

# The Theology of the Cross and Gospel Receptivity

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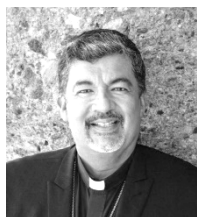
*Abstract:* The theology of cross provides a Christological and cruciform lens for assisting the church to identify possible receptivity in those who not only demonstrate need in various forms of poverty but also profess reverence toward God through recognized humility. Such recognitions should enable a better stewardship of the church's mission endeavor. Dr. Espinosa presents a theological foundation for these possibilities and Dr. Chittick elaborates on left-hand kingdom resources that may very well facilitate opportunities for right-hand kingdom mission, especially as these possibilities might apply to Lutheran schools. The article expresses a special interest in serving students with special needs, who too often are marginalized even by the church.

Luther's theology of the cross can be applied extensively, most assuredly to the mission of the church. Not only does the reformer's famous theological lens help us know God by seeing Him revealed in the humility, weakness, and death of Jesus, God incarnate, but it also enables one to see Jesus as He is *in the people* the church is called to serve. We may focus on "the least of these" (Matt 25:40), some still without the saving gospel in their lives. Luther expounded on how the priority of the gospel is connected to the poor:

Next to the proclamation of the Gospel it is the task of a good pastor to be mindful of the poor. For wherever the church is, there must be poor people. Most of the time they are the only true disciples of the Gospel, as Christ says



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(Matt. 11:5): ‘The poor have the Gospel preached to them.’ For both human beings and the devil persecute the church and bring poverty upon many, who are then forsaken and to whom no one wants to give anything.<sup>1</sup>

Althaus in his analysis of Luther’s *theologia crucis* in opposition to natural religion’s *theologia gloriae* points out: “The theology of glory leads man to stand before God and strike a bargain based on his ethical achievement in fulfilling the law, whereas the theology of the cross views man as one who has been called to suffer (emphasis added).”<sup>2</sup> Is it true? should the church recognize higher receptivity of the saving gospel especially among those who observably suffer?

In thesis 18 of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation: “It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Luther connected two ideas: despairing of one’s own ability coinciding with receptivity of the gospel. In this connection, however, there seems to be a dilemma.

On the one hand, the great commission of the Lord Christ is clearly universal in scope: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19a). Without question, the church maintains *gratia universalis* and the objective reality of Christ’s universal atonement. Who is helpless and needy? Answer: all are. Who is suffering the impact of sin, the world, and the devil? Answer once again: all are. That is, all people are suffering the horrendous impact of sin and death whether they realize it or not.

However, any empirical observation of signs, outward behaviors, external conditions can be deceptive. In fact, the very core of the theology of cross emphasizes our need to walk by faith and not by sight. (See 2 Cor 5:7.) For example, Luther in his sermon about the Pharisee and publican (Luke 18) states, “we should open our eyes and not judge the people according to their outward appearance.”<sup>4</sup> The reformer goes on to discuss how the works of the Pharisee were in themselves good works, so that someone with a different heart could have worked those works without the accompanying pride and self-praise. Or someone else could have emulated the words and actions of the publican, but without contrition and faith. Thus, the theology of the cross humbles us in realizing our considerable limitations to recognize the spiritual condition of anyone with our fleshly eyes.

On the other hand, while sin is a universal malady—“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23)—the Scriptures still maintain distinctions among people. That is, there are signs and indicators that should both guide perception in the church and also warn the church. Note Luther’s thesis 19: “The 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 [Romans 1:20].”<sup>5</sup> We might put the situation this way: the church can see with her eyes of flesh all people who suffer, but the church cannot see with eyes of flesh those who within themselves despair and yearn for salvation.

However, the theology of the cross does not eliminate indicators for the invisible reality of what goes on in the hearts of people. Informed by the theology of the cross, the church may recognize the things contrary to the theology of glory that are consistent with the image of Christ Himself, the One who was “despised and rejected

by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . we esteemed him not” (Is 53:3).

Could this be a contradiction? How can the church under the Lord Christ recognize what it cannot see? The church is helped because while the theology of the cross maintains the spiritual blindness of men, it also teaches about the condition of men who insist upon the theology of glory. The theology of the cross understands the cross itself as the lens for seeing what coincides with the things of God. Through Christ on the cross, this Christological and cruciform lens provides a means of recognizing those who might be especially receptive to the gospel.

One encounters a theological paradox in the theology of the cross. Alister E. McGrath points out, “For Luther, the sole authentic *locus* of man’s knowledge of God is the cross of Christ, in which God is to be found revealed, and yet paradoxically hidden in that revelation.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, this is not a new *modus operandi* for God. This paradoxical revelation is entirely consistent, for example, in the Old Testament. Luther was assuredly aware of this.

In his thesis 20 at Heidelberg, Luther says, “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.” That is, “Luther’s reference to the ‘*rearward parts of God*’ serves to emphasize that, like Moses, we can only see God from the rear; we are denied a direct knowledge of God, or a vision of his face (cf. Exodus 33:23...). The cross does indeed reveal God – but that revelation is of the ‘*rearward parts of God*’.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, the cross is both an indirect revelation *and* genuine revelation.<sup>8</sup>

All the while, the theology of the cross stands in stark contrast to the theology of glory which presumes to fully see God, but in actuality rests on the speculation and inaccurate perceptions of people even when they say they represent the authentic teachings of the church. But how does the theology of the cross move from the cross to the present?

In explaining Luther’s teaching, Hermann Sasse wrote, “But although God remains hidden to our eyes, he still reveals himself by the Word. So, the revelation in the Word is the way of divine revelation to this world.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Sasse maintains that for Luther, the revelation of the Word of the cross “is one of the marks by which the true Church of Christ on earth is recognised [sic], that she must go through persecution and suffering.”<sup>10</sup> Christians are called to share Christ’s cross.

The Lord Jesus teaches, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). And while Christians bear their cross to follow Christ, where does Christ lead them? This, too, the Lord teaches: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matt 25:35–36).

What might be some of the other indirect and yet genuine signposts for identifying those to whom the church ought to especially reach out? Who might easily despair and be eager to receive the church’s gospel-harvest ministry? Especially, how might these be represented in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? And how does the theology of the cross help Christians to recognize people led by the Spirit of Christ who are ready to receive the life-giving Gospel?

Holy Scripture itself teaches that there are indeed signs the church may look for under the cross of Christ and through the lens of the Word of Christ. The apostles led by the Spirit of God made distinctions by considering the condition of persons. After the saints James, Peter and John certified the holy ministry of St. Paul and St. Barnabas, St. Paul records the reminder that came from these reputed pillars of the church: “Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal 2:10). Such apostolic direction pinpoints attention towards those who suffer in poverty.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, the Lord Christ bestows His grace upon those “poor in spirit” (verse 3). In the beatitudes, many of the descriptors of those receiving God’s grace in Christ represent various forms of suffering and therefore various forms of poverty. It is not difficult to hear the echo of St. Paul’s assertive revelation that describes such need: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27b).

All the while, the church cannot rely upon natural perception apart from the theology of the cross. When David confronted Goliath, the giant conformed to the world’s standards as he looked upon David: “And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth” (1 Sam 17:42a). Perception controlled by the sinful nature will disdain other people, and as a result, misread them entirely.

Even the prophet Samuel, following the Lord’s direction to anoint a son of Jesse to be king of Israel, “looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him’” (1 Sam 16:6). The Lord would correct mighty Samuel: “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature. ... For the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). Even servants of Christ by nature tend to look at the outward appearance of others. The church’s lesson here, however, is to learn to perceive the heart, especially that heart despairing of itself and recognizing its need for the Savior of the world.

God gives His church glimpses of the heart when the church sees through the cross those whom the Lord Himself has prepared to receive the Gospel of Christ. Nevertheless, the whole heart is only truly known to God. Because of the old Adam, people judge and make assumptions when they view others through their human lens, building barriers to sharing the gospel. Recognizing the importance of the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we recognize that with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). He can break down walls and use us to reveal hope through Christ.

Throughout history people have been and continue to be marginalized. Some are ostracized because of their physical differences; some are disliked because of their ideals or political views. Others are left to be passed by because they are misunderstood or because they do not conform to the beliefs and norms of the community. One such person who was avoided is found in Luke 19. A man who used his societal position for his own gain, Zacchaeus was not a person others included at their dinner table. He was unpopular and viewed as greedy and dishonest. As Jesus was passing through Jericho, Zacchaeus was curious. Was there a gospel invitation intended for him? Who would share it with him when he was left out and not invited to social gatherings? Fortunately, Jesus called to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19:5). Scripture tells us his heart was

changed, and salvation came to his house. People looking on assumed this could never happen due to his selfish ways.

Scriptures present Zacchaeus and others as being receptive towards grace and chosen by God to receive salvation. The narratives provide the following signposts of receptivity towards the grace of God: (1) An observable cause of suffering, (2) humility and reverence toward God, (3) confession of sin. These characteristics align with the theology of the cross that presents the Lord Jesus Christ in (1) suffering on the cross, (2) humility on the cross, (3) confession of the sins borne for the world “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

In the days Jesus walked the earth, those marginalized were treated as insignificant, and they included many people such as tax collectors, people with leprosy, and paralytics. The same is true today with certain groups treated differently. Because of their income, where they live, with whom they associate, or because of their differences in ability, intellect, and capabilities, they may not be invited or included even in the church.

In the New Testament and especially as noted in the great commission, Jesus models inclusivity and the universality of the gospel. Jesus tells His disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). People of all nations, cultures, abilities, backgrounds, and statuses need salvation. God calls His people into ministry to share the saving grace of God through Jesus with everyone.

Still today some people are neglected or overlooked. One subgroup sometimes marginalized are those with special needs: those who have physical differences or intellectual and developmental disabilities, and those who are neurodivergent. Scripture tells us in Psalm 139:14, “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.” This includes all mankind, not just able-bodied and socially astute persons; all are created in the image of God (Gen 1:27).

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Through the theology of the cross, Scripture presents an identifiable pattern for recognizing receptivity for the gospel of God’s grace in Christ. Thus, the all-inclusive and universal gospel is especially applicable to those within the world who are often marginalized and treated as less than others, while at the same time they show a readiness for receiving the gifts of God. Many of these who are often overlooked, are in fact yet more likely to hear the promises of hope in the gospel. What, then, can the church do to increase opportunities to reach them? In our commitment to living out the great commission we can generate connections of closer proximity between the left- and right-hand kingdoms.

One left-hand kingdom approach is to be proactive in using laws to promote direct contact for the sake of the gospel. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) originally called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, was enacted in 1975 to establish rights and protection for all children to receive a free and appropriate public education to meet their specific learning needs.<sup>11</sup> Many changes

have evolved through reauthorization and amendments including adding categories such as autism and traumatic brain injury.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is also a public law designed for access. Persons with disabilities are protected in employment, transportation, and public accommodations. These laws were designed to help people with needs to increase their access and participation in society.<sup>12</sup> Advocating for the needs of people who are marginalized and especially receptive to the gospel includes being good stewards of our left-hand kingdom resources. The more this is done, the more we generate contact with the harvest field.

Russ Moulds explains God's two strategies to be aware of:

Scripture informs us of two strategies God is using to free humanity from its captivity to the devil: one strategy sustains the present world, thereby providing opportunities for the Gospel, the other advances the Gospel in the world. These strategies work together and not independently since they are both God's strategies for his single purpose of our salvation.<sup>13</sup>

In public schools, learners receiving special education or related services make up fifteen percent of the population of students aged three to twenty-one. This includes those with specific learning disabilities, vision or hearing impairments, autism spectrum disorder, giftedness, and other health impairments to name a few.<sup>14</sup> Focusing on this subgroup, many of our Lutheran schools have added resource programs to support students with various learning differences, enabling them to be included in the school community. Because of this, more children have access to a Christian education which supports their academic needs and, most importantly, their opportunity to hear the gospel daily.

Consequently, Lutheran schools have provided left-hand kingdom resources which then also connect students and their families with the right-hand kingdom gospel ministry. The students have exposure to the gospel that they might not have otherwise. Chapel, religion classes, and connections with the church are mission opportunities. Therefore, advocating for children who learn differently, who are often among the marginalized, so that they are included in the Lutheran school community serves their eternal need for salvation in Christ.

Jesus was an advocate of those excluded because of their differences, and He acted by reaching out to those in need. He met the blind man and "commanded him to be brought to him" (Luke 18:40), he *entered* Jericho to encounter Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1), and he *called him* and *went to* his house (Luke 19:5). He engaged the Samaritan woman by *going to* the well and asking for a drink (John 4). He *initiated* washing the feet of His disciples, who were confused and confounded (John 13:7).

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We can learn from the deliberate outreach of Jesus. He taught not by staying idle or in places of comfort, but by going out and by being relational. Jesus broke barriers

of societal norms to teach us to be proactive in making the gospel accessible to all. He did not avoid those who were ostracized; he took steps toward individuals and conversed with them.

Another example of advocacy is found in Luke 7. Once again Jesus demonstrated His movement towards those in need by responding to the request of a Roman centurion who by virtue of his role in the Roman empire was inherently associated with that culture's idolatry. Some of Jesus' disciples might have questioned the Lord serving a religious outsider, a person who would have been marginalized by their religious traditions. The Lord ventured out to him, nevertheless. The centurion was associated with great need and suffering (on the part of his servant), he expressed reverence and faith toward the Lord, and he offered humility in the way he justified his request to Christ.

As missionaries and leaders in kingdom work, we have opportunity to emulate the Lord Jesus by moving forward, moving especially towards those who are clearly in need. We move toward the marginalized who want to know God and who with a humble and reverential spirit towards God, are prepared to learn from Him. All of this is to be viewed through the Christological and cruciform lens described in this analysis which boldly seeks the marginalized. After all, this is what the Lord, who suffered on the cross, did for the needy and excluded as described in Romans 5:6–10:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For ... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

The suffering Christ on the cross, where God can be seen and known, also saw those who would receive His saving work: the weak, the ungodly, the sinners, and the enemies of God. That includes the marginalized, the poorest ones, who are only known in their misery, but who are also perfect candidates for receiving the saving Gospel. Therefore, just as they know they are included in the universal condemnation of sin, may they also come to know that anyone who calls on the name of the Lord, confessing their need for His grace, will receive His gift of salvation. This too is for us all.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians 1535," in *Luther's Works* American Edition, vol 26, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 26:105.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 27.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Luther's Works* American Edition, vol. 31, eds. Helmut T. Lehmann and Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 31:52.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, "A Picture and an Example of a True Saint," in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, vol. IV, ed. John Nicholas Lenker (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 338.



<sup>5</sup>Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” 31:52.

<sup>6</sup>Allister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 149.

<sup>7</sup>McGrath, 149.

<sup>8</sup>McGrath, 149.

<sup>9</sup>Hermann Sasse, *The Journal Articles of Hermann Sasse*, eds. Matthew C. Harrison, Bror Erickson, and Joel A. Brondos (Irvine: New Reformation Publications, 2016), 306.

<sup>10</sup>Sasse, 312.

<sup>11</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>

<sup>12</sup>ADA, U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2024, <https://www.ada.gov/law-and-regs/ada/>

<sup>13</sup>Russ Moulds, “Kingdom Teaches the Other: The Two Strategies of Lutheran Education,” in *Learning at the Foot of the Cross: A Lutheran Vision for Education*, edited by Joel Heck and Angus J.L. Menuge (Austin, TX: Concordia University Press, 2011), 82.

<sup>14</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2024, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg>