

# On the Theology of the Cross for the Mission of the LCMS as a Church Body United

Kevin D. Robson

*Abstract:* Is the theology of the cross understood and actualized by the LCMS? Over against a “theology of glory,” the theology of the cross is exhibited by distinctively faithful Lutheran doctrine preached and taught in congregation, school, and home. This, however, leads to an additional question: Is the theology of the cross grasped and actualized also by the LCMS as a united church body in national/international *corporate* perspective—that is, as a *collective* of church worker members who have outwardly bound themselves together first by subscription to a confessional standard (which is of chief importance) and then by a voluntary, agreed-on manner of polity and governance which always serves and assists to advance the church body’s confession of the faith? Our aim in this paper is briefly to recapitulate the theology of the cross and then to answer this question in the affirmative, while offering some evidentiary explanations and observations along the way.

## Cross Against Glory

Within Lutheran circles, any reasonable consideration of the theology of the cross and/or a theologian of the cross finds its ground in some of the historically most significant and intensively examined theological theses of the Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation (1518). There the Reformer begins with a treatment of the law of God (Thesis 1) and concludes with the love of God (Thesis 28). The directly relevant theses for the topic at hand are Theses 19–21:

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20].



---

*Rev. Kevin D. Robson has served as the LCMS’ Chief Mission Officer since 2015. On behalf of the Synod President, he supervises the LCMS Office of National Mission, Office of International Mission, Office of Pastoral Education and the LCMS Mission Advancement and Communications units. Prior to his current call, Robson served as pastor of several congregations in the LCMS Minnesota South and Minnesota North Districts. He holds BS and BSE degrees from the University of Michigan, an MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and an MDiv from Concordia Theological Seminary Fort Wayne, where he is currently completing a final DMin project dissertation.*

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.<sup>1</sup>

In these theses, Luther effectively issues a firm smackdown on a “theology of glory” and on “theologians of glory” who would claim to see and understand the inner workings and divine majesty of God through visible created things, observable human history, and the works of man. In fact, a theology of glory captures every theology and religion, other than the Christianity that can properly claim fidelity to the Word of God. The cross stands in opposition to all false theologies and religions.

Against theologians of glory, the Apostle Paul flatly declares, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Rom 1:22). In contradistinction to a theology of glory, a theology of the cross asserts that in His infinite love and wisdom for fallen sinners, God cannot truly be directly perceived or understood directly in invisible characteristics such as virtue, godliness and so forth. Instead, God chooses to reveal Himself by taking on our human nature in weakness, foolishness, and suffering, sinlessly living among and loving the very people who mock and reject and persecute Him. He brings His Son to a bloody death in agony and torment upon a cross. In substituting Himself in the place of fallen mankind doomed in its rebelliousness against God, Jesus fulfills the Law in its entirety and placates divine wrath completely, thus destroying death and the work of Satan and imputing God’s perfect righteousness to all sinners.<sup>2</sup> This is the hidden mystery behind our forensic justification before God, without any merit or worthiness of our own. Luther thus explained the theology of the cross in this way:

Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering. As the Apostle says in 1 Cor. 1[:21], ‘For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.’ Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus, God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. [45:15] says, ‘Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.’<sup>3</sup>

The cross is the cornerstone, the foundational launchpad, of the church's mission to a broken, sin-corrupted world and to those souls who have yet not been brought to saving faith in the person and redemptive work of God's Son. To recognize and know God is to recognize and know the *crucified* Christ, who declared of Himself, "No one comes to the Father except by me" (Jn 14:6) and "I am the door" (Jn 10:9) and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). He is Jesus of whom the Apostle John wrote under divine inspiration, "Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also" (1 Jn 2:23) and "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 Jn 5:12). And so the church must constantly and as a matter of first importance be about the business of proclaiming Jesus crucified as the atonement for all sin. Luther went on to say:

The cross is the cornerstone, the foundational launchpad, of the church's mission to a broken, sin-corrupted world and to those souls who have yet not been brought to saving faith in the person and redemptive work of God's Son.

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore, he prefers works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil. These are the people whom the apostle calls 'enemies of the cross of Christ' [Phil. 3:18], for they hate the cross and suffering and love works and the glory of works.<sup>4</sup>

A theologian of glory who promotes and centralizes the mere wisdom and works of man has no legitimate place within the mission and ministry of the LCMS. The cross takes center stage among us because it is inextricably bound to the church's doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the central teaching of the Holy Scriptures by which the church stands or falls.

When it comes to the holy cross and justification, it is rightly said: you cannot have one without the other. A theology of glory is utterly incompatible with this understanding. Forde captures this sentiment when he warns that "the hallmark of a theology of glory is that it will always consider grace as something of a supplement to whatever is left of free will and power. It will always, in the end, hold out for some free will."<sup>5</sup> He adds that "theologians of the cross attack the way of glory, the way of law, human works, and free will, because the way of glory simply operates as a defense mechanism against the cross."<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to the holy cross and justification, it is rightly said: you cannot have one without the other. A theology of glory is utterly incompatible with this understanding.

Also germane to our discussion here—quite interestingly so—are Luther's theses that bookend Theses 19–21 cited above:

18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ. ...<sup>7</sup>

22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.<sup>8</sup>

The second use of the Law demands that each of us despair over the sin-wrought limitations of our own capacities and skills and instead utterly rely on the Gospel—of which we are never ashamed, “for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16)—and on the work of the Holy Spirit in the divinely established means of grace. Here is a note of warning—applicable to us as individuals *and* to the LCMS collectively—that as we strive to fulfill our earthly vocations, equipped with the rich blessings of First Article gifts and abilities (with joyful thanksgiving to God) that we walk humbly before our God. Mutually encouraging the saints with whom we run this earthly race, we ought never trumpet our mere stewardship of the rich resources that God has abundantly provided to accomplish the mission of the church. Neither should we ever hold forth our “leadership” or “management” as an important or powerful or satisfying thing, or—as is so often the case among theologians of glory—package our plans with a self-assured, triumphalist or paternalist mindset. No, said Luther:

The remedy for curing desire does not lie in satisfying it, but in extinguishing it. In other words, he who wishes to become wise does not seek wisdom by progressing toward it but becomes a fool by retrogressing into seeking folly. Likewise, he who wishes to have much power, honor, pleasure, satisfaction in all things must flee rather than seek power, honor, pleasure, and satisfaction in all things. This is the wisdom which is folly to the world.<sup>9</sup>

Here is how Jesus perfectly summarized it: “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:10). This requires the kind of reflective humility that Melancthon described in his *Loci praecipui theologici* (1559):

While we are still in subjection to the cross and mortal death, we are being exercised in great calamities, and sins and great darkness still cling to us. We are under attack by the devil, who constantly ties us up in his evil traps. And no one is so careful, so diligent, that he does not from time-to-time wander into thoughts about these things. And we ourselves cannot govern the very difficult and perilous course of this life and our calling only by human actions and diligence, as Jeremiah says [10:23], ‘I know, Lord, that the way of man is not in himself.’<sup>10</sup>

What does the foregoing mean for us in the LCMS national and global context, thinking and working together collectively as a unified church body, striving to plan and execute to the utmost of our God-given abilities in all activities and initiatives in the Synod’s mission? Here several helpful observations may be made.

## In Practice

The theology of the cross serves the foundation for the development, exposition, understanding and implementation of all LCMS mission work, as the cross is the focal point—the pivotal event in God’s plan for man’s salvation by redemption and justification. The cross is the crucial factor that binds us together in our life and labors as a church body. Schulz summarizes such an Augsburg Articles IV-and-V-based approach to mission quite nicely:

[T]he doctrine of justification includes the doctrine of Christ’s death and resurrection. The total accomplishment of Christ in achieving righteousness for the world compels one to confess Luther’s dictum that ‘the cross alone is our theology’ [Heidelberg Disputation, Theses 20–21]. ...Mission is the act of extending the gift of righteousness and forgiveness to the world through its preaching of the Word and administering of the Sacraments.<sup>11</sup>

One rightly concludes from this statement that the act of extending God’s righteousness and forgiveness to individuals outside of currently existing church congregations (i.e., those who are unbelievers and disconnected from the church) necessarily carries with it a firm objective to eventually bring them into the regular fellowship of an assembly of believers gathered around altar, pulpit and font.

Over the course of its normal business at its 68<sup>th</sup> Regular Convention in the summer of 2023, at Milwaukee, WI, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted multiple resolutions pertaining to the church’s mission under the convention theme, “We Preach Christ Crucified” (1 Cor 1:23a)—the theme itself aptly reflecting the church’s commitment to the theology of the cross. Concordia Seminary St. Louis President Thomas Egger offered this to convention delegates from an essay written for the occasion:

We do not test-market our message for today’s culture. We do not custom design a Jesus who resonates with the spirit of our times. If we were to come up with a religion that would really “sell” today, it probably wouldn’t be centered around a crucified Messiah. The Lord has not called us to invent a new message, but to proclaim the crucified Messiah of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>12</sup>

Among notable mission-related *Resolveds* adopted by 2023 LCMS Convention delegates were the following:

*Resolved*, That the Synod in convention affirm *Making Disciples for Life* as its mission and ministry emphasis for the 2023–26 triennium.<sup>13</sup>

*Resolved*, That the Synod reaffirm the Synod’s current seven mission priorities as they exemplify our fervor in being faithful to the Lord and loving our neighbor, and also encourage their use to affirm our unity as Synod as lived out by congregations, national servant-leaders, district servant-leaders, and circuit servant-leaders in accord with the Synod’s current mission priorities:

- plant, sustain, and revitalize Lutheran churches;
- support and expand theological education;
- perform human care in close proximity to Word and Sacrament ministries;
- collaborate with the Synod's members and partners to enhance mission effectiveness;
- promote and nurture the spiritual, emotional, financial, and physical well-being of pastors and professional church workers;
- enhance early childhood education, elementary and secondary education, and youth ministry; and
- strengthen and support the Lutheran family in living out God's design.<sup>14</sup>

One notes that the Synod's longstanding, overarching objectives as spelled out in Article III of the LCMS constitution<sup>15</sup> are well-represented among the seven mission priorities listed above. The first three of these priorities directly address the enablement and actualization of the church's mission to be about the task of preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments. The remaining four mission priorities might be seen as indirectly—yet no less importantly—supportive of the same.

Considering herself from national/international perspectives and operating under such self-identified mission priorities, corporate LCMS prayerfully considers and then strives to create conditions wherein the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments might have their most free and unhindered course. We do so while acknowledging that it is never we alone accomplishing the end goal, but rather the work of the Holy Spirit, all under God's grace, accompanied by a multitude of participants and partners in both the US and around the globe.

Moreover, the proclamation of this saving Word—considered in an even wider sense than the public preaching that necessarily takes place through the Office of the Holy Ministry (Augsburg Confession Article V)—occurs in and through the everyday vocations of the believer. As with Philip the evangelist (Acts 8:26–40) the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace in Word and Sacrament enables every baptized Christian to bear Christ's love to neighbor—at home, at work, in social life.

Why does the LCMS conscientiously plan and then work under such mission priorities as listed above? Here is sound rationale offered by Öberg:

From 1519 until his death, Luther emphasized the following scheme of soteriological economy: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; the Word and Sacraments; the testimony of laypeople and the ordained ministry of the Word and Sacraments; and a created and sustained faith. Throughout his life, but especially after the dispute with the spiritualism of the enthusiasts, Luther emphasized the necessary connection between the means of grace and faith. No one can receive saving faith without the Word and Sacraments. Wherever the true Gospel is in motion, faith and the community of saints are created. The church as the institution of the means of grace and the spiritual importance of faith are connected to each other. ... The Gospel of the church

and mission is the instrument of God's salvation, something unavoidably necessary. Forgiveness of sins and eternal life are received only where the Father, the Son, and the Spirit communicate these blessings in the means of grace.<sup>16</sup>

Under that kind of prayerful thinking, the convention-elected members of the LCMS Board for National Mission (BNM) and Board for International Mission (BIM) are diligent in carrying out their bylaw-mandated duties to assist the Synod President in establishing specific end goals and then to exercise oversight for actions and initiatives of staff in the Offices of National Mission (ONM) and International Mission (OIM). LCMS Boards work to ensure that convention resolutions pertaining to the Synod's corporate mission and ministry efforts are effectively fulfilled.

Along the way, the Synod as a collective entity strives to maintain excellent coordination and accountability among the diverse participants in the mission of corporate LCMS. For instance, 2023 Convention Resolution 9-04 added an LCMS Bylaw requirement to strengthen BNM and BIM roles and responsibilities, calling for the respective boards' annual formal review and endorsement of the ONM and OIM standing strategic plans.<sup>17</sup>

Space simply does not allow for a full exposition here, but just one example of such cross-centered LCMS mission leadership on the domestic side is the BNM's prelude to its ends policies located under the first of the Synod's seven mission priorities:

The Board for National Mission establishes policy for the Office of National Mission to assist districts and congregations through their districts in planting, sustaining, and revitalizing Lutheran congregations around Luther's seven marks of the Church: the preaching and teaching of God's entire Word, Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, Holy Communion, called pastors, public prayer and thanksgiving, and faithful suffering *under the cross of Christ* (AE, Vol. 41; p. 148–165). Word and sacrament ministry is central to planting, sustaining, and revitalizing congregations, in order to reach the lost and bring them into the fellowship of saving faith. Where Christians faithfully and regularly receive the means of grace in the Divine Service, they are sustained in their faith and live out their faith in Christ in loving service to God and their neighbor in their respective callings [*emphasis added*].<sup>18</sup>

On the international side of LCMS mission, the OIM's established strategic plan currently features three "pillars" that stand completely on a proper theology of the cross: Spread the Gospel, Plant Lutheran Churches, and Show Mercy. Virtually all OIM work around the globe is done around those pillars, most often in close coordination and collaboration with Lutheran partner church bodies, LCMS recognized service organizations, other faithful Lutheran groups (including FOROs [A forum of the church to come together by LCMS missions and sister churches in Latin America and the Caribbean to further the work of the Gospel]<sup>19</sup>), and individuals located within all four of the Synod's global regions that comprise her overseas foreign mission fields.



Some in LCMS circles complain that the Synod's mission efforts have become too pastor-centric, especially on the international side. Currently, just under one half of the Synod's missionaries (who all are called and sent by the BIM and then supported and supervised by the OIM) are ordained LCMS pastors; many of these men are serving as theological educators in international seminaries. A proper theology of the cross cannot be embodied in a churchly mission served and supported by a less-than-well-formed ministerium. The most oft-repeated direct request that the LCMS receives from her international church partners in established altar-and-pulpit fellowship: "Help us train future church workers." Such requests are not only aimed at training future ordained pastors but also Lutheran deaconesses and teachers as well. To respond to this need, the LCMS OIM, Concordia Seminary St. Louis and Concordia Theological Seminary Fort Wayne work closely with one another today on multiple foreign mission fields.<sup>20</sup>

With respect to the "Show Mercy" pillar, our observation applies not only to the Synod's international mission activities and initiatives, but just as reasonably fits within the U.S. domestic side. The Synod's third mission priority as set forth above states it clearly: "Perform human care in close proximity to Word and Sacrament ministries." *Without* the clear proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments—and that requires the intentional formation, presence and participation of both laity and called ministers of the Gospel, gathered or being gathered within an assembly of the saints around font, altar and pulpit—the mission of the church under a genuine theology of the cross is absent. The familiar dictum attributed (likely mistakenly so) to St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach the Gospel at all times; use words, if necessary," simply does not hold up well within the mission of the LCMS in national/international corporate perspective.

## **What Shall Serve the Mission?**

Only through the offense of suffering and the cross are sinners enabled to see and know the God who took into Himself our human nature to save us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. The theology of the cross is central to the mission of the LCMS as a church body united. There is plenty of current evidence—in fact, far more evidence than could ever be examined within a brief overview such as this—that the Synod is determined to translate a sound theology of the cross into mission practice, even despite our often-surfacing flaws and imperfections, yet always in the weakness and humility of the crucified Christ.

A theology of glory does not serve the LCMS as a church body united because it does not serve the Gospel. Efforts to "Lutheranize" (with a theology of the cross) non-Lutheran (with a theology of glory) church authors and church mission resources represents questionable stewardship of time and efforts. My earthly boss at the LCMS International Center has lately been fond of saying something like this: "In everything we're striving to do together, let's straightforwardly be who we say we are. Let's be Book-of-Concord Lutherans." What a blessing daily to be reminded of that. I might add, "Let's steadfastly remain theologians of the cross in everything we do on the mission field, both here at home and around the world." God grant it for the sake of Christ.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Luther, Martin, *Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, ed. J.J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 40. [Hereafter LW vol:page]

<sup>2</sup>As Detlev Schultz (*Mission from the Cross* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023], 119), observes: "God not only sent Christ for the sake of the world but also to placate the Father's wrath. ...No other theologian has promoted this distinction as efficiently as Luther with his theology of the cross. Luther gained the deepest insights into the hidden and revealed God at the cross, into the "proper" and "alien work" of God. ...[T]he cross does in fact communicate both God's alien work, that is, the exclamation and satisfaction of His wrath, as well as His proper work, that is the expression of His grace and love for the world."

<sup>3</sup>LW 31:52-53.

<sup>4</sup>LW 31: 53.

<sup>5</sup>Forde, Gerhard O., *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 16

<sup>6</sup>Forde, 12.

<sup>7</sup>LW 31:40.

<sup>8</sup>LW 31:40-41.

<sup>9</sup>LW 31: 53-54.

<sup>10</sup>Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, *Christian Freedom: Faith Working through Love*, trans. Christopher J. Neuendorf, J. A. O. Preus et al., eds. Edward A. Engelbrecht and Charles P. Schaum (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 172.

<sup>11</sup>Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023), 78.

<sup>12</sup>Egger, Thomas J., "We Preach Christ Crucified," *Proceedings of the 2023 (68<sup>th</sup>) LCMS Convention* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023), 93.

<sup>13</sup>Resolution 4-02, "To Affirm and Continue Making Disciples for Life as Mission and Ministry Emphasis for 2023–26 Triennium," *Proceedings*, 136.

<sup>14</sup>Resolution 4-03, "To Affirm and Continue Mission Priorities for the 2023–26 Triennium," *Proceedings*, 137.

<sup>15</sup>Article III in *Handbook: Constitution, Bylaws, and Articles of Incorporation* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023), 11–12, states:

The Synod, under Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, shall—

1. Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3–6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy;
2. Strengthen congregations and their members in giving bold witness by word and deed to the love and work of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and extend that Gospel witness into all the world;
3. Recruit and train pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers and provide opportunity for their continuing growth;
4. Provide opportunities through which its members may express their Christian concern, love, and compassion in meeting human needs;
5. Aid congregations to develop processes of thorough Christian education and nurture and to establish agencies of Christian education such as elementary and secondary schools and to support synodical colleges, universities, and seminaries;
6. Aid congregations by providing a variety of resources and opportunities for recognizing, promoting, expressing, conserving, and defending their confessional unity in the true faith;

7. Encourage congregations to strive for uniformity in church practice, but also to develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith;
8. Provide evangelical supervision, counsel, and care for pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers of the Synod in the performance of their official duties;
9. Provide protection for congregations, pastors, teachers, and other church workers in the performance of their official duties and the maintenance of their rights;
10. Aid in providing for the welfare of pastors, teachers, and other church workers, and their families in the event of illness, disability, retirement, special need, or death.

<sup>16</sup>Öberg, Ingemar, *Luther and World Mission: A Historical and Systematic Study with Special Reference to Luther's Bible Exposition*, trans. Dean Apel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 83–84.

<sup>17</sup>Resolution 9-04, “To Establish Mission Board Responsibilities Regarding Mission Office Strategic Plan and Annual Budget Proposal,” *Proceedings*, 137.

<sup>18</sup> For the complete content of the BNM’s and BIM’s current policies, see <https://www.lcms.org/about/leadership/board-for-national-mission#board-policies> and <https://www.lcms.org/about/leadership/board-for-international-mission#board-policies>, respectively.

<sup>19</sup>Resolution 2-07A, “To Commend Use and Attendance of FOROs,” *Proceedings*, 136.

<sup>20</sup>Egger, in another essay delivered to the 2023 LCMS convention (“Our Residential Seminaries: Deep Pastoral Formation and Worldwide Impact,” *Proceedings of the 2023 (68<sup>th</sup>) LCMS Convention* [St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023], 110) said: “I can tell you without exaggeration that the faculties of the seminaries of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod serve as valuable resources and encouragement to Lutheran churches throughout the entire world, who hold them in the highest regard. Our partner churches and friends are sending gifted scholars and leaders to study in Fort Wayne and in St. Louis—students from Brazil, Argentina, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Macao, Australia, India, Ethiopia, South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Ghana, Rwanda, Madagascar, Sudan and South Sudan, Germany, Latvia, Norway, and more. Our faculties also accept invitations to lecture abroad, all around the world, as church bodies and pastors on every continent say, ‘Come over and help us!’”