

January 22, 2017

I Corinthians 1:18:

“The Word of the Cross”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Making the sign of the cross is often considered by Lutherans to be Roman Catholic. Yet, Martin Luther suggested the sign of the cross as a daily practice, even directing in his *Small Catechism*, "When you get up/when you go to bed, make the sign of the holy cross and say: 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.'" However, making the sign of the cross is a matter of Christian freedom. You may or may not feel comfortable doing it, and that's okay. Nevertheless, when one makes the sign of the cross, it is supposed to be an indication that we have been marked by Christ crucified.

Christians through the ages have found great comfort and strength in the outward action as it serves as a powerful reminder of our daily participation in the death of Christ in Holy Baptism. Paul writes: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin (Romans 6:5-6)." In making the sign of the cross we are saying, "I am always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus might be seen in me. And I will rise with him and see God. Therefore, even in the midst of suffering and death, I do not lose heart, for all of this will give way to "an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor. 4:17)."

Indeed! We look forward to glory in the face of God. Paul calls all of this in our epistle lesson: "**The Word of the Cross.**" The unbelieving world and most of American Christianity marches to a different tune. At the time of Paul, the church in Corinth was having a very difficult time with **The Word of the Cross** as they were caught up in the cult of personalities, glamour, success, and prestige. They wanted a different word, the word of glory even in a fallen and inglorious world. Glory was not to be in the future for them, but now. In thesis 20 of the *Heidelberg Disputation of 1518*, Luther cites 1 Cor. 1:21, 25, and continues: "It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise . . . For this reason true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ."

The crucified Christ is not simply a part of the message, but the whole message and only message of the Church of Jesus on earth. The hymn says, "In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time." Any pursuit of glory down here apart from Christ crucified - **The Word of the Cross** - ends up nothing but a wreck. It will only puff up a person so that he does nothing but find and love himself. It is really difficult to accept that in this life God can only be found and retained in suffering and the cross, but that is the case. After all, our Lord Jesus wasn't kidding when he said, "if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23)." A person must be deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil that he may know that he is worthless and that his works are not his own but God's.

All of this is really tough to swallow, because it requires us to accept that the glory story is reserved for us and all Christians on the occasion of our own Happy Easter, to paraphrase Steven A. Hein in his book *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?* With this understanding in mind, he later writes:

Cross life begins from the splashing of grace in Baptism which unites the sinner with the death of the crucified Christ. There in the cross, the Christian lives as a dual citizen of this world and the Kingdom of God until he is translated into the glorified life of Christ. Luther labeled as theologies of glory all distortions of the Gospel that would promise the Christian elements of glory in this life if he will perfect or offer spiritual things that deserve God's favor. Any promise that would grant to the believer in this life some reprieve or release from the experience of his own sinfulness or that of others and this world, Luther would characterize as a theology of glory.

Now, we need to be careful that we don't go off the deep end here. We are not trying to negate the gifts of God down here, or wonderful moments, a miraculous answer to prayer, God working in our lives, or even what we might say is a "good life." But, these are not our expectations as if these things are supposed to happen if we just believe in Jesus Christ. And, we are certainly not advocating the idea that we should be weeping and wailing all the time, rolling around in abject agony. After all, the apostle Paul does write, "rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice . . . whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Phil. 4:4-9)." So then, what are we saying?

We are saying this: trials, tribulations, and spiritual anxiety are normal Christian experiences for all who call themselves Christian and they are ongoing in varying degrees. They should be expected because we participate in the crucifixion of Jesus - we are marked. Again, Hein:

" . . . life in Christ will continue to have the gates of Hell rattling around us, producing spiritual warfare from within and without. Christians are saved by faith alone, but it [faith] will not be left alone as we sojourn through the valley of the shadow of death. It [faith] will be assaulted continually by the unholy triad - the world, the flesh, and the Devil."

So, whether we make the sign of the cross or not, we are participants in the death of our Lord. That means that we are forgiven for all of our sins, we have died to sin and die daily, we are being renewed inwardly but not yet perfected, and we suffer the sufferings of Jesus, as he says, "a servant is not greater than his master." But, as Jesus rose in glory, so will we rise with him and glory in his glory! We do not lose heart since we are marked with his cross. Rather, we see things in a different way and live our lives in complete submission to the will of our Lord, for we know that no matter what the will of God might be in the particulars, we believe that the particulars are designed to take us to the glory of heaven.

Pastor Richard Eyer served as a Lutheran hospital chaplain. In his book, *Pastoral Care Under the Cross*, he tells of a patient by the name of Mr. Witt, who required kidney dialysis and was in the intensive care unit following an open-heart surgery. Whenever Pastor Eyer would pray with him - asking that God's will would be done - Mr. Witt would make the sign of the cross.

One day his daughter visited him full of smiles, bubbling over with reassurances, telling her father not to worry, that God would heal him. "But somehow her father doesn't seem comforted by this," Pastor

Eyer recalls, “and turns to me to make the sign of the cross.” Pastor Eyer observes: “There is no place for weakness and suffering in her understanding of the will of God. He [Mr. Witt] knows that it is the cross that lies at the heart of one’s confidence in the Lord.”

Indeed! **The Word of the Cross** - when times are deemed good or bad - even when death is looming around the corner. Here there is no *quid pro quo* with God, or “I do this for you and you do this for me.” There is only **The Word of the Cross**. Here one only relishes their death and resurrection with Christ, and therefore asks: “Thy Will Be Done!” because God’s will is always good. I leave you with this final thought from Pastor Eyer:

As much as parishioners may want to see the hand of God in nature’s beautiful sunrises moving stories of conversion, or success in parish programs, it is in the cross of Christ and in bearing their own crosses that God chooses to reveal his heart to them. [With the theology of glory], we will begin to demand that God justify himself to us in our sufferings by giving us healing and success. We will demand a God who does what we want him to do, and we will reject the way of the cross by which He comes to us. We will become fearful of suffering and preoccupied with its avoidance at the expense of truth and faithfulness.

May we never embrace the theology of glory, but embrace the heart of God in the cross of Christ!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott