

# The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past

Douglas John Hall

Among those who have read some of my work it is fairly well known, I think, that I am an admirer of Martin Luther. I have even been introduced—in print—as “a Lutheran theologian.” Alas, I am not a Lutheran. Insofar as these distinctions are still relevant and meaningful, I am a member, minister and theologian of the United Church of Canada—which, historically, ought to bring me closer to the Reformed than to the Lutheran side of the Reformation, since the union of churches that brought my denomination into being in 1925 included both Presbyterian and Congregational components. But somehow these distinctions, while not meaningless, are far less meaningful than they were even two or three decades ago. The question today is not what confessional tradition we adhere to but whether we are able—in the face of the many problems that confront our species—really to *confess* the faith at all: not merely to profess it, but to confess it, that is, to engage the world at the level of its real crises and to confer upon it the blessings of both truth and hope.

## Two Preliminary Observations

My topic is “The Theology of the Cross: A Usable Past,” and before I turn to the primary substance of my presentation I would like to make two preliminary observations. First, a brief comment on the term *theology of the cross*; it was part of the genius of Martin Luther that he detected, quite brilliantly, the difference between this biblically-based conception of the theology appropriate to our faith, and the culturally and philosophically-based *theology of glory* that has coloured most of the history of Christendom. Luther named this distinction, and the naming of things is of vital importance for the corporate thinking of the church. But, of course, he did not invent the theology of the cross. Luther himself depended, as we must, upon a tradition: the tradition particularly of Paul, but behind that the tradition of the Hebraic prophets and poets who understood the highest consciousness of Hebrew faith to consist in the awareness of the ‘pathos of God’—as Abraham Joshua Heschel insisted.

But when we ourselves want to draw upon the tradition named *theology of the cross* we—if we go deeply enough—will find ourselves drawing not only on this biblical and classical past but, in addition to Luther himself, on a modern host of exemplars of this tradition that is both numerous and impressive. It includes, certainly, Kierkegaard, the early Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Kazuo Kitamori, Kornelius Miskotte, Hans-Joachim Iwand, Jürgen Moltmann, Kosuke Koyama, Dorothee Soelle, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, and many others—persons who, in their particular times and places, have grasped essential aspects of this theological tradition and applied them to their analyses of and messages to their social and ecclesiastical contexts. Luther in many ways stood alone when he first introduced this term and this distinction, though the German mystics Tauler and Nicholas of Cusa and others were certainly there in the background, along with Augustine of Hippo. But Luther has not been alone in the exemplification of this tradition in subsequent centuries, and I will draw upon some of these in what follows.

The second preliminary observation concerns Luther himself, or rather our appropriation of his thought—though it could be applied to any great thinker of the past (for instance, Karl Rahner applies something like this same observation to St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>1</sup>). When as Christians in the here and now we turn to the great figures of our faith’s past, there are two attitudes that can be taken: one is a strictly historical attitude which asks, “What did this thinker actually say and do?” The other is an attitude which, whilst wishing to take history seriously, is asking for something more than history alone can give. Standing in the present and wanting to be a faithful witness in that present, this second attitude asks, ‘What would this thinker say and do if he or she were here with us—here, therefore, as one

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<sup>1</sup> See Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych, S.J. (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1968), especially the Author’s Introduction, pp. xlix f.

consciousness not only of the problems and possibilities of the past to which he or she belonged, but conscious also of our present-day context in all its specificity.

My interest in Luther is chiefly of this second type. In fact, I have found Luther as interesting as I have (for decades now) because from the first I sensed, in what I learned of him, that this was indeed a figure from our common Christian heritage who could understand something of our present situation, and who could be shown to have some very important things to say to us. In short, his life and work was such that it could constitute for us "a usable past." Not all that makes up the past of the Christian sojourn through history is usable today. In fact a great deal of it, when not simply useless, is positively misleading for us, and a hindrance. For instance (to consider a recent period) 19<sup>th</sup> Century utopian liberalism is at least misleading today, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Fundamentalist reaction to that liberalism and modernism is more than misleading, it is dangerous—a fact that is illustrated for us on this continent daily, in spades. The need for a past, which is an *essential* need for Christians (for we do not invent our message arbitrarily as we go along!), cannot be satisfied with any and every testimony from the past. Theological judiciousness is nowhere more vital than in our choice of pasts on which to meditate in our search for foundations. I have found Luther a trustworthy guide in most things; but my interest in him is not that of an historian, who only wants to know what Luther did and said then; I want him to help me know what to do and say now. I hope to have grasped his own person and thought with something like a reasonable intuition, but my purpose is quite clearly not that of the historian or Luther scholar, but that of the theologian; and (linking this with the first observation), as a theologian I am bound to hear his 'theology of the cross' (which is a term I would apply to his theology as a whole) in tandem with those later and earlier witnesses to this tradition who tried in their own times and places to comprehend and apply this tradition.

### A Spirit and Method

This being said by way of presupposition, I turn now to the main part of this address. If our purpose is to find in the theology of the cross such a "usable past," it is essential that we attempt to achieve some grasp of this theology that can be shared by as wide a spectrum of Christians as possible. It is certainly not a theology that lends itself to popularity—as Jürgen Moltmann said of it, "There is a good deal of support in the tradition for the theology of the cross, but it was never much loved."<sup>2</sup> But while it will likely never be a theology with wide popular appeal, neither ought we who feel its power and relevance imagine, in our pride of ownership, that it is so far above the ordinary grasp of churchfolk that it is unprofitable to make the attempt. The truth, as I have experienced it, is that minorities within all the once-mainline churches of this continent, disillusioned with the pompous Christian triumphalism of popular religion and sickened by the religious and cultural imperialism that triumphalism inevitably begets, are extraordinarily open to the alternative that this submerged theological strain represents. But of course it needs to be cast in language that can be grasped by persons without a great deal of theological and historical background, and above all it needs really to engage the real problems and possibilities of the present.

What *is* the theology of the cross? I have tried on many occasions, in both sustained argument and more metaphoric ways to describe this "thin tradition"—as I called it in my first book on the subject, *Lighten Our Darkness*. I know that I will never do justice to it because, to begin with, the theology of the cross is not an "it"—not a specific and objectifiable set of teachings or dogmas; not "a theology"—it is, rather, a spirit and a method that one brings to all one's reflections on all the various areas and facets of Christian faith and life. I have never been able to improve on Moltmann's metaphor when he says that the theology of the cross is "not a single chapter in theology, but the key signature for all Christian theology."<sup>3</sup> This is a theological approach that is not easy to pin down, as one can (with care) pin down terms like "orthodoxy," or "neo-orthodoxy," or "liberalism," or "fundamentalism." But *theologia crucis* as a spirit and method of theological thought cannot be stated in a formula. It may, however, be *recognized* when it is heard or experienced, whether in sermon, serious theological writing, or artistic expression. With regard to the latter, I have found it interesting that some of the best expressions of this very classical Protestant approach to the Christian message are found in plays and

<sup>2</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1973), p.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

novels by Roman Catholics—like Shusaku Endo's *Silence*, Graeme Green's *The Power and the Glory*, or George Bernanos' *Diary of a Country Priest*. It is also representable in art. The great figure of modern ecumenism, W.A. Visser t'Hooft, wrote a beautiful book about his countryman, Rembrandt, in which he presents Rembrandt as an "artist of the cross," and in letters to me he reinforced this connection between Rembrandt's painting and sketches and the theology of the cross. I think one could make a similar observation about Georges Roualt, Kaethe Kollwitz, Ernst Barlach, and many other artists.

If one cannot exactly codify the theology of the cross, what one can perhaps do is to identify certain informing or overarching principles that inform this "thin" tradition. And in what remains of my presentation I should like to attempt just that.

### Informing Principles of this Theology

#### 1) The Compassion and Solidarity of God

This must be thought the "first principle" of this theology. The *christological* basis of the theology of the cross is at the same time its *theological* basis (and I am using theology here in the more restrictive sense, meaning our understanding of the nature of the deity). For this theological approach, the cross of the Christ is not only Jesus' cross, it is also and simultaneously God's cross. As Jon Sobrino writes:

Our theology of the cross becomes radical only when we consider the presence (or absence) of God on the cross of Jesus. It is at this point that we face the alternative posed by Moltmann: Either the cross of Jesus is the end of all Christian theology [by which he means the end of speculation concerning the being and acting of God] or else it is the beginning of a truly Christian theology.<sup>4</sup>

This is indeed a radical affirmation in the light of the entire theological background of the church triumphant, especially from the time of its Establishment in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. The need of all self-declared "high" religion, particularly when it is politically and culturally "established," to keep God absolute in power and transcendence, and therefore free of contamination by earthly involvements and passions, is so strong in the whole history of Christian Theology—also today!—that it is astonishing and unacceptable to many Christians whenever God is too closely associated with His crucified son. Curiously, especially in the Christian West, we characteristically accentuate the second person of the Trinity—to the point, as H. Richard Niebuhr complained, of ending with a "unitarianism of the second person of the trinity"; and yet when it comes to assumptions about God "the Father," we fail to apply this same christomonistic tendency and accentuate attributes of magnificence, especially of power, that scarcely reflect either the God of Israel, who is so deeply *involved* with his people, or the God and Father of Jesus, the Christ.

Luther (and in this I think he has been followed by all who took up the theology of the cross subsequently) dared to break with this hold of classical philosophic-theology, as it was held especially by the school of Alexandria, and in the spirit of the school of Antioch accentuated the themes of compassion and solidarity. One could say, using other terms, that he christologized the Deity, even going so far as to speak of "the crucified God." As Moltmann characterizes this:

Christian faith stands and falls with the knowledge of the crucified Christ, that is, with the knowledge of God in the crucified Christ, or, to use Luther's even bolder phrase, with the knowledge of the "crucified God."<sup>5</sup>

The implications of this radical identification of God with the crucified Christ are manifold, for it means not only that the famous "distinctions" between the persons of the Trinity are radically qualified and their tendency to devolve into tritheism checked, it means also that theories of the *work* of Christ (soteriology) that depend upon these distinctions, as does that of Anselm of Canterbury, are implicitly called in question. And in that connection I think that Gustaf Aulén was entirely justified when—in his famous little study, *Christus Victor*, he affirmed that Luther did not follow the general tendency of the Christian West in picturing Christ's work as satisfaction offered to a holy, remote and implacably righteous God for the sins of the many. Such a conception of the atonement depends upon keeping God

<sup>4</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> Moltmann, p. 65.

strictly differentiated from the substitutionary victim, Jesus; and it is one of the anomalies of Western Protestantism that most of it has nevertheless clung to an Anselmian soteriology indistinguishable in essentials from the very Catholic Theology (doctrine of God) that Luther questioned. Calvin, of course, did not help very much in this process!

## 2) The Cross as World-Commitment

If the cross of Jesus is first of all a statement about the nature of the Deity, it is in the second place—but not even as a second step, but implicitly and necessarily—a statement about the world and God’s abiding love for the world and all its creatures. It is not strange to faith, however astonishing or incredible it may seem to unbelief (which is always at base cynicism about the worthwhileness of the world), that when the author of the fourth Gospel, allegedly the most hellenistic of the four Gospels, wished to state in a sentence the whole intention of God in the Christ, he wrote, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Nor is it surprising that this same verse of scripture is the best-remembered New Testament sentence of them all; for despite the rhetoric and the activity of Christians and churches, which often betray precisely such a sentiment, that which is best in all of us remembers that at the centre of this faith there is an extraordinary affirmation of creation. Doctrine must never become so drunk on redemption, or rather on its own superlatives and exaggerations of the redeemed estate, that it ends by denigrating the creation that God “so loved” and loves.

The cross is at once, for Christians, the ultimate statement of humankind’s movement away from God and of God’s gracious movement towards fallen humankind. I think of the cross of Golgotha as the divine determination to *claim* this world, however wretched its history and however costly its redemption. “I will be *your* God and you will be *my* people!” Against the clear tendency of the creature to degrade itself and abuse its environs, God in Christ reinstates the divine ownership of creation and commits Godself to creation’s fulfilment, its flourishing.

It was this sense of the divine commitment to the world that made the young prisoner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, perhaps the best advocate of the theology of the cross in our epoch, call in question the interpretation of Christianity as a religion of “redemption.” He writes:

The redemption myths try unhistorically to find an eternity after death.... [For them] redemption... means redemption from cares, distress, fears, and longings, from sin and death, in a better world beyond the grave. But is this really the essential character of the proclamation of Christ in the gospels and by Paul? I should say it is not. The difference between the Christian hope of resurrection and the mythological hope is that the former sends [a person] back into . . . life on earth in a wholly new way.... The Christian, unlike the devotees of the redemption myths, has no last line of escape available from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but, like Christ himself . . . he must drink the earthly cup to the dregs, and only in his doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with him, and he crucified and risen with Christ. This world must not be prematurely written off; in this the Old and New Testaments are at one.<sup>6</sup>

## 3) Honesty About Experience (Christian Realism)

As a third principle at work in the theology of the cross I would name an extraordinary commitment to truth-telling, a rare determination to be honest in one’s faith-claims—rare, I mean, in the whole realm of “religion.” For me at least, the 21<sup>st</sup> thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation has been vital:

Der Theologe der Gottes unverborgene Herrlichkeit sucht, nennt das Uebel gut und Gutes uebel; der Theologe des Kreuzes nennt die Dinge beim rechten Namen.

[The theologian who seeks God’s unconcealed glory names evil good and good evil; the theologian of the cross calls things by their proper name.]

This is in some ways an enigmatic statement, but only if we fail to grasp the critique of religious triumphalism that is being contrasted with the theology whose character Luther is attempting to depict.

<sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller (3<sup>rd</sup> edition; New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), pp. 185-186.

A theology that seeks to show the obviousness of the divine power and glory has to end in exaggeration and untruth. Why? Because in order to uphold its exaggerated positive it must downplay or neglect everything by which that positive is negated or called in question—which is to say, the “evil” that manifests itself in everyday life. By contrast, he says, the *theologia crucis* names the negating realities openly, beginning with the cross of Christ itself: the cross and all that it stands for by way of human degradation and suffering is not good, not *in se*—in itself! We are not called to laud and embrace this symbol of violence and torture and death as though it were something splendid. What is good lies hidden underneath or behind this dreadful reality: namely, God’s concealed presence and determination to mend the creation from within. The theology of the cross is thus not only allowed but commanded to draw the attention of church and world to that, in both, which contradicts and demeans the glory of God. The theologian of the cross is not (as is childishly alleged) a pessimist, but he or she is also not the congenital optimist who must repress every thought of doubt, despair, the demonic and death. The theology of the cross therefore leads to a *prophetic* stance on the part of the church, a boldness which “calls a spade a spade.” It is here that Reinhold Niebuhr’s “Christian realism” has its foundations.

But thesis 21 has another connotation that is easily overlooked. It means not only that faith is called upon to be *honest* about the reality of historical experience but that it must be *modest* about its own claims. For if God’s triumph is indeed “hidden beneath its apparent opposite,” we dare not imagine that we have captured the truth of God in our theology! That is precisely the error of the theology of glory! We, rather, who live “under the cross,” are able only to point to the mystery of the divine *agape* that is manifested in this strange, paradoxical manner. As von Loewenich writes in his biography of Luther:

Luther’s view appears to be complex, but basically it is quite simple. The apparent paradoxes prove to be true in experience. It is a question of honesty whether we acknowledge the reality of this experience or whether we reject it. Luther calls this honesty *humility*.<sup>7</sup>

This “humility” has always been mandatory for those who have grasped the fact that God is *Person*, “Thou” (in Buber’s terms), and who have contemplated in all seriousness the mystery of God’s compassion and solidarity with us *en Christo*. But today it is of the very essence of Christianity, for like all religion our religion too, as religion, is sorely tempted to make grandiose claims for itself, and in that direction—in our pluralistic world—lies violence and death. Whatever else may be said of the monumental theology of Karl Barth, his ties with Luther’s *theologia crucis* are no more clearly in evidence than when, in his *Evangelical Theology*, his Chicago lectures, he insists:

Evangelical theology is *modest* theology, because it is determined to be so by its object, that is, by him who is its subject.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4) The Contextual Character of This Theology

In my book, *The Cross in Our Context*,<sup>9</sup> I argued that the theology of the cross is inherently and fundamentally a contextual theology. I suppose such a claim could be interpreted as an attempt, on my part, to justify by reference to an authority-figure whom I respect, a predilection of my own for contextuality in theology. I am a sinner, also intellectually, and therefore I shall not seek to argue for the purity of my motives. Yet I do not see how one can immerse oneself in this theological tradition, not only Luther but the whole tradition, without coming to that kind of conclusion. As for Luther himself, it is of course perfectly obvious that he did not think of his work in modern contextual terms. Contextuality in theology is a by-product—rather late in time, actually!—of historical consciousness, which is a Modern mindset. Nevertheless Luther *acted* in a contextual manner, as one intensely aware of the fact that he was—for instance, a German; an Augustinian; and a critic of Aristotelianism and its ascendancy in the official theology; and so on. That Aristotelianism, as James M. Kittelson notes in his biography of Luther,

<sup>7</sup> Walter von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982), p. 123.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 35ff.

assumed as its primary methodological presupposition that “all important truths. . . were universal. Circumstances of time and place made no difference to the truth of propositions that could be developed by the exercise of right reason.”<sup>10</sup> Precisely that assumption, which in the hands of religious authority was no innocent teaching but a potent tool for the suppression of difference, was what Luther had to challenge—and not only because he had been influenced by the so-called *Via Moderne*, but because as a German conscious of his own and his people’s particularity he simply could not accept as binding truths that were “made in Rome,” a quite different context from his own. One could argue, surely, that the whole Reformation was steeped in a place-consciousness that could not be fitted easily into the religious ideology of external authority.

But in addition to such *historical* reasons for concluding that this theological approach is inevitably contextual, there are (in my estimation at least) solid *theological* grounds for such a conclusion. It follows irrevocably from all three of the previous principles: (1) A conception of God as one having compassion for, and desiring solidarity with the creature would be an empty sentiment unless “the creatures” for whom such love is intended were seen in all their particularity—which only represents, in fact, a return to the tradition of Jerusalem, with *its* historical consciousness, and away from the kind of abstractionism belonging to that side of the tradition of Athens that loves universals at the expense of particulars. (2) To speak of the cross of Christ in terms of God’s world-orientation and commitment could only be an empty claim if “the world” remains at the level of an intellectual construct and does not become explicit. The “world: that God loves is not a construct but a reality, constantly in flux, rich in variety, old in sin but redolent of potentiality. Love itself, whether divine or human, is never love for generalities but for specifics; and it becomes an absurdity and a pretense if it indulges in generalities that defy specificity—which unfortunately happens all too often in religion (“I love the world, it’s only these wretched people I can’t stand”). (3) A theology that is committed to truth-telling, realism about evil, modesty about itself, can only be a contextual theology. Its honesty (*Wahrheitsorientierung*—its orientation towards truth) is nothing but a determination to pay “attention” (in Simone Weil’s sense) to what is actually there in front of it. It is not permitted to contemplate an ideal that is wholly unrelated to the here and now. It entertains change, certainly, and even strives for change with every fibre of its being, but it wishes to change what actually is, and (as in the famous serenity prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr) “can be changed.”

To translate all this into other terms, the theology of the cross is at base a *practical* theology. It is not interested in pure theory. It is inherently critical of ideology. It drives always towards incarnation, towards enactment. This at least it has in common with liberation theology, that it is never satisfied with being theology but must become an ethic. Yet never an ethic separable from its own theological base and point of departure. Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran, complained about the Lutheranism that nurtured the theology of justification because it did not find its inherent goal in just action but rested in the security of a doctrinalized grace. One could complain just as appropriately of the Christian activism that never ponders the why of the act and, therefore, perennially complicates the very problems it would address.

##### 5) The Refusal of Finality

It would be difficult to grasp the character of this theological tradition without paying a good deal of attention to the eschatological dimension that runs through its length and breadth. One could even say that the chief difference between the theology of the cross and the antithesis that Luther uses as his contrast, the *theologia gloriae*, is their eschatology. The theology of glory depends on an eschatology that is fully “realized,” namely, realized in the church, realized in theology as true and irrefutable doctrine. There is a “realized” dimension in the theology of the cross, too; but it is not a realization to which the church and its theology can lay claim. The purposes of God are realized *in Christ*, and faith looks to God in trust and hope. But the faithful live without finality, without closure, without certitude. All our ancestors were “under the cloud,” says Paul. “Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. . . . Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:1ff). In confidence (*con – fide*) we may feel that we are on the right road, but woe to any who imagine they have arrived. The following statement seems to me typical of Luther:

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<sup>10</sup> James M. Kittelson, *Luther The Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), p. 47.

Christian living does not mean to *be* good but to *become* good; not to *be* well, but to get well; not *being* but *becoming*; not rest but training. We are *not yet*, but we shall be. It has *not yet* happened, but it is the way. Not everything shines and sparkles as yet, but everything is getting better.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of statement does not deny progress or betterment, but neither does it affirm the kind of perfectionism that John Wesley courted. We are living, it is true, after the victory of God in the risen Christ; but while the Christ is risen we ourselves live in hope and not fulfilment—we live, as the late Alan Lewis put it, on holy Saturday, between cross and resurrection.

And this is perhaps the best place to address the question: What is the relationship of the resurrection to the theology of the cross? Contrary to many critics of the theology of the cross, this theology does not overlook or downplay the victory of the third day; what it critiques is the use, or rather the misuse, of the resurrection to render the cross null and void. And that misuse is by no means a minor thing. Especially in North American popular Christianity the resurrection—or what I call resurrection-ism—functions to turn the religious *away* from the cross as a thing well and truly overcome. And that means not only the cross of Jesus, but the cross of reality; so that the religion thus mythically bolstered becomes a primary factor in the deadening of otherwise sensitive people to the pain of God in the world. I suspect there is no greater theological task in North America today than to refuse and redirect this false and dangerous functioning of Easter in this society. Rightly to grasp the meaning of Christ's resurrection is to be turned *towards* the cross, with understanding, not away from it. Moltmann puts it this way:

[Easter] does not overcome the story of Christ's passion so that we no longer remember it. Rather, it establishes Christ's cross as a saving event. The one who goes before us into the glorious and liberated future of God's resurrected is also the one who died for us on the cross. We come face to face with the glory of the coming God beholding the features of the crucified and not through infinite demands or flights of fancy.<sup>12</sup>

Being turned by resurrection faith and hope towards the cross of Jesus is not merely an act of piety; it is also an act of human and ethical solidarity with all who suffer. For Jesus is never alone, never just Jesus. He is this representative of the suffering God and of suffering creation and creatures. A religion that in the name of faithfulness to Jesus turns away from, or becomes smug and indifferent in relation to the world, is a blasphemy in the service of false religion, the religion of glory without the cross. We are living in a society that walks very close to this blasphemy.

## CONCLUSION

I must bring this lecture to an end, and I can only do so reluctantly, for I could have wished to cover all the aspects and facets of this theological tradition in a persuasive and final way. But that too indicates the temptation of theology always to covet glory for itself. If it is the theology of the cross that we are treating, there can be no final statement. Final statements in Christian theology are invariably to be mistrusted. That is the frustration of this discipline whenever it wishes to be a theology of the cross.

In concluding, I will leave you once again—as I did in *The Cross in our Context*—with a kind of meditation on the three Pauline virtues, faith, hope, and love. The best way that I have found of conveying what I think this theological method and spirit is all about is by considering these so-called virtues in the light of what they are each negating. Unless the negation of each is understood, the positive statement (the “virtue”) of each is cheapened and made into a cliché. We do not have to speculate about what these virtues negate, for in each case the negation is clearly present in the collected works of Paul; and as the New Testament's chief exemplar of this “thin tradition” Paul speaks, I believe, not only for Luther but for all who have been grasped by the principles of this tradition.

Faith. What does this term negate? The metaphor that crops up time and again in Paul's writings is “sight.” Faith, which “comes by hearing” and is precisely a not-seeing. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,”—one of Luther's favourite texts. The eschatological element—especially the “not yet” side of Christian eschatology—is here strongly present. The theology of the cross is a theology of *faith*, and while faith is certainly a positive term for Luther it

<sup>11</sup> WA 7, 336. [Trans. by Edward Furcha.]

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 30.

must not be elevated beyond its proper limit. In the act of trusting, the One trusted is glimpsed—as through a glass darkly; but not seen. Faith that is not sight is thus a faith warned against presumption. It is also a faith that is able to live with its antithesis, doubt, and that is in fact dead faith (as Unamuno said) when doubt is no longer allowed a hearing.

Hope. Hope is at once an orientation to the future and a recognition that the present is still lacking its promised fulfillment. Hope *realized* is no longer hope. The stance that we call hope is one constantly made conscious of the fact that the present, the *hic et nunc*, is a falling-short of what is most to be desired. So the hope that is faith's future dimension is always "hope against hope" (Rom 4:18). As faith must live with doubt, so hope must live with its antithesis, hopelessness, despair. What is hoped for must not be taken for granted, as though it were already experienced reality, already "seen"—for here too Paul resorts to the metaphor of sight: "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom 8:24-25).

Love. Love negates many things, as Paul makes plain in the famous hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13. But I think that what must receive priority where this discussion is concerned is power. "Love does not insist on its own way (1 Cor 13:5). "The crux of the cross," wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, "is its revelation of the fact that the final power of God over man is derived from the self-imposed weakness of his love."<sup>13</sup> This, I think, is of the essence of this theology, and it is hard for all to accept who think of deity chiefly in terms of power—*omnipotence*, almighty-ness. But if God is love, then the divine power must accommodate itself to divine love, and not vice versa. And that, for the theology of the cross, is basic. Paul Tillich writes (and I will quote the entire thought because I think it is wonderfully illuminating):

One of Luther's most profound insights was that God made himself small for us in Christ. In doing so, He left us our freedom and our humanity. He showed us His heart, so that our hearts could be won.

When we look at the misery of our world, its evil and its sin, especially in these days which seem to mark the end of a world period, we long for divine interference, so that the world and its demonic rulers might be overcome. We long for a king of peace within history, or for a king of glory above history. We long for a Christ of power. Yet if *He* were to come and transform us and our world, we should have to pay the one price we could not pay: we would have to lose our freedom, our humanity, and our spiritual dignity. Perhaps we would be happier; but we should also be lower beings, our present misery, struggle and despair notwithstanding. We should be more like blessed animals than men made in the image of God. Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified, have no knowledge of the mystery of God and of man.<sup>14</sup>

To summarize: the theology of the cross is a theology of faith (not sight); a theology of hope (not consummation); and a theology of love (not power). And if you want to understand what the theology of glory is you just have to turn this ordering of the virtues around: it is a theology of sight (not faith), of consummation (not hope), and of power (not love).

The one aspect of the theology of the cross that I have omitted from this characterization concerns its consequence as an ecclesiology. This is a serious omission, because the *theologia crucis* is only a viable theology as and when it expresses itself in an *ecclesia crucis*. To make up for this omission, besides referring you to Part 3 of my book, *The Cross in Our Context*, I want to quote the final paragraph of Paul Tillich's best-read book, *The Courage to Be*:

. . . a church which raises itself in its message and its devotion to the God above the God of theism without sacrificing its concrete symbols can mediate a courage which takes doubt and meaninglessness into itself. It is the Church under the Cross which alone can do this, the

<sup>13</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 148 [from the sermon entitled, "He Who is the Christ."]



Church which preaches the Crucified who cried to God who remained after the God of confidence had led him in the darkness of doubt and meaninglessness. To be as a part in such a church is to receive the courage to be in which one cannot lose one's self and in which one receives one's world.<sup>15</sup>

Douglas John Hall is .....

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1952), p. 178.

The theology of the cross shines forth as Luther properly distinguishes the Law and the Gospel, all the while placing it in the real human struggle between life and death. The Law is clear and deadly with the stark language Moses employs, and the Gospel is there with true comfort, albeit veiled and waiting for its New Testament fulfillment in Christ. In this essay I provide a brief exegesis of Psalm 90 and an analysis of Luther's lecture. This provides our footing for a deep examination of this Psalm's most frequent use in pastoral ministry which occurs outside the lectionary, in the rite of "Alister McGrath, Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), 149-150. The term "posteriora Dei" (LW vol. 31, 52) is translated as "the back parts of God," i.e. that vision of God which gives us but an incomplete and indirect knowledge of God." He is a world-renowned systematic theologian and prolific author, who has distinguished himself as a theologian of hope in the areas of Christology, Catholic Evangelical ecumenism, and mission theology. Read more. Article.