

Growing in the Cross

Robert Stuenkel

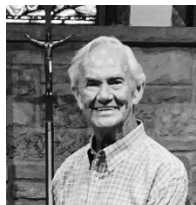
Any positive action in response to the word *cross* appears to be contradictory. A cross is the ultimate of suffering, also of least possibility for a response. The accounts of Jesus' crucifixion in the four Gospels, however, proclaim boldly that all areas of spiritual growth lead in that positive direction and culmination. This article focuses on applying the theology of the cross to the mission of campus ministry in the church.

A Particular Facet of The Theology of The Cross

Christians of all traditions recognize the cross of Christ as central to our faith. The vertical and horizontal dimensions of the structure embrace a Christian worldview. In proclaiming the preeminence of Christ, the Apostle Paul exclaims, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace *by the blood of his cross*" (Col 1:19-20).

That which the New Testament Scriptures reveal as universal, we believe also to be personal. We come face-to-face with Christ's cross; questions arise—especially with young adults. Questions arise about God permitting this injustice to take place—for Jesus to feel abandoned, and for the injustice of His suffering and death. "What is the meaning of this terrible happening on Golgotha?" is the way theologian Juergen Moltmann asks the question.¹ The first answer is that God surrendered Christ *for us*. He did it out of love. In the self-giving of the Son, we discern the self-giving of God.

Professor Moltmann goes on to give two comprehensive answers. "First, so that God could be *beside us* in our suffering and with us in our pain. That means: God's solidarity with us. Second, so that he could be there *for us* in our guilt, freeing us from its burden. That means: God's *atoning intervention* for us."²



Robert (Bob) Stuenkel, a 1964 graduate of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, served in campus ministry for 36 years: 1967-74, at Indiana State University and Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terre Haute; 1974-78, in the Detroit Metropolitan Lutheran Campus Ministry; and 1978-2003, as pastor of University Lutheran Church & Campus Ministry at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Bob received the S.T.M. degree at Concordia Seminary in July 1973. Bob and Julie continue to make their home in Boulder, where Bob remains close to Lutheran campus ministry. Since retirement in 2003, Bob and Julie spend the winter months in Sarasota, FL. Bob's clergy membership is in the Florida-Georgia District, LCMS.

A phrase by Martin Luther became an emphasis in my thirty-six years of campus ministry; the “glorious and joyful exchange of Christ with us” is the realization of the gospel, and it is the source of our growth. The theology of the cross is another concept that “lifts high the cross.” It is helpful to know that it was in a university community in 1518, just in the year after his posting of the Ninety-five Theses in Wittenberg, Germany, that young theologian Martin Luther discussed his theology of the cross in what is called the “Heidelberg Disputation.”

The fuller understanding of the theology of the cross is being described from various perspectives in this issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters*. The facet that emerges strongly from my experience in campus ministry as an outreach of the church is *growth in Jesus Christ*.

It is helpful to know that it was in a university community in 1518, just in the year after his posting of the Ninety-five Theses in Wittenberg, Germany, that young theologian Martin Luther discussed his Theology of the Cross in what is called the “Heidelberg Disputation.”

The Mission of Campus Ministry—Growth in Vocation in Christ

The mission of campus ministry in our Lutheran circles is to help people in higher education settings *to grow in their vocation* in Jesus Christ. This is a simple, powerful approach to ministry.

Closely related to growth are the words *increase* and *development*. In educational circles, the stages of development remain a measure in both natural and intentional ways. Young adulthood—at least into one’s twenties—is a key time of potential growth, and higher education remains focused on those years. (Thankfully, continuing education is also increasingly recognized and productive of growth.) Biblically, we have the examples of Jesus and John the Baptist who “grew and became strong” (Luke 1:80; 2:40). The Apostle Paul speaks of the spiritual growth in Jesus significantly to the Ephesian community. By God’s grace, believers are given new life in Christ,

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are *to grow up* in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body *grow* so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:12–16)

This Biblical description of growth may begin to sound idealistic and not sufficiently realistic for young adults in their preparation for careers and for the challenges of adult life in our world. The very distinction that Martin Luther is making between a theology of the cross and a theology of glory may seem clouded. Rather, our Lutheran campus ministry commitment, in “helping people to grow in their vocation in Jesus Christ,” always places the cross at the center of the story. “The truth is, *Theologia Crucis* in Luther refers to a spirit and a method, a way of conceiving of the whole content of the faith and the task of theology”³

Luther applies the decision of Paul to himself: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor 2:2). To this Scripture Luther refers again and again. And Luther, however boldly he announced victory of the Crucified, never did so in such a way as to suggest that now, after Easter, the cross is no longer a part of the human situation. The theology of the cross is not good news of deliverance from the experience of darkness and pain and death as much as it is the permission and the command to enter that experience with hope. The “glory” of Jesus consists in the fact that He makes His disciples on earth willing and capable to bear the cross after Him.

Going Out. . . In The Cross

Our colleges and universities bring together cross sections of people for a period of time, and communities are formed. The church has the opportunity, both as ongoing congregations and as specialized campus ministries, to serve the students and the established faculty and staff members “to grow in their vocation in Jesus Christ.” In so doing, investment is made in the developing lives of countless persons, and the Holy Spirit is building the body of Christ. For the vast majority, there is the movement after a period of a few years into the multiple crossroads of life—also internationally. Is it too narrow, too pious, to describe this commencement as “Going out. . . in the Cross”?

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod adopted “Affirmations on God’s Mission” almost sixty years ago. The first of six areas of commitment, entitled “The Church Is God’s Mission,” written in the form of resolutions to the church convention, lifted up these statements:

Whereas, The Son in obedience to His Father’s commission laid aside His glory, became a man to serve [all people], and died on the cross to reconcile all things unto God (passages include 2 Cor 5:17–21),

Resolved, That we thank the Lord of the church for the ways in which He graciously used us and our church body in His mission, blessing us and making us a blessing to others” (passages include 1 Cor 1:4–9).⁴

This action came at a time of marked growth of institutions in higher education and development of campus ministries in the mid-1960s. Most significant was the insight into the needs of the “whole [person],” the “whole society,” and the “whole world.” Exceptional change was being absorbed on all fronts.

Douglas John Hall says that Christian mission today means “the stewardship of life in the kingdom of death.” Hall quotes Karl Barth stating, “the theology of the cross has to do with the ‘freedom for all humanity’ that is the core of the gospel of ‘Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor 2:2).”⁵ The theology of the cross at its core is about God’s abiding commitment to the world. It is the world that God loves and wills to redeem. The immense challenge is to convey and relate this message meaningfully to young adults, for their perspective on all of life and its questions, especially of personal suffering and concern for suffering peoples.

Our University Lutheran campus ministry community was introduced to Dr. Douglas John Hall, professor of Christian theology at McGill University in Montreal in 1983. His presentations in various campus settings were also variations on the theme of his influential book, *Lighten Our Darkness—An Indigenous Theology of the Cross*. In his later book, *Thinking the Faith*, he reflects, “It is my view. . . that the tradition North American Christians today are most in need of contemplating and assimilating is that thin, neglected, and frequently *rejected* one to which Luther gave the nomenclature (he did not invent it) *theologica crucis*.”⁶ My perspective for this time also is that his view holds true.

The enduring and decisive factor in our full ministries in campus communities is to proclaim and live out the gospel of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We are crucified and risen with Christ in baptism, and we keep preparing young adults for the realities of that risen life. Dr. Hall sets the pace for us:

[T]he theology of the cross takes as its point of departure the brokenness of the human spirit and the human community. It places its hope in God’s transformative solidarity with fallen creation, with the world *in* its brokenness. It wants to serve, not as a ready-made ideological panacea for every form of human and worldly suffering, but as the salvific base from which the courage may be found willingly to participate in the suffering of the earth and its creatures. Thus, the community that is moved by the gospel of the cross inevitably finds itself drawn towards earth’s suffering ones, for they are those in whom the divine pathos and compassion become especially transparent.⁷

Youth grow in being able to serve and in doing so confront the hard features of life. The questions arise, and here we benefit from truthful reflection upon and confession of our real condition. Dr. Hall cautions against being an “answering religion,” which too often also becomes “popular religion.” Rather, he writes: “Over against this simplism, serious representatives of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ must learn how to identify themselves with the *questions* of a humiliated and fearful rationality, and to ask these questions with the same earnestness as the sensitive representatives of worldly concern ask them.”⁸

When we have achieved that kind of solidarity with the human questions; when we count ourselves among those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” and for God, then we shall have the right to explore again, in new ways, the revelatory answer to the human question. Again, Dr. Hall: “Only as we participate in the suffering of the intellect and the humbling of the human enterprise shall we have any possibility of

bringing comfort from the side of the suffering God. This is what it means to apply to this aspect of Christian theology—to the dialogue of reason and revelations—the revelation called *theologia crucis*.”⁹

In summary, “By contrast, the ‘theology of glory’ instinctively draws away from the sufferer, except where it can play the role of benefactor and miracle worker. . . . As Luther put it succinctly in his Heidelberg Disputation, thesis 21: ‘A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.’”¹⁰

Suffering in life is inevitable, and it involves a great range of experiences in which we are largely passive. The questions abound, and we accompany maturing youth in their mutual struggles. They discover in the suffering Christ the God who understands them and suffers with them. Once we sense this, we perceive that God in Christ has become the human God who cries out with us and in us. The God who has become human intervenes on our behalf and has made our lives part of His life, and our sufferings his suffering.

Another dimension of meaning for young people to carry with them throughout their lives is that of passion. Christian faith lives from the suffering of a *divine passion* and is itself the passion for life which is prepared for suffering, for discipleship and service. People discover in the suffering Christ the God who understands them and suffers with them. Active suffering on our part is the willingness to open oneself to be touched, moved, affected by something other than self.

Anyone who hears the message of the crucified Jesus hears the call to discipleship as well; and anyone who enters the discipleship of Christ must be prepared to take up the cross. That is what the Gospels tell us. Christ is not merely a person. He is the Way—a road, too. And the person who believes in Him takes the same road He took. Juergen Moltmann gives this description: “There is no Christology without Christopraxis, no knowledge of Christ without the practice of Christ. We cannot grasp Christ merely with our heads or our hearts. We come to understand him through a total, all-embracing practice of living, and that means discipleship.”¹¹

It all comes together in our approach to campus ministry. The commitment to the growing person is to provide the means for this “all embracing practice of living.” We recognize the need for meaning in one’s life. The building up of one another is our commitment, and the focused years of higher education in a concentrated setting is a compelling opportunity. Growing up and growing outward is the hoped for result. “Discipleship is the holistic knowledge of Christ, and for the people involved it has a cognitive as well as an ethical relevance; it means knowing and doing both.”¹²

An outgrowth of that “knowing and doing” is the participation in Christ’s own *messianic passion*. Again, in the words of Moltmann, “The Gospels tell the story of Christ’s passion as the history of an ever-deeper self-emptying on Christ’s part.”¹³

Following the way of Christ, according to the Gospels: “And proclaim as you go, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons.” (Mt 10:7–8). Then, Christ loses everything. Paul’s hymn in the Letter to the Philippians sums up this humiliation: “[Christ] emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant . . . he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:7–8). Men and women who take Christ’s road, who take up the cross, take up the struggle of life against death. It means engaging in

this struggle in our own time and our own place. Christ's own messianic passion inspires us to be passionate about our service and advocacy for justice. Oh, that we may be open to God's Spirit instilling such passion in us and in our communities!

The most common phrase about youth and campus ministry students is that they represent the future of the church. Yes, and so much more. Juergen Moltmann envisioned all mission as preparing for God's kingdom. He maintained that in Jesus' cross, in His death and resurrection, Jesus Christ brings God's future to us human beings, and we are invited to God's future.

So, in the New Testament gospel and evangelization are messianic concepts. They are the word and the language through which God reveals the future and makes his new creation of all things known. So, the gospel is also the word which liberates the captives and justifies sinners, which wipes away the tears and raises up men and women who are burdened and bowed down. . . . People who believe the gospel experience the powers of the future world 'and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and of the age to come' (Hebrews 6:5). They move into the springtime of the new creation.¹⁴

Dr. Moltmann gives us an additional word of freedom and hope:

Evangelization is *an invitation*, nothing more than that and nothing less. It is not instruction, and not an attempt at conversion either. It is a plea: 'Be reconciled with God!' . . . It is the authority of the pleading Christ, who carries our sins on the cross and with his outstretched arms invites us: 'Come, for all is now ready.' . . .

The pleading Christ begs for his invitation to be accepted. He appeals to the people invited, but the appeal is based on their freedom. In Christ, God has reconciled the world with himself, so be reconciled with God! Reconciliation is possible. So here too we are told: God is going to create everything anew, so seize these opportunities. They are there already, in yourself and close to yourself. Peace is possible. Justice is possible. Liberation is possible. God had made the impossible possible, and we are invited to seize our possibilities for living. Participate in the renewal of society and nature.¹⁵

The Theology of the Cross applies equally to people of all ages and circumstances

The distinctiveness of the mission of campus ministry in the outreach of the church is in the application of growing up and growing outward in the cross as a way of life. The vocation, the calling in discipleship, however, relates to us *all*. As I mark sixty years since graduation from seminary and my wife, Julie, and I have celebrated our sixtieth anniversary of marriage in this year, we have drawn again upon the text of my father's sermons at the time of ordination and marriage: "And he [Christ] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (2 Cor 5:15).

ENDNOTES

¹ Juergen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 38.

² Moltmann, 41.

³ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith - Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 23.

⁴ The Mission of the Christian Church in the World V, Accessed at [Ctsfw.netctsfw.net/media/pdfs/CTCRTheMissionoftheChristianChurchintheWorld.pdf](https://netctsfw.net/media/pdfs/CTCRTheMissionoftheChristianChurchintheWorld.pdf), 9.

⁵ Hall, 25.

⁶ Hall, 23.

⁷ Hall, 28–29.

⁸ Hall, 425.

⁹ Hall, 425.

¹⁰ Hall, 29.

¹¹ Moltmann, 47.

¹² Moltmann, 47.

¹³ Moltmann, 38–39.

¹⁴ Moltmann, 145–46.

¹⁵ Moltmann, 146.