

10-1-1985

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Recommended Citation

Kelly, Robert A. (1985) "The necessity of the theology of the cross today," *Consensus*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol11/iss4/3>

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THE NECESSITY OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS TODAY

Robert A. Kelly

In times past, when Martin Luther would stride toward the pulpit of the City Church in Wittenberg, men and women throughout Europe would tremble in fear. As far away as the papal palace in Rome you could hear the sound of knocking knees and chattering teeth. Today when a preacher mounts the pulpit, the only sound you are likely to hear is nervous shifting in the seats — which soon turns to quiet snoring. Why was it that Luther's preaching inspired the Reformation and the contemporary North American church does well to inspire people to show up on Sunday? What made Luther so radical and most modern preachers so innocuous?

One word explains the problem — the cross. Luther understood the cross and taught, preached, and believed a theology of the cross. Modern North American Christians, on the other hand, tend to think of the cross as a nice piece of eighteen carat gold jewelry or a neon sign to decorate churches. Luther knew that the road to faithfulness led through the crucifixion; many Christians in the United States and Canada today think that “faith” is a synonym for positive thinking and faithfulness the door to prosperity.

Early in his career Luther announced his theological program as a *theologia crucis*. This theology cut at the heart of the corruption of the medieval church, unmasked the idolatry inherent in the semi-Pelagian theology of the day, and exposed the charade that passed for pastoral care in the parishes. As Luther himself said, “And while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it.”¹ The Word was the Word of the cross. The late medieval church had lost its ability to preach authentic Law and Gospel; it took a theology of the cross to enable preaching to speak God's actual Word to the actual situation.

Theologically and ecclesiastically the late twentieth century in the churches of North America exhibits certain parallels with the sixteenth century in Germany. In its current guise as the fundamentalist/evangelical movement and the charismatic movement, semi-Pelagianism dominates popular theology. Some have labeled so-called self-esteem as the new Reformation, but this, too, is part of the problem, not a solution. The

1. Luther's Works, American Ed., vol. 51, p. 77.

church has become so enmeshed with the values of the culture that it has lost the ability to preach a Law that condemns or a Gospel that frees. Real pastoral care is fast being replaced by media ministry, church growth, organizational development, and systems management. The church has been captured by frontier triumphalism. I would like to propose that the only way to bring about a new reform — a badly needed new reform — in the church today is to recognize the necessity of the theology of the cross and to develop such a theology for our time.

To understand better the need for a *theologia crucis*, it helps to begin with the root of the problem, American triumphalism. By that phrase I mean the dominant ideology of the culture of the United States which is based on what Gerard Fourez has called the “myth of free enterprise.”² The primal hero of this myth is the Horatio Alger hero, the poor boy who starts out at the bottom and by working hard moves up through the ranks and becomes president of the company and a millionaire. The assumptions of this myth are that any person can be anything s/he wants to be, that there are no limitations on personal aspiration, and that hard work and positive thinking will inevitably take one to the top.

Because of our commitment to this ideology, the basic belief of the American people is in themselves. We believe that we and our nation are the best people and nation on earth. Our culture is superior to others, our governmental systems are more democratic than any, our technology can solve all problems, we are more ingenious than other peoples, we are more honest and hard-working than anyone, and we are — justly so — more successful than other nations. There is nothing that we cannot do and our future is always bright. I do not know Canada well enough to make conclusive statements, but my suspicion is that similar attitudes exist here as well as south of the border. The evidence produced by Douglas John Hall in his 1976 book, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross*, leads to this conclusion. What I have called the myth of free enterprise Hall refers to as the officially optimistic society.³

This myth is more popular today than at any other time in the history of the United States. The 1984 election returns are only the most obvious example of how much people want to believe in the truth of the stories of Horatio Alger. Our cultural environment is filled with messages extolling the myth of free enterprise. Just last Thursday I attended my daughter’s graduation from junior high school. The assigned topic for the student speakers was: “Positive Thinking: The Key to Success,” and the speakers demonstrated that they had been well indoctrinated into the ideology of free enterprise. Our television constantly tells us: We are prosperous because we work hard; we deserve what we have. The President of the United States believes that the United States is God’s new chosen people, selected because of virtue unparalleled in human history. The enemies of the United States are the Satanic forces of darkness, the great apocalyptic beast rising up from the East to work evil in all the world. I would assume that these messages have penetrated Canada, at least as far as southern television signals travel.

2. Gerard Fourez, *Liberation Ethics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).

3. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

If the United States were a small country with meager resources, this creed might not be such a problem. But the United States has the power to put its beliefs into practice. It has the power to be prosperous, no matter what the cost to other peoples and nations. When the most powerful nation in the world assumes that any cause which benefits it is good for everybody else as well, the results are tragic. The list of peoples who have paid an especially high price for United States security should bring tears to the eyes of every American, but it does not. Americans so thoroughly believe in themselves and their goodness that they cannot imagine their own complicity in the starvation, oppression, and death which they cause.

In the early sixteenth century Luther identified the dominant theology of late Scholasticism as the *theologia gloriae*, the theology of glory, that stood in sharp contrast with the *theologia crucis*. The theology of glory, according to Luther, is a theology that attempts to understand God through such attributes as “virtue, godliness, righteousness, goodness, and so forth.” While these define what we normally think of as God, the true God cannot be discovered by contemplating these attributes. Rather, says Luther, God must be understood through “his human nature, weakness, foolishness.” If God is to be honored, he must be honored “as he is hidden in his suffering.” The theology of glory cannot help anyone approach the true God, because God can only be recognized “in the humility and shame of the cross.”⁴ The theology that Luther was criticizing said that the person could participate in his/her own justification by doing what is in oneself — *facere quod in se est* — thus meriting the grace of God. Luther understood that this is impossible and denied the reality of the crucifixion.

The myth of free enterprise is the contemporary expression of the age-old *theologia gloriae*. “Be anything you want to be,” the modern equivalent of *facere quod in se est*, is salvation by works. The goal is human achievement; the method is performance. The myth of free enterprise says that if you perform the proper works with the proper attitude, then you will receive the award of achievement and recognition.

The only way to counter the *theologia gloriae* is with the *theologia crucis*. Only the cross can counter the glory of human achievement and power. When the people of Israel dreamed of conquest and kingdom, God sent a Messiah who suffered and died. God attacked their theology of glory with the cross. The cross retains its power today. Just as it smashed the disciples’ dreams of glory, so the cross can smash our dreams and transform us from theologians of glory into disciples of the crucified Christ.

Only the cross can let God be God. The God of the theology of glory is not the true God. He is at best a role that God plays. More likely he is a false god, a god we have created in our own image to do our bidding. The true God is the God who came to earth as a poor man, the one who suffered and died on the cross. Only in the cross can we see God as he really is. Only in the cross does God work as he chooses to work.

So, the most crucial task facing North American Christendom is the development of a contemporary theology of the cross. Douglas John Hall already issued the call in 1976, but few have answered. Since 1976 the need has become more pressing every year. For the health of the church, but also to provide an important witness to the culture, it is necessary that a contemporary, North American theology of the cross be

4. Luther’s Works, American Ed., vol 31, pp. 52-54.

developed. Since we Lutherans are part of a tradition that values the *theologia crucis* at least as a positive contribution in the sixteenth century, it seems to me that we have a special responsibility to work toward the development of the theology of the cross today.

The ability of a *theologia crucis* to provide a critical principle for the church is obvious. The cross is God's critique of our religion and our ideology. A theology of the cross sets forth the crucifixion of Jesus as the primal story and paradigm for Christian theology and ethics. The story of the crucifixion is Christianity's alternative to the myth of free enterprise. Our story is the story of a little baby born poor in one of the less desirable neighborhoods of Bethlehem. He grows up, studies hard, and works hard. Somehow he never finds a steady job, so he becomes a wandering preacher. He is never much of a success: the disciples he attracts are not the better sort of person, the crowds he attracts come mostly for the show and drift away. In the end he becomes so offensive that the religious and political leaders arrest, try and execute him.

This story, the story of the cross of Jesus, is God's critique of human religion. That is what Luther's *theologia crucis* is all about, demonstrating that the cross undermines every system of religion based on relating to God through human achievement. Under the cross we cannot relate to God through our pious lives, our intelligence, or even our desire to believe. We are left only with Christ on the cross as the revelation of God. Of necessity, a theology of the cross will have to face the dominant religion of North America head on and say a prophetic, "No!" to any theology which says that people relate to God on the basis of their own decision to believe or that the purpose of the church is institutional success or that the form of Christianity is respectability. With this "No!" we join Luther in his "No!" to the late-Medieval theology.

What Luther does not seem to realize, and what we must assert today, is that just as the cross is God's critique of all human religion, so it is also God's critique of human ideology. As Bonhoeffer said,

The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself ('My God, why has thou forsaken me?'), he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. The world must not be prematurely written off....⁵

What Bonhoeffer calls drinking the earthly cup to the dregs involves critical engagement with human ideology. As God's people in the world, the church has the responsibility to apply the cross to ideologies as well as to religions, for ideology often has more impact on a person's thought and life than religion. If the cross is to exercise its liberating power, theologians and pastors must point out where and how the cross works over against the dominant ideology.

For example, the ideology of "Be anything you want to be" denies the reality of original sin. The myth of free enterprise posits a world in which there are no limits on

5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Enlarged Edition, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1972), p. 337.

individual achievement. The doctrine of original sin teaches us that fallen human beings live within a world with limitations. Because of the Fall we are limited individuals who must live our lives on earth under the shadow of sin. Even as Christians we are *simul iustus et peccator*. When we form social institutions, our fallenness infects those institutions and sin becomes institutionalized.

In the fallen world inhabited by fallen people, no one can be whatever s/he wants to be. Thus the modern person is trapped in a dead-end alley. The myth of free enterprise has become the object of everyone's trust; yet it is just that myth which seals North American society into a never-ending search for a non-existent security.

As another example, the ideology of "Be all you can be" refuses to recognize who is creature and who creator. The person who believes in the theology of glory loses control over his/her own destiny. What an irony! The theology that proclaims control over your own destiny actually is the source of chaos. The result is that theologians of glory assert the mastery of humanity over creation in a vain attempt to hide reality.

While the *theologia crucis*' critique of ideology is primarily a theological critique, it must be fully conversant with political and social philosophy and with the fields of sociology and anthropology. The critique of ideology involves the theologian with cultural worldviews and social systems in a way that demands the full integration of theology with the social scientific disciplines for adequate social analysis.

What may not be as obvious as the cross's value as a critical principle is the cross's value as a constructive principle. The cross can and should provide the paradigm not only for critique, but also for our efforts to construct theological systems in the present. The cross, when taken seriously, impacts the idea of system, the architecture of system, and the content of system.

Normally the purpose of theological system is to provide coherence to theology and to bring clarity to various theological issues by demonstrating their relationships to one another. In addition, systematic theology is usually expected to provide rationally satisfying discussions of various Christian doctrines. If we are to construct a system according to the *theologia crucis* some of these purposes may have to be adapted or abandoned. Worshipping a crucified God is simply not a rationally defensible activity. Under the paradigm of the theology of the cross the purpose of system construction is to bring together the story of the crucifixion of Jesus and the doctrine, ethics, and spirituality of the church so that the cross can exercise its paradigmatic function. The purpose of the theology of the cross is not to reduce the offense of Christianity to the culture, but to throw that offense into high relief.

Often the architecture of a theological system — the overall design of the system and the ways in which various doctrines relate to one another — will reveal as much about the author's theology as the content of the various loci. A good example of this is the problem of the place of the doctrine of election in a system. Should the doctrine be discussed along with the sovereignty and providence of God or should it be discussed along with the order of salvation or should it be discussed with the means of grace? A theologian's answer to this question reveals that person's presuppositions about how God relates to people. What I would like to emphasize is that the architecture of a theology of the cross will exhibit the centrality of the crucifixion of Jesus in the very structure of the system. While I certainly cannot claim to have achieved a solution to the problem, it seems to me that a *theologia crucis* would need to move from the act of crucifixion to the person who was crucified to the God who is Father of that person,

thus reversing the traditional relationship of theology proper and Christology. At any rate, the point to remember is that we cannot design systems of theology without reference to the cross as the paradigm.

The cross then must be allowed to shape the content of each and every doctrine the church teaches. Luther is an example of a theologian who set out to understand all doctrines from the perspective of the cross. He succeeded perhaps better than any other theologian, but not completely. The task still awaits completion — and even if Luther had developed the ideal theology of the cross for the sixteenth century, we would still face the task of expressing that theology appropriately for the late twentieth century. Let me give you two examples of how I see the cross determining the shape of doctrine — and how those doctrines then influence pastoral care. The first is the question of discovering God's presence in the world today; the second is the question of the mission of the church.

The cross and crucifixion of Jesus show us where to discover God's hidden presence and action in the world today. God in Christ identified with the weak and powerless. In his lifetime Jesus was criticized for eating with prostitutes and touching lepers. In his death he was crucified like a slave. The powerful and religious feared, rejected, and killed Him. This tells us something about God — God identifies with slaves, prostitutes, and lepers. God hides himself among the lowest scum of society.

So a contemporary *theologia crucis* will begin with God's hidden work among the weak and suffering today. The *theologia crucis* teaches us not to look for God in the cathedral or capitol, but to notice him sleeping on an urban street corner. Of course, we say, these homeless bums are not God. Of course; yet Jesus says: "The least of these are my brothers." If, as Nietzsche says, Christianity is a religion of slaves,⁶ we should look among the slaves to discover what God is doing in the world today.

Perhaps the best place to begin looking for God in the modern world is with the victims of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel relates this story from Auschwitz:

The SS hung two Jewish men and a boy before the assembled inhabitants of the camp. The men died quickly but the death struggle of the boy lasted half an hour. "Where is God? Where is he?" a man behind me asked. As the boy, after a long time, was still in agony on the rope, I heard the man cry again, "Where is God now?" And I heard a voice within me answer, "Here he is — he is hanging here on this gallows...."⁷

As Christians, who bear a special responsibility, we must affirm that the Spirit of Christ was in Auschwitz with the Jews, suffering and dying with them. From this point we can trace the work of God in the modern world from his presence with those who died at Hiroshima to his presence with those who are dying in El Salvador and Ethiopia.

A theology of the cross sets forth the crucifixion of Jesus as the primal story and paradigm for the church. Under the cross, the church shares in the suffering of its Lord Jesus. The New Testament uses this as a primary motif in its description of Christian discipleship. Mark on several occasions points out that disciples will share the fate of

6. Cf. e.g., Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*.

7. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Stella Rodway, tr. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 70f.

their master. Paul especially made a close connection between the life of the church and the suffering and death of Christ.⁸ The life of the church and the life of the Christian are inseparably connected with the suffering of Jesus. But carrying your cross is not putting up quietly with the minor traumas of everyday life. It is a specific act of solidarity with the victims of the powers of this world. Under the cross, the church chooses to suffer alongside the victims of this world.

This leads to a consideration of the relationship of the hidden church to the institutional church. The Lord of the church is one who gives his life in death for others. How can the church follow him in this service? Can institutions die for others? It is much easier to see how the hidden church can be under the cross, but how is the institutional church to order its life according to the paradigm of the crucifixion? In the first instance, it may be helpful to address the question of goals. Under the cross the goal of the church can never be survival or even success (as defined by North American culture). The goal of any congregation, synod, or national church under the cross will be to order its resources for serving people, whether this leads to institutional success or not. The ideal for the church is not Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, but the Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in San Salvador that worships with armed soldiers at its doors, whose pastor has been jailed and tortured, some of whose members have fled into exile in the United States and Canada, and yet which manages to spend most of its resources operating the Faith and Hope refugee community, offering legal assistance services, feeding the hungry, and preaching the Gospel to the poor.

The implications for pastoral care of approaching the mission of the church in this way are great. Those who are called into the pastoral ministry of a church that is the community of the cross cannot define their ministries as the achievement of programmatic success or as assisting the middle class to cope with the traumas of life in North American suburbia. Pastoral care becomes the ministry of enabling people to see the world and their own lives through the eyes of the God who frees slaves. At the same time the North American middle class cannot be written off as a hopeless case, especially middle class Christians who have a tradition of service to neighbor and who, as long as the Holy Spirit exists, have the potential for faithful service in the future. The people of congregations need to be called to undergo a paradigm shift from the myth of free enterprise to the story of the crucifixion, but such a shift can only be facilitated by pastors who love their people and serve them with compassion.

In pastoral ministry it is especially important to adopt an attitude toward suffering which is determined by the story of the cross. The God of the cross is not a God who causes suffering, but a God who identifies with those who suffer and chooses to suffer with them. God in Christ takes suffering upon himself as a conscious act of solidarity with suffering people. Dorothee Soelle has raised two important questions in regard to suffering. The first is: "What are the causes of suffering, and how can these conditions be eliminated?" The second is: "What is the meaning and under what conditions can it make us more human?"⁹

8. Cf. Erhard S. Gerstenberger and Wolfgang Schrage, *Suffering*, John E. Steely, tr. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), pp. 180ff.

9. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, Everett R. Kalin, tr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 5.

The cross, as well as the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve, teaches us that the source of suffering is to be sought not in God, but in the world where fallen human beings interact with one another. Thus, to answer the question of the cause and elimination of suffering, pastoral theologians — hopefully that includes all pastors and all theologians — will need to use the findings of political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists who concern themselves with the discovery of social and cultural systems and relationships, and with the place of individuals within these systems and relationships.

The question of the meaning of suffering and growth through suffering is the ultimate pastoral question. I am not sure at this moment what the answers are or even how best to pursue them. Most of the material I have read seems to run along the surface of the question rather than descend to the depths of the reality of suffering. I am not sure that I can offer anything better, but I am convinced that if we are ever to plumb the depths of the meaning of suffering it will have to be done under the guidance of the theology of the cross.

No doubt the church in North America will survive the late twentieth century — after all, Christ has promised us that his church will be present in the world until the last day. The question to which we who study and teach theology must address ourselves is whether our church on this continent will continue to preach an authentic message. When the year 2000 arrives will the dominant message be “Possibility Thinking,” “Positive Confession,” prosperity theology, and pseudo-Christian nationalism or will it be the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Word of the cross? As St. Paul told the Corinthians, “I made up my mind to forget everything except Jesus Christ and especially his death on the cross.” We have come to a point in the history of North American Christianity when Paul’s desire must become our own, when the *theologia crucis* is a necessity. The church on this continent and the culture of this continent need desperately to hear the Word of the cross in language they can understand. As theologians and pastors it is our duty to respond to this need with a contemporary and indigenous theology of the cross.