; what Peter does in Cornelius's house; and

The parable of the wicked tenants as illustrated in the Codex Aureus Epternacensis, an illuminated Gospel Book produced at the Abbey of Echternach (Luxembourg) in the 11th century.

what Paul does on Mars Hill—these instances of preaching the gospel are examples of how the apostles understood and conveyed what they had seen and heard. But Luke had already conveyed what had happened in and through Jesus Christ. So we can understand that Luke gives us instances of Scripture interpreting Scripture. Moreover, and important for our purpose, these instances recapitulate a story. Jesus does something similar in some of his parables. In the parable of the Sower and the Seed, Jesus talks about his ministry of preaching the gospel. Most of Jesus's parables went right by most of his hearers, but one parable that everybody understood was the parable of the Wicked Tenants. Here Jesus interprets what had been going on, and relating that he would be rejected and killed, and that judgment would fall on those who killed him. Again, these are instances of Scripture interpreting Scripture,

and they relate to us how the Bible tells its own story. Mary's song and Zechariah's song are likewise examples of Scripture interpreting Scripture, and from them we find how the Bible tells its own story. There are Old Testament passages that do the same. Psalm 136: "O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endures forever." This psalm tells about Israel's God and relates what he had done. In 2 Kings 17 the author summarizes the story of how and why Israel had come to such a bad end. For us, however, the most important instance comes in Nehemiah 9. This comes at the end of the Old Testament age after Israel had had the kingdom, lost the kingdom, and now had returned to the promised land but under foreign domination.

So what is this story? And why does this rendering make sense? Let's start with the beginning. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." When you

Some believed in Jesus, but others would not.

read the first chapter of Genesis, you read about God making all things. God said, "Let there be light." And there was light, just as God said, and he saw that the light was good. When I tell this story for Sunday school, I say, "This is cool." And so on and so forth, the universe comes into being. There are the sun and the moon and the stars. There are the fish and the birds and all the creeping things that creepeth. There are human beings. And every time God makes something, it is good. And at the end, how does the account go? When God is finished with his work, he looked upon all he had done. God, who, if the Scriptures are any indication, is not easily impressed, looks out and says, "This is really good." That's the beginning of the story.

Then evil and sin enter God's creation. The serpent deceives the woman and the man. What does God do? Think about it, God has created this universe. This wonderful universe. This unfathomably huge, complex, beautiful, it-all-works-together universe. And then evil and sin enter it. So the sin of Adam and Eve does not amount simply to disobeying the Creator, which is bad enough. They were messing with creation itself, tearing the fabric of the wonderful universe God had made.

So what does God do? God does what you would do. God curses. And when God curses it's not like saying "Shoot!" or "Darn it!" He curses the ground. He curses the woman. And he really curses that serpent. But cursing is not God's last word. God also promised redemption.

According to the book of Genesis, first, they eat from the wrong tree. Then one son kills another son. And then there is murder and mayhem and all kinds of disobedience and wickedness. God sends a flood. The people decide to prepare for the next flood and they try to build a tower.

At that point, the story turns to Abraham and to his descendants. This is how God will make all things new. The story of God and his redemption starts to run through Abraham and Israel. God calls Abraham and sends him to the land of promise and blessing. He promises wonderful things for him and for his offspring and for all the nations. Israel goes down to Egypt, and they are enslaved. When God hears their cries, he delivers them. He takes them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. God establishes a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. God kills kings and overthrows nations, and he gives Israel their land. He puts them in the place that was promised for them. When the people want a king, God gives them a king, too.

But that is not enough for the people. The people rebel and disobey; God punishes them, and they repent. But the cycle continues. Over and over the people are rebellious. They defy God. They do not listen to the prophets he sent to them.

So ultimately there is for Israel defeat and exile. Not only is the kingdom divided, but the northern kingdom—the ten tribes—is conquered and taken away and never heard of again. For the southern kingdom, Judah, there is exile. And even when the remnant returns, they are still under foreign domination. They live in the land that

God promised, but they are not living in the *promised* land. The land belongs to someone else.

The people of God recognize their plight. This long confession, recorded in Nehemiah 9, of God, creation, and Israel ends with a confession of their sin and its consequences: "Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress" (Neh 9:36–37). As the familiar hymn goes:

> O come, O come Emmanuel,
> And ransom captive Israel,
> That mourns in lonely exile here,
> Until the Son of God appear.

The good news comes to Israel when the angel announces to Joseph: "She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). God has heard again the cries of his people and is set on delivering them. The angel tells Mary: "And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (Lk 1:33 KJV). The angel tells the shepherd: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:11–12). The chosen people of God have their redeemer, their savior. This is the good news. For God and his people, there will be good things, great things.

That is what happened at Jesus's birth. After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus begins to preach: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus preaches as the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus preaches as the answer to the prayers of God's people. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he says, quoting Isaiah. And then he announces, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk 4:18, 21). He also teaches about the kingdom of heaven: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to . . ." "The reign of God is like . . ." And not only does Jesus announce and teach about the kingdom of God, he begins to bring it about. He inaugurates God's rule and reign over all things. When John sends a couple of disciples to Jesus, they ask him: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Mt 11:3) Jesus tells them to go back to John and tell him what they had heard and seen: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Mt 11:5). This is the coming of the kingdom of God.

But this was the problem. Some believed in Jesus, but others would not. To the question, "Could this be the Son of David?" those who did not believe answered, "No, of course not. He casts out demons by the prince of demons." In this way he is rejected. As Jesus himself said in the parable of the Wicked Tenants: "And they

took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him" (Mt 21:39). There were servants and other servants. The tenants dealt with them badly. Then comes the son, and the tenants take him and kill him. They did as Jesus knew they would and as Jesus said they would. "If you are the King of the Jews," his enemies taunt him on the cross, "save yourself!" (Lk 23:37) The people who rejected Jesus understood plainly who he claimed to be and what he claimed to be doing. They simply did not believe him. How does Jesus die? What is the charge written over his head? "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." They taunt him in this way. They mock him in this way. And Jesus dies on the cross.

But Jesus came back. Jesus rose from the dead. Peter, preaching on Pentecost, said: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Peter's message amounted to this: "Let's be clear: you messed with the wrong guy. Amen." It is the same way when Peter says: "This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:11–12).

And after he rose from the dead, Jesus tells the disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:18–20). He told the disciples: "repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [my] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47).

Luke confirms this in the beginning of his account of the Acts of the Apostles. He relates how Jesus was with the disciples for forty days after he rose from the dead. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God. And after forty days, the disciples understand. So they ask, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). He tells them that this was not for them to know. Instead he instructs them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

And then Jesus goes away. He ascends into the heavens. Angels appear and ask the disciples, "Why are you looking up into the heavens?" The answer was, "Well, the kingdom of God just went away. The ruler of the universe just left." The good news when Jesus ascended into heaven was: "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). And when he does return, he will finish what he started. And then it will be really, really good.

This is a rendering of the biblical story of everything. It could be told in different ways, just as the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been told in different ways. But it would be still be the same God, the same Jesus, the same ministry, the same death, the same resurrection, the same return. It could be told with different kinds of themes, and this is only one version of the story, but it is a version of a single story. It is a story about God and creation. Human creatures have a special place in the story, and the story is

addressed to human creatures. But the story is about God and all that he has made, and all that he will make new in and through Jesus Christ.

Is this right? What justifies this rendering?

If this or any rendering of the Bible's story of God and creation claims to be "public" or "official" or "catholic" or "objective," then it needs a particular kind of justification. It needs reasons that all Christians can recognize and identify with. Here are four.

1. *This rendering of the story tracks with how the Bible tells its own story.* I discussed this reason already. This way of telling the Christian story of everything derives from and goes along with how the Scriptures tells the story of God and creation, especially those places where Scripture is clearly interpreting Scripture. It is worth noting how closely Old Testament passages that summarize the story, like Psalm 136 and Nehemiah 9, relate to each other, and also to the Gospels and Acts.
2. *This rendering of the story is congruent with the Creeds.* I also discussed this reason earlier. The Creeds relate key features of a story about God and creation. The account rendered here is the kind of account that gives rise to the contours and contents of the Creeds.
3. *This rendering of the story makes sense of the Christian life.* These first two reasons pertain to acknowledged Christian rules and norms. Any candidate for the Christian story of everything should fit together with the Scriptures and the Creeds. But it should also fit with Christian practice and Christian theology. It should make sense of the Christian life, both as a church and in individual lives. It also should make sense of the Christian body of doctrine—not only its contents, but also the questions and problems that give rise to the doctrine.

   This version of the story makes sense of the church practices like evangelism, baptism, and catechesis. People who hear the story and believe it are then incorporated into it as God's people through baptism. They will become those who will readily think, "Other people should hear this. If the end of the world is coming, and there is going to be judgment, I think I should share that." And for those who hear their witness and are struck by the story, who wonder, "What should I do now?" the answer is straightforward—and comes straight from the story itself: Repent, be baptized, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, keep all he has commanded, look for him to return in glory.

   In similar ways, the story gives rise to what the church should preach and teach, to the public worship of the church and the administration of the means of grace. For example, this story explains the means of grace.

   This rendering of the story also makes sense of the lives of individual Christians, because the story itself leads Christians to their identity and their life. The Catechisms of the Creed already do this. From the beginning of the story, God being the Creator means that Christians understand themselves as creatures

and live as creatures. "God has made me and all creatures. . . . He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. . . . He defends me against all danger. . . . For which it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey him." From this, too, the ideas of station and vocation also make sense. Jesus Christ being Lord and coming to bring the Kingdom of God means that the Christians also understand themselves as "His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."[6]

4. *This rendering of the story makes sense of Christian doctrine.* The story accounts not only for the content of doctrine. The story often helps to explain the topic or the problem that the doctrine addresses. For example, the story makes sense of why there is a doctrine of the Trinity, as well as its content. The story that tells of one God who created all things, but then tells of this one God sending his Son into the world, raises the questions and occasions the problems addressed by the doctrine. If there is one God, and Jesus is his Son, what is their relationship? Is the Son simply the one God in another form or mode? Is the Son another God? Is the Son a created being? The story calls for God and his Son to be distinct persons—not one person in two different modes of existence. But the story also calls for God and his Son to be one God—not two Gods or one God and one creature. And so Christians came to confess and "worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance."[7] Along the same lines, questions about Jesus arose because the story shows him both to be the Son of God and the child of Mary. How was it that he was born? How was it that he died? Such questions give enduring relevance to the doctrine of the incarnation, and they are questions arising from the story. Apart from the story, such questions could have only academic value. Distinctively Lutheran teachings also are rooted in the story. For instance, the story shows all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus. He will be the judge of the living and the dead. Do we have to wait until the end to know whether he will justify us? No. For this, Christ instituted baptism. Baptism is justification—our justification. It puts us in the right with God, and it happens purely by grace. Justification comes to us apart from anything we do or are. And it gives us "something to believe."[8] It is ours simply through faith. Justification is by grace through faith, all on account of Jesus Christ. That kind of thing—this kind of justification—will make your day. It will change your life. If you wondered where you stood before God, and then

Our entire identity as Christians and everything that we are in our lives are implicated with Jesus Christ and him crucified.

you were made a child of God, well, that would be great! You would be great! And so we say, "Sanctification always follows justification." It just does. This rendering of the story gives rise to the kinds of questions out of which comes our body of doctrine.

Other renderings of the Christian story of everything are certainly possible, but all valid versions must contain these four features:

1. Track with how the Bible tells its own story.
2. Be congruent with the Creeds.
3. Make sense of the Christian life.
4. Make sense of Christian doctrine.

The Word of the Cross in View of the Christian Story of Everything

How does the Christian story of everything affect how we think of Christ's death on the cross? How does it matter to the "word of the cross"? Christians often think about Christ's death as atoning the "word of the cross" as the message of reconciliation through Christ's death. The story of everything, however, shows us that Christ's death matters to more than how we think about atonement. His death bears on everything; it bears on God and his creation. When Christ came into the world, he came as the King of Israel, as the Lord of all, as the Son of God. These are huge claims. They bear on everything. The idea that there is a god—a creator—and the knowledge of who God is are found in and through Jesus. The nature and destiny of the universe are found in and through Jesus. But this also poses a huge problem. God makes himself known and God works out all things in and through Jesus of Nazareth. When Jesus delivered his "bread of life" discourse (Jn 6), the people found him to be the problem. They must have been telling each other: "Isn't that Joseph and Mary's oldest boy? Didn't one of your kids go to high school with him? How can he be saying, 'I have come down from heaven'?" God makes himself known and God works out all things in and through Jesus of *Nazareth*. They found it impossible to believe in his day, in his very presence. Many in our day find it hard to believe, too. In his day, Jesus insisted. He didn't back down. So he was rejected, and he was crucified.

The death of Jesus was no accident. No one was accidentally crucified. One had to do something to be put through the pain and shame of the cross. Jesus did it. His willingness to endure the cross shows, as much as anything can, how he believed about himself, his mission, and his God. He went all the way. He "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil 2:8 KJV).

Then God raised Jesus from the dead. He showed that Jesus truly is the King of Israel, the Lord of all, his one and only Son. God showed that Jesus's word is the word of God, and his works are the works of God.

The "word of the cross" in this context stands for the message about all that

God did through Jesus Christ. The "word of the cross" includes Jesus's identity and mission. They led to his suffering and death, and God vindicated them when he raised Jesus. His death has to do with why everything we believe, teach, confess, do, live for, and are willing to die for, is true and right. So his death does not simply pertain to "everything" in the sense of all creation, but also to everything that we are. Our entire identity as Christians and everything that we are in our lives are implicated with Jesus Christ and him crucified. The story of everything calls on us to put the rejection, suffering, and crucifixion of Christ—and also his resurrection on the third day—over against all of the questions and objections that might be put to us as Christians.

So "Christ crucified" and the "word of the cross" can and should stand for more than Christ and his atoning death on the cross.

At this point, someone will ask: "How does atonement arise at all from the story of everything? As I followed the story, Jesus's death is not atoning." The point is well taken. The account of God and creation outlined here does not exclude that belief in Jesus's death atoned for sins, but atonement in this sense does not drive the story.

Before I explain, let me take care of this question, too: "How can you do this?" My response is that I am not doing this. I am following the Scriptures as rule and norm. We all should. This is not about you or me—your salvation or mine. This is about everything—God and his creation. If you wish to object, then these are the terms. And this is not about you or me—your idea of what is right or mine. This is about all of us—what Christians as Christians should think right. If you want to challenge, do so on behalf of all of us.

This is not to deny nor to minimize Jesus's death as an atoning sacrifice. Once you see that Jesus Christ came and fulfilled all God's promises, it is easy to see that his blood shed on the cross is like the blood of a lamb at Passover, except more. His blood is like the blood of the covenant sprinkled upon the people (Ex 24), except more. His blood is like the blood of bulls and goats shed for sins, except more.

But you must see and believe that he came and fulfilled all God's promises. This was only clear after he rose from the dead. This is true even before his death when Jesus spoke about himself. When Jesus told the Jews who challenged him for driving the sellers and money-changers out of the temple, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," he was speaking about himself—the temple of his own body (Jn 2:18–21). But the Evangelist relates that this was clear only after he rose from the dead: 'When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word Jesus had spoken" (Jn 2:22). In the same way, it was evident that Jesus did not observe the Law of Moses strictly. He touched a leper and a corpse, and he praised the faith of an unclean woman who touched him. He even declared all foods clean (Mk 7:19). But such things led to his crucifixion (Gal 3:13), not to recognizing that he was the end of the law (Rom 10:4). This only happened after he rose from the dead. Jesus was reviled for eating with tax collectors and sinners, and he was worshipped by magi from the East as an infant and

sought after by Gentiles in his ministry—even a Canaanite woman. These were hardly fitting for the King of the Jews and the Son of God—until he rose from the dead. The idea that Jews and Gentiles would form one people of God who lived by faith apart from works of the law was unthinkable—until he rose from the dead.

But Christ's resurrection would not have changed everything had Christ not come and died for everything. If Christ had not come to bring God's rule and reign over all things, if he had not been rejected for doing this, if he had not been crucified, then his resurrection would not have meant that everything had changed. But Christ did come to bring God's kingdom, to redeem his creation. He was rejected and crucified for this work, but God raised him from the dead and exalted him in the heavens. And so everything—in the sense of God and his creation—takes its meaning and significance in light of Christ crucified and raised. Certainly this includes the sacrifices of Passover and for atonement. Certainly this includes even more.

In today's situation, "Christ crucified" and the "word of the cross" should stand for more than his atoning death, because in today's situation, everything is up for grabs. "Jesus" is the key to all our answers, as he always has been. But how are we to preach, teach, and understand him today? The crucifixion of Jesus is the key for understanding, believing, proclaiming, and teaching his identity as the Son of God and his mission to redeem and rule over God's people and over all God's creation. He came to redeem all God had made. It had gone wrong when evil and sin and death entered the world. But God resolved to make all things new. Through Jesus, God did. By itself, this is not good news. It is a message of impending judgment. So the message of the church is, first, "Repent!" The good news is that God offers life and salvation to all who believe in Jesus, all who trust in him, all who look to him.

And this is why it makes such good sense to say with Paul: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

Endnotes

1 Emily Hanford, "Physicists Seek to Lose the Lecture as Teaching Tool," *America Public Media*, 1 January 2012, https://www.npr.org/2012/01/01/144550920/physicists-seek-to-lose-the-lecture-as-teaching-tool. See also Craig Lambert, "Twilight of the Lecture," *Harvard Magazine* 114, no. 4 (2012): 23.

2 See Ibrahim Abou Halloun and David Hestenes, "The Initial Knowledge State of College Students," *American Journal of Physics* 53 (1985): 1043–1048; Halloun and Hestenes, "Common Sense Concepts about Physics," *American Journal of Physics* 53 (1985): 1056–1065; and Hestenes, "Toward a Modeling Theory of Instruction," *American Journal of Physics* 55 (1987): 440–454. See also Lambert, "Twilight of the Lecture," 23.

3 Lambert, "Twilight of the Lecture," 23.

4 William H. Willimon, *Shaped by the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 12–13.

5 Small Catechism, Explanation to the First Article, from *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 16.

6 Ibid., 17.

7 The Athanasian Creed, from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 24. David Maxwell in "The Nicene Creed in the Church" [*Concordia Journal* 41 (2015): 13–22] made a similar point about the development of the Nicene Creed, and more generally about the importance of the story for doctrine in his section, "The Creed as Plot Summary of the Bible": "Whenever a text is interpreted, it must be interpreted within the larger narrative of which it is a part. . . . So, the meaning of the resurrection comes not from the event itself, but the role that the event plays in the larger story. Therefore, it is crucial to know what the larger story is. One way to think of the difference between the Arians and the Nicenes is that they are operating with different versions of the biblical story" (16–17).

8 "Faith must have something to believe—something to which may cling and upon which it may stand. Thus faith clings to the water and believes it to be baptism, in which there is sheer salvation and life." The Large Catechism, Fourth Part: Baptism, par. 29, from *The Book of Concord*, 460.

Homiletical Helps

Anatomy of a Sermon
Introducing a New Series

David Schmitt

Preaching is a complex art. Reading books on homiletical theory is one way to grow in the art of preaching. But, so often, when I'm reading a homiletics text, I wonder, "what would that look like in practice?"

Listening to other preachers is another way to grow. But, so often, when listening to a sermon we come across something that we like but we are not able to put it into words. That is, we lack a conversation partner who can help us process what is happening in the sermon that makes it effective for us.

For years, we have offered the *Preacher's Studio* at *concordiatheology.org* as an opportunity for preachers to listen in on a conversation with a preacher. You are able to listen to the sermon and then listen in on an interview where two preachers sit and explore what was happening in the sermon.

Now, we are offering the *Anatomy of a Sermon*. Selected sermons will be printed in full with a running homiletical commentary on what is happening in the sermon. While not as personal as one-on-one conversation, the *Anatomy of a Sermon* offers readers the opportunity to read the sermons of others and reflect homiletically on the practice of preaching.

You are invited to read through the sermon once, without the commentary. Get a sense of its flow. Let yourself respond to the sermon in light of your experience of preaching. What do you appreciate? Why? What would you do differently? Why?

Then read through the sermon a second time, pausing to read the commentary. The commentary is not meant to be an authoritative pronouncement upon the sermon. It has not been written in conversation with the preacher (for that you can watch the *Preacher's Studio*). The commentary instead is simply a homiletical reflection on the sermon, identifying choices that the preacher is making, and offering ideas that you may want to put into practice the next time you preach.

Anatomy of a Sermon
A Pentecost Sermon by Peter Nafzger

David Schmitt

From the editor: In the following analysis, the actual sermon by Peter Nafzger is represented in italic type, which you can read all at once by following the gray bars in the margin. David Schmitt's analysis is interspersed in regular type. You can view Dr. Nafzger's sermon at https://scholar.csl.edu/cs1718/124/. The outer margins are set wider to provide space for taking notes.

The following sermon, "The Christian Life of Possession by the Spirit," was preached by the Rev. Dr. Peter Nafzger in chapel at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis on May 16, 2018. The service was the observation of Pentecost.

Sometimes we have trouble imagining our relationship with the Holy Spirit. We don't have the problem with the Father. We are familiar with fatherhood. Likewise, with Jesus. His humanity makes him relatable. But the Spirit? Our relationship with the Spirit is more . . . ambiguous.

Sometimes we think about the Spirit as a gift. Peter spoke that way at Pentecost. "You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2).

Sometimes we think about the Spirit as a helper. Jesus used that language in the upper room. "I will send you another Helper," he said (John 15).

Sometimes we think about the Spirit as a guide. Jesus told the disciples, "He will guide you into all the truth" (John 16).

Preaching to Christians on major festivals can be difficult. Our hearers have been to these celebrations before and they know the basic teachings that will be covered. They can anticipate what we will say. For the preacher, this is a challenge. How do you preach when everyone knows what you will say?

Some preachers begin by trying to find something new. They want to

reveal something that has not been preached before and the sermon sounds artificial, or silly, or even heretical. This is not the wisest approach. Think of those family gatherings that happen every year. What do you expect to eat on Thanksgiving? Knowing what is going to be served does not lessen our enjoyment of it. Rather it nourishes it. On these occasions, the familiar is actually desired.

The same is true for preaching on major festivals. Christians return to certain teachings of the faith not because they want to hear something new but precisely because they want to hear what is old. The festival celebrates something central, foundational, powerful for the faith and our hearers expect to hear these things preached. Why? Because such things need saying, again and again. These events are central to faith and life.

In this sermon, notice how Nafzger begins with the relationship his hearers have with the Holy Spirit. He assumes that the hearers are interested in such things. He does not need some creative introduction to lead us into the topic of the Holy Spirit. It is Pentecost. The festival itself is his introduction. The sermon begins by naming where the celebration of Pentecost has brought us: to the person of the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives.

Nafzger opens by reminding us of our relationship with the Holy Spirit and he pauses to explore various ways we have spoken of this relationship. Using different Scriptural texts, Nafzger gives us different images of the Spirit. By doing this, he prepares us for a sermon that is not going to work with one particular text but rather with a larger teaching found throughout the Scriptures.

> *How shall we think about our relationship with the Spirit. Is he a gift? A helper? A guide? Those are all biblical, so I guess we could think of the Spirit in those ways. But they all seem too…small. Thinking about the Spirit in these ways implies that the Spirit is, somehow, at our disposal. Think about it. We use the gifts we receive. Or we don't use them and put them in a closet until we move and then we give them to the resell-it shop. We ask for a helper, but only when we've become convinced we can't handle something on our own. We seek guidance, but only if we can't find our way on our own. In each of these cases, we remain in charge. And that just doesn't seem right, for we're talking about the Spirit of the living God. And the Spirit of the living God is not at our disposal. He's not something that we use when we feel like we need him.*
>
> *It's more the case that the Spirit uses us.*

At this point, Nafzger confronts us with a challenge. How do we faithfully celebrate the Holy Spirit? This challenge is central to the event of Pentecost and yet Nafzger particularizes it for his contemporary American hearers.

While Nafzger could have highlighted challenges that the church has had over time with the celebration of the Holy Spirit (e.g. does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father and the Son or from the Father alone?), he focuses in upon our cultural moment. Living in a consumer-oriented economy where we turn to the world for products that we use to address our needs, is it possible that we could approach the Holy Spirit that way without even knowing it?

With a series of short examples, Nafzger brings the possibility home for the hearers. He takes each of the images of the Spirit we have learned from Scripture and puts them into a consumer-driven mindset. We overhear what it would be like for us to take control of the Spirit.

At that point, Nafzger makes the great reversal. The great reversal occurs when a sermon switches gears and God becomes the subject of the sentences, the actor of the verbs, rather than us. It is reminiscent of Hans Frei's "reversal of fit" where instead of us bringing God into our world, we find ourselves being brought into God's world. By divine revelation and proclamation, we become citizens in the reign and rule of God.

Suddenly, with a great reversal (i.e., not us using the Spirit but the Spirit using us), we find ourselves face to face with the power and the person of the Holy Spirit. And we wonder, "what would it be like to celebrate the Holy Spirit as none other than the living God?" Certainly, that's a fitting question for the celebration of Pentecost.

We've got a word for this. It's a good word. But this word makes us a little uncomfortable. I'm thinking of the word possession. This morning, as we observe Pentecost, I'd like to think with you about the Holy Spirit as one who possesses his people. Which makes you and me people who are possessed.

We don't talk much about possession. As far as I know, there aren't any courses dedicated to it in the new curriculum. Perhaps it's because possession is a bit unsettling. Or a lot unsettling! Have you seen The Exorcist? We hear the word "possession" and we think of an evil spirit occupying a helpless victim. Remember the man who lived among the tombs in the region of the Gerasenes (Mark 5, Luke 8)? The man had a legion of demons. A whole legion! Chains could not contain him. Night and day, he ran around without clothes, wailing and cutting himself with stones. What a terrifying thought! Or how about the boy with the unclean spirit in Mark 9? He would foam and grind his teeth and become rigid. The unclean spirit would throw him into fire and water to kill him. Can you imagine such an existence? Possession is horrifying thought. And here's why—the possessed has no control. He is completely at the mercy of his possessor.

Nafzger has chosen to confess the Holy Spirit's work in our life by using the term "possessed." The language of possession is going to be a problem for the hearers. We have been enculturated to think of spiritual possession as demonic and so it will be hard to use this language to describe the work of the Spirit.

One way to have dealt with this would be simply to use a contrapuntal, to tell the hearers that you don't want them to think of this as demonic possession. In this case, however, the cultural experience is too strong and such a simple statement may not work.

What Nafzger does, instead, is he allows us to reflect on our common experience of possession but to place it within a biblical framework. Rather than use contemporary movies to unfold the experiences of possession, he moves from a contemporary reference (The Exorcist) to a biblical remembrance. He asks us to recognize that the world is indeed inhabited by evil spirits that possess. Rather than use the cultural connection as negative and to be avoided or as sensational and to be exploited, he uses it as a contact point to lead us into the Scriptures that then take over. He takes us from a cultural connection to a biblical frame of reference that reshapes our world.

Once in the biblical world, Nafzger develops the stories for us. He chooses stories that may be familiar for the hearers from the gospel accounts and he emphasizes the terror of the experience in order to lead his hearers inductively to the point. The real terror of possession is not the sensational aspects of its manifestation. No, the real terror of possession is having no control, being at the mercy of the possessor.

The use of the word "mercy" at this point is brilliant. It's the poetic use of a common cliché. The phrase "at the mercy of" is a cliché for us. We commonly talk about "being at the mercy" of someone. But, because Nafzger is making a poetic turn of phrase, this cliché becomes a transition from something common to something divine. Nafzger uses the phrase of "being at the mercy of his possessor" to prepare us unconsciously for the experience of literally being possessed by one who has mercy. When possessed by the Holy Spirit we are at the mercy of and near the mercy of our possessor. The living and loving God.

But imagine being possessed by a different kind of spirit. Imagine being possessed by one who aims not to hurt or harm or destroy, but who restores and comforts and saves. Imagine what it would be like to be possessed, not by a legion of demons, but by the Spirit of a good and gracious God.

We don't have to imagine. That's what happened at Pentecost. Jesus had promised, in our reading from John 14, that the Spirit would be with

the disciples and the Spirit would be in them. That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. The sound of a rushing wind from heaven filled the house. Flames of fire landed on their heads. And then they started speaking. An inspired, chaotic chorus of foreign languages. And then the possessed proclamation of the apostle Peter. Preaching the promises of Jesus. Thousands of people were saved that day. Thousands of people were possessed that day. And it didn't stop there. These possessed believers continued speaking possessed words, and as they spoke, the dead came to life. Hearts were restored. Lives were renewed. More possession. More speaking. The word of the Lord grew as the Spirit of the Lord took possession of those who heard and believed.

He's possessed us, too. "I believe that I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit"—you know how it goes—"has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts…" He has taken possession of me so that I am no longer my own. I am no longer in charge of my life. I no longer live under the illusion of autonomy and self-determination. I am at the disposal of the living God. I am possessed by the Spirit of the risen Christ! For now and eternity, he has made me his dwelling place. And he has done the same with you. He has taken up residence in you. You are his possession.

Here, we come to the heart of the sermon. Nafzger proclaims the great reversal that has happened. We have moved from being ones who try to possess the Spirit (in our work of autonomy and self-determination) to being those who are possessed by the Spirit (by the work of a good and gracious God).

God's gracious work, however, is not merely a raw exercise of his divine power. That would make God a despot who rules by power and not our Lord who rules in a relationship of love. This powerful reversal happens in the person of Jesus Christ.

To proclaim this salvation, Nafzger places Pentecost in a larger narrative framework. He reminds his hearers of the promise of Jesus to send the Holy Spirit and then takes his hearers to the on-going fulfillment of that promise. By using a narrative framework, Nafzger is able to proclaim the Pentecost event as part of a much larger saving story and he is able to locate his hearers today in that on-going work of the risen and ascended Christ. Here, I might have worked a bit more fully with the death and resurrection of Christ as central to that saving story so that the wonderful litany of the Spirit's works ("the dead came to life, hearts were restored, lives were renewed") were fantastic echoes of this Christ who, in his death and resurrection, brings life out of death and on that basis rules over God's kingdom in life-renewing grace and love.

One of my favorite movies of all time is a basketball movie from back in 1986 called Hoosiers*. Have you seen it? Gene Hackman stars as the coach of a small Indiana high school basketball team that goes all the way to win the Indiana State Basketball tournament. It's loosely based on a true story from a team back in 1954. The school was in a tiny little town. The team had only 7-8 players. One of them was named Strap. Strap was a big farm boy. The son of the town preacher. A very religious kid. But Strap was a lousy basketball player, so he never got into the game. On the road to the state championship, however, during a really important game, the team began running out of players. One boy was injured. Then another fouled out. The game was very close. Strap was the last person you'd want on the floor. But he was all they had, so the coach put him in the game. Everyone—the coach, the fans, the other players—hoped and prayed he wouldn't get the ball. And especially that he wouldn't take a shot. But Strap surprised them. On the first play after checking in he caught a pass, gave a pump fake, and drove to the basket and scored over their center! Incredible! The next play down the court he got the ball again, and without hesitating he faded back from 15 feet off of one foot and drained another shot. To everyone's shock, Strap was single-handedly saving the season. The coach called a time-out to make a plan for the last few minutes, and the players came back to the bench. The look on Strap's face was priceless, with a sly grin as he looked at the coach. The coach made eye contact and asked, "Strap – what's gotten into you?" And Strap, the son of the preacher, said, "The Lord. I can feel his strength."*

At this point, the sermon takes a sharp turn. Nafzger just jumps into a story without any suggestion as to how this might fit or why he is telling it.

In preaching, it is helpful to shift between deductive and inductive moments. Deductive moments, where you clearly state your idea up front and then develop it, are helpful for hearers. They focus attention and make points plain. Too many deductive moments, however, may cause the sermon to sound like a lecture with a preacher simply making points.

Shifting to an inductive moment awakens curiosity. It surprises the hearers. They have been following the sermon but now there is something new. This surprise causes them to listen more attentively as they try to figure out where the sermon is going and they are thereby drawn more fully into the experience of the sermon.

As Nafzger tells this story, notice how carefully he controls the narration. The danger of this illustration is that the movie Hoosiers could be heard as a great underdog story. By analogy, in the game of life, God would work a miracle for his people and things would always turn out all right.

Such a story would work against the sermon's proclamation. It would unfortunately make God a minor figure in our American story of self-

fulfillment. With a larger Christian tradition where the Spirit's work can lead to martyrdom, where disciples carry a cross, and where Christians are called to follow their Lord in suffering service, Nafzger needs to be careful.

What he does is decenter the story so that we focus our attention on a person called Strap. After offering an overall framework of the story (a helpful technique for people who may not know the film), Nafzger focuses his attention on Strap. He offers a full description of this character and reveals a change that happens to him. The climax of the story, as Nafzger tells it, is less about the basketball team winning the championship and more about understanding how one person can be changed.

When we overhear the conversation between the coach and Strap, we are drawn into the climax of Nafzger's telling. The coach asks our question – "what has gotten into you?" - and Strap gives the climactic answer – "The Lord. I can feel his strength." Because of this artful retelling, we don't even need to hear the end of the movie because the confession of Strap captures our hearts with a confession of the power of the Lord and we begin to see how this story connects to the sermon.

What's gotten into you? They'll ask you that question when you move your family across the country to serve people you've never met. What's gotten into you? They'll ask you that question when you love the people in your congregation who are so hard to love. What's gotten into you? They'll ask you that question when you defend a brother in the ministry and as you work hard to bring healing to our ministerium. What's gotten into you? They'll ask. And they'll genuinely wonder, because they'll see you doing things that sinful human beings are not supposed to do.

What's gotten into you? You'll respond like Strap, and you'll say, "The Lord." You may not always feel his strength. But the Spirit of the risen Christ—who has bound up the strong man and who has defeated every dark and diabolical power—he has gotten into you. To comfort you, and restore you, and save you. And to use you. To comfort and restore and save others through you.

Having made the question/answer dialog pivotal in the story, Nafzger now uses this exchange to offer his hearer interpretation. Notice how closely and concretely the preacher works with life. The question is always the same, "what's gotten into you?" but the concrete situations when it occurs differ. We see our lives being played out on the big screen. Small moments that make up our future are part of the working of God. The Spirit is alive and at work in our daily lives.

Here, Nafzger anchors the sermon in the resurrection of Christ. Christ's resurrection has revealed his defeat of Satan and our lives are

living manifestations of his work. The recollection of how Jesus "bound up the strong man" is important. It captures the earlier narrative of Jesus exorcising demons, connects it to the resurrection and to the the sending of the Spirit, and thus gives the sermon coherence.

With a simple phrase, "the Lord" we confess the heart of God's power, the risen Christ's living Spirit possessing our lives and using us in God's kingdom.

Now, there's another spirit who resides in you. He resides in me, too. This other spirit doesn't give in so easily. This is the old spirit. He clings, and he scrapes, and he claws, and he fights like hell to bring you down.

That spirit must die. Every day.

At this point, Nafzger offers another tension in the sermon. Here, the tension is not between us using the Spirit and the Spirit using us but between the Spirit who uses us and the spirit of the devil who fights against the Spirit of God.

One of the lies of a pluralistic culture is that there is neutral ground. We can safely stand in neutral territory and choose what things we want to believe and how we want to form our religious life in the world.

Nafzger fights against that problem by denying us neutral territory. We are located in the midst of a battlefield with the Spirit of God waging war on the evil spirit, the devil. We do not have a choice. We are chosen. Nafzger wants to help us understand what it means to be chosen and to live in that working of God. He does this by positioning us in the midst of the battle over forces we cannot control and now laying out for us the way in which God works to save.

We talk a lot about remembering our baptism, and that's a good thing. But what do you remember when you remember your baptism? Think back with me. Do you recall what we do right before we start pouring the water? We renounce. Do you renounce the devil? [Invite the congregation to respond out loud.] Yes, I renounce him. Do you renounce his works? Yes, I renounce them! Do you renounce his ways—and before you answer, let's be clear. I'm not talking about his ways out there in the world. I'm talking about his ways in here. In my heart. In your heart. In your words. In your life. I'm talking about the way he twists us and turns us from beloved children of God into hateful and hurtful, mean-spirited people who don't look anything like who he's made us to be. Do you renounce his ways in here? YES! I RENOUNCE THEM!

Every day, we remember. Every day, we renounce. Every day, we lean into our possession by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus. And every day we go forth in his gracious power.

Part of the work of the preacher is to help people engage in meditation. As preachers, we have shibboleths that we like to say. These are quick reference points that we hope evoke a world of meaning for our hearers such as "you are baptized," "the cross and resurrection," "word and sacrament," or "baptism and the Lord's Supper."

The danger, however, is that these statements become gospel clichés (a term coined by Francis Rossow): simple statements that assure our hearers that the sermon is Lutheran but don't really unpack what these phrases mean for them. Nafzger avoids that problem.

Nafzger begins by offering us a well-known phrase: "remember your baptism." Rather than state that phrase and move on, however, he pauses to develop it. He leads us in meditation.

First, we remember the actual experience of baptism. Then, we hear once again the words of renunciation. As we pause and contemplate that moment, the words of the baptismal liturgy begin to shape the lives of the baptized. The renunciation in baptism now becomes the lifelong activity of the Spirit in the lives of God's people. Those who are possessed by the Spirit are constantly renouncing the devil and all his works and all his ways.

A few weeks ago, I attended my niece's confirmation. It was a profoundly moving experience for me. 14 years ago, I held little Joanna at the baptismal font as her dad, my brother-in-law, baptized her. She screamed through the whole thing. I remember sweating profusely trying to calm her down. At her confirmation, her dad again (still her pastor, too) laid his hands on her and spoke a blessing. It was a fitting blessing for a young Christian woman who was beginning a new stage in her Christian life. Many of you are beginning a new stage very soon. You're taking your first call. You're going on vicarage. You're beginning graduate work. You're moving to Arizona. If you'll allow me, I'd like to conclude this sermon by giving you the same blessing my brother-in-law gave to my niece at her confirmation.

Father in heaven, for Jesus' sake,
stir up in these, your people
your Holy Spirit;
confirm their faith,
guide their life,
empower them in their serving,
give them patience in suffering,
and bring them to everlasting life. Amen.

Homileticians differentiate two kinds of conclusions: logical and dynamic. A logical conclusion offers a summary of the main points of the sermon and brings it to a logical closure for the hearers. A dynamic conclusion creates an experience for the hearers that is powerful and, by being so powerful, brings the sermon to a close. Here, Nafzger uses a dynamic conclusion. He relates a profoundly moving experience for him and hopes that it is profoundly moving for his hearers as well.

As he relates the experience, notice how he develops the detail of the father/daughter relationship. That detail may seem out of place since the focus should be on baptism and the words of God that are offering comfort to the hearers. What Nafzger is doing, however, is emphasizing the deep love and affection that are present for the father as he cares for his child, serving as both her pastor and her father.

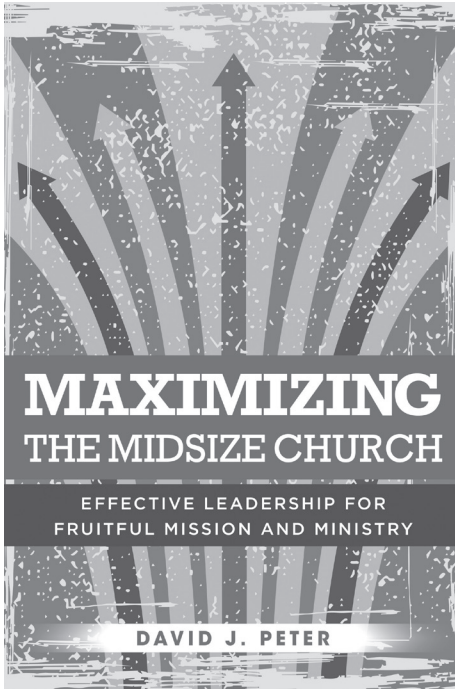
The reason that is important is that Nafzger wants the hearers to experience the same love and affection when they receive a blessing from him. Just as the father gave this blessing to his daughter, so Nafzger will give this blessing to the community of faith. Paul often uses paternal metaphors when speaking to his people. He is like a father or a mother to them. So, too, Nafzger allows the power of paternal relations to capture the love that is present in this closing blessing. He wants his hearers to receive this blessing from God as part of his ministry among them, a ministry that is both pastoral and personal.

The blessing itself then captures one of the main themes of the sermon and thereby glances toward a logical conclusion. The prayer is that the Father would stir up the Spirit in his people to do the works that are listed. Thus, the main teaching that God possesses us with his Spirit is visited again and we find ourselves reflecting on the power of the Spirit at work in our lives. A fitting conclusion to a sermon on Pentecost.

Reviews

MAXIMIZING THE MIDSIZE CHURCH: Effective Leadership for Fruitful Mission and Ministry

By David J. Peter. Kregel Publications, 2018. 173 pages. Paper. $18.99.



In this reviewer's thirty plus years of pastoral ministry much has come across the desk under the theme of Church Growth (the popular term used in the 1980s and 1990s) and its twenty-first-century counterparts. With many analyses of the dynamics of various sized congregations, pastors such as myself with an eye to growing our congregations paid major attention to the latest thoughts on moving from small-sized congregations through various stages of congregational size with the distant mountaintop heights of "megachurch" beckoning us with great allure. Still, as Peter points out in this volume, the one area that was lacking in this panorama of studies was a study of the mid-sized congregation. It was an ironic reality, since Peter consistently points out that the mid-sized congregation (150–400 weekly worshipers) holds a majority position in the rankings of sizes of congregations in the United States and has for decades. It is and has been the "neglected middle" (13).

As such, this well-written and readable book can be a gold-mine for pastors, church leaders, and church members interested in the ministry possibilities and the nature of the mid-sized congregation. The opening chapters focus on the unique realities of a mid-sized congregation in contrast with both small and large parishes. A following chapter addresses the distinctive evangelical practices that can be incorporated into the mission life of a mid-sized congregation. The last half of the book examines the ministry opportunities and best practices to maximize productivity of mid-sized congregations. A postscript addresses the journey of a medium-sized congregation transitioning to a large-sized parish, or, if moving in the opposite direction statistically, to a small-sized one.

Most of my thirty years of ministry was in one medium-sized parish. My hope of eventually moving on to the larger sized parish was never realized. Part of the reason for statistical stagnation was simply a lack of knowledge and a lack of information that specifically addressed the needs of the medium-

sized congregation. Moving from 100 in attendance to a high of 230 we seemed to reach an unexplainable barrier that could not be broken or crossed. Hiring an intern studying for the pastoral ministry on a yearly basis was a joy and a wonderful ministry in its own right, but it was not the answer to reaching the next plateau of congregational size which we thought it would be. Peter's book would have proved invaluable at the very least in helping me as a pastor understand why things were the way they were in a congregation consistently hovering around 200 in weekly attendance. Such a book, is now available to the majority of pastors and church leaders serving in congregations similar to the one I served.

I have often felt that, though a benefit towards understanding, many books like this provide information that would be just as beneficial to the local Kiwanis Club as it would to a Christian parish. However, Peter does not disappoint. He encompasses much biblical and theological wisdom in his writings and the flesh and muscle he attaches to the statistical skeleton in his analysis of the medium-sized church satisfies the hunger of a pastor or church leader anxious to answer the question, "But what am I to do as a Christian servant leading and guiding saints in their relationship with Jesus Christ?" No one can say that this volume is simply another manual designed to get you greater attendance numbers when, admittedly, half the time you do not even know why you want bigger numbers at all! Jesus and his love for people dominate the pages of Peter's writing.

Finally, the worth of this book flows to my post-parish calling as district president to our six-state region. In our district, the average worship attendance currently stands at 91. Of course, that is an average; that reality implies that a good number of our parishes are on the cusp of becoming medium-sized congregations as the good Lord leads them. This book is an invaluable resource for these parishes and leaders facing the barriers to reaching the medium-size plateau. How I wish this book had been available thirty years ago when facing those same barriers. This book is the godsend I lacked. I may even make it "required reading" for the pastors and congregations I love in the Lord!

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HOPE WHEN YOUR HEART BREAKS: Navigating Grief and Loss. *By Michael W. Newman. Concordia Publishing House, 2017. 221 pages. Paper. $12.99.*

This work by Michael Newman delivers what the titled describes. With compassion, insight, and a pastoral heart, he guides mourners through the challenging paths and difficult turns of grief and loss. He accompanies the despairing through rough waters of complex, often unpredictable, emotions. The map for this journey is the word of God and Newman pilots readers into a multitude of biblical narratives that

comfort and restore. There are many books available for mourners. What distinguishes *Hope When Your Heart Breaks* is that it draws on *so many* biblical narratives. With pastoral skill, the author applies scripture texts that give hope to those who whose hearts are broken. It is also a helpful guide to those who come alongside on this difficult journey—pastors and laypeople alike.

Each chapter invites readers into God's heart with a message of hope rooted in God's love in Jesus Christ. Yet it is not a one-size-fits-all message. He uses 52 biblical narratives with numerous additional scripture references. These connect God's word to people experiencing various types of loss such as the death of a loved one, job loss, struggles with aging, relationship crises, and more. Each chapter is a stand-alone meditation that is clearly titled. The reader can then choose what is of interest at the time. Each three-page vignette identifies with a major emotion related to loss. Topics include: "When You're Angry," "When Everything Changes," "When You Don't Know Who You Are Anymore," "When You Have a Good Day—and Feel Guilty." Each chapter is followed by a brief devotion guide. These include a Scripture reading with simple reflection questions and a brief prayer on the chapter's theme.

A good example of Newman's awareness of the needs of mourners is seen right away in chapter one. Those experienced in caring for the grieving know that men in particular can struggle with the emotions of sorrow. The first Bible story features Joseph in Genesis. As he does throughout, Newman skillfully relates the biblical narrative to the reader, with a special reference to males. He writes, "Grieving is not easy. It may be the most difficult thing you'll ever do. The emotions, thoughts and feelings saturate your being. They slip out when you least expect them. They overcome you when you thought you were in the clear. As Joseph walked through his grief, there were times when he had to run out of the room to weep uncontrollably. *This was a Middle Eastern man—a man who became one of the rulers of Egypt. These men did not break down in tears publicly. They did not show their emotions openly. But such is the pathway of grief"* (110, italics added).

As already noted, a strength of this book is the generous use of Scripture. The reader is continually invited to see his or her personal story in relation to various biblical narratives. However, in some places the aspect of grief described and the circumstances of the attending scripture passage may not correspond very well to a mourner's own situation. An example might be the feelings experienced by Abraham when he was told to sacrifice his son Isaac ("When Your Dream Dies," chapter 19). The unique circumstances of this account may make it hard for readers to connect it with their own grief. Further, in some cases the biblical texts do not have sufficient detail to make a clear connection with the experience of the reader. In those places the author makes some assumptions about the feelings and attitudes of the biblical characters to create a correspondence. For example,

when Jesus appears to his disciples after the resurrection ("When You Have a Good Day—and Feel Guilty," chapter 17) can we really know how the disciples are feeling in their unique situation of being with the resurrected Christ? On the other hand, as preachers of God's word know, applying biblical narratives to the specific real-life situations of hearers requires creativity. This calls for granting some poetic license. Overall, Newman gets high marks for not abusing this license as he carefully and creatively applies Scripture to people's specific and sensitive needs.

Another strength of the book is the application of the healing gospel of Jesus Christ to those experiencing grief and loss. Throughout the book the gospel is clearly given as a response to the effects of sin and death. Newman is at his best when he connects the Christian's own story to God's plan of salvation. Tremendous comfort is given in remembering baptism, encouraged to find hope in the "for you" gifts of Christ. An example is seen in chapter 22, "When You Don't Know Who You Are Anymore." This section features Jesus's encounter with the widow of Nain whose son has died. After relating how this loss created a crisis of identity along with tremendous grief, the writer points out how Jesus was attentive to her needs. Then he says to us—the readers, "God sees you. He approaches you in your adversity. He draws close to restore you. God gets involved. . . . He is the one who renews your identity, calls you by name, and raises you to life. God's foolproof identity-theft protection is the resurrection. . . . When you are clothed with Christ in Baptism, there is never a doubt about who you are or whose you are. Only one label prevails in your heartbreak: the God who sacrificed His one and only Son for you has made you His precious and resurrected child" (96).

Michael Newman has taken great care in providing a resource for ministering to those experiencing loss. It can be used in a variety of ways and by various people. It can be a devotional resource based on the immediate needs of a mourner. Its carefully titled table of contents, as well as its scriptural index provide guides to locate chapters addressing specific needs. It can also be used as a daily devotional book by an individual, couple, or family, reading a short chapter each day. With its accompanying "Words of Healing" devotional guide, it can also be used as a Bible study for a grief group or any small group. Further, it can serve as a helpful resource for pastors and other spiritual caregivers who are preparing devotions for groups in nursing homes, pastoral visits, church gatherings, or sermons.

In this volume, Newman delivers as promised, *Hope When Your Heart Breaks.*

Mart Thompson

OUTLINE OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE: An Evangelical Dogmatics. *By Wilfried Härle, Eerdmans, 2015. 643 pages. Paper. $50.00.*

Wilfried Härle presents a comprehensive, contextual, and intellectually engaging dogmatics textbook as an introduction

to the task of systematic theology. The editor and co-translator, Nicholas Sagovsky, notes regarding the relevance of *Outline of Christian Doctrine: An Evangelical Dogmatics*, "For nearly twenty years, it has been the most widely used German text to introduce students to Christian Doctrine" (xiv). With a smooth translation provided by Ruth Yule, Härle is brought into the English-speaking world. The textbook consists of two sections: "Essence of the Christian Faith," where the Christian faith is reconstructed, and "Explication of the Christian Understanding of Reality," where Härle analyzes the Christian's relationship to God along with the Christian's relationship to the world. With each chapter broken down into subchapters and subsections, a reader is able to find any topic within the book with relative ease, and the format of the textbook allows Härle to cross-reference other parts of the dogmatics where topics overlap.

Moving to the content, Härle brings clear insight to the challenges Christians face living in the twenty-first century, using theology as a science to evaluate core doctrines of the Christian faith. While Härle rightly identifies many challenges facing twenty-first-century Christians, his method of resolving these issues trends toward the modernist approaches of the twentieth century—namely theological liberalism and the historical-critical method. One challenge Härle rightly defines is that by eliminating the relevance of God from daily life, humanity has now assumed the role of God. Theodicy, where humans pardon God or where the sinner must justify God, transforms into an *anthropodicy*, where humans assume the responsibilities of the world without any possibility of forgiveness. Atheism then becomes the highest acquittal of God by declaring his innocence through non-existence. As a result, the burden of bearing the evils of the world, a burden which in earlier generations was borne by God, is too great for humanity to bear. An example of anthropodicy includes the ecological crisis, where attempts to control climate change may be beyond human capacity, even though humans are in some part responsible for the change in climate. The modern "call-out culture" is another example of humans attempting to replace God, then finding themselves under an impossible burden of judgment. Any perceived negative comment or social media post, no matter how old the offensive statement is, will bring merciless denunciations with no hope of true forgiveness for the person who made the comment. This "loss of grace" extends into every facet of modern life, leading to "nihilism as a final decision to renounce the acceptance of a supreme destiny for the world and for human beings" (385). In this way, Härle thoroughly illustrates the challenges Christians face in the West.

While Härle's scientific approach to theology correctly diagnoses the challenges facing modern Christians in the West, the "solutions" or answers to the questions of faith and life leave much to be desired. Härle at times emphasizes what he calls the "essence of Christianity," rather than systematically addressing difficulties that arise in

the Scriptures. Härle wrestles with appropriating the phrase in the Apostles' Creed, "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary," to modern German theology. On one hand, Härle raises reasonable concerns regarding misunderstandings of the conception of Jesus—Jesus as a demigod or unhealthy views of sexuality. However, Härle is quick to move toward the doctrine of the virgin birth being a metaphor rather than an actual historical reality.

Lack of attention to the narrative of salvation extends into eschatology, where Härle is torn between two models of the judgment—the so-called double outcome (heaven and hell) and the *apakatastasis pantōn* (universalism). Although Härle recognizes the weaknesses of universalism to the point of self-awareness of his own theological leanings in his dogmatics, he maintains that universalism is the best model of the eschaton, even with the indifference to discipleship universalism creates. As Härle rightly notes, God is love according to 1 John 4:7–21, and this is the center of God's essence (202). For Härle, this love is a love that can never exclude, and this theological core drives his entire systematic approach. The fallacy of defining love solely by its inclusivity is that at times love must be exclusive. Härle admits to this when he speaks of the deficiencies of the *apakatastasis pantōn*, "In [the *apakatastasis pantōn's*] normal form, however, it does not give adequate space to pain at love scorned or betrayed, and pain at life destroyed or damaged" (508). Love means at times accepting rejection, even if the consequences are eternal. As for the doctrine of the "double outcome," the goats in Matthew 25:33 are a sad and unfortunate reality but a real consequence of humanity's failure to love God and their neighbor as themselves. Because of his historical-critical leanings, Härle does not deal with the parable of the Sheep and the Goats in any meaningful way.

Within the section on eschatology, Härle's need for scientific accuracy and objectivism is more than evident—a trait that makes his dogmatics at times mechanistic. The hope sought after in the life of the world to come seems uninteresting and nothing seriously to be invested in, as the artistic images of the resurrection and the judgment found in the Scriptures are supplanted with dry, scientific semantics.

Outline of Christian Doctrine is a testament to the genius and piercing insight Härle brings to the academy and the church. Criticisms of Härle must consider the introductory nature of this work, and on that account, Härle's dogmatics is a monumental achievement. While intellectually stimulating, his theology might leave one unenthusiastic in terms of Jesus's message. This volume preaches a world where *all* might be saved, regardless of one's personal responsibility to spread the gospel. Where does one's responsibility to keep God's word and spread that message fit into Härle's theology? Perhaps this question provides a good way to measure any dogmatic work.

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