

Shepherds under the Cross

A reaction

As we meet here today, safe and dry on a pleasant hill in Wisconsin, people in the Carolinas are sloshing through water to salvage belongings, watching rivers swallow their homes, even planning unexpected funerals. You know the question many of them are asking—if not in front of news cameras, then behind closed doors, or at least within their hearts.

“Why?”

It’s as universal a question as any, heard in hospital rooms and war zones, funeral homes and living rooms around the world. No matter the language, it’s laced with emotion—frustration, confusion, anger, grief, desperation. Ancient patriarchs, Greek philosophers, and German poets alike have searched in vain for a satisfactory human solution.

But there is an answer. In his fine essay, Pastor Schroeder leads us to where it is found: in the cross, that of Christ and of the Christian.

The first voice looking for answers is the one that comes from our own hearts. I’m sure I’m not the only one here who has a hard time saying *das liebe Kreuz*—and not because my three years of college German have faded fast. I just don’t enjoy the cross. It’s not pleasant. That’s what makes it a cross, of course—but, like Peter, a real and vocal part of me would rather not deal with it.

Pastor Schroeder points out that our crosses are “custom-made” (p. 6). Each has its own shape and size and weight, perfectly designed and measured for its bearer. Yet he also helps us consider some aspects of the cross that are common to shepherd-leaders: failure, success, even the precious sheep the Lord has entrusted to us. More than that, he reminds us where to turn when our crosses press hard.

I appreciated our brother’s observation that “the hardest times in ministry seem to coincide with the times our devotional life has ebbed” (p. 11). I, too, have found this to be true—though in a way that may seem paradoxical. I can think of times when *tentatio* drove me to my Savior in Word and prayer. Yet that didn’t make my trouble disappear. In fact, sometimes trouble seemed to multiply in parallel with devotional time. Satan uses this opportunity to pounce: “Look, you tried spending more time with Jesus and things only got harder! What’s the point?” It’s true that a close relationship with our Father doesn’t make life or ministry easier—just ask Jesus—but it does make it easier to handle, with his strength. “When I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10, NIV). When your walk with Jesus grows closer, your cross may indeed grow larger—yet, somehow, lighter (Matthew 11:30). On the other hand, I’ll admit to times of struggle under the weight of the smallest of crosses—and, sure enough, those were times when I wasn’t a regular student of the Word.

The question “Why?” also comes from the souls for whom we care. While it pains us to hear the hurt that question carries, we also see therein an opportunity to point them to Christ’s cross.

Brother Schroeder’s pastoral heart and experience came through in his advice to be careful in the way we apply our knowledge of the cross to our members—even the strong ones—in the face of suffering (p. 19). The Spirit inspired Paul to write Romans 8:28 because he wants Christians to know and treasure the truth it contains. However, a wise pastor may want to use a different verse in the moment of crisis. The essay brought me back to one of my first real hospital calls. It was an emergency and I wasn’t prepared. As I stood at the bedside of a man whose life hung in the balance, the only verse I could think of was Philippians 4:4. What I told him and his family was true: they could rejoice even in those circumstances, knowing that God was working

for their good. A more pastoral choice, though, might have been a verse like the one I used later at a funeral in the same family: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine” (Isaiah 43:1). I’m thankful these were strong, mature members, who were patient with their rookie pastor and helped him learn to become a better shepherd.

Our essayist goes on to describe the opposite “ditch” for shepherd-leaders: trying to rationalize the cross instead of simply acknowledging it (p. 19). He gives the positive example of a Christian who expressed her trust that God had used an earlier hardship to help her deal with the latest one. This matches what Paul says: we “glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3, 4). However, once again Satan is quick to attack: he entices pastor and member alike to go further and speculate about God’s specific purpose in allowing a certain evil. Somehow, we feel better if we can come up with a good reason...but why? And what happens when the evil is so great or the pain so blinding that one cannot see any good that could come from it? This is the rationalizing against which Pastor Schroeder warned, a close relative of the theology of glory. We serve as faithful shepherd-leaders when we encourage and model a simple trust in what God does reveal (like his promises in Romans 5 and 8) and remain silent about what he does not.

Finally, “Why?” comes from the world around us—yes, even from those who have no God to whom they can direct the question. Pastor Schroeder is right when he says that those have forfeited the right to ask whose materialistic worldview precludes the existence of any being who could answer (p. 2). Still, it’s not hard to find folks whose hearts feel something their mind doesn’t want to allow. They may think they have the universe solved without God in the equation, but when tragedy strikes, they still long to hold someone accountable for it. We need to have an answer for them, too.

I confess that, as a pastor, I would sometimes cringe when the “Why?” question came up during instruction classes. It wasn’t for lack of a Scriptural answer. Rather, it was because I knew how my Old Adam makes that answer seem unsatisfying—and had seen a few looks on faces that indicated he was at work in others, too. If even honest questions from earnest disciples have that effect, how much more intimidating it is to hear an atheist wield the “Why?” as a knife meant to carve the faith right out of us!

Yet isn’t the question an opportunity? A soul demands an answer, and we have it. Best of all, the answer lies in Christ’s cross—and that’s just where we wanted to take them in the first place! There the Spirit does the arguing for us. There, in the darkness of history’s most unspeakable evil, the Advocate shines a spotlight on the Truth, and on his eternal blessings, which far outweigh our light and momentary troubles. There, at the cross, the problem of pain finds its only solution. We should prepare ourselves so that the question meant to end the conversation becomes a perfect segue to the gospel. That our essayist has such mission work always on his mind was evident in the applications and examples he used throughout this paper.

Pastor Schroeder, I thank God for the gifts and experience he’s given you, through which he has set before us once again the joy we find in the cross—Christ’s and ours. I am confident that your work will be a blessing to the shepherds gathered here today as well as to their sheep—those already in the pen and those that Jesus must bring in through them.

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