

# HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AND THEOLOGY OF GLORY (How does God work?)

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## Overview



### Objective

The first session introduces the biblical (and Lutheran) concept of a “theology of the cross” (*theologia crucis* in Latin) and contrasts it with a “theology of glory.”

Jesus of Nazareth was not the only person crucified in the first century. Crucifixion was a favored form of capital punishment in the days of the early Roman Empire. However, Christians ever since have insisted there is something special about the cross of Jesus, since it is through this cross that God has chosen to be revealed. You can do a lot of things with the cross of Christ: wear it around your neck, tattoo it on your bicep, sign it over your chest, put it on your steeple, and even sew it into your flag (as in many European flags).

### Materials needed

- name tags
- Table Talk cards for Session 1
- songbooks
- a Bible
- *The Lutheran Handbook II*
- *The Lutheran Course II Workbook*
- Course DVD
- DVD player and screen
- DVD of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (optional)

You can say a lot of things about the cross of Christ as well. Martin Luther stated the matter simply: “The CROSS alone is our theology” (*Weimarer Ausgabe* 5:176). The fact that Luther wrote the word *cross* in capital letters emphasizes that he wanted to emphasize the emphasis on the cross! (Or to put it another way, Luther believed the main thing was to make the main thing the main thing.) Luther was simply taking his cue from the apostle Paul, who once declared, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). While some Christians will insist that there’s got to be more to it than “just” the cross, other Christians—especially Lutherans—will insist that the cross is the be all and end all of Christ’s work among us on earth.

## Table Talk

Participants will discuss these questions as they arrive:

- Think of words or terms that contain the word *cross* (for instance, *cross section* or *crossed fingers*). How many can you name?
- Name one thing you could brag about, if you were the bragging type.
- Why do you think the legendary vampire Dracula is kept at bay by holding up a cross?
- How do you define the word *theologian*?

Suggest that one person at each table pick up a Table Talk card at random, respond to the question, and pass the card to the person to the right, who will also answer the question and pass the card on. When that card has gone around the table, someone else can pick up another card and repeat the process until time is up.

## Large Group Stuff

### Opening

Welcome participants and introduce yourself. If appropriate for the size of the group, invite a few participants to share examples of their responses to the Table Talk questions. Next, give a brief overview of *The Lutheran Course II*. For example: “In this course, we will look at key themes of Lutheran Christianity, for instance, faith versus works, saint versus sinner, even vacation versus vocation. From these examples, you can see that Lutheran Christians like to think in terms of opposites. The first opposites we’ll look at are two conflicting theologies: ‘theology of glory’ versus ‘theology of the cross.’”

Read or have a participant read the Overview on page 8 of the *Workbook*.

### Session preparation

- Read the session material in this *Leader Book*, the *Workbook*, and the *Handbook*.
- Preview the entire DVD presentation.
- Set up DVD player and screen.
- Cue DVD.
- Set up refreshments.

### Table Talk preparation

- Make copies of the Table Talk cards on page 87.
- Cut on the dotted lines.
- Place a set of four cards on each table.



*The Lutheran Handbook II* readings for this session:

pp. 161–63, 170–73, 191–92, 283  
(The First Article: On Creation)

### Hymn suggestions

Each of these hymns speaks of the admittedly odd idea of glorying in nothing else but the cross of Christ.

- *ELW* 324
- *ELW* 335
- *ELW* 338

Invite a participant to read the key scripture text for this session: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14). Explain that the writer of the verse, the apostle Paul, could have bragged about any number of things: how much faith he had, how much religious training he’d received, how much he’d suffered for the sake of Jesus, and so on. Instead, he insisted that the only thing worth bragging about was the work and wisdom of Christ on the cross. Invite someone to read 1 Corinthians 1:17–31 for more explanation of what Paul means when he speaks of boasting in the cross alone. Explain that while various theologies of glory seem sensible by human standards, a theology of the cross insists that God’s work will not be subject to human standards.

Introduce the opening prayer with the following exchange:

**Leader: The Lord be with you.**

Group: And also with you.

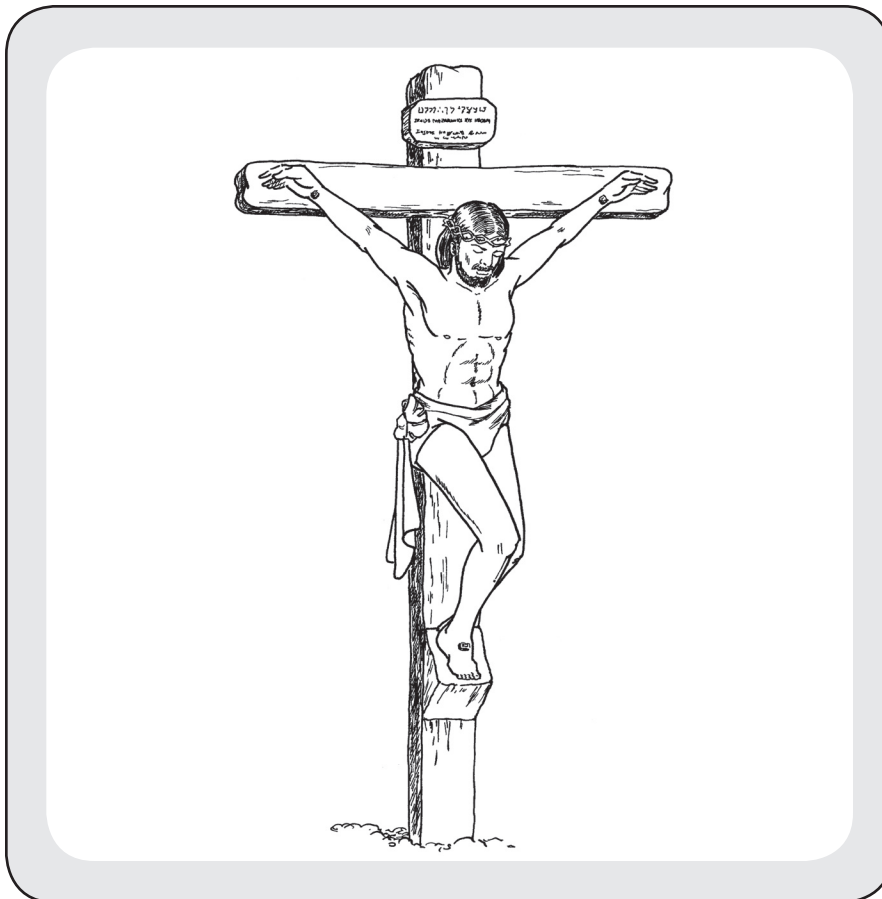
**Leader: Let us pray. . . .**

*Merciful God, your Son was lifted up on the cross to draw all people to himself. In the cross, you reveal yourself to us under the sign of the opposite. Foolish, weak, and despised, your cross brings to nothing our human ideas of wisdom, power, and glory. Give us, therefore, eyes to see and ears to hear; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.*

## Video

*Introduce the video:* The video presentations for *The Lutheran Course II* follow a narrator, Bryan McInnis, as he learns about key opposites or paradoxes in Lutheran Christianity and what they mean for daily life. For each session, McInnis travels to a different location to talk with people on the street, a Lutheran scholar, and members of a Lutheran congregation. For this session on theology of the cross and theology of glory, our narrator travels to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to speak with Timothy J. Wengert, Ministerium of Pennsylvania Professor, Reformation History, The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia; and members of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lansdale, Pennsylvania.

Play the Session 1 DVD presentation in its entirety. After the presentation, ask for any initial reactions. (Receive all responses.) Which person in the video was most intriguing? Why?



*The cross is key to salvation and the way God works.*

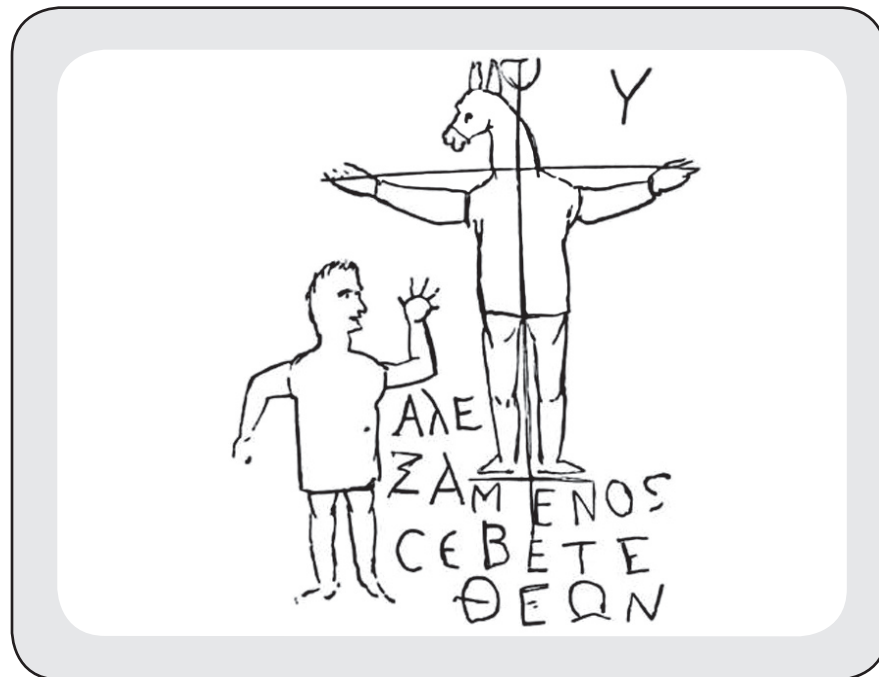
## Large Group Activity

- ① The Christian claim that God is particularly known in the crucified Jesus is counterintuitive to say the least. Two thousand years of Christianity have perhaps dulled us to the preposterousness of the original claim: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16). This large group activity is designed to get participants thinking about the divine wisdom hidden in the foolishness of the cross. Some ancient graffiti provides a lead-in to this subject.

Direct participants to turn to page 9 in the *Workbook*, the page with the “Alexamenos Graffito.” Provide participants with the following information:

- The “Alexamenos Graffito,” carved on the wall of the ruins of a boys’ school in Rome, was discovered in 1857.
- Most scholars believe that the graffito is authentic and dates to a time before A.D. 300.
- Today, you can see the graffito for yourself at the Palatine Antiquarium Museum in Rome.
- Written in Greek (a language that would have been taught to boys attending this school), the caption translates: “Alexamenos worships [his] God.”

*This drawing, called the “Alexamenos Graffito,” is a good place to begin our investigation of various understandings (or theologies) of the cross. The Greek inscription translates: “Alexamenos worships [his] God.”*



Ask participants what they see in the crude drawing. (The drawing features two figures. The central figure is a crucified man with the head of a donkey. To the left is a figure (supposedly Alexamenos) with his hand extended in reverence of the figure on the cross.) Explain to participants that in the Roman world, there were many gods and goddesses. What bothered many people about Christians was not only that they worshiped a crucified God, but also that they stubbornly refused to worship all other gods. Bowing down to a God who was executed in cruel Roman fashion seemed dumb enough; insisting that the crucified God was the *only* God worthy of worship seemed even worse—an idea deserving of severe mockery (if not worse). Hence the cartoon making fun of poor ol' Alexamenos.

To introduce your group to the idea of the divide between a theology of the cross and various theologies of glory, lead them in the following activity.

1. Form two groups, A and B.
2. Invite those in Group A to think of or write down two or three reasons why they might understand that the message of the cross reveals God to the world.
3. Invite those in Group B to write down two or three reasons why they might understand that the message of the cross reveals only weakness and foolishness.
4. Invite participants on both sides to share their responses with the large group.

Afterward, note how in most cases the reasons given by Group B have to do with human expectations and standards for divine behavior.

- ② If there is time, read the items listed under “How to Tell the Difference between Theology of the Cross and Theology of Glory,” beginning on page 170 of *The Lutheran Handbook II*. Be prepared to get things started by providing some examples of theology of the cross and theologies of glory. Ask participants to respond to these items with their comments or questions. Don't feel that you need to have answers for all of their questions. Being a theologian of the cross is not something that one learns in a one-hour session; it is something that one becomes at the hands of the Crucified and Risen One.

### **Multimedia Option**

As mentioned in *The Lutheran Handbook II* (p. 171), “once you start looking for theologies of glory you begin to see them everywhere.” One fine example of a theology of glory is found in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989; PG-13). In the climactic scene, Indy must solve a series of booby-trapped puzzles to reach the Holy Grail. Before he can obtain the “Cup of the Carpenter,” he has to “prove his worth” by (1) bowing in penance, (2) following in the footsteps of God’s proper name, (3) taking a leap of faith, and (4) selecting the true grail from dozens of false ones. This represents a typical theology of glory: God’s salvation—in this case, the healing cup—can only be attained by proper human decision and effort. On the other hand, there is a subtle theology of the cross in this scene as well. When it comes to selecting the real cup of Jesus out of all of the fake ones, Indy ignores all of the chalices made of gold and jewels and opts instead for the humblest goblet.

Start DVD at 1:43:45 (just before Indy attempts the first puzzle); stop DVD at 1:54:10 (as Indy leaves the chamber with the grail). Give participants an opportunity to identify the theology of glory and the theology of the cross demonstrated in this scene.

### **Small Group Stuff**

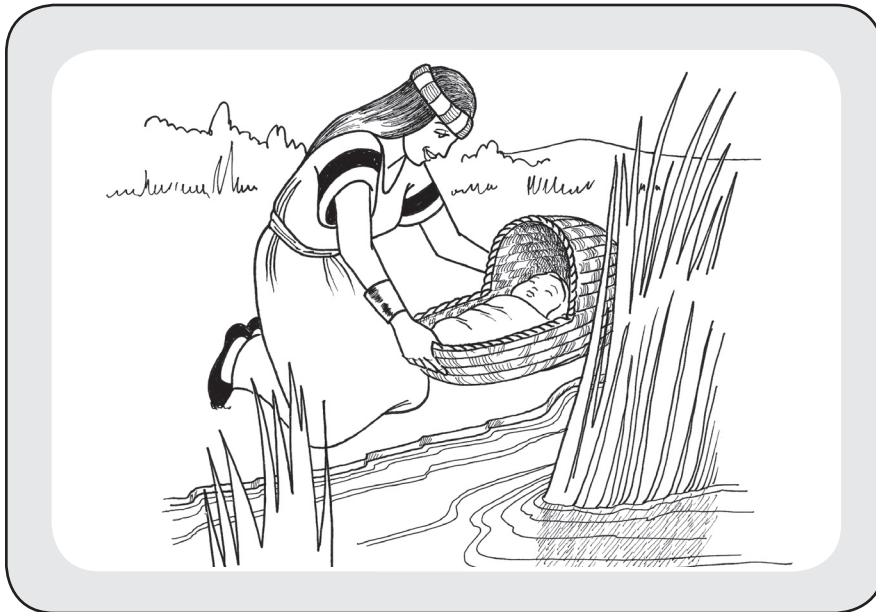
Direct participants into small groups to discuss the questions on page 10 in the *Workbook*. Tell the groups what time to return for Wrap-Up. Be ready to answer questions as needed.

## Wrap-Up

Review small group discussions by having participants from each group respond to one or more of the following questions:

- What are some of the more interesting crosses you have seen?
- What are some typical human expectations of God?
- What is the most difficult aspect of “understanding” the cross of Christ?

Conclude with words like these: “Lutherans have preferred to think of the cross of Jesus as the place where God is revealed ‘hidden under the opposite’ (or, if you want to impress your friends with Latin: *deus absconditus sub contrario*). For Lutherans, speculation about what God might be like, in all of God’s glory, is discouraged. Knowing God is not achieved by accessing some trove of secret knowledge or through transcending human existence. Instead, for Lutherans, there is a stubborn insistence that God has chosen to be known through the crucified and risen Son, Jesus Christ.”



*The Bible is filled with examples of unlikely people assisting God’s mission. In this case, Pharaoh’s daughter adopts Moses, a Hebrew baby, as her son, saving him from certain death.*



As a follow-up to the theme of this session, invite participants to spend the days ahead listening for everyday talk that reflects a theology of glory or a theology of the cross. Ask them to return next time ready to share examples. Also in preparation for the next session, invite participants to read the related material in *The Lutheran Handbook II*.

### ***Closing Litany and Prayer***

Lead, or invite a participant to lead, the following responsive prayer based on “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross” (*ELW* 335; text by Fanny L. Crosby, 1820–1915).

**Leader: The Lord be with you.**

Group: And also with you.

**Leader: Let us pray. Jesus, keep us near the cross, where there is a precious fountain of life, free to all.**

Group: In the cross, let my glory be forever, for there my ransomed soul will be at rest.

**Leader: Near the cross, where love and mercy find trembling souls, and light shines all around.**

Group: In the cross, let my glory be forever, for there my ransomed soul will be at rest.

**Leader: Near the cross, and in its shadow, help us live from day to day.**

Group: In the cross, let my glory be forever, for there my ransomed soul will be at rest.

**Leader: Near the cross, make us watch and wait, hope and trust, until we reach the heavenly shore.**

Group: In the cross, let my glory be forever, for there my ransomed soul will be at rest.

**Leader: Remember us in your kingdom, O Lord, and teach us to pray: “Our Father . . . [finish with the Lord’s Prayer].”**