

Theologians of the Cross/Theologians of Glory

WFAGC

Show pictures of churches with crosses on them? How do we know the buildings are churches? *The cross!*

Four Theologians

Luther: He coined the terms and gave flesh to the concepts. Sometimes we use theology of cross and theology of glory. Based on:

Paul: The crucifixion and cross of Jesus are central in all of his letters.

Mark: Associate of Paul? His gospel is the story of the crucifixion.

The Roman Soldier: The first to see God in the death of Jesus. He must have been overwhelmed by the mystery of it all.

Theme Verse: 1 Corinthians 2:2 *"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."*

We are all theologians. We all think about God, and even if we don't believe in God, we think about how we don't believe in God, which makes everyone a theologian. Luther identified the two basic stances from which our understanding of God arises. One, the theologian of glory sees God as essentially the being which gives us things: food, health, clothing, government. Our job is figure out how to please this God so that God continues to do that. The theologian of glory is always climbing the ladder to God. The theologian of the cross views God as the being which is with the person regardless of circumstances. The cross is the identifying feature of God. God is with us, even in death. The theologian of the cross recognizes that in Christ, God has climbed down the ladder, to the last rung, to give us all things.

The theologian of the cross recognizes that we find God's strength in our weakness, God's wisdom in our foolishness, God's light in our darkness, God's health in our sickness, God's richness in our poverty, God's life in our death.

Mark is the consummate theologian of the cross. When Jesus dies utterly abandoned by God, the Roman soldier who crucified Jesus sees in this complete absence of God the full presence of God in the death. This is the heart of the good news. When we are experiencing the absolute absence of God, then God is most fully present. We've been examining some paradoxes this summer, and there is no deeper mystery than that one.

We have been exploring some of the major themes of the Lutheran Reformation. It's not something we do every day, but during this 500 year anniversary, it was suggested that we preach on reformation themes. There are some major ones, but if you are starting to deduce that there is a common thread holding these different themes together, you would not be wrong. Today's theme gets close to the heart of the matter.

Luther often talked about theologians of the cross and theologians of glory. He understood that everyone is a theologian. If you think about God, you are a theologian. Now some people are well-read theologians, and they learn how to use big words and write almost unintelligible tomes, and those are the people we look up to as the ones who know about God and think of as theologians. But some of the best theologians in modern culture are country western singers – and they are some of the worst. Sometimes pastors fit into the category of the lofty well-read theologian, and almost every parent at one time or another, when confronted by their children's deep questions about the mysteries of God that they can't answer, will respond, "Why don't you ask the pastor." They assume that because pastors have gone to seminary they know how to answer the questions. The problem with that assumption is that God is much bigger than our answers, and while we sometimes get insights into the nature of God, we never crack the full mystery. It might be true that all a pastor learns to do at seminary is learn how to ask more questions, not answer them.

So everyone here is a theologian. You all think about God, and you all have come up with your own unique understanding of how God is working in your life. Often that is similar to what other people believe, but everyone does their own synthesizing. And everyone is a bit orthodox and also a bit of a heretic. We're sinners after all. Our belief systems don't always hang together.

So maybe what we should be talking about here in church is not, what are the answers, but how do we ask the questions. The questions we ask will betray the assumptions we bring to the questions. For Luther, all the questions were asked through the lens of the cross.

I learned about it this way. Our understanding of God has a center, and from that center, all other beliefs emerge and hang together. For Luther, the cross was at the center, and all other teachings grew out of that single event in the life of Jesus. As we ask questions about God, we do it through the lens of the cross. As Paul says, I will know nothing except Jesus and him crucified. (Bertram's circle of doctrines)

Luther contrasted these theologians of the cross with the theologians of glory. Every understanding of our relationship with God that relies on our efforts becomes a theology of glory. Today, the best example of that would be the prosperity gospel preachers. Jesus is preached, but not the Jesus crucified. The prosperity gospel says that if you believe in Jesus, God will be on your side and you will find success. If you listen closely, you will discover that success is the real God of the prosperity gospel. That is what people want.

Where the prosperity gospel emphasizes how we can discover God's blessings, generally by living the right way, the theologian of the cross thinks about what it means to die in Christ as the source of new life. Both are concerned with how we live, but one sees how we live as a way to get something from God, and the other wonders about what a new life in Christ looks like, where the Spirit gives direction based on God's love for us.

The prosperity gospel invariably ends up with the believers as the ones God likes, as opposed to those whom God doesn't like. There will be a us versus them mentality. God likes the believers and punishes the unbelievers. Living under the shadow of the cross we understand that we all come short in our lives, some with sins more noticeable, and some with sins more easily hid. We understand that God died for all, whether we understand it or not. Christ died for all those prosperity gospel preachers also, and Christ holds all things together in his death. God so loved the world.

Which brings us, finally, to our gospel reading in Mark. Paul was the first theologian of the cross. He wrote about the gospel first, shortly after the formation of the church. Mark was the first gospel writer, and he also is the prototypical theologian of the cross. His gospel is the story of Jesus suffering and death, with a long introduction to help us understand the events of those last three days. He was the first to write about Jesus predictions of his death and how we also must die if we want to live. We must

give up if we want to have. We must love others if we want to experience love ourselves. It is Jesus' love for others, to the point of giving up his own life, that overwhelms the centurion and finally the disciples. Jesus dies, and when he gives up his last breath, the one who nailed him to the cross exclaims, "Surely he was the Son of God." It is Jesus' death that moves this man to faith. In Jesus' death we see most clearly what God is doing. It is the supreme act of self-giving love. And it is a deep mystery.

Mark's resurrection story is hardly a story at all. He leaves it to us to live out the resurrection. That God dies for us is what he sees as the great mystery of God.

Mark 15:33-47

The Death of Jesus

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land^[a] until three in the afternoon. ³⁴ At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"^[b] ³⁵ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." ³⁶ And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." ³⁷ Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. ³⁹ Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he^[c] breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"^[d]

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

The Burial of Jesus

⁴² When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶ Then Joseph^[e] bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body,^[f] wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body^[g] was laid.

Footnotes:

- a. [Mark 15:33](#) Or *earth*
- b. [Mark 15:34](#) Other ancient authorities read *made me a reproach*
- c. [Mark 15:39](#) Other ancient authorities add *cried out and*
- d. [Mark 15:39](#) Or *a son of God*