

An Optimistic Theology Of The Cross

[Delivered at "Sharing Our Blessings: A Networking Workshop for Large Congregations" at Cousins Retreat Center, St. Francis, Wisconsin, February 4-6, 1997. Pastor Gurgel serves at David's Star Ev. Lutheran Church, Jackson, Wisconsin.]

Richard Gurgel

It happened at our Southeastern Wisconsin District convention at the seminary this past June. A representative of the Board for World Missions had drawn the dreaded after-lunch time slot to address the delegates of the convention. But his main opposition was not just the full stomachs that were making many of us nod in approval of his remarks. The sound of his presentation was being nearly drowned out by the muffled rumbling of various conversations at the back of the convention hall. These conversations were being carried on by delegates who probably figured they had heard all of this before. And if they hadn't, they must have figured there would be a mailing that they could ignore later in the privacy of their offices. As I raised my sleepy head and turned to take note of the commotion from those conversations, I saw many enjoying some fellowship time while others around me appeared to have fallen completely into Morpheus' arms. But suddenly, at a table just behind me, I happened to notice a recent seminary graduate who was neither nodding nor conversing with his neighbor. He was not only attentively following the presenter from point to point. He was actually taking notes on the key points being made. It was almost as if he was under the impression that what was being said from the podium was an important matter of the work of the church!

What may appear to be a trivial anecdote is really meant to illustrate a very real and troubling problem for the work of the ministry in our congregations. The danger is that we lose our zeal and our first love for the work of the ministry. Nowhere may that temptation be greater than in the spiritual behemoth we call the "large congregation." Consider for a moment another new seminary graduate heading out to his first call or perhaps a pastor arriving to begin his ministry at a new congregation. Picture the recent Martin Luther College teacher graduate or the newly elected council member or elder. They often have a real zeal for carrying out the ministry entrusted to them. There's a confidence that the troubles of the congregation will be no match for the plans they have in mind. I remember a seminary classmate remarking that at first he had the impression that he could cry out from the pulpit, "I lead!" and the people would jump up from the pews and proclaim, "And we follow!" I distinctly remember worrying during the first few months of my ministry in Oklahoma how I would avoid running out of things to say since I was somewhat naively convinced that once an issue had been dealt with from the pulpit it had been laid to rest. Who of us cannot picture the zealous pastor, teacher, or lay leader who is convinced he has the answers to what ails the congregation. He is confident that if only his plans for ministry would be applied with diligence, the problems would be solved and great things will begin to take place.

Unfortunately, this zeal to carry out the ministry runs smack into the reality of the church militant—and boy can she ever be militant! The word militant and military aren't related by accident! The pastor's, teacher's, or lay leader's enthusiasm for trying something new may often be greeted with a chorus of "We tried something like that a few years back, and it didn't work!" Or, "Pastor, we don't do that here!" And even if the called or lay worker persists in pursuing his plan, all smile knowingly when the effort seems to "bomb."

Isn't that especially true in the larger church? No one has yet been able to accurately measure the inertial weight of a large body of the church militant. Our large churches may often have many 3rd, 4th, or 5th generation members who more than they may realize have allowed much of their Christianity to degenerate into doing the "rite" thing for the "rote" reason. In many of our larger congregations longtime members may not necessarily be looking for someone to come in and turn upside down everything that genuinely needs changing. They are all too often looking for someone to allow them to continue on the well-known path they have been walking that is comfortable and safe—provided, of course, that you keep the budget balanced as the Scriptures must say somewhere.

And all of this wears on the lay leader or called worker whose zeal for the Lord's house runs into one discouragement after another. For instance, the new midweek Bible class with its fascinating topic which he prepared for weeks and promoted with great diligence ends up with far more chairs than people. That sure-fire stewardship program that was going to elevate the giving of the entire congregation appeared only to have elevated the people's defenses and excuses for why they don't participate in such things in this congregation. Or the elders are sidetracked from their new plan to reach out to the straying sheep as they try to referee the turf war between the church and school staff. I'm sure that in every one of our congregations such examples could be multiplied, and the larger the congregation, the greater the multiplier becomes and the higher the potential for frustration.

And what is the effect on the pastor, teacher, or lay leader? There are three that I believe I see in myself and in others whose ministries I obviously can observe only from the outside. First of all there is the danger of drawing this conclusion: "If only I work harder and longer and smarter we can still get past all of this. Somehow I can overcome all these obstacles." And where does that thinking lead? That thinking often leads only to a broom tree, under which we sit down with Elijah and lament, "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors." I cannot speak for you, but I know how often hitting the barriers, then working harder, hitting the barriers, then working still harder has left me knowing all too intimately what that part of 1 Kings 19 is all about. Perhaps many of you have been sitting there with Elijah and me more times than you would like to admit.

Or, the barriers can have what appears to be the exact opposite effect on zeal for ministry on the part of the pastor, teacher, or lay leader. Instead of increasing frantic activity the person in ministry begins to reason that it's no use beating his head against the wall. Perhaps there is no changing the status quo of the congregation. One just must learn to live with things the way they are. More and more, without perhaps even realizing it, the pastor, teacher, or lay leader gives those who want nothing but comfortable Christianity exactly what their sinful natures are crying out for. And so the sermons get preached decently enough, the lessons get taught in the school, the meetings get run in fairly good order, and expectations for personal and congregational ministry become lower and lower. Permit me to quote sainted Prof. August Pieper as he noticed this same tendency for spiritual leaders in his day. He first presented these words in a synod convention essay in New Ulm in 1919.

How eager were not our hearts, when we as young pastors were sent from the seminary into the ministry, to preach the Gospel to sinners and to win them for Christ! With what zeal did we preach, how fervently we prayed, preached, and cared for the souls entrusted to us! We thought we could convert every unbeliever, make every heterodox person a Lutheran, and how energetically we worked at it! How soon had we visited every member of the congregation, and how diligently did we visit the sick! How we gathered the young people about us, with what self-denial we taught the parish school in order to plant the Word of Truth in the hearts of the children. And we did not tire of it!

That was the time of our first love. But gradually, unconsciously we left our first love (Rev 2:4) and cooled off more and more. Our praying and studying diminished, our preaching became more intellectual, our teaching became a burden, visiting our people was neglected, and we became more indolent. And still we got along. We developed a certain facility in our various ministerial tasks by practice, and experience made us richer and wiser, and we got along rather well without much worry or exertion. With this stock of knowledge and this attitude we proceeded to ride at anchor in the harbor of our office, and conscientiously did what our ministry required of us, always more easily and more complacently, more quietly, and gradually turned more and more into spiritual and physical machines without noticing it. We still pray, but for the most part officially in the family circle and in church; we still study, but only to prepare our sermons; we still preach, but it is always the same old thoughts as formerly; we still practice the care of souls, but we restrict our visits to a few select families. Things are going quite well, the

people praise us at times, and this seals our spiritual obtuseness. We are spiritual workmen, slaves of routine, mechanical men, who discharge their office according to habit, in an official manner.

Dear brothers, let me assure you that I share this quotation with you not so much because I see that tendency in you and wish to make you see it, but I have felt the struggles of that temptation and fear it. I know from all too much bitter first-hand experience what it means to feel like an empty shell going through ministry saying the "right" things but with little joy. Our daily routine becomes just that—routine, and our expectations for ourselves and the ministries of our congregations grow less and less. And woe to our congregations when we their leaders are idling in neutral. There is no large congregation with greater inertia than the one where the greatest inert mass stands in its pulpit, teaches in its classrooms, or presides over its meetings!

But there is still a third reaction to the discouragements that come in the church militant: the barriers out there not only lead to frantic working or complacent going with the flow. There is also the temptation when things are not going so well to resort to tricks and gimmicks. Methods become more important than the message that is shared, and though we start with the best of intentions, what happens is that the Word of God is distorted. After all, such gimmicks are directed more to the old Adam's desire to be gratified and entertained than to the new man's need to be disciplined and edified.

But as different as called and lay leaders' reactions can be to the discouragements, setbacks, and roadblocks in the ministry, the reactions always have something in common. Whether we react to discouragements by thinking that our working harder is the answer, whether we resign ourselves to a complacent going through the motions, or whether we resort to tricks and gimmicks, in every case what has happened is that we have lost confidence in the power of the gospel.

Could it be that all along we have forgotten that God works in hidden ways in his kingdom? It is that thought which takes us back to where I had promised to take you in the first place, to the theology of the cross. Indeed, in this work of the ministry we are asked to put our confidence in something that seems to be quite feeble by worldly standards. We are asked to put our confidence in the gospel of a Savior who appears in weakness and foolishness. How odd that we are asked to find our power in the gospel of a God who clothed himself in human weakness. How strange that we are asked to find wisdom in what the world will call foolishness. How peculiar that our message is of a Savior whose greatest moment of triumph was in the midst of the agony of a Roman crucifixion. The glory of our gospel is a hidden one. It is the glory of the cross.

Not only is the glory of the gospel itself a hidden glory, but the means which God has given us to communicate the gospel are also "foolish" as well. The church of the Crucified One also lives under the cross since our gospel is communicated in the outward weakness of the means of grace. The church is asked to proclaim that the power of the Holy Spirit is found in a few drops of water combined with a few words! The church is asked to repeat as its main meal one that seems to offer nothing but a sip of wine and a morsel of bread. The church is asked to find the power of its gospel in a message that comes from the pen of frail humans and is shared by fragile and flawed clay pots. It is a gospel, to use the words of Jesus' parable set to poetry by Martin Franzmann, that can be "snatched . . . scorched . . . choked . . . and matted flat" (CW 544, stanza 4).

The glory of the gospel is hidden behind the cross. The glory of God's people in this life is also hidden under the cross. Take a good look at the people in whose midst, as we confess, lives the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, the Bride of Christ. She doesn't look so glorious under the cross, as she whom God calls holy struggles with sin. The spots and stains we see on her clothing hardly call to mind the pictures of the beautiful bride of Christ that Scripture describes. Indeed the Church's gospel, its means of grace, and the Church herself, all have their glory hidden under the cross in this life.

But we make a grave error if we allow the hidden nature of that glory to lead us to forget that God's glory is there, in his gospel, in his means of grace, and in his Church. The theology of the cross is not a truth of Scripture which intends to discourage us from setting high goals for our ministries. The theology of the cross is not cause for thinking that it all really does depend on us. It is not a cause for just going through the motions because nothing will change anyway. It is not a cause for seeking to find what can make a difference in human

tricks and gimmicks. For remember, though the message of the gospel is cloaked in weakness, there alone is the real power of God. Though the message we proclaim is foolishness to human ears and always will remain so to human reason, yet there alone can the real wisdom of God be found in this life. The gospel that because of human unbelief is "snatched . . . scorched . . . choked and matted flat" is the same gospel that produces fruit, as Jesus tells us, "a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." Although the gospel comes to earth in means that are as plain as simple rain and snow coming down from the sky, yet God promises, "It does not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." And, you know what? These promises are even good in the fields of labor that we are lovingly calling the "large congregation"!

In other words, the fact that we hold to the theology of the cross is no reason for discouragement or a frantic searching for other more effective means of carrying out our ministries. The scriptural theology of the cross teaches us to know that where our human reason seems to see nothing but weakness and foolishness—there is wisdom and power. The scriptural theology of the cross teaches us to trust that where we think we see only seed being snatched and scorched and matted flat, there God will produce the fruit of his gospel—a hundred-, sixty-, or thirty times what we have faithfully sown. The scriptural theology of the cross promises us that though we see the Church struggling now, yet in the midst of that struggle God is perfecting the saints to truly be his holy bride forever. The theology of the cross—that God has hidden the greatest power and wisdom in the world in the foolishness and weakness of a suffering Savior and in the proclamation of that gospel by what appear to be frail means through and to weak and foolish human beings—this does not give us reason for discouragement. Rather, it gives us every reason to put our hope and trust in what wonders the message of the cross can indeed produce.

This gospel proclaimed by the theology of the cross works wonders, despised and rejected by human reason though it may be. The gospel of the cross works wonders, no matter how many times our own heart and feelings seem to be screaming out that it is all for naught. The theology of the cross is not a pessimistic message of discouragement that leads us to toss down the sword of the Spirit in despair or frustration. It is rather the optimistic confidence in a God who works wonders in his wonderful way although the entire world and our own reason rise up and call his gospel nothing but weak foolishness. It is the confidence of which Paul once spoke when discussing the foolishness of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

But, dear brothers in ministry, if we are indeed going to raise the sights of our large congregations to the great things God can do through that gospel, remember where it must start. You and I must first be in the Word ourselves so that the gospel can work its wonders on us. If we go off to workshops that talk about getting more of the Word to more people more often while we ourselves neglect its power in our own hearts, we are in grave danger of rank pharisaic hypocrisy. If our own hearts are not the first to find again the power of the gospel, how can we encourage others with conviction to do the same? Allow me to quote Prof. Pieper one more time.

Oh, if once again we professors, pastors, and teachers would live and walk and search in the Word, how bright, how light, how clear, how warm, how hot, how glowing, how powerful, how strong, how mighty our hearts would become in spirit, how our preaching and teaching would grip the hearts of our hearers, persuade them, overcome them, so that the Church would become a veritable plain of Sharon, an Eden, a garden of God! (Isaiah 35; 51:3; 65:10). I am not speaking of a little professional operation with God's Word. Yes, whoever has to teach Bible history and the Catechism, whoever has to deliver a sermon or a theological lecture, must study the pertinent material in the Bible, otherwise it will amount to nothing. This is the necessary official study of the Bible required by the office of the ministry for a specific purpose Such official duty of the Scripture can indeed impart to you a certain amount of familiarity with the Bible, if it is conscientiously pursued, but it can leave your heart completely cold and unaffected. Mechanically you write it down in your sermon or lecture, and mechanically you reproduce it. Therefore do not be surprised, if it also has only a mechanical effect, and not only leaves your

own heart cold, but makes it ever more indifferent and hard. This merely official study of the Bible is, and always remains, although it may be a sizable quantity, an incoherent piece of patchwork, which does not train spiritually nor perfect anyone, but perverts and distorts, so that a single gust of wind of false doctrine, of unbelief, of temptation causes it to collapse. Yes, that is our defect, that we use the Bible only officially altogether too much. Whoever wants to study the Scripture properly and with blessing, so that he himself becomes illuminated, warmed and filled with the Holy Ghost and with power from on high, must above all read, search, meditate, and study for his own heart, for his own edification and strengthening with the prayer that ever recurs in the 119th Psalm: Lord, teach me, show me, lead me, strengthen me, open my eyes, that I may see the wonders of Thy Law! This must be done in this sense: Incline my heart to Thy testimony, refresh me in Thy righteousness, let me experience Thy grace, my soul fainteth for Thy salvation. Scripture study in this sense alone is true, wholesome, fruitful, and fills one with the Holy Ghost.

All talk of lifting the sights of our large congregations, of improving our ministries to God's people, is so much wasted breath if we are not personally tasting regularly in the Word how good God is to us. But when our own souls, as leaders in the church, are delighting in the richest of fare at the banquet table of the gospel, then we are ready to help others find more of the joy of salvation. When the Word has lifted our sights again by touching our hearts personally with the awesome wisdom and power of the cross, then we can go to work lifting the sights of those entrusted to our care. It is in your heart and mine that God wants to **work the delight** of knowing that he has loved us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). When our hearts feel the weariness and burdens of sin, may we be the first to heed Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). So that we can pour out the fullness of Christ to others, Jesus desires to fill our hearts first of all with the comfort of "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18-19). When our hearts need strength to carry that ministry to others, he wants us to recall with Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). When the hearts of the leaders of God's Church are filled with these wonders and promises of the gospel, then, and only then, are we truly prepared to turn that power of the gospel loose on God's people! My heart must be the first one to be thoroughly convinced of the wonder and power of the gospel lest I become nothing but a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. After all, isn't that what King David proclaimed in Psalm 51:10-13 when he wrote, "Create in me a pure heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you." It is not an oversimplification to state that the spiritual welfare of our synod directly corresponds to the personal spiritual growth of those whom God has called into positions of leadership. The fragile jars of clay God chooses to use to lead his Church need to be so full of the treasure of the gospel that to overflow is not a demand of God but a spiritual necessity. To act otherwise is to put our trust in the jar of clay rather than in the treasure it was designed to contain!

Dear brothers, the gospel works! In fact, in the kingdom of God it is the gospel alone that works and upbuilds faith and produces the genuine fruits of faith. Therefore, since the gospel of the cross works, what is before us these three days is encouraging one another as brothers to be vigorously working the gospel no matter what the outward obstacles may be. No, we are not looking for ways to make the church triumphant somehow appear on earth. We will never change the fact that until heaven our real life as Christians will always be hidden with God (Colossians 3:3). We must always remain aware that the most subtle form of millennialism is the theology of glory which proclaims that somehow by vigorous effort we can cause the Church Triumphant to appear before the last day. But this is within our grasp by the power of the Spirit: to lift the sights of our congregations to find more ways to get more of the gospel to more of our people more often. With Paul,

knowing that the Lord's gospel will not return empty, we can devote ourselves to being all things to all people, knowing that God has promised to use us as his tools to save some.

That's what we are going to be about today at this networking workshop: whether it is seeking all 100 sheep, or setting priorities for ministry, or seeking to blend the best of the past and the best of the present in worship. We do all these things with the confidence that the gospel, which we will share and which we are training others to share and to live, is the wisdom and power of God by which God has promised to do great things. And since the field of labor into which he has called us is the "large congregation," we have the added privilege of being able to unleash that gospel on many souls.

Allow me to finish where I began, with the zeal for ministry displayed by the new worker in the kingdom. A constant prayer in my ministry, especially in difficult days, has been that God not let me lose an optimism about what the gospel can do. You see, I'm convinced that the zeal of the new worker in the Lord's harvest is not something to smile at condescendingly, but is something to pray for eagerly. That zeal needs only to be tempered in one direction. The zeal of the new worker needs to learn more and more to drop the outward concept of a theology of glory and in its place more and more hold to the Bible's theology of the cross. Such an optimistic theology of the cross knows that a person may not build a crystal cathedral, but it is confident that one's labor is never in vain. Dear brothers, with such confidence, may we confidently work with the gospel, trusting that the gospel works!