

No Cross, no Christian

Theology of the Cross (Reflections on His Cross and Ours)

by Daniel M. Deutschlander

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Reviewed by Al Todd

“If anyone would come after me, he **must** deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34)

Jesus Christ, God's only Son, true God and also true man, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Savior/Redeemer.

“...True theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ. The cross of Christ is the only instruction in the Word of God there is, the purest theology.”

Martin Luther, Heidelberg Disputation, 1518

“By the theology of glory, seeking God in nature, we perceive the invisible God by his visible works, his power and majesty and glory; but God himself remains invisible. It is in the cross – God’s shame, his humiliation, his weakness, his suffering and death – that God lets us see himself.” *Hermann Sasse, Lutheran Theologian, Letter 18 of Briefe an lutherische Pastoren (Letters to Lutheran Pastors), October 1951*

In regard to their own struggles with evil, believers find in the cross the reminder that they pose a false question when they demand to know why the Creator does not treat them better. Finally, the expectations of the human creature cannot demand more of the Creator than he has promised. Indeed, his ultimate promise will bring the end of all evil, but in the interim he has promised his presence in the midst of evil, not its exclusion from our lives. Nor dare our expectations of ourselves be less than God’s expectations of us. God’s promise of life and of his steadfast love suffice. The promise in fact gives hope and joy and peace. It fosters a defiance of evil and the assurance that the people of God can move through life on the solid ground of the love Christ revealed on the cross.

Robert Kolb, Lutheran Quarterly, Winter 2003

In this important book, part of the Impact Series from Northwestern Publishing House, Professor Deutschlander (professor of History, German, and Religion at Martin Luther College) provides not only an analysis and explanation of those aspects of the theology of the cross that are universal, but also reflects on the cross in the lives of Christians and in the life of the church. In fact, he defines the theology of the cross as “that study of the Word of God that looks for the connection between his cross and ours.”

Why do we have a struggle that is so painful? Why do we have a cross that is so hard to carry? As Professor Deutschlander reminds us, it is because the struggle is against *self*; the cross is to deny *self*. He elucidates: “Suffering becomes a

cross not just because it is painful in itself but because it tempts the soul to turn away from Christ and his Word. All suffer sickness. But sickness becomes a cross when *self* uses it to cast doubt on the promises of God's gracious presence. Death comes to all. It becomes a cross when *self* uses death to argue that we are alone in the world, that death ends all, and that we should therefore serve *self* while we still can....It is the allure of the adulterous and sinful generation to the always adulterous and sinful *self* that makes resistance a struggle and a cross. It is these connections that distinguish cross bearing from the suffering which is the lot of all humanity to one degree or another."

The chapter on the paradoxes of the cross (The Paradox) is especially insightful since the paradox of having a sinful self (hates the cross) and a renewed self (loves the cross) living within me at the same time is complicated. Here is just one of many examples, regarding the way the Christian in us "harasses" the sinful self: "The Christian conscience condemns the old self both for what it wants to do and for what it actually succeeds in doing. Yes, to some extent the Christian in me robs the old self of the pleasure he was hoping to get from his sins!" And again, what frustrates the Christian nature: "The Christian nature (the new self) is also frustrated because it does not completely conquer the old nature, sinful flesh/*self*....the old self keeps banging on the door and barging in." We recall the words of St. Paul in Romans 7: "What a wretched man I am."

What about when God seems to be the enemy? If we could ask Abraham, Jacob, Job, and even the poor Canaanite woman begging Christ to heal her demon possessed daughter what their first thoughts were about God would we not hear that He appears to be unspeakably cruel, heartless, and angry? Indeed, a God who sends His one and only Son to die an unimaginable death on the cross! Deutschlander explains what we should all know: "the gospel remains an effective means of grace...(I)t preserves faith and trust in God even when he appears as the enemy.

Here are some of Professor Deutschlander's reflections that especially resonated with me:

In the chapter Slivers Under the Cross (regarding happiness): "Where the refusal to love and serve dominates, where the cross is cast aside, there unhappiness and an always complaining, discontented life is guaranteed."

In the chapter The Theology of the Cross and the Hidden God: "God remains hidden in and under the cross, in weakness and in struggle, and he chooses to be found nowhere else"

And in the same chapter this comparison between the Theology of the Cross and the Theology of Glory:

Theology of the Cross

Theology of Glory

I am nothing and all my works are sin

I may not be much, but at least I believe and haven't done (fill in the blank).

Christ is everything, and his work on the cross won forgiveness for all my works.

Christ is God whose death has made my salvation possible.

Since my salvation is entirely Christ's work, I am certain of my salvation already.

I will do the best I can and hope that it is enough on the day of judgment.

In the chapter The Hidden God in the Christian: “Instead of arrogance or self-righteousness, instead of depression or despair, the Christian has reason to rejoice beyond all measure because of the reality of his status. The Christian is a saint and child of God, a brother or sister of Christ and an heir of everlasting life. That a Christian should consider his life as meaningless or insignificant or in any way trivial is ruled out by the status that Christ won and that the Holy Spirit gives in Word and sacraments.”

These are just a few insights from this experienced Lutheran Professor and Pastor. Professor Deutschlander provides many more in the ending chapters entitled Crosses – a Sampler (yes, you will find your cross discussed) and The Special Crosses of Pastors and the Visible Church (we're in there too).

I highly recommend this book to all who want a deeper understanding of the theology of the cross, a theology that is central to a clear understanding of the Word of God.

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