

Nice Lutheran schools? Glory or cross in the education marketplace

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Brooklyn (US) public school, I.S. 293 (now known as the Boerum Hill School for International Studies) is a confronting example from the 1960s of how commendable educational aspirations can fail. The *New York Times* podcast series *Nice white parents* reflects on the history of a single building with a succession of names over its years and with a series of educational institutions within its walls over that time.¹ Yet I.S. 293 is a school in which much the same story has played out again and again.

The podcast traces the efforts of a group of idealistic white parents to promote racial integration in a proposed local public school. Towards the end of Episode 1 we are whisked out of the humble school in an economically disadvantaged and racially diverse area into a swish gala in Upper Manhattan. Few of the guests have any attachment to I.S. 293. Most have been invited because they are wealthy, potential supporters of a new dual-language French program attached to the school, promoted as something of value to the whole student body. The program ends up being all but irrelevant for those in the school who need the most support. The idealistic push for racial integration in I.S. 293 by ‘nice white parents’ had somehow taken a turn to a quite different destination. Many had previously lobbied their Board of Education through a letter campaign declaring they did not want their children to be part of some ‘small, white, middle-income clique.’ They wanted the proposed new school in their neighbourhood to be racially integrated. Of those writers, none ended up enrolling children in I.S. 293.

Nice white parents offers sobering insights about a range of issues: public vs private education, the disproportionate influence of powerful parent groups on educational priorities, the question of who really knows what is best for different minority and racial groups, and the real versus imagined value of racial integration for learning. What piqued this writer’s interest most, though, was how fundamental and honourable educational intentions can be left unrealised, and how that story of I.S. 293 can be easily replicated in Lutheran schools when it comes to honourable intentions about faithfulness to their Lutheran identity. When these schools find themselves competing with other school systems in the marketplace of education, it takes more than good intentions to resist the temptation to put aside core beliefs in order to appeal to the marketplace.

The particular core belief in mind here is the theology of the cross. What follows is first an explanation of the nature of the theology of the cross and why it matters, and then a consideration of the challenges and opportunities for Lutheran schools seeking to be faithful to that theology within the education marketplace.

1 Serial Productions, a New York Times Company, *Nice white parents*, podcast (July–August 2020), accessed 2 March 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/01/22/podcasts/nice-white-parents-podcast.html.

The theology of the cross and why it matters

It was at the Heidelberg Disputation in April 1518 that Martin Luther first publicly presented his theology of the cross. This was only a short time after publication of Luther's *95 Theses* in October 1517. It is this earlier event which is most commonly regarded as the starting point of the Lutheran Reformation, but the theology Luther outlined at Heidelberg was much more ground-breaking than what was in the *95 Theses*, such that it '...astounded its hearers in 1518 and has not ceased shaking the world's foundations since'.²

So what is Luther's theology of the cross? The theology of the cross is not exclusive to Luther and Lutheran theology, but for the sake of both clarity and brevity Luther's foundational explication of it is what this article is working with.

It is crucial to recognise first of all that the theology of the cross is paradoxical to the core, not something one can make logical sense of. St Paul (1 Cor 1) declares the cross to be both offensive to human thinking and also his only possible message and focus. Bartsch describes it as 'a distinctive way of understanding theology; it provides a lens or filter through which all theology is viewed'.³ It is not simply the cross (or crucifix), though crosses and crucifixes point us to it. It is not the theology of the atonement (Christ died to pay the penalty for human sin), though it is certainly linked to that. For the purpose of this article, it will suffice to think of Luther's theology of the cross as a way of seeing how God works, recognising that the way God works is not what humans naturally expect, and finally recognising that how God works is of the utmost importance for being fully human. That is why Theses 19 and 20 (of the 28) from the Heidelberg Disputation can be regarded as expressing the crux of this theology and so they are quoted in full here, and it is on these that we will focus our attention:

(19) That person is not worthy to be called a theologian who thinks the invisible things of God are observable from events which have actually happened (Rom 1:20; 1 Cor 1:21–25).

(20) Conversely, a person is worthy of being called a theologian who understands the visible and ordered things of God after fixing his sight on the passion and cross of Christ.⁴

By 'events which have actually happened' (Thesis 19) Luther is referring to 'earthly stuff'.⁵ What Luther means is that if we think we can grasp who God is and how God works by observing 'earthly stuff', we will end up with a god of our own fabrication. To illustrate, by studying microbes through a microscope lens, people can draw some preliminary and potentially valid conclusions about the possibility of an astonishingly clever creator god; but if we shift our microscopic attention to the Covid-19 virus, for example, we could

2 Caleb Keith and Kelsi Klembara, eds., *Theology of the Cross: Luther's Heidelberg Disputation and Reflections on Its 28 Theses*, transl. Caleb Keith (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2018), 1.

3 Malcolm Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts: Theology for Teachers in Lutheran Schools* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2013), 119.

4 Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 19–20.

5 Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 6.

find ourselves drawn to the conclusion that this same god has either lost control of the natural world, or is detached from it, or is even malicious. Luther instead would counsel the microscope users to first learn to grasp who God is and how God works by fixing 'their sight on the passion and cross of Christ' (Thesis 20). Then they will be better able to understand 'the visible and ordered things of God' which make up the world in which we live. This example alludes to the core role of schools in supporting learners in their exploring of all aspects of the world through science, the arts, literature and everything else.

The visible world includes humans. It was stated above that recognising that how God works is of the utmost importance for being fully human. That is because to see ourselves through the cross is to recognise ourselves honestly as sinners who need God to reach out to us through Christ and the cross. This is to see ourselves as we really are, and to leave us open to the gospel declaration that through Christ we are 'made whole'. This points to the role of all education and schools in supporting learners in their exploration of what it means to be human and to belong to society as well as the natural world. But more about educational implications in the next section of the article.

This brings us to the matter of theologies of glory, referred to in Thesis 21 where Luther states that 'A theologian of glory says that evil is good and that good is evil. A theologian of the cross says that a thing is what it is.' The theology of the cross and the theology of glory 'are not complementary theologies which we must keep in proper balance and tension. They are, rather, mutually-exclusive, opposing, antithetical theologies'.⁶ Bartsch comments that 'Theology of glory finds difficult the idea of suffering and weakness as seen in the suffering and crucified Jesus Christ but concentrates rather on examples of the power of God. It...can also lead people to rely on their own "good works" to contribute to their status with God rather than relying wholly on the grace of God.'⁷

So theologies of glory dangerously misguide people in their quest to discern how God works by focusing not on the passion and cross of Christ, but on 'earthly stuff'. Recall the microscope example from earlier. Wonderful insights for life are achieved through the work of scientists, philosophers, writers, artists, and others who are not attempting to comprehend God through their disciplines. However, for an understanding of who God is and what the world and humans are about, the cross is where the focus must be to begin with.

The marketplace challenge and the opportunities for Lutheran schools

The term 'marketplace' implies a need for schools to appeal to consumers and with it the temptation to sacrifice a school sector's core beliefs in order to appeal to the marketplace. This temptation is less likely to influence how schools present themselves formally through a website or a prospectus than it is through ongoing operational choices. This is not easy for Lutheran schools as they grapple with the financial realities of student enrolments and the associated need to provide an education program which attracts and retains those

6 John G. Strelan, 'Theologia crucis, theologia gloriae: a study in opposing theologies,' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 23, no. 3 (Dec 1989): 99.

7 Bartsch, *A God Who Speaks and Acts*, 121.

enrolments. Christenson sympathises with this challenge when he asserts that ‘Lutherans see God’s love for a sinful humanity in the cross. When God embraces us and our sinful world, that embrace takes the form of the cross. We might wish it were otherwise but that is the reality of it. *An ad agent might advise Christians to choose a new logo, but this is the one the suffering and dying God chose.*’⁸ The dilemma could be depicted as a stark choice between being completely faithful to the theology of the cross or disregarding it completely. However, the church and its schools are called to strive to be faithful to the cross as well as to acknowledge and address their shortfalls.

What is helping schools in that is the participation of marketing consultants who identify with Christian beliefs and are skilled at marketing Christian environments. Consider also the many families seeking educational environments that are overtly and unapologetically Christian. Add to that Covid-19 along with other challenges to Australian society’s sense of security which have chipped away at human hubris and self-reliance, and the theologies of glory which are associated with them.

The Australian government charges all schools with the responsibility of helping young Australians to become successful learners who ‘are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are’.⁹ In terms of the Lutheran theology of the two kingdoms, secular schools are demonstrations of God’s left-hand care for the world in the way they help learners to explore the ‘visible and ordered things of God’. As schools of the church, though, Lutheran schools are charged with not only that same responsibility but also the responsibility of being agents of God’s right-hand care for the world. Using the language of the theology of the cross, this right-hand care is to help students to explore and understand ‘the visible and ordered things of God after fixing (their) sight on the passion and cross of Christ’ (Thesis 20), i.e. to help them towards being ‘able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are’ by inviting them into a cruciform perspective of the world and themselves. This process requires everything that secular schools do, but to go further: to challenge learners to recognise the crucial difference it makes to see the world and themselves in the light of the cross. What they come to see is that they are sinners, yes, but also loved and redeemed, and freed for service in the world.

Lutheran schools will do that in many and diverse ways alongside of but distinct from (e.g.) the science and humanities programs, and sometimes integrated with them. Far from distracting Lutheran schools from what some regard as the real and important educational tasks, the theology of the cross enriches and deepens that learning by affirming ‘that the same God who is the author of creation embraces that creation in a cruciform way that includes suffering, humiliation, and death’, and what this means is that ‘To worship God on the cross is to be willing to take our place there, to see the world and ourselves from that

8 Tom Christenson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 53 (emphasis added).

9 Education Council, ‘Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration,’ December 2019, accessed 2 March 2021, <http://www.educationcouncil.edu.au/Alice-Springs--Mparntwe--Education-Declaration.aspx>.

point of view. That is not a world-negating view but a world-transforming one.¹⁰

If they choose to 'market' this, Lutheran schools engage in a risky and daring venture: inviting young people and their families to meet a God who comes to humans in suffering and weakness, and so challenging them to engage with a transforming view of the world and themselves. This is risky for schools because it may deter many in the education marketplace from enrolling. And it entails a risk for those who do accept the invitation and find themselves taking up the challenge of adopting and living out that transformed view of the world and themselves.

So far this consideration has not gone beyond the implications of the curriculum (narrowly understood) in Lutheran schools in adopting education goals and practices that have the cross at their core. But *everything* in a Lutheran school is affected by the cross. LEA's *Growing deep* declares that

The foundation of Lutheran education is the gospel of Jesus Christ (which) informs all learning and teaching, all human relationships, and all activities [The LCA and its schools, 2001]. The Lutheran lens identifies key theological concepts that underpin Lutheran education. The lens provides a way of seeing and being in Lutheran education.¹¹

To illustrate this point, consider how the subject of every other article in this publication might be viewed and responded to in a cruciform way. To highlight just a few: teacher underperformance, support of transgender students and students with complex needs, the intersection of science and theology. There is insufficient space in this short paper to tease out examples like these, in part because a cruciform view of things does not and ought not to lead all schools in different sets of circumstances to look for the one 'right' response. Knowing this can liberate schools from the fear of not 'getting it right', and can also excite them with the potential for theologically and practically imaginative responses to each issue. The tempting alternative is to put this challenge aside as too complex and difficult, and head down a track very much like that taken by Brooklyn's I.S. 293.

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10 Christenson, *The Gift and Task*, 54.

11 Lutheran Education Australia, *Growing deep: Leadership and formation framework* (Adelaide, SA: Lutheran Education Australia, 2016), <http://growingdeep.lutheran.edu.au/>.