

# Toward a Theology of Mercy: Winning Student Essays for 2008

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Volume 2

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By Mary Moerbe &  
Samuel P. Schuldheisz



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Winning Student Essays for 2008  
– VOLUME 2 –

*A Merciful Servant of the Cross: Theology  
of the Cross for Christian Caregivers*

by Mary Moerbe

*History Worth Repeating: C. F. W. Walther and  
Wilhelm Löhe on Mercy and the Church*

by Samuel P. Schuldheisz



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## PREFACE

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The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) has a history of sponsoring the “Toward a Theology of Mercy” essay contest at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. This writing contest was initiated by Rev. Matthew C. Harrison, executive director of LCMS World Relief and Human Care, as a way to encourage students to contemplate the church’s corporate life of mercy and thereby stimulate them to think more deeply about the Lutheran theological foundations of this aspect of our life together in Christ Jesus. In this way, future pastors and deaconesses of the church will be better prepared to be compassionate servants well grounded in the confession of the Gospel, equipped for every good work.

The four essays in these two volumes were selected by a panel of judges from the Fort Wayne faculty. Each essayist explores a particular aspect of Lutheran thought and/or history that continues to enliven our contemporary witness and work. Peter J. Brock, a then second-year seminarian, draws on the rich work of the contemporary German Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer to show that the church’s life of mercy is given space to act in between the two eons, the old creation and the new creation. Then first-year seminarian Jason Gehrke examines Luther’s seminal treatise of 1520 on Christian freedom, demonstrating that justification by faith alone liberates the believer for a life of mercy in the world. Then deaconess intern Mary Moerbe uses Luther’s “theology of the cross” from the Heidelberg Thesis of 1518 to scrub Christian caregiving clean from every barnacle of the “theology of glory” so that works of mercy are freed from heroic claims of self-assertion and are allowed to remain acts of faltering humility in service of the suffering. Finally, this collection is rounded out by an essay on

C. F. W. Walther and Wilhelm Löhe written by then fourth-year seminarian Samuel P. Schuldheisz. Schuldheisz probes the writings of these two 19th century churchmen to gain clarity into the legacy that they have left us: faith receiving God's benefits in Christ and love active in the stewardship of mercy.

Those of us who teach here at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, are rightly proud of these four students and the work they have produced. In their essays we are confident that you will delight in the gifts of scholarship and evangelical clarity that they are even now bringing to the church. We pray that as you are edified by their essays, your own grasp of a truly Lutheran theology of mercy will be deepened and that you will be enlivened to be an instrument of that mercy in this dying world.

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

BY MARY MOERBE

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In the garden, Adam and Eve rebelled and rejected God's 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; 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

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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 (*Luther's Works*, 31, 41. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House). 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!"

within time and entered into history Himself 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.

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 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 purposefully through what man intends for evil (GEN. 50:20)! The

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

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, the Trinity and the like. Some try to study

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<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*, p. 39.)

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 and yet also delivered sinful man.

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



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 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**).

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<sup>6</sup> See Sasse, "The Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, p. 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*, p. vii.

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

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

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

not accomplish knowing God apart from God's will,<sup>11</sup> but 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. 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 clarity and 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*

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<sup>11</sup> Walther 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*, p. 35).

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

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

*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

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

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>

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<sup>15</sup> Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 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

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 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.

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Theology of the Cross," *We Confess Jesus Christ*, p. 43).

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; 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 of the Christian.<sup>19</sup> Each Christian, baptized into God’s abundant mercy, is then called to

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

<sup>19</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957), p. 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*, p. 13).



live in mercy. LCMS President Matthew Harrison comments, “Rendering love to the neighbor is in large measure the content of the priesthood of the baptized (“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice . . . the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness” (ROM. 12:1, 8)).<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 give 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 his or her 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

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew Harrison, “The Church is a Mercy Place!” *Mercy Essays Series*, p. 4. (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2004.)

<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 salvation of man, an office which no one else has” (Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 172).

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

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.

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

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 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 his or her 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.

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Harrison, "The Church is a Mercy Place!" *Mercy Essays Series*, p.4 (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2004.)

The spiritual dilemmas can, therefore, span from overconfidence to despair. Past sins may be plaguing a person's conscience, whether realized or not. Eager helpfulness 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).

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<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Forde. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 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 caregiving, read John T. Pless's *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005) or C. F. W. Walther's classic *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986).

- 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**).
- 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.

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

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HISTORY WORTH REPEATING:  
C. F. W. WALTHER AND WILHELM LÖHE  
ON MERCY AND THE CHURCH

BY SAMUEL P. SCHULDHEISZ

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*“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (HEB. 13:7).*

Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther was such a man; Wilhelm Löhe was such a man; both are leaders worth remembering. Walther was not a self-proclaimed leader. He sought no pride in his service to the church, save that of boasting in the grace of God who has blessed the church with the riches of Christ. Nevertheless, as LCMS President Matthew Harrison rightfully notes,

*C. F. W. Walther is the greatest Lutheran theologian/ churchman in the history of American Lutheranism ... an audacious statement, to be sure, but through Walther’s dogged faithfulness to the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of Martin Luther, there was produced a church body which in its public confession has remained faithful to the Formula of Concord to the present day, even when most others have long since surrendered Lutheran doctrine and clarity.<sup>1</sup>*

Walther was a prolific theologian and remains a formative standard for the theological edification of the church today. Seminarians, pastors and laypersons continue to benefit from the sublime brilliance of *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* and his theses on *Church and Ministry*.

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<sup>1</sup> C. F. W. Walther. *Walther on Mercy: Selections on the Pastoral Office, the Congregation and the Church’s Corporate Diakonic Life*. Trans. by Matthew Harrison, (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2006), p. 3.

Wilhelm Löhe was also a brilliant theologian of the church in his own right, committed to confessional Lutheranism and the spread of the Gospel through tireless mission work, even though he never left Germany.<sup>2</sup> In his treatise *Three Books about the Church*, a work he humbly called “deficient and insignificant,” Löhe deliberates on the historic and confessional view of the church for pastors and laity who had neglected the study of the “luminous reality that lies behind the name, church.”<sup>3</sup>

While Walther and Löhe have both shaped the theological and missiological foundation of the Missouri Synod, there remains a significant area of influence that has only recently begun to be unearthed in their individual writings. For Walther and Löhe, Christian faith and theology, the church and the ministry were never separated from the Gospel *and* the corporate life of mercy in which the church is continuously engaged — even in spite of later disagreements on the doctrine of church and ministry. In other words, justification leads to sanctification; the love of Christ for the sake of sinners leads to the love of man for his neighbor — for the sake of Christ. For Walther and Löhe, the church was to be conscious of the congregation’s efforts in showing mercy both internally and externally. This is most certainly history worth repeating.

Trite as it may be to repeat the litany of tragedies in recent times, the corporate life of mercy offered by the church is needed now more than ever; there have been tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, wars and rumors of wars and more will surely come until Christ’s return. The reality of life in a sinful world means that our fellow man’s suffering is inevitable. Yet in the midst of such gloom, Löhe writes, “Mercy is love toward the wretched, and

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<sup>2</sup> John T. Pless. “The Missionary Who Never Left Home,” *Lutheran Witness*, 127:2 (February 2008), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Löhe. *Three Books about the Church*. Trans. by James L. Schaaf, Reprinted by Permission of Augsburg Fortress Press (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1989), p. 43–44 .

it comes into being with misery, but it does not even cease to exist with misery ... whenever love meets misery, mercy is awakened.”<sup>4</sup>

The church lives and breathes a life of mercy in its witness. Because the mercy that is truly unique to Christianity is so desperately needed in our world, the topic of mercy and the church in the writings of Walther and Löhe will be addressed. The former LCMS World Relief and Human Care endeavored, successfully I would argue, to sustain and spread the theology of mercy through the translation of key writings by Walther and Löhe on this topic, not to mention many other insightful articles.

This study will focus primarily on key texts from Walther and Löhe. Walther’s writings on mercy in his *Pastoral Theology*, *The Form of A Christian Congregation*, and occasional excerpts from sermons, provide valuable insight into his proclamation of mercy. Löhe’s chief insight into a theology of mercy for the church comes via his work in *Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*. This work was originally written for deaconess students to familiarize themselves with the church’s history of mercy dating back to the Old Testament. The goal of this paper is to examine Walther and Löhe’s thoughts on mercy and the church; through the study of these two towers of confessional Lutheran theology, Christians today can apply their collective wisdom in the Lutheran church’s own corporate life of mercy for the 21st century.

To begin with, what definition of mercy did Walther and Löhe work with? What is mercy according to these great theologians of the church? Walther’s theology of mercy was one of stewardship, “Whoever has true love does not consider himself to be a lord over his goods but a steward of them, and he wishes, according to God’s Word, to distribute those goods to his brothers in need.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Löhe. *On Mercy: Six Chapters for Everyone, the Seventh for the Servants of Mercy*. Trans. by Holger Sonntag, (St. Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2006), p. 3–4 .

<sup>5</sup> C. F. W. Walther. *God Grant It: Daily Devotions from C. F. W. Walther*. Trans. by Gerhard P. Grabenhofer, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), p. 514.

Löhe begins his treatise with this sublime definition of mercy:

*Mercy is goodness, goodness is love, and, therefore, mercy is love. Mercy is goodness and love but in a specific relationship, namely, in relation to the unfortunate and wretched. Love is manifold. When it is directed toward God on high, it becomes devotion and adoration. When it is directed over the whole earth to other redeemed brothers, it becomes goodness, affability, and friendliness. But when it enters areas filled with misery and brings with it consolation, relief, and help, then it becomes mercy.<sup>6</sup>*

Love, Löhe contends, is the source of mercy for the Christian. This love is born of the Holy Spirit through Baptism, creating faith and new life where sin and death once reigned. Having freely received life and salvation, Christians are free to serve the neighbor. Notice that the direction of Christian love is two-fold: love of God demonstrated through devotion and adoration, and love of the neighbor demonstrated by consolation, relief and tangible or visible acts of mercy. This resonates well with Luther's famous dictum from *On the Freedom of the Christian*, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>7</sup> In fact, both Löhe and Walther were avid students of Luther's theology. It is no surprise to find that common trains of thought between Walther and Löhe stretch back to Luther. Indeed, all three of these men were champions of *sola Scriptura*. For Walther and Löhe, Scripture speaks about the vibrant character of Christian faith and life as Christ Himself is alive in the new man (E.G., EPH. 2:10).

For Löhe, mercy and love are intertwined, first, as gift from God unto sinful men, and second, as a continual expression of that love whereby Christians shower mercy upon those in need. This reflects the two-fold character of the first and second table

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<sup>6</sup> *On Mercy*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*. "The Freedom of the Christian" Harold J. Grimm, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 7.

of the commandments in *Luther's Small Catechism*. Likewise, it harkens the ear back to the liturgy of the Divine Service where the sacramental reality of the Christian life that brings forth works of mercy toward the neighbor. This is prayed and confessed through the words of the post-Communion collect:

*We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift, and we implore You that of Your great mercy You would strengthen us in faith toward You and in fervent love toward one another; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.*<sup>8</sup>

Both Walther and Löhe understood that works of mercy — that is care for the neighbor in body and soul — were indispensable from the life of faith lived in, with and under Word and Sacrament in the church. Mercy was ecclesial as well as historical. Keeping in mind the church's responsibility to show mercy to the neighbor, these men highlighted unique aspects of mercy in the church, not unlike examining two different facets of a well-cut diamond. In the writings examined, Walther was primarily ecclesial and theological in approach, while Löhe focused primarily on the historical reality of God's people demonstrating works of mercy throughout time.

Walther links the care of body and soul directly to the duties of the pastoral office as part and parcel of the Lord's work through his servant. In *Pastoral Theology*, he writes, "Although a preacher above all has concern for the spiritual needs of the members of his congregation, concern for the physical well-being, particularly the needs of the poor, the sick, widows, orphaned, the infirm, the destitute, the aged, etc., are within the scope of the duties of his office."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Lutheran Service Book. Divine Service Setting Five*. Prepared by The Commission on Worship of the LCMS. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), p. 218.

<sup>9</sup> *Walther on Mercy*, p. 5. The portions of "Pastoral Theology" are a translation of section 35 of Walther's *Pastorale*, Fifth edition, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906.) Note: Walther goes on to reference several Bible passages, namely, Gal. 2:9-10; Acts 6:1ff; 11:30; 12:25; 24:17; Rom. 12:8, 13; James 1:27; 1 Tim. 5:10; 1 Thess. 4:11-12.

In contrast — although not uncomplimentary — consider Löhe’s historical approach taken early on in his treatise: “If it is true that all of history is a continuous testimony to the combination of justice and mercy, then it is obviously also a continuous testimony to mercy alone. During all the periods and peaks of history, mercy clearly is not just combined with justice, but prevails against it with great glory (JAMES 2:13).”<sup>10</sup>

In fact, to examine the church’s corporate life of mercy, confessional Lutheran theology and ecclesiology cannot be divorced from the historical reality of mercy in the church that has endured from the time of the early Christians.<sup>11</sup> Although a contrast of approaches existed between Walther and Löhe, there is a great harmony that results from the examination of their collective theological reflections on mercy and the church.

Practically speaking, how did this scriptural and confessional theology of mercy work its way into the daily lives of Walther, Löhe and the congregations whom they catechized? Löhe operates with an assumption — albeit a biblical and confessional one — that, “God does all His works through His servants. Therefore His works are divine and human at the same time, and wherever He works, He soon opens a wide course of mercy for His saints. But they are only to be, as they should, coworkers of the divine worker.”<sup>12</sup> As Löhe demonstrates throughout his treatise on mercy, this is how the Lord has always worked through His people, beginning in the Old Testament and continuing to the present day; God uses means to do His work. Löhe understood that mercy had both an individual and a corporate nature in the life of the Christian church. Löhe saw God’s work of mercy accomplished through His

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<sup>10</sup> *On Mercy*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> For example, consider the Christians and churches cited throughout the Book of Acts and the Pauline epistles, especially the church’s example in Acts 6 of selecting some to perform the task of diaconal work on behalf of the church for the sake of the Gospel.

<sup>12</sup> *On Mercy*, p. 19.

servants in the Levitical priesthood, the apostles and disciples of the New Testament, and in various institutions that the church had incorporated over the centuries. This becomes even more specific in his seventh and final chapter, in which Löhe zeroes in on the role of the deaconess in providing diaconal works of mercy in both body and soul.

However, Walther takes a different approach. Instead of tracing historic precedence for the church's individual and corporate works of mercy, Walther narrows his focus to the pastoral office. As mentioned earlier, he locates the responsibility of diaconal work first in the pastoral office, and then through preaching and teaching of God's Word, the congregation learns and grows in its life of mercy toward the neighbor.

At first glance; the focus on works of mercy in *The Form of A Christian Congregation* appears to be self-centered on the part of the congregation and even the pastor. Walther notes, "In the first place, the congregation should do everything in its power to see to it that its pastor has food, clothing, and a home for himself and his family."<sup>13</sup> However, Walther answers the charge of egocentricity well in connecting the care of pastors with Luther's explanation of the Third Commandment and by stating that, "If the ministry and office of pastors did not receive financial support, many would be deterred from it, and from this the Church of God would suffer great harm."<sup>14</sup> Walther upholds the responsibility of the church to continue in her life of mercy. The Christian congregation extends this mercy towards its pastor first because he is the man called by God to care for them in body and soul and to provide them with divine mercy through the pure proclamation of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments. By supporting the pastor, the congregation is not only showing mercy towards

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<sup>13</sup> C. F. W. Walther. *The Form of A Christian Congregation*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

him and his family, but building a foundation of mercy that will extend beyond the pastor into the congregation, but also to the neighbor. For, “the congregation shall also provide food, clothing, habitation, and all other necessities for the poor, widows, orphans, aged, and invalids, which these themselves cannot procure . . . The congregation shall also care for those who suffer distress through special calamities like fire, famine, scarcity, robbery, and so forth.”<sup>15</sup>

Care in body and soul for the neighbor arises not in order that the Christian might do good works to gain some kind of reward, either temporal or eternal, but rather the work of mercy is a fruit of faith. Walther and Löhe both taught that true mercy is ultimately expressed on account of faith in Christ; without faith the work is, in fact, sin. “My beloved, as impossible as it is for natural man truly to love his neighbor, so impossible is it for a believer not to love his neighbor.”<sup>16</sup>

Even though Walther begins with the responsibility of the pastoral office as the locus of mercy in the church, he also recognized that the Christian church itself was to play a role in this life of mercy. Quoting Luther on the issue of the office of almoner in the Jerusalem church, Walther understands that the Christian community is to, “Look after souls, and go about preaching and praying. They also bring about that the body is cared for and set up certain men who dole out the goods, as you have heard. Thus the Christian government is concerned both with the body and the soul that no one has any need, and all are richly fed and well cared for in both the body and soul.”<sup>17</sup>

Addressing the work of the deaconess, Löhe arrives at a similar conclusion to Walther’s claims on communal responsibility for

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 147–148.

<sup>16</sup> *Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther: Selected Sermons*. Henry J. Eggold, trans. August R. Suelflow, series editor. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981), p.139.

<sup>17</sup> *Walther on Mercy*, p. 7.



the church's work of mercy. Löhe states that "A deaconess without community and connections is actually no deaconess at all . . . That is why the training of deaconesses concentrates both on the individual soul, practicing mercy, as well as the group, which appears as a sacred force, focusing on the greatest thing women can possibly choose: serving others in love and helping them to be awakened in the same walk."<sup>18</sup>

This point made by Löhe can also be extended to the office of pastor as well as the corporate and individual work of mercy done by the congregation. Isolation was the way of the strict monastic orders of the Reformation. Luther rightly recognized that the life of the Christian church was to be lived in the world where the Gospel could be proclaimed and the love of Christ toward the neighbor could be fulfilled by caring for both body and soul of those in need. God would not have the church live in isolation or in seclusion from the dangers of the world. In the person and work of Christ, God reveals Himself as one who is constantly giving Himself on behalf of others, even to the point of experiencing unspeakable pain and suffering as He approached a shameful death on the cross. In this life, this is the work of the church — its pastors and people, namely, to continue steadfast in His Word despite any trial that may come, enduring the scorn of sinful men in order to bring them mercy in word and deed for body and soul.

In the face of this great task, Walther reminds us that in this life no person attains complete love; everything, also love, remains imperfect. "Therefore seek comfort not in your poor love but in Christ's rich, complete love; it covers your lack."<sup>19</sup>

It is precisely because of Christ and His gifts to the church in Word and Sacrament that the church is God's source of mercy in this life. In a day and age when federal and state governments

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<sup>18</sup> *On Mercy*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> *Selected Writings of C. F. W. Walther: Selected Sermons*, p.139.

supply a majority of the monetary commitment necessary to care for many of the poor and needy, it can be tempting for Christians to forsake the corporate and individual responsibility to render mercy unto their fellow man in favor of supporting government initiatives. Certainly, the work of government aid and care for those in need is not at issue. What is at issue, however, is the Church's life of mercy towards the neighbor. Do tax-funded charities and government programs fulfill the Christian's duty of performing mercy? Walther and Löhe would argue it does not. According to Walther, "A Christian congregation cannot simply claim that there are state funds for the poor and homes for them, which they also support ... Here where Church and State are separated, the church should not allow its sole care for its poor to be taken away."<sup>20</sup> Walther certainly had in mind the poor within the congregation, but this also extends to the poor and needy outside the congregation. He goes on to say, "Indeed, each individual Christian should demonstrate his kind readiness toward everyone, also toward the stranger (including those of different belief) ..."<sup>21</sup>

Löhe would most likely agree with Walther's assessment of church- state relations regarding care for the needy. However, Löhe appears to provide more room in his understanding of what the state's involvement should entail.

*One great question remains, namely, who is to take the effort of mercy in his hands and govern it — the state or the church? The judicious recognize that the state can do nothing without the willing spirit of the church, which holds the key to the treasures that the needs of our time require ... Therefore, it is time for every person to let the Spirit of the Church of Jesus stream into himself and to assist the tremendous job that the Lord has given His Church. Although state charity alone is not going to get*

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<sup>20</sup> Walther on Mercy, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

*the job done, we should not entertain the idea of relegating the state to the status of a mere observer of the things that take place under the hands of the church ... Thus, just as one has to award the church the full right and the full duty to do the works the Lord will ask for on the Last Day — the works of mercy — so one has to preach to the lords of the world and the rulers of the state that they are founded and instituted to the glory of God, and are not to hinder His works but to foster them.*<sup>22</sup>

However, it must be noted that the church-state issue was quite different in Walther and Löhe's day than today. Löhe's situation must be taken into context because Germany was still under the governance of the state church system, whereas Walther came to America where freedom of religion and state-sponsored religion was not as frequent. Also, the modern development of the welfare system must be taken into consideration. Walther and Löhe knew of no such program. However, welfare programs and government-sponsored charity do not exhaust the church's own responsibility to reach out to the neighbor in mercy. In fact, the high number of abuses and cases of negligence gives the church further recourse to initiate its own care for people in need.

What, then, is the significance of Walther and Löhe's theology of mercy for today? What do these men contribute to the church's understanding and commitment of mercy for the neighbor? In his foreword, Löhe writes, "If after reading this they are stimulated to study the works of mercy themselves, then the publication has served its purpose."<sup>23</sup> The future of mercy in the church lies in reflection on words; good words from great men, such as Walther and Löhe, and above all, on God's Word. Yet, the future of mercy in the church also lies in the hands of baptized Christians, not as meritorious works, but as divine works — better yet, divine

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<sup>22</sup> *On Mercy*, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

mercy. The hands of mercy extended to the poor and needy in our time may be our hands, but it is Christ's love and the power of the Holy Spirit accompanying them, encouraging them, and sanctifying them. Christ uses our hands, our time, our treasure, our talents — for they are all His to begin with — in order to give clothing to the naked, to visit the prisoner, to give a cup of water to the thirsty, that seeing our good deeds they may glorify our Father in heaven and be swept up in His mercy and love in Christ.

*There is a rich stream of love flowing from the cross of Christ through the centuries. Filled with admiration, we see its rich, deep waters. But we also realize that He who caused it to stream out of the hearts of men, only after it had come out of His own pierced heart, does not bind Himself only to the modern time. Instead, He provides for His people at all times to do the necessary in the simplest way.<sup>24</sup>*

For Walther, the congregation is the instrument God uses to dispense His mercy, through pastors administering Word and Sacraments, through the visitation of the sick, through the help of the poor and needy and through the vocations of those who receive such blessings in body and soul from Christ. Walther locates the work of mercy as part of the preacher's duty. "Where there is not an office for care for the needy, there it is required of every Christian member of the congregation, by virtue of his membership, in cases which arise, to take over the functions of this office or to see to it that these functions are taken over by someone in his place."<sup>25</sup>

Walther and Löhe teach us that it is the whole body of Christ throughout history that engages in works of mercy toward the neighbor. God's work of mercy involves both pastor and congregation, both individual and corporate works of mercy, not only on the part of the local congregation but in the Church as a whole.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> Walther on Mercy, p. 13.

Therefore as the Missouri Synod continues to reflect on the work of the Gospel and the mission of the church in evangelism, it does well to recall its own rich history of works of mercy as found in the writings of Walther, Löhe and other Lutheran fathers. As both Walther and Löhe noted, the work of mercy done by the church in body and soul is never separated from the Gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. Compartmentalization of the Gospel will not suffice. Rather, a clear confession of Christ as proclaimed by the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions leads to a clear witness of that faith through the Church's diaconal life.

As Löhe wrote, "Working alongside the office of the Word is the office of bodily mercy. In Holy Scripture, all offices of the Holy Spirit are called diakonia, or service, just as all those — beginning with Christ all the way down to the most humble ones — who carry out offices and duties in relation to people in the name of God are called diakonoi or servant."<sup>26</sup> Löhe argues that service and servant-hood is precisely what the role of the deaconess exists for. Service in the name of Jesus is what the office of pastor exists for as well. Therefore, pastors, all manner of churchwork in the Missouri Synod and its congregations are servants that exist for service to the Gospel and in works of mercy. The words of Walther and Löhe on mercy and the church are words that teach us the mercy shown to us by God in Christ on the cross and teach how Christians show mercy towards those in need. For Walther and Löhe, Christian faith and theology, the church and the ministry were never separated from the Gospel and the corporate life of mercy in which the Church is continuously engaged. To be a confessional Lutheran also means to be merciful. Or as **HEB. 13:7** puts it, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." This history of mercy, found in Walther and Löhe, is most certainly history worth repeating.

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<sup>26</sup> *Löhe on Mercy*, p. 23.

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