



## A Theology of the Cross

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It is a commonplace that Christian theology is concerned with that kind of knowledge about God that is obtained through Jesus Christ. But it is not a commonplace that the cross of Jesus is the criterion for the authenticity of such knowledge. It was Paul who first emphasized the cross in such a way. And later on it was Paul's argument against the supposedly superior wisdom claimed by the Corinthians that Luther called upon when, in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, he praised the theology of the cross in contrast to the theology of glory which speculates about the nature of God on the basis of his work in the creation of the world.

By calling upon the cross of Christ as criterion for authentic theology Luther challenged both the method and content of the medieval theological tradition. He challenged its method insofar as it developed its doctrine of God on the basis of a philosophical concept of God, by deriving its statements from the notion of God as first cause of the universe. But Luther's criticism was mainly meant to oppose what he considered a wrong conception of human righteousness and how a person can become righteous. This, he affirmed, is not possible by doing what is morally good, but only by faith in Jesus Christ: "He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ" (Thesis 25).<sup>1</sup> This thesis rejects the Aristotelian notion of justice as a virtue that is acquired by developing an appropriate attitude or habit of action. This notion of justice encourages an attitude of priding oneself on one's lawful behavior, as indication of being wise and knowledgeable ("who boasts that he is wise and learned in the law,"<sup>2</sup> commenting on Thesis 23). This is the core of

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<sup>1</sup>"Non ille iustus est qui multum operatur, sed qui sine opere multum credit in Christum" (WA 1:364). Quotation above from *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 31:55.

<sup>2</sup>"Gloriatur in Lege tamquam sapiens et doctus" (WA 1:363). Quoted above from *Luther's Works*, 31:54.

what Luther rejected as *theologia gloriae*, the self-glorification of works righteousness. The notion of *theologia gloriae* was broadened, however, to comprise the method of philosophical theology, because in Luther's opinion it was this method that led to the definition of justice as virtue and finally to works righteousness. His alternative was called *theologia crucis*, because our righteousness was achieved through the cross of Jesus Christ and is communicated to us through the forgiveness of sins which he earned for us by his vicarious suffering and death. Hence, the core of Luther's concept of *theologia crucis* was the doctrine of satisfaction for our sins offered to God in the vicarious death of Jesus Christ. Because of his atoning death at the cross we become just and righteous by faith in him who offers us the forgiveness of our sins. That is, we

become just and righteous not by developing a habit of acting in accordance with the law, but by faith in the crucified Christ.

## I. LUTHER AND PAUL

The main authority to whom Luther appealed in order to prove his thesis of *theologia crucis* was, of course, Paul. But what the apostle wrote on this subject in 1 Corinthians is not identical with Luther's doctrine. It does not have the same focus, and it was addressed to a different situation. In 1 Corinthians the focus is different from what the apostle has to say in Galatians and Romans on justification. Here wisdom is the issue, and that is not simply the same as justification. There may be a common denominator, but only in a rather general way, insofar as human self-assertion before God is inherent in both justification through the works of the law and wisdom. Paul's attack was directed against groups that claimed a specific spiritual experience and wisdom while denying a place of central importance to the cross of Christ. To reconstruct in detail the positions of the different groups in the Corinthian congregation of that time is a matter of continuing exegetical dispute. But presumably the Jewish idea of preexistent wisdom had a central role in the thought of Paul's opponents, and Jesus may have been presented by them as the figure in whose life and teaching that preexistent wisdom was revealed and whose glorification overcame the powers of this world. According to the Corinthian groups, then, this wisdom provides the spiritual power that makes a person independent of the rest of the world. Therefore differences concerning the interpretation of such wisdom could have a divisive effect in the life of the congregation.

Here we have the concrete address of Paul's attack which was very different from that of Luther's *theologia crucis*. In Paul's case the issue was the divisive effect of the Corinthian claims to superior wisdom (1 Cor 1:10-17) on the life of the church. When he turned to the root of the divisions within the Corinthian community, then he hit the claim to wisdom which had no use for the cross of Christ, because it prided itself on its spiritual strength in contrast to others. But why did Paul emphasize the cross of Christ in order to rebuke the arrogance of such wisdom? Was it because the cross is a symbol of weakness, of helplessness and defeat? In the course of his argument, Paul mentioned the "weakness" of the cross (1:25), since his opponents apparently took the weakness of the crucified one as evidence of the "absurdity" of the cross: The cross

does not provide the spiritual power to become independent of the world. That is its weakness. Paul's answer was not that he idealized weakness as such: It is only because God was active in the weakness of Jesus' suffering on his cross, that this weakness is stronger than all human strength (1:25). Thus it is in spite of the weakness of the crucified one, not because of it, that the cross of Jesus is said to be our true wisdom.

The apostle did not spell out in detail, in this connection, how God was active in Jesus' death on the cross. He presupposed what he had said elsewhere: God gave his Son for our sins (Rom 8:32; cf. 4:25), and by participating in his death we receive the hope to share in the life of his resurrection too (Rom 6:3-11). According to Romans 6, this is what happens in baptism, and at the beginning of the passage in 1 Corinthians 1, that deals with the divisions at Corinth, Paul mentioned these issues briefly: By baptism the baptized do not enter into a special relationship to the one who administers the rite of baptism to them, but to Jesus Christ, because he—and not the

minister—was crucified for us (1 Cor 1:14). Obviously, that Jesus was crucified for us is a basic condition for our participation in him as it takes place in baptism, and in that way—in the hands of God—the cross has become a powerful instrument to bring about the salvation of those who believe (1:21).

According to Paul's argument, the cross of Jesus Christ has become the source of our salvation and therefore constitutes the true wisdom of the Christian. This was also what Luther asserted in his *theologia crucis*. To that extent he shared the point of Paul's argument, although his focus was different, as will be discussed later on. So far it has been shown that the application was different. In Luther's case the notion of *theologia crucis* was used against a self-righteous concept of justice as virtue, a concept which was considered an effect of the domination of scholasticism by the Aristotelian philosophy. In Paul's case the cross of Christ was referred to as basis of Christian unity, because it is the only source of our salvation. Luther's *theologia crucis* was not primarily concerned for Christian unity over against divisions. Luther was haunted by the issue of personal righteousness by faith rather than works or virtue. Actually the individualism of this concern contributed to the development of one of the most tragic divisions in Christian history. Paul, because of his concern for unity, argued against the divisive effect of claims that pretend some superior wisdom. Therefore he emphasized the weakness not only of the crucified one, but also of the Christian constituency: Nobody should exult in his or her own wisdom (1 Cor 1:29) so as to compete with God's own action in Jesus Christ. Our knowledge is imperfect (13:9). How, then, can we insist on "pure doctrine"? Certainly Luther did not infer from his theology of the cross a weakness of theological knowledge. At this point his *theologia crucis* presents itself as rather different from its Pauline prototype. He shared in the emphasis on unequivocal doctrinal truth that had prevailed in the church since the patristic period and continuously became the occasion for divisions. But did not Paul himself insist on his doctrine, on the identity of the gospel he preached, in a not altogether dissimilar form? At least in his letter to the Galatians he undeniably did. Perhaps the history of Christian dogmatism could develop because the issue was not clarified in the apostolic age itself. Paul's theology of the cross in 1 Corinthians points in the direction of a

solution, but it does so on the basis of his own theology. One cannot refer to the action of God in the cross of Christ except through the medium of one's own understanding of it. But on the other hand, the thesis Paul developed—that all human wisdom is provisional—requires a self-application. To argue for the provisional character of all human knowledge does not allow for an *a priori* exception concerning the knowledge of the apostle himself. The consideration of the provisional status of one's own thought may be particularly hard to follow through in theology, because here we are concerned with the truth of God himself. Therefore it is understandable that it was always easier to consider the theologies of other persons as human wisdom than to apply this consideration to one's own theology, notwithstanding its claim that it is occupied with perceiving the truth of God. But such a self-application is a condition for consistency as soon as one argues for the provisional status of all human wisdom in contrast with the truth of God himself. It should also be considered a criterion in judging the authenticity of any contemporary theology of the cross that claims to involve the person of the speaker himself or herself and not only to describe a historical phenomenon.

## II. *Theologia Crucis* IN SCHLEIERMACHER AND RITSCHL

The historical reference, however, is also an indispensable aspect of any theology of the cross under the conditions of modernity. Since modern historical consciousness—with its keen awareness of the difference between the present world and the historical past—is a distinctive element of modern culture, it is no longer consistent to offer a theology of the cross of Jesus Christ without including historical considerations. The reason is that speaking about the cross of Jesus Christ implies already some reference to the historical event of his crucifixion. Furthermore, all historical events are relative to their context in the process of history, because they occur in connection with other events and only in that connection are they identifiable as what they are. Therefore a theology of the cross, if it claims plausibility in its reference to the cross of Jesus, requires some consideration of the place of the cross in the context of Jesus' own history. For this reason, a distinctively modern type of a theology of the cross developed in the 19th century, a type of interpretation that emerged from reflection on the place of the cross in the context of Jesus' previous activities. Interpretations of this kind were offered, e.g., by Friedrich Schleiermacher and by Albrecht Ritschl, but also lately in my own book on christology.<sup>3</sup>

This type of *theologia crucis* starts from the question whether there is only some accidental relation between the message and the activities of Jesus and his death, or whether his death is intrinsically related to the character of his teaching and of his behavior. In principle, it could have been a mere accident that Jesus was denounced to the Roman authority as a troublemaker. But this is not very plausible. Even such a denunciation would have required some reason, and the gospel tradition provides enough evidence for the assumption that there was

<sup>3</sup>Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 245-80.

indeed some intrinsic connection between Jesus' activities—certain hostilities they produced—and the final outcome of his history in a violent death.

In the theologies of Schleiermacher and Ritschl it was not the occurrence of suffering and death as such that was intrinsically related to Jesus' activity, but rather the way Jesus took such experience upon himself. The violent reactions to Jesus on the part of some of his Jewish contemporaries, and especially from those in leading positions, were considered a matter of contingent historical fact, though perhaps understandable if one remembered Jesus' attacks on Pharisees and scribes. The important thing to Schleiermacher and Ritschl was how Jesus related to this developing conflict and to the final fate it would bring upon him. The answer was that Jesus suffered the consequences of such conflict and a painful death rather than to give up on his vocation. He could have saved his life, if only he had abandoned his proclamation of the kingdom of God and ceased to perform the works that accompanied his preaching. That he did not do that, but rather suffered the consequences of the rejection he met, was taken by Schleiermacher and Ritschl as evidence of his perfect obedience to his vocation. According to Schleiermacher, it was only this complete devotion to his task, which he had received from God, that proved his perfect communion with God,<sup>4</sup> and according to Ritschl the ethical perfection of Jesus in following his divine vocation constitutes the basis for the church's confession to his oneness with God.<sup>5</sup>

These two theologians were fully aware of the difference of this interpretation of the theological meaning of Jesus' death from traditional church doctrine. Both Schleiermacher and

Ritschl repudiated the doctrine that the death of Christ was a sacrifice required to alleviate the wrath of God and a satisfaction for the sins of the whole human race. Schleiermacher said explicitly that only in relation to his ministry of founding the kingdom of God among human persons could any theological meaning be attached to the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Schleiermacher had a peculiar conception of the office or vocation of Christ. He modified the traditional Protestant doctrine of a threefold office of Christ (prophetic, priestly, and royal) to the effect that he gave priority to the prophetic office, but in such a way that certain elements of royal responsibility were bound up with it: The teaching of Jesus which corresponded to the notion of his prophetic office was related to the purpose of founding a social community in communion with God, which Schleiermacher called by the name of the kingdom of God. Thus Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and his activity of founding the church were integrated into one overarching issue. The founding of a community of people in communion with God, however, was interpreted as the saving activity of Jesus. His teaching was only part of it, because salvation is more than doctrine; it is the restoration of communion with God.

This conception of the vocation of Jesus managed to bring the traditional

<sup>4</sup>Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube* (2 vols.; Berlin: G. Reimer, 1830-31) 2:118-22 (§101, 4). English trans., *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Steward (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928) 435-38.

<sup>5</sup>Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (3 vols.; 3d ed.; Bonn: Adolph Marcus, 1888-89) 3:417-26 (§48). English trans., *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macaulay (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902) 442-52.

doctrine of the office of Christ closer to the historical reality of Jesus' activity as a modern, critical reader finds it documented in the gospels. With certain modifications, this picture does still correspond to our contemporary understanding of the activity of the historical Jesus. The most important modifications are, of course, two. First, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom did not mean that Jesus by his teaching *established* the kingdom. He simply announced its future, which the heavenly Father would bring about at the time of his own discretion. Second, the kingdom is not identical with the church, but the church as a community only witnesses to and symbolizes the kingdom to come.

With these important modifications, however, we have to admit that Jesus' historical mission was indeed to proclaim the imminent kingdom and to witness to its future also in his actions. His suffering and death was not the immediate purpose of his peculiar mission. His suffering and death occurred only as a consequence of his proclamation of the kingdom. In this important respect, Schleiermacher's and Ritschl's revision of previous types of a theology of the cross can claim continuing validity.

Nevertheless, their achievement was limited. Schleiermacher and Ritschl did not fully perceive the intrinsic relation between Jesus' message of the kingdom and his death on the cross, since they did not consider the inherent ambiguity of Jesus' behavior. Therefore the action of God in Jesus' death did not become an explicit issue in their argument, and consequently their rejection of the traditional doctrine affirming a substitutive function of Jesus' death remained somewhat premature.

### III. JESUS' DEATH IN RELATION TO HIS MISSION

The decisive point is the ambiguity in Jesus' behavior. Although at present it seems exegetically probable that, in contrast to the gospel reports, the historical Jesus did not arrogate to himself any of the traditional titles like Messiah, Son of God, Son of man, still his assertion that the kingdom is not only imminent, but already becoming present in his teaching and activity (Luke 11:20; 17:20) implied a most extraordinary claim for his own person: If the kingdom of God becomes a present reality with those who receive his message, then Jesus is the mediator of the presence of God. The content of his message implied such a claim regarding himself, whether he wanted it or not. But this inevitably cast the shadow of a deep ambiguity upon his behavior: Could any human being be entitled to identify himself as the place of the presence of God, even by implication? Did not such behavior show an extreme and sacrilegious arrogance of assuming to oneself the authority of God?

This was the ambiguity in the historical situation of Jesus' proclamation and action. It explains the rejection he met according to the gospel tradition. The Gospel of Mark reports that the special occasion for such rejection was the way Jesus related to persons who were publicly known as sinners: He invited them to share his meal (Mark 2:15-17), which was presumably connected with an assurance of participation in the kingdom of God. But Jesus also without further ado, could declare to a person that his or her sins are forgiven (Mark 2:5-12). Because that was considered a prerogative of God himself, Jesus appeared to

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arrogate to himself the power and authority of God. This issue is addressed most explicitly in the Gospel of John. Here we read again and again that Jesus' opponents accused him of making himself equal to God, e.g., in calling God his Father (5:18 et al.). When Jesus declared that he was one with the Father, his opponents called it blasphemy (10:33). And according to John blasphemy was the charge against him at his trial by the Jewish authorities at Jerusalem (19:7). In substance this presentation of the controversy concurs with the evidence on that trial provided by the synoptic gospels. Whether the concrete offence resulting in the trial was a word of Jesus against the temple (Mark 14:58), or whether it was something else—whether the basis of the indictment was the provision of the law against blasphemy (Exod 22:28; Lev 24:16) or that of Deuteronomy 17:12 concerning disobedience to the priest—in any event the scandalous claim involved in his teaching and provocative behavior formed the background of the conflict that ended up with his death.

The gospels, of course, rejected the blame of Jesus' opponents that he put himself in the place of God. Even the Gospel of John emphasizes that Jesus did not arrogate to himself the authority of the Father but, on the contrary, submitted completely to the Father and to the mission he had received from him. In order to avoid the appearance of arrogance, the historical Jesus may even have tried to calm down the enthusiastic response to his actions by some, and especially among his disciples. Mark's allusions to such an attitude may have more historical content than critical exegesis since William Wrede has allowed. In any event, when Jesus called those persons blessed who did not take offence at him (Matt 11:6 = Luke 7:23), it seems to indicate that he was aware of the ambiguity that surrounded his teaching and behavior.

This ambiguity, however, was inevitable, if it arose from the core of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom as becoming a present reality for those who followed his call to subordinate

everything else to the concern for the kingdom to come. If Jesus could not abandon that proclamation, he just had to take the foreseeable consequences.

The intrinsic relationship between the claim involved in Jesus' proclamation and behavior, the fate of hostile reactions, and finally death was perceived by Martin Kähler in his book on the "Science of Christian Doctrine," first published in 1883.<sup>6</sup> Kähler therefore arrived at a considerably more profound theological interpretation of the significance of Jesus' death than Schleiermacher or Ritschl did.

The first conclusion from the intrinsic relatedness of Jesus' death to his mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God is that Jesus was put in the place of the sinner in consequence of his devotion to the mission which he had received from God. Thus it can be said that God himself caused him to appear in the position of the sinner who tries to be like God. This is confirmed by the fact that it was by the authority of the law of God that the Jewish authorities sentenced him as guilty of blasphemy, whatever the connection with the Roman death sentence may have been afterwards. That Jesus in consequence of his devotion to his divine mission was put in the place of the sinner does not yet include,

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<sup>6</sup>Martin Kähler, *Die Wissenschaft der christlichen Lehre* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1883).

however, that he became a curse *for us* as Paul says in Galatians 3:13. That he came to stand in the place of the sinner does not automatically entail that the sinner was relieved from the curse of the law. It does not yet entail that the death of Jesus meant substitution. But that he was put in the place of the sinner was at least the presupposition of any attribution of a substitutive significance to his death.

A second conclusion from the intrinsic relatedness of Jesus' death to his divine mission is that his death occurred to him as a consequence of being put in the place of the sinner, since death is the consequence of sin. According to the Old Testament, death means being separated from community with God, who is the source of life (Ps 88:11-12; Isa 38:18). Therefore, everything that separates us from God brings us closer to death. This is especially true for sin. Sin is essentially alienation from God. Therefore death is its natural consequence. When Adam is told that he and his wife should not eat from the tree of knowledge, because they would die (Gen 2:17), death is not a punishment that would relate extrinsically to the deed itself, but it is the manifestation of the inherent nature of sin as alienation from God. Actually death was to occur as a consequence of Adam's sin (Gen 3:19), though not so immediately as had been threatened. Certainly the connection between sin and death is not everywhere in the Old Testament stated as explicitly as in Numbers 27:3, but the New Testament is even more unequivocal on that issue. Nowhere in the New Testament, Rudolf Bultmann has written, can one discover any interpretation of death as a natural phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> It is Paul, however, who most explicitly stated the connection between sin and death: the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23).

#### IV. THE RELATEDNESS OF SIN AND DEATH

To modern thought, these biblical affirmations are difficult to appropriate. The science of biology considers death to constitute an essential aspect of organic life. It is the inevitable fate of multicellular organisms, perhaps even of the living cell as such. Moreover, the death of individuals is the precondition of continuing life and evolution of the species. These are

elementary facts in our knowledge of the nature of organic life. But the religious conception of life is different. It perceives God and his Spirit as the source of life, and on this basis it is quite natural that death occurs as the inevitable consequence of separation from God. In some way, of course, the life that is talked about in religious discourse and the organic life studied by biologists must be finally the same. The organic life has to be interpreted, then, as a form of life that already exists under the condition of separation from God and therefore groans under the yoke of decay, as Paul said (Rom 8:22). In some way, then, the effects of sin as separation from God extend over the whole of nature, as becomes evident in the pervasiveness of death and decay.

Some modern theologians like Schleiermacher and Ritschl, but also Karl Barth and, among contemporary theologians, Eberhard Jüngel have felt that the

<sup>7</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, "Thanatos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76) 3:14-15.

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biblical affirmation of such a close connection between sin and death is difficult to accept. It appeared more natural to them to regard death as an inherent element of finite life, especially in view of the fact that death is not limited to humanity, but extends its power over all organisms. These hesitations are understandable, but their conclusions are not inevitable as I have already tried to argue. In any event, they are at odds with important affirmations of Paul, affirmations that underlie his thesis of the universality of sin as well as his theology of the cross.

According to Romans 5:12 the universal fate of death is evidence of the pervasive presence of sin. The universal diffusion of sin, however, is at the basis of Paul's argument that there is a universal need for salvation (Rom 11:32: God consigned all people to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all; cf. Gal 3:22). Because all members of the human race are under the power of death, the death of Jesus Christ could become the occasion for the salvation of all. The reason for this saving potential of Jesus' death is, of course, that his death was not the final event of his life history. Without the resurrection, there could be no salvific significance of the cross. The cross would only indicate the final defeat of Jesus and of his cause. There can be no theology of the cross without Easter. Only in the light of Easter does the horrifying death on the cross receive a positive meaning. The basic point of that meaning is that Jesus is now vindicated by the power of the Spirit of God who raised him from the dead (1 Tim 3:16). The ambiguity surrounding him during his earthly activity is removed in the light of the resurrection. What this means in relation to the person of Jesus is not our subject now. It entails, however, the confirmation of Jesus' pre-Easter proclamation and behavior. This divine confirmation extends, among other issues, also to the way Jesus granted assurance of participation in the kingdom of God by receiving a person into communion with himself, especially in the celebration of the meal. Therefore, now, whoever is received into communion with the death of Jesus is assured of participation in the new life of his resurrection. This is, as Paul pointed out in Romans 6:4, the meaning of Christian baptism. Therefore, one can now affirm that Jesus died not because of his own sin, but because God put him in the place of the sinner for our sake: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). God made him to be sin who knew no sin, because Jesus—though convicted by the authorities of his people for blasphemy—was vindicated by God in the event of the resurrection. On that basis it is determined that he knew no sin. Nevertheless, in his death he had to suffer

what in general is to be considered the consequence of sin. But he suffered not for his own fault, but for our sake, because this death became the chance of salvation for all. Since he himself died, he can receive our death-bound lives into communion with his own so that even death can no longer separate us from God and from his life. Because of their communion with Jesus' death, all sinners who have to face death as the final consequence of their sinful lives can hope for a future of life beyond death, because their communion with the death of Jesus gives them assurance of participation in the life of his resurrection.

This seems to be the most fundamental aspect of Paul's theology of the cross. At this point, another difference between Luther and Paul becomes

apparent: Though in both theologies the death of Jesus Christ is related to our sin, according to Paul's thought the death of Christ becomes effective for our salvation by way of its immediate relation to our death, while in Luther's thought the death of Jesus was primarily seen in relation to God as satisfaction for our sins by vicarious suffering of our punishment. Luther focused on the forgiveness of sins distributed by the proclamation of the gospel as fruit of Jesus' vicarious death. In the case of Paul, the focus is more on our mortal life which gets united with Jesus' death in order to obtain the hope for sharing his eternal life. In Paul's thought there is no need for satisfaction offered to God in order to appease his wrath. Rather, it was God himself who delivered his Son to be sentenced like a sinner, and thereby God revealed his love to his creatures who went astray. However, although there is no appeasement of God's wrath by Jesus' death, still atonement is necessary. It is necessary, because sin inevitably ends up in death. This natural consequence cannot be suspended. It has to take its course. It can only be absorbed into some other process so that the final outcome will be different. This happened when Jesus by his death took our fate upon himself and transformed it so that death is no longer the final result. At this point, patristic theology with its emphasis upon the death of Jesus as overcoming our death and transforming our mortal life into immortality was closer to Paul's intentions than either medieval or Reformation theology.

## V. VICARIOUS DEATH AS INCLUSIVE SUBSTITUTION

This leads to a final point: In what sense was the death of Jesus vicarious? In rejecting the notion of a vicarious offering to God, it was already decided that Jesus' death should not be considered as a vicarious work of satisfaction as in medieval theology. Nor can it be understood as vicarious suffering in the sense that others would no longer have to endure death. Each human person continues to face death as the final event of this mortal life, and to each one of us, death will occur as the final consequence of our emancipation from God. But we need no longer be alone in the event of death, nor look upon it as the end of our personal history. We are given the chance to go through that experience in communion with Jesus Christ and in the hope of participating in his future of a life beyond death.

In technical theological language this has been called "inclusive" substitution. This term denotes a case of vicarious action or suffering where the substitute does not relieve the one in whose favor he acts by taking his burden so that the other one has nothing to carry himself. Rather "inclusive" substitution refers to a situation where somebody enters into our condition in order to share it and thereby changes it in our favor. Such is the case with Jesus: He entered our

condition of mortal life and shared the fate of death in such a way as to change its significance for all of us.

This “inclusive” substitution, however, does not work without some element of exclusiveness. Otherwise it could not change the general condition. Thus Jesus had to endure a death that nobody needs to die anymore, the death of exclusion from communion with God. In being sentenced for blasphemy under the law of the God whose kingdom he had proclaimed, he had to endure

the utter loneliness which is expressed in the cry of Psalm 22:2: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). But Jesus also accepted the course of events that would issue in this hour of loneliness, because he did not want to abandon his mission. The acceptance of that loneliness of being excluded from communion with the God whom he called his Father was the apex of his self-discrimination from, and submission to, the Father in considering himself a mere creature, contrary to the accusations of his opponents. In the New Testament this has been called the obedience of the Son which became apparent in the event of the resurrection. The vindication of Jesus by this event overturned the sentence that has been passed in the name of the law of God. Even the validity of that law itself was now abolished, because it lost the power to exclude from communion with God.

## VI. CONCLUSION

A theology of the cross, then, must start with the intrinsic relatedness of Jesus’ death to the character of his teaching and activity. It must deal with Jesus’ acceptance of the foreseeable consequences of his activity in terms of his faithfulness in relation to the mission he had received from his heavenly Father. But only when this intrinsic relatedness of Jesus’ death and ministry is seen as intended in the mission itself; which the Father had entrusted to Jesus, does the interpretation of Jesus’ suffering become a “theology” of the cross. The purpose of the divine intention—which relates Jesus’ mission to the result of his crucifixion—becomes apparent only from the point of view of the resurrection. It is only in the perspective of Easter that the death of Christ can be seen as a salvific event. But to that effect two further conditions are required. The first is the general connection between sin and death. The other is that Jesus himself accepted those who entrusted themselves to him, and to his message of the kingdom, into communion with himself, and thereby granted them participation in the kingdom to come. This was expressed particularly in the celebration of the meal as a symbol of the communion in the kingdom of God. Even when he faced his own death, Jesus extended such communion to his disciples on the occasion of his last supper, and this is the basis of the church’s teaching that every human person can obtain the hope for eternal life beyond his or her death, if they accept communion with Jesus Christ for themselves.