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## A MERCIFUL SERVANT OF THE CROSS: THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS FOR CHRISTIAN CAREGIVERS

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In the garden, Adam and Eve rebelled and rejected God at His Word. They ate from the tree of knowledge and came to know evil. This knowledge of evil thoroughly corrupted them, body and soul, so that they fled the presence of the Lord. Their new perspective of reality distrusted and disregarded the Lord and His Word.

Man cannot un-know evil, nor can he change his assumptions and perspective by himself; fallen man sees through sin. Fallen man rejects God through flight and fight, ignoring God's Word; hiding behind ignorance, distraction, rationalization and speculation; distancing himself from contact and attacking how the true God chooses to come to man. This sinful perspective condemns goodness itself, juxtaposing human understanding and goals against God's ways and revelation: "good is called evil and evil is called good."<sup>1</sup>

Combining the consequences of sin with this fallen perspective, sinners suffer in body and soul with no true way of understanding or answering it. Hopelessness and meaninglessness haunt many as marriages fail, businesses collapse and violence overrides both conscience and physical vulnerability. Distraction and reckless abandon become primary human tools against both boredom and despair, characterizing man's thought, word and deed.

Adam and Eve had to leave the garden and paradise, but God has not left Adam and Eve or their children. Instead, God works within time and Himself entered into history to fulfill His promise of hope and salvation from sin and man's state. God's Word and His actions reveal the goodness of His character and His perseverance as He continues to act and interact with His fallen creation through His chosen ways.



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Perhaps ironically, God hides Himself in response to man's flight from Him. God no longer walks to speak with man in the Garden of Eden, but He sends His Word to human ears and ultimately incarnates His Word — His Son — as Jesus, the Christ. Apart from His Word, God's true self is hidden so that the saving knowledge of God must disclose itself in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ the Lord. Reflecting upon Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, Sasse writes:

Luther does not deny that such invisible things of God as 'His power, His wisdom, His justice, His generosity and so on' can be seen in the works of His creation ... [but what Luther] does deny is that such knowledge is useful ... It does not change our relationship with God ... Men have misused

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<sup>1</sup> This is a common expression of man's thorough corruption and sinful perception that is frequently heard in conversations about theology of the cross. Martin Luther used the phrase in the "Heidelberg Disputation," Thesis 21, in *Luther's Works* vol. 31, ed. Harold Grimm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1957), 41. The scriptural reference is Is. 5:20, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

the knowledge of God which they have from what He has made. They have thus become fools. The knowledge of God from His works has never kept anyone from falling away from God and becoming an idolater. So it has pleased God to save those who believe through the folly of what is preached. This preaching is the word of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18 ff).<sup>2</sup>

Theology of the cross, or study of the cross, reveals the reality hidden by sin: God as He is, His Word, His works, His ways, His Christ in the incarnation and suffering, as well as man's absolute dependence upon God, his standing before God, his suffering and his service within creation. God has chosen to work for good purpose-fully through what man intends for evil (Gen. 50:20)! The mercy of the cross answers man's greatest needs for forgiveness, cleansing, freedom from sin, acceptance, reconciliation, hope, unity and new life, directly from the cross.<sup>3</sup>

Theology of the cross is the substance of the Gospel. It is God's truth cutting through death and sin to give new life.<sup>4</sup> Perspective shaped by this is particularly a blessing to those who suffer or who offer Christian care amid suffering. It has direct implications for Christian understanding and practice, for individuals and the corporate church as the demonstration of God's mercy becomes the motivation and source for all Christian mercy. Theology of the cross offers God's views and actions on Law, Gospel, mercy and man's sinful perspective, and has direct implication and application to comfort, instruct and encourage those in the midst of pain, guilt or tragedy. This essay will address theology of the cross with Christian caregivers in mind, offering: a) a summary of biblical theology of the cross for the sake of awareness, b) its teachings relevant to mercy made clear on the cross and c) an introduction to merciful application.

## Theology of the Cross

To say *the* theology of the cross can be misleading. Theology means study of God, and some scholarship attempts to study God apart from the divinity of Christ, denying His incarnation, virgin birth, fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and messianic promises, resurrection and Trinity. Some try to study Jesus apart from His historical hours on the cross — and apart from God's Word and its authority. Other scholars prefer to speak in terms of *a* theology of the cross, focusing on one person's treatment or understanding of the subject; Luther's theology of the cross is the classic example.<sup>5</sup> Luther himself specifically sought to proclaim the truth instead of speak about the truth; and so this paper will limit its focus to the biblical theology of the cross, appreciating Luther's clear understanding and proclamation of it. In addressing Luther's positions, however, this paper will use secondary sources in hopes of introducing readers to good resources for further reading on Luther's extensive works.

Study of the cross must rely on God's Word. Not only did Christ's Word prepare His path to Golgotha, and incite His enemies to kill Him, but the cross contains godly action that cannot be understood apart from God's Word, His revelation. This Word then reveals the importance of the cross as a historical event in itself and its ongoing effects in heaven and on earth (Eph. 2:13–16; Phil. 2:5–11; Col. 1:18–23; 2:9–15; etc.). Indeed, the Lord continues to work through the cross to interact with the world and in the lives of individual Christians (Gal. 2:20; 5:24; 6:14; etc.).

On the cross, God showered His mercy on the world while withholding it from His Son.

The theology of the cross, therefore, paradoxically demonstrates God's justice and His mercy, the extent and depravity of sin and God's reaction to it, in anger and in grace. God held Himself to His word, punished sin, yet also delivered sinful man.

The Lord worked through the clearest demonstration of the world's rejection of Him and His ways. What man meant for evil, God used for good (Gen. 50:20). God worked through man's weakness to identify once and for all His fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, despite the total lack of goodness, merit or worthiness in man. The Lord even sends His Spirit to sinful man, who cannot believe on his own that the Son of God would suffer on behalf of

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," in *We Confess Jesus Christ* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Supporting Bible passages include: forgiveness (Acts 10:34–43, Rom. 4:7–8, Eph. 1:7–10, Col. 2:12–14); cleansing (Eph. 5:25–27, 1 John 1:7); freedom from sin (Rom. 8:2); acceptance (Acts 10:34–43, Rom. 12:1–2); reconciliation (1 Peter 3:18); hope (1 Peter 1:3); unity (Eph. 1:7–10); and new life (Rom. 6:4).

<sup>4</sup> "Always it is from the cross that everything is understood, because hidden in the cross is the deepest essence of God's revelation. Because this is so, Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) wants to be more than just one of the many theological theories that have appeared in Christian history. It stands against its opposite, the prevailing theology in Christendom, the *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory), as Luther calls it, and claims to be that right and Scriptural theology with which the church of Christ stands and falls. Only of the preaching of this theology, Luther maintains, can it be said that it is the preaching of the Gospel." Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, 39.

<sup>5</sup> A basic introduction to Luther's theology of the cross can be found in Regin Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, Facet Books, Historical Series, 17, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1976); Alister McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990). On the more practical side, Richard Eyer, *Pastoral Care under the Cross: God in the Midst of Suffering* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1994), is also very helpful.

man, sacrifice apart from all selfish interest or die — effectively changing everything, even granting God's favor and blessing forever.

According to the historic scene on the cross, God's greatest display of eternal, unearned mercy is horrific to man's body, soul and mind:<sup>6</sup> stinking bodies under a hot sun; bloody, meaty wounds; naked humiliation; slow-coming death; shame and rejection; apparently lackluster defenselessness; and even well-known, quoted words instead of guilty tears, anger or repentance. Yet, this is how the Lord reveals Himself to the world. This is the way the Lord works for the good and salvation of the world.

Charles Anderson summarizes theology of the cross this way, "The basic understanding here is that God often works under the sign of the opposite ... He deals graciously by means of the cross."<sup>7</sup> God sends His Son, incarnate by the Holy Spirit, mothered by Mary, to be God-made-man, and He works through that very fleshliness to win permanent freedom from sin on man's behalf. In short, God fulfills His own demands and commands, because man is not able to (Rom. 7:18). God restores and elevates man to life with Him forever (2 Tim. 4:18; 1 John 2:17; Rev. 22:5).

In a brief, readable introduction to the subject, Regin Prenter writes:

Luther regarded the theology of the cross not merely as one part of theology but as theology in its totality, that is, theology in so far as it is at all capable of understanding the unity underlying the antitheses in the divine works: God's righteousness under his judgment, his grace under his anger, the life which he bestows even in the midst of death, his power to turn the present evil into a thing of good.<sup>8</sup>

Theology of the cross does address antitheses, also termed paradoxes, contradictions and hiddenness. The paradoxes include that the immortal God takes on flesh to be mortal; the contradictions that the crucifixion displays both the full wrath of God toward sin and the ultimate loving sacrifice that merits grace and mercy for the whole world; and the hiddenness of God's revelation and glory in His crucified son's mortal, dying and dead body.

Regarding God's hiddenness in the cross, Prenter summarizes Luther's view succinctly, "Luther's God is the God who reveals himself in the cross of Christ, God hidden in suffering. His revelation is at the same time a veiling, for His entire divine majesty lies hidden under the suffering and shame of the crucifixion."<sup>9</sup> The Lord reveals Himself, but not the entirety of His wisdom or His glory, so that in a sense He is hidden even as He reveals Himself.

Much emphasis on God's hiddenness — how and how much the Lord reveals Himself — stems from man trying to know God apart from how God has chosen to be known. As von Loewenich paraphrases, "A knowledge of God that does not understand itself properly is the root of all idolatry."<sup>10</sup> Not only can man not accomplish knowing God apart from God's will,<sup>11</sup> God knows that sinful man cannot directly see His full glory and live (Ex. 33:17–23); sinful man should not see the revelation he truly desires. Again, "The knowledge of God from His works has never kept anyone from falling away from God and becoming an idolater. So it has pleased God to save those who believe through the folly of what is preached. This preaching is the Word of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18 ff)."<sup>12</sup>

God, hidden in suffering, gains and grants mercy to the world, while the world recoils from living freely by faith. Man wants to live by his own sight, trusting his personal perspective and understanding above all else, while God is immovable in His insistence on faith through His Son. Hence the Lord *declares* man righteous, incorporates believers into the death and resurrection of Christ *by Baptism* and sends His Spirit by His Word. Man may *want* to live by sight, but true life is only accessible and seen by faith through the grace and merit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Theology of the cross is theology of revelation,<sup>13</sup> not theology of man's aspirations or works. Theology of the cross focuses on Christ, His incarnation, suffering and death as a revelation of the heavenly Father, and, indeed, the Trinity.

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<sup>6</sup> See Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," in *We Confess Jesus Christ*, 50, second paragraph: "[T]he place where God's revelation is most repugnant to our reason ..."

<sup>7</sup> Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, vii.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> von Loewenich, p. 28, citing Cf. W. LVI, 174, 18 ff.; LW 25, 154; W. LVI, 177, 25 ff; LW 25, 158.

<sup>11</sup> von Loewenich writes, "We must not meddle with God's inscrutable will with our human questions. All our inquiring will not lead to the goal anyway." *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Sasse, *We Confess Jesus Christ*, 47.

<sup>13</sup> von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 29.



Although this outlook and its scriptural insights are frequently used to address man's prideful assumptions about glory and the Law, this theology offers far more. Speaking of Luther's clear exposition, Sasse writes:

While Luther in the deep experiences of his struggle for a gracious God was learning to understand what the cross of Christ means for us human beings, he came to understand ... the deepest nature of the revelation of the cross ... He saw not only the depth of God's wrath and the magnitude of His love, but with a grasp of both he probed the deep secrets of the way God comes to us human beings, the secret of how He deals with them, the mystery of revelation itself.<sup>14</sup>

Theology of the cross must address the apparent contradictions and reality while proclaiming Christ and all He has done, and does, on behalf of His people. This is not a simple matter — as judgment and mercy, Law and Gospel are revealed in their full strength in the suffering and death of Christ, which highlights the falseness of man's sinful understanding and corrupted perspective.

The sins of the world were displayed on the cross and punished in their totality on the person of Jesus Christ the Lord. This means that every sin of every person has been paid for within history. Every man has sinned and fallen short so that no man is worthy of Christ's sacrifice; yet, theology of the cross equally shows that there is divine mercy toward everyone. Divine hatred of sin will not change, and no sin will be small or harmless, but Jesus felt the wrath of God *on behalf* of man. Christ on the cross is the perfect scapegoat, the appeasement of the judging Father and the completion of all punishment with the finality of judgment day. Christ on the cross offers universal hope and forgiveness to every man, woman and child throughout time.

Theology of the cross does not hesitate and linger over the apparent contradiction, but professes with Scripture the dominance and power of Jesus' message for salvation. The Father sent His Son out of mercy; the Son freely gave Himself for the sake of saving mankind; and the Spirit points to this temporary death, creating ongoing life and sustaining life by faith. As Schlink summarizes from the Lutheran Confessions, "What is decisive ... is not the co-existence of God's wrath and God's mercy, of sin and grace, but the victory of mercy over wrath, the victory of grace over sin and condemnation."<sup>15</sup> God's mercy is so abundant that it overflows the Law, fulfilling it and exceeding it for man.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the Gospel predominate to bring comfort and hope to any who will receive Christ, but it also instructs, rectifies and enlivens the Christian to bring and restore true Scriptural perspective through the revelation of the cross.

Theology of the cross does not reveal why man continues to die, although it highlights that true life is wholly lived by faith. It does, however, reveal why Christ died: obedience to His Father, love toward man and His earnest desire to forgive man and reconcile creation with the Father. Theology of the cross reveals that God truly is at work in all things, however horrible, for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28; Gen. 50:20). Many things may be hidden from man in his natural, sinful state, but the Lord has made clear that He is working on his behalf, in suffering as well as any other time or situation.

God's mercy is best understood in contrast with the very real dangers and reality of sin, as is displayed on the cross. Although disbelief tries to ignore the depravity of sin and the severity of God's righteous judgment on sin, Scripture's revelation of the crucifixion does not. By acknowledging the pain and brokenness of this world, Christians are especially able to address the very real needs and concerns of those around them, body or soul. In stark contrast to human understanding, Christians can seek out sinners to show them God's love, spiritually and physically, while upholding a Gospel-centered call to repentance and new life. Christians are uniquely gifted to offer godly perspective in the face of uncertainty, guilt, shame and fear.<sup>17</sup>

Man's assumptions must be directly addressed, and careful attention may be necessary in order to discern them at any given time. For example, many assume that pain, suffering and hardship infer guilt or divine rejection. However, that is not true. Jesus was no less the Son of God because He suffered. He was no less loved and favored by God because He was humiliated and shamed. Likewise, Jesus' servants are rejected in spite of God's blessing on them. It is simply

<sup>14</sup> Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, 45–46.

<sup>15</sup> Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 55–56.

<sup>16</sup> The Son's obedience to His Father ought never be trivialized, nor God's will as made known in the Law, but these topics exceed the capacity of this paper.

<sup>17</sup> "It is significant that the discovery of the suffering and death of Christ as a fearful reality went hand in hand with a new realization of the seriousness of sin and of its forgiveness." Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," in *We Confess Jesus Christ*, 43.

a fact that Christians suffer and bear their own crosses as they follow Jesus, and that they too must rely by faith on Christ crucified, trusting the wisdom and discernment of God.

### Teachings on Mercy

Sin corrupts both body and soul, and the Lord's redemption redeems both body and soul. The fact that Jesus accomplished salvation in the flesh of His body demonstrates that He cares and provides for both body and soul. Both body and soul can be served mercifully, as Christ Himself did throughout His ministry, preaching the Word, but also feeding the hungry, visiting the grieving, healing diseases, literally restoring life and limb to those in need.

In Jesus' flesh, God conquers death. This does not mean that death is no longer painful — Christ Himself grieved in spite of the resurrection — but He always remained sensitive and mindful to those around Him. Mercy is such an automatic part of Jesus' life that, even as He slowly asphyxiated, He looked in pity on His mother, His grievers and even those who mocked Him. Facing death, Christ still remembered the widow, the orphan, the outcast and the helpless.

How did Jesus' personal mercy show itself? Hands bound, He spoke words of forgiveness, affirmed the Word of God even with His last trembling breaths and mercifully prayed for those around Him. He did not rage uncontrollably or complain about the hardships in His life of violence, grief, betrayal and deceit. Instead, He submitted to the situation, and honored and obeyed the authorities involved. Jesus continued to look outside Himself toward His heavenly Father, the Scriptures and those around Him. He lived by faith and not by sight until He gave up His spirit.

Mercy is not earned by man, nor can it be, but the Son of God gave it freely. He bore His suffering so that all guilt may be taken away from man. God had mercy on the whole world, body and soul, and so motivates and instructs His followers to have mercy, sharing God's gifts.

True mercy recognizes and shares God's gifts. True mercy points to Christ, His Word and His forgiveness; and true mercy feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, honors the shamed, grieves with the grieving, offers hospitality or a patient presence and remembers the forgotten or marginalized. True mercy offers godly perspective, unconditional love, mutual and embodied support and rampant confession and absolution.

Every sin has been condemned and removed by the cross, even sins after the historical crucifixion and sins after Baptism or conversion. Indeed, true mercy and true comfort do not consist of pleasantries that ignore or distract from the pains of reality, but offer the Lord's comforting revelation and resources. True mercy is not a generic kindness, but Christ fulfilling the Law on man's behalf and dying that man may be reborn to new life and sure hope in Him. True mercy recognizes that both body and soul are saved by Christ and should be cared for as part of His creation, brothers and sisters united in Him, and potential brothers and sisters restored by Him.

Faith and perspective are not the same thing. One can certainly have faith in spite of incorrect perspective. Truthful (or godly) perspective is another blessing given by the Spirit, cultivated by study of God's Word. It affirms the promises and encouragements of the Lord while guarding against deception and error that tempt away from faith. This gift (or discipline) is given because there are such great temptations as all things may be so easily misunderstood by fallen man! To extend an earlier quote from Prenter:

The basic understanding [of theology of the cross] is that God often works under the sign of the opposite; that is to say that He deals graciously by means of the cross, *that faith is not based upon empirical verification and in fact is often called to believe in spite of such empirical data*, and that it is to such faith that God reckons righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

Christ joins the mercy of His incarnation with the suffering and death of this world. He does not annihilate His offenders (Matt. 12:20), but offers them new life, their own life in His (Rom. 6:4; Eph. 4:17–32). Each Christian is united with Christ in Baptism (Rom. 6:3). Awake or sleeping, active or at rest, the Christian is tied to the death and resurrection of Christ as living proof of the cross' ongoing ramifications and effects (Rom. 6:6; 2 Cor. 13:4; Col. 1:20; 2:14, etc.). This automatically means that every good work is directly united with the cross, as well as every forgiven sin. The historical cross and the crucified Christ impacts Christians daily: every breath, let alone every action, is dependent on Christ, thriving on His abundant mercy.

Luther does not often speak of the theology of the cross with the same breath as mercy, but Gustaf Wingren ties together Luther's mature emphasis on the cross with vocation, "where God Himself lets the cross take form" in the life

<sup>18</sup> Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, vii.

of the Christian.<sup>19</sup> Each Christian, baptized into God's abundant mercy, is then called to live in mercy. Matthew Harrison comments, "Rendering love to the neighbor is in large measure the content of the priesthood of the baptized ("Present your bodies as living sacrifices ... the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness" (Romans 12)).<sup>20</sup>

Mercy is personalized both by the giver and the receiver. God incarnate has mercy and interacts with individuals. Jesus gave as only Jesus could, and He showed His mercy in different ways to different people, whether it was saving the world on the cross or turning water into wedding wine. This does not show divine inconsistency, but rather diversity within mercy. The Christian's cross is tailored to each Christian.

Christian care is, therefore, also personalized, both by the giver and the receiver. No Christian is savior,<sup>21</sup> but a Christian may be a farmer, waitress, businessman, etc., using unique talents, skills and resources to serve their fellow man. Each person gives according to ability, opportunity and sometimes even responsibility, so that each assists others, or benefit from others, in different ways through various means, sharing in God's merciful system of vocation.<sup>22</sup>

God has chosen to work through weakness to provide His own strength. Similarly, He offers divine comfort even through suffering. Christians must therefore remain humble about what they may contribute to their neighbor, recognizing God's gifts as they pass from hand to hand, or mouth to ear, but Christians may also speak true comfort and hope with confidence in God's Word and Christ's accomplishments. Prenter remarks on Christian freedom and the righteousness received in God's mercy on the cross:

It is a 'strange righteousness' in the fullest sense of the word and one which gives us the freedom to become the children of God, a freedom which not only sets us free from the impossible task of trying to justify ourselves, but which makes us free to love God and to serve our neighbor. Only because this freedom has been given to us by the historical act of Christ on our behalf are we able to think about making the cross of Christ our own ... No one can bear the cross of Christ — which in this connection means bearing one's own cross as the cross of Christ — without first having tasted the freedom of being a child of God.<sup>23</sup>

### Application of Mercy

All may offer mercy freely, without hesitation, as long as one remembers what true mercy is: God's gifts addressing man's need (physically, intellectually, emotionally or spiritually) within his vocation. For example, every Christian is free to share the Gospel, point to Christ and urge a person into God's Word. However, not every Christian is a pastor. It pleases God that no single man must do everything, except for His Son. Another example is that while every Christian is free to give to the poor, he should not neglect his family in order to do so.

God gives His gifts through multiple people in various vocations. God works through doctors, psychologists, farmers, storekeepers, waitresses, etc., working through all the types of relationships: family, business, church, friendship and even through newly begun acquaintances. He enables Christians everywhere to live out individually what He has given through creation and His church.

Christians must remember that meeting needs, even miracles, did not produce faithful followers for Jesus. Only His Word equips and brings new life. Therefore, pastors are indispensable. The Church exists not only because Christ

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<sup>19</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1957), 54. Prenter writes, "It was decisive for Luther's theology that the proclamation of the historical crucifixion of Jesus Christ was seen in relationship to the effect of the cross which the individual experiences in his daily life. The judgment, which is proclaimed in the cross of Jesus Christ, and the judgment, which is experienced through one's own cross, cannot be separated from each other. Furthermore, the freedom from the guilt of sin which is proclaimed in the cross of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the freedom to praise God and to serve one's neighbor which is experienced through one's own cross." *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ross Edward Johnson ed. "The Church is a Mercy Place!" *Mercy in Action: Essays on Mercy, Human Care and Disaster Response*. (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2015), 110.

<sup>21</sup> "Christ is not to be imitated by us, but rather to be accepted in faith, because Christ also had His special office for the salvation of man, an office which no one else has." Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 172.

<sup>22</sup> Basic introductions to vocation include Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2002). To explore vocation more, there are books like Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2004); Wingren, *The Christian's Calling* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Oliver and Boyd, 1958); or the harder to find Einar Billing, *Our Fortress* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1964). There are also books more specific to particular areas of vocation, such as Angus Menzies, *Reading God's World: The Scientific Vocation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Prenter, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 11.

instituted it, but because it is Christ's source of mercy, in Word and Sacrament, and, more generally, in supporting and strengthening His people.

A Christian caregiver cannot distribute God's gifts without first receiving them, and so must be continually tied to their church and community. In church, both individuals and the community are constantly receiving abundant mercy that they are to share. Harrison points out that there is a pattern of mercy in the church, where Christians receive mercy and then go out to share that mercy:

Lives that have received mercy (grace!) cannot but be merciful toward the neighbor (love!). Thus the merciful washing of Baptism (Rom. 6:1ff) produces merciful living (Rom. 7:4–6). In absolution, the merciful word of the Gospel begets merciful speaking and living (Matt. 18:21ff). In the Supper, Christ gives himself for us, that we might give ourselves to our neighbor (1 Cor. 10:15–17; 1 Cor. 12:12ff & 26).<sup>24</sup>

Those without godly perspective are prone to think that either their problems center on themselves or that someone else is responsible for fixing them, as though they are only passive victims in this world. If it is the first, their very worldview pressures them to try to fix it on their own, as though personal merit, dedication or action can redeem them from their situation for a better future. On the other hand, if someone can only see himself as a victim, he can only cast blame about and neglect his own responsibilities to those around him, who may also be sharing his struggles and concerns.

The spiritual dilemmas can therefore span from overconfidence to despair. Past sins may be plaguing a person's conscience, whether realized or not. Eager hopefulness relies on willpower and personal strength instead of turning outside oneself to God and His aid. Those who suffer may feel abandoned, overwhelmed by their responsibilities, or overwhelmed by their helplessness and attempt either total control or total dependence on another person.

Christian caregivers must discern carefully. No one can earn his way out of a crisis, and eager enthusiasm to do so may, in fact, hide fading hope and immediate need for assistance. False perception can feed and cultivate addiction to sin, resulting in self-righteousness, moral decadence and idolatry to perceived needs or immediate gratification. Gerhard Forde writes, "When the addict discovers the impossibility of quitting, self-esteem plummets. The addict tries to hide the addiction and puts on a false front. Superficial optimism breeds ultimate despair."<sup>25</sup> Only Christ can free someone from such an addiction or despair, working through His servants. Mercy must point to, and rely upon, Christ, and not the short-term fulfillment of needs, signs or miracles that man may be desiring.

Christians are faced with concrete revelations. Things do go badly for people and suffering is very real. Yet Christians are free to admit that and support those who suffer in spite of it.<sup>26</sup> Every Christian can confidently say:

1. On the cross, Jesus paid the full debt and cost of sin so that man does not have to (Col. 2:13–15).
2. Jesus' death offers the entire universe forgiveness and reconciliation to His Father (2 Cor. 5:19).
3. Jesus won salvation on the cross so that all who believe will be saved (John 3:16).
4. Baptism unites with Christ and His cross for newness of life (Rom. 6:4).
5. Jesus perfects man's faith (Heb. 12:1–2).
6. God fulfills His own demands and commands through Christ.
7. Christ sends His servants to help.
8. Physical ailments and suffering are not signs of punishment over sin (John 9:3).
9. Sometimes bad things happen so that God may work through them (John 9:3).
10. Death is no longer a sign of divine judgment and condemnation (1 Thess. 4:13–14).
11. There is life after death, and believers will go to a place without suffering (Rev. 7:17).

<sup>24</sup> Ross Edward Johnson ed. "Theology for Mercy" *Mercy in Action: Essays on Mercy, Human Care and Disaster Response*. (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2015), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Forde. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 16.

<sup>26</sup> To better incorporate Law and Gospel understanding — whether one needs to hear God's Word condemning sin or God's Word proclaiming Christ's forgiveness — into one's Christian care giving, read John T. Pless, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005) or C.F.W. Walther's classic, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986).

12. The devil is lying when he claims sinners are too far gone or bad to be saved.
13. The devil accuses, but God has already judged not guilty. Man is justified (Rom. 3:23–25).
14. Christ has assumed responsibility for even the worst sins.
15. Jesus has had mercy on idolaters, adulterers, murderers, liars, betrayers, homosexuals, hypocrites, etc.
16. Even Jesus suffered and grieved.
17. Christ is perfectly faithful to God and to man (2 Thess. 3:5).
18. Even though one can't see evidence that things are getting better, one can live by faith in Christ, trusting His promises.
19. One can hold God to His Word.
20. God keeps His promises and He keeps His Word (Rom. 15:8).
21. There is hope apart from work, merit or the past.
22. God's mercy offers new life, new chances, cleansing, healing, forgiveness from each and every sin, complete reconciliation and hope.
23. God's wisdom and ways may be beyond understanding, but He has revealed His eternal love for us in His Son Jesus Christ.

## Conclusion

The Lord does not delight or take pleasure in the death of anyone (Ezek. 18:23, 32; Ezek. 33:11), but reveals Himself in a hidden way to give mercy to the world. He sends His Word into the flesh to live and die in a world of suffering. The Lord then proceeds to work directly through this humility to implement His greatest works of love and glory. Jesus' suffering was no less than what man experiences, but was even more as His Father poured out the full wrath of God upon Him. Christ took on Himself the one thing that was not His own — sin — in order to bear it away from the world that delights in it.

Jesus Himself chose to suffer. He was not passive the way man must be, but remains active even in suffering, both in His own and man's. It is good to remember that there are worse things than suffering. Not only does suffering play a role in refining faith (1 Peter 1:6–7) and uniting Christians with each other (1 Cor. 12:24–26), Christians suffer for the sake of Christ (Phil. 1:27–30) and doing good (1 Peter 2:20).

A Christian caregiver is not a one-person miracle worker, nor the Savior of the world, but is God's servant to incorporate God's many diverse gifts into humble, merciful service to the neighbor. Only by faith through the activity of the Holy Spirit can a Christian live his hope in Christ in this world, with no guarantee that he will recognize God at work. Even a Christian cannot lean on his own understanding. Living by faith, he must fight the false perceptions that would tempt or distract him from Christ and His work and rely on the work of Christ on the cross. Von Loewenich writes:

The theologian of the cross does not confront the cross of Christ as a spectator, but is himself drawn into this event. He knows that God can be found only in cross and suffering (W. I, 262, 28f). For that reason, he does not ... shun suffering ... For God Himself is 'hidden in suffering' and wants us to worship Him as such.<sup>27</sup>

Theology of the cross cuts through death and sin to give new life, to the Christian and through the Christian. Perspective shaped by this is particularly a blessing to those who suffer or who offer Christian care amid suffering, and a powerful tool for individuals and the corporate church to proclaim and live out God's mercy. It is the biblical, Christocentric answer to man's distorted human presumptions and understanding, and the revelation of God interacting mercifully with fallen man.

<sup>27</sup> von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 113.



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