

Theology of the Cross: Subversive Theology in a Postmodern World

A major issue facing Christian theology today is the question of power. On the wider cultural level, the postmodern critique of thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and especially Michel Foucault contains the charge that all claims to truth, including the claims of theology, are merely secret bids for power. Christianity, it is claimed, dominated Western society for centuries not because it was more true, but because it was more powerful than its rivals. At the local level, too, similar issues face local churches today. Where does power lie? How are clergy and church leaders to use their power? What of the abuse of religious power evident in many religious movements, from the 'Nine o'Clock Service' in Sheffield to American televangelists, even down to clerical domination in local churches today? These accusations have been strengthened by the sense that the church has often used theology to legitimate its claims to domination. Is theology merely an exercise in buttressing the power-claims of those in authority in the name of an all-powerful God? How can Christians claim to hold the truth when truth itself is seen as an oppressive assertion of power? These questions are crucial for the future of theology; as Anthony Thiselton puts it: 'These perspectives constitute the most serious and urgent challenge to theology, in comparison with which the old-style attacks from "common-sense" positivism appear relatively naïve.' The result of all this is that Christian theology today needs to search its own heart and past to discover whether it holds the resources to meet such challenges.

One theme in Western theology which can claim to do this is the theology of the cross. Sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered, this "'thin tradition" which has functioned like an antiphon beneath the high triumph song of Christendom' has impressive credentials as a kind of theology possessing an in-built resistance to the abuse of power. It has shown itself on several significant occasions to be capable of mounting a serious critique of theologies which are used to legitimize claims to power, and to offer instead an alternative vision of both God's use of power and that of those who claim to be his people. This article outlines three specific examples of theologians who have turned to theology which begins at the cross in order to address power-struggles within the church of their time.

Paul in Corinth

1 Corinthians, probably more than any other NT writing, has been the beneficiary of sociological analysis over the past two decades. This research, carried out principally by Gerd Theissen yet with other notable contributions, has been complemented by interest in the role which rhetoric plays in the letter, both the interest shown by the Corinthians in *sofia logou*, and in Paul's own use of rhetoric. In all, these new perspectives have helped us to see the letter in a new light, and to appreciate that it is impossible to understand the dynamics of the early development of the church in Corinth purely in doctrinal terms, as older scholarship tended to do. There is clearly a

socio-economic dimension to the tensions in Corinth, from the way in which the Eucharist was conducted (cf. 11:22), to the tendency to seek justice in secular litigation (only the rich could afford to go to court), and even over food offered to idols. This is to say nothing of the social mix which made up the church itself (1:26), with the inevitable tensions that brought in a very status-conscious society.

Having said all this, social factors do not explain everything in the Corinthian church. There are still some real ideological issues which divide the church from Paul and, presumably, the Corinthians themselves. Most of the literature on 1 Corinthians concludes that it was not so much a case of four separate parties slogging it out, following Paul, Apollos, Cephas or Christ (as 1:12 might suggest), as a matter of two sides being involved. On one account, an axis lies between Paul and Cephas, perhaps reflecting a Gentile–Jewish divide in the church. Others have tended to see Paul and Apollos as the major foci of loyalty in the congregation. Recently, perhaps, the pendulum has swung more towards the Apollos theory, and the idea that the disputes in Corinth caused division, less between Jewish and Gentile Christians than among different groups of Gentile believers in the church. This is normally attributed to several different factors, such as: (i) interest in rhetoric and Apollos’s skill at it, and the Acts 18 evidence that he had visited Corinth, contrasting with uncertainty as to whether Peter ever did; (ii) the virtual disappearance of Peter from the Paul–Apollos argument in chapters 3 and 4, and the absence from the letter of the normal contentious issues in Jewish–Gentile Christian relations, such as law, promise, circumcision and the like; and in general (iii) factors involving the Hellenistic context of Pauline churches, in which there has been a recent growth of interest.

Gerd Theissen has shown how most of the people named in the letter were probably of high social status, and most probably supporters of Paul. There is also evidence to suggest that ‘some’ within the church were disdainful towards Paul, perhaps because of his lack of rhetorical ability (as opposed to Apollos) and his artisan status (ch. 9), who at the same time disparaged the poorer members of the church. It is arguable that this same group claimed that ‘there is no resurrection from the dead’, that ‘there are no idols in the world’ (8:4), argued for the right to eat in pagan temples, possibly joining in the cultic meals in honour of idols (8:1–13; 10:7–33), and displayed a strange mixture of sexual licence (5:1) and asceticism (7:1). It is possible to suggest ideological settings in first-century Corinth which would explain the origin of some of these ideas and practices. For example, local Epicureans, who held that knowledge of the essential principles of matter gave them power and superiority over others who lacked it, would have held a number of beliefs and practices which bear striking resemblance to some Corinthian positions. They believed, for example, that at death people simply cease to be, and that resurrection of any kind is nonsensical. They had a reputation for keeping themselves separate from the rest of society, in a way similar to those who ate apart at the Eucharist, and perhaps they felt that they had no need of those less gifted than themselves (12:21). They held ambivalent attitudes to sex, encompassing both kinds of the sexual attitudes mentioned above. Although not actually atheist, they held the gods to be of no account, distant and uninterested, and thus held that one could engage in pagan worship without its necessarily meaning anything, much like some Corinthian Christians seem to have done (8:10). And, of course, like all good first-century upwardly-mobile Greco-Romans, they were interested in wisdom and rhetoric.

In any case, it is a fair guess that the church in Corinth was experiencing a power-struggle between two groups of wealthy Christians. One, perhaps converted by Apollos’s rhetorical style and charismatic ability, may have been still influenced by close association with ideas and practices most evident in the Epicurean group in the city, and uncritically brought these ideas into their new Christian faith to justify their behaviour. In reaction, a number of those who had been in the church longer, originally converted by Paul, began to disapprove. (Had they already written to him to complain about those who associated too closely with immoral men – 5:9?) On this scenario, this argument had quickly degenerated into an argument about names and loyalties, one side disparaging the ministry and abilities of the other’s ‘leader’. The poor in the

congregation, for example Chloë's slaves (1:11), saw just an argument over names. The rich took sides, some even staying aloof from the quarrel by claiming to follow the distant Peter. Paul, it seems, has to address two quite separate problems, namely boasting by those who followed Apollos and valued rhetoric, knowledge, wealth, status and charismatic gifting, so disparaging both the poor and Paul himself, and quarrelling between these and Christians who thought they were remaining loyal to Paul. Both of these attitudes, of course, touch on the use of power within the church.

Paul's response centres upon the cross of Christ, as the place where God has revealed his 'wisdom', or his 'characteristic way of working'. As he begins a carefully argued reply in 1:18, he shows that their unity, so easily fractured, is found in the fact that Christ has died for them. Paul was not crucified for them, Christ was. They were baptized not into Paul's or Apollos's death, but into Christ's. Their dispute over who baptized whom would 'empty the cross of its power' because it denied the reality of the unity which the cross achieved. The cross stands as the bedrock of the teaching which gave the church its original identity and unity (15:3).

Furthermore, the cross answers not just Corinthian quarrelling, but Corinthian arrogance as well. God's wisdom is exemplified in his scandalous choice of a crucified Messiah as the means of salvation, a relatively low-status group of people for the majority of his church in Corinth, and a weak, rhetorically unskilled and spiritually exhausted apostle (1:26–2:5). The cross gives value to the weaker, poorer brother, as one for whom Christ died (8:11). Whereas these Corinthian Christians disdained the poor and Paul, God had chosen them for his purposes. The cross thus deconstructs both competitiveness and arrogance.

Beyond this, the cross acts as a model for the use of power, or more specifically, the cross as exemplified in the life of Paul the apostle. Paul appeals to the Corinthians to imitate him (4:16) in his role as servant/slave (3:5; 4:1). As chapter 4 proceeds, the imagery of crucifixion creeps into the text, as Paul portrays the apostolic life as one of shame, suffering and degradation. Paul's boast is that he 'made himself a slave to all, that I might win the more' (9:19); that by choosing the life of a common artisan he became socially 'weak, in order to win the weak' (9:22). Paul's own life has taken on a cruciform shape, sacrificing his own social power and status for the sake of others. The true content of Christian wisdom is not 'knowledge' but 'love': in other words, self-giving towards one's fellow-believers, and especially the poor. It is this pattern of life he recommends to these Christians, namely the way of servanthood, the way of the cross. A theology which begins at the cross is, for Paul, the radical antidote to any religion which is only a thinly veiled copy of a power-seeking culture.

Martin Luther

After Paul developed his *theologia crucis* in Corinth, the theme lay pretty well dormant for many years, at least in mainstream Western theology. Throughout the patristic and medieval periods, most theologians were wary of viewing the cross as directly revelatory of God and his ways. This was due partly to their reluctance to question the impassibility of God (too close an association between the cross and the being of God would seem to compromise this), and partly to the 'two natures' Christology which neatly enabled them to ascribe the suffering of Christ to the human rather than the divine nature. For example, although Tertullian was the first to coin the phrase 'the crucified God', this seems little more than a rhetorical flourish for him: he is not really interested in developing a theology from this point. Despite his great theology of atonement, Anselm fights shy of reading any implications for the doctrine of God from the cross. For Thomas Aquinas, the cross is a contingent, not a necessary, means of salvation. God could have chosen to save the world in another way, had he wished. So it is hard to see how the cross could have any great theological significance for him either.

When Martin Luther begins to outline his *theologia crucis* in the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, he does so without the help of a long tradition of use within academic patristic or medieval theology. Where then does he get the idea from? In part, he appears to get it from 1 Corinthians itself. Towards the end of his first set of Lectures on the Psalms (the *Dictata super Psalterium* of 1513–15), and then during the period leading up to Heidelberg, 1 Corinthians 1–2 is quoted with remarkable frequency. As with Luther's other Reformation insights, however, it would not be true to say that he simply rediscovered this theology by sitting alone in his Wittenberg monastery with St Paul. Luther gained his interest in the cross as the heart of Christian life and thought not so much from mainstream academic theology, which had largely forgotten this type of theology, but from popular traditions of practical spirituality and piety.

Contemplation of the sufferings of Christ was the heart of late-medieval piety. Many popular works had appeared which helped the meditator to focus upon the sufferings of Christ, some reminding people of the efficacy of the sacraments, some aiming at a more affective individual response to Christ's sufferings. At several points in his early writings, Luther shows himself to be distinctly aware of this practice of Passion Meditation. Luther particularly commends the second of the above kinds, whereby the sufferings of the cross are expected to have an emotional impact upon the meditator. However, he takes it further by insisting that meditation on the cross is not meant merely to evoke sentimental sorrow for Christ, but sorrow for one's own sins which put him there, and a sense of thankfulness for God's love and forgiveness.

Besides this tradition of popular passion piety, Luther seems to have learnt his *theologia crucis* from at least one other source as well. Bernard of Clairvaux has long been recognized as an important influence on the young Luther, yet his role in suggesting the themes of the theology of the cross to him has not. Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs, standard fare in the monastic circles in which Luther spent his early years, contain several themes which found their way into Luther's developing *theologia crucis*, for example the importance of suffering for the Christian, the dialectic between God's proper and alien work, the insight that God reveals himself in Christ's lowliness and humility rather than his glory and power, and the idea suggested by Exodus 33 of God revealing his 'back', taken up by Luther in the Heidelberg Disputation.

What Luther gained from late-medieval monastic and popular Christian life was therefore not so much theology as spirituality. In fact, much of the young Luther's problem is his experience of dissonance between this late-medieval spiritual tradition and the semi-Pelagian theology of the *via moderna* which underpinned it. On the one hand, this spirituality taught him constantly to examine his sins, to despair of himself so that he would acquire humility, and to value suffering as God's way of making him penitent. On the other hand, his theology taught him to value works of contrition, penance, indulgences, masses, to nurture the growth of his humility as a virtue, and to try to love God above all else in the strength of his own unaided natural powers. Within the young Luther, therefore, a spirituality of self-accusation lived uncomfortably alongside a theology of self-justification. What his spirituality led him to accentuate (his own nothingness and worthlessness before God), his theology told him to deny. It was not just his experience, but the spirituality which he had learnt, which was at odds with the prevailing theological resources available to interpret it. Due to this mismatch, theological concepts such as *iustitia dei* and *poenitentia*, which were intended as consolatory, became terrifying. Luther found in them not peace of heart, but uncertainty and despair over his ultimate salvation, because they set before him a standard of holiness which his spirituality taught him he could never achieve. Luther found himself caught between a spirituality and a soteriology which he increasingly felt to be mutually incompatible.

One of these had to go, and it was the soteriology of the *via moderna* that finally gave way. Popular and monastic spirituality did not remain unchanged, however. Luther's response to this crisis was a theological reworking of late-medieval spirituality. Some elements of this spirituality were rejected, yet other elements of passion meditation and Bernardian theology helped him to

move beyond it. He radicalized these spiritual traditions, and in the process took them far beyond both the *via moderna* and even the *via antiqua* of the Thomists, who had held the line against trends in late-medieval soteriology which implied some kind of co-operation between people and God in the drama of salvation. This response was in fact the development of the theology of the cross. The *theologia crucis* can therefore be seen as a revolt or protest of popular and monastic piety against the dominant privatized speculative theology of late-medieval scholasticism.

It seems that sometime towards the end of 1515, Luther arrived at a realization that the cross was not just the way God chose to save the world, or the path to be trod if salvation was to be achieved, but that it reveals God's characteristic way of working in the world. God condemns before he saves. If God is to be able to save him, the sinner must be made passive, brought to a sense of his own powerlessness before his creator. He can only come with empty hands. God reveals this pattern in the cross, where Christ too is made passive before God, before he can be raised. On the cross, Christ seems to be suffering defeat, yet, to the eye of faith, God is working out the salvation of the world. In this theology, therefore, revelation is back to front, hidden, and contrary to what is expected. Things are not what they seem and the sign and the thing signified are out of joint. What seem to be valuable (human piety, wisdom, philosophy) are in fact worthless, and what seem weak and negligible (the experience of suffering, temptation, awareness of sin and failure) are in fact God's precious work to humble and then save the sinner.

How, then, did this new understanding of the cross help to resolve Luther's dilemma? All the contrition, self-accusation and awareness of sin which late-medieval spirituality evoked in a monk like Luther seemed to him a barrier to his acceptance by God. His spirituality taught him to magnify his own unworthiness, his distance from God. If he had nothing he could offer to God, how could it help him to be told: 'to him who does what in him lies, God most certainly communicates grace' (*facienti quod in se est infallibiliter Deus infundit gratiam*). This new understanding of the cross as the revelation of God's ways with sinners gave a new meaning to his experience of despair about himself. Far from a disqualification from grace, it became the only qualification for it. As Anders Nygren put it, for Luther we have 'fellowship with God on the basis of sin'. God saves only sinners, teaches only the stupid, enriches only the poor, raises only the dead. Therefore, to be saved, one must become sinful, foolish, poor, helpless, exactly what his spirituality had led Luther to acknowledge himself to be.

Another way of expressing this dissonance in Luther's experience is that revelation was divided from salvation. The way God had revealed himself in Christ bore no particular relation to the way he saved people in the present. Christ's life, death, suffering were past actions which could arouse emotional sympathy or validate the sacraments, but which were quite definitely past. Because Christ had suffered, there was no great need for the sinner to suffer now. God, it seemed, had acted one way in Christ and another in Luther. For Christ, God was saviour; for Luther, he was judge.

At the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther's theology centred upon two assertions: that God first condemns in order to save, and that he reveals himself at the cross. At the core of Luther's theology lies the connection he makes between these two insights. The way God saves people in the present, and the form in which he has revealed himself historically, are joined at the cross. The vital clue for understanding the way God works is always the cross: God works and reveals himself in suffering and weakness, not strength and glory, whether in Christ or the Christian, in the first century or the sixteenth. God's activity in the present is always continuous with his revelation in history. Luther's *theologia crucis* is therefore an assertion of the unity and continuity of God's action in history and in the present, in revelation and in salvation. He is not one God in Christ and another God for us. This is why Luther insists that to know God is to know him in Christ alone, or in the words of the Heidelberg Disputation, 'true theology and the knowledge of God are in the crucified Christ'. The theology of the cross roots God's present

action in his revelation in history, and refuses to sever the two. It therefore asserts in the strongest possible way the faithfulness of God to his promise and his revelation.

This theology, bred by his meditation upon the themes of 1 Corinthians 1–2 in the spirit of late-medieval spirituality, thus became for Luther the vantage point from which he conducted a polemic both against scholastic theological power which had become the monopoly of experts and remote from the realities of everyday Christian life, and against the power, prestige and wealth of the papal church. In this church, the wise and the powerful fed off one another, and the Indulgence controversy of 1517 was a prime example of false theology being used to legitimate an oppressive practice which only served to increase papal wealth. If God's action in the present is continuous with his action in Christ, then the papacy and the church needed to model themselves on the weakness and poverty of the cross, rather than on images of imperial power. They needed to seek sufferings and the cross, not the false peace of Indulgences. The papacy's failure to do that simply betrayed not just its moral deficiency, but also its theological misunderstanding. As in Corinth, so in Wittenberg, theology which began at the cross had served to critique the abuse of power.

Blaise Pascal

In seventeenth-century France, the crucial question was no longer Luther's 'Where can I find a gracious God?' but rather Montaigne's 'What do I know?' It was also a place where theological controversy was closely intertwined with political power. Blaise Pascal's theological career saw him engaged in polemic on three fronts at once, against the confident dogmatism of Cartesian Rationalism, the sceptical tradition of Montaigne and Pyrrhonism, and on behalf of the Jansenists against their sworn enemies, the Society of Jesus. The place of the cross in Pascal's theology has seldom been noticed; in fact, Pascal's significance as a theologian is not often recognized as much as it should be, perhaps in deference to his reputation as apologist, satirist and scientist. Yet, for Pascal, the cross was the decisive hallmark of Christian life and theology, a stone against which these contemporary trends, whether rationalist, sceptical or Jesuit, all stumbled.

Uniquely among 'orthodox' apologists of his day, Pascal had a great interest in the identity of God. Many seventeenth-century apologists such as Antoine Sirmond, Pierre Charron, Jean de Silhon and Yves de Paris had tried to prove God or the immortality of the soul. The attempt had failed, thought Pascal, not so much because it chose the wrong methods, as because it aimed to prove the wrong God, a God susceptible to proof.

Especially after 23 November 1654, his 'night of fire', commemorated in the famous *Mémorial*, sewn into his coat and found only after his death, Pascal identified God as the God of the Augustinian tradition represented in his own day by the movement associated with the Abbé de Saint-Cyran, the convent at Port-Royal outside Paris, and by Jansenism. In one particularly important fragment of the *Pensées*, L449, he argues that much of the contemporary argument against Christianity does no harm at all to the Christian God, but merely undermines the God of deism. Pascal is quite clear what Christianity is NOT. It is by no means 'the adoration of a God considered great and powerful and eternal; that is really Deism, almost as far distant from true Christianity as atheism'. Instead Pascal depicts the true God of the Christian, the God of the Bible. Using the motif of the God of the Patriarchs, as in the *Mémorial*, this God, far from being merely the 'author of geometrical truths and of the order of the elements', is one who fills the soul and heart, directly invading the interior emotional life of believers to bring about a sense both of their own *misère* and his mercy, who desires intimacy with them at the deepest level of the soul, a jealous God who instils in those whom he possesses an insatiable and exclusive desire for himself. In place of the impersonal creative force of deism, or even of Cartesianism, Pascal evokes an intensely personal, passionate God. Pascal's God is not object but subject, the

Augustinian God of love and consolation. This passage is in effect an exposition of the 'God perceived by the heart, not by the reason' (L424), a God apprehended in an entirely different way from the God of the deists, pagans or Epicureans, and at an entirely different level of human cognition. God is known in this radically different way because he is a radically different kind of God.

This God can be approached only by love, not speculation, through moral reorientation, not rational deduction. This God therefore hides himself from human attempts to find him through objective observation. Pascal's famous theme of the Hidden God is a direct result of his belief in Jansenist theology. Pascal's world is not the neat Thomist world where God gives clear indications of his existence and nature, but the deeply ambiguous, fallen Augustinian world which speaks simultaneously of God's presence and his absence. For human creatures to know this hidden God will involve a much more radical solution than contemplating obvious proofs in nature. It will involve not just an engagement with God as object but an encounter with him as subject. At the heart of Pascal's discussion of these questions lies the symbol of the cross, again strongly coloured by the themes of 1 Corinthians 1-2.

Firstly, for Pascal, in one range of fragments of the *Pensées*, the cross hides God from unbelievers, where God 'hides himself from those who tempt him but reveals himself to those who seek him' (L444). From the perspective of indifferent unbelief, all that can be seen in God's revelation is this foolishness and obscurity, and thus the cross closes the door to an abstract, speculative knowledge of God.

Secondly, the cross reveals God to those whose hearts have been moved to find him. The cross represents for Pascal the dialectic of fall and redemption. It indicates that there is a God, that humanity is fallen so it no longer recognizes him clearly in his creation, and that God has sent a redeemer to rescue it (L427, 431). Once Christ and the cross, the act of reconciliation between man and God, are understood, both God and human wretchedness, both human grandeur and misère, are understood. When this dualism is grasped, with all that it implies about both the reality of God, and yet human inability to see him, the reason for the obscurity of God behind creation is understood: we do not see him because we are blind to him. In the light of Christ (and this principle of creation and fall understood within him), everything in creation now 'bursts forth with proofs of these two truths'. Without him, all remains confusing. To grasp that Christ was crucified for the sins of the world is to confess one's own fallenness and epistemological weakness, the obscurity in one's own mind. It is to understand that failure to see God clearly in creation is not caused by the fact that he is not there, but by human blindness which can only partially glimpse truth. Christ crucified therefore becomes the key which unlocks the mysterious ambiguity of nature and reveals God to the seeker.

Thirdly, another set of fragments shows how, for Pascal, the cross represents the pattern of the Christian life, and the way in which the transition is made between unbelief and faith, namely through the crucifixion of self-will, the willingness for moral and spiritual reorientation which is the evidence of God's touch of grace. As recent scholarship has tended to think, the famous argument of the 'wager' is not intended to compel belief. It is in fact a device intended to show that the real reason for unbelief is not that faith is illogical (any gambler weighing the odds would opt for belief over unbelief any day), but that the unbeliever simply does not want to believe. The obstacle to belief is not epistemological but moral:

¼ if you are unable to believe, it is because of your passions, since reason impels you to believe, yet you cannot do so. Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence, but by diminishing your passions. (L418)

From these three insights, all focused on the cross, Pascal is able to address the three opponents of Augustinian theology in seventeenth-century France.

1. The followers of Descartes fail to take into account the cross as representing man's fall, his

consequent epistemological blindness, and his need for grace. Because their minds are unenlightened by grace, those confident of rational powers see only the apparent foolishness of Christianity, which bars the way to an objective, direct rational knowledge of God. God is hidden from these dogmatists, and until they recognize their sin and their need for the sacrifice of the cross, they remain in a false light, thinking they see while they are blind. Reason is always blinded by passion, and until the moral issue of desire is addressed, it is useless as a tool for discovering truth. They fail to understand the cross, the hiddenness of God.

2. Pyrrhonists, on the other hand, propose universal doubt, where nothing can be known at all. For Pascal, however, the revelation of God in Christ who was crucified is the perspective from which truth can be grasped, once the inner disposition to believe has been given. Knowledge is possible to those who have grasped the fundamental principle which the cross contains: man's degradation and his potential. Truth is the sole possession of God, it rests not on this earth, but in his presence alone (L131), yet the cross is the sign (chiffre) that St Paul gives (L268) which enables us to begin to grasp it. The Pyrrhonists have failed to account for the way in which God does make knowledge possible, so that their reductionism, although true from the perspective of indifference, is not total, and is overcome from the perspective of faith. Pascal's qualification 'having no certainty outside of faith' in L131 is highly significant. Outside Jesus Christ and the cross there can be no self-knowledge or knowledge of God, life or death (L416, 447, 449). Conversely, in Jesus Christ crucified there is true knowledge, which not even the acids of scepticism can destroy.

3. The Jesuits, who were dedicated to the elimination of the Jansenist movement, were known for their flexible approach to ethics and their accommodation of a wide variety of behaviour within the church, brilliantly lampooned in Pascal's earlier Provincial Letters. For Pascal, such moral laxity suggested that it was possible to become a true Christian without the need for deep moral change. Jesuit moral theology allowed a sinner to receive absolution, attend mass and live with a clear conscience while remaining exactly as he was. When Pascal accuses the Jesuits, in both the *Pensées* and the *Lettres Provinciales*, of preaching 'Christ not crucified', of 'suppressing the scandal of the cross', Pascal's charge is that they have neglected the third aspect of the cross which we noted in the *Pensées*, namely the cross as signifying the profound moral realignment that needs to take place if a person is to come to know and love God. When they 'hide the mystery of the cross' they deny Pascal's fundamental insight that conversion, the change of perspective, takes place initially through moral, not intellectual, reorientation.

Towards the end of Pascal's short life, as the royal absolutism of the court of Louis XIV grew (and of course Jesuit confessors were regularly to be found among the great and the good of the time), he stood against the Jesuits, insisted on the importance of holding to the Augustinian God in opposition to trends in seventeenth-century French theology which were abandoning it, and undertook extreme self-denial with an eye on the poor during his final months. All this should perhaps not be read purely as world-renouncing negativity, but as an eloquent form of dissent from the economically comfortable, morally lax and socially divisive theology of his day, which took little notice of the poor and suggested that conversion to Christ made few demands for moral and economic change. For Pascal, a theology centred upon the cross was the only kind which could stand against the sell-out of the French church to political or intellectual power.

Conclusion

In these three examples, theology which begins at the cross has shown itself to be truly subversive. Although not an approach which has dominated Western theology, and which for long periods seemed almost forgotten in the halls of academic thought, it was kept alive more in popular spirituality and worship than in academic life. As such, it has proved a much-needed corrective to triumphalistic power-seeking theology within the church. A *theologia crucis* can

offer a number of significant resources for us today.

1. It reminds us of the unity of God's action in the past and in the present, in revelation and in salvation, in Christ and in us. The believer and the church should not be surprised if what happened to Christ happens to them. The *theologia crucis* is for these theologians an insistence on the paradigmatic nature of the cross: it is not solely a soteriological event which remains locked in the past, but is a paradigm of the way in which God always works. For this reason, atonement theologies which regard the cross as purely a past action, the benefits of which one simply enjoys in the present, are inadequate if they fail to make the connection between God's action in Christ and God's action in the ongoing life of the church or the Christian.

2. It stands as a critique of theology which becomes exclusively academic. This is not just because of the tendency of academia to forget this theme, but more because it insists on the involvement of the theologian with God himself. For salvation and the knowledge of God to take place, there must be a conformity of the knower to what is known. In other words, the God who reveals himself in the cross of Christ can be known only from the cross of the Christian and the church. The forms of these 'crucifixions' are different, yet all three insist on the necessity of the personal experience of being humbled, becoming powerless, whether socially, soteriologically or epistemologically, and on the fact that only from that perspective can God rightly be known. This means that Christian existence today must be shaped by the form of God's self-revelation, the crucified Christ. Quite simply, it becomes difficult for a church to use power in manipulative ways if its theology is founded upon the cross, and it seeks to remain true to the God revealed in it. Instead, the church's use of power must be marked by the way God in Christ has used his power: in its giving power to those who lack it, and in the use of power to advance the interests of those disadvantaged by power relations.

3. In the face of postmodern critiques of the notion of power, the *theologia crucis* is a protest against forms of relationship between people, or between people and God, which are based primarily on manipulative power rather than love. It is not an ideology, but because of its insistence on the unity of God's action in the past and the present, it makes demands on actual relationships within communities, the way leadership operates, and the way those on the margins are heard. Because the *theologia crucis* depicts the God who does not abandon power, but who uses it for the healing and salvation of his creation, exercising his own power in the foolish, powerless vulnerability of the cross, it can therefore offer an alternative model of power for the Christian community. The truth revealed in the *theologia crucis* is not oppressive, but liberating, because it is inseparably connected to self-giving Love as its mode of expression. It tells of the God who places himself at the service of his people, and invites his people to follow suit.



Graham Tomlin

Graham Tomlin is the Bishop of Kensington, and President of St Mellitus College, London. He is a

popular author and conference speaker.

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