

# Interview with Pastor Paul Cerny

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*Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Campbellsport, WI*  
*By Ben Sadler on December 6, 2009*

On Good Friday we see God's grace in action: Jesus, alone on a cross, sacrificing himself for the salvation of the world. Yet, in our hearts, we find the gravest of sins: our sinful nature looking to take some credit for that salvation. God's grace and man's works are always at odds, not only in the world, but in the heart of a Christian as well. Therefore, the Lord, in his wisdom and love, allows his children to suffer their own crosses, so that they would fight against work-righteousness and look to Christ's cross alone for their salvation and their strength. Martin Luther called this the Theology of the Cross. We see evidence of the Theology of the Cross in the life of the Apostle Paul:

<sup>7</sup>To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. <sup>8</sup>Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. <sup>9</sup>But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. <sup>10</sup>That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Although Paul was able to call such hardship a "delight," I, myself, have struggled to embrace the Theology of the Cross. After reading similar sections in Scripture, I have often thought, *Why would I want to enter the ministry if the Lord has promised to give me hardships? What kind of crosses will I have to experience? Will I be able to bear up under such crosses? And finally, will I be able to remain joyful even when I have been humbled?*<sup>1</sup> Yet, that is why I enjoyed interviewing Pastor Paul Cerny from Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Campbellsport, WI. In this interview, Pastor Cerny shared his experiences with personal crosses and the joy and blessing that the Lord has brought through them.

Pastor Cerny was assigned out of Seminary to Immanuel in 1996. He recounts how he was warmly received by the congregation. Pastor Cerny credits this to Immanuel's high view of the pastoral office. Yet, over these past thirteen years, the Lord allowed him to experience some

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<sup>1</sup> It was and is naïve for me to think that I could escape the Christian cross by avoiding the ministry. The reality is the Lord, in his love, allows all his children to be humbled that they would all trust in him alone.

dark days. In the interview, Pastor Cerny speaks about his severe stomach problems, which forced him to change his lifestyle and excessive work schedule. Yet, even as Pastor Cerny was weak, the Lord was strong. For much of Immanuel's history the congregation left all the duties of the church to the pastor. Pastor Cerny said that, historically, the congregation showed up for worship on Sunday, and that was about it. Yet, because of Pastor Cerny's sickness God's people were forced to take up a greater role in gospel ministry, such as, scheduling guest preachers, visiting the sick, preparing God's house for worship, etc.

The next great trial that Pastor Cerny talks about was the decision to disband their partnership in a grade school with Trinity Lutheran, Dundee, WI. The school was named Waucousta. By the time Pastor Cerny arrived at Immanuel, the church had been supporting this grade school for about twenty-five years. Yet, it became obvious that this school was more of a drain on gospel ministry than a tool for gospel ministry. The school was located far from Campbellsport. It was only being used by a few families. Yet, at the same time it was costing Immanuel a large portion of their budget to support. It is possible that, for a few people, Immanuel's partnership was not based entirely on the desire to share the gospel, but also the intense emotional connection to the grade school institution. There was a motion from a member to disband the school and the motion was approved. Because of the emotion behind this situation, Pastor became a target for much persecution. The Lord used such abuse to drive Pastor Cerny back to Christ's cross for his comfort and strength. In fact, during this time, not only did the Lord strengthen the faith of Pastor Cerny, he also blessed Immanuel numerically.

This interview is exceedingly practical for a seminary student who is concerned about facing the crosses of ministry. As a person listens to Pastor Cerny recount those difficult days, he will be reminded that the Lord has said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."