

2

The Classical Epistemology of the Cross

God can reveal himself only in concealment—
in the humility and shame of the cross.

—Martin Luther¹

Epistemology has often been treated as an adjunct to the classical *theologia crucis*. In contrast the current study finds it to be one of two core dimensions systematically structuring it. This “epistemology of the cross” is itself divided in two.

In its negative aspect crucicentric epistemology stands in opposition to a parallel system holding it possible for the creature to obtain direct knowledge of God by anthropocentric means. This the classical crucicentric theologians consider foolish, impossible, and sinful. They argue critically that God alone possesses the knowledge of God in Godself, thus God alone can disclose God as God really is.² It follows that there can be no direct access to such knowledge. The creature’s attempt on it is necessarily the attempt to know as God alone can know, and therefore to be glorious in its own right.

In its positive aspect classical crucicentric epistemology asserts and defends a revelatory solution to the ancient question as to how true knowledge of God in Godself might become available to the creature.

1. Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 31:52–53. (Thesis 20, Heidelberg. Disputation.)

2. Influenced by Paul in 1 Cor 2:11, Athanasius for example says that no one “knows what pertains to God except the Spirit of God.” Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 179. (*Letters to Serapion* 1:22.)

Drawn through the cross the creature's mind is absolutely identified with the mind of Jesus Christ, and thence with the mind of God. It participates in Christ's cognitive orientation, his self-knowledge, his wisdom, it sees with his eyes. This cognitive union is finally completed eschatologically. Then the creature's mind is totally transformed and renewed, becoming not divine but within Christ's noetic humanity fully human.

Dialectical tension within crucicentric epistemology and soteriology lends these dimensions internal coherence and strength, methodologically and theologically. In respect to crucicentric epistemology contrary pairs include: darkness and light, falsity and truth, the back and the front, the weak and the strong, revelation 'under the opposite'—or in the opposite place to that reasonably expected, revelation and hiddenness, wisdom and foolishness, humiliation and exaltation, time and eternity. The juxtaposition of these polarities unbalances natural expectations as to how things actually are, and therefore what is really true.

These pairs hinge on the cross. Von Loewenich explains:

The cross puts everything to the test. The cross is the judgement upon all of man's self-chosen thoughts and deeds. In view of man's actual situation this means the radical reversal of all human assumptions. What is foolish is wise, what is weak is strong, what is disgrace is honor, what appears hateful to man is to be desired and loved in the highest degree. Does it not follow as a matter of course when we are told that lack of understanding is the true understanding of God? When we plunge into lack of understanding then we go the way of the cross.³

Similarly Wells, for whom the essential epistemology of the cross revolves around its radical revelation of knowledge regarding the man-God Jesus Christ—a God far different from the isolate, unknowable, deistic entity⁴ of speculative metaphysics. Or in Wells' own words, "[The] theology of the cross, with its primary source in Paul and developed explicitly by Luther . . . emphasizes the radical difference between the gospel of Jesus Christ and human wisdom"⁵—"human wisdom" here

3. Von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 75.

4. According to *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, "'Deism' [refers] to belief in the existence of a supreme being who is regarded as the ultimate source of reality and the ground of value but as not intervening in natural and historical processes by way of particular providences, revelations and salvific acts." Pailin. "Deism," 148. The deistic god is the propositional god of metaphysics.

5. Wells, "Holy Spirit," 479. By "human wisdom" is meant speculative methods for deriving the knowledge of God.

connoting speculative methodologies for obtaining the knowledge of God. Wells continues, “The gospel proves to be not simply one more instance of general human religious wisdom, but a reversal of the wisdom . . . of the world. It is *evangelion*.”⁶ It is *the news of God proclaimed by God*, overturning the methodologies of the world for accessing that news.

Before turning to examine the negative and positive dimensions of this radical crucicentric *evangelion* however, two general background explanations are useful. The first concerns Luther’s distinction between the theologian of glory and the theologian of the cross, the second relates to the classical crucicentric understanding of faith.

For Luther the *theologia crucis* is not simply a theoretical construct, even a divinely inspired one, but a living knowledge articulated through living beings. For him, as Gerhard Forde writes, “When the cross conquers, it becomes clear . . . that there is a quite different way of being a theologian.”⁷ It is then a commonplace of Luther scholarship that in Luther’s recovery of the crucicentric tradition the distinguishing of theologians rather than of theological systems is of first importance.

Luther initially makes this distinction in his Heidelberg Disputation. “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who claims to see into the invisible things of God (Thesis 19),” he says. “He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends what is visible of God through suffering and the cross (Thesis 20).” “The theologian of glory calls [the knowledge of God, deduced from the creature which is] evil, ‘good’, and [the knowledge of God revealed from the cross which is] good, ‘evil’. The theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is (Thesis 21).”

But it is in his *Explanations of the Disputation Concerning the Value of Indulgences* the same year as the Heidelberg Disputation, 1518, that Luther is generally considered to set out his two theologians’ characteristics, or marks, most succinctly. Here he bears quoting at length:

A theologian of glory does not recognize, along with the Apostle, the crucified and hidden God alone. He sees and speaks of God’s glorious manifestation among the heathen, how his invisible nature can be known from the things which are visible and how he is present and powerful in all things everywhere. [This theologian] learns from Aristotle that the object of the will is the good and

6. Ibid.

7. Forde, *Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 10.

the good is worthy to be loved, while the evil, on the other hand, is worthy of hate. He learns that God is the highest good and exceedingly lovable. Disagreeing with theologians of the cross, he defines the treasury of Christ as the removing and remitting of punishments, things which are most evil and worthy of hate.

In opposition to this the theologian of the cross . . . (that is, one who speaks of the crucified and hidden God) teaches that punishments, crosses, and death are the most precious treasury of all and the most sacred relics which the Lord of this theology himself created and blessed, not alone by the touch of his most holy flesh but also by the embrace of his exceedingly holy and divine will, and he has left these relics here to be kissed, sought after, and embraced. Indeed fortunate and blessed is he who is considered by God to be so worthy that these treasures of Christ should be given to him.⁸

In sum the major distinction between Luther's two theologians is that they each perceive reality differently. The philosopher-theologian of glory looks at God directly from around the back of the cross, thereby circumventing it; the theologian of the cross looks at God indirectly through the cross of Jesus Christ. The theologian of glory learns from natural methodologies that the knowledge of God can be reached speculatively; the theologian of the cross learns from the cross that God ultimately reveals the knowledge of himself in the crucified Christ. The theologian of glory looks towards the invisible things of God with the eyes of the intellect; the theologian of the cross looks towards the visible things of God with the eyes of faith.

The theologian of glory charges the theologian of the cross with foolishly beginning with that which is not tethered naturally, leading to the embrace of that which God in his perfection rejects: suffering and punishment. The theologian of the cross charges the theologian of glory with an equivalent foolishness for beginning with false and anthropocentric premises, leading to false vision, false discernment, and—disastrously—false proclamation.

Luther's point is that it is the theologian of the cross who is really wise, for in looking at God *through* the cross such a theologian correctly perceives reality. The metaphysical methodology of the theologian of glory produces not God, but only the image of its blinded creator.

8. Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:225f. (Here "crosses" references that of Christ, and that of the creature.)

There is a second introductory matter. Generally the classical crucicentric theologians hold faith to be a capacity originating in God and graciously gifted to the creature. Faith is not a capacity to derive propositional truth or formulate dogma, (that being in the province of natural reason), but the capacity to trust the One who alone makes patent the knowledge of God in Godself, and who grants salvation through the darkness of death. From the crucicentric perspective faith is thus the antithesis of lack of trust, of hopelessness, of blindness to what actually is the case.

For Paul faith has a profound objective and christological character. It is always first *Christ's* faith, and that means finally that the gift of faith is one with the gift of Christ himself. So Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:8–9)." Paul's understanding of faith is also usefully interpreted by Barth when explaining Gal 2:20, (the square brackets below are his). "I have been crucified with Christ. I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live in the faith of the Son of God [to be understood quite literally: I live—not in my faith in the Son of God, but in this—that the Son of God had faith!] who loved me and gave himself for me."⁹

For Athanasius too faith is not a human construction.¹⁰ Rather it is a gift of the Father, mediated by the Scriptures, the saints, and supremely

9. Barth, "Gospel and Law," 7. The excerpt is further cited, see here pp. 198–99.

10. Athanasius (c.296–373), Patriarch of Alexandria from 328, is generally regarded as one of the four great patristic doctors of the Eastern Church. In retrospective overview, against the backdrop of a tumultuous age, one which saw him exiled from his patriarchate five times, Athanasius worked out his doctrines of the Son and Word of God, defending the full divinity of the Son and his consubstantiality with the Father. Athanasius also insisted on the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, and with this the trinity of the Godhead, a trinity which enhanced rather than compromised essential unity in God. In doing so he upheld the creed of the Council of Nicea (325), which council he had himself attended. In addition Athanasius contributed significantly to the orthodox doctrine of creation, holding that the Son and the Father are together creative in the power of the Spirit. He maintained, as had Irenaeus (c.130–200), that the world came into being *out of nothing* [*ex nihilo*]. In line with this he taught a fundamental distinction between the Creator-God and his creation. Creation included both the human body *and* soul; until this point the soul had being considered an aspect of the spiritual realm. Contra Gnosticism and the Manicheans Athanasius argued that creation was the work of a good God and so itself good; this was also important because at this time monasticism was questioning the spiritual value of Christian involvement in the affairs

the Son at the point of the cross. It follows that reason dictates a starting point with “the faith of the cross.”¹¹ It is this God gifted cruciform faith which enables the human soul to know and confess Jesus as the incarnate Word and Son.¹² Thence Athanasius refers to Christ’s death as “the capstone of our faith.”¹³ A comment in his *Vita Antonii* well expresses his position: “[Certain Greeks came to Antony] to dispute concerning the preaching of the divine Cross . . . [Antony asked them, ‘Which] is better, faith which comes through the inworking (of God) or demonstration by [speculative] arguments?’ And when they answered that faith which comes through the inworking was better and was accurate knowledge, Antony said, ‘You have answered well . . . We Christians therefore hold the mystery [of the cross] not in the wisdom of Greek arguments, but in the power of faith richly supplied to us by God through Jesus Christ.’”¹⁴

Luther’s understanding of faith closely follows that of Paul and Athanasius. In summary faith for him is the capacity to see that which is not visible to natural sight but rests in secret in Jesus Christ, above all in the cross. Or as von Loewenich explains, [“According] to Luther’s Heidelberg theses . . . faith can be directed only to what is concealed, hidden, and invisible.”¹⁵ Such faith “stands in permanent conflict with perception. Its object is nothing perceptible, nothing visible, but their very opposite.”¹⁶ In turn this means that faith is not naturally founded. It

of the world. Athanasius set such notions out in a number of treatises, orations and pastoral letters. These include the early two-part work *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione Verbi*, in which he described the epistemological and soteriological foundations to his thought. They also include anti-Arian writings declaring the full divinity of the Son, letters defending his doctrine of the Spirit (*Letters to Serapion* and *On the Holy Spirit*), and an inspirational biography of Antony the Great, *Vita Antonii*, of value to contemporary and later monasticism. There is too a corpus of exegetical studies. (Note that the so-called *Athanasian Creed* is actually a late fifth or early sixth century Latin work, likely related to Augustine’s *De trinitate*.) See Pettersen, “Athanasius,” 41–42, and Weinandy, *Athanasius*.

11. See Thomson, *De Incarnatione* 28.2 and 28.5.

12. Athanasius says of Jesus Christ, “[He] is himself wisdom, himself Word, himself the very power of the Father, himself light, himself truth, himself justice, himself virtue, the very type, brightness and . . . unchanging image of the Father.” *Contra Gentes* (46.8). See Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 23.

13. Thomson, *De Incarnatione* 19. See also Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 57.

14. Schaff, “*The Life of Antony*”, IV:74–78.

15. Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 36.

16. *Ibid.*, 91–92.

“does not have its origin in any of the given abilities of the soul. [Neither can it] be classified with the rest of the psychic functions.”¹⁷ Faith then is not a flight into nothingness but faith in another, in a higher reality which is the genuine reality.

Faith for Luther is vested in Jesus Christ. He is the subject and object of faith, its divine originator and ontological content. This being so, faith is “Christ given and Christ inhabited.”¹⁸ Von Loewenich says here, “[For Luther] Christ is not only the principal object of faith but also the ground for making it possible . . . Christ is related to faith as form to matter . . . This does not express identity between Christ and faith, but reduces their belonging together to its most acute form.”¹⁹ It follows for von Loewenich that on the basis of Luther, “Both ‘through Christ’ and ‘through faith’ must be said. Neither may be separated from the other.”²⁰

This unity means for Luther, as von Loewenich also says, that “faith is not a leap into a vacuum. It perhaps gropes in the darkness—and precisely there runs into Christ. It moves away from all experience and experiences Christ. And Christ is the firm possession of this faith.”²¹ A later Luther scholar comes to very much the same conclusion. Jenson says shortly, “[For] Luther faith has trust in Christ as its ground and centre. Only through faith can Christ be seen as the God who is hidden in the incarnation and cross.”²²

It is then for Luther not possible for the creature to *have* faith so as to trust in God, apart from receipt of Christ who *is* faith and trust. With this in mind faith and trust “directly” in God rather than by way of Christ, and him crucified, can only be false trust in a false god. Or as Luther himself says bluntly, “[Those] who approach God through faith and not at the same time through Christ actually depart from him.”²³

How then can authentic faith—faith that is originated, gifted and inhabited by Christ, be received? Luther’s answer is via passage through the cross in which creaturely faithlessness and its corollary self-trust are

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 90.

19. Ibid., 104.

20. Ibid., 103.

21. Ibid., 106.

22. Jenson, “Karl Barth,” 18.

23. Luther, *Luther’s Works*, (Lectures on Romans), 25:287.

put to death, that Christ's faith may be received in their stead. Only by such deadly exchange can faith be had. Only via passage through the cross can faith disclose the meaning of the cross, first faith and then understanding; understanding is always predicated on faith and never the reverse. In McGrath's words, "[For Luther the] correlative to *Crux sola* is *sola fide*, as it is through faith, and *through faith alone*, that the true significance of the cross is perceived, and through faith alone that its power can be appropriated."²⁴

This all has significant consequences for Luther's understanding of epistemology. As Dalferth explains, authentic epistemological knowledge is not for Luther a system of rationally verifiable axioms, but of objective truths asserted and verified on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, and him crucified.²⁵ It follows too that Luther (as the classical crucicentric theologians generally) is deeply suspicious of all methodologies for the knowledge of God which bypass, or otherwise relativise, receipt of gifted faith as the precursor to all true knowledge of God, all true epistemology.

The Negative Epistemology of the Cross

The classical crucicentric theologians reject all anthropocentric starting points for the knowledge of God, including starting points in human experience, the law, a self-engendered mysticism, and the several strands of natural theology. In doing so they take up arms in—as Torrance notes in immediate reference to Athanasius—"a conflict between underlying frameworks of thought, an objective [thoroughly crucicentric] way of thinking from a centre in God and a subjective way of thinking from a centre in man."²⁶

The first two of these starting points may be disposed of very briefly. Crucicentric epistemology regards *human experience* as the subjective product of either the senses or the reasoning mind. Starting with experience the creature cannot attain objective knowledge of God as God really is, for then it would be as God. The knowledge of God is attainable only by way of faith. Faith perceives that which experience subjectively cannot perceive; it validates that which experience subjectively cannot

24. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 174. Italics McGrath's.

25. See Dalferth, "The Visible and the Invisible," 24.

26. Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 163.

validate. McGrath (thinking of Luther) explains this further. “[The] theology of the cross draws our attention to the sheer unreliability of experience as a guide to the presence and activity of God. God is active and present in the world, quite independently of whether we experience him as being so. Experience declared that God was absent from Calvary, only to have its verdict humiliatingly overturned on the third day.”²⁷

Similarly, crucicentric epistemology denies the employment of the *legal* starting point for the knowledge of God, and therefore for truth.²⁸ For Paul and Luther the prime revelatory task of the law is not to declare the truth of God, but the truth of humanity in its fallen state before God. (The following chapter on soteriology will take this further.) It follows that those who would use the law to condition their access to God’s knowledge of God merely disclose the knowledge of their own sinfulness.

To turn in greater detail to the third of the matters listed above, the classical crucicentric theologians also reject *the mystical starting point* for the knowledge of God, this being prominent in the medieval world.

A New Dictionary of Christian Theology defines *mysticism* as follows, “[The] main characteristics of mysticism seem to be: 1) [A] profound, compelling, unforgettable sense of union and unity; 2) the successive character of time is transcended in an awareness of simultaneity; 3) the experience is not felt to be a mere subjectivity; rather it is a disclosure . . . 4) There is always a sense of enhancement of joy, exultation, . . . 5) there is also an overwhelming sense of “presence,” of the utter nearness of the transcendent.”²⁹

In the western branch of Christendom the broader ascetical and dogmatic traditions part at an early date, developing on parallel paths. In contrast in the eastern church mysticism develops in dialectical response to dogmatic theology. In both geographical spheres however, it is a particular strand of the ascetical tradition that keeps the crucicentric tradition alive during the Middle Ages, in due course coming to influence Luther’s *theologia crucis* strongly.

27. McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross*, 159.

28. As set down in Holy Scripture, divine law can be found chiefly in the decalogue (Exod 20:1–17, Deut 5:6–21), the interpretation of the decalogue in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7), and the instruction concerning these commands given by the Apostles. Luther gives first attention to the Mosaic law.

29. Tinsley, “Mysticism,” 387.

To recap, stretching between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries major crucicentric mystical theologians include: St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), the anonymous writer of the *Theologia Germanica* (c.1350), Johannes Tauler (c.1300–1361), and Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464). Together these figures hold certain commonalities of approach epistemologically and, to foreshadow future discussion, soteriologically. On the grounds that creation is fundamentally of God and so “good” they advocate a moderate discipline rather than an extreme asceticism, one which respects the physical body. They follow the Pauline tradition of the New Testament worshipping not the cross in and of itself, but its victim. Thence they reject much popular contemporary piety,³⁰ along with that practice meant to imitate Christ’s passion in order to win justification.

In their epistemology the crucicentric mystics do not despise the use of reason, far from it, but they recognize that as a natural capacity reason is appropriate to the natural sphere only. Its limited sight cannot perceive God directly. Rather, and as Neufeld says, “Crucicentric mysticism recognizes no other way to discover the glory of God than to follow Christ through darkness.”³¹ The crucicentric mystics propose a *via negativa*, a negative path leading *through* the cross in and with Jesus Christ, as the sole way by which the creature might attain the knowledge of God in Godself, knowledge therefore of his glory. Moreover the knowledge received in this dark way is itself held to be glorious, (and not simply the content of that knowledge), just because it is the exclusive possession and gift of God. Cruciform passage is then the one route by which the creature’s mind can be mystically united to Christ’s mind, cognitive union made glorious because it is God and not the creature who has brought it about.

It follows that the medieval crucicentric theologians, as after them also Luther, rail against a very different and broader strand of medieval mysticism, one seeking direct knowledge of God by means of self-induced union with God. A key representative of this anthropocentric mysticism is Meister Eckhart (1260–1329), and a brief examination of his position might indicate what it is the crucicentric mystics so dislike.

30. Late-medieval piety centred on a eucharistic re-presenting of Christ’s sacrifice and otherwise involved contemplation of the sufferings of Christ, in order to attain union with God.

31. Neufeld, “The Cross of the Living Lord,” 136.

Theologically Eckhart holds to a pantheistic *union mystica*, the mysterious union of God and creation in which all things are in God and God is in all things. This conception gives rise to a contemplative practice in which human desire for the things of the outer and sentient world is channeled into desire for the things of the inner and spiritual world. So the soul becomes radically detached from creaturely being, losing its individuality. Its inner *uncreated light* finally illuminates God “without a medium, uncovered, naked.”³² In Eckhart’s conception the soul is then a *seed of God*, growing to become one with “the immovable cause that moves all things.”³³ Indeed humankind *is* God, being neither beneath nor above where God is.³⁴ Given such identity between the human soul and deity, God can be known by looking within with the aid of the intellect. Thence Eckhart advocates reason as a direct pathway to God.³⁵

From the perspective of the crucicentric mystics however, Eckhart’s mystical path represents a straight nullification of the message from the cross concerning the revelatory work of Jesus Christ. It is a blatant attempt at self-glorification. As Neufeld puts this, the crucicentric theologians see that Eckhart’s “eager abandonment to mystical thought without a corresponding halt before the cross of Christ, led him towards an unbridled acceptance of a theology of glory.”³⁶

32. Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons*, 198.

33. *Ibid.*, 203.

34. See *ibid.*, 187.

35. To stray into soteriology, Neufeld says, “Eckhart’s definition of sin as the ‘dissolution of order, and fall from the One,’ corresponds with his depiction of salvation as a reintegration of the universe, the soul being brought ‘back to conscious realization of its divine ground.’ What is striking about this unbiblical doctrine of sin is its lack of ‘appreciation for the demonic power of evil’ without which it is impossible to perceive the profound significance of God’s work of redemption.” Neufeld, “The Cross of the Living Lord,” 142. See also Eckhart, *The Essential Sermons*, 44–45.

36. Neufeld, “The Cross of the Living Lord,” 133. Barth is also instructive here. Laying Eckhart’s mystical abnegation of self at the door of Plato, he writes, “Note how Eckhart . . . does not cease to be a theologian of glory. [For him, as for Plato,] the basic aim of the philosopher is to die and be dead, his work being no other than that of detaching and separating the soul from the body. In my view [this mystical abnegation of self] for Eckhart was in the last resort simply Platonic purification.” Barth, *Calvin*, 64–65.