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PREFACE

In every age the church has had to deal with litmus tests of orthodoxy. The litmus test helps the Christian to distinguish between genuine, biblical Christianity on the one hand and corrupted or counterfeit versions of the faith on the other. One famous theologian said that the tests over the centuries could be illustrated by the figure of a church building. During the first three or four centuries, attacks on genuine Christianity were directed chiefly at the cross on the top, as heretics attacked the Bible's teaching concerning the person of Christ. The Nicene Creed was the answer of the faithful church to those attacks. During the next thousand years, the litmus test of genuine Christianity dealt with the body of the church building, that is, the definition of what the church itself is, its fundamental message, the nature of its authority, and its work. The Reformation, in no small part, dealt with those questions. From the 18th century on, the litmus test has dealt with the foundation on which the church rests, on the origin and authority of the sacred Scriptures. In other words, are they the infallible and verbally inspired Word of God and the only ultimate authority for the doctrine and life of the church, or are they merely fallible human records of what people believed in the days when the various books of the Bible were written?

What is the litmus test of genuine Christianity today? The old tests can never be completely put away; attacks on the person and work of Christ, attacks on the purpose and nature of the church, attacks on the source and authority of the Bible are renewed in every age. And yet each age has its own special litmus test in addition to these universal and ever resurfacing ones. What might a special litmus test for our day be? Could it be the theology of the cross that separates genuine Christianity from corrupted and counterfeit versions of the same?

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We see on every hand a desire to make Christianity fun and happy-go-lucky. Some churches and their leaders go so far as to claim that God really wants Christians always to be healthy, wealthy, and wise. Others turn worship services into hours of self-discovery; the goal is to give the Christian personal fulfillment and better character. If the individual can learn to get along better with himself, then he will get along better with everyone else too, and God should be happy about that. Still others are obsessed with the notion that the true church should be successful, big, and influential in world and national politics. Within the church, no matter what denominational label the particular church may wear, many members want to be their own bible; they want the freedom to pick and choose what doctrines to believe and what behavior to praise or blame. Their choices change with their circumstances of the moment, and woe betide any preacher who tells them on the basis of the Scriptures that they are wrong and their choices damnable in the eyes of God. All of that is a theology of glory, a theology which lets man be his own god and turns the God of the Bible into a creature subject to personal whims of the moment.

The God of the Bible—the one, true, and only God, however, is the God of the cross. Jesus calls us to submission under his cross and then to bear the cross that he sends us and by which he marks us as his own. He did not come to entertain but to redeem us by his blood. He does not call us to be our own gods but to bend low before his cross in total submission to his Word and then to the cross that he is pleased to send. The cross of his own sending always and of necessity and by definition means struggle for us. The cross is not merely a piece of jewelry worn around the neck but pain carried on the heart and in the soul. Jesus calls us to the cross and sends one after another for us to bear. He bids us imitate him in stumbling under its sometimes crushing weight and to cry out in anguish as he did in the midst of its pain. All of that seems so, well, so un-American. We pursue pleasure, and for every pain there should be an instant remedy. We are addicted to entertainment and want church to be entertaining too. We shun any notion that we live in a veil of tears, in *einem rechten Jammerthal*, as our forefathers put it. We think that anyone who is in physical or spiritual pain must

be sick and in need of therapy that will make him happy again—and soon!

At the same time, the Bible tells us that in the midst of suffering and under the cross, we should rejoice. Yes, it tells us to rejoice constantly and precisely because we are suffering under the weight of the cross that crushes and threatens to destroy us. It assures us again and again that those who rejoice without the cross and those who suffer without joy understand neither true joy nor the value of the cross that God has sent.

So we come again to the question: Could the theology of the cross be the litmus test of genuine Christianity in our day? The corrupt and the counterfeit push aside the whole concept of cross bearing in favor of a joy without it. Fake Christianity offers the Christian an imitation of Christ's glory in heaven, not of his humiliation on earth. The phony and the artificial church turns worship into a spiritual happy hour devoid of repentance, with cheap absolution, with no thought of taking God seriously in either the law or the gospel. And people love it. They still get to be their own god, their own bible, their own source of ultimate truth and salvation.

In the pages that follow, we will search the mind of God, as he has revealed it in his holy and inerrant Word, for his definition of Christian faith and life under the cross, under his cross and ours. We will wrestle with the seeming contradiction of the necessity of cross bearing and rejoicing at the same time. We will strive to bend our minds and hearts and souls beneath his cross and our own. Then we will rise under the healing balm of the gospel in his Word and sacraments to rejoice evermore in his cross and ours, until he takes us from the imitation of his cross to the enjoyment of his glory in heaven.

May God bless our consideration of his Word and the cross for the glory of his name and the strengthening of our life from him, to him, in him!

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What Is the Theology of the Cross?

Our first hearing of the phrase *theology of the cross* might give us no pause at all as to its definition. After all, the cross is what Christianity is all about—the cross of Christ. Surely by a *theology of the cross* we mean a theology that is fixed on Christ and his cross, on the work of our redemption. Certainly any theology worthy of the name is always stamped by the mark of the cross of him who died for us and for our salvation and then rose to proclaim his triumph for us over death and hell. His cross and resurrection are the beginning, the middle, the end, the all-in-all of our theology, our faith in this life and our hope of heaven in the life to come. But when we speak of the *theology of the cross* in dogmatic theology, we are speaking not only about Christ's cross but also about our cross, the cross of the Christian in his life of faith. While never losing sight of Jesus' cross, it is the cross he sends *us* that will also occupy our attention in this book. The centrality of his cross will never be far from our minds, and in the center of the book it will

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be our chief concern. But in much of this work our focus will be on the results of his cross in our cross; we will examine how the two are never separated, how they are intertwined, and how the one defines the other as to content and purpose. It is, as we shall have occasion to repeat often, his cross alone that saves. It is the cross he sends us that sums up so much of our life of hope and expectation for the glory yet to be revealed in eternity.

Jesus himself gives us the reason to speak thus about the connection between his cross and ours, about the centrality of his cross for our salvation and our cross in a life that is faithful to him and to his Word. He promises that we will bear the cross as a necessary consequence of following him. He spells it out for us in sharpest clarity when he declares:

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. (Mk 8:34-38)

In our consideration of the theology of the cross, we want to examine this promise of Jesus with some care. Every word he speaks on the subject of the Christian's cross is so carefully chosen. And the subject itself is so weighty and broad that it embraces all of the Christian's life without ever being exactly the same from year to year or from person to person. We will therefore consider first of all those aspects of the theology of the cross that define it and that apply universally. In subsequent chapters we will examine particular and changing aspects of the cross in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church.

Characteristics of the Christian's cross

Notice first that Jesus makes the cross for his followers a *consequence*, not a cause, of discipleship. He is addressing those in

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whom the gospel has already created faith and who now wish to follow him. Immediately before the promise of the cross for his disciples, Jesus spoke plainly of his own cross, of his impending passion, and of his resurrection after his suffering. It is his cross that saves, not ours. Nor does our cross contribute to our salvation—no, not in the least part. Even our faith is a gift that comes from his cross, from the proclamation of the gospel that we have been redeemed by his cross alone and not our own. It was after he had announced the saving work that he was about to complete for us that he turned to the crowd and to his disciples and announced a *consequent cross* for all who in such faith would follow him.

How shocking those words of Jesus must have sounded in the ears of all who heard them! Indeed, Peter speaks for us all according to the flesh when he takes Jesus aside to instruct his Lord that such a thing as a cross for the Son of God was altogether out of the question. When Jesus then announced that not only he himself but all who follow him would bear a cross, Peter must have been stunned into silence. If he did not want Jesus to carry a cross, we should not expect that he would cherish the prospect of carrying one himself.

The cross for the Christian is a consequence of discipleship. It is a *necessary* consequence. No cross, no Christian! It is the cross that marks the Christian as a Christian. Those who are ashamed of the cross in this life, both his and their own, will see the Son of God ashamed of them at the last judgment. Could there be a more horrible prospect than that? Could there be a more pummeling hammer against our sinful flesh? The flesh wants to hear nothing of a cross and certainly does not want to carry one. But Jesus is insistent and makes the whole matter still more emphatic by putting it all into the singular. Not *all those* but *anyone*. Not *they* but *he*. Not a single soul who follows him should ever think that he will be able to hide cross-less in the crowd of cross-bearers and so escape its weight and its pain. Not one Christian should imagine that he could meet Jesus on the Last Day without the sign of the cross.

A third characteristic of the cross, a characteristic wrapped in the word itself, is that the cross is *heavy and painful*. The pain and even the awareness of the cross may change from year to

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year in the Christian's life. But nevertheless a cross there is; a cross there must be. A sermon from the pulpit or a lesson in the classroom, therefore, that tries to make Christianity sound painless, effortless, easy, entertaining, or just a Sunday morning jaunt to the happy place of souls is counterfeit Christianity. Luther expressed it well in his Large Catechism. In his comments on the Third Petition of the Lord's Prayer he says this:

For where God's Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind. And let no one think that we will have peace; rather, we must sacrifice all we have on earth—possessions, honor, house and farm, spouse and children, body and life. Now, this grieves our flesh and the old creature, for it means that we must remain steadfast, suffer patiently whatever befalls us, and let go whatever is taken from us. (Large Catechism, Third Petition, par. 65,66; Kolb, pp. 448,449.)

All of these calamities can come as a result of the gospel and have befallen many because of their faithfulness to the Word. That these calamities do not always come is only because God often has chosen to spare us. Luther's point is that we should have a mind-set that understands and is ready to let everything go because of the gospel. He makes the same point in his great hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," especially in the fourth stanza (*Christian Worship*, 200). Even if our cross does not have the dimensions and the weight of those described by Luther in the Large Catechism, nevertheless a cross there will be; a cross there must be!

The liturgy addresses the needs of cross-bearers

The Sunday morning liturgy assumes the constancy of the cross in the Christian's life. The liturgy is addressed to cross-bearers. We do not come to church to do our own thing, anymore than we go to the emergency room in the hospital to do our own thing. We go to both places wounded, in need of help that only comes from another. We go to both places for healing, where our opinion and preference is of no consequence; only that of the healer matters.

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The confession of sins assumes that we come into the house of the Lord in pain, aching at heart for the balm and soothing ointment of pardon and peace from God because of our still sinful condition and the abundant proofs of that condition in our lives. The cry of the “Kyrie,” “Lord, have mercy,” is the cry even of the forgiven sinner, who recognizes his continuing weakness both in body and in soul. It comes from the heart of one whose life knows needs of both body and soul that cannot be supplied apart from the mercy of God. Even the exultant “Gloria in Excelsis” repeats again the refrain of cross-bearers through the ages: “O Christ, have mercy and hear my cry; O Christ, have mercy!”

From beginning to end, the whole of the worship service addresses the Christian’s varied needs under the weight of the cross. And at the same time it gives abundant opportunity to worship and adore and give thanks to *the* Cross-Bearer for the help and rescue granted in Word and sacraments. Preaching and teaching that does not take the mark of the cross on the Christian into account is missing the mark. It is the presence of the cross that makes the Christian realize his need for comfort under the cross and the gift of strength to bear it. Without such comfort and strengthening, each believer will lose heart, be crushed under its weight, and finally fall into despair. And tragically, his heart may become so cold and his soul so blind that he doesn’t even realize that he has been crushed; his despair may finally be a deadness to any spiritual life at all.

It is to the Christian, who is made aware of the cross by events in his life and by preaching and teaching, that Jesus promises rest and refreshment in the pronouncement of absolution, in the readings for the day, and in the sermon. And it is in response to these that the cross-bearer sings exultantly his thanks and praise to God in the rest of the liturgy and in so many of the hymns. So effective is the consolation to the cross-bearers that we join with one another in the confident expression of the faith worked by the Word to cheer and encourage one another: *I (we) believe!* we confidently declare on the basis of comfort and strength received in Word and sacrament.

Jesus sums up his response to our need as cross-bearers so beautifully when he tenderly invites us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my

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yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30). If the Christian had no cross to bear, he would need nothing of what Jesus promises in these verses. Nor would he have the least yearning for it. But in point of fact the cross-bearer is often worn out in his heart and parched in his soul. He comes to the Savior in the Word and the sacrament, longing for relief. That longing is not, however, for a life of ease without the cross. No, that could never be! For Christ has promised the cross and promised that it will not go away until the Christian enters into the glory prepared for all who follow under the sacred sign of the cross. Jesus carefully words his promise in Matthew 11 with that in mind. The word translated as "rest" would be better translated as "refreshment." Rest, final rest, comes at the end, but that is not what Jesus is talking about in this promise. This is a promise for a refreshment that enables the cross-bearer to get back to the labor and the load. The labor and the load become light not because they have disappeared but because of Jesus' promise that the yoke is his yoke and the burden his burden. We therefore carry and endure it with him and in his company. That is the company of one who loved us all the way to his cross, to hell and back.

The pain of the cross is at the heart of the Christian's joy

The simple fact that the Christian's cross sends him running again and again to his Savior for help, for strength, for refreshment should be reason enough for us to rejoice in cross bearing. For without the cross there would be no such constant recourse to him in Word and sacrament. At best, the running would degenerate into a casual or occasional Sunday morning stroll; the confession under the cross that the flesh is unwilling and the spirit still weak would become nothing more than a polite formality. The exaltation of the *Gloria in Excelsis* that follows the words of absolution would be no more than routine ritual. Luther makes the point eloquently in his comments on the Sixth and Seventh petitions of the Lord's Prayer in his Large Catechism. Every hour, he says, the Christian is subject to torment and temptation; today he stands, tomorrow he falls; today it is this trial, tomorrow that. Therefore we have reason to cry out

in every hour, not for a life of ease without the cross, but for rescue and help in bearing it. For temptation (*Anfechtung*) of every sort is what Christ has told us we will have in this life, and it is help and rescue in the midst of it that he promises in the Word and sacraments.

The cross and the Christian's will

Notice too an astonishing thing about this theology of the cross, as Jesus defines and outlines it for us. *It involves the Christian's will!* Jesus speaks in Mark 8, previously cited, of what we *want* to do. Who would have thought it? Again we call to mind Peter's protest when Jesus spoke of his own cross. But Jesus had to take up the cross if the world was to be redeemed. And just as Jesus had to take it up willingly, so too must the Christian. Jesus does not say that he is going to impose the cross contrary to the will of his followers. He calls on the Christian, expects the Christian, to embrace the cross and to embrace it willingly. St. Paul understood that perhaps better than anyone when he declared:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, *but we also rejoice in our sufferings . . .* (Ro 5:1-3)

Jesus embraces and captures the soul in the proclamation of full redemption, full forgiveness as an accomplished fact and received by faith alone. So fully does he capture us by that message that the new will of the Christian, given by the Spirit through the gospel, rejoices to follow him under the cross of suffering. Only a Christian or a lunatic could understand that! The new will of the Christian may be weak in its embrace of the cross. Its weakness consists of a still-powerful sinful nature that surrounds it, that threatens to engulf and swallow it up. It may take a long time under the cross before the Christian will so triumph over the sinful will that he not only surrenders to the cross but rejoices in it. And that surrender may be a roller-coaster ride

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that lasts a lifetime. But ultimately the reality of the cross as a blessing (in German we always called it *das liebe Kreuz!*—the *dear* cross) sinks in, in part now, in full when we arrive at its consummation in glory.

Only the proclamation of the work of Jesus on his cross and its blessed result can move the Christian to imitate Christ in a willing and even joyful embrace of the cross. St. Paul inspires the will and kindles that joy in the great *sedes doctrinae** for Christ's states of humiliation and exaltation in Philippians 2:5-11. He begins that whole glorious section on the work of Christ for us with an appeal to the Christian's will. He says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus." The apostle has just that short line about our will and then a long and graphic account of Christ's will accomplished in lowliness for us, in suffering for us, on the cross for us, and then in resurrected glory also for us. It is all that Christ did in his humiliation on the cross that moves us to an attitude and will that imitates his. Just so, Jesus speaks first of his cross and then of ours in Mark 8, as he works to conform our will to his. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews speaks in the same way. First he exults in Christ's suffering for us, and then he speaks of our suffering at the hands of a loving Father who only disciplines us for our good (Heb 12:1-11); it is that love of the Father which moves our will to submit to the momentary pain of the Father's discipline.

But what if our attitude is not the same as the attitude of Christ? What if our will resists the cross? The simple fact of the matter is that our will is not yet completely renewed. The renewed will, as already noted, is still weak because we still have the old will, the will of fallen man, which always resists the cross. That is why St. Paul's appeal, like that of Christ himself in Mark 8, is to the *Christian* will, the will that has been born through the proclamation of the gospel. For the Christian always has two natures; he retains the fallen will inherited from Adam and Eve. At the same time, through the proclamation of the

**Sedes doctrinae* is a technical term in theology. It means the "seat of the doctrine." The *sedes doctrinae* is usually one passage in the Bible that most completely sums up that particular doctrine. Other passages may speak of the same doctrine, may add depth and dimension to it, but it is the *sedes doctrinae* that best sums it up.

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gospel in the Word and in the Sacrament of Baptism, he receives an altogether new will, a will that wants only what God wants, a will that loves its source—Christ in Word and sacraments. These two wills remain in conflict our whole life long, as St. Paul so graphically testifies in Romans 7:14-25. In the matter of cross bearing, it is only the new will that truly submits to the cross. The old will hates it, resists it, and tries with all its waning powers to throw it off. St. Peter uses the analogy of a newborn baby when speaking of the new will; still weak, still immature, it yearns for the pure milk of the Word that it may grow and become stronger (1 Pe 2:2). Again, the need for that milk to strengthen the new will is an ongoing one; it lasts a lifetime.

It is a fact that each Christian carries the cross as he follows Christ. It is a fact that such cross bearing is not optional but a necessary consequence of faith. It is a fact that the cross is often difficult and painful. It is a fact that the Christian embraces the cross willingly, even joyfully according to his new man. Though all of this is nonsense to the world, it is the ultimate rationality for Christ and those who follow him. Jesus makes that clear when he sets up the alternative in Mark 8. The alternative to cross bearing is the forfeit of the soul, that is, the forfeit of eternal life.

Why would anyone want to forfeit eternal life? What a horrible thing to contemplate, much less actually do! But that is exactly what those do who are ashamed of Christ and his Word, who therefore shun the cross that comes to those who follow him. It's an axiom: No cross, no Christian! Would someone trade in the cross in exchange for the whole world and all that it has to offer? A poor exchange indeed, even if it were possible! For the temporary and perishing world would come at the expense of eternal blessedness and would finally result in eternal torment. In reality no such exchange is possible. In point of fact, those who aim at such an exchange never get the whole world. They settle for far less. They get tinsel, not gold; they get baubles, not treasure; they get the fleeting and transitory, not the durable and the eternal. If the whole world weighed in the balance is a fool's bargain, how much more so isn't its tinsel and perishable pleasure? Thus, for example, the one who buys popularity with one compromise of principle after another ends up ashamed and disgraced often in

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this life and certainly in the one to come. The one who trades listening to the Word for work and wealth ends up with health ruined, wealth gone, and an eternity of the utmost poverty with the rest of the damned. The one who shuns the cross of struggle against the flesh and chases after pleasure as the goal of existence ends up frustrated and always dissatisfied in this life and covered with disgrace and eternal suffering in the next.

Joyful cross bearing

Jesus' brilliant discussion in Mark 8:34-38 of the alternative to cross bearing helps move the Christian's will to embrace what appears to many as a glaring contradiction in the Bible. It helps move the Christian will to embrace *joyful suffering*. Joyful suffering seems to be such a contradiction in terms that we need to focus our attention on the nature of joy in suffering. For both the suffering and the joy are real. The cross is indeed painful. The writer to the Hebrews recognizes that when he says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful" (Heb 12:11). Yet so many passages in the Bible exhort us to a constant joy. To cite but one of the more striking examples, St. Paul makes joy a Christian imperative in Philippians 4:4 when he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" The astonishing thing about the insistence on joy in Philippians is that this epistle is one of Paul's prison epistles. He wrote it while he was shut off from much of the work he lived for. He wrote it while separated from beloved members of the churches he served and from many of his friends and coworkers. Still he insists on joy! How can the Bible insist that we should rejoice when it speaks with equal insistence about the necessity of suffering?

Each one of Paul's epistles is an answer to the question, and Peter's first epistle is a commentary that deals with the seeming paradox in every chapter: Suffering and joy are two sides of the same coin in the Christian's life. That elemental fact is what distinguishes the Christian's suffering under the cross from the suffering of the unbelieving world. Suffering without joy is the sorrow of the world in the ordinary course of things; it is sorrow and nothing but sorrow over the pain of sickness and death, over the anguish of loneliness or of human failure, over the bitter fruit stolen from a tree that promised pleasure but gave only