

## Introduction

Dogmatics is possible only as a *theologia crucis*, in the act of obedience which is certain in faith, but which for this very reason is humble.

—Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>

The term “the theology of the cross”<sup>2</sup> is intriguing; it comprises a definite feature within the contemporary theological landscape even as its meaning, via its classical tradition,<sup>3</sup> seems little understood. For every work implicitly or explicitly forwarding one theme or set of themes as its essential explanation, others will advance different themes with equal assurance, and without apparent awareness that alternate proposals exist. Some central elements of crucicentric<sup>4</sup> theology receive little scholarly attention, while others are diametrically reversed.<sup>5</sup> Likewise in the contemporary literature there appear to be no explicit criteria for designating someone a “theologian of the cross.” By broad consent various theologians past and present enjoy this status, but apparently do so for differing reasons—some because they embrace issues of class suffering, others because they focus on the dogmatic significance of the crucified Christ. At the same time the crucicentric status of otherwise prominent theologians passes with little comment, and what there is is confused.

1. Ibid., I/1, 14.

2. Or simply “theology of the cross.”

3. What may be called “the classical era” of the theology of the cross stretches from the early church to the Reformation.

4. Here “crucicentric” means “pertaining to the theology of the cross,” (whereas “cruciform” recalls the cross itself.)

5. Wells points out that many liberation theologians co-opt crucicentric elements in support of anthropocentric theologies, diametrically reversing their classical application thereby. See Wells, *Cross and Liberation*, 161.

## 2 CROSS THEOLOGY

Such is the case with pre-eminent twentieth century Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968).

Lack of comment on Barth's crucicentric status is especially curious given the voluminous nature of the Barth secondary literature. It may simply be that the sheer magnitude of Barth's project means that the significance of the opening note in his mature theology, *viz.* "dogmatics is possible only as a *theologia crucis*,"<sup>6</sup> is overlooked. But it may also be that the current confusion regarding the nature of the theology of the cross means alertness to its presence in Barth, or indeed elsewhere, is simply not present.

Two central questions and associated proposals stem from the above. First, "In view of the first sixteen centuries of Christian tradition what is signified by the term theology of the cross?" In response, it is suggested:

That the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) is an ancient system of Christian thought conveying the message of the cross of Jesus Christ, that in it alone all—necessarily self-glorifying—creaturely attempts to know and be as God are overcome, that the proper glorification of human knowledge and being may proceed.

Second, "On the basis of the theology of the cross as defined in Part One, can Karl Barth's project be called a theology of the cross and Barth himself a theologian of the cross?" Here it is considered:

That the crucicentric system provides a pervasive, pivotal, and generative influence in the twentieth century orthodox theology of Karl Barth, who crucially recovers, reshapes and reasserts it as a peculiarly modern instrument—in so doing further advancing the system itself.

A subsidiary question and proposal follow, "Given that Barth is fairly adjudged a theologian of the cross, in the secondary literature why is there a nuanced appreciation of him as such?" ("Why is his crucicentric status not commensurate with his stature otherwise?") Here it is suggested:

That where the crucicentric nature of Karl Barth's project has been missed or misassigned, and therefore he himself not considered crucicentric, there has likely been failure properly to comprehend

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 14.

the shape and content of the system structuring the crucicentric tradition, and to perceive the marks of its theologians.

The first proposal here suggests that a dual disciplinary foundation undergirds crucicentric thought. One of the leading mid-twentieth century German commentators on the *theologia crucis*, Walther von Loewenich, points to such a foundation when commenting on the meaning of the cross for the person Luther scholarship generally considers to be the first crucicentric theologian. He writes, “In the cross [the Apostle] Paul sees both the rule that governs God’s Revelation as well as the rule that governs . . . the life of the Christian. The entire thought of Paul is controlled by the thought of the cross, his is a theology of the cross.”<sup>7</sup> This observation is interesting in itself, but important now because here von Loewenich finds dual theologies of divine revelation and creaturely transformation, epistemology and soteriology therefore, to rule Paul’s crucicentric perspective.

Soteriological and epistemological foundations also undergird the crucicentric perspective of the great patristic theologian Athanasius (c.296–373). In his early work *De Incarnatione* he speaks explicitly of two ways in which “our Saviour had compassion through the incarnation.”<sup>8</sup> These are firstly that he “puts away death from humankind and renews [it] through the resurrection, and secondly [that] he makes visible what is invisible, that is, that he is ‘Word of the Father, and the Ruler and King of the universe.’”<sup>9</sup> Athanasius’ whole project subsequently becomes an elaboration of these two ways.

Clear evidence for a dual disciplinary foundation to crucicentric thought may too be found in Martin Luther (1483–1546). The Heidelberg Disputation (April 1518) particularly illustrates this, it being widely considered the culminating document of the classical crucicentric tradition. Within the disputation’s deeper levels Luther delineates, systematizes, and for the first time codifies<sup>10</sup> the ancient crucicentric idea that the cross itself proclaims a self-disclosing and a saving Word, each emphasis

7. Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 12.

8. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* §16, in Thomson, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, 173.

9. *Ibid.*, §17. See also, Weinandy, *Athanasius*, 36.

10. Barth serves to illustrate the point. He declares that “The man who thought out first, and with most originality and force, the basic anti-medieval and . . . anti-modern thought of the Reformation, that of the theology of the cross, [was] Luther.” Barth, *Calvin*, 70. Quotation further cited here page 165–66.

#### 4 CROSS THEOLOGY

being of equal importance.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time it is then Luther who retrospectively designates this idea, as also the dual disciplinary system predicated on it, “*theologia crucis*.”<sup>12</sup>

Barth similarly sees both soteriological and epistemological importance in the theology disclosed from the cross. For instance he says that the effectiveness of the intervention “which took place on the cross of Golgotha . . . consists in the salvation of the sinner from judgement and the Revelation of faith in which he may grasp this salvation.”<sup>13</sup>

As the literature review in Part One will show, many commentators effecting to write on the theology of the cross do not however recognize a dual disciplinary foundation systematically structuring it. Rather, and as already noted, explicitly or implicitly they align it to one or a few theological sub-disciplines; of which epistemology is the most common. To foreshadow the review’s conclusions, these commentators’ perspectives are in fact too narrow to enable them to see the whole.

Recognizing dual dimensions (epistemological and soteriological) structuring crucicentric theology now though, the discussion finds that each of these dimensions is again further divided. Each is expressed *negatively* in opposition and negation, and *positively* in defense and advance.

*The negative epistemology of the cross:* The self-glorifying human attempt to reach up to the knowledge of God and know as God knows, but the inability to do so, and therefore the crucicentric rejection of that attempt.

*The positive epistemology of the cross:* The summons of the cross to vicarious death in and with the crucified Christ, in whom the creaturely presumption to know as God is overcome. In exchange union with Christ’s mind, consolidated through an ongoing sanctifying process of death to the natural attempt to know as God. This leads to the receipt of Christ’s true and crucicentric knowledge of God, a process completed eschatologically with the resurrection of the creature’s mind in and with the exalted mind of Christ. Thus the creature is made participant in

11. The Excursus to Part One makes the disciplinary handling of the crucicentric idea within the Heidelberg Disputation explicit.

12. Luther scholar James Kiecker says, “As far as I can tell, Luther uses the phrase ‘theology of the cross’ for the first time in his *Lectures on Hebrews* (1517–1518) . . . The complementary phrase, theology of glory, however, does not yet appear.” Kiecker, “*Crucis et Gloriam*,” 182.

13. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 405.

Christ's glorious wisdom and governance, becoming thereby not God but fully humanly cognizant.

*The negative soteriology of the cross:* The self-glorifying human attempt to merit salvation by natural means, but the inability to do so, and therefore the crucicentric rejection of that attempt.

*The positive soteriology of the cross:* The summons of the cross to vicarious death in and with the crucified Christ, in whom the creaturely presumption to be as God is overcome. In exchange union with Christ, consolidated through an ongoing sanctifying process of death to the natural attempt to be as God. This leads to conformation to Christ's faith and obedience, a process completed eschatologically with the resurrection of the creature in and with the exalted Christ. Thus the creature is made participant in Christ's glorious person and kingship, becoming thereby not God but fully relational, fully human.

This negative and positive theology is grounded in three fundamental principles. The first and overarching principle holds that "God alone is glorious." Contingent on this an epistemological principle holds that "God alone truly knows God so as to reveal God truly," and a soteriological principle holds that "God alone can condition God and therefore the electing will of God." Defence of these principles results both in radical opposition to all anthropocentric epistemologies and soteriologies, and powerful reassertion of the centrality of the crucified Christ. Only in him is there true knowledge of God in Godself, and of the creature in relation to God. Only in him is salvation *already* worked out.

As a discrete system of theological thought each element—major theme or simple notion—of the theology of the cross corresponds with every other element, the same concepts constantly re-emerging and re-engaging from different angles. But the crucicentric system is always open to the inbreaking Word it proclaims. For in the deepest sense by *theology* the crucicentric theologians traditionally understand a divine *Theology* or *Word* or *Message* articulated from the cross. Ultimately for them this *Theology* has an ontological character, that is, Jesus Christ himself. Hence for example Luther's bold declaration, "*Crux Christi unica est eruditio verborum dei, theologia sincerissima.*"<sup>14</sup> [The cross of Christ is the only way of learning the words of God; it is the purest theology.]

14. Exegesis of Ps 6:11, "*Operationes in Psalmos*," in Luther, *Luther's Works*, 14:342f. See also Oberman, *Luther*, 248. Note: The definitive German collection of Luther is: *Martin Luthers Werke*. [WA]. Its definitive English translation is: *Luther's Works* in 56 volumes, [LW].

## 6 CROSS THEOLOGY

As Wells says, “The theology of the cross, with its primary source in Paul and developed explicitly by Luther, is a minority tradition in Christian theology.”<sup>15</sup> It forms a subsection within wider Christian theology. In the view of the present investigation a similar idea might be expressed by characterizing the theology of the cross as a system within a system, a distinctive word within the broader system of Christian belief, with the special service of distinguishing the boundaries between Christian thought and that of the world.

In line with its minority status the theology of the cross is sometimes referred to as the *narrow* or *thin* tradition, the contention being that it runs like a fine gold thread down the centuries of Christian thought and history. Hall explains, “[There] has been in Christian history a thin tradition which tried to proclaim the possibility of hope without shutting its eyes to the data of despair . . . This is, we must emphasize, a *thin* tradition. It has appeared only here and there, now and then, it never really belonged to Christendom.”<sup>16</sup> Tomlin agrees, “Sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered, this ‘thin tradition’ . . . has functioned like an antiphon beneath the high triumph song of Christendom.”<sup>17</sup>

That antiphon sounds back and forward across the ages with greater or lesser force. Barth too notes its fluctuation. Anticipating later twentieth century commentary on the thin tradition, in 1922 he speaks of “a straight if for long stretches broken line [of ideas leading up] to Luther’s view of . . . the theology of the cross.”<sup>18</sup>

This long thin tradition is so described for another reason also—those marking it are not numerous. As already indicated, in its classical period it originates with the Apostle Paul and continues through a narrow line of theologians. Among these are Athanasius, and later a group of medieval mystics including: 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).<sup>19</sup> In turn the

15. Wells, “Holy Spirit”, 479.

16. Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness*, 113–14. (Italics Hall’s.)

17. Tomlin, “Subversive Theology,” 59.

18. Barth, *Calvin*, 65.

19. The figures listed will receive particular mention here. There are however other medieval crucicentric mystics, at the far end of the age notably including the Spanish Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and her compatriot John of the Cross (1542–1591). Born after Luther and outside the Reformation, obviously they do not influence him nor likely he them; nevertheless the Luther secondary literature notes similarities between his thought and theirs.

crucicentric mystics indirectly, but nonetheless significantly, influence Martin Luther's crucicentric understanding.

Support not only for the narrowness but also for the antiquity of the crucicentric tradition is offered obliquely by John McIntyre. In setting out various models of atonement he notes a certain "classic idea," the recovery of which he attributes to Gustaf Aulen in the latter's 1931 Latin work, *Christus Victor*. Beginning with the New Testament writers and Irenaeus (c.130–200), this classic idea is said by McIntyre to undergird the first thousand years of Christian soteriology, and to be still present up to Luther.<sup>20</sup> The idea itself concerns the exclusivity of the sovereignty of God, the centrality of the cross in all properly Christian theology, and the unique character of the salvific work of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup> While McIntyre does not directly identify Aulen's classic idea with the soteriology of the cross, in the present view that identification may reasonably be made. If so, Aulen's discovery adds additional weight to the notion that crucicentric theology is rooted in the earliest centuries of Christian thought.

Luther's systematizing of this ancient and thin tradition within the Heidelberg Disputation takes place explicitly over against another equally ancient but broader system, *viz.* the *theologia gloriae* supporting human self-glorification. In fact here Luther walks an old way. Shaped in mutual dialectical engagement the two systems have kept parallel course across the millennia of Christian thought.

The centuries following Luther see explicit awareness of the theology of the cross fade again. Though not the first significant theologian of the cross of the twentieth century—arguably that honor belongs to P. T.

20. McIntyre writes, "Aulen claims that the 'classic theory' is the dominant idea in the [New Testament], being at the foundation of ransom theories, and the ruling soteriology for the first thousand years of the Church's history [as] illustrated chiefly in Irenaeus and Luther." McIntyre, *Soteriology*, 43.

21. McIntyre writes, "[The classic idea] consists of several clear and simple affirmations: the salvation of mankind is a divine conflict and victory in which Jesus Christ on the cross triumphs over the evil power of this world and of this age [which have kept mankind] in perpetual bondage and suffering ever since the Fall . . . This work of atonement is presented as being from start to finish the continuous work of God and of God alone, not partly God's work and partly man's." (*Ibid.*, 42–43.) McIntyre adds immediately that through its history the sponsoring text for this idea is Col 2:11–14, which refers to believers being incorporated in the *circumcision* (or *cruciform death*) of Christ, being buried with him in baptism, and by faith being raised with him from the dead, the record against them now nailed to the cross.

Forsyth—it is Karl Barth who signally recovers the classical crucicentric tradition for twentieth century modernity and beyond.<sup>22</sup>

An opening caveat applies here. As Lovin rightly says, “Karl Barth’s project illustrates the power of a few central ideas to shape a systematic project of remarkable scope.”<sup>23</sup> That these few central ideas are indeed *crucicentric* ideas does not mean that Barth’s entire project can be read only in this way. This discussion is not suggesting that Barth is primarily or only a theologian of the cross. Any such quick estimation of a figure as seminal, multifaceted and fecund as he must clearly fail.<sup>24</sup> But that Barth is *also* a theologian of the cross, and crucially so for the modern rediscovery of the crucicentric tradition itself, is being contended here.

### Stylistic Considerations

A note concerning certain stylistic decisions connected with this study may be of interest to readers. These relate to its: structure, terminological explanation, and Barth quotation.

In keeping with its twin concerns the work is presented in two parts. Each commences with an appropriate literature review. Reflecting the structure of the crucicentric system itself the two ensuing discussions are each divided again into epistemology and soteriology, and then into negative and positive aspects of these disciplines. (As an added guide and summary here chapter 4 includes a chart diagrammatically depicting the crucicentric system.)

22. A possible argument that Barth is unsympathetic to the classical *theologia crucis* on the grounds of its systematic character cannot be sustained. As is well known he describes himself as a *dogmatic* rather than a *systematic* theologian. He does so in order to protect the integrity of a faithful theology open to and conveying the Word of its Object and Subject, and to deny the reverse—a closed and anthropocentric system in which God becomes the prisoner of human religion. Nevertheless Barth is himself powerfully systematic in actual procedure. Jüngel supports this. “Barth’s theology,” he says, “was, from the beginning, an avowed enemy of systems. It remained so even in the very systematically written *Church Dogmatics*.” Jüngel, *Karl Barth*, 27. See also Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 477–78.

23. See Lovin’s preface to Barth’s *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, ix.

24. In his prologue to his 1991 reading of the *Church Dogmatics* around six selected *loci*, George Hunsinger reviews several previously tendered “overriding conceptions” or single “interpretive motifs” of Barth up to that point, and concludes that while all are of value, none is definitive. None catches “the complexity-in-unity and unity-in-complexity of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*.” Hunsinger’s own work “proceeds on the assumption . . . that such a conception is unlikely to be found.” This conclusion is now generally accepted. See Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 20.



Most terminological explanations are provided as the discussion proceeds. The paradigmatic terms *modernity* (or *modernism*) and *post-modernity* (or *postmodernism*) are defined now however. To turn to *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* explanation:

On the longest view, [modernity] in philosophy starts out with Descartes's quest for a knowledge self-evident to reason and secured from all the demons of skeptical doubt. It is also invoked—with a firmer sense of historical perspective—to signify those currents of thought that emerged from Kant's critical "revolution" in the spheres of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetic judgement. Thus "modernity" and "Enlightenment" tend to be used interchangeably.<sup>25</sup>

Note that it is now considered historically more correct to speak of multiple Enlightenments, mutually differing in form across time and place.

The associated entry on *postmodernity* begins:

In its broad usage postmodernity is a "family resemblance" term displayed in a variety of contexts (architecture, painting, music, poetry, fiction etc.) for things which seem to be related, if at all—by a laid-back pluralism of styles and a vague desire to have done with the pretensions of high modernist culture. In philosophical terms postmodernism shares something with the critique of Enlightenment values and truth-claims mounted by thinkers of a liberal-communitarian persuasion . . . There is a current preoccupation . . . with themes of "self-reflexivity" [and with] puzzles induced by allowing language to become the object of its own scrutiny in a kind of dizzying rhetorical regress.<sup>26</sup>

The final stylistic consideration here relates to quotation from Barth. As often observed Barth has an unparalleled gift for theological imagination. He relentlessly probes everything he finds, constantly circling in on his object from many angles and in exhaustive detail. Jüngel, for instance, says that Barth "resolves to make progress precisely by constantly correcting, or else completely changing direction, . . . beginning once again at the beginning."<sup>27</sup> This characteristic approach is rightly acclaimed for its theological merit, but it also makes it difficult

25. Norris, "Modernism," 583. Pre-eminent German philosopher Immanuel Kant, 1724–1804, is popularly termed the *Father of the Enlightenment*.

26. Ibid., "Post-modernism," 708.

27. Jüngel, *Karl Barth*, 27. See also Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century," 165, and Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 14.

to quote Barth succinctly. Accordingly in the following study some excerpts from him are abridged or paraphrased for ease of meaning, the intention being always to reflect the original faithfully. Such treatment is clearly indicated.

## Conclusion

Currently the term *theology of the cross* (*theologia crucis*) is vested with a range of meanings, none of which is generally regarded as definitive. On the basis of the classical crucicentric tradition, the system it conveys, and the Word from the cross conveyed by that system, the first part of this work hopes to contribute towards a broadly accepted definition. An associated aim seeks to uncover the defining marks of the theologian of the cross. If achieved these objectives should enable a new and crucicentric hermeneutic for Christian thought and history, in light of which *any* theological project might be evaluated for its crucicentric content.

In the second part of this work it is argued that lack of clarity concerning the dogmatic shape and theological content of the classical crucicentric system, as also of the concomitant marks of the theologian of the cross, has contributed to current uncertainty regarding the crucicentric status of Karl Barth's project and of Barth himself. In distinction to this uncertainty, in light of its earlier conclusions the discussion seeks to demonstrate that Barth's modern, orthodox<sup>28</sup> and evangelical<sup>29</sup> theology stands within the long thin crucicentric tradition, and that he himself exhibits the defining marks of its theologians. If this is so a crucicentric hermeneutic should provide an additional lens through which to read Barth freshly. It should also enable twentieth century crucicentric theology to account properly for Barth's contribution to it.

To commence Part One the relevant secondary literature is reviewed to determine how the theology of the cross, ancient or modern, has recently been understood.

28. After Vincent of Lerins (d c.450 CE) *orthodoxy* is traditionally defined as, "What has been believed in all places, at all times, by all people." See Denney, *Death of Christ*, 73.

29. Barth himself calls his theology *evangelical*, stressing that he does not mean this in a confessional or denominational sense. Rather, "The qualifying attribute 'evangelical' recalls both the New Testament and at the same time the Reformation of the sixteenth century." Barth, "Evangelical Theology: An Introduction," 11.