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We shall reserve for yonder life how it came about that God died and that nonetheless not God the Father or God the Holy Ghost but God the Son, the Second Person in the Godhead, died and rose, and yet that there are not three Gods but one almighty God, though three distinct Persons in the eternal, almighty, divine Being. There we shall see it in the mirror of the Holy Trinity, when we shall see the Godhead face to face. Here we intend implicitly, directly, and simply to believe and trust the Word. Farther than that we cannot go.

—*WHAT LUTHER SAYS*, EWALD M. PLASS, COMPILER
(ST. LOUIS: CONCORDIA, 1959), 194

To no people does the preaching of the Cross seem so foolish as to philosophers and men of power, for it is utterly contrary to them and to their point of view.

—*WHAT LUTHER SAYS*, 1047

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Robert D. Preus

PART 3 THE LIVING WORD³⁷

But how can I become a theologus crucis, a theologian of the cross, a preacher of the cross? How can I come to believe this message of foolishness, a message which tells me that God is terribly angry with me, and at the same time loves me and gives His Son for me? It is through the Word, the infinite power of the Word. The Augsburg Confession makes this point crystal clear (AC V):

In order that we might attain this faith, there has been instituted the ministry of teaching the gospel and dispensing the sacraments. For through Word and sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith when and where it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.

Luther puts the matter even more succinctly. Everything Christ has won for us on the cross is summarized in the one word forgiveness; for "where there is forgiveness, there is also life and salvation." Luther says:

We treat the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But He has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in

the Supper or sacrament. There He has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once and for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world.

Christ on the cross and all His suffering and His death do not avail, even if, as you teach, they are "acknowledged and meditated upon" with the utmost "passion, ardor, heartfeltness." Something else must always be there. What is it? The Word, the Word. Listen, lying spirit, the Word avails. Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take it, take what is yours.

If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Carlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel, the Word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.³⁸

But where is this Word of God which brings us all the benefits of the cross? If "to know Christ is to know His benefits," as Melancthon said, how do I learn to know His benefits? What is the Word of God? Has God spoken at all?

The answer to these questions would have been simple in Luther's day. But it is not so simple today when people are finding the Word of God in ever new visions, insight, ecstasy, experience; or do not believe that there is any Word from God at all, and one must find Him once again as the philosophers tried to do, and failed, through speculation and induction. The so-called scientific method of research, which holds sway at all our universities in political, economic, scientific discussions, is lord and master in our secular society today.

This situation is not new. H. Daniel Friberg, a Lutheran missionary and professor for many years in Tanzania, addressed the question years ago in a provocative little article titled "The *Locus* of God's Speaking."³⁹ There Friberg pleaded to go back to the Bible and find the Word of God there, to go to the preaching in our churches and find the Word of God there. But most of modern theology ignores such counsel and continues to speak about some nebulous and distant word which cannot be found or objectified or even repeated, and thus cannot be kept or treasured in our hearts and convey a message to us which will be good news and save us and change our lives.⁴⁰

So let us go to the Scriptures and find out what the Word of God is and where it can be found, and what it says to us and how we can find our Savior there.

Broadly speaking, the Bible tells us that God's Word is every communication of God to man. He first spoke audibly, walking and talking with the patriarchs. Later He spoke directly to His chosen prophets, and they in turn spoke to the people. The prophet, the man of God, speaks "in the Word of the Lord" and his word comes true (1 Kings 13:32). Thus we have the frequent refrain among the prophets, "Hear therefore the Word of the Lord" (1 Kings 12:24; 22:19; 1 Sam. 9:27; Ps. 81:8). Hearing means heeding, believing (Ps. 85:8; Num. 22:38; 24:4, 16; Isa. 22:14).

At times the Word of God is communicated visibly as in a dream or vision (Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1). The prophet Micah speaks of seeing the Word of God (Micah 1:1). What was seen in a vision was written down by these prophets for our learning. Often such visions and oral words were recorded in writing, and God actually commanded that this be done. The constant reference in the Old Testament is "thus said the Lord," or "the Word of the Lord came . . ." Or at the end of an oracle a prophet will say the words, "the mouth of the Lord has spoken" (Isa. 1:20; 45:23; 58:14; cf. also Matt. 4; 1

Cor. 14:27; 2 Tim. 3:16), thus assuring us that God is the very Author of what He speaks and writes.

At times God has communicated Himself or something about Himself through actions, often called "theophanies." These actions speak for themselves and authenticate themselves (Isa. 9:8; 45:23; 55:10ff.; Jer. 39:16).

The final Word of God to man, however, is His communication in His Son (Heb. 1:1). He is the personal Word who was with God and is God and who alone reveals God to us (1:18). Therefore God directs us to hear Him (Matt. 17:5). And we hear Him when we hear His apostles whose word is His Word (John 17:14). He sent His apostles into the world to continue His prophetic office (John 20:21). Their word is the continuation of His Word (John 17:8, 18; 1 Cor. 1:10). Their witnessing is His witnessing and the witnessing of His Spirit (John 15:26-27; 16:13; 14:26).

There is no real difference between the authenticity and power of the Word of God whether God spoke to Abraham on the field of Mamre, or to Adam in the Garden of Eden, or to you and me today through the words of His prophets and apostles. Everything is "the Word of God." Whether Paul preaches to the Corinthians on one of his visits or writes them a letter, it is the same Spirit of God speaking through Paul, God's Word to them and to us.

This unity of the Word of God, unity which focuses on Christ, the Incarnate Word, is of great comfort to us today. We do not talk and walk with Jesus as did Peter and John. We do not hear the sermons of Paul which carried with them the saving power of God. But we have today in the Scriptures, of the Old and New Testaments, the testimony of the prophets and apostles. As we preach and teach that Word, we know that our preaching and teaching are God's Word, drawn from those clear fountains of Israel. We must be absolutely certain in this matter. Just as the apostles' proclamation was a continuation of Christ's preaching

(John 17:8, 18), yes, was His preaching, our testimony is a continuation of their proclamation. We dare to say today with Paul: "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). We dare to say this because it is His gospel which we preach. We dare even to curse an angel who would proclaim another gospel (Gal. 1:8). We believe as Luther says, "God has placed His Word in our mouth to preach so that He teaches and preaches through us, and we are nothing more than His mouth and tongue."⁴¹ Let me cite another passage from Luther to indicate the assurance which every minister of the Word should have as he preaches and teaches God's Word:

On the Last Day God will say to me: "Have you preached that?" And I will answer, "Yes, exactly." Then God will turn to you and say, "Have you also heard that?" And you will answer, "Yes." And He will say further, "Why, then, didn't you believe it?" And you will say, "Oh, I regarded it merely as the word of a man, since a poor chaplain or town pastor spoke it." Thus shall the same Word which sticks to your heart accuse you and be your judge on the Last Day. For it is God's Word, it is God Himself whom you have heard, as Christ says, "He that heareth you, heareth me." I have sufficiently done my office before the tribunal and presence of God, for I have exposed your sins and offenses and reprimanded you for them and I am pure of your blood. Now see how you stand.⁴²

Luther in this context is speaking of his preaching God's law to the people. How much more certain must he be of his message as he preaches the theology of the cross, which he did so faithfully thousands of times?

The fact that we can preach Scripture, that is, the content of the divine Word, and apply it to the people of our day, should be of great comfort to us. What we today pro-

claim is nothing less than the Word of God. Just as Paul and the other apostles quoted loosely from the Old Testament but retained the *sense*, just as Paul could articulate the same doctrine of the cross in a score of different formulations, you and I today proclaim the divine Word in various languages and new applications and to people of diverse backgrounds, and yet it is the same Word of God.

Now that we have established where the Word of God is and in our previous discussions have discussed the theology of the cross, the very heart and center of the Word's message, we must go on and speak to the nature of the power of God's Word.

Just as the word of a chief executive in a country or factory carries with it the power and authority of that country or business, so God's Word possesses all the might and power of God Himself. And our God is powerful. He is not to be confused with Aristotle's first cause who sits back and observes what transpires in this world. Nor is He Descartes' quiescent creator, who for some reason does not see fit to intervene in our worldly affairs. Nor is He the God of certain modern theologians who dialectically affirm that God speaks and acts but not in our time and space. Nor is He a helpless God, the invention of modern man to provide for his happiness. No, our God is One who is eternally active, who makes contact with His creation. He is a living God, acting, speaking, working, striving to make His claim on man. Through His law He kills and by His gospel He makes alive. He exalts and He casts down. He speaks, He gives knowledge, He shows His strength, He performs mercy, He delivers. He not only loves, but He makes His love manifest by sending His only begotten Son into the world. He not only hates sin, but He executes judgment, and His wrath is actually revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and righteousness of men. God's justice and His grace, His omnipotence and His holiness, His majesty and glory are

not quiescent attributes, but are active and dynamic. *And as God is, so is His Word.*

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My Word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return unto Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).

Here we are told that God's words are power, life-giving energy. You and I speak, and often nothing happens. But God speaks, and it is done (Ps. 33:9). For He does not merely speak "naked words" (*nuda vocabula*) as Luther says, but "deeds and things" (*res*); "God speaks, and those things which are not come into being."⁴³ And so God works with His Word and through His Word. Luther says, "God's works are His words."⁴⁴

Very often in Scripture the Word of God is described as His action and practically identified with His power. The Prophet Elijah speaks the Word, and what the Word says happens: The dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel and her carcass becomes dung in the field of Jezreel (2 Kings 9:36-37). The Word must bring about its fulfillment: for, the Word is infallible and "true" (*emeth*). "The sum of Thy Word is truth, and every one of Thy righteous ordinances is everlasting" (Ps. 119:160). This means that God is faithful in carrying out His words, and at the same time faithful to Himself (consistent) in giving the Word. "The Word of the Lord is upright; and all His work is done in faithfulness" (Ps. 33:4). Hence a prophet must remain silent when God does not reveal His Word; and when God speaks, the prophet must prophesy (Amos 3:7-8). The very events of history occur at the Word of God (1 Kings 2:27; Ps. 105:19-

20). Even the course Christ took, the way of the cross, was dictated by the Word (Luke 18:31-33; 24:44, 46). This Word not merely predicts what happens; it creates what happens (Ps. 33:9). The Word of God is an act of revelation which is always effective (Num. 23:19) and infallibly achieves its purpose (Isa. 45:23; Ps. 107:20). Thus we have in Scripture such regular refrains as the following: "Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass" (Josh. 21:45; cf. 1 Kings 8:56).

Now what is to be our response to this mighty and infallible Word? The answer, of course, is faith. How often does the New Testament speak of "receiving" (*dechesthai, lambanein*), "believing" (*pisteuein*), the Word (1 Cor. 11:4; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:13; Acts 11:22; 13:7; 15:17; 18:8; 28:24)!

But how hard it is to believe what God says. His words often seem to be at odds with reason and science and experience. The supreme revelation in Christ beginning with the incarnation and ending with His bloody death on Good Friday is contrary to all reason. In fact, the center of His revelation, the theology of His cross, is impossible for the natural man to receive and believe. "If you receive the Word of God seriously, the world will judge that you are a fool."⁴⁵ What are we to do? We must first of all remember something that Luther has told us, something which helps us greatly in understanding the theology of the cross: "We always regard God's Word and work impossible before it happens. And yet it does happen and happens so easily. But before it takes place, we neither know nor understand it; we can only believe it."⁴⁶ Isn't this always the case? Think of the impossible things God has asked people to believe. Jarius is to believe that his daughter is alive, although people declared her dead and she has stopped breathing (Matt. 9:24). The nobleman is to believe that his sick son is healed simply by a word of Jesus spoken at a distance from

the boy (John 4:50). Abraham is to believe that he will have a son when he and Sarah are old. He is to believe that God is a loving, Redeemer-God even when God commands him to sacrifice his only child, in whom his salvation is centered. The Virgin Mary is to believe that she shall have a Child, although she has known no man, and her Child shall be the Son of the Highest. Martha is to believe that her brother will come to life, although his body is putrefying in the grave (John 11:39-44). And we are to believe that we will rise too, although this is contrary to all evidence. Evidence speaks against believing in any of these things; yet God expects us to believe them simply on the basis of His Word. This is His way, and it is axiomatic. Luther puts it baldly. "This is the way faith speaks, 'I believe You, God, when You speak to me.' But what does God say? He says things which are impossible, false, stupid, inconsistent, absurd, abhorrent, heretical, and diabolical, *if you consult your reason.*"⁴⁷

But how can we believe such things? How can I believe in Christ the crucified, when I "by my own reason and strength cannot believe in Him, or come to Him"? The Word of God is operative in us. It is not merely the object of our faith, but it is the cause of our faith. How is the Word of God operative in our lives? It is operative, as we have already shown, as law and gospel. Both law and gospel are powerful Words of God, although they conflict with each other at every point.

The Word of the law has a destructive power. In the mouth of Jeremiah this Word is like fire, and the people are wood, and the Word devours them (Jer. 5:14). Like a hammer breaking rocks into pieces, the law breaks down every human fortress of self-security and self-righteousness (Jer. 23:29). The power of the law is inexorable. People can stop their ears like the Jews who stoned Stephen; they can adopt a condescending attitude or try to outshout the law like the

enemies of Jesus. But God's law will speak the last Word. It is no dead letter, but a letter that kills (2 Cor. 3:6). Christ's Word will judge all unbelief on the Last Day (John 12:48). "He shall strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked" (Isa. 11:4; cf. also 2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 1:16).

In contrast to the law, the gospel Word has as its ministry to give life (2 Cor. 3:6ff.). In its outer form the gospel is a report, an announcement of facts concerning Christ's life from His birth to His death. But, as Werner Elert says, the "report is distinctive in that the historic event is designated as the acting, speaking, calling, and decreeing of God."⁴⁸ Paul's gospel offers a report of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1f.), but Paul's gospel is much more than a mere report about what people can learn and know and speak; it is related to the greatest needs of human existence and authenticates itself as power. It is a preaching which brings results into our lives. Its power centers in the theology of the cross and the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4). Through His death and resurrection Christ has conquered death and restored life. This life becomes an actuality through the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel makes the work of Christ efficacious in the world by giving men life (2 Tim. 1:10).

As "God's gospel" (Rom. 1:1; 15:16, subjective genitive) the gospel is never an empty Word but always creative, bringing about what God its Author says. Thus, we find various metaphors for the Word of God in Scripture, and various activities that are likened to its power. It is likened to a lamp and a light (Prov. 6:23), to a living and imperishable seed (1 Peter 1:23), to rain and dew (Deut. 32:2), to honey (Ps. 119:103). Sometimes it is portrayed as a living, thinking, acting person; it is hypostasized: it is portrayed as increasing, growing, multiplying (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). The gospel is not bound (2 Tim. 2:9), it goes out (Rom.

10:18), it runs (2 Thess. 3:1) through the world and opens doors (Col. 4:3). Thus, it is the very power of God at work.

1) What specifically does the gospel Word, the Word of the cross, accomplish? It works salvation (Eph. 1:13), it rescues us and saves our souls (James 1:21). It is the very power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 15:2). This is its chief and final purpose; this is its almighty power. And the salvation, the deliverance, the rescue the gospel brings us is total and complete. We are justified, righteous in God's sight for the sake of the crucified Christ. And so it can be said that the gospel saves (1 Thess. 2:8).

2) The word of the gospel saves by bringing us to faith (Rom. 10:17; John 17:20), and then by nourishing this faith (Phil. 1:27). By the foolishness of the cross God saves those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). For when they believe the gospel Word, their faith stands not in the wisdom of men but in God's power (1 Cor. 2:1-5), a power from which nothing can separate them.

3) The word of the gospel works regeneration and new life. We are born spiritually of an imperishable Seed, Peter tells us (1 Peter 1:23), the Word of God which is living and remains forever. And James says that God makes us His children by the Word of Truth (James 1:18). Paul tells the Corinthians that he has begotten them again through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15). And so Jesus says that His words are life and spirit (John 6:63). They convey the Spirit of God to the believer.

Teaching a theology of glory (works righteousness), the Papists in Luther's day deny the saving and Spirit-giving power of the gospel Word. Thus, they utterly confuse law and gospel, but do so in the name of Scripture and its divine authority. Luther counters their law passages from Scripture with the theology of the cross. He is not imposing this theology on Scripture, but he is using it consistently as a kind of "hermeneutical principle" which, as we have

heard before, alone opens up the Scriptures to us (Apol., IV, 5). I believe that his words at this point are extremely important for us as we contend for the theology of the cross also in our day. Luther says:

Therefore one should reply to them as follows: Here is Christ and over there are the statements of Scripture about works. But Christ is Lord over Scripture and over all works. He is the Lord of heaven, earth, the Sabbath, the temple, righteousness, life, sin, death, and absolutely everything. Paul, His apostle, proclaims that He became sin and a curse for me. Therefore I hear that I could not be liberated by my sin, death, and curse through any other means than through His death and blood. Therefore I conclude with all certainty and assurance that not my works but Christ had to conquer my sin, death, and curse. Even on natural grounds reason is obliged to agree and to say that Christ is not my work, that His blood and His death are not a cowl or a tonsure or a fast or a vow, and that in granting me His victory He is not a Carthusian. Therefore if He Himself is the price of my redemption, if He Himself became sin and a curse in order to justify and bless me, I am not put off at all by passages of Scripture, even if they were to produce six hundred in support of the righteousness of works and against the righteousness of faith, and if you were to scream that Scripture contradicts itself. I have the Author and Lord of Scripture, and I want to stand on His side rather than believe you. Nevertheless it is impossible for Scripture to contradict itself except at the hands of senseless and stubborn hypocrites; at the hands of those who are godly in understanding it gives testimony to its Lord. Therefore see to it how you can reconcile Scripture, which as you say contradicts itself. I for my part shall stay with the Author of Scripture.⁴⁹

Liberal theologians, including some Lutherans, have had a heyday with this citation, alleging that Luther believed the Scripture was confused and contradicted itself.

Or sometimes they have alleged that Luther just arbitrarily picked passages out of the Scripture and then made them normative, ignoring the other witnesses of Scripture. Nothing could be further from the truth. Luther is simply showing that the message of Scripture is the theology of the cross, and that law passages, which are found throughout the Scriptures, can not vitiate the biblical testimony concerning the theology of the cross. He admits the paradoxical relationship between the law and the gospel. The law is God's revelation revealing man's sin and lost condition. The gospel is the revelation of the theology of the cross. The message of the law is true, the revelation of God's just condemnation of sinful man. The revelation of the theology of the cross is true, the revelation of God's just verdict of acquittal of man. *Simul justus et peccator*. But the revelation of the theology of the cross takes precedence over the law. In the section just read, Luther is not opposing Christ to Scripture, but, at bottom, opposing gospel to law.

4) The word of the gospel, the theology of the cross, works hope, an eschatological viewpoint. Into our present life, crowded with the concerns of this world, the gospel brings something future, namely, "the hope that is laid up for us in heaven" (Col. 1:5). The gospel not merely declares this hope, but we now have a share in it by virtue of the gospel message (Col. 1:23). And this hope changes our outlook totally: we recognize that our "citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20).

5) Finally the word of the cross is a source of strength for every issue of life. The gospel is not only the gospel of comfort and peace (Eph. 6:15). It also enables me to speak confidently to God and know that for Christ's sake my petitions are heard (John 15:7). This Word of the cross establishes my faith in God's own power (*en dynamei Theou*, 1 Cor. 2:5). The word of the cross takes hold of me and effectually works (*energeitai*) in me (1 Thess. 2:13), that is, it sus-

tains me in my faith, and therefore I sing with assurance:

Lord, Thy words are waters living,
Where I quench my thirsty need;
Lord, Thy words are bread life-giving;
On Thy words my soul doth feed:
Lord, Thy words shall be my light
Through death's veil and dreary night;
Yea, they are my sword prevailing,
And my cup of joy unailing.

Of course, since the preaching of the cross is the power of God for salvation, the Scriptures, from which this message is drawn, possess that same power. Paul makes this point very clear in 2 Timothy 3:15-17 where, speaking to his younger coworker, he points out the practical power of the Scriptures in the life of the "man of God," that is, the pastor. These verses follow a warning directed against all who, like Jannes and Jambres, resist the truth. The rebellion of these evil men is against pure doctrine and "will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (v. 13). But there is a sure way in which Timothy or any pastor can avoid such pitfalls. But "continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of." Paul then reminds Timothy that he has taught him, and Timothy has been convinced of the doctrine of the cross based upon Scripture. For from childhood Timothy has known the Scriptures which Paul tells him are able to give him "the wisdom that leads to salvation." His grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice taught him the Scriptures. Thus, the Old Testament Scriptures also teach Christ, proclaiming the theology of the cross, and from childhood Timothy has known them and believed their saving message.

When Paul tells Timothy that the Scriptures are able to give him wisdom, he is not just merely talking about Timo-

thy gaining more knowledge of this or that. No, he is talking about a divine wisdom, the wisdom of very God in a mystery, foreordained for our glory (1 Cor. 2:7). Scripture works this wisdom of the cross in us by leading us to faith in Christ who is the heart and center of the Scriptures. The Scriptures possess such inherent power, Paul goes on to say, because they are not human words but God's Word, the product of His breath; *pasa graphee theopneustos*. The apostle's argument is clearly that as God's Word, Scripture carries with it God's power, so Scripture works faith in Christ and all the blessings that Christ crucified brings the poor sinner. The living Word of Scripture brings even more blessings to the man of God; for Paul goes on to say that they are *oophelimos*, that is, useful, beneficial, profitable for everything that the pastor needs to do his work: "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" in the way in which we Christians should live out our lives of faith in Christ.

And what is the purpose of Scripture's instructing, convincing, correcting, and training? It is that the man of God, the pastor (or any Christian, for that matter) might be perfectly equipped for carrying out the work of his calling, living out the Christian life of faith in Christ. Our old Lutheran theologians have talked about the "efficacy and perfection of Scripture," and they are right.

Whence does the written and spoken and sacramental Word derive its power? The answer is threefold; it is Trinitarian.

1) The written and spoken Word of God draws its power and authority from its Author, who is God. This is made clear in the New Testament where the Scripture is called God's Word, God's utterances, the product of His breath (Matt. 4:4; 2 Tim. 3:16). Although it is only men who preach the gospel, it is nevertheless God's gospel (Rom. 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor. 7:11; 1 Thess. 2:9). God's Word and

gospel are never empty and sterile but active and creative. Paul makes this point eminently clear when he tells the Thessalonians: "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the Word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). Paul is clearly tracing the effectual working of his word back to its divine origin, to our gracious God. The Word of God, Scripture, and the word of the cross which we preach carries with it all the attributes of God Himself. This is why Luther and our old Lutheran theologians insisted so emphatically that Scripture was God's Word. It was as they said, "something of God." It was God speaking. God is the Speaker in Scripture. God is the Speaker when we preach God's law and declare the theology of the cross.

2) The written and spoken Word draws its power from its content, Christ and His suffering and death. The power of the Word is not some sovereign, stern, irresistible force which coerces the human will and intellect of its victim into obedience. It is an almighty power, but it is gentle and persuasive, a still, small voice working always as cognitive message, the message of a crucified and risen Savior. It is the gospel of *Christ*, which is powerful. Scripture gives us wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). When Paul speaks of the power of his preaching, it is always within a Christological context (cf. 1 Cor. 2). The written and spoken Word exists and is proclaimed for the sake of Christ, for the sake of salvation through faith in Him. We recall the charming statement of Luther: "Christ is involved in Scripture through and through, like the body in its clothes. Preaching is the crib in which He lies and is composed, and therefrom we get food and nourishment."⁵⁰ Again Luther says: "All the works which Christ performed are recorded in the Word, and in

the Word and through the Word He will give us everything, and without the Word He will give us nothing."⁵¹ Therefore "a man who has God's Word is a partaker of all the possessions of God."⁵² Luther is most emphatic on this point: "If Christ were given and crucified a thousand times for us, even so it would all be for nothing if the Word of God did not come, share, and bestow it all on me."⁵³ We recall how Luther believed that the Scriptures were Christocentric, not merely by implication but specifically and throughout Scripture.

3) The written and spoken Word draws its power from its union with the Holy Spirit who is always operative through it. The Word of God and the Spirit of God are inseparable. When the Word is preached, the Spirit is always present. Paul preaches, he says, not in persuasive words of men's wisdom but "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4), and for this reason our faith stands in the power of God. Hence the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Word of God are not two works, nor a composite of two different operations, but they are one work, the unity of operation, as our old theologians have called it (*unitas energieas*). John Andrew Quenstedt says:

The Spirit and the Word of God are not only united themselves, but they act together. Their action is one action and indivisible, the Spirit working as the efficient agent of the operation and the Word as the instrument or means of the operation. Spirit and Word work together in accomplishing the one result of conversion and salvation.⁵⁴

Quenstedt is saying that you cannot separate God's Word from God, from the Spirit of God, anymore than one could separate my words from me.

We Lutherans have not always been faithful to our heritage. We have not always believed in the power of the cross

which we preach. May God help us to continue to draw water from these wells of salvation, which are God's Word, and thus be faithful theologians of the cross.

PART 4

THE THEOLOGY OF GLORY, OR THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Opposed to the theology of the cross is what Luther calls the theology of glory (*theologia gloria*).⁵⁵ The theology of glory is no true theology at all. It is an attempt to know God but without going to His Word, the word of the cross, the gospel. It is the attempt to know God perhaps by contemplation, perhaps by experience, perhaps by philosophical speculation. It is the theology of the natural man, of secularism, of the Turk, the Jew, all those who wish to know God apart from Christ and His cross. And that is the secret of the theology of the cross, the mystery of godliness: that we see and know God as a Child in Bethlehem's manger, born to a poor, young, forsaken maiden; that we see Him as a rejected preacher of the gospel, already bearing the sins of the world; that we see Him finally on the cross, His ultimate degradation and humiliation, the innocent suffering God against the guilty, but at the same time His glorification of the Father. For that was why He came into the world and accomplished the will of Him that sent Him, namely, to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

The theology of glory rejects all this. The theology of glory wants to understand God and see Him from the visible things which God has made and from that standpoint alone. Thus, the *theologus gloriae* can know that God is and that God is powerful. But God remains invisible to him and unknown to him. The theologian of the cross sees God not in His splendid creation, but in the humiliation, shame, suffering, and death of Jesus. Thus, in seeing the

shame of Christ and the death of Christ he sees God in all His splendor and grace. Luther says, "For this reason true theology and the recognition of God are in the crucified Christ."⁵⁶ God can be found only in suffering and the cross. Man sees God only through the man Christ and only in suffering. The divine majesty is hidden under the cross of Christ. In fact, to Luther, "it is necessary that everything which is believed should be hidden."⁵⁷

In essence the theology of glory is legalism and unbelief. It appears in many subtle forms, in the attempt to understand God or control or manipulate Him, in the attempt to ignore sin and our need of grace and God's love in Christ. During the time of Luther the scholastic theologians who preceded him established a doctrine of sanctification whereby man, the sinner, worked out his own salvation with very little attention given to God's grace in Christ, and the great emphasis upon what man does, whether on his own initiative or through the priest in the sacrifice of the mass and other "blessings" dispensed by the church. The connection between the work of Christ and faith in Him was diminished and sometimes even lost. Luther fought this theology of glory in his attacks against Erasmus and the Humanists on the one hand, the Papists and Enthusiasts on the other hand. The enemies of the theology of the cross were right within the bosom of the church in Luther's day.

So it is today. Today the ways of the enemy are even more subtle than in Luther's day, as the inherent legalism in the theology of glory attempts to vitiate the theology of the cross and supplant it. Today we have the subtle synergism of the post-Reformation Lutherans and the Pelagianism of the Arminians, but more frightening still, Pietism, Methodism and its offspring, and Pop Evangelicalism.

By pop evangelicalism I designate that movement, originating in the United States, which has permeated almost all of American Protestantism and even Roman Catholi-

cism. It is an admixture of Arminianism and Enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*, as Luther called it), with a dash of American capitalistic business principles, success-oriented pragmatism, and popular humanism. So much has been written about this phenomenon that it is quite unnecessary—and hopeless—for me to analyze it and show how it is in most of its programs, strategies, and theology an unvarnished modern paradigm of what Luther called the *theologia gloriae*. The movement, which has given rise also to what has been commonly called the “church growth movement,” extols the power of prayer as a virtual means of grace, while denying to the means of grace (the word of the cross and the sacraments) the power to save. It builds on the premise of Pietism and Methodism in extolling the Third Article of the Creed as man’s doing and growing and receiving blessings from God on account of so-called “gifts” which he finds in himself through some means or other. Thus man feels good about himself. Little attention is given repentance as the work of the Holy Spirit through the word of the cross.

Prof. Kurt Marquart of Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, has written an essay analyzing the church growth movement, based on a lecture given originally at Matongo Lutheran College, Kenya, in 1992. The title of his essay is “Changing Mission ‘Paradigms’: From Lutheran to Generic?” At this point I merely address Marquart’s discovery of what faith is to the proponents of the new pop evangelicalism.⁵⁸ Marquart shows how the two neoevangels who have most warmly fathered and endorsed the church growth movement, namely, Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner, define faith not only as a work of man, but as something that includes what traditional Lutherans, Calvinists, and even Roman Catholics call the fruits of faith. Faith is no more than a human act of decision. McGavran and Arn simply cite the great evangelist Charles Finney:

To believe in the name of Jesus means at least three acts. First, intellectual acceptance. We move from ignorance or doubt to an acceptance of the truth: that “Jesus” is the mighty name, the only name. That God has willed to reveal Himself through Jesus Christ, His Word made flesh, Jesus who upholds “the universe by His Word of power.”

Second, since Jesus is Lord, and I accept this intellectually, I submit my entire life to Him. I obey Him in every command He gives. And He is my Lord. I submit all my actions, thoughts, attitudes and values, expenditure of time and money to Jesus Christ. I treat my fellow men as Christ commands. I try to create a family, community, business and state which would please Him. I accept what the Bible so clearly says, again and again, that the whole life of the Christian has been transformed. He is therefore a new creation . . .

The third meaning of belief is that I must share the good news with others. With this new definition of faith as decision, good works, and witnessing to Christ, the theology of glory is put in place. The cross of Christ is virtually ignored. The theology of the cross is not proclaimed in the context of the thunderings of the law, but pragmatically used as the Christian carries out the Great Commission. The heresy of making faith a work (my option, my decision [Billy Graham, Charles Finney, et. al.], my “will to believe” [William James]) at very best makes faith a condition of salvation, or to put it differently, makes faith a part of the gospel. Thus the gospel is transformed into a theology of glory. My faith saves me, but not by virtue of its object. Justification is *propter fidem*, because of my faith. Jesus is Lord, not because “He has purchased and won me from sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood, and innocent suffering and death,” but because I make Him my Lord. I “obey Him in every command He gives me.”

What an awful theology! How can anyone be certain of

forgiveness, divine grace, salvation, or a loving God, burdened by such a theology of glory?

A mark of the theology of glory, in our day as in Luther's, is either to reject or to ignore the Word and sacraments as a means of grace and forgiveness. According to Luther the Holy Spirit "calls" me into the kingdom of Christ by the gospel, that is, the word of the cross. Baptism works forgiveness of sins. The Lord's Supper is simply the gospel "acted out"; our eating and drinking Christ's body and blood for our forgiveness and all the blessings of God. If it is asked how water or bread and wine can do such things, Luther replies, "It is not the water, but the Word in and with the water."

Luther says, "God reveals the mystery of salvation through the external Word. *This Word He has ordained to serve as a means and as a hollow reed* through which He conveys saving truth in His heart."⁵⁹ And so the Word becomes the most valuable of all gifts of God to us sinners. For it is always available, at hand. If you take it away, it is like taking the sun away from the earth.

For if the Word were removed, what would the world be but a hell, a mere realm of Satan, the wealthy people, the lawyers and doctors and others still in it? For what can people do without the Word? For only the Word keeps a joyful conscience, a gracious God, and our entire religion. For from the Word flows as from a spring all religion; yes, it upholds the entire world.⁶⁰

For the Word introduces us to the theology of the cross, and in that theology we live. For the word of the cross, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, creates the very understanding which we are unable to accord it. Luther says:

Now when I say that you should fix the Word of God in your heart, I do not mean merely that you should know it and meditate on it. That is nothing. I mean rather that you

should regard and esteem it as it ought to be regarded and esteemed. That is, you should hold it to be a living, eternal, all-powerful Word that can make you alive, free from sin and death, and keep you so eternally; that brings with it everything of which it speaks, namely, Christ, with His flesh and blood and everything He is and has. For it is the kind of Word that can and does do all these things, and therefore it should be so regarded. That is its proper honor. It is not satisfied with any other kind of honor. In short, the proper honor for the Word is nothing else than a genuine faith from the bottom of one's heart, a faith that holds the Word to be true, that trusts it and stakes its life upon it for eternity.⁶¹

Today the theology of glory, pop evangelicalism, simply does not believe what Luther says about the power of the Word. Something must be added: gifts, gifts allegedly from God, but critically inventoried by the donees or their mentors; strategies, entrepreneurial, sociological, psychological strategies; ever new paradigms; the power of positive thinking (Robert Schuller), etc. Something must be added to the theology of the cross. The simple word of the cross does not work anymore in our day, it does not "reach people," it does not bring the success which is called for, growth of the church. For in our day even the work of the church is measured by external growth. Thus modern pop evangelicalism, in its yen for success, loses the one and only way to God, "the way of the cross."

One other common feature, often attendant to trendy new evangelicalism and its success-oriented theology of glory, is a marked impatience with those of us who simply cling to the word of the cross and take our confidence and certainty and hope solely from that divine revelation. The theology of the cross creates a certain "piety" in those who cling to it. Confidence in the crucified Savior, secure in His arms, total trust in Him through His Word of promise, these are not seen to be signs of piety at all by the theology

of glory but signs of weakness, pride, laziness, and the lack of sanctification. Certainly, we are told, such a posture does not bring in new converts. It does not lend itself to victorious living. It has been called quietistic and egocentric. One Missouri Synod Lutheran minister, enamored with the church growth movement, has even accused in a book his whole church body, known historically for its bold proclamation of the theology of the cross, as “dysfunctional.”

It has been said that for the proponents of the *theologia gloriae* in evangelical circles today the Great Commission has superseded the doctrine of redemption as the article on which the church stands and falls. This may sound like too sweeping and harsh a statement, for many evangelical and confessional Lutherans and others are devoted to the Great Commission and spend their lives preaching the gospel. But there is no doubt about the fact that just as the Pharisees traveled “about on sea and land to make one proselyte” (Matt. 23:15) but did not recognize the Son of Man when He came to be their Savior, so the zealous members of cults and sects today reject or lose sight of the *theologia crucis* as they march toward their distorted evangelistic goals by their “obedience” to the Great Commission.

The only response to God’s revelation in Christ, to the preaching of the cross, is faith. But faith is never inactive or dormant. Faith receives the good things from God, but then witness is made. The Christian confesses Christ, confesses Christ as one to whom God has given eternal wisdom. He must do so! The words of the anonymous Danish hymn written during the period of Pietism ring out:

To me the preaching of the Cross
Is wisdom everlasting;
Thy death alone redeems my loss;
On Thee my burden casting,
I, in Thy name,

A refuge claim
From sin and death and from all shame—
Blest be Thy name, O Jesus!

This is how faith responds to the theology of the cross. It speaks with conviction and boldness.

And what are the results of witnessing for the Savior? What happens? Through the preaching of the cross God saves those who believe it. The word of the cross, whether proclaimed by an eloquent preacher or the humblest child who can barely stammer the words, is still the power of God unto salvation. The Ethiopian eunuch was converted when Philip explained to him the theology of the cross. But Philip did not convert everyone who heard his witness. Three thousand were saved on Pentecost through the proclamation by Peter of the theology of the cross. But many more who heard this message rejected it. Christ Himself won few converts as throughout Judea and Galilee He preached about His person and work. And when He told His disciples that He would go to the cross, none of them at the time even understood what He was talking about.

So it has been throughout the history of the church, and so it will be. He who witnesses to the cross will experience rejection. And he will have to bear his own cross. Jesus made this point crystal clear throughout His ministry. Every one of the apostles sustained persecution because of the message he proclaimed and confessed. So it has always been and so it will always be (Heb. 11:35-12:29).

Paul Gerhardt, who spent his life witnessing to the theology of the cross in preaching and song, portrays the paradigm of the *theologus cruci* in perhaps his greatest hymn (stanzas 1, 2, 3, 7, 8):

If God Himself be for me,
I may a host defy;

For when I pray, before me
 My foes, confounded, fly;
 If Christ, the Head, befriend me,
 If God be my support,
 The mischief they intend me
 Shall quickly come to naught.

This I believe—yea, rather,
 In this I make my boast,
 That God is my dear Father,
 The Friend who loves me most;
 And that, whate'er betide me,
 My Savior is at hand,
 Thro' stormy seas to guide me,
 And bring me safe to land.

I build on this foundation—
 That Jesus and His blood
 Alone are my salvation,
 The true, eternal good;
 Without Him all that pleases
 Is valueless on earth;
 The gifts I owe to Jesus
 Alone my love are worth.

Who clings with resolution
 To Him whom Satan hates,
 Must look for persecution
 Which never here abates;
 Reproaches, griefs, and losses
 Rain fast upon His head,
 A thousand plagues and crosses
 Become His daily bread.

All this I am prepared for,
 Yet am I not afraid;
 By Thee shall be cared for,

To whom my vows were paid.
 Though life and limb it cost me,
 And all the earthly store
 Which once so much engrossed me—
 I love Thee all the more.

Many years ago in the chapel of Concordia Theological Seminary we sang all the stanzas of Gerhardt's magnificent hymn. An older professor came up to me after chapel and said, "We can't sing that hymn today. It just doesn't apply anymore. People don't suffer for their faith anymore." Even though I had never suffered any severe crosses for Christ's sake, I disagreed profoundly with that old veteran of the cross. Of course, there are different kinds of crosses. Luther's suffering the pangs of conscience in the monastery at Erfurt were as severe as the crosses he suffered when persecuted by the pope and the emperor and maligned by the Papists. So it also is today. Not everyone loses his head like St. Cyprian, lies in a Nazi prison camp like Dietrich Bonhöffer, is imprisoned like Bishop Bergrav, or forbidden to worship like the Christians in the Soviet Union for more than seventy years. And we could go on and on with more modern examples of persecution, affliction, and cross-bearing sustained by Christians.

But God does send crosses to those who believe, teach, and confess the theology of the cross. It happens without fail. It must happen. And it is God who sends them. They are not the ordinary afflictions that befall humankind. They are thrust upon us for Christ's sake. God sends them in order to bless us and make us theologians of the cross. Luther says:

The gospel was not given that we might seek our own praise and glory through it or that the common people might acclaim us, its ministers, on account of it. But it was given

that through it the blessing and glory of Christ might be illumined, that the Father might be glorified, who has shown us in Christ, His Son, whom He gave up for us and with whom He has given us all things.⁶²

These are profound words and ought to be etched into the memory of every faithful preacher of the gospel. He who preaches salvation by grace alone and not by works, who preaches the unconditional love of God in Christ—how can such a one claim any glory for doing such a good work? Anyone who seeks his own glory as he preaches the gospel and confesses Christ is thereby a liar. Preaching Christ crucified brings crosses, not glory. *Soli Deo gloria*. To God alone be the glory. The apostle Paul tells us that every minister of the Word will suffer opposition and persecution if he preaches the gospel. Jesus warned the same, that we would be hated for His sake, not praised.

Following our Savior (Matt. 5:10-11), Luther says that God has “attached suffering to the teaching of the Gospel,” and this is for our own benefit, to make us better theologians and more faithful to our message of the cross. Otherwise, Luther says, God would never be able to repress and crush in us “this beast called *Kenodoxia*.” *Kenodoxia* is the yen for the admiration and praise of men, the yen for the life of ease in the ministry of the gospel, the yen for self-glory. It is the product of the *theologia gloriae*. Such a propensity and attitude in a “witness for the truth” is a certain sign that he is a false witness. Luther says, “The fact that you teach faithful doctrine and live a holy life is not your gift, it is God’s. Therefore you should not receive the praise; God receives it in you.” Nor will you be elated by the praise of men—nor will you be moved by their insults, slander, and persecution or pressure to “desert your calling.”⁶³

Therefore it is with the very grace of God that He covers all those who confess the word of the cross with slander,

bitter hatred, persecution, and blasphemy from the whole world as well with contempt and ingratitude from our own followers. In fact, the devastation we receive from followers and false brethren is worse than that which we openly suffer from outright enemies of the gospel. There are, of course, some among our followers who honor us on account of the ministry of the Word; but where there is one who honors us, there are a hundred who hate, despise, and persecute us. Therefore the slanders and persecutions of our opponents, as well as the great contempt, ingratitude, and secret bitter hatred of those in whose midst we live—are joyful sights and delight to us so much that we easily forget vain glory.

Thus, we are graciously preserved from that awful mark of the *theologus gloriae*, *Kenodoxia*, the desire for the applause of the crown, the desire to be thought of as proud and courageous, brave and daring.

And so the Christian, especially the Christian pastor, suffers crosses for the sake of the theology of the cross. His zeal is interpreted as anger, his courage as stubbornness, his orthodoxy as heterodoxy, his suffering as self-inflicted. And throughout it all he sings in his heart, happy in the forgiveness of sins, confident in the sure hope of a gracious God who has saved him forever through the blood of Christ—he sings with Paul Gerhardt:

And I will nail me to Thy Cross,
And learn to count all things that draw us,
Where in the flesh doth pleasure take;
Whate’er is hateful in Thine eyes,
With all the strength that in me lies,
What I cast on Thee and forsake.

And to his Savior he sings:

Thy heavy groans, Thy bitter sighs,
 The tears that from Thy dying eyes
 Were shed when Thou wast sore opprest
 Shall be with me, when at the last
 Myself on Thee I wholly cast,
 And enter with Thee into rest.

Author

The late Robert D. Preus was one of one of the century's best scholars of Lutheran orthodoxy. He received doctorates from Edinburgh University and the University of Strasbourg. For many years he was president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana. Before becoming president at Concordia, Fort Wayne, he served as a Lutheran pastor (LCMS) and for seventeen years was a professor at Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. A prolific writer his books included *The Inspiration of Scripture*, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (2 volumes), and *Getting Into the Theology of Concord*. He was often published in numerous journals including *Concordia Theological Monthly*, *The Lutheran Witness* and *Scottish Journal of Theology*.

Notes

37. Most of this chapter is based upon an article I wrote for the *Concordia Theological Monthly* titled "The Power of God's Word," XXXIV, 8; August 1963 through 465.
38. LW 40, 212-214.
39. H. Daniel Friberg, "The Locus of God's Speaking," *Christian Century*, Vol. 79:15:455-457.
40. Karl Barth, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:1:160; Emil Brunner, *The Divine Human Encounter* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), 84f.
41. WA 37, 437.
42. WA 47, 120.
43. WA 42, 17.
44. WA 3, 152: *Opera dei sunt verba eius*.
45. WA 40, 3, 121.

46. W2 13:239.
47. WA 401, 361.
48. Werner Elert, *Der Christliche Glaube* (Hamburg: Furche-Verlag, 1956), 117.
49. LW 26, 295.
50. WA 12, 418.
51. W2 13:1556.
52. W2 3:760.
53. W2 20:274.
54. John Andrew Quenstedt, *Systema* (Wittenberg: 1685) 1:183.
55. LW 31, 41.
56. LW 31, 53.
57. LW 33, 62.
58. See Koester, pp. 152-153, as quoted in Marquart, 33.
59. W2 7:830.
60. W2 4:1806.
61. LW 36, 278.
62. LW 27, 100.
63. LW 27, 102.