

Christ the Evangelist

By Darwin Raddatz

“The fog comes on little cat feet.” Carl Sandburg tells us that this is the way of the fog as it comes into Chicago: It steps lightly, settles softly among the buildings as a cat upon its haunches, and finally envelops the whole city in its gentleness. This is also the way our God comes into the world, gently takes over, and fills every part with His fullness. Our God is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire but in the still, small voice. He intrudes Himself quietly into the angriness and confusion of the world as the divine-human Word. With His majesty deliberately concealed He has no intention of commanding peace by demanding unconditional surrender from man. His whole program was and is to win peace with God for man, declare peace to man, and thus finally also to win from man peace toward God.

Christ’s way of revealing Himself to men is the way of hidden glory, the way of the cross. That’s God’s chosen way of grace. That’s the church’s way. And that’s the way of evangelism.

God Established the Gospel by the Cross of Christ

God’s invincible and irrefutable argument in the creation and preservation of the whole world by majestic wisdom and power failed to bring Adam and Eve to that wisdom by which they might know God as “Abba,” trust Him, and live under Him as dear children. Instead of responding to God’s display of wisdom by becoming wise themselves, they became fools, trusted themselves and the Snake to get out of life what they wanted to get out of it, and renounced God as Father. They rejected “God in His power” and thus established the ways of man toward God. Man’s stubborn blindness to God’s display of wisdom and power led God to renounce that way, the way of wisdom and power, as a means of bringing man into communion with Him. But in His forbearance He still sought a way. And He took the initiative. He determined to re-establish communion with men by entering into their foolishness and weakness and thus winning them by His weakness and foolishness. He hid His glory beneath the veil of humanity, genuine humanity, endured the human cross as man in the place of man and gave witness of the Father’s winning love, a love that wins men from below rather than from above.

Christ Established the Gospel by the Cross

God brought His Son into the world as man and as the least of men. At His birth there were no mighty demonstrations of His Godhead to cow the high and the mighty and to demand their submission. He was born in the lowliest of places; perhaps He had already been deliberately rejected not only by an innkeeper but by the usually hospitable relatives of Joseph and Mary because she was “too pregnant” to be accepted by respectable Jews. And already as a child He was under sentence of death. He fled before human rage and jealousy. Would “God in His weakness” be rejected as rudely and universally as “God in His power?”

Jesus’ youth, too, was not filled with spectacular works. Our Christian fathers in their spiritual wisdom rejected as unworthy those pretended historical documents which recounted a magnificent miracle-working youth. He walked and talked, studied and worked, learned and achieved like other youth. As He grew, He grew on people: “He grew in favor with God and man.” But He did not overwhelm men by the majesty of His person.

His ministry was a ministry of mercy, kindness, and truth told in love, rather than a ministry of mighty displays of Godhead seeking recognition through power, invincibility, and genius. He called upon the viewers of His greatest works not to spread the tale of His miracles. They were works of compassion, not propaganda devices. He did not want the crowds to be awed by mighty works and by His power to *give*; He wanted them to trust Him for His death and His mercy in taking away their sin.

He was not constantly pulling rank on men, winning them by declaring to them His infallibility. He didn’t come down on them from above. He came from out of the midst of them, shared the Truth with them, and sought to win them with its substance. He did not shrink from asserting the mystery that he was God in the

flesh, but He did not deny His humanness either. In fact, He affirmed it constantly by His tiredness, hunger, and so on.

A man (Peter) who knew how to confess of Him, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” knew only half the story. He could therefore be so mistaken about Jesus that in the next moments he could hear Jesus saying to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Why? That man wanted greatness in Jesus, not lowliness and death. And so that man knew neither Jesus nor himself and his great need. That man did not know that God’s way with man is epitomized by cross. God wants to reveal Himself by the cross. What God has in His heart for men is best revealed by cross: His suffering the guilt of man’s sin, His bearing the penalty of man’s sin, His loving of man to His own shame and death. All this is the work Jesus had come to do and the message He had come to get across. It was a work He could not do from above. He had to do it from below. It was a message He could not get across from above; He had to get it across from below. To work God’s love, to reveal God’s love, He had to come into intimate and total communion with man, the sinner, the sufferer, the wonderer. He had to enter into marriage with harlot man to prove His love: He became “bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.”

In Jesus God descended from above to enter into communion with the creature He loved. He lived in communion with men; He suffered with them; He died with them. And thus they could believe that He lived *for* them, suffered *for* them, died *for* them. Although men who wanted a mighty God could not recognize Him, He did win the recognition of men who were crushed by His teaching of repentance and moved by His Truth in Word and in work. They were awakened by the Spirit from their death so that they could say of Him, “My Lord and my God.”

The resurrection is no departure from the theology of the cross. No miracle of might can turn men to faith in the Father so that a man loves Him and fears Him in one consistent act. Might can produce awe but it cannot win trust and love. Therefore the risen Jesus appeared only to those who had been disposed to trust Him by His teaching and humble communion with them; to such ones He disclosed His resurrection. They would know what to make of His power. They would do more than stand in awe. They would trust, love, and fear.

But how about those men who want a mighty God rather than a dying God? Has Jesus by revealing Himself in lowliness cheated them out of a revelation that could bring them to faith? No. Men who want a mighty God revealed to them can find Him in the earthquake, the tornado, the volcano, the atom, and the harvest. Men have ever seen these revelations and they have ever suppressed them. They have ever presumed on the God of power, pretending to adore Him while blithely and proudly doing their own thing. They have suppressed His call to gratitude and obedience; they have substituted for Him the love of His gifts. They have discarded Him in favor of His gifts.

Therefore our God wants to reveal Himself to men and establish genuine communion with them through the cross.

Christ’s Chief Interpreter Established the Gospel by the Cross

As Jesus originally established the Gospel on earth by the cross, so His believers went everywhere establishing the Gospel by the cross.

When the Apostle Paul established the Gospel in Corinth, there was only one thing he wanted to plant in the hearts of the people, Christ Crucified. Men had to know the foolishness of God in accepting the guilt of a guilty world as His very own guilt. Men had to know the weakness of God in suffering and dying in communion with man to make atonement for man. Corinth didn’t need another glorious God; it needed the crucified God to heal its wounds and win it to faith.

Christ’s way was Paul’s way, too. He did not come in greatness, in the power of Greek rhetorical excellence. Paul came among them in all human weakness like Jesus. If the Corinthians were going to be won for communion with God it was going to be by the crucified God, by the Good News of a God who stoops to bear man’s most dreadful burdens. This is the Spirit’s way. The lowliness of Paul’s words matched the lowliness of the crucified Christ and thus they were the Spirit’s finely fitted tool to reveal the secret heartbeat of God. The Spirit wins men not through the formal irrefutability and invincibility of Paul’s arguments but through

the material content which he presented, the lowliness of Jesus Christ, the Crucified. Jesus' cross has its own power to create faith.

The Lord of History Continues to Establish the Gospel in the World by the Cross

As we know, the Bible did not drop down from heaven in a spectacular miracle of might. That's not the Spirit's way of working out His Salvation. The Spirit lets His Word be born, like Jesus, in all lowliness, almost in casualness. At various times and in various places Paul writes to various congregations to deal with various problems. Luke writes to Theophilus to give him a full knowledge of how Christ saves by the cross and how the church moves out into the world under the cross. The one writes as an apostle; the other as an apostolic helper and careful investigator. Their word is a human word: God conceals His unspeakable glory beneath the veil of human language. *But* their word of witness to Christ is also the Holy Spirit's own Word to bring men to know the grace of God and His gift to men. Their witness is the Word of the Spirit who searches the deep things of God. Like Jesus, this Spirit-given Word did not impress men by outward demonstration of power; but it grew on men. The early church began to recognize the various epistles and gospels as the Spirit's Word to lead them to the Christ who was dear to their hearts. The Spirit won men to trust the Word not by its formal splendor but by its lowly material beauty in presenting the Christ. They recognized His Sacrifice for sin as the Bread of Life to satisfy the repentant and nourish the church.

It is characteristic of the Spirit's way that He entrusts the continuing distribution of the Gospel to the lowly. When Jesus walked the earth, He appointed a group of 12 and then a group of 70 to go from city to city and home to home to announce the coming of God's kingdom. The 12 and the 70 were not angels. They were men. They were men who really knew quite little of Christ's way. They proved that their understanding was not altogether adequate by taking offense at His death. Thus they were hardly invincible in their arguments; but they were witnesses to Christ and His Spirit was willing to use them. Their limited understanding was sufficient for their limited mission. Later when Jesus chose to withdraw His visible presence from this earth, He commissioned His church to go out and make disciples. They were fallen men, all of them, just a few days away from their hour of shame and despair at His death. But Jesus commissioned them. The Spirit is quite willing to use nobodies, zeroes, negatives – sinners, simple men and women, who make Jesus Christ their one glory – as the agents of His mission. In their repentance they receive the one quality they really need to be witnesses, *the Joy of Salvation*. This is the gift of the Spirit for which the church still constantly prays. It is the gift which the Spirit still constantly gives and by it God's church is being empowered for mission.

What Christ Established by His Cross is Gospel

Our Christ-given message is a Gospel, a Good News, a word of joy, a shout of triumph to people who thought they were surely defeated. Jesus came to liberate men by winning a victory over their enemies and by announcing the victory. He did not come to bind men to a complex system of religious thought and morality. He came to free, to unloose men held captive to despair and angry mistrust of God. He came to encourage men by the Good News of the depth of God's love for men toiling under cross. He came to show salvation to the lost.

Our sermons and our evangelism conversations should reflect this elementary fact. They should not be essays about the God who was; they should tell people about the God who *is* and who *is for* them. We should not think of ourselves as laying on men a difficult and complex way of thinking and feeling and doing. We should not think of ourselves as imposing upon men the burden of a more difficult life than they already have. The opposite is true. We should think of ourselves as helping men to be liberated from the shackles of a misery-causing way of thinking about God and about life. We should think of ourselves as freeing men from the torment of an evil conscience and from the orphan loneliness of life without a Father who cares. We have a Good News for a really desperate people.

We should remember that men without Christ are in a kind of prison from which they themselves cannot make an escape. Men without Christ are doing their own thing; but their freedom to do their own thing is God's judgment and Satan's heavy yoke. Just in doing their own thing, they make out of their lives a hellish prison. They bring upon themselves a wretched, meaningless existence that drives them ever further into the blaming of

God. Unless they hear of Christ's shattering of their prison! Our Gospel is a word of compassion to break men out of their spiritual prison of hatred toward God.

Of course, men can grow to love their chains, their bondage to sin. That's where the law comes in. We want men to see the chains they love are an ugly, sinful, selfish, stupid rebellion against a beautiful God. We want to call sinners to repentance. That call may drive them into a rage; then again they may hear it with unruffled self-confidence; hopefully, they will be crushed. In any case we have begun to do our part no matter what the response. Men are responsible for their own false responses to the Word of God. We cannot blame ourselves for Satan's work. The law must be spoken to men in love with their chains whether they like it or not – whether we like it or not. Jesus often irritated people and so may we. He bore the cross for it and so may we. He invites us to bear it. There should be no thought of winning men for the church without winning them for repentance. Church isn't a society of good Joes with a common purpose; it is an assembly of sinners who have repented.

But Jesus especially loved to tell troubled men and women about the forgiveness of their sins. His freedom in telling sinners their forgiveness is sometimes shocking. He spoke the words of forgiveness with the wonderful freedom of a man who has joy in forgiving. There is good reason to speak forgiveness freely where sin abounds. Men who think God is stubbornly and irreversibly against them are going to have no interest in serving Him or repenting before Him. Men who know how much He loves to forgive are far better informed. They have been given a far richer insight into God and life. They have been served with the Bread of Life their soul most needs. By the Spirit the Gospel can bring them to repentance and to joy. What we want under the Spirit to establish in our communities is this anger-freeing, sin-freeing, rebellion-freeing Gospel of free forgiveness. The message is a beauty. It needs no enhancement from man. Let us establish the Gospel by the cross.

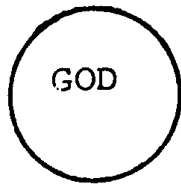
By the Gospel of the Cross Men Are Brought into Communion with the Father

Jesus is the Way: He speaks of Himself as the only way to the Father. His will is to bring men into a restored communion with the Father. All His teaching supports this goal. The Parable of the Prodigal Son leads men to the Father. The Kingdom parables are meant to lead men to the Father in revealing the blessed manner of His ruling. The Lord's Prayer leads men to speak with the Father. In His dying Jesus commends Himself into His Father's hands and thus commends all mankind to the Father with Himself. That's where Jesus wants us: in the hands of the Father. Can we say He wants us to walk life's scary and treacherous path with our hands in the Father's? Surely He wants us to be on such intimate terms with God that we call Him respectfully but trustingly, "Abba – Dad – Father." He wants that not only for His Father's sake but for our sake. He knows that life with the Father is a blessed life.

It is important to recognize that our task is to use the Gospel to lead men to the Father. It is even important that we keep reminding ourselves of that goal. Lesser goals are more alluring. They are also more attainable. They please man's natural inclinations better.

I would like to suggest that American man, even the American religious man, prefers to address himself to lesser gods than the Father. Naturally man's flight from holy God does not make him any more comfortable; it only makes him even more wretched. Yet man today flees intimate communion with the Father, just like pagan man of old, like modern pagan man, and like Roman Catholic, fundamentalist, and PTL man. In thinking about these varieties of men in flight from God we may be able to clarify our Gospel's goal with men. The following illustration seeks to depict how men tend to turn the Father into a God-Afar-Off and seek an encounter, a really living engagement, a real working relationship with less worthy gods.

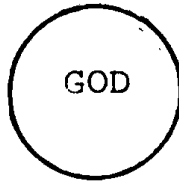
ROMAN PAGAN
GOD-AFAR-OFF



nature
wood
stone



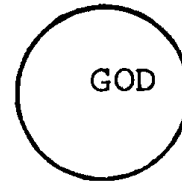
MODERN PAGAN
GOD-AFAR-OFF



forest spirits
water sprites



AMERICAN
GOD-AFAR-OFF



science
technology
medicine



The Roman pagans suppressed the knowledge of God and fled from being beholden to Him as did Adam and Eve far earlier. But to be utterly without God was uncomfortable for them. They created in His place pocket-sized gods, idols of wood and stone, with whom they played the game of religion. They made out of God's gift of creation lesser gods upon whom they might freely presume. They pretended to worship these gods but they really served their own passions. Their idols, the creation of their own imaginations, naturally approved their self-serving life and worship styles. In pretending to serve the idols their real engagement was with their own passions. It was with them as with Adam and Eve. The gifts God gave them to bring them into (or sustain them in) loving communion with Him became their sufficient gods. They let the Father become a God-Afar-Off and chose to get the good things of life from His gifts but apart from the Father.

A similar spirit of darkness, I am told, is at work among those who hold to modern pagan religions. They tend to be aware of the existence of a great God but He has no real part in their lives. He is a God-Afar-Off. Their real gods are the lesser spirits who inhabit nature: tree spirits, water spirits, etc. Their real engagement is with these lesser gods. They serve them with ritual chant and incantation – and in most other respects they do what they please to satisfy their own hearts. They turn God's self-revelation in nature, meant to lead men to seek after Him, into their sufficient god. But their real engagement and encounter is with themselves as they win the good life and the feeling of peace with chant and ritual. The Father remains a God-Afar-Off. His merciful fellowship is not sought.

The modern American is equally religious. He has a god called "Somebody Up There Likes Me." But this is a God-Afar-Off. The modern American's real gods, by which he explains life and from which he seeks his benefits, are technology, science, medicine, politics, oil, energy, penicillin, and democracy. With these he has his really gripping encounter of the heart. He worships them by practicing their sacred arts. He worships not by chant but by workaholic busyness. But, of course, his real engagement is with himself as he works out his life by himself and for himself. He likes to think of himself as being religious, however, so he practices certain specifically religious forms that are just difficult enough for him to deceive himself into thinking that he respects a god. But the real bulk of his life and effort is dedicated to self-gain. His real god is Self; the Father remains a God-Afar-Off, His mercies unsought.

MEDIEVAL
GOD-AFAR-OFF



SAINTS



FUNDAMENTALIST
GOD-AFAR-OFF



true
doctrine



PTL
GOD-AFAR-OFF



"Jesus"
his gifts



The religious phenomenon at work among pagans endangers also unwary Christians. They may prefer God's gifts, His self-revelation, to God Himself and thus make Him a God-Afar-Off with little value for real life.

Roman Catholicism of old made Jesus so divine and so fierce in judgment that the Christians retreated from Him. His real heavenly helpers became God's legendary and historical gifts to the church, the saints. Through the saints they implored the mundane blessings God surely was not vitally interested in bestowing, as they thought. Their love and trust engagement was with God's gifts rather than with God: He became a God-Afar-Off. He could be no comfort to His spiritually troubled people.

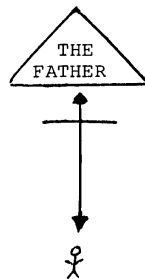
In fundamentalism we have a similar but far more dangerous development. Between God and man fundamentalism has erected the barrier of "True Doctrine." God's self-revelation in the Scripture, His beautiful gift to man, is made the object of man's devotion in such a way that God is nothing more than a God-Afar-Off. Fundamentalism emphasizes acceptance of a system: "You must believe this... You must believe that..." Do you see what has happened here? Man is called to engagement with a doctrinal system; the required response is to adhere to the system. Man wins his blessings by conforming to the system. Man's real engagement is with his own capacity to believe rightly. He seeks salvation in his rightness rather than in Christ's righteousness.

An example of this fundamentalist trait (besides the tell-tale "you must believe" syndrome which turns the Gospel into Law) is its doctrine of the immutability of faith. The fundamentalist tends to say, "Once a man believes, he cannot lose his faith." Thus he turns man away from trusting the faithful God to trusting a system of belief and really he is turned to faith in his own precarious inner condition. God has been allowed to become a God-Afar-Off rather than a near and faithful Father to whom men may appeal in every trial of body and of soul. And when God is far off, man is left to his own best devices to be saved.

Another popular God-Afar-Off is presented in PTL religion. The Praise the Lord people of TV fame are so-o-o-o happy, so happy in someone they call Jesus and in the good gifts He gives. But "Jesus" and His good gifts intrude between them and God. PTL people are like the Corinthians of old: filled with their gifts of knowledge and speech they had no room for God. PTL people have so much pleasure in God's good gifts that their really interesting engagement is with His gifts. Even Jesus is just another gift of God to make men happy. PTL people smile and smile; they mention Jesus at every turn but their real engagement is with themselves. They are high on their own religiousness. They huckster indulgences as blatantly as Tetzels that people may feel good about their religious sacrifices. The God who made the great sacrifice for sin remains a God-Afar-Off.

We have an important function as Lutherans who live by the theology of the cross. We have a God to bring to the world who is not a God-Afar-Off. He has come close to us by the incarnation and cross of Jesus and

by proclaiming the cross we bring men near to God as their dear Father. Our doctrine of Christ Crucified bridges the distance between God and man. While fundamentalists are saying, “You have to believe that Jesus is the Son of God;” we are saying, “Jesus has reconciled you with the Father; trust Him.” While fundamentalists are saying “You have to believe that God is omnipotent,” we are saying, “Our God is the most beautiful God you could want. He is powerful enough to do anything He wants. Trust Him.” The fundamentalist tends to turn man’s attention to a system and to engagement with the system. The Lutheran leads men to the Father, to trust the Father. The Lutheran is taught to find comfort not by the uncertain attitude within him or by his own faithful conformity to a doctrinal system but by the sure love and faithfulness of the God who sent His Son to die.



The PTL god of happy religiosity is an inadequate God for the day of trial. Lutherans have a better God to share with the world, a God who is near in trial as well as in good days. Luther’s theology of the cross teaches us that God came near by the birth, suffering, and death of His Son, redeeming us and reconciling us to Himself. Moreover, God continues to come to us by His cross rather than by glory. Luther wrote in his commentary on Romans, “If God should not test us by tribulation, it would be impossible for any man to be saved. The reason is that our nature has been so deeply curved in upon itself because of the viciousness of original sin that it not only turns the finest gifts of God in upon itself and enjoys them (as is evident in the case of legalists and hypocrites) indeed, it even uses God Himself to achieve these aims, but it also seems to be ignorant of this very fact that in acting so iniquitously, so perversely, and in such a depraved way, it is even seeking God for its own sake. Thus the Prophet Jeremiah says in Jer. 17:9: ‘The heart is perverse above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?’ That is, it is so curved in on itself that no man, no matter how holy (if a testing is kept from him) can understand it... Therefore our good God, after He has justified us and given us His spiritual gifts, quickly brings tribulation upon us, exercises us, and tests us so that this godless nature of ours does not rush in upon these enjoyable sins, lest in his ignorance man should die the eternal death. For they (the gifts) are very lovely and vigorously excite enjoyment. Thus (through tribulation) man learns to love and worship God purely for Himself, and not just because of His grace and His gifts; but he worships God for His sake alone.” Thus we see that the Lutheran teaching of the cross brings man to the Father Himself, the Fountain of Grace. And the Lutheran teaches that God is constantly drawing near to us by cross. Once He drew nigh by His Son’s cross and He still draws nigh by letting us bear His Son’s cross. Even in trial He is a God who is near and is actually working through our trouble to save us from our curved in natures. The God of the cross deserves to be shared with the world and with our neighbor next door. He is a Father in goodness and grace; and He is near.

Our purpose in comparing the missionary approaches of Lutheran, fundamentalist, and PTL man has been to help us distinguish through contrast the appropriate understanding of our role in Christ’s mission. We have also wanted to establish that churches which live by the cross have a uniquely important role in American mission. Not all of the churches which live hard by us in our communities know how to lead men to the Father by the cross. It is not our business to boast in our rightness but it is our proper business to glory in Christ’s righteousness. It is in the interest of Christ’s cross and righteousness that we have sought to identify, positively and negatively, our evangelism task, goal, and means.

Random Applications

1. In His approach to the world our God was not ashamed to bear the cross. Let His witnesses not be ashamed of His cross either. Recall the early church. In its Apostles Creed it rushed to confess that the Son of God and of the Virgin suffered and died. That's the message that they wanted told and learned. That is the Gospel for the world. Now a crucified Jesus is surely an offense, a stumbling block. But He must be confronted. One cannot remain neutral and unaffected by Him. To talk about Jesus as the One who died for men sins is to call men to decision about God in the Spirit's own way and by the Spirit's own strength.

2. There is always the temptation to be ashamed of Jesus' death. That shows itself in our preferring to draw men into the church by the theology of glory rather than by the theology of the cross. Here are some examples: "Our preacher is very friendly and really smart..." "We have an aggressive, growing church." "We are more faithful to the old time religion than other churches." "We have an exciting program for the whole family." "We keep the social gospel out of our church." "We have tougher standards of church membership than most churches." There is no point in our taling any farther unless you will agree with me that God's Word is infallible. "We aren't one of those churches that's going to give in to the pope." "Catholics and Lutherans are a lot alike, you know; our liturgies have a lot in common."

In conversational evangelism just about any of the above topics may come up. My point is: Beware thinking you can do more for God by drawing men to the church through these "glorious" affirmations rather than through talking specifically about man's lostness and our Savior's cross. God wants to be known through the still, small voice of the Gospel. He wants to reveal Himself not by His or His church's glory but by His lowliness in suffering and dying.

3. Religious genius, philosophical insight, cleverness of speech, and faultless logic qualify men as good conversationalists and interesting speakers; but all these mighty gifts are as nothing in qualifying a man as a witness when compared to "joy in salvation." What do we hear from our pulpits? Angry intensity or the intensity of joy? Do we preach Christ "of contention", eagerly stressing our rightness and the wrongness of others? When we are more full of joy in our rightness than in Christ's righteousness, our voice may carry a note of spiritual pride, condescension, and angry intensity. Angry intensity suggests an angry God from whom I want to flee. Intensity of joy suggests a Father God running out to embrace His fallen son. What kind of speech should we cultivate for sermon and for conversation? Is there any better way to cultivate the proper speech than by prayer for the genuine joy in salvation?