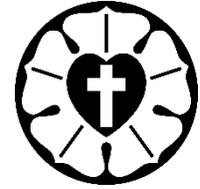


Keynote Presentations for the Arizona-California District of the WELS upon the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation



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500 Years Later, It's Still All About the Cross!

Intro and Theme

1 I developed my theme for my three sessions here around an obvious, yet so vitally important point for
2 Lutherans observing the 500th anniversary of the Reformation: **500 Years Later, IT'S STILL ALL ABOUT**
3 **THE CROSS.**

4 We know about the 95 Theses. Perhaps we even know that the CELC produced a new set of 95 Theses
5 for the 21st century, that may have arrived in your mailbox (as it did mine) a few weeks ago.

6 Theses 92 and 93, as Luther brings his document to a climax, state:

7 *Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is*
8 *no peace! (Jer 6:14)*

9 *Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Cross, cross," and there is no*
10 *cross!*

11 The young professor was fired up about two crosses: the cross of Jesus Christ – and "blessed are the
12 prophets" who talk about that to the people of God; and the papal cross that accompanied Tetzel from
13 place to place. The latter was decorated in garish colors and emblazoned with the papal coat of arms,
14 and these traveling preachers were claiming this cross had as much power as that of the Savior's (as he
15 describes in Thesis 79). "...and there is no cross!" That is: "No! Don't talk about that one! Rather, talk
16 about the only cross that matters. And let us talk about *that* true cross without the other one trying to
17 steal center stage!"

18 **IT'S STILL ALL ABOUT THE CROSS**, and a great blessing to us—and certainly to God's people whom we
19 serve—to focus their attention, their learning, their LIFE on the cross of Jesus Christ. To learn the
20 attitude of St. Paul: "*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the*
21 *world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*" (Gal 6:14).

22 _____

23 But now, a question. What do you think of TED Talks? Whether for classroom or Bible class, an
24 educator's candy store! So many topics! 15 minutes long! All these ideas presented by engaging

1 speakers. Ready-made discussion platforms. What's not to love for classroom enrichment or personal
2 development. TED. is. cool.

3 This isn't a TED talk, and I'm even going to try to imitate one. (For one thing, this block of time is way,
4 way more than 15-20 min). But I will make this observation about TED talks to get us going here this
5 morning. So much, much knowledge. So many, many topics. But despite all those positives, the whole
6 program is missing the one thing needful. *Where there is knowledge*, Paul wrote the Corinthians, *it will*
7 *pass away*. It's tragic, in a way – the endless hamster wheel of human knowledge and learning; always
8 chasing, chasing, chasing... but never arriving. A thirst for knowledge that is never truly satisfied. And
9 even though God in his grace still permits the crown of his creation to do amazing things, to learn and
10 reason out amazing things even in our sinful, fallen state, there is still that "itch" of being incomplete.
11 It's the "itch" that Solomon wrote about in Ecclesiastes, that *God has set eternity in the heart of man,*
12 *but we can't fathom what God has been doing from the beginning*. Deep down all people know there is
13 more, there's gotta be more... But Ps. 62 says, *Our souls are not at rest until they rest in Thee, O Lord*.

14 So, in a way, I can't present a series of TED talks because we approach knowledge and life differently; we
15 strive *to take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ*. For us, **IT'S STILL ALL ABOUT THE**
16 **CROSS**. But a theme needs a logo. And so, if you'll bear with me a minute, I'm going to alter this (TED
17 Talk logo) a bit. There. This is why we're here. In pulpits, in classrooms, in Adult Bible class, in Sunday
18 School, in confirmation class, in the church or school newsletter - **IT'S STILL ALL ABOUT THE CROSS**.

19

20 **Part I. Our Labor in the Lord Starts at the Foot of the Cross**

21 But how do we do this – **STAY FOCUSED ON THE CROSS** in all we do? I really can't offer you a method;
22 I'm a pastor and never took a methodology course (or wrote a Reflection Journal.) But I'd like to suggest
23 that we can approach this most important topic not really from the vantage point of "how," but of
24 "where." Where – in relation to the cross of our Savior? Where?

25 Since becoming a prof, of course, I have taken much more interest in "education things" than when I
26 served a parish. Recently, this promo for a webinar came across my desk: *Six Myths About Teaching*
27 *Personas*. Here they are:

- 28 • Myth 1: Try to be like your own best teacher:
- 29 • Myth 2: Teach the course you'd like to take:
- 30 • Myth 3: Consider your teaching persona as a mask:
- 31 • Myth 4: Just do what comes naturally, and your teaching persona will emerge:
- 32 • Myth 5: Start out being a tough teacher; establish that you are in charge:
- 33 • Myth 6: Teaching persona is not important enough to merit much attention:

1 Wow! Many, many teachers out there who apparently either don't know who they are...or don't know
2 whom they're supposed to be. This ad was a "hook" for a webinar: [Who Am I When I Teach?](#)
3 [Understanding Teaching Persona](#)¹

4 Who are we? For Christian educators, **OUR LABOR IN THE LORD BEGINS AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS.**
5 That's the first "where." And being at the foot of the cross means that our teaching and preaching
6 begins not with what we know or what credentials we have, what seminars we've attended (or
7 presented at), what latest "thought-provoking" or "insightful" book we've read. Nor does it begin with
8 certificates we've gathered, degrees and titles we've earned. Rather, it begins with who we really are,
9 and who God has made us in Christ.

10 In the ancient world in which I live mentally much of the time, this hit me one day when I was reading a
11 bit of Cicero, the great Roman statesman who died the year after Julius Caesar and who, like him, was
12 also assassinated. In his later years, Cicero got so sick of Roman politics that he quit the Senate and
13 retired to his country estate in central Italy and there, in his mature, reflective years, he devoted himself
14 to reading ancient Greek classics and to writing philosophical treatises. He wrote *About Old Age*; and
15 *About Friendship*; and *About the Nature of the Gods*; and one of his monumental works, *The Brutus* –
16 which (you wouldn't guess from the title) is actually all about being an orator. You need to understand
17 something about being an orator in the Greco-Roman world. To be an orator, in the Roman mind, was
18 to be the consummate man. It was to understand and apply both personally and in public life the great
19 principles that should govern any society – mercy, justice, law, order-- and to be able to express these
20 principles, or implement those principles, for the public benefit.

21 But here's why I bring this all up: Cicero wrote in *The Brutus*: "The Orator must be a good man." For
22 those with the ambition to rise to the heights of Roman public life, it was vital to study at the feet of the
23 right teacher. But what made the "right teacher"? "The Orator must be a good man." For students
24 aspiring to be educated, the *character* of the teacher was equally – if not more – important to the
25 student than where the teacher had studied or what books he had written. That's why when a group of
26 traveling philosophers called "The Sophists" appears in Athens in the days of Socrates (5th century B.C.),
27 they were met by the Athenians with suspicion and resistance. The Sophists sold themselves as tutors
28 to the kids of aristocrats, and in a society where arguing cases in law courts was a daily occurrence, the
29 Sophists (whom Luther called *die Weise-eseln*) promised to teach young men how to manipulate words
30 and emotions. Learning these tricks, they could present the case in such a way as to sway the crowd,
31 win the argument, regardless if the verdict was just or not. The Athenians saw the messing around with
32 the human mind as a serious violation. To Aristophanes the satirist of the same day, he saw them as
33 such a threat that he lampooned them in one of his plays called *The Clouds*. These Sophist philosophers
34 were "air heads"; Aristophanes packed them all into their school ("The Thinkery") at the end of the play,
35 set fire to the building and killed them all – the ancient Attic version of "Burning Man."

¹ <https://www.magnapubs.com/online-seminars/who-am-i-when-i-teach-understanding-teaching-persona-13646-1.html?st=FFemail&s=FF151026>

1 Point: it was the character of the teacher that mattered. We know that from Scripture too. St. Paul
2 encouraged Timothy, “remember those from whom you learned these things.” Hebrews says, “Imitate
3 their faith...” And, of course, most notably, you know that in that long list of qualifications for all public
4 ministers of the gospel, all of the traits listed there in 1 Timothy and Titus deal with character, and only
5 one with the ability (“able to teach”).

6 For the Christian called worker, character begins and is constantly shaped at the foot of the cross.
7 Because at that place, we don’t get feedback from our students, from a supervisor, from a colleague,
8 from a member as to “how we did” or “how that sermon went,” but it is at the foot of the cross that we
9 get an accurate picture of *who we are*.

10 Educators of our world stress “competence.” We do too—educators and MLC and Seminary. But far
11 more important than “competence” or “certificate” or “license” or “diploma” is “repentance.”

12 Back to the 95 Theses. Here are the opening words of the document that shook Europe:

13 *When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of*
14 *believers to be one of repentance. (Thesis 1)*

15 We cannot forget, even 500 yrs on, that the Lutheran Reformation arose from the anguished soul of a
16 monk who had a veil over his face when he read Scripture. He could only see it one way—through the
17 lens of the law, in the brightness of God’s holiness and righteous wrath against sinners in his world. In
18 the preface to the Latin edition of his writings (1545), Luther talks about the stark contrast between
19 what people assumed him to be, and what his guilty conscience told him what he was:

20 In whatever manner I was living as an irreproachable monk, before God I felt that I was a sinner of a
21 restless conscience, nor was I able to trust that I was placated by my [making] satisfaction. I was not
22 loving God; indeed, I was hating God, the Just One and the Punisher of sinners. And if not with silent
23 blasphemies then certainly with grumbling I was resentful towards God, saying: “Really? As if it isn’t
24 enough that miserable sinners who are also eternally lost through their original sin are also crushed by
25 every kind of calamity through the Decalogue, except that God then adds grief to grief in that also through
26 the gospel he stretches out his righteousness and wrath against us. In this way, I was burning angry with a
27 harsh and perturbed conscience...”²

28 Various sources agree that Luther was, to the human eye, an exceptionally pious man. A monk named
29 Nathin, who was once Luther’s superior, once addressed the nuns at Muelhausen and spoke of Luther as
30 “a new St. Paul converted by Christ himself.”³ Some suggested that he was a living saint, in the full

² *Praefatio in opera Latina (1545)*. Text from Augustana Bibliotheca: https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost16/Luther/lut_prae.html . Trans. by KCW from

³ Ernest George Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times: The Reformation from a New Perspective*, 1st edition (Concordia Publishing, 1950), 151. Cf. also p. 150 for Luther’s own accounts of how he treated his body while in the monastery.

1 Catholic sense of the word. Kittelson, however, accurately portrays this period of Luther's life by
2 entitling his chapter, "A Man of Sorrows."⁴

3 The cause of Luther's sorrows was the concept of repentance with which he and the rest of Europe had
4 been raised. The entire system threw the problem of sin onto the sinner. Yes, Christ died for sin—
5 original sin—and baptism washed *that* away, but from there on sin was essentially "your problem."
6 True, one could obtain "graces" and could access the merits and help of the saints. The sacramental
7 system helped also, but sin essentially remained for the individual to try and handle somehow. What
8 terror of conscience! Luther felt it, what he called *Anfechtung*, "this grinding sense of being utterly
9 lost."⁵ Who can live in peace and joy when one is convinced that God hates him? Who would want to
10 take the last breath of life wondering if they were right with God—had worked hard enough, punished
11 oneself enough; done good enough to overcome the sins? Imagine the doubt! And where there is
12 doubt, there is anger. Luther's confessor correctly analyzed it; on one occasion he simply told the
13 troubled monk, "God is not angry with you, but you are angry with God."⁶

14 Gradually, though, in little ways, the warmth and light of the gospel's rays began to shine in Luther's
15 dark life. Melancthon, in a brief biography of Luther written in 1548, mentions how Luther frequently
16 spoke with "a certain old man at the College of Erfurt"⁷ who patiently listened to Luther confess his sins,
17 recognized the anguish of his (Luther's) soul, and applied the correct remedy:

18 [Luther] listened to him discussing much about faith, and said that he led him to the Symbol (i.e.,
19 Apostles' Creed) in which it is stated, 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins.' [The old man] had interpreted
20 this article in this way, that it was not only to be believed in a general way that sins are forgiven to certain
21 people (as even the demons believe)—such as to David or Peter—but it is the directive of God that every
22 individual believe that [his or her] sins are forgiven. And, further, he was saying that this interpretation
23 was confirmed by a statement of Bernard⁸, and then showed him the passage in a sermon on the
24 Annunciation where there is the following statement: 'But, in addition, believe also this, that through the
25 very same (*per ipsum*), sins are forgiven TO YOU. This is the testimony which the Holy Spirit shines into
26 your heart, saying, 'Your sins are forgiven you.' For the Apostle also reckons it this way, *that a man is*
27 *justified by grace through faith.*'⁹ Luther said that he not only was strengthened by this voice but also
28 reminded about the entire opinion of Paul, who presses this statement so many times, *We are justified by*
29 *faith.*¹⁰

⁴ James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career*, New Edition edition (Minneapolis, Minn: FORTRESS PRESS, 2003).

⁵ Kittelson, 56.

⁶ Kittelson, 57.

⁷ Probably Staupitz, Luther's superior and confessor at the Augustinian monastery.

⁸ Bernard of Clairvaux was a Cistercian mystic, and yet said many fine things that influenced Luther.

Schwiebert notes that "Justification [Bernard] defined as the 'non-imputation of sin by a merciful God.'" (171)

⁹ The quotation of Bernard ends here. cf. Schweibert, 171.

¹⁰ Text from Melancthon's *Historia de Vita et Actis Reverendissimi Viri, D. Martini Lutheri, verae Theologiae Doctoris* at Augustana Bibliotheca: https://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/Chronologia/Lspost16/Melancthon/mel_hist.html. Trans by KCW.

1 As soon as the light of the gospel began to shine in Luther's dark cell and into his heart, there was no
2 turning back. Regardless of exactly when the epiphany occurred, Luther is very clear about the result: "It
3 was if the gates of heaven flew wide open for me."¹¹ The veil was gone. He read Scripture in a
4 completely different manner, running through the Old Testament and now seeing Christ on every page.
5 But more than discovering some sublime exegetical principle, God revealed to Luther that one thing he
6 was seeking most, namely, the knowledge that God had forgiven him and loved him. In his *Explanation*
7 *to the Ninety-Five Theses*, the Reformer states this in the context of Theses 62:

8 Through the law we have nothing except an evil conscience, a restless heart, a troubled breast because of
9 our sins, which the law points out but does not take away. And we ourselves cannot take it away. There-
10 fore for those of us who are held captive, who are overwhelmed by sadness and in dire despair, the light
11 of the gospel comes and says, "Fear not" [Isa. 35:4], "comfort, comfort my people" [Isa. 40:1], "encourage
12 the fainthearted" [I Thess. 5:14], "behold your God" [Isa. 40:9], "behold the Lamb of God, who takes away
13 the sin of the world" [John 1:29]. Behold that one who alone fulfills the law for you, whom God has made
14 to be your righteousness, sanctification, wisdom, and redemption, for all those who believe in him [I Cor.
15 1:30]. When the sinful conscience hears this sweetest messenger, it comes to life again, shouts for joy
16 while leaping about full of confidence, and no longer fears death, the types of punishments associated
17 with death, or hell.¹²

18 What about us, Luther's spiritual descendants. What does reviewing this bleak period of Luther's
19 *Anfechtung* do for us, Lutherans of a later age? And why is it so important to begin here today, as
20 Lutheran pastors, teachers, and staff ministers?

21 At the foot of the cross, we see ourselves as sinners. As we gaze up at the bloodied man hanging there,
22 writhing in pain, crying out in anguish as he suffers the torments of hell, there we see how a holy and
23 just God feels about sinners, feels about me. God hates sinners. Please don't say, "No! God hates the
24 sin and loves the sinner!" At times it's ok to say that, but the harsh truth of the law is this: God isn't
25 going to send "sins" to hell; he's going to send sinners. And just the fact that this body is aging and
26 falling apart, gradually bending back down into the dust from which I was taken – that is proof enough
27 that sin lives in me, and I am also included in the number of "sinners." It's not somebody else; it's me. I
28 can't cop the plea, "The devil made me do it!" No, I did it. I did it yesterday; I'm doing it today, I will do it
29 tomorrow. And I do it again and again and again. And sometimes I play around with my eternal soul as if
30 it's a toy God gave me, shrugging and convincing myself that, "But He really wouldn't send *me* to hell.
31 After all, I'm ME!" Yeah. That's the problem; I'm me. At the foot of the cross, I see – and shudder with
32 fear – to see how God feels about sinners, about me.

33 Lutherans know and say it this way that repentance is God's work in us; he *works* repentance in us
34 through his Word. Here, at the foot of the cross, I do not manufacture inside of myself some maudlin,
35 sappy sentimentalism about how sad a thing it is that Jesus died. Here, at the foot of the cross, the cross
36 "falls" on me; I *am crushed* by the devastating message of God's holy law, and any sliver of hope that I

¹¹ A statement also found in his *Praefatio in opera Latina* (1545).

¹² *Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses* (LW 31:79-252)

1 have that God loves me for who I am likewise is crushed. Luther called himself a *Magen Sack*, a "bag of
2 worms."

3 But at the foot of the cross, I also gaze up at this man, this God-man, my brother – the only man who
4 never sinned, who never deserved to die. He is there for me. He is there for us. He is there for the
5 whole world of sinners, regardless if they ever love him for it or not. It causes me to wonder; it causes
6 me to tremble. It causes me to say, "Why, dear Lord Jesus? Why would you do this for me?" It causes
7 me to say that about the Father as well. After all, he loves his Son from eternity with a love that is
8 impossible for me to have for my children. I have five children. Would I really give any one of them into
9 death for someone else, especially a condemned murderer or sexual predator on death row? But at the
10 foot of the cross I see that what I would never be able to do even with my imperfect love, God did. And
11 Jesus willingly went – uncomplaining forth. More than that, in Hebrews it says that Jesus, *for the joy set*
12 *before him endured the cross*. The joy? Yes! Of having many sons and daughters who believe in him.
13 Of bringing those sons and daughters to faith, forgiving their sins, and bringing them – us – into eternal
14 glory.

15 There, at the foot of the cross, is the only place where we can see how much God loves sinners.
16 Nowhere else can this happen – law and gospel meet – but at the foot of the cross. On the cross, we see
17 both the God who is just and the God who justifies (Ro 3:26). There, like no place else on earth, my life
18 comes into focus too.

19 You think about your life from time to time, don't you? How can't you? For me, I've always marveled
20 at a statement Paul made when he was trying to explain the meaning and purpose of life to a bunch of
21 gossipy Athenians on Mars Hill (Ac 17). *God determined the exact times and places that people should*
22 *live*, Paul said. Think about your life. You could have been born anyone, anywhere, at any time in the
23 history of the world. We read history and some pretty sobering statistics. 6 million Jews died in the
24 Holocaust, 25 million people died under Stalin. Why wasn't that the story of your life? 1 million people
25 died building the Great Wall of China. Why wasn't that the story of your life? Nearly half of Europe died
26 in the Great Plague of the 14th century. Why weren't you one of them? Why are you here – in this
27 place, at this time? Why?

28 All those things that our Savior did for us happened before you were born. But when you finally arrived
29 on the planet--more marvels. As for me, in 1964 God set my heart beating. I was born in the idyllic
30 town of New Ulm in June of the following year. I was placed into a Christian family, and those parents
31 brought me forward to the font. There God gave me a new name – just as he did to Abraham, to Israel,
32 to Peter. He brought me into his family. He has watched over me – clothed me, fed me, protected me –
33 mostly from myself! And then, he has given me the undeserved, unbelievable privilege of being a jar of
34 clay which he uses to do his ministry to his people, young and old. Then he promises me that he will
35 never leave me or forsake me, especially on that day when I must walk through the valley of the shadow
36 of death, as we all must. There, at the gate of heaven, there will be no, "Now... what was your name
37 again?????" But only this: "Keith! DON'T change your name. Welcome home!"

1 Why? It is vital for called workers to stand daily at the foot of the cross awash in, astounded by God's
2 grace to each of us, knowing it is undeserved. This is what it means to live a life of repentance – to be
3 crushed by the message of the law so that we confess our sins. But then—more importantly-- clinging in
4 faith to our Savior for the forgiveness and joy of salvation he alone can give. The kids see it, the
5 congregation sees it – our understanding of repentance, radiating out from us. They can see it. They can
6 tell. They can sense that this isn't just a teacher, this isn't just a preacher or someone who's been
7 trained how to conduct a class professionally or lead a worship service. Rather, they see a Christian
8 called worker who has learned this grace of God from experience, and who serves compelled by the
9 indescribable mercy and love of Christ. Here – this body, this face – is one of the books that the kids and
10 members alike actually read. Let them see the CROSS of Jesus Christ on every page.