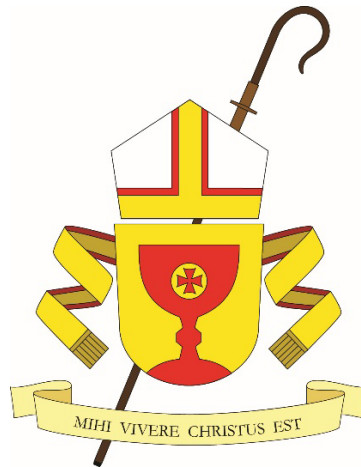


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Essay for the 2023 LCMS Convention in Milwaukee

## **We Preach Christ Crucified: The Redemption of the World**

Over a hundred years ago in Finland, a young man was going through a spiritual agony. He was walking down a country road and stopped by an old fence. While he was looking at the red-painted fence, it crossed his mind: The fenceposts certainly look wretched inside, but the red color covers them all. With a new joy he confessed: "The righteousness of Christ Jesus covers me totally. Although I am a sinner, I receive forgiveness." This man later became a pastor and wrote a hymn: "Go to the ends of the earth preaching the Good News from the cross: It is fulfilled!"

"But we preach Christ crucified"(1 Cor. 1:23). This is the mission statement of St. Paul. This is the Gospel that he preached. This message, which is the wisdom and the strength of God, has only one goal: to save us. "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe" (v. 21, also 18).

### **1. The cruciform content of our salvation**

We know that the words *save* and *salvation* are used in a generic sense. We had a parliament election last spring in Finland and one party had as its slogan: Save Finland. We need to be saved from many things: war, famine, accidents, illness, poverty, or even from boredom and too long meetings. The New Testament also speaks of salvation in a non-theological sense. When the imprisoned Paul was in a storm, Luke writes, "All hope of our being saved was at last abandoned" (Acts 27:20).

The Apostle Paul, however, had a specific meaning, a cruciform content, for the words *Gospel of salvation*. This was passed on to him from the eyewitnesses directly in Jerusalem. And he had handed this sacred and immutable apostolic teaching to the congregation in Corinth: "The Gospel I

preached to you, which you received, in which you stand and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you. ... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried that he was raised on the third day" (1 Cor. 15:1–4). The content of the Gospel of salvation is this and this only: Christ was crucified for our sins, and since he was raised from the dead we are no longer in sin and do not perish (vv. 17–18). Redemption is not a utopian dream to be fulfilled on earth, not a spiritual opportunity to achieve and earn final salvation, and not even something that our faith in Christ causes. Redemption of the world is an existing reality. Paul is preaching the Gospel of salvation in a world that is already atoned for and redeemed on the cross and declared forgiven in Christ's resurrection (Rom. 4:25, 2 Cor. 5:19–21). Certainly Paul teaches that salvation is a future and eschatological reality, when we are saved on the Day of the Lord from the wrath of God (1 Cor. 5:5). However, salvation is also a present reality, one to be received as a gift through faith: "Behold, now is the favorable time, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

A young man walks down the street in Milwaukee and sees a fence painted with rainbow colors. What might he think? Progress, but there are still too many fences, unequal power structures that must be demolished. If he searches for deeper meaning in life or even God, he desires to be pleased rather than to be saved. He strives for emotional well-being rather than being forgiven. He wants society and church bodies to affirm who he chooses to be and to celebrate his ultimate freedom of expressing himself rather than being called to live by moral codes of natural law or by some "bigoted" church authority to transform his life according to the image of Christ.

We preach Christ crucified, but Paul's sermon included something else in his mission tour in Greece. In Thessalonica people "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9). In Athens Paul's spirit was provoked to see all idols, and he preached that the time of ignorance was over: Repent (Acts 17).

While we keep on speaking of sin and guilt, grace and forgiveness, we should also unmask the idols of our time, which promise a meaningful and satisfying life but apart from the living God. In his excellent book *The Unholy Trinity*, Rev. Michael A. Lockwood unravels our Western idolatrous culture of Me, Myself, and I.<sup>1</sup> We are called to dethrone the rivals of Christ, the idols of our time, in which we are tempted to put our trust and hope. Whether they focus on consumerism or generic spiritualism, idols give empty and deceitful promises but eventually turn out to be weak and of no help for a dying and suffering man facing the final judgement. We are called to confess our love for the greatest idol: the Self, who strives to be self-sufficient and independent from God and provide for oneself and even determine one's own existence and direction. This is nothing but self-justification, the way of the law and not the way of the Gospel of salvation.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were saved from idols: "We know that an idol has no real existence and that there is no God but one. For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth ... for us there is one God, the Father from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:4–6). What a message to meditate upon and share: Idols have no real existence, but in the Lord Christ we have our existence!

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Lockwood, *The Unholy Trinity* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016).

We preach Christ crucified! But how did Jews in Jerusalem see Christ crucified? According to Dr. Scott Hahn, it was impossible for Jews to see Christ's crucifixion as a sacrifice:

A sacrifice was permitted only in one city, the holy city of Jerusalem; yet Christ was crucified outside the walls. Sacrifice could be offered in only one place in that holy city, in the Temple, on the altar, by a priest of the tribe of Levi; yet Calvary was far from the Temple, and it had no altar and no offering priest. To even the most careful observer, the crucifixion of Jesus would have appeared to be a profane event, a fairly unremarkable Roman execution. A sympathetic soul might have judged Jesus' death to be an act of martyrdom, like deaths recounted in the histories of Maccabees, but not a sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

What would you answer to this claim? Should we ask about the sacrifice from Christ himself?

## **2. The sacramental and communal nature of our salvation**

It is no coincidence that St. Paul in the same letter for the second time mentions: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood'" (1 Cor. 11:23–25). Christ himself preaches Christ crucified. He defines the true meaning of his death on the cross. My body and blood for you, on your behalf! This is sacrificial language. Christ is the ultimate vicarious sacrifice. Through Jesus' atoning blood we have redemption, the new covenant and the new liturgy in remembrance of him established. Christ is the new Paschal lamb, whose blood saves us from death and damnation. Paul states: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). This is the Gospel of salvation!

But Christ's words are more than explanatory or a prophecy. They are institutional, having the divine power to accomplish what they say. These words consecrate the bread and wine to a meal of redemption. Herman Sasse summarizes how we cannot separate the cross, the Holy Communion, and the Church:

Without the institution of the Lord's Supper the Gospel could be misunderstood as a teaching about the redemption and Jesus Himself as the greatest of the prophets of the coming Kingdom. This misunderstanding is now no longer possible. ... Wherever the Words of Institution resound anew, there redemption is something more than the object of the promise. It is actually given to whoever receives the Sacrament in faith. ... The Lord's Supper confirms the sacrificial meaning of the death of Christ. ... The Passover of the new covenant is really the organization of the new people of God.<sup>3</sup>

We preach Christ crucified when we gather to receive his true body and blood, as Paul writes: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). When we gather in remembrance of him, that is, when we receive his true body and

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Hahn, *Consuming the Word* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2013), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Herman Sasse, "The Lord's Supper in the New Testament," *We Confess The Sacraments*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985), 88–89, 94.

blood as gifts so that our God remembers us graciously, we gather as the Church. To gather around the Lord's table means living as the Church. St. Paul starts the section on the Supper, saying when you gather "as a church" (v. 18). Preaching Christ crucified is not only sharing information and teaching. It is not something that we can only follow online and from a distance. Christ crucified is always bodily and concrete, sacramental and communal, that is, liturgical and ecclesial.

My late teacher Kurt Marquart reminds us that in the transmitted Gospel traditions the Supper (1 Cor. 11:23ff) and Resurrection (1 Cor. 15) are the special points of our Lutheran teaching. The perfection of the objective justification and the true presence of the Lord's body and blood are also the demarcation line between the Lutheran teaching and both Rome and the Geneva Reformed tradition. Prof. Marquart writes: "The two constitutive foci of the Church of the Augsburg Confession are justification and the Holy Supper. These stand at the center of her confession, and without them she ceases to be."<sup>4</sup>

How do we then pass on this heritage to the next generation and new people? We asked this over twenty years ago in the midst of spiritual ruins in Finland. There are many mission models. What would be ours? We fixed our eye to this profound truth: All the life of the Church flows out of the altar and the pulpit. What builds the Church is the purely preached Gospel and the rightly administered Sacraments as our fathers confessed at the Diet of Augsburg (AC VII). We gather weekly to hear Christ speaking to us and to receive his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

This way of the cross has both a vertical and a horizontal aspect for building up new congregations. We need both substance and contact, faith and love. Theological substance means the vertical gifts given freely by Christ through the service of his ordained servants in the divine service. The horizontal aspect is the contact with people, showing hospitality, sharing life together as the family of God amidst individualistic society and broken culture. This means that the mission is shared together with pastors and the royal priesthood, each according to one's vocation. This means that in a postmodern world it is not enough to theoretically explain crucifixion and teach how the congregation is a body of Christ, but rather to call people to live and experience the sacramental and communal life together. If the younger generation is skeptical of the big words and cynical about solemn statements and they look for concrete answers, we have a great opportunity to invite them to an embodied liturgical and congregational life. Christ's mission is his Church. The motto of my church is simply: "Divine service for life, congregation as home." Nothing new but old truth rediscovered in a different cultural context — and we are still in the learning process!

St. Paul shows us this sacramental and communal aspect in his letter to the Corinthians. The Church is the wandering people of God (*ecclesia migrans*). Christ is the new Moses, who leads the new exodus through the waters of Baptism, for both Jews and Gentiles to a new promised land: heaven. "Our fathers were all under the cloud ... and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and

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<sup>4</sup> Kurt Marquart, "The Church in the Twenty-First Century: Will There be a Lutheran One?" *All Theology is Christology: Essays in Honor of David P. Scaer*, ed. by Dean O. Wenhe et al (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2000), 195–196.

in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:1–4).

The Church is one body with many members: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). Often we suffer from the tyranny of numbers, the idea of being big — at least if you have a state church background. However, the house congregations gathered in Roman-style homes, in which the inner courtyard (atrium) had a capacity only for a few dozen people. No wonder St. Paul describes the congregation as being small and as a place of caring and genuine relations: "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (v. 26). This should not only be a noble ideal but an everyday reality. From this angle, being a small congregation is not necessarily a threat but can be also a gift and a possibility. And for a larger congregation, it poses questions like: How can we maintain a close family-like atmosphere? Should we be open in prayer to start a new daughter congregation?

To preach Christ crucified, to receive the water and blood from the side of the Crucified, and to live a communal life as members of the Crucified call us in the Holy Spirit to share the redemption of the world to the whole world.

### **3. The cruciform witness of salvation**

When a Christian mother walks down her home street and sees a red-painted fence, she may well think that the public space is getting smaller for Christians. How long do we maintain our basic freedoms? Do I dare to speak up in the school board or keep my opinions to myself? How do I keep my children close to God, truth, and beauty when all moral fences have been torn down? Yes, red is the color of the martyrs.

We preach Christ crucified! We have been given the holy calling of proclaiming the Good News of the redemption of the world that everyone needs to hear but no one by nature wants to listen to. The prince of this world is a liar and murderer and cannot stand the word of truth and life (John 8:44). By necessity, in this world preaching the cross means carrying the cross. Christ's cross reminds us constantly that we cannot escape suffering for his name's sake. "A servant is not greater than his master" (John 15:20). St. Paul's letter is written by a persecuted apostle to persecuted Christians: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too" (2 Cor. 1:5).

I am reminded of the words of a German theologian: "A Christian never lives without persecution. Either he is persecuted or he suffers with the fate of those who are persecuted."<sup>5</sup> This is a lesson that we are all learning also in the West. In my experience when God plans to expand his work, he increases the weight of the cross. Thus he pulls us closer to himself. But carrying a cross is a powerful witness and always a gift, not a punishment from the Lord. At this time we need even more mutual prayers and encouragement from sister churches and organizations like the International Lutheran Council, a worldwide association of confessional Lutheran church bodies in five continents. We are responsible for passing the faith to the next generation. There is a constant temptation to shy away from the scandal of the cross and to adapt ourselves to the

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, *The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All* (Oregon: The WEA Global Issues vol. 5, 2001), 16.

surrounding culture and to the spirit of the age. At the moment we see all over in Christendom massive apostasy from the Christian faith. In this cultural pressure one church body after another is divided on issues of creation and redemption of man. If church bodies and church leaders do not confess the sacred faith in a hostile world, they betray their mission and the people wandering in darkness — and they soon join persecutors. "No man's land" is not an option in a spiritual battle.

In post-Constantine and now even post-Christian Western societies, we within the Mission Diocese of Finland have had to learn anew the way of the early church and the future church. First, mission and outreach work is not only done somewhere far away but right here due to waves of immigration and the dechristianization of Western societies. Second, hostility and oppression towards Christians are not only far away in non-democratic countries but an issue among our members.<sup>6</sup> Third, while our culture in a narcissistic way idolizes the body, there is a great confusion about what a man is and a devaluation of our created body given as a gift from the moment of conception to natural death.<sup>7</sup> Fourth, the presence of diabolic phenomena and spiritual warfare are not issues only in a traditional pagan environment but are becoming a part of pastoral ministry.<sup>8</sup> Fifth, we have to learn to do the Lord's work together as the family of God with much fewer resources, numbers of people, and cultural support but still remain joyful, hopeful, and bold in Christ!

A few years ago a man, not so young anymore, walked on the beautiful island of Malta. So many rulers have conquered this strategically important island in the Mediterranean. Romans came with their iron power. Ottoman rulers attacked it with a mighty fleet. Napoleon's powerful army was stationed there, and the great Royal Navy of England harboured there. When I walked down to St. Paul's bay in distress, pondering the weaknesses and challenges in my church, I stopped to marvel at the sea and asked myself, how did our Lord conquer the island? Who was our King's ambassador? Imprisoned Paul. What was our King's fleet? A sunken ship. How did our King arrive? Paul swam to the beach soaked to the skin among a group of criminals. How was he received? He was bitten by a snake. What were his resources for mission? Owning nothing but the word of Christ crucified.

This was the great entry of our crucified Christ! This was and is his way of showing his power and his wisdom and bringing the word of the redemption to the whole world even today.

What more can we ask in our short life than to live by his grace and share his Gospel of salvation!

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<sup>6</sup> See Jesse Yow, *Standing Firm* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> See John W. Kleinig, *Wonderfully Made* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> See Robert H. Bennett, *I am not Afraid* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013).