

## The Cross Alone is Our Theology

### 1 Cor 2:2

The first of seven Lenten sermons on the theology of the cross

We are going to focus on the statement by Martin Luther: "The cross alone is our theology." This does not mean the cross alone is *important* in our theology. This does not mean it's the *key* thing in our theology. Rather, the cross alone *is* our theology. That is an astounding statement. It is not something Luther created in his novel way of doing things. He's simply repeating what Paul writes: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). And in another way in Gal 6:14: "Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Which then leads us to ask: What does this mean?

If you want to learn a word in a foreign language, you have to use it 27 times. Yet you could repeat "the cross, the cross, the cross" 27 times in a sermon, but that would not be proclaiming the cross alone is our theology.

Of course the cross is a prominent symbol in our churches. Often in the front of a church or on a steeple. But a cross is also used outside of Christianity. For example, in the ancient Egyptian world, there is the hieroglyph, the ANKH, which is a cross-like figure with a little loop at the top, meaning "life."

What does the Christian cross mean? There is a famous Presbyterian church in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where Eisenhower used to attend. At the front of the sanctuary there is a great white wall. If you look closely there is a tiny black dot on the wall. What's that? It's the spot for a nail so that on Good Friday a cross can be hung there. But the rest of the time the wall is just a beautiful white blank wall.

And several years ago a British Airways' stewardess was fired for wearing a gold chain with a cross on it. The cross was deemed offensive.

How do we sort out what the cross means? There are two ways we are waylaid and led astray in sorting this out.

First, some say what the cross means is all a matter of interpretation. In the 1970's a book was published which was simply a bibliography of all the books on the cross written in the previous ten years. From about 2006 to 2009 another huge spate of books on the cross was published. There are three things we should ask ourselves about "interpretation":

First, the claim is made that there are many interpretations of the cross. Behind that is another claim: "It's **all** a matter of interpretation." That claim works like the ace of trump.

You have your interpretation and other people have theirs. To say: "There are many interpretations" is part of the breakdown in our culture in the last twenty years.

The second has to do with mythology. There is among us the idea that everything that is not math is myth. This can be seen in that old PBS show by Joseph Campbell, titled: "The Power of Myth," which was replayed for years, again and again, because someone regarded it as important.

The third way is the particular thinking in philosophy called "deconstructionism." In the Anglo-Saxon world this kind of thinking is well-explained by the illustration: "Everything out there is a mirror reflecting yourself." It is all relative. The deconstructionist movement arose in the 1960's and 1970's, but by about 1989 the whole movement collapsed. It became evident that it didn't illumine anything; it didn't go anywhere. Where do we go now?! Although there are still many professors at our universities who teach this philosophy, it's really over.

The second major way we are misled is by culture. We have among us this rule of sociology and psychology: Everything is a matter of different cultures. There is no law of nature or human nature. For example, the first missionaries in New Guinea were eaten by cannibals. How could they be criticized? That was their custom, their culture.

As William Butler Yates writes in the poem *The Second Coming*: "Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity." He wrote this in 1920 (!), but it is particularly appropriate for today, from the fall of deconstructionism in 1989 up to the present. Where do we go?

This sets the stage for the first scandal of the cross: The scandal of particularity. The One who is not only infinite but beyond infinity became a certain person at a certain time in a certain place. He had a real mother. He was about 5'7" with a hooked nose, brown eyes, and he died on a cross. This particularity is basic to the Christian message that he died on the cross. This One who is infinite became finite even in the way we are.

The second part of this first scandal of the cross has to do with the Bible itself. The Bible is a book of history and preaching, not a book of doctrines. In the Eighteenth Century a philosopher named Gotthold Lessing wrote about the ditch between history and doctrine. He asked: How do we make that jump from history to doctrine?

What do we say to that? The Bible is full of stories and proclamation and metaphors, particularly metaphors about the meaning of the cross, and there are those who say there are three basic metaphors (Aulen), and those who say there are ten basic metaphors (Dillestone). What we do is go from the metaphors to doctrine, and then say the doctrine means such and such about the cross.

The other difficulty with doctrine is that each doctrine implies every other doctrine and pretty soon we have a hodge-podge or a kaleidoscope. It's as if we have all of these different metaphors and doctrines, and we just give it a shake and a different image comes up.

The problem is that as a result everything turns into ideas. Everything becomes the idea that God is love. Or the idea that God is like the great parent.

This is the same error and same attack on Christianity that there was beginning in the Second Century. The church almost went under because it became entangled in this kind of thinking. It is called Gnosticism, which means having a certain kind of knowledge. And then being a Christian means: Yes, I agree with that saving knowledge.

This leads to the second scandal of the cross which is more serious and greater: The Holy One took on sin. We have no way of doing anything but pointing to this. We are unable to face the fact that our thinking and our reason itself is also fallen and this means that we can't begin to do anything but point to the cross.

We stand in awe. It's impossible to look at the cross unless we also have the resurrection. The cross by itself is too horrible, too overwhelming. This doesn't mean that we end up with the resurrection as a super-miracle. The resurrection is totally other. It's beyond all our categories, beyond all our thinking. In a theology of the cross the resurrection is all important. It is only the resurrection which snatches victory from defeat, brings about something new, and enables us to look on the cross as a real death.<sup>1</sup>

Over against that is the other side of the coin. People are looking for security, for something to hang onto. Remember the famous statement by G. K. Chesterton: "When people don't believe in anything, they end up believing in everything." As a result people reach out for a cause, or person, or book, or their feelings, because they are looking for security. Over against this kind of thinking we proclaim: The cross alone is our theology.

What is the cross? What is it about? The cross is our starting point, from which everything is decided and thought through. For Christians the cross alone is our theology. This is our comfort and help. Paul writes in Rom 8:37: "I am sure..." Or 1 Peter 1:3: "We have a living hope..."

How does that work? Over against this sea of relativism we have that which is outside of us, in spite of us. And it doesn't depend on whether we do it right or think it right because it is that which he does and which he has done. Out of that we have our salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 37-38.

The Evil One tempts us to diminish the cross. This happens all the time. We are tempted and misled. We go back to Paul and Luther: The cross alone is our theology, and that makes everything work. Amen