A Man of Sorrows

Dale Meyer

Abstract: This article explores the theme of mission in the light of the Theology of the Cross, emphasizing the importance of engaging with marginalized and oppressed communities. It highlights the prophetic call to address societal injustices and the need for the church to embody Christ's love through action. It advocates a hermeneutical approach that sees the exalted Christ speaking to contemporary issues and underscores the significance of Christ's suffering and exaltation, urging congregations to adopt a missional culture that reflects the love and justice of the Man of Sorrows.

"The prophets take us to the slums."[1] Whoa! Not comfortable for us who like our cushioned pews. It is on the very first page of Abraham Heschel's classic, *The Prophets*. At least to this follower of Jesus—Heschel was not a Christian—it speaks to mission in light of the Theology of the Cross. Great Commission. Sharing Jesus' love. "All are precious in his sight." We hear those motivations and others to do mission, and they are true, for sure, but this issue's theme is mission in light of the theology of the cross. Better to say, mission into the darkness of so much in our

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communities, nation, and world. This is not about a slick evangelism brochure, not about music to bring people into church, not about the church taking to social media. "To the slums." "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Mark 2:16). Because Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, [We naturally avoid "those kind of people"] and *we* esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3). "Human love avoids sinners and evil persons,"[2] but Jesus identifies with the marginalized, the victim, the abused, the homeless, the hungry, the has-beens or never-will-be people. "This is the love of the cross, born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good, which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the evil and needy person." (Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 28, proof).[3]

Heschel again:

> The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world. There is no society to which Amos' words would not apply.
>
> Hear this, you who trample on the needy
> and bring the poor of the land to an end,
> saying, 'When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain?
> and the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale,
> that we make the ephah small and the shekel great
> and deal deceitfully with false balances,
> that we may buy the poor for silver
> and the needy for a pair of sandals
> and sell the chaff of the wheat?' (Amos 8:4–6)[4]

My thesis: When our preaching and teaching the Old Testament, especially, but not only, the prophets, urges the concern of the exalted Christ for the body and soul well-being of all people in all historical times, then we will help foster a congregational culture wherein the theology of the cross becomes truly actionable in the missional awareness and activities of the congregation.

Nostalgia is not going to bring back churched America. While many societal changes are out of the church's control,[5] two assumptions underlying the theology of the cross can motivate and inform outreach efforts by a congregation into its increasingly secular community. The first assumption is hermeneutical, namely, that *the exalted Lord Christ is speaking to us today through the prophets*. Nowadays, Old Testament texts are often presented as nothing more than "Save the Date" for some eventual fulfillment in the future. "Today's Old Testament lesson is fulfilled in the Gospel lesson when Jesus…" Hence, a prophetic text, like Amos quoted above, is seldom the thrust of a sermon, but if it is, the interpretation is likely spiritual, not a look at predatory commercial practices.

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This limitation of a prophetic text's meaning is a result of the Enlightenment when reason became magisterial in exegesis, not ministerial. No longer could a historical event, especially one from the distant biblical past, be assumed to be true and

applicable to later generations, which was how the ancient church fathers had read the texts, Luther and the reformers as well.[6] Biblical events, like miracles and prophecies, had to be explained by modern categories, such as the natural order of cause and effect. The Enlightenment unraveled the grand connection between disparate narratives, removed Christ from the Old Testament, and severed the unity of the two testaments. In defense of unity, "biblical theologies" emerged, scholarly attempts to abstract overarching truths from the myriad texts.[7]

One strand of biblical theologies—this is where we get the "Save the Date" reduction of meaning for Old Testament texts—is "salvation history," locating biblical stories on a timeline from creation to eschaton.[8] To be sure, a linear understanding does have ancient precedent. David Maxwell: "In the early church, the meaning of a text of Scripture is to be found in its role in the larger story of salvation."[9] "Salvation history," however, is different. It is a 30,000-foot flyover that misses the down and dirty realities of human life on the ground, and what better place to find those stories than the Old Testament? Its innumerable sins, unrestrained evils, hard to believe divine interventions or depressing lack thereof, and logical inconsistencies in describing God, all present us with troubled and perplexing life as sinners lived it long ago.[10]

Whatever God intended in His mysterious counsels hidden to us, their lives were still *coram deo*, before God in judgment and in need of mercy, just as we are in our time. "Salvation history" smooths out all the troubling stories by neatly placing texts on a *manmade* continuum from creation to the eschaton that we can understand. Sarcastically, Hans Frei wrote, "God's purpose must be identified."[11] Martin Luther: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who perceives the invisible things of God as understandable…" (Thesis 19).[12] But "a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is" (Thesis 21).[13]

Mark Seifrid:

> The attempt to interpret Scripture as a comprehensive and unified story presupposes that the reader is in a position to discern God's work as a rational plan, from the creation to the eschaton. Such a position, set above the fray, is not ours. We are not yet beyond the battle between unbelief and faith, between the worship of the idols and the worship of the one, true God. We remain simultaneously sinners and saints, and therefore do not yet possess a whole and unified identity but await it in hope. It is the Scripture that interprets us, tells us who we are in our present state, as in the apostle's penetrating narrative of the human encounter with the Law and recognition of the Gospel in Romans 7. So long as we remain in this body and life, we find ourselves in that wretched person, who cries out for deliverance and finds it in Jesus Christ.[14]

That is how Luther interprets the Fourth Servant Song, Isaiah 52:13—53:12, especially 53:3, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." His interpretation is far more than "Save the Date" for Lent.

> This passage forms the basis for the church's faith that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Now follows what He would accomplish by His

> suffering…. And this is the second part of our understanding and justification, to know that Christ suffered and was cursed and killed, but FOR US. It is not enough to know the matter, the suffering, but it is necessary to know its function. . .. Unless God has instructed us, we will not understand this. Therefore, I delight in this text as if it were a text of the New Testament. This new teaching which demolishes the righteousness of the Law clearly appeared absurd to the Jews. For that reason, the apostles needed Scripture, *Surely, He has borne our griefs.* His suffering was nothing else than our sin. These words, OUR, US, FOR US, must be written in letters of gold. He who does not believe this is not a Christian. . .. Therefore, the prophet leads us so earnestly beyond all righteousness and our rational capacity and confronts us with the suffering of Christ to impress upon us that all that Christ has is mine.[15]

Luther jumps straight to Christ's suffering for us, no horizontal rational explanation of the unfolding plan of God through the centuries. "I delight in this text as if it were a text of the New Testament." Seifrid again: "God's address to us in judgment and mercy within the biblical narratives *itself has the power to bridge past, present, and future.*"[16]

Does a prophetic text which pleads the plight of the oppressed and outcast have application to the mission of the church today? Can we, *mutatis mutandis*, apply that Law to the congregations of today's institutional church? Allowing for contextual differences between ancient Israel and contemporary America, which are absolutely necessary moves when doing exegesis, do prophetic calls to work for justice in society apply to the church's mission today? Consider Isaiah 58.

> Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. . .. Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily. (Isaiah 58:3b, 6–8a)

James Voelz asks, "Does a text 'have' a meaning which reflects the intention of its author? Yes."[17] The authors of prophetic texts, Isaiah here and Amos quoted earlier, are human authors but the ultimate author is the Spirit of God and Christ. "No prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21; see also 1 Peter 1:10–12). With "salvation history," minimalization of texts being legitimately removed, texts pleading for help to the least and the lost do indeed apply to today's church.[18] The Man of Sorrows works through His church in community. "I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice" (Isaiah 42:1–3).

A second assumption underlying the theology of the cross is that *the Man of Sorrows is ascended, exalted, and now ruling all for the good of His church*. Hence the present tenses of thesis 28, "God's love does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it."[19] The culture of a congregation should be missional, but here too, "salvation history" can reduce the Great Commission to an unheeded sermon closing or an unlived mission statement. Without repeatedly presenting Christ as crucified *and exalted*, with us but also over us, hearers are tempted to think of New Testament accounts as sacred history, the church as a religious museum, and pastors are the docents. Who wants to go to a museum every Sunday morning?

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How do parishioners picture our Lord *right now*? He is not in a manger, not on a cross, and out of the tomb for 2000 years. And when we speak about the resurrection, we usually direct thoughts to two times, back to that Easter day or forward to the resurrection on the Last Day. The former is history and the latter, I suspect, is for most people far, far off.[20] That can leave a gap in the timeline for parishioners; what is our Lord doing *right now*? Again, lest you misread me, all these acts of God through Jesus are absolutely necessary for our salvation. They must be preached and taught constantly but, as with hermeneutics, the "salvation history" schema can effectively take Christ out of our here-and-now, as if he is in the "green room" waiting for his next appearance on stage. The Ascension and all it entails is richly present throughout the liturgy, lectionary, and hymns, and in the church's public confession. He is at God's right hand "to rule and reign forever over all creatures, so that through the Holy Spirit he may make holy, purify, strengthen, and comfort all who believe in him, also distribute to them life and various gifts and benefits, and shield and protect them against the devil and sin" (AC III, 4–5).[21]

Right now, Jesus Christ is in His State of Exaltation, seated at the right hand of God in glory, ruling over church and world, all powers subjected to Him (Col 1:15–20; Heb 1; 1 Pt 3: 22; Rev 1:12–18). Right now He is hearing our prayers (Heb 4:5; 1 Pt 3:7; 4:7) and interceding for us with His Father (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34). Right now He is giving His Spirit through the means of grace. The Word is maturing us toward our glorious future (1 Pt 1:23–25; 2:3). Baptism, giving "forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation,"[22] is not transactional, we give so that we get, but is total grace that orients us to the future (Rom 6:4–5; 1 Pt 3:21). Similarly, the Lord's Supper where He is mysteriously present by faith while absent to our sight is forward looking, a "foretaste of the feast to come."

This outpouring of gifts from our Lord at the right hand of God creates the church as a unique community, loving God and one another, living as we do in an often impersonal, sometimes hostile society (1 Pt 1:8, 22–25; 4:7–11). "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Pt 5:10). Rather than hearing evangelism and mission exhortations as echoes of Jesus speaking in the first century, awareness that He is now *Lord over us* means scriptural words about the least and the lost are words *He is speaking directly to us today.*

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Of His imminent appearance in glory to judge all, there are two audiences. First, the prospect humbles us. How we do mission, and to whom we take mission, falls under the Law. "[E]ach one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done" (1 Cor 3:13).

Thesis 6: "The works of God—we speak of those that are done through human beings—are thus not merits as if they were sinless."[23] In the proof, Luther compares our faithful works, and this must include our mission efforts, to rusty hatchets. "There is a comparison: If someone cuts with a rusty and rough hatchet, even though the worker is a good craftsman, the hatchet leaves bad, jagged, and ugly gashes. So it is when God works through us."[24] Secondly, for the oppressed and outcast in society, even when they know Christ, the Good News is strongly eschatological. The heart-wrenching pleas spoken by the psalms, prophets, and sufferers today will only be answered finally and fully when the Lord appears in glory.

N.T. Wright:

> The picture of Jesus as the coming judge is the central feature of another absolutely vital and nonnegotiable Christian belief: that there will indeed be a judgment in which the creator God will set the world right once and for all…. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God must be a God of judgment.[25]

In summary, the session of Christ and His imminent return, even when not explicitly stated, are a fundament of the New Testament, the predicate of much paraenesis, and formational for Christians in the first century and today, since the Spirit through inspired authors wrote not only to form Christian faith in first century Christians in the Roman Empire but also wrote for us in our impersonal, sometimes hostile, post-churched America.

Lutheran theology aims to be Christocentric. "[A]ll of theology has been embraced in Christology. Without Christ one cannot speak properly about God or

about creation, not to mention redemption and eternal glory. Everything is comprehended in him, and everything refers to him."[26] Therefore, Christian life should be wholly cruciform, and mission must be in light of the theology of the cross. "God can be found only in suffering and the cross" (Proof to thesis 21).[27] The mission of the prophets had two intimately related foci: In worship, true repentance and faith before God, and in community, striving for God's justice. Jesus identifies those two foci as the two great commandments in Matt 22:36–40 and parallels.[28] Luther related the two this way:

> Now when you have Christ as the foundation and chief blessing of your salvation, then the other part follows: that you take him as your example, giving yourself in service to your neighbor just as you see that Christ has given himself for you. See, there faith and love move forward, God's commandment is fulfilled, and a person is happy and fearless to do and to suffer all things. Therefore, make note of this, that Christ as a gift (i.e., grace) nourishes your faith and makes you a Christian. But Christ as an example exercises your works.[29]

Of the intimate connection of the two tables, Philipp Melanchthon said, "The works of the Second Table are *truly the worship of God*…that is, *when our works are guided by the fear of God and by faith*."[30] For your congregation, it may not be going to the slums. It might be partnering with an inner-city church or ethnic mission. It might be a community garden or a food bank. It might be a service to children and parents of a public school. It might be hosting a community organization. It might start with a simple block party to get acquainted with the neighbors around your church. It might start by talking with city officials about community needs.[31] The immediate goal is not to make church members but begin to meet people outside your church who need God's love and His mercies that you can deliver. "Love…does not seek its own" (1 Cor 15:5).

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Martin Chemnitz:

> God puts before us a person who in his necessity needs our help and love, and you can help him, this person is your neighbor whom you are commanded to love, nor are you to argue as to whether he is your friend, your enemy, known to you, a stranger, of a different religion or language.[32]

A biographical passage from Dietrich Bonhoeffer shows that it all comes down to the First Commandment.

> I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we

> wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it is quite likely that he did become one). At the time, I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I should like to learn to have faith…. I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous man or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; that is *metanoia* (repentance); and that is how one comes a man and a Christian. May God in His mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may He lead us to Himself.[33]

ENDNOTES

[1] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001), 3.
[2] Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 28 in Timothy Wengert, ed. *The Annotated Luther: The Roots of Reform* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015), 85. Hereafter Wengert, *Roots* for quotations of Heidelberg Theses.
[3] Wengert, *Roots,* 104–5.
[4] Heschel, 3.
[5] E.g., hyper-individualism, omnipresence of media, artificial intelligence, growth of government, the omnipotent market, decline of mediating institutions, etc.
[6] Robert Preus about the Lutheran reformers, who followed the traditional hermeneutic: "To be sure, there is a vast difference between the Old and New Testament Scriptures in their presentation of doctrine; there is a definite unfolding and advance in clarity as well as phraseology and thought. The Old Testament Scriptures present the doctrine under different circumstances and different times; in the Old Testament Christ is prefigured under shadows and types as something to come. But substantially the theology of Scripture is one, even as Christ is one. *Tempora variata sunt, non fides*." Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism,* Vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 332.
[7] You can picture this genre somewhere between exegetical commentaries on one hand, and systematic, dogmatic texts on the other. James Barr: "The very idea of 'biblical theology' seems to hang uncertainly in the middle air, somewhere between actual exegesis and systematic theology" (James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 2). Foster McCurley and John Reumann, *Witness of the Word: A Biblical Theology of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) introduced their work: "This book is an exercise in that elusive discipline called 'biblical theology." xv. (, xv). Barr makes a bald confession: "The theology of the Bible, as most modern biblical scholarship has envisaged it, is something that *has still to be discovered*." (ibid., 3; emphasis his).
[8] "Salvation History" was especially promoted by Lutheran professor J.C.K. von Hofmann of Erlangen. He sought a biblically and historically based alternative to historical criticism.
[9] David Maxwell, "The Exegetical Elephant in the Room," *Concordia Journal*, 49:3, (Summer, 2023), 16.

[10] E.g., Martin Luther, "Scripture approves of homicide in the case of some kings, in others it condemns it." (Martin Luther, "Jonah," in Luther's *Works,* vol.19. Tr. Charles D. Froehlich (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 5. Hereafter LW.
[11] Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* (New Haven: Yale University Press,1974), 174.
[12] Wengert, *Roots*, 83.
[13] Wengert, *Roots*, 84.
[14] Mark Seifrid, "Story-Lines of Scripture and Footsteps in the Sea," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology,* 12:4 (Winter 2008), 94.
[15] Martin Luther, Lectures on Isaiah Chapters 40–66. tr. Herbert J.A. Bouman, LW 17: 220–221. Emphases by capitals is Luther's.
[16] Seifrid, 89–90.
[17] James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 215.
[18] The tide has been turning against critical exegesis. David Steinmetz wrote in 1980, "The defenders of the single meaning theory usually concede that the medieval approach to the Bible met the religious needs of the Christian community, but that it did so at the unacceptable price of doing violence to the biblical text…. I should like to suggest an alternative hypothesis. The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can endlessly be deferred." David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today,* (1980), 38.
[19] Wengert, *Roots*, 85.
[20] It is interesting to note that Jesus' visible life, suffering, and resurrection and the resurrection at the end of times are matters of sight. Of the former, "one of these men (candidates to replace Judas) must become with us a witness to his resurrection" (Acts 1:22). Of the latter, "he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (Rev 1:7). However, Christ's session now at the right hand of God is known only through the words of faith. Might that explain the relative lack of attention given to the Ascension and its entailments? "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor 5:7).
[21] Augsburg Confession III, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds R. Kolb, T.J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 38. Hereafter KW.
[22] *Small Catechism,* Baptism: "What gifts or benefits does baptism grant?" KW, 359.
[23] Wengert, *Roots*, 82.
[24] Relevant to humility in our religious works are Luther's references to "the fear of God," six times in the 28 theses of his Heidelberg Disputation (7 [2x], 8, 9, 11, 12). He is contrasts human trust in works to the fear that our works may be damnable before God. The seventh thesis: "The works of the righteous would be mortal sins were they not feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God." Old Testament texts, real stories of saints and sinners *coram deo*, can instill the fear of God, judgment for our sinfulness, but more wonderfully, the pious fear of God, marvel that He saves us sinners. Do we today talk about the "fear of God"?
[25] N.T. Wright, Surprised *by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church* (NY: HarperOne, 2008), 117.
[26] Samuel Nafzger, ed., *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 416.
[27] Wengert, Roots, 100.

[28] "Teacher, what is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it; You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Mt 22: 36–40).
[29] Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction," Tr. E. Theodore Bachmann. LW 35:120.
[30] Philipp Melanchthon, in Martin Chemnitz *Loci Theologici.* Tr. J.A.O. Preus. II, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 716. The sharp distinction between forensic justification and the resultant life of sanctification (the Second Table) is present in Scripture but was not delineated sharply until Luther and the Reformation. Alister McGrath: "Justification is then interpreted as *Gerechtsprechung*, being 'pronounced righteous' or 'accepted as righteous.' A sharp distinction thus comes to be drawn between justification, as the external act in which God pronounces or declares the believer to be righteous, and regeneration, as the internal process of renewal in which the believer is regenerated through the work of the Holy Spirit." Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification 4th edition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 209. David Maxwell about Augustine: "Justification…refers to the inner transformation of the sinner into a righteous person that happens when God pours his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). It is not a forensic declaration of innocence by the judge as it is in Lutheran theology; rather, it is a process of healing. The dogmatic term that describes this is *sanative justification* or justification by healing. That does not mean that forensic justification was something Augustine never thought of." David Maxwell, "Justification in the Early Church," *Concordia Journal,* 44:3 (Summer 2018), 29.
[31] However a congregation decides to serve the community is not merely a private church matter. City services like fire and police protection are provided to congregations even though congregations pay no taxes. The rationale for tax exemption is that the congregation provides valuable service to the community. Some religious institutions voluntarily pay a "PILOT," "payment in lieu of taxes."
[32] Chemnitz, 747.
[33] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillian Publishing Company, 1971), 369–370.