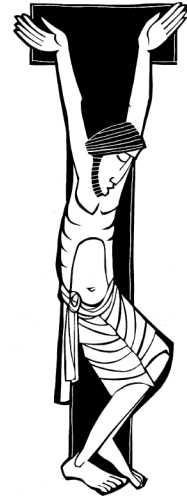


# SHEPHERDS UNDER THE CROSS



An essay  
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“Why?” As a shepherd-leader of God’s flock this word will be in your ears and often on your lips as the members of Christ’s church face challenges. “Pastor, why is this happening?” “God, why is this happening to my church, my family, to me?”

At times that question is easy to answer. “Why? Well, you got fired because you were drunk on the job, Fred.” The “why” is pretty simple. “You are in prison for seventeen years because you used a handgun in commission of a crime.” Some “whys” are easy to answer.

Others, however, defy simple explanations: the “whys” that come in the moments after tragedy happens for no good reason, when evil drops out of the sky onto good people, when a member family suffers a shot-in-the-gut kind of loss. The hard ones to answer are asked by faithful Christians, who say, “Why? Pastor, why did this happen to me?”

The unbelievers of the world don’t get to ask that question in the face of tragedy or loss. They and their selfish genes live in a worldview of their own creation, subject to nothing but the law of tooth and fang and pitiless indifference. Those who posit a godless universe have lost the privilege to ask why, because they have rejected the possibility that there’s someone to give an answer.

But for those who believe in a God who rules, and speaks, and loves—when those people are faced with unearned evil or unexpected tragedy and ask, “Why God? Why this? Why me?”—implicit in their question is an inquiry about the nature of God. What is he like? Would God do this to me?

Understanding what God is really like is imperative for Shepherd-leaders who guide God’s people as they face challenges together. To show us what he is really like, God leads his shepherd and his flock to the unlikely of places: the cross.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is God really like?**

Ever since Adam and Eve wanted to know what it was like to be God, humankind in our new life east of Eden has wrestled with the question, “What is God really like?” The issue is not the question itself, but the way man seeks to answer it.

In *The Republic*, Plato explores that question by dialoging with Adeimantus about a hypothetical state. For a city-state to be ideal, he proposes that it needs rulers and guardians who are trained to be lovers of wisdom, and the conversation centers on how such potential philosopher-rulers might be trained. They agree that an item of great importance was that the rulers be given an accurate description of divinity; they must be taught what God was really like. Adeimantus asks, and Plato answers through the voice of Socrates:

Adeimantus: What are these forms of theology which you mean?

Socrates: Something of this kind, I replied: —God<sup>2</sup> is always to be represented as he truly is.

A: Right.

S: And is he not truly good? and must he not be represented as such?

<sup>1</sup> The essayist first presented on this topic for the Emmaus Conference, a free conference that gathers LCMS, WELS, and ELS pastors and laity in Tacoma, WA, during the week of Easter 2. Learn more at [theemmausconference.org](http://theemmausconference.org).

<sup>2</sup> ὁ θεός not οἱ θεοί, here and throughout this passage. Kenneth Quandt notes, “The article here has its categorical meaning so that ὁ γὰρ θεός, with the reinforcement of γὰρ, means god as god. It may well be noted that Plato’s expression often accommodates and sometimes invites a monotheistic interpretation...” *A Commentary on Plato’s Republic*. <http://onplatosrepublic.com>.

- A: Certainly.
- S: And no good thing is hurtful? A: No, indeed.
- S: And that which is not hurtful hurts not? A: Certainly not.
- S: And that which hurts not does no evil? A: No.
- S: And can that which does no evil be a cause of evil? A: Impossible.
- S: And the good is advantageous? A: Yes.
- S: And therefore the cause of well-being? A: Yes.
- S: It follows therefore that the good is not the cause of all things, but of the good only?
- A: Assuredly.
- S: Then God, if he be good, is not the author of all things, as the many assert, but he is the cause of a few things only, and not of most things that occur to men. For few are the goods of human life, and many are the evils, and the good is to be attributed to God alone; of the evils the causes are to be sought elsewhere, and not in him.
- A: That appears to me to be most true, he said...
- S: Let this then be one of our rules and principles... that God is not the author of all things, but of good only.<sup>3</sup>

By reason Plato deduces that God cannot be the author of actions or events that man considers bad. Those events must, by default, be caused by something else—a man’s evil actions, for example. That Plato arrives at this conclusion is no surprise. He makes perfect sense, and his conclusions resonate in an innate part of us. It is what we want to believe. God is good, and so only good comes from him. Anything we wouldn’t call “good” must come from someplace else. Plato might have laid the foundation for Western thought, but here is the limit to which man, apart from revelation may come: What we call good comes from God, but not what we call evil. Joy and pleasure come from God, but not suffering. And there is a Platonic part of our heart that wants to agree.

Brilliant as he was, Plato fell victim to a fundamental misreading of reality. In order to allow God to be purely good, he had to take parts of this world out of God’s control. To Plato, God is either wholly good or wholly in control of the events of the universe, but he can’t be both.

Plato was not unique in asking the question or coming to this answer. How many brilliant men have stumbled over the same dilemma? They look at heartbreaking conditions around the world such as hunger, poverty, abuse, neglect, and persecution of Christians, and they conclude: If God is good, he is not in control; if God is in control, he is certainly not good. To consider that suffering could come from the hand of God risks saying that God isn’t completely good. How could that be? So says the wise man, the philosopher, the scholar of every age.

Dialogues and hypotheticals are interesting places to discuss abstractly the role of God in suffering. Harder by far is to discuss such suffering from within its midst. Job joined Plato in wrestling with the question, “What is God really like?” and he faced the dilemma of how to account for suffering in a world ruled completely by God. The example of Job is especially arresting for Christians, precisely because of the man Job was. He had great wealth and blessing from the hand of God; in fact, he was the greatest man among all the peoples of the East. The

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (MIT: Internet Classics Archive), Book 2, accessed June 25, 2018, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.

Bible, however, makes that description ancillary to the chief point: he was blameless and upright, a man of faith who shunned evil, a singular example of piety in an impious world.<sup>4</sup>

That Job lived devoutly before God highlights the paradox when unimaginable tragedy strikes this devout man. The Sabceans and the Chaldeans robbed him of both man and beast. Lightning destroyed seven thousand sheep. A tornado fell upon his gathered children, and suddenly the little boys and girls he had raised into adulthood were dead—every single one. All that remained was his health and his wife, neither of which would give comfort for long. When faced by such misfortune only a man of great faith could answer, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.”<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Plato, Job never questioned the source of the tragedy. He always attributed it to the LORD. Even when the matter became one of skin for skin, even when confronted with the fact that his wife would never be nominated for Spouse of the Year,<sup>6</sup> Job did not charge God with doing wrong but confessed the hardest words for suffering Christians, “Shall we accept good from God and not evil/trouble?”<sup>7</sup>

Suffering that persists, though, can grind away at the faith of even the most devout people, and Job begins to question what this God of his is really like. In the third chapter, Job comes close to doing the bidding of his wife and cursing God. He cursed his own birth and wished he were a stillborn child. He questions the *gubernatio dei*—why does man have life if it’s nothing but pain? As you listen to this man who lost everything, we are tempted to agree with him that God seems either capricious or detached.

The friends of Job came and sat with him silently for seven days. This is when they were at their best; they didn’t speak but simply wept with him. We can glean a bit of wisdom for God’s people who attend to mourning friends, namely that simply being there brings comfort. The trouble starts when his friends try to find the reason why it all happened. Had we not been supplied the backstory of chapter one and the conversation between God and Satan, we would be right there with Job and his friends trying to reason out why bad things happen to good people. And maybe we’d come to the same conclusion as his friends, which is ... they don’t. Bad things don’t happen to good people. So, Job, you must be bad.

Job, of course, denies that this is retribution for offense; he had done nothing to deserve this. In doing so, he puts the question back on the table, “Then what is God really like?” The question makes us wrack our heads and hearts until we join Job in demanding answers from God. Why did this happen to a good man, Lord? It’s not fair. It’s not right. Is it that you’re not in control or that you’re not looking out for us? “Oh, that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense—let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing.”<sup>8</sup>

The bold challenge from Job is met by distant rumbles of thunder. Elihu’s final speech in Job 36-37 is peppered with references to the storm that was building around them. After 37

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<sup>4</sup> Job 1:1-5

<sup>5</sup> Job 1:21 (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Job 2:9

<sup>7</sup> Job 2:10. אֶת־הַטּוֹב נִקְבְּלִי מֵאֵת הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֶת־הָרָע לֹא נִקְבְּלִי. The word הָרָע can be used to describe things that are objectively evil or things that *seem bad subjectively* in someone’s opinion. The NIV and CSB offer interpretive translations to help the reader, as does the ESV in the footnote.

<sup>8</sup> Job 31:35.

chapters of trying alternately to blame God or justify God, suddenly the LORD answers Job from “out of the storm.”

What is more shocking: that God answered Job at all or what God said? The answer? Plato is wrong. Not only what you call “good” comes from my hand, but what you call “bad,” too.<sup>9</sup> The problem, Job, is that you are too dim, too obtuse, too short-sighted to understand that this, too, is meant for your blessing and my glory. Brace yourself, because it’s my turn to ask you some questions. Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations? Tell me, if you understand. Have you molded the earth like clay? Do you bring the constellations out each night? Can you begin to comprehend even the smallest part of my governance of the earth? Four chapters of this ... God neither explaining himself nor excusing himself but simply saying that Job just doesn’t understand that even in events we call “bad,” God rules.

We can do nothing but marvel at God who is wholly good, yet says even suffering comes from his hand. Nothing but marvel and hope with Jesus’ disciples that God would reserve such actions for the Old Testament. Perhaps that’s why Jesus’ words in Mark 8 stick in our craw:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

Peter wanted an Isaiah-63-not-53 Messiah; he had no room in his worldview for a Savior who suffers and dies on a cross. What would God be like if that happened? Jesus answered: You are speaking the lies of the devil. Not just a cross for me, Peter, but a cross for every Christian. Cross-bearing is a necessary consequence of discipleship. Now pick yours up and follow me.

For our natural mind, it’s bad enough that God says the cross was necessary for the Messiah<sup>10</sup> but it’s a testament to the degree to which I am *incurvatus in me*<sup>11</sup>, that it’s Jesus’ words about my cross that really bother me. What I really want is a life without any cross—especially for me. So Jesus’ next words of warning are meant for me:

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?

Jesus’ question in Mark 8:36 is completely rhetorical—no one in their right mind would trade temporal comfort for eternal punishment. Or would they? Would you trade your soul for a life without the cross of suffering in this world? That was the essence of the figure from German legend, Dr. Faustus, a man of brilliance tempted to trade his soul in a deal with the devil so that he might have everything he wanted in life. The story has appeal precisely because of the short-sighted, self-absorbed creatures we are. The idea that suffering, that bearing the cross is part of

<sup>9</sup> Amos 3:6; Isaiah 45:7; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:18ff.

<sup>11</sup> Turned in upon oneself. Luther used this expression of Augustine to demonstrate that sinful man is completely self-interested and self-involved in his propensity to sin.

God's plan for my life as a Christian, offends the natural part of me, just as it offends the wise man, the scholar, and the philosopher of every age.

One such scholar was the great man of German letters, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose play *Faust* brought the legend and the question to life for the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His learning and influence on German culture can hardly be overstated. Napoleon, who had risen from nothing to claim Europe as his personal fief, left a meeting with Goethe in 1808 saying, "*Voilà un homme!*"<sup>12</sup> Though born into a Lutheran home, Goethe's faith was shaken by the question of Plato and Job: What is God really like?

Goethe's childhood saw Europe embroiled in the Seven Years War and shaken by natural disaster. On All Saints Day, 1755, at 9:40 in the morning, a massive earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal. Estimated at 8.5-9 on the Richter scale, the earthquake, fires, and tsunami are estimated to have killed up to 100,000 people in Lisbon alone. Since he could not answer the dilemma, "If God is good, he is not in control; if God is in control, he is certainly not good," he simply rejected faith completely. The Great Man referred to himself as *der große Heide*.<sup>13</sup> Though sprung from Lutheran roots, he exchanged his soul for the devil's lie that what we call "bad" cannot come from God. He had no room for the cross in his worldview. In fact, in a poem called "Cross Lines,"<sup>14</sup> he identified the four things he found most hateful. The last on the list: the cross.<sup>15</sup> He had the world, but he lost his soul.

The struggle to accept the cross as a necessary consequence of Christianity is not restricted to the great men of history. It is the daily struggle of every shepherd-leader and every congregation, a struggle characterized by the sobering reality that the cross Christ asks us to carry is not generic. It's completely custom-made for us. That was hard for me to discover.

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<sup>12</sup> "That is a man!"

<sup>13</sup> The Great Heathen.

<sup>14</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Cross Lines: Venetian Epigrams No. 66," 1790.

<sup>15</sup> The last line reads: *Wenige sind mir jedoch wie Gift und Schlange zuwider; Viere: Rauch des Tabacks, Wanzen und Knoblauch und †.*

## Das liebe Kreuz<sup>16</sup>

As a child I loved mission festivals. I grew up in the parsonage at Bethel Lutheran, Bay City, Michigan, a congregation that took corporate mission work seriously. They committed generous offerings to the synod's mission efforts and celebrated the work with annual services featuring world missionaries home on furlough. Those were my favorite services, because as a child I was convinced that I wanted to go share the gospel with the lost.

I would belt out all the stanzas of "Hark! The Voice of Jesus Crying," knowing in my heart that I would say, "Here am I—send me, send me!" I sang stanzas two and three,<sup>17</sup> but I largely disagreed with their premise. Leave the little children and uphold the prophet's hands for others. I would rouse the wicked. I would be the watchman standing high on Zion's wall.

Years later, in July of 1999, my time had come to say, "Send me!" I had been assigned out of the Seminary to be the church planter for an exploratory effort in the southwest Atlanta suburbs. A simple mission: Find the lost, share the gospel, and see if the Holy Spirit would build a congregation. I had excellent preparation: four years of prep school, four years of college, four years of Seminary. I knew the Word, I knew the Man, and I knew missions. I had spent the twelve months of my vicar year with Pastor Chuck Westra, the *Übermensch* of WELS home mission work. I knew what to do and how to do it. As I rolled into town, I brimmed with confidence.<sup>18</sup> I had everything I needed ... well, almost everything. "One thing you still lack," Jesus once said.

Our Board for Home Missions had told me I would find a nucleus of fifty committed people, ready and willing to help plant this church. I don't know where they got that number, because I never found those fifty people. At our first service, we had nine in attendance. Unbeknownst to me, while I drove from Wisconsin to Atlanta, the District Mission Board polled the Atlanta WELS pastors as to whether they thought we should try to plant the church in Sharpsburg. The solid consensus was against it; the plan was to meet me in Atlanta and send me on to another mission field. At the last minute the District Mission Board chairman decided to give it a try.<sup>19</sup>

The early days of a church plant are exciting and terrifying, depending on the day. The first thing I did was set up meetings with the leadership families to talk about our plan for reaching out with the gospel in Sharpsburg, Georgia, in order that the Holy Spirit might grow a church there, *so der liebe Gott will*. The plan called for aggressive outreach activities and meaningful evangelism opportunities. As a tiny church plant, outreach was going to be our bread and butter for years.

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<sup>16</sup> The dear/beloved cross.

<sup>17</sup> If you cannot speak like angels, If you cannot preach like Paul,  
You can tell the love of Jesus; You can say he died for all.  
If you cannot rouse the wicked With the judgment's dread alarms,  
You can lead the little children To the Savior's waiting arms.

...

If you cannot be a watchman, Standing high on Zion's wall,  
Pointing out the path to heaven, Offering life and peace to all,  
With your prayers and with your bounties You can do what God demands;  
You can be life faithful Aaron, Holding up the prophet's hands. (TLH:496)

<sup>18</sup> Will there ever be a solution to the hubris of youth?

<sup>19</sup> I am glad my friend, Pastor Larry Zahn, who was the DMB Chairman, didn't share this story with me until eight years later.

I met the first leader in his home for dinner. As I started explaining the plan, he cut me off and said, “I just want to let you know up front that I don’t do that outreach stuff. I don’t like doing evangelism, so I’m not going to be involved with that.” Since that’s all we had in our ministry plan, I spent the rest of dinner wondering what *he* thought we were going to be doing.

When I met with the second leader, I sensed a pattern developing. He said, “Evangelism doesn’t work in the South. Besides everyone here is Baptist anyway.” By the time I got to our third leadership family, I was waiting for it. He said, “I’m not sure this is going to work. I don’t know why the synod sent you.” *Take the task he gives you gladly... Answer quickly when he calleth.* Had I answered too quickly?

The first year of the exploratory was a difficult one for me. Outreach exploratory work is a beast that will eat all the hours you throw at it. We hit the streets hard. We canvassed, hung up door-hangers, made cold calls in the evening, put up signage, held events, even did phone canvassing.<sup>20</sup> We did everything I had learned how to do, but then we’d gather for Sunday worship, and we’d have twelve people one week, fifteen on another—well below the kook number.<sup>21</sup> We were working so hard, but nearly no one came.

I had been full of passion and excitement, but the disappointment started to grind on me. I had some dark days that first year. I would sit in our make-shift chancel, next to the folding camp table we called the altar, and I would look out and count the people in the chairs ... eleven or thirteen or sixteen ... I started to wonder, is all this work worth it?

I thought of how many outreach calls we made that week, but no one came. I thought of how many hours of preparation the sermon, the service, and the Bible study took—for fifteen people? I began to wonder, “Is this really the best use of my time? Is this really where God wants me to be? God, have you forgotten about me all the way down here in Georgia? Because this isn’t what I expected. This isn’t what I had hoped for. God, is this what you’re really like?” I didn’t know it then, but I had found one of the many things I had lacked. I found the cross, custom-made for me and my congregation in Sharpsburg, Georgia.

Luther said<sup>22</sup> the correct way to study theology is through *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*.<sup>23</sup> I had had ample opportunity for the first two, but in that first year, Jesus supplied what I lacked in the third. Luther wrote, “This (*tentatio*) is the touchstone which teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s Word is, wisdom beyond all wisdom.”<sup>24</sup> In the testing and temptation to question God, I had found the cross, but it was not yet dear to me.

Professor Daniel Deutschlander’s excellent book of reflections on Christ’s cross and ours offers this explanation as to why every cross Christ asks us to carry should be called a *dear* cross:

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<sup>20</sup> With the Do Not Call Registry, Caller ID and the move to mobile phones, this is an outreach method largely relegated to dustbin of history. I can’t say that I’ll miss it. We would have phones set up in my basement and lists of every phone number in the target area. We usually had a 250:1 ratio of dial-ups to people who said they might be interested in literature. This was a soul-sucking process.

<sup>21</sup> I think this is about forty for my target area. If a first-time visitor comes to worship in a rented space and finds fewer than forty people there, the first question that comes to their mind is, “Who are these kooks?”

<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 285.

<sup>23</sup> Prayer, meditation, testing (*Anfechtung*).

<sup>24</sup> Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 1999, 34: Career of the Reformer IV:239.



Ultimately the reality of the cross as a blessing (in German we always called it *das liebe Kreuz!*—the dear cross) sinks in, in part now, in full when we arrive at its consummation in glory...What a powerful point! Read the rest of chapter 8 [of Romans] and see how fully Paul delights in that point. The cross is dear and a gracious gift precisely because it keeps pointing me to and driving me back to the cross of Christ! Were there no cross and no struggle for me, I would not be singing endless praise and thanks to him for his cross and his struggle.<sup>25</sup>

The cross becomes dear for a pastor when he stops being a theologian and becomes a theologian of the cross. *CRUX sola est theologia nostra*, Luther said.<sup>26</sup> The cross answers the question of Job, of Plato, of Goethe, and of every suffering and tested Christian: we find out what God is really like. The answer is what Lutherans call *theologia crucis*, the theology of the cross. I had learned about it in school; I just hadn't experienced it.

### **Theologia Crucis et Theologia Glorae**

As a seminarian, I was acquainted with the theology of the cross as opposed to the theology of glory. I could define it and defend it. But there's a world of difference between knowing the proofs and living them, isn't there? The theology of the cross can be expressed in a few minutes but must be learned and relearned over a lifetime. *Theologia est habitus practicus*,<sup>27</sup> so said the *Prolegomena* of our Dogmatics notes. Yet it surprises us again and again.

The concepts of the theology of the cross are, of course, expressed in Scripture, but *theologia crucis* was formally developed as a result of Martin Luther's work during the Reformation, especially in his set of theses prepared for a debate in 1518 at Heidelberg for the occasion of the triennial gathering of the Augustinians of Germany. Since the storm hadn't settled yet from the 95 Theses Luther had nailed to the door of the *Schloßkirche* a few months earlier, Luther's superior, Johann von Staupitz, had told him to stick to uncontroversial topics. Luther took topics meant to be uncontroversial (sin, free will, and grace) and with his set of 28 theological theses proceeded to upend the entire Roman system of theology. Pope Leo X took note and used the outcome of the debate as part of the grounds to excommunicate Luther.<sup>28</sup>

With these theses Luther asked, "How can someone arrive at righteousness that lets us stand before God?" "The delicate thing about it is that it attacks the best we have to offer, not the worst. This explains why the theology of the cross is generally spoken of in contrast to a theology of glory. The two theologies are always locked in mortal combat."<sup>29</sup> The theology of glory puts works, self, and will above all:

It operates on the assumption that what we need is optimistic encouragement, some flattery, some positive thinking, some support to build our self-esteem. Theologically

<sup>25</sup> Deutschlander, 8, 36.

<sup>26</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Baker Publishing Group (MI), 1995), 169. The capital letters are Luther's.

<sup>27</sup> Theology is a practical aptitude.

<sup>28</sup> *Exsurge Domine* attacks Thesis 13 specifically. *Exsurge Domine* "Arise, O Lord," is the papal bull of 1520 issued by Leo X that threatened Luther with excommunication. Heidelberg Thesis 13 especially angered his papal opponents. Thesis 13, "Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin." Luther burned his copy of the papal bull on December 10, 1520.

<sup>29</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*, Kindle Edition. (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), Kindle Locations 127–129.

speaking it operates on the assumption that we are not seriously addicted to sin, and that our improvement is both necessary and possible ... The hallmark of a theology of glory is that it will always consider grace as something of a supplement to whatever is left of human will and power. It will always, in the end, hold out for some free will. Theology then becomes the business of making theological explanations attractive to the will.<sup>30</sup>

Theologians of glory constantly look for worth in their works: I made a decision for Christ; I got in touch with my inner Brahmin; I am such a good Lutheran missionary. Glory-thoughts such as those that man calls “good,” God calls “bad,” because they lead to self-reliance and self-glory. They lead us away from God rather than toward him. Instead, God acts in ways that we think are “bad” but are really for our highest good. Isaiah 28:21 says God must do the *opus alienum dei*, his strange and alien work of crushing us, so that he might have mercy on us. God’s strange and alien work is that which seems to contradict what God is really like, but in fact, if the work is traced to its ultimate conclusion of working penitence and faith in the sinner, then it is most decidedly not contradictory to the character God has revealed to us. This is what God is really like: *Occidendo vivificat*.<sup>31</sup>

In three theses Luther lays out the *theologia crucis*. The American Edition of Luther’s Works misses the imagery and allusion to Exodus 33 present in Luther’s Latin especially in Thesis 20, which this translation preserves:

19. The man who looks on the invisible things of God as they are perceived in created things does not deserve to be called a theologian.

20. The man who perceives the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross does, however, deserve to be called a theologian.<sup>32</sup>

21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.<sup>33</sup>

Luther, too, asked Plato’s question, “What is God really like?” Luther, however, maintained that reason must be the handmaiden of faith, not its queen, so he subjected reason to the truth of Scripture. He saw that God can only be seen where he reveals himself, and he reveals himself hidden in flesh and hidden in suffering.

Luther had come to the foundational conclusion that the cross was revelation. The cross is where we see what God is really like. We could not bear the sight of God in all his glory; it would literally kill us. So God remains *deus absconditus*<sup>34</sup> as Isaiah says, “Truly you are a God who hides himself.”<sup>35</sup> To Moses, God showed his back. To Elijah, he came as a gentle whisper. The mind-boggling reality is that when God wants to reveal himself to us, he does so by hiding himself. When he wants us to know what he’s like, he comes to us with his glory and power hidden. God revealed himself in Jesus by hiding himself in flesh and blood. God revealed himself

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Kindle Location 259.

<sup>31</sup> Deuteronomy 32:39. By killing he makes alive.

<sup>32</sup> 19. *Non ille dignus theologus dicitur, qui invisibilia Dei per ea, quae facta sunt, intellect conspicit. 20. Sed qui visibilia et posterior Dei per passiones et crucem conspecta intelligit.* McGrath 148.

<sup>33</sup> AE 31:40.

<sup>34</sup> The hidden God

<sup>35</sup> Isaiah 45:15 (NIV84)

to the world by hiding himself in Christ crucified. Look at the cross: That is what God is really like! In his writing on the Psalms from this period Luther says:

In the kingdom of his humanity and his flesh, in which we live by faith, he makes us of the same form as himself and crucifies us by making us true humans instead of unhappy and proud Gods: humans, that is, in their misery and their sin. Because in Adam we mounted up towards equality with God, he descended to be like us, to bring us back to knowledge of himself. That is the sacrament of the incarnation. That is the kingdom of faith in which the cross of Christ holds sway, which sets at naught the divinity for which we perversely strive and restores the despised weakness of the flesh which we have perversely abandoned.<sup>36</sup>

God is hidden in suffering. Rather than man becoming gods like Adam and Eve wanted, God in Christ became truly human, suffering all, even the cross that we might live. The cross of Jesus shows us that what looked bad in the eyes of the world was in fact the highest good for us. At its heart then, *theologia crucis* can call a thing what it is<sup>37</sup> and can tell us what God is really like: He is hidden in suffering, the suffering of Christ *and* the suffering of Christians. “God works in a paradoxical way *sub contrariis*:<sup>38</sup> his strength lies hidden under apparent weakness, his wisdom under apparent folly, his *opus proprium* under his *opus alienum*,<sup>39</sup> the future glory of the Christian under his present sufferings. It will therefore be clear that there is a radical discontinuity between the *empirically perceived situation* and the *situation as discerned by faith*.”<sup>40</sup>

The theology of the cross leads us to despair of ourselves, and it recognizes that anything that accomplishes that in us—even if it seems bad to us at the time—is a *dear* cross, given by God for our eternal good.

### **The blessing of the cross**

I had found the cross; I just hadn’t recognized it as dear. I struggled when ministry was not a glorious success. I questioned whether God wanted me in this place, at this time. I wondered how we were supposed to build a congregation and a church in Sharpsburg, Georgia. When God does his strange and alien work, it can drive the unbeliever to despair, but not the believer. Luther offered a translation of Isaiah 28:19:<sup>41</sup> “*Denn allein die Anfechtung lehrt aufs Wort merken*.”<sup>42</sup> For a young pastor and an even younger congregation, that is exactly what bearing the cross meant. The *tentatio* of the cross sent us back for more *oratio et meditatio*.

After a few years serving as a shepherd-leader, you may observe that the hardest times in ministry seem to coincide with the times our devotional life has ebbed. It’s not that God is punishing us for our lack of devotional piety, but the absence of it handicaps our ability to meet adversity with faith and rejoice even in sufferings. God puts his pastors and congregations in

<sup>36</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Kindle Locations 243–246.

<sup>37</sup> Thesis 21.

<sup>38</sup> Under opposites. God makes alive by killing; he condemns man to make him righteous.

<sup>39</sup> Proper work and alien/strange work. God’s alien work are those things which *seem* contrary to his revealed nature but ultimately show they are in keeping with it. God’s proper work are those things which are easily seen as corresponding to his revealed nature.

<sup>40</sup> McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough*, 167.

<sup>41</sup> וְהָיָה רִקְוֹנְעָה הַבְּיָן שְׂמוּעָה Lit. It will be only trembling to understand the message. Luther’s translation is quite interpretive. Even if you don’t see his point in this verse of Isaiah, it is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.

<sup>42</sup> Temptation teaches you to pay attention to the Word.

situations that test their faith, test their joy in ministry, test their trust in him. But he does those things to strengthen us, to mold us into the servants that he wants. That is what makes our congregational crosses so dear. When the potter puts his hands on you, run to his Word. I ran to the book of Zechariah—a book of comfort for the remnant of Israel.

After years of disobedience, God had had enough, and the Babylonians crashed into the land of milk and honey. The throne of David was cast down, the sanctuary of God on earth was burned to the ground, and the people were killed or carried off into exile for 70 years so that the land might have its Sabbath rest.

Seven decades later, the exiles returned to Judea following a man named Zerubbabel. He descended from the royal family, but there was no king in Jerusalem. The royal line of David had been cut down to a stump. They returned to a destroyed city and a ruined temple.

Zerubbabel had come as the governor to rebuild the city and the temple, but God's people were opposed on every side. The Samaritans didn't want a powerful Jewish capital. Neighboring peoples took every chance to lie, cheat and steal. They bribed the government; they tried to thwart the work. So the rebuilding of the city of God and the house of God nearly ground to a halt, and it seemed like the God of Israel had forgotten his people.

In my early days of exploratory ministry, I identified with that group. Here we were trying to build the house and city of God in the midst of a hostile world. Then there's the guy in charge, Zerubbabel. He came from the royal family, but how much comfort did that give him when the going got rough? I wonder if that lineage instead intensified his feelings of inadequacy? No matter how you cut it, Zerubbabel was no King David; he was no King Solomon. Even his name, זְרֻבָבֶל,<sup>43</sup> reminded everyone who heard it that he was nothing compared to the past. Who was Zerubbabel to build the house and city of God? He had every reason to wonder if God had asked him to do the impossible.

Can you identify with Zerubbabel? We are ministers of the Gospel, handlers of the very mysteries of God. We have a rich and royal lineage. But I look at myself, and I see all too clearly that I am no Paul, no Luther, no Chemnitz. Who am I? Who are we to build the house and city of God? Some days it feels like God has asked us to do the impossible, doesn't it?

Then I read what God said to this man tasked with an impossible job, this man who so paled in comparison to his great predecessors, this man filled with doubt and pessimism—this man so much like me. God spoke these words through his prophet Zechariah:

זֶה דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־זְרֻבָבֶל  
לֵאמֹר לֹא בְחַיִל וְלֹא בְכֹחַ  
כִּי אִם־בְּרוּחִי  
אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:

This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel:

Not by might, nor by power  
But by my Spirit  
Says the LORD Almighty.<sup>44</sup>

"This is the word of the LORD." This is not advice from the right or from the left. This is not just one more suggestion on how to handle congregational problems. This is not well meaning advice from your neighboring pastor that ends up just making you feel like more of a

<sup>43</sup> Seed of Babylon or Born in Babylon.

<sup>44</sup> Zechariah 4:6.

failure. No, this is the word of the LORD, the God of the covenant of grace, who does not forget his people but remembers<sup>45</sup> them in every cross and hardship.

“To Zerubbabel.” God called him by name. God didn’t say, “To the leader of God’s people,” or Zerubbabel might have wondered if God intended the message for a better one. God didn’t say, “To my faithful follower,” because sin and doubt would crush that. God called him by name, so that there would be no doubt. God does the same for every pastor and congregation still today. The call of God through the Church wasn’t just to some seminarian or any leader of a church. Through the Church, the Holy Spirit calls his pastors by name. When God calls through the Church, he means it.

What does God say? His very first word is לֹא.<sup>46</sup> He starts with the not. Why? Because as leaders, as churchmen, as proclaimers, we get too distracted with all the things we think it takes to make God’s kingdom come. If only we had all the right methods or programs, buildings or billboards! If only we had just the right amount of charisma or just the right skill set! No wonder we start to feel like Zerubbabel and start to wonder if the Church has been given an impossible task. That’s why God says, לֹא, לֹא. Not... not with the things you think.

Not with כֹּחַ, and not with יְהוָה. They are both words for strength; the first means “ability,” and the second means “power.” God says neither one makes a bit of difference. Instead, it all hinges on this: כִּי אֶם-בְּרוּחִי By my Spirit. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת, the LORD of the armies, the LORD of all power and might. God says he is the God of armies, the God of strength to remind us that he could have given us כֹּחַ and יְהוָה. But he chose not to, and instead he gives us the Spirit.

The Spirit is the answer to the impossible task we’ve been given. That’s why Jesus breathed on his disciples before he sent them. That’s why they waited for Pentecost before evangelizing the world. The Spirit moves our hearts and thoughts and hopes off of us, and back where they belong, on Christ.

That’s the whole point of sharing the Gospel in the time in between Christ’s resurrection and ours. One day the kingdom of God will come in power and might, but now it comes by the Spirit. It turns out, this little exploratory congregation was *exactly* where God wanted me to be. I just needed to have God wrap my brain around what he had so clearly said through his Church. It took the blessing of the cross, the *dear* cross.

To the flesh, it’s a message of foolishness, a message the world calls dumb, a message that every bit of our sinful flesh revolts against. The cross of Christ is offensive to those who want to see a vindicating God who rewards those who follow the rules. The cross of Christ is just plain crazy mythology to those wise men of the world who think the only form of reality is what they can see and touch.

The cross of Christ offends mankind, but not nearly as much as the cross of the Christian. For sinful man, the cross that is even more offensive and more foolish is the cross to which Jesus points and says, “Whoever would come after me must take up his cross and follow me.” We are so anthropocentrically wired that we find our cross to be a far greater injustice than the one carried by the high prince of the heavenly kingdom. Such is the depth of our depravity. Such is the height of our hubris.

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<sup>45</sup> Even Zechariah’s name means, “The LORD remembers.”

<sup>46</sup> Not.

For shepherd-leaders and the congregations they serve, understanding the cross of Christ is crucial to bearing the crosses that Christ gives them. Theologians of the cross know that their cross is not an anomaly, but a necessary consequence of discipleship. Theologians of the cross know that both what the world calls “good” and what the world calls “bad” come from the hand of God. This is what God is really like, because the cross is revelation. A man quite experienced with cross-bearing, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, said:

If it is I who determine where God is to be found, then I shall always find a God who corresponds to me in some way, who is obliging, who is connected with my own nature. But if God determines where he is to be found, then it will be in a place which is not immediately pleasing to my nature and which is not at all congenial to me. This place is the Cross of Christ. And whoever would find him must go to the foot of the Cross, as the Sermon on the Mount commands. This is not according to our nature at all; it is entirely contrary to it. But this is the message of the Bible.<sup>47</sup>

God had not forgotten me. No, he sent the cross to humble us and prepare us for his work. Yes, the hard times, the challenges, even the hurting and wondering, they came from the dear hand of the Lord. He sent the cross so that our congregation and her pastor would be ready to fail for Jesus—to fail gloriously for Jesus if need be. In that way, God used the cross to prepare his congregation in Sharpsburg, Georgia, not just for failure but for success as well.

Almost two decades ago, we had our first service with nine people in attendance. God is good. Through hundreds of adult confirmations, the Holy Spirit has built a church for himself of 560 people in Sharpsburg. We have a preschool with 102 students, have gone from a staff of one to a staff of fourteen, and we have had five building phases. That’s all to God’s credit and his glory.

The cross that God gave us in our early years prepared us to meet every success he brought with the humility of knowing that it was not power or might from us that made this happen, but simply and only the Spirit of the LORD Almighty.

It also prepared us to recognize that sometimes even what the world calls success can be a cross. On a beautiful Georgia morning, I sat in the upper level of a little study cottage that we call *The Hermitage* located at the back of our congregational property. As I looked out the window over our eight-acre campus and saw 100 preschool families and their children coming in for school, I thought back to when we were a tiny little handful of people who had to carry in their altar and pulpit from a trailer every week... and I was tempted to smile and sigh and be content.

Then a news article blinked up on my laptop. Kim Jong-un had ordered the execution of 33 missionaries in North Korea.<sup>48</sup> Their crime was starting 500 congregations in the most repressive country in the world. The reward they received was a silent death in a cell of the State Security apparatus. What a cross to bear! I have had a hand in starting three congregations, and they 500. Our biggest concern for the week was purchasing more chairs for our growing midweek service. They were persecuted, driven underground, and finally martyred. How many

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<sup>47</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: a Righteous Gentile Vs. the Third Reich* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 136.

<sup>48</sup> Cheryl K. Chumley, “Kim Jong-un Calls for the Execution of 33 Christians,” *Washington Times*, March 6, 2014, : <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/mar/6/kim-jong-un-calls-execution-33-christians/>.

of the people walking into my church building that day would dare to do so if the penalty were death?

None of us in America wants to give up our freedom of religion or speech or assembly. They are blessings for the Church and for every Christian who lives here. But such freedoms come with a cost. When the Christian community has had such success that it can operate in an environment of complete tolerance, we are tempted to act like theologians of glory.

Luther once wrote, "*Nulla persecutio tota persecutio.*"<sup>49</sup> How true are his words in our day! "Today the Devil is endangering the Church with the greatest conceivable persecutions, namely without persecution, with tolerance and security. Woe to us, who are so dazzled by satiety and well-being that we fall into the Devil's trap."<sup>50</sup> Martin Franzmann's sermon says it well:

This lesson comes hard to our comfortable Christianity. We six-to-the-padded-pew disciples have blurred the line of the either-or; we grow uneasy at the fact, the completely obvious fact, that if we are involved with Jesus Christ at all, we are totally involved ... Whether we put it into words or not, most of us believe in our hearts that the decision [not to be a mere spectator of Christ] was somehow easier in the heroic days when there were stakes to be burned at and lions to be thrown to. Our days are soundproofed against leonine roarings, and our temperatures are a genteel and uniform 72.<sup>51</sup>

There are still lions in the world today, some dressed in comical quasi-military frocks, others frowning behind a Kalashnikov held in the name of jihad. The fact, however, that we in America are still largely protected from them can be a persecution of the highest order. It can convince us that the Church can do pretty well on her own as long as we have the right programs to attract committed members and keep them happy. Success can pull our eyes off of the one thing needful and distract us with all the needy little things that fill a congregation's ministry.

Thankfully, even in this land of great tolerance God gives crosses to his Church so that they might continually despair of self, despair of glory, and find their comfort and strength only in the cross of Jesus Christ. A theologian of the cross knows that God suffered and that he did it for us. So he also knows that God promises that even in the broken and hurting places of this world, God is present to use his cross to draw you closer to him. The theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is: even the "bad" parts of this life God uses for our lasting good.

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<sup>49</sup> The absence of any persecution is absolute persecution.

<sup>50</sup> Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Image, 1989), 256.

<sup>51</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets: Sermons* (St. Louis: CPH, 1994), 48.

## **Bearing the crosses of our members**

Serving as shepherd-leaders under the cross means helping our members carry the crosses that God gives them. “Not all suffering is a cross and suffering in and of itself is not a cross. Suffering *becomes* a cross not just because it is painful in itself but because it tempts the soul to turn away from Christ and his Word.”<sup>52</sup> The crosses of our members are myriad, and different types of crosses come to members at different points in their lives of faith.

### **Crosses of the new to faith**

An eye-opening aspect of outreach among the unchurched is seeing the level of brokenness in the lives of seemingly successful people. Their understanding of Christianity is superficial on the best days and just plain misinformed on the worst. When people brand new to the faith come into our congregations, they come carrying the baggage of their past and the assumptions about God that their sinful flesh or their resident theologian of glory has given them. They have fallen prey to the theology of glory that says God loves the noble, the good, the people who have their life together—but not the broken people like Miranda.<sup>53</sup>

How does the theologian of the cross approach the brokenness of life? Miranda came into our congregation like a house afire. “I’m back!” she said. Even though it had been two years since her one-time visit to worship on Christmas Eve, she said it like she had just run out to the store.

On a cold January day, I visited her at home and over coffee we had a chance to talk about her rather difficult life. She was the daughter of an Italian mobster, and her years in his house comprised the best part of her life. Now cut off from her family because of a string of bad choices, she said, “Pastor, I’ve had a hard life. My first husband used to pimp me out for drugs. I was homeless and lived with my daughter in a tent. I abused drugs and alcohol. I have so much in my past. Do you know, I had a good second husband and two children, and one day I just left them—for a biker. I just left them.” What does a theologian do with Miranda? A theologian of glory says: Believe, pray, and try to restore the broken things, because you won’t be right until things are right.

That’s what the man thought who bought my used car when I was a vicar. Fresh out of prison, he said, “I have come to restore that which the locusts have eaten in my life.” He tried to fix his broken relationship with a daughter he didn’t know by buying her a car.<sup>54</sup> It didn’t work, because the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. The daughter was just using her old man and ran off with the car (with my license plates still on it) and Raymond was left trying to get me to help him steal back the car he had bought, because it certainly hadn’t restored “that which the locusts had eaten.”

A theology of glory ends up leaving the broken people broken, because it gives them the false belief that God loves folks who can get their act together. But what if the choices you’ve made make that impossible? What if you can’t fix the baggage, but you just have to carry it?

I had the joy of telling Miranda that those sins that she will never forget, our God in heaven has forgiven, and he remembers them no more. He doesn’t remember the bad choices and the worse actions. I got to take a broken woman to the cross and show her the Son of God

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<sup>52</sup> Deuschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 32.

<sup>53</sup> I changed the names of all the people in this essay who are described by first name only.

<sup>54</sup> As the cast off of a Lutheran vicar, by definition the car wasn’t a very nice one.



broken because of her and on behalf of her, and we got to exult, “Who is a God like you who treads our sin underfoot and casts our iniquities into the heart of the sea?”<sup>55</sup>

The message of the cross declares there are no eternal repercussions for the sins of the past, but the theology of glory tries to remove the temporal ramifications, too. That thought is latent in the temptation to soothe a sinner’s heart by saying, “It will all be OK.” One day, yes. But there’s no guarantee of life getting better right now.

Some broken things cannot be fixed, but can only be borne. At that point, the theology of the cross means everything. The brokenness of this world, broken through sin in general or my sin in particular, cannot always be fixed, but can simply be borne as a cross that makes me despair of myself and cling to my Savior. The theologian of the cross will keep pointing the new believer to the cross of Christ as the reason and the power to carry the crosses that come from our past.

### **Crosses of the weak in faith**

Cross-bearing is not popular. We are all like Peter who didn’t want a cross for Jesus, much less for himself. To hear Jesus call us to bear the cross is hard enough; it’s even more difficult when a theologian of glory contradicts him. In the American South many churches preach a prosperity gospel or one based on charismatic gifts that turns suffering into a sign of the lack of genuine faith. For many Christians who are weak in faith, this can cause them to despair.

We had a family in our congregation who had come through adult instruction class. After a short time, the family stopped attending. When I followed-up, Fred was honest and said that he was looking for something else. Fred had first come to faith while in prison, where he had been served by a Pentecostal group. He was longing for a ministry that showed the power of God acting in the world right now, not just two thousand years ago.

Fred came to the same conclusion in prison that Goethe had arrived at two hundred years ago. In his play about selling one’s soul to the devil, *Faust*, Goethe had the title character setting out to translate the Gospel of John from the original into his beloved German. Faust gets stuck on the first line, “Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος.”<sup>56</sup> He says<sup>57</sup>:

*Geschrieben steht: "Im Anfang war das Wort!"*

*Hier stock ich schon! Wer hilft mir weiter fort?*

*Ich kann das Wort so hoch unmöglich schätzen,*

*Ich muß es anders übersetzen...*

*Mir hilft der Geist! Auf einmal seh ich Rat*

*Und schreibe getrost: Im Anfang war die Tat!*<sup>58</sup>

Goethe was a theologian of glory who looked for God to take action in the world. “In the beginning was the Deed,” he said, because ultimately that’s the path down which *Faust* leads: Man’s salvation is dependent on striving—Christ being prototypical of that fact. That Christ was the Word, the revelation of God, Goethe found insufficient. That God was revealed in Christ on

<sup>55</sup> Micah 7:18ff.

<sup>56</sup> John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word.”

<sup>57</sup> Rough translation: It stands written, “In the beginning was the Word!” I’m already stuck on this point. Who is going to help me? I can’t treasure “the Word” so highly! I have to translate it differently. The Spirit helps me! I see the answer and write it confidently: “In the beginning was the Deed!”

<sup>58</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethe’s Faust*, ed. Albert M. Selss (London: Longmans, Green, 1880), Part I, Scene 3, lines 1220 ff.

the cross? Goethe was not the first man of letters to find that wholly undesirable.<sup>59</sup> He understood that it stands written<sup>60</sup> “in the beginning was the Word.” But like Adam at the dawn of time, the serpent’s question intrigued him,<sup>61</sup> and he decided that “*es sollte stehen*—it should really stand written differently.”

When suffering comes into the lives of Christians with a weak or uninformed faith, they can quickly fall victim to the accusation that it’s their lack of faith that is causing their suffering. Fred took his family to the local Pentecostal church where they could see all the gifts of the Spirit, as they said, and watch Christ act—feel Christ acting in their lives.

They attended the services of healing and were especially interested in having their daughter healed, because she was born with one leg shorter than the other. So they took their teenaged girl up on stage, and the elders prayed and laid on hands, and they waited for God to act. In the South faith healers make the point that God wants you to be healed, and he has the power to heal you, so you just need to “name it to claim it.” You need to believe enough, and God will heal you.

Of course, half of their premise is false, and that falsehood has robbed many people of their comfort and faith. The family came back and told the sad story that their daughter’s leg did not, in fact, grow longer. It stayed as stubbornly short as the moment they had walked into that place of Pentecostal power. They left, however, carrying the theologian of glory’s lie: There must be something wrong with you. The pernicious character of a theology of glory is that it calls evil that which is good, and says that if you were born with one leg shorter than the other, you are deficient or your faith is deficient, otherwise God would have healed you.

The result is a fundamental misreading of reality. The truth for that young girl is the same as it was for the man born blind in John 9. Jesus told his disciples that God doesn’t operate on a karma principle. The man was born blind that the works of God might be displayed and that God’s glory might be revealed. Why did God let Fred’s daughter be born with one leg shorter than the other? I have no idea. I was not there when he laid the earth’s foundation, either. But I know that because Christ suffered for her on the cross, he is most certainly with her when she suffers here. I got a chance to say that her faith is sufficient, and her God is sufficient, and when we are weak that just leaves more room for God to be strong.

Too often, when counseling hurting brothers and sisters, we are tempted to focus on penultimate solutions rather than the ultimate one. “When that happens the church becomes predominantly a support group rather than the gathering of the body of Christ where the word of the cross and resurrection is proclaimed and heard. This temptation is abroad in the land and must be resisted.”<sup>62</sup> A focus on the ultimate solution, rather than penultimate ones, points those weak and wondering Christians to the one place where they can find strength to bear the crosses in their life and learn to boast not in the strength of their faith but in the magnitude of their weakness.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18ff.

<sup>60</sup> Goethe uses Luther’s great German expression for the Greek *γένεσθαι*.

<sup>61</sup> “Did God really say?” Genesis 3:1

<sup>62</sup> Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, Kindle Locations 62–63.

<sup>63</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9.

### **Crosses of the strong in faith**

When a faithful member of the congregation suddenly has a new cross in their life, ministering to them can be a challenge for their pastor. It's a narrow road of pastoral counseling we are to walk, and the ditches on either side are deep. We fall into one ditch by making assumptions about their faith and their ability to apply it to this part of their life. Just because the pastor's mistake is well intentioned, doesn't make the damage any less severe.

This happens when we explain the cross too quickly as a providential act of God. We do it because these folks have walked closely with Jesus since they were born. They *know* that the man wasn't born blind in John 9 because of the sins of his parents. They've known it all their life. And so with what he hopes is a comforting and confident tone, the (usually) young pastor quotes the most over-used passage in cross-counseling, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."<sup>64</sup>

My friend, Jessica, was born into a Lutheran home, raised in church, in the catechism, in the Word. She has served as an integral member in a several WELS churches. She still bears the scars of a well-meaning pastor who quoted that passage to her when her little girl died. Twenty years later, she still cries, not just at the thought of her child, but at the crisis of faith she had. Romans 8:28 is true; for Jessica, however, it was just the wrong time to say it. Seeing God's providential hand in taking a child home to heaven might just be a conclusion we can only fully draw when we are reunited with them in glory. In your cross counseling, faithful members need to hear all the things that you know that they know. Don't take a shortcut to the blessed end that God will make of it. Let them cry, and cry with them. Give them time before telling them that this is part of God's plan for their good. There will be plenty of time to explain that to them, and an eternity to do it while they are with their little girl at Jesus' side.

The ditch on the opposite side of the road consists in agreeing with what every faithful member facing a cross feels deep inside: I don't deserve this. I do for you, God. Why would you let this happen to me? It's the inborn theologian of glory that demands a deal from God that does not include the cross. As pastoral counselors, we fall into this ditch when we rationalize the cross rather than simply acknowledging it and then pointing God's people back to the one thing that can both explain our crosses and empower us to carry them: the cross of Jesus Christ.

Understanding the cross of Christ lets the theologian of the cross call a thing what it is. I counseled a woman whose little girl had been diagnosed with celiac disease one year prior,<sup>65</sup> and we discussed that being a Christian was not a guarantee of an untroubled life, but rather that Jesus promised us trouble.<sup>66</sup> She said, "I wish more people understood that about Christianity. So many people reject it because it seems ineffective when Christians suffer." Five days later she called me to say her little girl's recent CT scan had come back, and the doctors diagnosed her with bronchiectasis.<sup>67</sup> The woman was devastated. It was not a time for Romans 8:28. All I could do was share the words she needed to hear:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?"

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<sup>64</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>65</sup> An autoimmune disease that is incurable, but can be managed through extreme diet restrictions.

<sup>66</sup> John 16:33 "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

<sup>67</sup> A very serious lung disease that is incurable, but calls for extreme treatments or lobectomy.

Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”<sup>68</sup>

When we spoke later, the Spirit had done his work, and she said something that amazed me, “Pastor, we now understand that God let us get the celiac diagnosis a year ago so we would be prepared for this diagnosis.” That is a theologian of the cross, willing to take what the world would call “bad” and say it is exactly what God intended it to be: good.<sup>69</sup>

As shepherd-leaders comfort and console our fellow believers in the congregation, we will be sorely tempted to point them to penultimate solutions or explanations that can’t possibly satisfy. Instead let’s share the message of a God who suffered on the cross. That means he can also be found when we are suffering. We are tempted to think our words won’t work.

I stood near the hospital bed of my friend, Bill Wendt. Bill had come through our adult information class and was a faithful man and a healthy man, until he went to a family reunion in Illinois, ended up in the hospital and never got out. For eleven months. After weeks of watching something eat away his flesh and then eat away his blood,<sup>70</sup> when you stand at the bedside of this suffering man, Satan makes you feel like a sham. He scoffs that the words you offer are trite platitudes. But every pastor who has spent time in a hospital knows what happens. You are sharing more than words; you are sharing the Spirit of God hidden within them. Words that should have no effect on a man give what they promise. As Bill languished, his wife told me in the hospital hallway, “You know, Pastor, he never once asked, ‘Why me?’ Not once.” Bill saw God, even amid suffering. He carried his cross like a follower of Christ, and it did exactly what God promised it would. It kept him close to Jesus until that day I stood by his bed and watched as Jesus lifted up his cross and took it away forever. A theologian of glory calls it all bad, but he has a fundamental misreading of reality.

### **Bearing the crosses that are our members**

It’s a challenge for pastors to help our members bear the cross. But what happens when—*horribile dictu*<sup>71</sup>—it’s the *members* who are the cross you have to bear?

My father served as a pastor for forty years. Every Friday afternoon he and five of his fellow pastors would meet for “Prayer Group,” which was their name for playing Sheepshead. Part fellowship, part therapy, Friday cards played the important role of brothers helping brothers bear the cross of ministry. I used to play with them when I would come home from the seminary. Any time I offered some idealistic opinion about ministry, they would all say, “Just wait until he gets a few bullets zinged over his head.” They saw bearing the cross of members as a rite of passage that was a *sine qua non* of ministry.

I have trouble speaking from experience on this, since the large majority of the congregation I serve came through adult instruction class with me as their spiritual father. I haven’t had the ministry dynamics that come when you are the 35<sup>th</sup> pastor the congregation has had, and they know Number 36 isn’t all that far away.

But when the bullets start flying you are tempted to look at the challenging members of your congregation—the members who are on you like white on rice, the ones who question

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<sup>68</sup> Isaiah 49:14-16

<sup>69</sup> With a Spirit-wrought perspective, she can now look back and apply Romans 8:28 to both diagnoses.

<sup>70</sup> It started with something like necrotizing fasciitis, but wasn’t, and ended with a form of leukemia.

<sup>71</sup> “Horrible to say!” The supine is my favorite Latin form.

what you do and why you do it—and see them as trouble and sorrow. You are tempted to think it would be easier for everyone involved if they just moved to the church across town.<sup>72</sup> A theologian of the cross, however, calls that person what he is: a sinner, redeemed and loved by God. He recognizes that the love of God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to it.<sup>73</sup>

A theologian of the cross also knows that his members are drastically sinful people. He calls it what it is and then expects that they will act like what they are. 1 Corinthians 13 love is not surprised by hostile circumstances. Deutschlander writes:

To the extent that we deny ourselves and follow Jesus under the cross, to the extent that we need what St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 and in so many other places, to that extent we will become and be happy human beings. That is another great paradox of our faith. Most human unhappiness is the result of self-service and the result of the very flawed assumption that other people exist primarily for the service of oneself.<sup>74</sup>

Knowing that, however, doesn't make it easy. When someone questions the pastor's integrity or the pastor's family, there are days when the pastor might long for a she-bear.<sup>75</sup> If God protected the honor of his prophet over baldness, certainly he should protect the integrity and service of a man of God still today! When members become a cross, and the pastor finds himself watching the wood line and hoping, remember...

God sent the she-bears against those youths to tell every embattled pastor, "I have your back. I could send bears right now. I could strike that man with a heart attack. I could teach them not to treat my ministers with contempt." God sent bears one time so that every pastor can have the comfort of knowing exactly how God feels about the dignity of his ministers. So if God could send a she-bear to protect you from the problem members, but he doesn't... then he has a reason. God has a purpose for this *Anfechtung*.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps he means to refine you like gold in the fire. Perhaps he means to keep you humble. Perhaps he means to make you just like Jesus, who was accosted by good religious people, who ran afoul of church leadership, and whose own inner circle abandoned him. Luther reminds us:

If sadness or any adversity, physical or spiritual, distresses you, strengthen your heart and say, "Well, why should I not be willing to bear a little grief, when agonies and fears caused my Lord to sweat blood in the Garden of Gethsemane? He who lies abed while his master struggles in the throes of death is indeed a slothful and disgraceful servant."<sup>77</sup>

Being just like Jesus means being bold with grace and forgiveness for the people you are called to serve. Harboring anger and resentment toward the flock that Christ called you to shepherd is the act of a theologian of glory who wants to be treated in keeping with his

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<sup>72</sup> A blessing of life in the far-flung home mission fields is that, much like family, you and your members have to love each other. The nearest congregations are often very far away.

<sup>73</sup> Thesis 28 of the Heidelberg Disputation. It is the marvelous conclusion at which Luther arrives after posing the question, "How does one arrive at a righteousness that stands before God?" He closes every loophole for works and will, and maintains that only through humility and fear of God is man ready to hear God's solution for righteousness: God's creative love.

<sup>74</sup> Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 99.

<sup>75</sup> In 2 Kings 2 Elisha is mocked by some youths from Bethel. Elisha calls down a curse on them in the name of the LORD, and two she-bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths.

<sup>76</sup> *Tentatio*, testing, temptation, the cross.

<sup>77</sup> AE 42:14.

performance. “I am a faithful shepherd, so treat me like one!” he thinks. The theologian of the cross never wants to be treated according to his works, but only according to grace—grace so free and bold that it will even forgive the pastor who lies abed while his master suffers. Grace so free and bold that it will overflow into a love that keeps no record of wrong for those problem members who God, in the wisdom that laid the earth’s foundations, has given to you.

Perhaps he’s making you just like Jesus—and that’s a very good thing. The theologian of glory calls good “evil,” but not the theologian of the cross—he simply calls a thing what it is and then steps under and bears it.

### **Bearing the crosses of our shepherd-leaders**

The crosses of shepherd-leaders are often no different than those congregation members carry: sickness and sorrow, loss and pain. No cross is generic, however, and the crosses of shepherd-leaders are custom-made, too. They face a special temptation to think their faith or their office is dependent on them. The devil runs pastors from one extreme to the other: One moment they question their worth in God’s eyes, and in the next they drastically overestimate it.<sup>78</sup> That’s specifically because the theology of glory is a recipe for despair when it is realistic and arrogance when it is not.<sup>79</sup>

The pastor must face the inevitable fact that he, like his members, is *simul iustus et peccator*.<sup>80</sup> The theologian of glory cannot escape the realization that even after all of his training and all of his time in God’s Word, after his ordination vows and a divine call, after years of service in the Church, he is a terrible spiritual failure. His sins haunt him. The devil and his flesh call him a hypocrite. He is inclined to agree, because there’s no arguing with the evidence.

In Zechariah 3, what could the high priest Joshua say in defense against the Accuser? His filthy clothes said it all. Then the LORD spoke:

“Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?” Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.” Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.” Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the LORD stood by.<sup>81</sup>

A theologian of the cross knows that God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing to him<sup>82</sup>—even when it comes to his clergy. This sinner, Joshua, God now called clean, and on his head he put the turban of his office inscribed with the words <sup>83</sup>קִדְּשׁ לַיהוָה

The pastor’s continuing battle with the flesh brings with it the temptation to think his work of sharing the gospel is dependent on his life of faith. The theology of glory, when it is honest, can only lead to despair. It cannot carry the cross of the flesh. It can only be in spiritual

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<sup>78</sup> I include here an encouragement to spend some devotional time with the eighth chapter of Prof. Deutschlander’s *Theology of the Cross*, entitled “The Special Crosses of Pastors and the Visible Church.” I found it uncannily and uncomfortably accurate.

<sup>79</sup> Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 105.

<sup>80</sup> At the same time both saint and sinner.

<sup>81</sup> Zechariah 3:2-5.

<sup>82</sup> Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 28.

<sup>83</sup> Holy to the LORD.

denial. The theology of the cross, however, recognizes that all my life, all my thoughts, all my ministry is comprised of nothing but sin. But then it also pulls the pastor's eyes off of himself and takes him back to the time when God removed the sin of the land in a single day,<sup>84</sup> the day he killed the one high priest as a sacrifice of atonement for every sinful servant. He shows the pastor the clothes and turban purchased for him that day and promises on oath that he is Holy to the LORD.

One moment the pastor despairs and wonders whether God will even save him. The next moment, he applies the theology of glory less realistically and finds himself lost in the arrogance that demands glory and success from God.

Elijah can teach us about bearing the pastoral cross. He had alligators in his congregation. They didn't want to fire him. They wanted to kill him. They didn't want to change service times; they wanted to change from true worship to idol worship. At a moment like that, men of God tend to long for a little glory. Elijah had seen the shock and awe on Mt. Carmel.<sup>85</sup> He had seen fire from heaven and his opponents humiliated and killed.

But then, the specter of failure and continuing opposition kept grinding at him. Like so many faithful pastors, he wondered, "If I am on God's side, and I am being faithful, why doesn't God do something about this? Why am I struggling so much here?" It's really a call for glory. That's what Elijah went looking for on the Mountain of God.<sup>86</sup> He went looking for glory, and God brought the heat: F-5 tornados, massive earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, but God was not in those glory-acts. Instead he revealed himself to Elijah in the gentle whisper. His message? Elijah, you are worrying about things way above your pay grade. I got this. I have it covered. My elect are still there, and my plans go forward. You, prophet, take up the cross and go back to your ministry. Carry on. Don't look for glory, but find the God of power in the gentle whisper of the gospel.

One day God will come in power. Now he comes in weakness and the cross. Yet, the cross of apparent failure or disinterest chafes the faithful pastor. He wants the Church to grow both inwardly and outwardly. He wants people to appreciate his service and sacrifice. He wants to be respected, and once he gets just a taste of any of those things, he wants them on command. If he doesn't find them when and where he wants, he is tempted to run away from what God wants him to do and to run instead to where he thinks he will find the shock and awe, the glory he seeks.

The true epiphany for Elijah and for every man who has served in the office is that God could use shock and awe, but that's not where he chooses to be. He chooses to be found in the gentle whisper, in the sweet sounds of the saving story. The journey to Horeb and back to his place of duty is a journey each minister of the gospel has to take if he is going to leave behind a thirst for glory and follow the path of a God who hides himself in weakness.

The pastor must learn to bear the cross but never blame the cross. There's a big difference. Yes, we are living in the end times when the love of many will grow cold. However, the reason no one has visited your church in the past six months might not lie in the obduracy of the unchurched hearts but in the fact that you never invited them.

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<sup>84</sup> Zechariah 3:9.

<sup>85</sup> 1 Kings 18.

<sup>86</sup> 1 Kings 19.

Yes, the people you serve might be sinners unaccustomed to treating their pastor with respect. However, the reason you are not respected might also lie in the fact that you treat your ministry like a part-time job compared to the hours you spend with family and avocations.

Bear the crosses that God gives you, but don't blame the cross for every trouble you have. We need to remember that God has given pastors both a great promise and a great responsibility. The promise is that the means of grace are efficacious. Nothing we do makes them work better. The great responsibility is that God commands us to be faithful stewards of the means of grace. We seek to use them in the best possible way.

We believe that the Word of God is efficacious. That means our job is to preach the gospel and leave the converting to the Holy Spirit. The Word is always efficacious because it is the gospel: It is living and active; it is the power of God; it never returns to him empty.<sup>87</sup> Yet at the same time, our Lord calls us to be faithful stewards of the means of grace and use them in the best way we can.<sup>88</sup> There is a tension between these two truths. Nowhere does he tell us that the efficacy of the Word excuses a lack of working or planting or going. Nowhere does Jesus tell us that our working and going and planting are what saves. Efficacy cannot be an excuse for laziness; effort or results cannot be an excuse for pride.

God has a plan to save mankind: God has a part, the Word has a part, and you have a part. I have appreciated Johann Andreas Quenstedt's distinctions between the causes of salvation.<sup>89</sup> The efficient cause of salvation is the Holy Trinity;<sup>90</sup> the instrumental cause of salvation is the Word;<sup>91</sup> the ministerial cause<sup>92</sup> of salvation is the messenger.<sup>93</sup>

We are correct when we say that the Word is efficacious by itself and the Spirit works when and where he wills. We have no effect on the efficient and instrumental causes of salvation. However, Scripture does say, "And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" The only cause of salvation you and I have any control over is the ministerial cause. It is that cause which the Lord addresses when he tells us to be good stewards of the means of grace (the instrumental cause)

<sup>87</sup> Hebrews 4:12; Romans 1:16; Isaiah 55:11; Romans 10:17; 2 Timothy 3:15.

<sup>88</sup> He tells us to preach the Word and to be prepared in season and out of season, to do your best, to be workmen approved, and to correctly handle the Word, 2 Tim 2:15; to entrust his words to reliable men who are apt to teach, 2 Tim 2:2. He tells his messengers to plant and water, 1 Cor 3:6; and to go and teach. 2 Timothy 4:2; 2:15; 2:2; 2:24, 1 Corinthians 3:6; Matthew 28:19.

<sup>89</sup> Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Dictactio-polemica*, vol. IV (Leipzig: Fritsch, 1715), XV: De ecclesia, XIII–XV.

<sup>90</sup> *Causa efficiens principalis est total SS. Trinitas. Θεσις XIII.* See also Θεσις XIV: the impulsive cause that moves God is outwardly the extreme misery of the people and the merit of Christ. Inwardly it is his goodness, compassion and grace.

<sup>91</sup> *Causa instrumentalis sunt Verbum et Sacramenta. Θεσις XVI.*

<sup>92</sup> *Causa ministerialis, qua Deus in collectione et conservatione Ecclesiae utitur, sunt ministri verbi.*

<sup>93</sup> They are the servants who bid the bidden come, Lk 14:17; those who become all things to all people in order to save some, 1 Cor 9:22; given by Christ for the Church, Eph 4:11-12; workers together in God's work of building, 1 Cor 3:9; ambassadors for Christ, 2 Cor 5:20; those who become fathers through the gospel, 1 Cor 4:15. They are a *causa ministerialis* not by reason of the ministers' persons, but by reason of their ministry—namely that they preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. See Baier, III, 9: *et suo modo etiam ipsi ministri ecclesiae*. Baier then quotes Gerhard " ... *non ratione personae, sed ratione sui ministerii, quatenus scl. verbum praedicant et sacramenta administrant. Sic evangelium est potentia Dei ad salute Rom 1, 16, et Timotheus, praedicans evangelium, salvat se ipsum et eos, qui ipsum audiunt 1 Tim 4, 16.*" Baieri *Compendium Theologicae Positivae*, III 185.



that the Trinity (the efficient cause) might achieve its goal: the glory of God and the salvation of man.

### **Jiro Dreams of Sushi**

I watched a Japanese-language documentary, helpfully subtitled in English, about an 85-year-old sushi chef. What, you may ask, would lead someone to watch this film, other than a shocking lack of social life? Years ago, I had read an article and remembered his name, Jiro. In 2008 his sushi restaurant won three Michelin stars, the highest status possible. Three stars means Michelin maintains that this restaurant offers an experience worthy of a trip from another country.<sup>94</sup> But Jiro's restaurant was in a basement subway station, lacked its own bathroom, and only had seats for ten customers.

*Jiro Dreams of Sushi*<sup>95</sup> documents the work and methods of Jiro Ono, a man who exemplifies the concept of *shokunin*. The Japanese word *shokunin* has no English equivalent but conveys the idea of "a person who embodies the artisan spirit of the relentless pursuit of perfection through his craft."<sup>96</sup>

Watching *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* provides an excellent way to understand the term. Listening to this slight, bald, bespectacled man talk about his profession, is listening to someone committed to his craft, engrossed in his work, dedicated to getting better every single day. Jiro says, "Once you decide on an occupation you must immerse yourself in your work. You have to fall in love with your job ... and dedicate your life to mastering your skill." Apprentices must learn the craft for ten years before they can prove themselves ready to be *shokunin*. Jiro says that the techniques they use are all well known. The difference between his and other sushi restaurants resides in making the extra effort and repeating it day after day, improving incrementally, to the point where you make sushi in your dreams. Talk about a commitment to excellence! And mind you, this is for raw fish and rice.

Shepherd-leaders can learn from this octogenarian sushi chef! Should not ambassadors of Christ, handlers of the mysteries of God, have the goal to be *shokunin* in ministry? Will not love for Christ and kingdom and the call to be faithful stewards of the means of grace mean that we will seek to be better and better at our craft? Not because our excellence makes the work effective, but because God calls us to use his tools with diligence and faithfulness?

Seminarians graduate well trained in the basics of homiletics. But understanding sermon writing as a craft I grow in weekly, means each sermon becomes an attempt for incremental improvement in communicating the Gospel. This means reading more than theology. Read

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<sup>94</sup> In the U.S., thirteen restaurants hold three Michelin stars in 2018.

<sup>95</sup> Iwashina, Kevin, Tom Pellegrini, Matthew Weaver, David Gelb, Jiro Ono, and Yoshikazu Ono. 2012. *Jiro dreams of sushi*. [United States]: Magnolia Home Entertainment.

<sup>96</sup> Silvia Killingsworth, "Perfect Sushi," *The New Yorker*, March 9, 2012: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/perfect-sushi>.

fiction. As Egan said, “Reading is the nourishment that lets you do interesting work.”<sup>97</sup> Read poetry. Study the craft of writing.<sup>98</sup> Have peers review your sermons.<sup>99</sup>

Be relentless analyzing your work. After programs, events, or major ministry efforts at Faith, Sharpsburg, we gather the team involved for what we call a “post-mortem.” We ask ourselves what went well and what we will better the next time. We produce a written report, because most events and ministry efforts will repeat. These post-mortems lead us to honest evaluation, a culture where we can make constructive criticism, and encourages us to get a little better each year.

*Jiro Dreams of Sushi* shows that sublime excellence does not require a large space, or a prime location, or unlimited resources. Excellence in ministry does not require a large church, or large programs, a staff, or an excellent building. In the small and quiet locations, in unremarkable places, we can strive to bring remarkable work.

But, bear in mind that your call as pastor doesn’t supersede your call as husband and father. Your drive for excellence in ministry cannot supplant the other callings God has given you. The same culture that produced the concept of *shokunin* also has a word, *karoshi*, death by overwork.<sup>100</sup>

Let’s bear any cross that the Lord sees fit to give us as a pastor, but let’s not blame the cross for our laziness, deficiencies or failures. Instead let’s run to the cross of Christ which will forgive us for all and empower us to be the best ministerial causes of salvation we can possibly be.

The crosses of pastors sit heavy on our shoulders. “The hard thing is to be good, not clever; to be faithful, not brilliant; to be honest, not urbane, to be the rough wool blanket that keeps the faithful people warm, not the flapping scarf of changeable silk that men admire. No one has promised us that confessing the truth will make us happy, but we shall be blessed—of that we may be sure.”<sup>101</sup> Call those things under which you labor exactly what they are: good from God.

### **Bearing the crosses that are our shepherd-leaders**

It’s a challenge for members of our congregations to watch their pastor bear the cross. But what happens when—*horribile visu*<sup>102</sup>—it’s the pastor who is the cross a congregation has to bear? What happens when congregations are faced with pastors whose gifts fall short of expectations or whose abilities seem out of step in an increasingly fast-paced and technological world?

<sup>97</sup> Jennifer Egan, <http://thedaysofyore.com/2011/jennifer-egan/>

<sup>98</sup> A good read from a surprising source is Stephen King’s *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. A good line: “Someone out there is now accusing me of being tiresome and anal-retentive. I deny it. I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops,” from the chapter “The Adverb is Not Your Friend.”

<sup>99</sup> WELS Mission Counselor Ed Schuppe was a member of my congregation for a several years. I asked him to give me a written review of every sermon when he was in town. Peer review of your sermon provides constructive criticism from a source that knows the study, writing and revising process, not just the end result.

<sup>100</sup> Edwin Lane, “The young Japanese working themselves to death,” BBC, June 2, 2017: <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-39981997>.

<sup>101</sup> Jerald C. Joerz and McCain, Paul T., *Church and Ministry* (St. Louis, MO: The Office of the President, the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, 1998), 150.

<sup>102</sup> “Horrible to see!” And the supine is still my favorite.

When congregations are faced with a pastor who is not meeting their expectations, the first step is to evaluate those congregational expectations. Tread carefully, lest you fall into the problem that the people of Israel had when John the Baptist didn't meet their expectations.

Jesus compares the men of "this generation" to petulant children sitting in the market place and calling to their playmates: "We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." (Matthew 11:17) The men of Israel were under the huge and arrogant delusion that they were entitled to call the tunes to which God's messengers must dance. They had their frame ready, into which the picture of the returning Elijah, the messenger and harbinger of the Messiah had to fit; if he failed to fit it, the worse for him.<sup>103</sup>

Congregational members should guard themselves from stepping outside of their role in the Table of Duties and judging a man God has not asked them to judge. Congregations, councils, and elders have every right to hold a pastor accountable to the Word of God, but this is not open license for what Deutschlander calls *Besserwisserei*:<sup>104</sup>

It may very well be that many children could run the household better than their parents. But that's not the responsibility that God has given to children... Whether someone else carries out his role as well as we think he should or could is our business to judge only if God placed us in positions of authority to make that judgment. Otherwise... we do well to learn humility. Maybe the member would be a better preacher than the pastor. If so, then either that member should go to school and become a pastor or learn to be patient and supportive of his pastor's efforts to grow and improve.<sup>105</sup>

Congregations have every right, however, to evaluate matters of faithfulness. In no way does God allow pastors to hide laziness behind their office. If pastors are falling short because of a lack of faithfulness to their call, the loving and best answer is Law and Gospel and a frank discussion of what the congregation considers faithful in their context.

If it's not an issue of faithfulness it could be a matter of giftedness—the pastor doesn't have the gifts that seem to be necessary for the congregation's ministry. Again, caution is in order. How many congregations today would issue a call as pastor to the man whose description in the call documents say, "Old, sickly, single?" Paul's epistles make the point repeatedly that the only attribute he had going for him was a complete devotion to Christ and him crucified.

Often what seems to be a lack of gifts is really a lack of training. Do congregations understand that their expectations of their pastor today far exceed what has been asked of previous generations? Preach, teach, and visit the sick...is just the beginning. Fred Kling

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<sup>103</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, *Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1961), 99.

<sup>104</sup> Better-knowingness. Deutschlander says, "We cannot help but note here the old German saying used by those who know everybody else's business best: the German before he proceeds to announce how everything would be better if he were running things may say, *Wenn ich nur König in Preussen wäre ...* (If only I were king in Prussia, then ...) German also has a special word of scorn for that kind of attitude by which one imagines that he knows everything better than the one who has some specific responsibility, "*Besserwisserei*." 105.

<sup>105</sup> Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 105–106.

conducted an analysis of clergy expectations across American denominations<sup>106</sup> and the list he made is not just exhaustive, but for the clergy reading it, exhausting.<sup>107</sup> Pastors are simply not trained at the seminary for every expectation of every congregation in America. In fact, they are trained in a way that seems peculiar to many people of talent in the business world. In large part their pastor was trained to share a very bookish message in a very post-literate world.<sup>108</sup>

A commitment to a culture of life-long learning brings blessing to both the pastor and the congregation. Congregations that commit the time, money, and effort to their pastor's continuing education can address the issue of giftedness versus lack of training. Have a dialogue about what kind of training would best serve the current needs of the congregation. An advanced degree in French might be a deep desire of *Monsieur Pasteur*, but it might not meet the needs of the congregation as well as a preaching seminar would. *Non scholae sed vitae discimus*.<sup>109</sup>

What if, however, the pastor is faithful to his call, is gifted to serve, and is willing to continue to grow and learn ... and yet still he falls short? That, then, is a dear cross that God is giving to the congregation to do what crosses do: take the focus off of self and onto Christ.

In my first year in the ministry, I had a lot to learn. Much of it God taught me not in books but in the lives of faithful members. I was talking to my dear friend, Mark Massmann, about the congregation he had attended previously which was served by a pastor who had lost both his legs and suffered from extended illness. Knowing all that I had planned to do at the church that week, I asked Mark how the pastor had been able to accomplish everything necessary to serve the congregation.

Mark said, "I believe that it's the privilege and responsibility of the congregation to make up for what their pastor lacks."

What a wonderful expression of the relationship between pastor and people in the body of Christ! That was just the first of many things I learned from Mark. As I have grown older and found so many more gifts that I lack, I have grown in the appreciation of that Spirit-given

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<sup>106</sup> Joerz and McCain, Paul T., *Church and Ministry*, 126–127.

<sup>107</sup> Maps out objectives and plans the overall church strategy and program. Teaches and works directly with children. Leads public worship. Ministers to the sick, dying, and bereaved. Counsels with people facing the major decisions of life—marriage, vocations. Fosters fellowship at church gatherings. Teaches and works directly with young people. Talks with individuals about their spiritual development. Visits new residents and recruits new members. Supplies ideas for new activities and projects. Works with congregational boards and committees. Recruits, trains, and assists lay leaders and teachers. Manages the church office—records, correspondence, information center. Preaches sermons. Follows a definite schedule of reading and study. Promotes and creates enthusiasm for church activities. Maintains a disciplined life of prayer and personal devotion. Cooperates with social, legal, medical, and educational workers. Helps manage church finances. Administers Baptism and Communion; conducts weddings and other sacred rites. Participates in denominational activities. Teaches and works directly with adults. Counsels with people about their moral and personal problems. Cultivates his or her home and personal life. Participates in community projects and organizations. Mixes socially to develop contacts. Maintains harmony, handles troublemakers, averts or resolves problems. Assists victims of social neglect and injustice. Speaks to community and civic groups. Visits regularly in the homes of the congregation.

<sup>108</sup> It reminds me of an episode of the TV show *The Office* in which a paper company produced an ad that read, "Limitless Paper in a Paperless World."

<sup>109</sup> We learn not for school but for life. This saying of Seneca adorns the current building of St. Lebwin School in Deventer, whose most famous alumnus is Erasmus. Michael Massing, *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*, 121.

attitude. I am thankful that there are leaders like Mark<sup>110</sup> that God has raised up in his Church. I pray that this kind of leadership might be spread over the church at large.

Let every pastor pray he is never a cross his members are asked to bear. Let him also thank God that the Spirit will certainly make them willing to bear it.

### **Let us follow**

What is God really like? Job found the answer in the storm, and he experienced its truth in the long-term results of God's interaction with him. Bearing the crosses of this life causes us to despair of ourselves and our strength and rely wholly on the wisdom and power of God who demonstrated his love for us by sending his Son to die. The cross finally shows us what God is really like: he means the best for us in everything that comes from his hand, and he promises us everything we hope for now will one day be ours. Then we will see the true nature of every cross he asked us to bear.

Job found out that both <sup>111</sup>אֶת-הַטּוֹב וְאֶת-הַרָע had come from God's hand, but God meant all of it for his blessing. Job's story ends with God making him twice the man he had been when he was the greatest man in the East. God doubled everything that Job had lost—except for his children. Job wasn't given twenty new children—only ten, the same number as those who died. But that *was* double, because the first ones weren't lost; they were simply waiting. Bearing the cross in the congregation means following the Savior who bore it first, all the way to death and back, and knowing even if the cross ends in death, *non moriar, sed vivam et narrabo opera Domini*.<sup>112</sup>

Shepherd-leaders, let us do our duty<sup>113</sup> and take up our crosses and follow.

Jonathan E. Schroeder  
Saint James Day, 2018  
Sharpsburg, Georgia

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<sup>110</sup> Mark Massmann served as a congregational leader, a member of the Synodical Council, and advisor to numerous congregations across the WELS. He was a dear personal friend. God called him to glory in January of 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Good and "evil"/trouble/hardship

<sup>112</sup> Psalm 118. I will not die but live and will proclaim the works of the LORD.

<sup>113</sup> Luke 9:23

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