

What Happens on the Cross? An Interchange and Conversation

Part 1

Colleagues,

In Part III of the Smalcald Articles, Luther lists what others would call “means of grace,” or as Luther puts it himself, ways by which the Gospel “offers counsel and help against sin.” There are five of these, he says: the spoken word, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the power of the keys, and “the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren” (SA III.iv, Tappert).

This week and next we send you a splendid example of what the last of these is about. You’re going to see a conversation between two pastors who didn’t know each other when the talking began. What launched it was a surprising response to a recent post that we thought would gladden hearts and put smiles on faces all around. It came from Pastor Richard Hoyer, who sent us an open letter to Pastor Ron Neustadt about the sermon he preached on August 9 at the ordination of Candice Stone ([ThTheol 828](#)). As you’ll see today, Pr. Hoyer was less than happy with what he saw there. He cares profoundly for the Gospel. It seemed to him that the cross of Christ had been under-preached, and he dared to say so. His reasoning is instructive, and it’s worth a careful look.

Now, as a rule, the world being the sinful mess it is, one would expect a critique like this to provoke an angry, defensive response. But knowing a little of Pr. Neustadt, we guessed at a different outcome, and sent him the letter, and got what we had guessed at. You’ll see that next week. And there too you’ll be instructed, not only in matters Christological, but also in the

look of pastoral integrity and the sound of faith acting in love, and not only on Pr. Neustadt's end of things, but on Pr. Hoyer's too. Good and blessed things can happen when brothers and sisters talk candidly in the strength of Christ and his Spirit. Through conversation comes the consolation we all require. For that, thanks be to God.

Does it bear mentioning that Pastors Hoyer and Neustadt were taught how to preach by the same great teacher, Richard Caemmerer? I think so; also that both have blessed us with Thursday Theology contributions over the past year or so. You'll find their contribution here to be a special treat.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

Dear Pastor,

I am dismayed by the theology in your sermon at the ordination of Pr. Candice Stone, recently published on Crossings' Thursday Theology. It does not seem to me to reflect a "theology of the cross" at all. Indeed, it seems to me to negate it. In the spirit of St. Paul, who, with Barnabas, went to Jerusalem to talk with "acknowledged leaders" about the gospel he proclaimed, "in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain," here's my dismay. Am I running in vain?

It seems to me that there is a sort of theology du jour circulating, reacting to a theology of the cross which proclaims that our Lord, through the cross, accomplished our reconciliation with the Holy One. The reaction speaks in terms of rejecting a "blood theology," accusing that theology of describing God as a "child abuser," and even going so far as to call it "throwing red meat to an angry God." Anselm's theory of

atonement gets dismissed with disdain in the process, throwing out not only the theory but also the fact of atonement (reconciliation) by the blood of the cross. Instead we hear only that the cross is a sort of visual aid to the message of his forgiving love. The cross doesn't accomplish anything, it only backs up what he tells us about God's forgiving love. The cross is not necessary, it is only sad.

I am dismayed because I hear in your sermon that distortion (as I see it) of the Gospel and rejection (as I see it) of a theology of the cross. It seems to me that you are saying that our Savior came (merely) to "offer us God's forgiveness." He was killed "because he made that offer." God raised him from death in order to back up God's offer of forgiveness.

As I hear you, you are telling us that Jesus didn't accomplish anything; he only showed us something. Anselm (who spoke of atonement) is wrong; Abelard (who said the cross only shows us how much God loves us) was right (this in spite of the church's historical judgment for Anselm).

Don't misunderstand; I'm not defending Anselm's theory. We can dismiss it if we must, but we dare not dismiss the fact that "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Like those who throw the baby out with the bathwater, the theology du jour (it seems to me), throws out the mystery of the atonement, the theology of the cross, with Anselm's watery theory. Does not a theology of the cross proclaim an atonement, a reconciliation with God, made by God himself, a mystery beyond explanation? Do you not distort that theology, yes, the Gospel itself, by making the cross merely a lynching by unhappy people who were threatened by his message? It seems that way to me, hence my dismay.

Does not the creed we have promised to uphold say "*crucifixus*

etiam pro nobis”? He died “for us.” He did not die simply because some people didn’t like him.

Do we not say at every Eucharist, “... my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin”? For us! He shed his blood for our forgiveness! The cross was not merely a sad mistake made by vengeful sinners. Does not St. Paul write (in Romans 3:25), “...the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood...”? We sing it in the hymn, “God’s own sacrifice complete”!

Does not the Apostle also say (in Romans 5:9), “Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God”?

One could go on and on: Eph. 1:7, 2:13, Col. 1:14, 20, 1 Peter 1:19, Heb. 9:22, etc.

Am I “running in vain?” Or are you preaching the theology du jour rather than of the cross? Help me out here. Ease my dismay.

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