

The Silent Voice of the Cross:

How Christ Crucified Speaks to All Things



Mike L Anderson

“A must-read for theologians and scientists from the pen of a philosopher of science who knows Jesus. Very, very inspiring! Mike Anderson convincingly shows from Scripture how central the cross stands and speaks "silently" since words can never adequately describe this act of God’s love for mankind and His cosmos. As this silent voice of God speaks so loudly, the evil one cleverly tries to off-centre the cross. The latter is brilliantly exposed in creative themes. And how freeing is the illustration of the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the cross in grasping the relationship between science and theology!”

Dr Jacob Pretorius (Pastor, Gereformeerde Kerk, Linden)

“Each of us who seek to follow Jesus does not want to be idolatrous in our thoughts, words or actions. Idols are subtle, otherwise we would recognise them and they would lose their power. The silent voice of the cross calls us to look into our blind spots, to re-examine our thinking and to keep “the main thing the main thing”. It is a reminder to us of the centrality of the cross. I recommend this book unreservedly.”

Revd Dr Susan van Niekerk (Chaplain, St Anne’s Diocesan College)

The Silent Voice of the Cross: How Christ Crucified Speaks to all Things

Mike L Anderson

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all my prayer and financial supporters.

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The Sermon on Golgotha

The Sermon on the Mount is perhaps the most famous and well-loved of Christ's sermons. It was not, however, his greatest. According to Jesus, that designation must go to the silent Sermon on Golgotha. When Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount he spoke with a Galilean accent,¹ but it was not nearly as strong as his accent on Golgotha. He placed the accent most of all on the cross. His country-bumpkin accent was surely inconsequential except to raise whether it would not have been a stumbling block to the intellectually pretentious with their sophisticated city-slicker accent? But the cross was a greater stumbling block and of far more consequence. For Jesus, that final podium upon which he died was the most significant and the gallows his most influential platform.

The voice of Jesus

He, himself, said so. For it was on the eve of his execution that he said, "Now the Son of Man is seen for who he is, and God seen for who he is in him" (John 13:31 The Message). The same evening he prays "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (John 17:1) and says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). What does he mean by this "lifted up?"

**"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth,
will draw all people to myself."**

(John 12:32)

Could he be referring to his resurrection when he rose out of the tomb (Mark 16:6) or his ascension when he was taken up before the disciples eyes (Acts 1:9) or the day of Pentecost when the Spirit of Christ came from heaven (Acts 2:2, Romans 8:9) or his Second Coming on the clouds of heaven (Matthew 24:30)? As vitally important as these all are, it is none of them. He is talking about his death on the cross (see accompanying painting by Jan van Noordt (1644–1676)). The Apostle John, as if anticipating that Jesus might be misconstrued, clarifies what he meant in the very next verse, saying, “He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:33).

In case this all wasn't clear enough, Jesus only ever instituted one memorial. It wasn't “whenever you get up from bed, remember my resurrection.” It wasn't “whenever you take a bath, remember my baptism.” It wasn't “whenever you get dressed for an occasion, remember my transfiguration.” It wasn't “whenever you walk up a set of stairs, remember my ascension.” No, the memorial Jesus instituted was, “And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me”” (Luke 22: 19).

The Apostle John says, “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). Of all these things, Jesus places the greatest emphasis on his death.



The very last word uttered by Jesus testifies to the preeminence he gave to his death. New Testament scholar David Rensberger says, “Jesus’ final utterance on the cross is a single Greek word, *tetelestai* (John 19:30). The traditional translation “It is finished” barely touches what it means. Jesus is not saying, “Well, that’s that. I’m done for.” The verb *teleō* has to do with reaching a goal, completing a task or course. Jesus’ cry is positive, not negative—something more like, “It’s completed! It is accomplished! The goal is achieved!” *What Jesus came to do has been done*”² (emphasis his).

Surely, someone could say, the resurrection is up there with the crucifixion in significance. Didn’t Paul say, “if Christ was not raised our faith is worthless” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Now the crucifixion and the resurrection are inextricably coupled. Indeed soon afterwards Jesus says to his disciples, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Luke 24:46-47). If Jesus did not rise, his death would be just like

any other death. But, and this is crucial, the resurrection does not nullify the cross, it vindicates it. In the words of theologian Robert Moberly, “The Resurrection is not so much a mere sequel to the Cross; or a reversal of the Cross; or a subsequent reward because of the endurance of the Cross. Rather, it is a revealing of what the Cross already was.”³ Theologian Fleming Rutledge nails the point when she says, “The resurrection is not a set piece. It is not an isolated demonstration of divine dazzlement. It is not to be detached from its abhorrent first act. The resurrection is, precisely, the vindication of a man who was crucified.”⁴ For New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, it was not the resurrection, but the crucifixion that was the “revolution” in the “entire story of God and the world. ... The resurrection was the first visible sign that the revolution was already under way.”⁵

You might think that Jesus would change the emphasis after his resurrection. He doesn't. You might think that the risen Jesus would change the emphasis for those whose faith is faltering. He doesn't. Two of his disciples are travelling on the road to Emmaus (see accompanying painting by Roelant Roghman(1627–1692)). It is soon after the crucifixion and their faces are described as downcast. Surely, the quickest, most effective way to bolster their faith would be for Jesus to appear before them, risen from the dead and saying, “Voila, here I am.” He doesn't. Instead, they are prevented from recognising him and he rebukes them saying, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:25-27). Later we will look at some of the passages that Jesus may well have used. And it worked. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scripture to us?" (Luke 24:32). It is noteworthy that their faith response occurred *before* Jesus opened their eyes to recognize him and *before* they realised he had risen from the dead. Scripture is clear. Christ crucified is the most significant event in all of history. Those who place it elsewhere have missed the plot.⁶ And note that the Scripture opened up here is the *Old* Testament. The New had not yet been written.



So it is on the cross that we see God's greatest self-revelation. The theme of the Gospel of John could well be encapsulated by "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12: 32). How thick is the accent of Jesus? It is as broad as the beam upon which he died. Any other emphasis is off-beam. Those who place the accent elsewhere have just not heard him properly. And listening to him has been commanded by the highest authority - God the Father himself. At the transfiguration he said, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). If the Father says listen to the Son, what does the Son say? It is that we are to listen to the silent voice of the cross. If actions speak louder than words then, as we will see, the cross has spoken the loudest of all.

The voice of babes

Our eldest daughter, Rachel, is grownup and married now, but when she was six, she said something that has stuck with me. Little did she realise

how true it was. We had just had supper and she had informed me that *she* would tell *me* how many dishes she would clear away.

“No,” I replied, “*I* will tell *you* how many dishes to clear away.

She responded, “Are you the boss around here?”

“As a matter of fact, I am,” I said.

“No you not,” she replied. “Jesus is.”

As a matter of fact it was Rachel that was right. At least, Jesus should be the boss. More precisely Christ crucified is the boss. He couldn't look less like a boss while dying on the cross. He is the most winsome of bosses. For his is not an authoritarian bellow of a command, but rather a plaintive whimper of an invitation to discover what Love is prepared to do for you.

The voice of the Apostles

The emphasis Jesus gave to the crucifixion is shared by the Gospel writers and reflected in the space that they devote to the events in Christ's life. The influential New Testament scholar Martin Kähler went so far as to say that the Gospel of Mark, “is a passion narrative with an extended introduction.”² Billy Graham says, “One-third of Matthew is given to a description of the death of Christ. One-third of Mark, one-fourth of Luke, and one-half of John are given to His death. All these pages are devoted to the last 24 hours of His life . . . Jesus came for the express purpose of dying for sinners. When He left heaven, He knew He was going to the cross.”⁸ Philip Yancey echoes the same point, “Only two of the Gospels mention the events of his birth, and all four offer only a few pages on his resurrection, but each chronicler gives a detailed account of the events leading to Jesus' death.”⁹ Fleming Rutledge says that “Mark and John, in particular, have arranged their Gospels to leave no doubt that the passion is the main event. For this reason the climactic christological statement in Mark's Gospel (“Truly this man was the Son of God” — 15:39) is not uttered until the moment of Jesus' death on the cross.”¹⁰

The emphasis Jesus gave to the crucifixion is also shared by the Apostle Paul. He says to the church in Corinth, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). For Paul, Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24).¹¹ N. T. Wright says, “As every serious reader of Paul has long recognized, though not so many have explored to the full, the cross of Jesus the Messiah stands at the heart of Paul’s vision of the one true God.”¹²

**“... but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”
(1 Corinthians 1: 23-24)**

The voice of the cross

Jesus audibly declared it, but the foreordained circumstances around Calvary silently also underscore the primacy of the crucifixion. For instance, it is striking that between the crucifixion and the resurrection it was the former that was far more public than the latter. Surely the Sovereign Father could have arranged it the other way around. Christ’s death could have been a very private matter (say in a Roman prison or on his deathbed) and his appearance, after he had risen, very public (say at a political rally). Why didn’t he? Would it not be the human inclination to have it the other way around? Is God, in his sovereign hand over the Passion Week, not stressing that Christ’s silent sermon on Golgotha is his greatest?

It is also striking that there is almost no theological reflection upon the meaning of the crucifixion in the Gospel accounts. There is no recorded, post-resurrection sermon by Jesus in which he expounds on the significance of the cross. Instead, reflection upon the event is left to the Apostles. Again, why is this? Would it not be the human inclination to have Jesus give one

final grand sermon just before the ascension. And then, for dramatic effect, have him give his clinching argument on his way up into heaven? Philosopher Dallas Willard drew attention to the low-profile way God goes about things saying, “Remarkably, even after his resurrection Jesus continued his low-profiled ways. The human mode would have been to pay a post-resurrection visit to Pilate, perhaps, and to say something like, “Now could we have that discussion about power and truth once again””¹³ Is the absence of a recorded post-resurrection sermon not a divine statement that not even the words of God Incarnate, with their self-imposed human limitations and the limitations of his hearers, can encompass the full significance of the greatest revelation? As theologian P.T. Forsyth says, “... only the uplifting of the cross, and not the uplifting of His voice, draws all men unto Him.”¹⁴ “... when Christ rose,” says theologian Jürgen Moltmann, “he did not turn into words. The crucified Christ is more than the preaching of the cross.”¹⁵ Perhaps it will take an eternity for humans to fully appreciate the full implications of the cross. And if there was a post-resurrection sermon, would there not be among his followers those who would treasure those words over Christ crucified? The silent voice of the cross is indeed God’s greatest revelation. Should there be a red letter edition of the New Testament? Yes. But it is not the *words* of Jesus that should be in red, but what he *did on the cross*. It should be red to match his blood and the primacy of the cross. And if the Person in that Event is the greatest revelation, do we not honour that revelation best by letting the Spirit of the risen Christ interpret the cross for us now and throughout all eternity? And does it not behove us to reflect on all things in light of Christ and him crucified so that all things may be put into proper perspective? The cross speaks to idolatry in particular. We will see that idolatry did not merely afflict the ancients. In insidious and numerous ways it affects us to this day. The cross speaks to this condition in regard to such matters as the Bible, science, creation, religion, miracles and human beings. It puts them all in their proper place before God. The cross both exposes idolatry and provides the cure.

**“ ... when Christ rose he did not turn into words.
The crucified Christ is more than the preaching
of the cross.” (Jürgen Moltmann)**

The voice of angels

Given the significance of the cross, perhaps it is not surprising that the Apostle John says of his prophetic vision, “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”” (Revelation 5: 11-13). Not that angels have grasped the full significance of the cross. It appears that they are ongoingly intent on taking it in. The Apostle Peter says of the gospel that “Even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:12).

**“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive
power and wealth and wisdom and strength and
honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5: 11-13)**

The voice of scholars

And perhaps it is not surprising that there are theologians, and New Testament scholars in particular, all across the denominational map that are so adamant about the centrality of the crucifixion.¹⁶ Martin Luther, for instance, said “ ... in Christ crucified is true theology and the knowledge of God” and “the cross alone is our theology.”¹⁷ Otto Zockler said, “The mystery of the cross is the mystery of mysteries; to seek to exhaust its depths is to seek to exhaust the depths of the whole Divine Revelation.”¹⁸ P.T. Forsyth said, “The very silence of Christ makes His atonement the holiest place of Christian faith”¹⁹ and describes the cross as, “the crowning

act of a holy and gracious God ...”²⁰ and “Christ is to us just what His cross is. All that Christ was in heaven or on earth was put into what He did there.”²¹ Elsewhere Forsyth said, “He is the Christ of the Holy Father not as the Ideal of the pure, but as the Saviour of the lost. What makes Christ Christ is what He did as His life's crowning work; not how He was born or grew up, not even what He said and did from day to day--except as such words and deeds take their consummation, and have their last meaning, in His condensed word and summary work of the Cross.”²² Gerhard Forde says, “the cross is the theo-logy” (emphasis his) and the cross itself is the “word of the cross.”²³ “The crucified Christ” according to Martin Kahler is “the key for all the divine secrets of Christian theology.”²⁴ Alister McGrath writes, “Theology begins at the foot of the cross of the crucified Christ; it does not begin somewhere else, and then proceed to assimilate the cross into its predetermined categories.”²⁵ Gregory Boyd says, “Hence, while everything Jesus said and did revealed God, the cross must be considered the quintessential expression of the character of the God who was revealed in everything Jesus said and did.”²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann avers, “The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the centre of all Christian theology. It is not the only theme of theology, but it is in effect the entry to its problems and answers on earth. All Christian statements about God, about creation, about sin and death have their focal point in the crucified Christ. All Christian statements about the future and about hope stem from the crucified Christ”²⁷ and “Christian faith stands and falls with the knowledge of the crucified Christ, that is, with the knowledge of God in the crucified Christ ...”²⁸ Philosopher Dallas Willard says, “The exclusiveness of the Christian revelation of God lies here. No one can have an adequate view of the heart and purposes of the God of the universe who does not understand that he permitted his son to die on the cross to reach out to all people, even people who hated him. That is who God is.”²⁹ Fleming Rutledge says, “The crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance.”³⁰ Pastor A. W. Tozer said, “The cross stands high above the opinions of men and to that cross all opinions must come at last for judgment.”³¹ Similarly for R. David Nelson “... the cross puts everything to

the test, including (especially!) our thought about God.”³² Christ crucified, as we shall see, does indeed speak to all things.

**“The very silence of Christ makes His atonement
the holiest place of Christian faith”
(P.T. Forsyth)**

So, between the incarnation and the crucifixion, these theologians stress the primacy of the latter. P.T. Forsyth said, “We know the incarnation only as the foundation of the cross. It is from the base of His cross that the stair descends to it.”³³ Robert Edgar said, “The Incarnation is undoubtedly a stupendous fact, but its chief value consists in its being the foundation upon which the crucifixion rests.”³⁴ Christ’s tree, then, has the prominence over the Christmas tree as I’ve implied in the following poem:

It's Christmas time

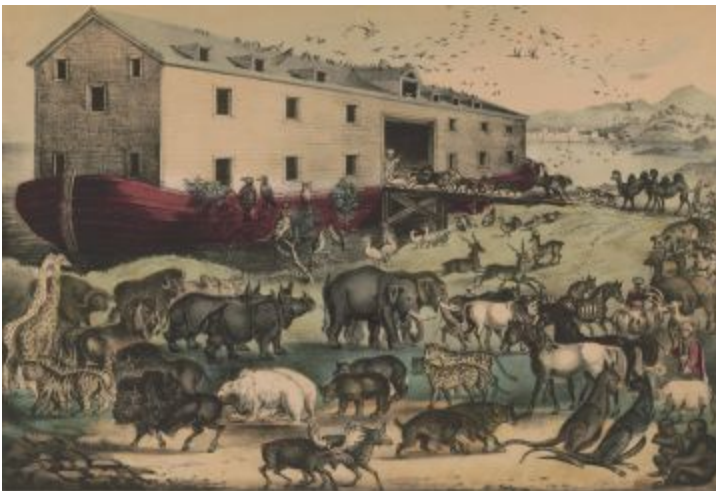
**It's Christmas time.
There is a box beneath the tree.
It has no ribbon, the tree no leaves.
The box is empty, but for hay.
The tree is bare, but for blood.
The Babe has grown and died and risen.
It's Christmas time.**

The voice of the people

This view among the scholars is not shared by everyone. Nevermind Good Friday, the term 'Easter' gets only one quarter of the hits on Google that 'Christmas' does. And, of course, how much of these holidays are actually about Christmas trees and Easter eggs than about Jesus? If you went by public opinion, the most important date on the Christian calendar is the birth of Jesus. It is perhaps not so surprising that confusion over the Christian calendar can reach ridiculous levels. According to a 30 year old supermarket public relations officer there is much ignorance among the British people on the subject of Easter eggs, "But over a quarter don't know why handing them out symbolises the *birth* of Jesus" (italics mine).³⁵ The irony of the ignorance of one lamenting the ignorance of others was quickly seized upon. Too quickly I think. There is something else going on. First off, we can quickly dismiss the disingenuous claim of the supermarket that it was a typo rather than ignorance. When the error was spotted they quickly sent an amendment to try to wheedle out of the clanger, "But over a quarter don't know why handing them out symbolises the *rebirth* of Jesus" (italics mine). Nope, they definitely had birth on the brain. I don't think it is simply a case of ignorance either. The babe in the manger is so thoroughly associated with Christmas rather than Easter, that it is hard to believe that British children let alone adults could be so confused. It is a little like thinking that the Easter bunny rides a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer! I think the story they told was the one that they wanted to be the case. Birth lends itself so much more nicely to selling confectionery than death and resurrection!

The journalist H. L. Mencken said the 1935 trial of Bruno Hauptmann for the kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby was the "the greatest story since the Resurrection."³⁶ For him the resurrection tops the crucifixion in significance and an American trial comes close. Whether he really believed this or knew how to deliver a sales pitch, I'll leave for God to decide. The resulting "trial of the century" media circus led novelist Edna Ferber to say that it made one want to resign as a member of the human race."³⁷

Some seek deep significance in more ancient events. Science teacher Paul F. Taylor, for instance, says, “Since the creation of the universe, the single most significant event in history was the Flood.”³⁸ How is that for missing the boat! And he says this in a book entitled, *Don't Miss the Boat: The Facts to Keep Your Faith Afloat*. In his book of 191 pages ‘God’ comes up only seven times, ‘Jesus’ five times and the cross three! The book certainly promotes faith. The question is faith in what? It is a small wonder if people come away from it thinking that the Christian faith is about believing *that* a whole lot of unscientific claptrap happened rather than believing *in* a Person and what he did for us. Even books supposedly about the cross can end up de-emphasising it. Theologian Ron Osborn mentions the book *Creation, Catastrophe, and Calvary: Why a Global Flood is Vital to the Doctrine of Atonement*, which says much about “geological columns, radiometric dating, and the Hebrew language but very little is actually said about Calvary or the person of Christ, despite the book's title. Calvary here is a kind of theological abstraction tagged to the conclusion of our scientific and linguistic reasoning and our systematic theology. The implication of creationist arguments such as these is that Genesis 1 actually tells us everything we need to know about the creation without any reference to the cross whatsoever, which only becomes necessary once we arrive at Genesis 3 and the human fall. Literalism of this kind is creation without the cross.”³⁹ Osborn laments that the book “boldly wagers the entire significance of Christ's life, death and resurrection not simply on the duration of the days of Genesis but on the fathoms deep of Noah's deluge.”⁴⁰



Gilbert Grosvenor, one-time editor of *National Geographic* magazine, said, "If the Ark of Noah is ever discovered it will be the greatest archaeological find in history ..." The wood of the cross has a much better chance of surviving to this day as did the stone of the empty tomb, but he made no mention of either. Others look to events, that are much more recent. The landing of the Apollo astronauts on the moon in 1969 so went to President Richard Nixon's head that he exclaimed, "It's the greatest day since Creation!" Then Billy Graham reminded him of Christmas and Easter.⁴¹ It appears that even those that aware of the cross easily miss its centrality.

In fact, the primacy of the cross for theology, as theologian Rosaline Bradbury summarises, has been a minority position or "thin tradition" "within Christendom over the ages."⁴² The cross is a stumbling block even for Christians. That an instrument of torture was instrumental in our salvation is an offense to our sensibilities. The historian Martin Hengel says, "The theological reasoning of our time shows very clearly that the particular form of the death of Jesus, the man and the messiah, represents a scandal which people would like to blunt, remove or domesticate in any way possible. We shall have to guarantee the truth of our theological thinking at this point. Reflection on the harsh reality of crucifixion in antiquity may help us to overcome the acute loss of reality which is to be found so often in present theology and preaching."⁴³

The primacy of the cross began with Jesus, was explained by the Apostle Paul, resurged with Martin Luther and has waned somewhat since. However, there have been sporadic, notable exceptions throughout such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Teresa of Avila (1515–1582), John of the Cross (1542–1591), Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) and Peter Taylor Forsyth (1848–1921). It seems that the cross is so scandalous and offensive that up to this day the natural human condition is not to give it the emphasis that is its due, even within the church. Edgar lamented in the 1800's "the preaching of something else than the Cross rules the hour. Preach up the general mercy of the Infinite Father, preach up the sacraments, preach up the priesthood, preach up culture, preach up indulgences, intellectual as

well as sensual; in a word, preach anything to our worldly and heavy-laden age, but do not, for you need not, preach the sacrifice of the Cross.”⁴⁴ To paraphrase the thoughts of Oswald Chambers, every angel is enthralled with the cross of Christ, every demon terrified of it, while humans are the only ones to ignore its significance.⁴⁵ Similarly, Billy Graham says, "I find that I can preach on any subject other than the cross, and it does not seem as offensive to people as the cross does. I can preach on doing good works, on social improvement, on all kinds of things, and people will applaud me. But when I preach on the cross and the blood of Christ, there is an offence.”⁴⁶

But the cross must be central if we want to have the same accent as Jesus. P.T. Forsyth said, "The Cross is the final seat of authority, not only for the Church, but for all human society." If this so, then far from letting lesser things displace the cross, should we not let the cross speak to all things? "The cross of Christ" said Michael Griffith, is "the measure of the world."⁴⁷ Edward Payson said it well, "If we would view every object in its true light, and rightly estimate its nature and design, we must consider it with reference to Christ and his cross. To the cross of Christ all eternity has looked forward: to the cross of Christ all eternity will look back."⁴⁸ The shadow of the cross is a great light. To take the cross seriously, we must let it shine on all things. It is not that we ignore all things but the cross. As Gerhard Forde says, "It is vital to realise that a proper theology of the cross does not just isolate attention on the cross event."⁴⁹ It is that we look at all things in light of the cross. No one can do this justice, but let us at least take a handful of things and begin to see how Christ crucified speaks to them.

The Affliction of Autolatry

It took Peter, the Rock of the church, some time to begin to appreciate the significance of the cross. He was a Jew born in Bethsaida on the northern shore of Galilee. His original Hebrew name was Simeon and his father's name was Jonah.⁵⁰ He grew up as an unschooled fisherman, moving a short way west to Capernaum in early adulthood. After being selected by Jesus, he became the acknowledged leader of the band of twelve. There was a

complication keeping Peter from fully trusting in Christ and him crucified and that was his belief in himself. This is illustrated by an incident which foreshadows his later denial of Jesus.

“Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.

But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?”

And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down” (Matthew 14:25-32).

Let us give credit where it is due. Of the disciples, it was Peter, the courageous one, who stepped out of the boat. In both this incident and in Peter’s later denial of Jesus, “Peter’s original response was more courageous than that of his fellow disciples in that he followed Jesus, but only to fail in the face of difficulties.”⁵¹ What was the problem? New Testament scholar D. A. Carson says, “It was not that he lost faith in himself ..., but that his faith in Jesus, strong enough to get him out of the boat and walking on the water, was not strong enough to stand up to the storm. Therefore Jesus calls him a man “of little faith” ...”⁵²



The basilisk from South America is a beautiful green lizard, sometimes called the Jesus Christ Lizard, because it has the ability to run on water. It does so to escape predators and in the process looks like it is in a mad panic. Surely the Lord, who calmed the storm, would have presented a serene and stately visage (see accompanying painting by Julius Sergius Von Klever (1850 - 1924)). Should the reptile not have been called the St. Peter Lizard?!

Peter's trust in yours truly

Peter's faith was mixed. It was somewhat in Christ, but also largely in himself. Peter, the natural-born leader had an impulsive self-confidence. This has its pros, but is a liability in the Kingdom of God. Scripture says you cannot serve two masters. It is also the case that ultimately, you cannot have faith in two masters - the Saviour and the self. There is always the danger that faith in self takes over faith in Jesus. Peter, the courageous, had a natural inclination towards worshipping self or autolatry. Autolatry works in some contexts, such as winning friends and influencing people. As Peter had to learn, in others, such as walking on water, and as we will see, in appreciating the way of the cross, it doesn't.

Now Jesus does not expressly say "You of little faith *in me*" and "why did you doubt *me*?" However, it is very clear from the context that this is what was understood. Peter had said, "Lord, if it's you tell me to come to you on the water" implying that the consent of Jesus was a precondition for

SUCCESS. Elsewhere Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him.'" (Mark 11:23) Again, Jesus does not expressly say in this verse, "believe in God." But, he never meant what he said about faith in one verse to be taken to the exclusion of what he said elsewhere about faith. In the immediately preceding verse Jesus gives a crucial proviso, "Have faith *in God*" (Mark 11:22). True faith is in God.

"Have faith in God." (Mark 11:22)

In the middle of his ministry, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replies, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matthew 16: 15-17).

It is instructive to compare Peter and Herod. Herod believed that miraculous powers were at work in Jesus (Matthew 14:1-4) and that Jesus was John the Baptist coming back from the dead. This is quite respectful, partly true, but also partly ridiculous - since Jesus and John the Baptist lived for the most part concurrently and John had only recently died. So, is God impressed when people just have respectful and partially true ideas about Jesus? Is not the important question whether they have faith *in Jesus*?

In contrast to Herod, Peter did have such a faith. His faith was directed towards the Person of Jesus Christ. He was blessed because truth about Jesus was revealed to him by God rather than by man. Why is this so important? It is important because it is quite possible to have some true beliefs about Jesus while our faith is actually in something other than him. To be blessed like Peter, one's faith must come from God and must be

directed towards God. God is both the object of our faith and the means to that faith. He is whom we believe in and he is why we believe.

The self versus the Spirit

We must be careful not to read too much into Peter's faith. What did it mean that Peter said, "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God?" It did not mean that he had great faith. Earlier Jesus had said to Peter, "You of little faith" (Matthew 14:31). Did Peter have Herod or Christ's accent? The answer is something of both. Peter reflected the enigma of the human condition. His faith was imperfect. Nevertheless he did have faith in Christ. Note the graciousness of Jesus. He is quick to acknowledge even the little imperfect faith that is directed towards him. Though Peter's accent was far from Herod's, it was not yet anywhere near Christ's. It was, of course, too early for Peter to have any clue about having faith in Christ's completed work on the cross. Far from it. And this is where we see how different his accent was to his Lord's. Straight after complimenting Peter, Jesus explains to his disciples "that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Peter does not get very far because he is interrupted with a very stern reprimand. Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:21-23). It is striking that while Peter (like Herod) did not object to the miracles of Jesus, he had a problem with his death - and he had the gall to declare it. Can you see it? Peter beckoning to Jesus and saying, if I may put words in his mouth, "Look - as the rock of the church, admittedly only recently appointed - I have to say, Lord, that you must not be so defeatist with this stuff about you getting killed." How arrogant of him! Jesus humbly deferred to his disciples about the word on the street, asking, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13). In the matter of God's plan of redemption, Peter needed to learn to defer to Another. Andrew Murray puts it this way, "There was Peter in his self-will, trusting his own wisdom, and actually forbidding Christ to go and

die. Whence did that come? Peter trusted in himself and his own thoughts about divine things.”⁵³ Notice how the graciousness of Jesus turns to anger if we try to monkey around with his redemptive mission. It is this way because grace is through the cross. Peter’s focus needed to be exposed.

Notice that Peter’s response shows that it is entirely possible to know Jesus as the Son of God without knowing him as Christ crucified. He was saying in effect, “I am quite prepared to associate with the Son of the Living God, but who I really believe in is myself.” It is entirely possible for autolatry to have a Christian veneer. Peter was a disciple of Jesus, but not yet a disciple of Christ crucified. God was taking Peter through a journey, a process. The Father had revealed Jesus as the Son of God to him, Jesus would die for him, and the Holy Spirit would later reveal the truth to him. Jesus said the night before his death, “But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong ... about sin, because people do not believe in me” (John 16:7-9).

And notice that the issue is over who to believe in. The fundamental sin is faith in self rather than faith in Christ crucified. There is a tussle between the self and the Spirit over the crucified Christ. A little later Jesus says, “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth ... He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you” (John 16:12-14). What is this truth that the Holy Spirit will guide Peter into? Well, it comes from Christ and is about Christ (v. 9) so the Holy Spirit can be called the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9). It must especially be about his greatest revelation so the Holy Spirit can be called the Spirit of the crucified Christ (1 Corinthians 1: 18-23). The Holy Spirit is crucial to appreciate the overarching significance of Christ’s death.

That takes time and would happen for Peter in due course. On the night before his execution, Jesus turns to him saying, "Simon, Simon, Satan has

asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." But he replied, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death." Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:31-34).

The cross has been speaking to Peter. At least with this lips, he is embracing the prospect of Christ's death, but he has yet to appreciate its full significance. God had revealed to him that Jesus was the Christ, but the Spirit of truth, who had not yet come, had yet to reveal to him all that that meant.

The Father's focus on faith

However, Jesus lets slip of a spiritual drama unfolding in the background that is a foretaste of what is to come. There is a religious visage about Satan. He is praying to God. He is asking for permission to test Peter. That Jesus says, "But I have prayed for you" reveals that God has granted Satan's request. Jesus's prayer is a window into what Satan and God are up to. The scene echoes that of Job 1-2. Satan does not want Peter to simply deny Jesus. This is the easy part. It depends on human weakness and humans are weak. He wants Peter's faith to fail. As commentator Joel B. Green says, "Satan is not only the accuser, as though his only aim were to detect faithlessness; rather, he inspires faithlessness. He is the one who supplies occasions for failure, who is active in resisting God's plan and God's people."²⁴ Satan wants Peter to say something like this to God "I have failed you. I do not deserve you. I am no good to you. You cannot love me." Satan wants Peter to think that God's love for him is conditional on his own performance. God, on the other hand wants to refine Peter's faith. Christ's prayer is a glimpse into God's heart. What he prays and does not pray for reflects his priorities. Jesus does not pray that Peter would not be sifted. God's focus is not in giving us positive experiences. It has always been this way. Remember the prophet Isaiah.

"Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the word of his servant?
Let him who walks in the dark,

who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.
But now, all you who light fires
and provide yourselves with flaming torches,
go, walk in the light of your fires
and of the torches you have set ablaze.
This is what you shall receive from my hand:
You will lie down in torment” (Isaiah 50:10-11).

Jesus does not pray that Peter would not deny him. God’s first interest is not in our performance *even when we are performing for him*. Instead Jesus prays that Peter’s faith would not fail. Faith in whom? It cannot be faith in oneself because Jesus knows in advance that Peter is going to fail. No, Jesus prays that Peter’s faith *in God* would not fail. God’s first interest is in Peter’s (and our) dependence on him.

**God’s first interest is not in our performance
even when we are performing for him.**

On the other hand, the human condition is to put our own performance first. You could say that autolatry is the original and fundamental sin. Theologian Gregory Boyd sums up the problem, “Believing the lie about God and themselves, Adam and Eve also bought the lie that fullness of life was to be acquired by doing something. If you want to really live—'become like God'—you're going to have to get it on your own. Assert your independence and get your own life by eating from the forbidden tree!. At that moment they ceased being human beings and began to be human doings. They were defined not by what their Creator thought about them and did for them but by what they thought about themselves and each other based on what they did.”⁵⁵ Similarly, philosopher Paul Moser writes that

idolatry “... is inherently a rejection, in attitude or in deed, of God’s supreme authority and a quest for self-definition, self-importance, and self-fulfillment on our own terms.”⁵⁶

Peter’s imperfect faith is representative of the human condition *in believers*. It is, as we saw, complicated by his own belief in himself. “I am ready,” he says, “to go with you to prison and to death.” Notice that his assertion comes soon after the disciples were bickering among themselves as to who was the greatest (Luke 22:24). It took the darkness of Gethsemane to expose the fact that faith in self is misdirected. The unthinkable for Peter started to happen – the temple guard came to arrest Jesus and take him away. Peter, instead of turning to Jesus’ word that he must be killed, turned to his own flaming torch - his sword. He cuts off the ear of Malchus, the High Priest’s slave (John 18:10).

The Anatomy of autolatry

Clues to why autolatry is our undoing can be found in Peter. His self-confidence would yet still fail him – even denying that he knew Jesus. Then he goes out and weeps bitterly? Do you think Peter was in torment? Perhaps the rock of the church was contemplating the words of the prophet “Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn” (Isaiah 51). The torment is both an act of judgement and an act of grace. It is an act of grace because God does not just leave us to our own devices. He is in the business of perfecting faith and this sometimes requires torment.

Is God big enough to accept us despite our failure? Yes. Even though Jesus knows ahead of time that Peter will deny him, he does not reject him, but instead prays for him. When Jesus repeats his name “Simon, Simon” in the culture of the time, it was a token of affection. In our day it is like calling him, “Pete.” Peter’s failure does not induce Jesus to disqualify him from a relationship with him or from service for him. Instead, Jesus commands him to strengthen his brothers when he has turned back. Far from disqualifying him, failure would prepare him.

But he first needed to fail.

“A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, “This man was with him.”

But he denied it. “Woman, I don’t know him,” he said.

A little later someone else saw him and said, “You also are one of them.”

“Man, I am not!” Peter replied.

About an hour later another asserted, “Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean.”

Peter replied, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” And he went outside and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:56-62).

His Galilean accent betrayed Peter as a follower of Christ, but his emphasis on his own performance is what betrayed Peter in the end. And that is the problem with autolatry. It looks to self instead of Christ for its ultimate hope,

And this would not be the last time that Peter would fail Jesus – that we know about. Much later, after the ascension and resurrection, the apostle Paul had to take Peter to task for hypocritical conduct and for not living up to the truth of the gospel (Galatians 2:11-14). Peter was acting as if Christ had not been crucified. There he was again autolatrously deviating from the centrality of the cross, no doubt under the inspiration of Satan. And we can be sure that Satan was at his left shoulder again saying something like, “And you call yourself an Apostle, the rock of the church! How can God accept such a man?” And we can be sure that Satan is up to these tricks to this very day. New Testament scholar D.A. Carson stressed, “I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry.”⁵²

Peter repeatedly stumbled, but his faith remained. And Jesus knew his Father would answer his prayer. Why was he so sure? Surely it was because Jesus had the same heart as his Father. He knew he was praying according to his Father's will because he had the very same priorities.

The cross exposes autolatry and reveals the Absolute

As we have seen, Christ's words to Peter strongly suggest that Peter cannot rely on his himself, but must rely on the unconditional love of the Absolute. What we can infer from the audible Christ is lashing and resoundingly demonstrated by the silent Christ. As we will see, the circumstances around the cross both exposes autolatry and reveals the Absolute. Peter was incapable of keeping himself from denying Christ. Jesus went to the cross for him anyway. God's love for us does not hang on our own faithfulness, but on the faithfulness of the One who went through with hanging on the cross for us. Indeed, Unconditional Love in Person hung there. You might think that Peter's denying of Christ is what sent Jesus to the cross! No. It was his faith in himself that he wouldn't deny Christ that did. The cross was required to expose the folly of the Rock of the Church's autolatry. It was autolatry that put Jesus on the cross, not only Peter's but all of ours. Autolatry operates according to what Gerhard Forde calls the glory story. "We come from glory and are bound for glory."⁵⁸ It was the glory road that put Jesus on the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrows.

Now why would we want to put our faith in our own feeble selves when we can put our faith in Christ crucified? As Charles Spurgeon put it, "God helps those who cannot help themselves."⁵⁹ The New Bible Dictionary describes the biblical view of view of faith. "Faith is an attitude whereby a man abandons all reliance in his own efforts to obtain salvation, be they deeds of piety, or ethical goodness or anything else."⁶⁰ While the Bible as a whole excludes any basis for autolatry, it is the cross that definitively exposes its folly. Spurgeon again, "He bequeaths us His manger, from which to learn how God came down to man, and His cross to teach us how man may go up to God."⁶¹ The cross teaches us our place before God.

If Christ's words to Peter are a glimpse through a keyhole into a spiritual drama between God and Satan, then Christ's death is a display window into

the very heart of God. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright sums it up thus, “The cross is the surest, truest and deepest window on the very heart and character of the living and loving God...”⁶² With a God like that to trust in, how could we possibly trust ourselves? Why are we desperate to make something of ourselves when we have a Maker who died for us?

“The cross is the surest, truest and deepest window on the very heart and character of the living and loving God...”
(N.T. Wright)

After the resurrection, an angel says to the women at the empty tomb, “tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee' “ (Mark 16:7) The singling out of Peter surely reinforces the point that his denial of Jesus did not disqualify him from his relationship with his Lord. “If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). Peter has sinned, but the cross had dealt with that perfectly satisfactorily.

The Passion play

Imagine a Passion play in which everything goes wrong. Simon the Cyrenean trips while carrying the cross and it goes cartwheeling down the Via Dolorosa into a Roman cohort. The head comes off the Roman soldier’s hammer and knocks the Chief Priest standing by in the eye. And and so on. Events seem to conspire against the play unfolding as planned. Behind the scenes, the director is madly trying to arrange the retrieval of the cross, get medical attention for the cohort and the priest, and get the play back on track. Superficially, the actual Passion (see accompanying painting by Eugène Burnand (1850–1921)) might look something like this.

Humanly speaking, the death of Christ on the cross could very easily not have happened. The most significant event in all of history was hanging on a thread. The religious authorities who wanted to sentence Jesus to death did not have the power to do so (John 18:31). Pilate, who had the power to

condemn Jesus, was sure of his innocence and wanted to release him (Luke 23:20). At each step it seems that things could go either way. God the Father's salvation plan appears to be at the mercy of circumstances while the Son of God's life appears to be at the mercy of his detractors. From the human perspective the cross was *contingent*. Why did God balance such a huge matter as our redemption on such a knife-edge? It is as if the Father stacks all the odds against his foreordained plan happening and then goes ahead and succeeds in the apparent failure of his Son's death anyway. From the divine perspective, the cross must *necessarily* happen. In this, is not God declaring his sovereignty over human autonomy? Is God not exposing the ridiculousness of autolatry even while revealing that he is the Absolute? Autolatry says, "I have the measure of all things." We will see that even while the autolatrous thought they had the measure of Jesus, he had the measure of them. Even while it looks like humans are in charge, God is demonstrating, through the Passion, that it is really he who is in charge.



Jesus himself says things which appear to alternately foster and inhibit the passion going forward. Theologian Nicholas Lombardo goes so far as to say, "In the Gospels, Jesus does not merely interpret his death as integral to his mission; he also provokes it."⁶³ For instance, in the context of denouncing the scribes and pharisees for following murderously in their ancestors footsteps, he says provocatively, "Go ahead, then, and complete

what your ancestors started!” (Matthew 23:32). He also says, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:21). Is he throwing himself on “the wheel of the world?” Albert Schweitzer portrayed it so saying that Jesus, “lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them.”⁶⁴

At other times Jesus says things which seem to have the potential to thwart his mission. Consider the encounter between him and the Roman cohort with officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees. Jesus asks, “Whom do you seek?” and they answered, “Jesus the Nazarene” (John 18:4-5). Jesus’s curt reply is, “I am He.” R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on John’s gospel says, “Jesus answered them as Deity, using the divine predicate “I AM” that reaches back to God's encounter with Moses at the burning bush when God said, "I AM WHO I AM"(Exodus 3:13-14).”⁶⁵ The effect is dramatic. The cohort, comprising about five hundred soldiers,⁶⁶ draws back and falls to the ground. Hughes continues, “Jesus’ answer was one of his last uses of the power by which he calmed the seas, stilled the winds, and healed the sick. The cohort didn’t arrest Jesus – he arrested them. His words were a gracious warning that they were in over their heads. Christ was not caught on the wheel of history. Rather, He is the axis of history.”⁶⁷ Jesus is not at the mercy of the Romans, he is playing with them. And in so doing, he appears to be disrupting his own redemptive mission. Will they disband and go home? He brings his Passion back on track by asking, “Whom do you seek?” And they say, “Jesus the Nazarene” he answers “I told you that I am He; so if you seek Me, let these go their way.” The apostle John adds that he did this, “to fulfill the word which He spoke, “Of those whom You have given Me I lost not one”” (John 18: 7-9). The Absolute is fully in charge of the Romans. As David Rensberger puts it, “Even as he is taken into custody, interrogated, and crucified, Jesus remains remarkably in command.”⁶⁸

Recall that Peter tried to disrupt proceedings by cutting off the ear of Malchus with a sword. Jesus rebukes Peter while dropping that he has at his disposal more than twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26: 53). The Romans would have been outnumbered by angels ten to one. Will the cohort now opt to disband and go home? No. Jesus brings his Passion back on track again by restoring the slave's ear and reminding Peter, "How then will the Scriptures be fulfilled, which say that it must happen this way?" (Matthew 26: 54). Jesus won't allow his disciples to monkey around with his mission. The Absolute is fully in charge of his disciples and the Romans. The cohort continues with the arrest.

Consider, now, the engagement between Jesus, Pilate, and the religious authorities. Pilate tries three tricks to avoid condemning Jesus. First, he tries to evade the problem by sending Jesus to Herod. Herod sends him back. Second, he offers the compromise of having Jesus flogged. Will the crowd accept it and thwart God's salvation plan? Just a few days earlier they were waving palms and singing "Hosanna to the Son of David." Perhaps there is sufficient residue in this sentiment to keep them from pressing for his death. Perhaps they will remember God's injunction, "I desire mercy rather than sacrifice." What is God doing pivoting his salvation plan on the fickleness of the crowd? They don't accept just flogging. His plan is still on track. Next Pilate offers the Passover amnesty as a way out. The mob could have Jesus declared a criminal without actually having innocent blood on their hands. Will they take the offer? Cleverly, Pilate tries to force their hand by asking whether they want the innocent Jesus released or the known murderer Barabbas. Given such a choice, maybe the mob will choose amnesty for Jesus and block God's salvation plan. They don't. His plan is still on track.

Then Pilate's wife tries to upset the proceedings. No doubt prompted by the Holy Spirit, she mentions her troubling dream the previous night as a bad omen and strongly admonishes her husband to have "nothing to do with this innocent man." Pilate has to live with his conscience (and his wife). Perhaps this Roman will not bow to the crowd.

Even Jesus says things that seem to obstruct Calvary. He had set his feet resolutely towards Jerusalem and the cross - let's be clear about that (Luke 9:51, 18:31-33). His crucifixion did not catch him by surprise, since he predicted it repeatedly (Mark 8:31, Mark 9:31, Mark 10:33-34). Why, then, does he say things that induce Pilate to make efforts to release him (John 19:12)? "Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin." (John 19:11). "From then on, Pilate tried to set Jesus free" (John 19:12) Will Pilate thwart God's salvation plan? Jesus knows that he will not. Jesus is playing with Pilate's mind. Pilate may have begun the day thinking that with the exception, perhaps, of his wife, he was in charge. In reality it is Father, Son and Holy Spirit that are.

In effect, Jesus is saying to Pilate that God above has ensured (here is the necessity of the cross) through the greater sin of another, that Pilate will contingently commit the sin that he is desperately trying to avoid. It is important to appreciate New Testament scholar D.A. Carson's point that "It is not God's sovereign hand behind Pilate's authority that mitigates his guilt; that would be to disown the compatibilism [the belief that free will and determinism are compatible ideas] of which the biblical writers are so fond and would imply that God is less than sovereign over the person with the greater guilt."⁶⁹

Pilate has the sobering words of Jesus and the shrill voice of his wife ringing in his ears as he faces the clamour of the crowd. Who is he going to listen to? He has exhausted his evasive options. All he can do is try again. "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" Their firm answer, "Barabbas." Pilate asks as many as three times, "Why, what evil has he done?" The crowd is insistent - they want him crucified. Finally, he cowardly bows to the crowd and delivers Jesus over to be crucified.

Even now the crucifixion is not a done deal. Yes, at the human level, wicked men are hammering nails into Jesus. But at the divine level, these men are utterly dependent on God to be able to even lift the hammer. Epimenides said, and the Apostle Paul affirmed, "For in him [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Even while men were defying

God in their self-determination, the Absolute remained absolutely in control.

What looks like a knife-edge to us, is not to God. Despite having the odds apparently stacked against him, the Father ensures that the crucifixion *will* happen. As Jesus taught, “the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31, emphasis mine). I ask again, in this, is God not exposing the absurdity of autolatry even while displaying his absolute sovereignty? Indeed, when Peter and John declare, “... Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed” they immediately quote the Psalmist as prophecy fulfilled, “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed ...” (Psalm 2:1-2). To continue further in the Psalm, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them” (Psalm 2:3-4). God's sovereignty trumps human machinations. It has always been this way, but it is most acutely seen at the cross. The Passion was a play, but it was God that was playing with humanity, in love and at great cost to himself in the life of his Son.

Advanced autolatry and its aftermath

Except from the perspective of the temporarily unfortunate Malchus (Jesus healed him), Peter's bumbling antics look almost comical. But, the effects of autolatry can be writ very large indeed. The motto, “I have the measure of all things” may look like an inspiring declaration of individual freedom. In actuality, it is a recipe for calamity. True freedom does not come from inventing our own truth, but from submitting to the (authoritative) Truth that is Him. Otherwise we are in bondage to falsehood and on a course towards destruction. "Egoism," says “P.T. Forsyth, “while it may produce “characters” for a time with a racy tang and a literary effect, is the enemy of character and the death of freedom ... The egoist, as he multiplies, grows less and less fit to assert himself against the crowd, which is only himself enlarged and inflated.”²⁰

Autolatry, has been given a “Christian” defense in the guise that between God and the Bible we have all the truth that we will ever need. Jesus does not claim to be that kind of truth. He is the Ultimate Truth that enables us to receive all truth wherever it may be found. Jesus said to Peter, “You are already clean” (John 15:3). In Jesus, Peter had all that he ever needed to be clean. Peter was redeemed, but far off from being qualified to be a spiritual leader (he denial of Jesus was still to come). Even less is he qualified to speak on all things. P.T. Forsyth says, “But, as a matter of fact, the unlimited right of private judgment is not a fruit of the Reformation but of the Renaissance and of the Revolution with their wild individualism. ... The Reformation, if it destroyed the hierarchy of the Church, did not destroy the hierarchy of competency, spiritual or intellectual.”⁷¹ Jesus was in the business of rescuing Peter from autolatry so that he could submit to truth.

To see where autolatry takes you, consider the case of Lord Christopher Monckton. He has been described as the world’s leading global warming skeptic. Over a four year period, *The Wall Street Journal* mentions his name more often in the context of global warming than the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).⁷² However, his credentials are in journalism and classics and he has not even published one peer-reviewed scientific paper, let alone in climate science. The IPCC is a body of thousands of scientists comprehensively assessing the risk of climate change. Autolatry, especially of this intellectual sort, as I document more fully elsewhere, is wrecking the planet along with us.⁷³

To take another example of the aftermath of autolatry, also documented elsewhere,⁷⁴ “virtually the entire intellectual context for the financial disasters of the early twenty-first century”⁷⁵ can be traced to a novelist described by philosopher Mary Midgley as a “contemporary American prophet of extreme egoistic individualism.”⁷⁶ That novelist was Ayn Rand, a phoney philosopher who got her inspiration from another one, Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Historian Adam Weiner finds that, between the two and their bad writing, the world was destroyed.⁷⁷ Literary scholar Joseph Frank says, “Chernyshevsky’s novel, far more than Marx’s *Capital*, supplied the

emotional dynamic that eventually went to make the Russian Revolution.” Ayn Rand, in turn, was the moral inspiration behind that “maestro of misery,”⁷⁸ Alan Greenspan. The Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, established by the U.S. congress, specifically fingered Greenspan as largely responsible for the seven trillion dollar deficit in the 2008 global financial meltdown.⁷⁹

The effect of the cross on Peter’s faith

Unless we welcome the grace of Christ crucified, the consequences of autolatry are bitter indeed. But that grace was welcomed by Peter in the end. He could eventually stand before a hearing of the Sanhedrin and boldly say, “Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11-12). And in a sermon full of insight, Peter says of Jesus, “This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross” (Acts 2:23). In a letter written shortly before his death, Peter encouraged suffering Christians with the reminder that “when they hurled insults at him [Jesus], he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats”(1 Peter 2:23).

Perhaps Peter’s greatest sermon was also made in silence. Jesus had predicted how Peter would die saying, ““I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!””(John 21:18-19).

How could the upside down death of Peter possibly glorify God? If Jesus genuinely loved Peter, how could he possibly allow this to happen? Christ crucified speaks to this. The death of Peter mirrors the death of Jesus in a lesser way. If the day Peter died looked bleak to Peter, how much more did Good Friday look bleak. Just as the death of Jesus, did not God Incarnate by surprise, neither did the death of Peter. Indeed, he predicted it. If God knew

what he was doing on that Day, he certainly knew what he was doing on Peter's. If Peter cowardly denied Jesus, what was he doing here going so far as to embrace his own death? Something significant and incontrovertible must have happened in between and that could only have been the death and resurrection of Jesus. To those who have the ears to hear it, Peter's crucifixion is a silent but compelling testimony to the death and resurrection of his Lord. Just as the Father was innocent of the death of his Son but used it for his good purposes, so is the Father innocent of the death of Peter, but used it for his good purposes.

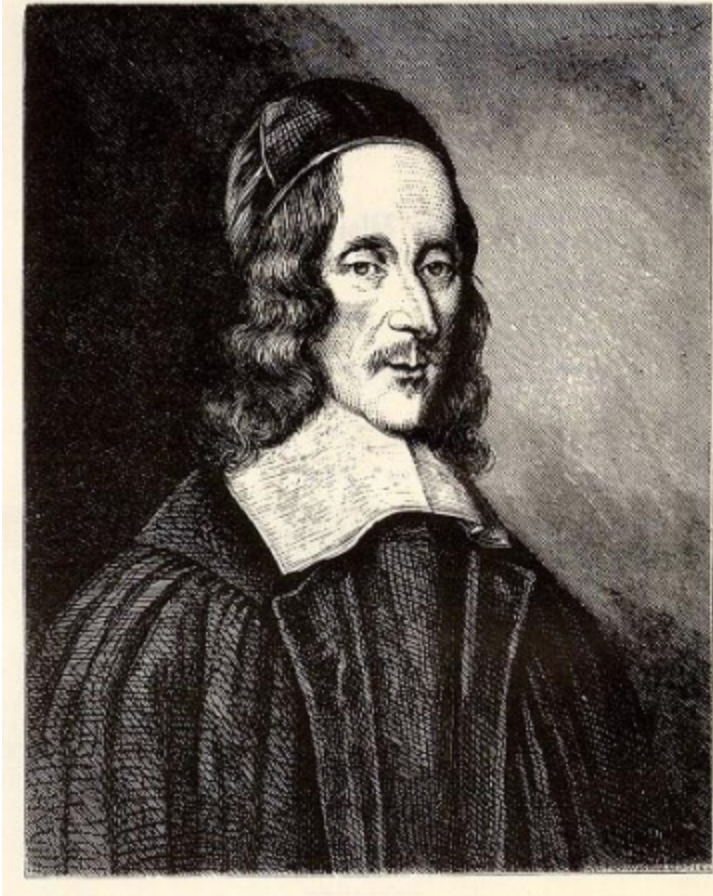
Popular sentiment is that Peter asked to be crucified upside down because he did not consider himself worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord. Non-canonical sources give a different reason. Peter was indeed making a statement, but the statement was that Jesus had turned the world's values upside down.⁸⁰ What the world considers valuable is what God despises. Peter *was* worthy, not because of anything he could do, but because of what his Lord had done before him and for him.



In the end, the cross had spoken irresistibly to Peter (see accompanying painting by Rembrandt (1606–1669)). He went from resistance to the cross and belief in himself to embracing the cross and a tried and tested faith in Christ. He went from just a follower of Christ to a disciple of Christ and him crucified. What happened to bring about the change in Peter? Calvary, the resurrection and Pentecost. God did it all. The Father revealed the truth about Jesus on the cross, raised him up and the Spirit testified to its truth in his heart and empowered him to boldly witness to his Lord. And down through the centuries God had his gracious way all those who would let the cross speak to the self's ambitions.

For instance, the 17th century metaphysical George Herbert (see accompanying portrait⁸¹) compellingly showed up the ineffectual self next to the efficacy of the cross:

“And then when after much delay,
Much wrestling, many a combat, this dear end,
So much desired, is given, to take away
My power to serve thee: to unbend
All my abilities, my designs confound,
And lay my threatenings bleeding on the ground.”



Isaac Watts (see accompanying painting by an unknown artist), in the 18th century, encapsulated the impact of the cross on his own autolatry in his sublime hymn,

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most
I sacrifice them to His blood.”



The cross speaks to our faith

If autolatry looked an absurd affliction before the crucifixion, how much more absurd does it look afterwards. Unlike Peter, with his less than effective use of a sword, we followers today cannot try to prevent the crucifixion of Jesus, but we can ignore it or de-emphasise it. Peter's "Never Lord! This *shall never* happen to you" becomes our "Never Lord! This *should never have* happened to you." Not many professing Christian leaders will say this or call people to autolatry overtly - it is too obviously contrary to the Gospel. The call to self-belief and the downplaying of the cross is more subtle than that.

They could, for instance, have Christian services in name without much mention of Christ crucified. Theologian Michael Horton recounts a theologian friend's experience at a megachurch. "In the church they attended Easter Sunday, nothing visibly suggested that it was a Christian service, but this distinguished theologian tried to rein in his judgments.

There was no greeting from God or sense that this was God's gathering. The songs were almost exclusively about us, our feelings, and our intentions to worship, obey, and love, but it was not clear whom they were talking about or why." When pressed to comment on the service he replied that "... there was no 'gospel' anywhere in that service that might convert me if I were unconverted ..."⁸²

Another way to downplay the cross, is to put the accent on faith instead. For instance, Kenneth Hagin called people to put their faith in ... wait for it ... faith! He writes, "Did you ever stop to think about having faith in your own faith? Evidently God had faith in His faith, because He spoke the words of faith and they came to pass. Evidently Jesus had faith in His faith, because He spoke to the fig tree, and what He said came to pass. In other words, having faith in your words is having faith in your faith. That's what you've got to learn to do to get things from God: Have faith in your faith. It would help you to get faith down in your spirit to say 'Faith in my faith.' Keep saying it until it registers on your heart. I know it sounds strange when you first say it; your mind almost rebels against it, we are not talking about your head; we're talking about faith in your heart."⁸³ The idea wasn't new with him. Christian Larson writing in the early 1900's said, "When we have perfect faith in faith, it can never fail us. The power within faith is limitless, and it is our privilege to call into action as much of this power as we may need or desire ... Faith can do anything. Have faith in faith."⁸⁴

We are not called to put our faith in faith, but to put it in Someone. If faith is all that was needed then Jesus would not have had to die. The cross has the primacy. The foundation of our salvation is not our faith, but the crucifixion. Jürgen Moltmann said, "Ultimately, one's belief is not in one's own faith; within one's experiences in faith and one's decisions, one believes in someone else who is more than one's own faith."⁸⁵ Faith in faith is a form of autolatry. Faith, in itself, cannot cause anything to happen in the Kingdom of God. Jesus says flatly, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The King of Kings, however, can and has caused the world to turn upside down in response to the faith of his children, never mind a mountain! God honours our faith, but is not hamstrung by our lack of it.

Indeed, Lazarus was too dead to lift a finger or have faith, yet God raised him! Peter's imperfect faith was insufficient to keep him from denying Christ. Jesus went to the cross for him anyway. Could Calvary have more clearly demonstrated that grace comes before faith? We are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8) and not the other way around. It wasn't Peter's faith in Jesus that led Christ to go resolutely to Jerusalem and the cross. Christ went to the cross to redeem Peter despite his denying him. In theological terms, the "crucicentric salvific order" is *theocentric*⁸⁶ in contrast to the *anthropocentric* order of Larson and Hagin.

“Ultimately, one's belief is not in one's own faith; within one's experiences in faith and one's decisions, one believes in someone else who is more than one's own faith.” (Jürgen Moltmann)

To see why faith in faith is a form of autolatry consider the following analogy. There is this newly qualified traffic cop. It is Saturday evening. He is on his way with his girlfriend to a fancy-dress party dressed in a bunny-suit. They come to a stop street. Cars are whizzing by without let up. “This is ridiculous,” he thinks to himself. Just yesterday he had been directing traffic and had noticed what a darn impressive finger he had. Just by pointing it he can bring cars to stop. “Watch this,” he says to his girlfriend as he leaps out his car. He walks to the middle of the intersection as a huge pantehnicon barrels towards him. He winks at her, points his finger at the truck and proclaims, “Halt.” The truck rides him over. The driver did not hear the command over the roar of the engine and presumed the rabbit would get out the way.

Faith is like the cop's finger. Just as the cop's finger has no power outside of the uniform and authority of the Traffic Department, so our faith has no power outside the authority of God. Putting our faith in faith is like the cop putting his faith in his little finger. Faith in faith is a diabolical affliction. True faith is not something we have to muster up in ourselves in order to

cause something to happen. Elsewhere Jesus gives a crucial proviso concerning faith. "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). As a sensible traffic officer puts on his uniform, so we must put on Jesus Christ, pray in accordance to his will and trust him to act.

Horatious Bonar said it well using a different analogy, "Faith is not our physician; it only brings us to the Physician. It is not even our medicine; it only administers the medicine, divinely prepared by Him who "healeth all our diseases." In all our believing, let us remember God's word to Israel: "I am Jehovah, that healeth thee" (Exo 14:26). Our faith is but our touching Jesus; and what is even this, in reality, but *His touching us?* (emphasis his). Faith is not our saviour. It was not faith that was born at Bethlehem and died on Golgotha for us. It was not faith that loved us, and gave itself for us; that bore our sins in its own body on the tree; that died and rose again for our sins. Faith is one thing, the Saviour is another. Faith is one thing, and the cross is another. Let us not confound them, nor ascribe to a poor, imperfect act of man, that which belongs exclusively to the Son of the Living God."⁸⁷

**"Faith is not our saviour. It was not faith that was born at Bethlehem and died on Golgotha for us."
(Horatious Bonar)**

A false faith can have serious consequences. Some time ago, Francesca, a young South African girl started telling people that if they looked into the sun they would see Mary, the mother of Jesus. A 37-year-old woman tried it and now her world is a blur - she cannot see shapes. Her sister explained, "You have faith... you believe. Francesca said Mother Mary would appear in the sun."

Scripture does not command us to pray for the relocation of mountains or to see visions of Mary in the sun. However, we are commanded to pray that we will not fall into temptation (Mark 14:38), that the gospel will be made known (Ephesians 6:19) and that God's kingdom will come (Matthew 6:10).

Some might say this all a cop-out by those who cannot believe that faith can move mountains. Jesus has spoken to this. He says, "Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home" (Mark 2:9-11). Christ's overarching point is that he has the authority to forgive. The subsidiary indicator of this fact is the healing of the paralytic. It is the spiritually mature who see that the proud and godless coming to forgiveness in Christ is a far, far greater thing than a mountain getting tossed into the sea as is seeing Peter mature from autolatriy to faith in Christ and him crucified.

Humanly speaking, Peter may seem to have been an odd choice as leader of the band and as Rock of the Church. Perhaps, in God's sovereignty, there is a message here that Peter is representative both of the human condition of autolatriy and what Christ crucified can do to both expose it and redeem us from it.

[The Ravages of Religiolatriy](#)

Just as it is possible to be in love with marriage, rather than in your spouse, so it is possible to be in love with religion rather than in God. We saw earlier in Christ's prayer for Peter that God's *first* interest is not in our service even when it is for him. God's *first* interest is in our love for him. The same order of things is reflected in the way Jesus calls Peter to service after the resurrection. He first asks Peter, as often as Peter had denied him, "Do you love me." *Then* Jesus says, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17) If we do not love God first we cannot love people. We will end up loving religious systems over people. If we love God first, we cannot help but love people. "We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister,

whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” (1 John 4:19-20).

So, while humans often want to make it so, religious service is not fundamental. If you have any doubts about this, there is a very clear and strongly worded statement by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

It should be noted parenthetically that the phrase “in your name” indicates that the Lord’s rebuke here is directed not at Jews, but at professing *Christians*. I might also try to avoid applying the passage to myself since I have never cast out a demon, but Jesus, of course, is providing “for instances” not an exhaustive list. The items in this list represent top religious achievements for some in his day. For some in our day it might be, “Lord, Lord, did I not write many words in your name and did I not argue your case against the skeptics and confess your name before millions on TV?”

“The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6: 28-29)

When the disciples asked, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” Jesus replied, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6: 28-29).

For the religiolatrous it is all about what we do for God. Actually, it is about what God has done for us through Christ. Faith in Jesus and being known by him precedes doing anything for him. Pastor A.W. Tozer said, “We’re

here to be worshippers first and workers only second. ... the work done by a worshipper will have eternity in it.”⁸⁸

**“We're here to be worshippers first and workers only second. ... the work done by a worshipper will have eternity in it.”
(A.W. Tozer)**

Religiosity is behind much evil. Indeed, Jesus warned his disciples that a time was coming, “when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. (John 16:2-3). As trenchant as the Lord’s critique of religion is in the sermon on the Mount, it gets an even more withering castigation by the events of the Passion Week. The cross is the definitive declaration of the pitfalls of religion with, as many commentators have noted, layer upon layer of excruciating irony. Calvary quietly vindicated Jesus, even while the raucous verbiage of his religious antagonists exposed them. The religious did not kill Jesus directly. They had him killed through their words.

Riveted on religious ritual

Consider, for instance, the bringing of Jesus before the Sanhedrin (see accompanying painting by Nikolai Ge (1831–1894)). The priests, elders and teachers of the law are interrogating him. Peter is in the background at a distance. How does the religious outlook play itself out in this context? “Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, “Prophecy!” And the guards took him and beat him” (Mark 14: 65). Elsewhere Jesus had described such sign-seeking as wicked and adulterous (Matthew 12:39). They called on him to perform religiously and their taunt betrayed their parochial mindset. They were riveted on religious ritual whereas Jesus is preoccupied with doing his Father’s will. Without Jesus saying even a word, the very next thing that happens is that Jesus’s prophecy concerning Peter’s denial comes true. Jesus is the true prophet, but his purpose at Calvary was to suffer and die and so he is silent. He is the true prophet, but not merely a prophet. He is the Saviour. While Peter was expressly denying Jesus, Jesus was silently remaining dedicated

to his redemptive mission. He does not play the triumphalist apologist making a point about the fulfillment of the prophecy. He is into redemption rather than religion. And notice that despite Peter's outward profession, when push came to shove, he expressly denied knowing Jesus even while Jesus was silently remaining resolute about fulfilling his mission.



It was a fixation on keeping the status quo that kept the religious from appreciating the wisdom of Calvary. Theologian Edward Schroeder says, “In the crucified Christ we see that God acts in creation in contradiction to what men naturally and reasonably expect, especially in contradiction to man's religious expectations.”⁸⁹ Consider another meeting of the Sanhedrin where the religious leaders are bemoaning the popularity of Jesus among the people. Caiaphas stands up saying, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish” (John 11:49-50). John adds, “So from that day on they plotted to take his life” (John 11:53). Religion was one of the prime evils that put Jesus on the cross. Could there be a more decisive repudiation of religion as a route to God than the crucifixion? “It was our Lord's claim to equality with the Father that outraged the religionists of His day and led at last to His crucifixion,”⁹⁰ said Pastor A. W. Tozer. Likewise Franciscan

priest Brennan Manning was spot on, “Jesus did not die at the hands of muggers, rapists, or thugs. He fell into the well-scrubbed hands of deeply religious people, society’s most respected members.”⁹¹ Notice the irony in Caiaphas. Rudolf Stier points out that the one who correctly declared that the others knew nothing knew no better himself!⁹² Even armed with the Old Testament this religious leader, could not see the wisdom of Calvary. The Apostle Paul later explained why it was necessary that this wisdom be kept from the religious leaders. He said, “No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7-8). Humanly speaking, it was necessary for these rulers not to be able to detect God’s hand at the cross for God to accomplish his redemptive mission.

The Apostle John says that Caiaphas “did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation” (John 11:51). Caiaphas did not realise what the prophecy meant. He understood his statement politically, not spiritually. He was an *unwitting* prophet. D A Carson says, “...when Caiaphas spoke, God was also speaking.”⁹³ You could say that in God’s hands, the high priest was no wiser than Balaam’s ass! (see Numbers 22: 21-39). This is not to say, as Carson points out, that Caiaphas was merely a puppet, but that God’s sovereign foreordaining is not constrained by human free will.

The religious outlook is that humanity reaches upward to God through its own efforts. What did the sinful human condition will coupled to the religious outlook achieve? It succeeded in having an instrument of torture pointed heavenward. Fleming Rutledge goes so far as to say that the “central claim of Christianity is oddly irreligious at its core” and that “the cross of Jesus is an unrepeatable event that calls all religion into question and establishes an altogether new foundation for faith, life, and a human future.”⁹⁴ Religion tries to reaches upward to find God. According to the cross that is an impossible endeavour. God has to reach downward to humanity and he has through Christ crucified. What we could not do, God

has done. While the cross was vindicating God, it was silently nullifying religion.

The sacred severity of Saul

The abuse of Jesus by his religious detractors continued even after his crucifixion and resurrection. A Pharisee by the name of Saul went so far as to persecute the church in his love for his religion, “Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” and approving of the killing of Stephen and others (Acts 7:59 - 8:1, Acts 29:10). Jesus took him to task saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4).



As with Simon becoming Peter, there was a turnaround. Saul became the Apostle Paul (see accompanying painting by Rembrandt (1606–1669)). The first step in that turnaround was that Saul became blind for three days. As is

the way of Jesus, this was an act of both judgement and grace. Elsewhere Jesus says, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind” (John 9:39). Saul’s religion gave him a sight that kept him from seeing Jesus for who he was. Saul’s very pride in his religion kept him from seeing the inestimable value of a humble carpenter’s ignominious death. As we will see later, this sort of religion can be called a “theology of glory” to use Martin Luther’s phrase. Gerharde Forde says, “The cross therefore is actually intended to destroy the sight of the theologian of glory. In the cross God actively hides himself. God simply refuses to be known in any other way.”⁹⁵ He described his observance of his religion grandly, as “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:5-6).

Jesus blinded Saul physically so that he could truly see. In his helplessness he came to see that he needed the help of others such as Ananias. “Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he could see again.” But Paul especially needed the help of Another. Jesus is the “rock of offense” because humans want to build their spiritual temple on their own. But Jesus says quoting the Psalms, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (Matthew 21:42). Saul needed the Holy Spirit to see that Jesus is the Rock he needs and the religion that he had been depending on was just rubbish.

And he needed the Holy Spirit to hear the silent voice of the cross. While the Apostle Paul was not a disciple of Jesus, he became an ardent disciple of the cross and it showed. The Spirit of Christ, with all his grace, let Saul see that all his religion was garbage next to “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (Philippians 3:8). Saul, the spiritually blind worshipper of religion, became Paul, the spiritually sighted worshipper of

Christ. Paul would later say to the Corinthian church, “When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2). The message of the cross requires “the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us” (Corinthians 2:12).

**“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”
(1 Corinthians 2:2)**

Notice that Paul said this not to Jews, but to Christians squabbling about leadership. Indeed, theologian Jacob Pretorius calls Paul’s resolve “The Great Focus” and says it is key to conflict resolution in the congregation which was the problem in the Corinthian church.⁹⁶ And Jesus, when he says, “I counsel you to buy from me ... salve to put on your eyes, so you can see (Revelation 3:18) is likewise speaking not to Jews, but to Christians. And when Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20), he says this in a letter, not to unbelievers, but to the Church in Laodicea.

All religion, whether Christian or not, that leads us to seek spiritual resources outside of Christ, and especially him crucified, is promoting spiritual blindness. Faith in the Christian religion is not, as Moltmann pointed out, the same thing as faith in Christ crucified, “But faith in the cross also distinguishes Christian faith from its own superstitious manifestations. The recollection of the crucified Christ obliges Christian faith permanently to distinguish itself from its own religious and secular forms.”⁹⁷ Former pastors Roger and Jeff Fields say, “The cross has become a symbol of religion. (How ironic!) Actually, it is the symbol of Jesus’

crucifixion that ended religion and its merit-based approach to God”⁹⁸ and “The cross means you are DONE with religion.”⁹⁹ Paul Ellis says, “Jesus didn’t suffer and die to establish a new religion. Jesus is the end of religion.” Faith in the Christian religion is as idolatrous as faith in the Jewish religion. The Christian religion put Jesus on the cross as much as the Jewish religion did. And it isn’t just Saul’s religiolatry that put Jesus on the cross, but my own. But it is by that cross that I am forgiven and set free from the treadmill of faith in religion. Loving religion instead of knowing Love is a curse. Know Love and everything will follow. As Augustine is said to have said, “Love God and do whatever you please.”¹⁰⁰ Those who are consumed by his love cannot but love others.

Faith in religion is a treadmill because you can never be sure that your religious achievements will be good enough. Faith in Jesus, in contrast, delivers, because the way of the cross is the way of grace. Jesus says, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace” (Matthew 11:28-29 The Message).

That grace was bought for us at the cross, but it was exemplified by Jesus even while he was dying for all of us. The thief on the cross next to Jesus had nothing to offer, spiritually, morally or religiously. There is not much room for self-improvement when you are hanging on a cross. And yet, Jesus could assure him, “you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

The Blight of Bibliolatry

The Bronze Serpent was commissioned by God (Numbers 21:8). It is a good, even holy thing. But, the religious impulse can take such an artefact and give it a devotion that should be reserved for God alone (2 Kings 18:4). Then, of course, it is being idolatrous. That good, holy thing can even be the Bible. Then the religious impulse becomes bibliolatry. Imagine someone preferring to embrace the love letters she received from a fellow than the fellow himself, and you get a rough idea of the problem with bibliolatry.

Pastor A.W. Tozer said, “One important point many fail to understand is that the Bible was never meant to replace God; rather, it was meant to lead us into the heart of God. Too many Christians stop with the text and never go on to experience the presence of God.”¹⁰¹

One important point many fail to understand is that the Bible was never meant to replace God; rather, it was meant to lead us into the heart of God. Too many Christians stop with the text and never go on to experience the presence of God.” (A. W. Tozer)

The Bible is God’s special revelation to humanity, but it is not his supreme revelation. How do we know this? As we will see, it is the Bible that says so. To fashion the Bible into God’s supreme revelation is to be both bibliolatrous and unbiblical! He did not quite say it this way, but this was Martin Luther’s insight. A theology of the cross says McGrath in his book on Luther’s theology, “rejects any attempt to “reify” God’s revelation, and above all demands a constant return to its origin and foundation for refreshment and renewal. The contemplation of the passion of Christ is seen as the source of a true understanding of the nature of things.”¹⁰² It is the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, that teaches that Christ crucified is the supreme revelation of God. Similarly, to claim that Paul and Barnabas are divine, as the Lycaonians did, is both idolatrous and unapostolic because Paul and Barnabas insisted, “We too are only human, like you” (Acts 14:15).

Bibliolatry is an affliction that can befall religious leaders. Jesus said to them in his day, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40). Clearly, Jesus had a different emphasis to these leaders. They placed the greater emphasis on the text; Jesus placed the greater emphasis on his Person. They had a relationship with the word (lowercase w) rather than the Word (upper case W). They would never have seen themselves as

bibliolatrous, but that is what they were effectively. Eternal life is not found ultimately in the Scriptures, but in the Saviour. As Jesus said to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in *me* will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in *me* will never die” (John 11:25, emphasis mine).

The emphasis on propositions over the Person bedevils modern believers. The invention of the printing press as great as it was (see image of the Gutenberg Bible),¹⁰³ came with a cost. Moderns are at greater risk of being people of the Book more than they are people of the Being. I once heard a preacher championing the priority of the word (lowercase w) using the following analogy. A matric pupil says to a girl in his class. “I want you to come with me to the Matric Dance.” The girl's heart skips a beat, she is all a flutter. All this happens because of the power of his words. “True statements,” said the preacher, “are very powerful things.” But now let’s change the particulars in the analogy. A pupil does say to the same girl, “I want you to come with me to the Matric Dance” but this time it is a boy who happens to be only 14 years old. It is not going to have the same impact is it? Anyone can make a claim, but the identity of the one making it is critical.



Notice that in trying to teach the overweening importance of the Bible, the preacher ended up undermining it. For it is the Bible that teaches the supremacy of the Living Word over the written word. The book of Hebrews opens with, “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:1). That the prophets and the Son do not represent God equally was a point John the Baptist clearly understood. When asked who he was, “John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’” and “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

And the supremacy of Christ as revelation was clearly taught by Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Theologian August Tholuck says of Jesus, “He is that truth, for he does not say, “I have the truth,” but “I am the Truth”¹⁰⁴ The Apostle Paul says, “When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2: 1-2) Paul did not rely on cleverly constructed arguments, but on a Person and what he did. Bible verses may well contain truth, but Truth is Him. For Jesus and Paul Truth is not ultimately textual, but Personal (the capital P is important). There is a very silly popular idea that, ultimately, all truth is personal (lowercase p) in the sense that what is true for you, may not be true for me). Jesus is the Truth for all people everywhere for all time. There is Absolute Truth and He is a Person. All the treasures of wisdom are hidden in him (Colossians 2:3).

One problem with giving text the supremacy, is that understanding text, including Scripture, is so very often context and culture dependent. As Old Testament Scholar John Walton insightfully says, “God's Word was written *for* us, but not *to* us” (emphasis mine). Bringing the ancient text to modern

readers is not just a matter of word rendering; it's also a matter of understanding the culture in which the text was written.”¹⁰⁵ The Word on the cross, however, is both for us and to us and it is both for and to all generations. Anyone, both Jews and Gentiles, both ancients and moderns can see Jesus dying on the cross and say “Surely this is the Son of God.” The Living Word has the supremacy over the written word, and as we saw, the Living Word taught the even greater supremacy of the Dying Word *as revelation*.

**“God's Word was written for us, but not to us.”
(John Walton)**

Unbiblical postage-stamp collecting

The trouble with those religious leaders in Jesus’s day is that they could not see past the biblical text to the Person behind the text. For them Bible study was about amassing a whole lot of theological truths rather than getting to know the Person behind the truths. In effect, they were merely doing postage-stamp collecting.

It might have put me off biology (though it didn’t), but in my final year of school I learnt that in the grooves of segments 9 & 10, and 10 & 11, on the ventral side of the earthworm, there are the openings of its spermethecae. Unfortunately, I have a good memory and cannot rid my brain of this true factoid. Perhaps it was experiences like this that led Rutherford to famously say, “Biology is just postage-stamp collecting.” To him, biology was merely a collection of unrelated and equal facts. He said this at a time when biology was not nearly as well-developed as it is today. Still, his statement reflected more on him than on biology. One of the great pioneers of evolutionary biology, Theodosius Dobzhansky famously said, “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” He may have been using hyperbole to some extent, but the wisdom in his statement has stood the test of time. Evolution explains why it is that creatures as apparently unrelated as sea-squirts and humans both have a post-anal tale at some point

in development. This is what I would have preferred to have learnt at school.

Now, we can similarly turn Bible study into just postage-stamp collecting. We do so when we treat the Scripture as a collection of unrelated and equal verses. If we do so we will miss its core message. To see where the mindset can take you, consider, for instance, 1 Corinthians 15:29. In it, the Apostle Paul refers to “the baptism of the dead.” Imagine basing church policy on just this one obscure verse in Scripture. There is a sect that does that. Their mindset has gotten them besotted on ancestors, at the expense of their descendants!

Just as nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution, nothing in the Bible makes sense except in the light of the cross. Theologian Ted Peters says, “... nothing in Christian theology makes sense except in the light of the cross and resurrection.”¹⁰⁶ All verses in the Bible are equally God-breathed, but this does not mean he made them equal. All facts are equally made by God, but this does not mean he made them equal. The fact of the cross eclipses them all. Between factoids and fact, the cross is the greatest fact of all. Unless our interpretations of Scripture have the stamp of Christ and him crucified, we have merely been doing postage-stamp collecting.

Can't see the Word for the decrees

The Bible abounds in moral precepts, but if you think the Good Book will make you good, then, as my mother used to say, you have another think coming! It is God who makes us godly. That is, as we will see, what the Bible teaches. The Written Word points us to the Dying Word and the Living Word as the route to holiness. The Good Book is better called the God Book. If we treat the Bible as a self-help manual in behaviour modification, it is going to be to no avail. Edgar asks, “Will the preaching of pure morality change the world? This has been the delusion of many a ministry and many an age. It is not by the publication of the purest ethical code, it is not by the enforcing of the daintiest moral maxims, it is not by the persuasive utterances of the purest and noblest life, that you will impress and subdue sinful men.”¹⁰⁷ Unless we are careful, a bibliolatrous preoccupation with mere moral injunctions, will keep us from the Source of godliness. It is not called the fruit of the Spirit for nothing!

Perhaps it is symptomatic of the autolatrous human condition, but we easily place the emphasis on the wrong thing. Consider the headings of modern versions of the Bible. They are not, of course, in the original and not part of the inspired Word of God. They are 20th century inventions. We would be wise to evaluate them.

Take the so-called “story of the prodigal son” in Luke 15:11–32. I distinctly recall, as a kid, coming away from this story and thinking, “You have this loving Father, but look how bad the son was.” I saw passage as yet another decree that I was bad. In so doing I put the emphasis in exactly the wrong place. The focus was not on me or the wayward son, but on the loving father. That is where Jesus places it. The prodigal son is a prop to a greater end. Jesus is teaching them about the love of God. We can see this from the immediate context. In the first verse of the chapter we read, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The parable is in response to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jesus is telling them that he, like his Father, loves the sinner.

I'm not sure how I managed to commit the so-called "fallacy of accent" by putting the emphasis in the wrong place. I strongly suspect being unduly taken in by the story's heading. The RSV gives it as "The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother." The NASB followed with "The Prodigal Son" and the NIV with "The Parable of the Lost Son."

If we went by the emphasis of Jesus, the three sections in Luke 15 (the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and lost son) would disappear under one overall heading - "The Father loves the sinner." Headings do not indicate emphasis, they differentiate between sections. They allow collectors to arrange items into compartments.

If headings reflected emphasis, we would have trouble distinguishing passages from each other because there is a unity of emphasis in the Bible. Yikes, we would even have trouble distinguishing the Old and New Testaments! The New Testament should be called The Testament of Jesus and so should the Old. As we have already seen both Testaments are about him. Jesus said so.

What heading would you give Luke 5: 17-26 if you went by proper emphasis? The NASB gives it as "A Paralytic Healed," the RSV as "Jesus Heals a Paralytic." Actually, the issue here is the identity of Jesus. We can see this from verse 21: "The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Jesus responds to them by saying, "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." The heading, if we went by emphasis, should be, "Jesus has divine authority to forgive sins."

I once heard a preacher confidently and completely invert the emphasis of this passage. Instead of "who is Jesus?" it became "who do you think you are?" Instead of the climax of the story being the authority of Jesus to

forgive, it became the healing of the paralytic. The preacher even had the temerity to ask the congregation, “Are you going to be content with just forgiveness or do you have enough faith to go onto healing?!” He had brought an entourage with him that shouted amen to this, but those who are attentive to the Person of Jesus would hear that the preacher had a very strange accent.

Some modern Bible versions give James 3 the heading, “Taming the Tongue” as if this was humanly possible. But the Apostle specifically says, “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (v 8) and “a fire and a world of evil” (v 6). ”It is an emphasis that James shared with his brother. Jesus said, remember, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15). It applies especially to doing anything about the tongue. The section would be better headed, “The Tongue cannot be Tamed.” This is why James stresses the need for a wisdom that comes from heaven. Human behavior modification programs are going to be of no avail. Or take Colossians 3:17: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God ...”. The NIRV misses the plot when it gives it the heading, “Rules for Holy Living.” Indeed, in the previous chapter Paul expresses his vehemence against mere rule-based living, saying, “Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules.” This time the NIV does better with its heading, “Living as Those Made Alive in Christ.” Holiness is certainly the section’s theme, but Paul stresses that it emerges from a life spent in Christ. Holiness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It cannot be hacked by humans. P. T. Forsyth said it well. If the theme of the New Testament as a whole can be said to be holiness, it is “one which is more concerned with God's holiness than ours, and lets ours grow of itself by dwelling on His.”¹⁰⁸

Looking at the headings some versions give in the book of Revelation you might come away with the notion that it is the revelation of the Beast. It is the revelation from Jesus Christ of Jesus Christ. It’s theme could well be, “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!” (Revelation 1: 17-18). Similarly, if you went

by the headings of some versions, you might come away thinking that Genesis 1 -3 is about creation. It is not. It is about the Creator and the bruised Creator at that (see Genesis 3:15). As awful as it was, Job is not primarily about his pain and suffering, but about his Redeemer that lives (Job 19:25), Isaiah is not primarily about the return from exile, but about the One crushed for us (Isaiah 53:5) Acts is about the acts of the Spirit of Christ through his witnesses, 1 Corinthians is about Christ crucified as the wisdom of God and Revelation is about the resurrected and victorious Creator.

The view of God the Father from the Old Testament?

The trouble with mere bibliolatrous verse-collecting is that it is a small step from it to atheism. It has been said that the Old Testament has produced more atheists than any other book. This is because there are plenty of verses in the Old Testament that, if read naively, might suggest that God the Father is a sadist.

Take the call for Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (see accompanying painting by Jan Lievens (1607–1674)). “Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (Genesis 22:2). At the very last moment, the angel of the Lord stops the sacrifice and provides a ram (Genesis 22:13). But what kind of God allows a father to go through the anguish of even contemplating the killing of his own son? As Robert Edgar understated it, “It was a tremendous trial of the patriarch's faith, and, when considered in itself, it undoubtedly presents a moral difficulty. In fact it is only in the light of the Cross that this circumstance, like so many more, becomes at all clear.”¹⁰⁹ In response to passages like these there are those would prefer to believe that there is no God rather than believe that he is sadistic. There is something noble in this. But where does this repugnancy come from? Our ancient ancestors didn't have it. They were perfectly content to believe the gods were a bunch of squabbling ogres. Without really realising it, these atheists have been informed by Jesus and especially Jesus on the cross.



The view of God the Father from Golgotha

Gregory Boyd says in *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*, “it is only by becoming convinced that the cross is the full revelation of God’s character down to his very essence that we will realize the true enormity of the challenge posed by the OT’s violent divine portraits.”¹¹⁰ Yes, but only by becoming convinced that the cross is the full revelation of God’s character down to his very essence that we will realize the true enormity of the challenge posed by *the cross’s* violent divine portrait.” As we will see, the Old Testament does not pose the greatest challenge to God’s character. The cross does. The cross is both the greatest challenge to God’s moral character and the greatest vindication of it. It could be argued, for instance, that the

human victims of God's apparent violence in the Old Testament may be lacking in innocence so that their suffering is either deserved or brought upon by themselves in some way or both. Or that the perpetrators of the violence misconstrued God. These arguments cannot apply at the cross. Humans may have some measure of innocence through moral ignorance. How much more innocent is Jesus who was completely informed morally, but always chose good over evil? Yet the truly Innocent One suffered and died unjustly under God's set purpose and foreknowledge (Acts 2:23).

Where do we see the wrath of God at its very worst? At the cross. Robert Edgar says it memorably, “Nowhere, consequently, do we learn so vividly the wrath of God against sin as when we see it descending upon the Substitute. The gathering waves of the Deluge, the flaming fire in Sodom, the sacking of Jerusalem, all famine, pestilence, and agony, do not proclaim so unmistakably as the Cross how real is the wrath, how terrible is the justice of the Most High in the matter of sin!”¹¹¹

If the Warrior God is crucified on the cross, is he not there also exposed, humanly speaking, as the Warrior God? How can he escape the charge that he is even worse - the Child-abusing God. According to Robin Meyers the cross declares that “we are dealing with a deity who not only must play by our rules but is, at best, capable of being bribed or, at worst, guilty of divine child abuse.”¹¹² As much as the Roman soldier pierced the side of Christ with a sword, did the Father not pierce Jesus? Is the cross not a giant sword wielded by God against his very own Son? Michael Card’s deeply moving song “God Will Provide A Lamb” goes, “What Abraham was asked to do, he's done. He's offered his only son.” And unlike in Genesis 22 where God’s call to Abraham to sacrifice his son may seem, humanly speaking, to have some mitigation as a spur-of-the-moment crime of jealous passion, the Passion Week was arranged in eternity past (Acts 2:23). The cross, it appears, does not exonerate God as a Warrior, but compounds the charges against him.

**“What Abraham was asked to do, he's [God's] done.
He's offered his only son.”** (Michael Card)

So how does the Father get out of this monstrous moral quandary? It is crucial to remember what Jesus said to Philip, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” When Jesus said, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do, he was acting most unlike a warrior.” The one who halted the storm with one hand could have, in a moment, wielded the cross as a blunt-force instrument to club the soldiers to a bloody pulp. The power was available to him. The human on the cross was fully God. But the idea is beyond preposterous because Christ crucified is just not that kind of person.

What kind of person is he? Moberly movingly describes him on the cross, “But here, — in Jesus Christ, — all the power of all His murderers is His own, and in His own hand. Very slowly He is passing through the anguish which kills by inches. Voluntarily, from moment to moment, He is choosing the pain; voluntarily He is being crushed under the deadly pressure of the effort of evil against Him. Only try to imagine the unimaginable pressure of this last concentrated temptation upon His human will. For none apart from Himself can put one pang upon Him. One moment's unwillingness to suffer — and He can wholly be free! Every separate item in the anguish is allowed by Himself. One moment's reluctance on His part, one moment's impulse to draw back, even one moment's hesitation of will, might instantly have ended it all. But that moment never came.”¹¹³

What kind of God would allow his perfectly innocent Son to die a horrible death on an instrument of torture? He is the very same kind of God who would pray for his torturers. Catharina von Greiffenberg (see accompanying image) gives this sublime picture of Jesus on the cross, “He, the supremely innocent one, grieved over the imprisonment of the guilty, and He promised them that they should enter eternal life that would come to them in their prisons, when He of course knew that He would soon be abandoned by

God, the angels, and humankind. In short, His love was longer than eternity, deeper than the abyss, hotter than hell, and higher than heaven!”¹¹⁴



What kind of God would give up his Son to die on the Cross? He is the very same kind of God who died on the cross. Could that blood spilled on the cross really be God’s blood? Yes, according to the Apostle Paul, “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Bishop Arthur Michael Ramsey puts it memorably, “God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all”¹¹⁵ (Cf. 1 John 1:5). This

means that the character qualities we see in Christ, “the self-humbling and self-emptying and the self-forgetting sacrifice are themselves part of the eternal glory of God”¹¹⁶ as Archbishop William Temple averred. The Father and Son went through mutual horror out of mutual love for the world. “This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion,” said Simone Weil.¹¹⁷ Edgar says, “The giving up of His other self in the person of His Son must have been a self-denial passing the bounds of all human thought, just as the submission of the Son to death and sorrow must have been an agony beyond compare”¹¹⁸

**“God is Christlike, and in him is no un-Christlikeness at all.”
(Arthur Michael Ramsey)**

It is Christ and *especially him crucified*, “that is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being” (Cf Hebrews 1:1). Jesus is “the crucified God,” to use Martin Luther's phrase. Who is crucified? “God is crucified by humankind so that humankind can be crowned by God”¹¹⁹ according to Catharina von Greiffenberg writing in the 1600’s. Similarly, P.T. Forsyth says, “... the Cross of Christ was Christ reconciling man. It was not heroic man dying for a beloved and honoured God; it was God in some form dying for man.”¹²⁰ Theologian Jurgen Moltmann puts it this way, “When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God,' the meaning is that this is God, and God is like this.”¹²¹ The cross which appears, at first sight, to give the very darkest view of God, gives the very brightest view of him. As New Testament scholar Tom Wright says, “The cross is the surest, truest and deepest window on the very heart and character of the living and loving God...”¹²² or as Fleming Rutledge puts it, “It is in the crucifixion that the nature of God is truly revealed.”¹²³

Robert Edgar again, “Yet, wonder of wonders, this same Cross of Christ, which is a revelation of Divine wrath, is also a revelation of Divine love. If

the fire of wrath nowhere burns so fiercely as above the Cross, nowhere does the light of the Divine love break forth so brightly. Love was lavished upon our first parents in Eden in the provisions and proscription of the garden; it has burst forth in no uncertain light in Providence; yet neither the bright dawn of love in the morning of creation, nor its progress in Providence ever since, can equal the summer noon which, to the open eye of a lost humanity, reveals its splendours around Christ's Cross. Upon Calvary love had its crowning manifestation; affection never welled forth as it did upon the day the dear Master died! "In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).¹²⁴

The view of the Old Testament from Golgotha

So, the cross puts the Old Testament in perspective. It shows that the violent portrayals of God in the Old Testament are far from being the greatest threat to God. The greatest threat is the cross, and the Son has more than survived that - as has the Father. Understood properly, the Old Testament does not provide the definitive revelation of God the Father. It is the cross that does. What the Old Testament does it to point towards that definitive revelation. "The Old Testament," says Gerhard Forde, "finally comes into its own in the light of the cross."¹²⁵ "Take away the cross of Christ, and the Bible is a dark book,"¹²⁶ said Bishop John C. Ryle. The cross teaches us the place of the Bible.

"Take away the cross of Christ, and the Bible is a dark book." (John C. Ryle)

Genesis 22 foreshadows the cross. Robert Edgar says it movingly, "God the Father, however, reaches analogous circumstances in the fulness of time. In due season His Son, the well-beloved, is bound upon the altar. He is nailed upon the cross; and, as one has beautifully remarked, "This other Abraham

has no one above Him to hold back His arm when prepared to strike,” but for the sake of sinners, from the love He bore us, He took away His Son's life with a stroke. Oh, what a devotion He exhibited to the interests of justice, and what a love He bore to man when He brought Himself to this!”¹²⁷

The ram caught in the thicket is a type of Christ who would come to provide the complete, once-and-for-all sacrifice. Sigmund von Birken draws the parallels in a poem, “Thou Isaac, who wast cut down and whom no angel delivered, didst, half dead, bear the wood cross there to the Place of the Skull!”¹²⁸

The angel of the Lord is the pre-incarnate Christ. When the Lord says, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (Genesis 22:16-17) he is not only saying it to Abraham. With his pre-incarnate Son standing by, he is, in effect, saying it to himself. What Abraham was merely prepared to do, the Father has actually done. And as a result, God is indeed the Father of numerous spiritual children. “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Romans 8:29).

The Thorn of Thaumatology

Just as it is possible to be in love with what your spouse does for you, rather than in your spouse, so it is possible to be in love with what God does, especially spectacularly, rather than in God himself. Thaumatology is the worship of miracles. Miracles are also called ‘signs’ in the New Testament because they are not ends in themselves, but merely point towards the destination. The trouble is that our prior mindset can keep us from seeing the destination.

The "scientific" turkey and the religious donkey

Consider the "scientific" turkey and the religious donkey. Ever since the turkey can remember, the farmer fed him morning and evening. In the

turkey's mind the feeding is an inviolable natural law. He doesn't believe that miracles happen. One morning the farmer feeds him and he presumes it will be a day like any other. Except it wasn't. He became lunch for the farmer and his family. "Scientific" is in inverted commas because the turkey is making something of a philosophical leap. Natural laws do not prescribe what necessarily must happen, but describe what ordinarily does. So much for the "scientific" turkey. If you say "how are you?" to a donkey, he will say nothing because, of course, donkeys are mute. Except this one isn't. He happens to be Balaam's donkey (Numbers 22:28-31). Recall that "the Lord opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?" The donkey, you could say, is quite religious about believing in miracles. He has a very different perspective to the turkey because of his experience. But we wouldn't ask the donkey about the purpose and place of miracles. His experience does not provide him with that.

There is the "scientific" turkey who gives no place to miracles and the religious donkey who gives pride of place to them. Both are getting their views on the subject of miracles from their own very limited experience. Indeed, as the turkey faced the chop, he might conclude that even if God should exist, he must be a monster. We need to get divine perspective on these things. Our experience needs to be subordinated to the words and especially as, we will see, to the death of Jesus.

If miracles are signs, what is the destination?

How about getting an answer to this question from Lazarus, the friend of Jesus? After all, he did experience one particularly stupendous miracle. Jesus raised him from the dead! And yet, we do not hear a single recorded word from Lazarus about it in testimony. Heck, we heard more from Balaam's donkey, than from Lazarus. Why is this? Perhaps experiencing a miracle does not, in itself, make one an expert on miracles? Perhaps God wants us to rejoice in something other than miracles? Imagine tourists getting out their car and excitedly dancing around a sign pointing towards the Eiffel Tower and you get a rough idea of what thaumatolatry is about.

Jesus tells us very clearly the destination that signs merely point towards. When Martha says, “I know he [Lazarus] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus responds with, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die” (John 11:24-25). Poor Lazarus. Getting raised from the dead was not so great. It meant he had to die for a second time! There is something much greater going on here than a mere miraculous sign. We are being shown that Jesus, the Person, is our eternal destination. The heading in the NIV (Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead) is dead wrong! A better heading is “How we can know that God the Father sent the Son” since Jesus expressly says that the point of the miracle is to show “... that they may believe that you [God the Father] sent me” (John 11:41). It is all about the Person. Even Satan can perform miracles. Jesus is the Compassionate One who weeps over the passing of his friend. Jesus weeps over you if you do not find him (see Luke 19:41), and rejoices with the angels if you do (see Luke 15:10). He wants to be your friend and for you to find your eternal destiny in him.

The greatest sign

Jesus had a very telling conversation with some in his day.

“Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.”

He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12: 38-39).

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matthew 12: 38-39)

What does Jesus mean when he says that no sign will be given when in fact he gave many signs such as the feeding of the five thousand and the raising of Lazarus? Jesus is using hyperbole. He is saying that the sign of Jonah is the sign to beat all signs. That sign wasn't Jonah being spat out by the fish, but his time in the belly of the fish. And that sign wasn't Jesus being resurrected out of the earth, but his burial in the earth. What we have here is yet another declaration of the supremacy of his death as revelation. The greatest sign of all is not a miracle. It is a non-miracle that sheds light on miracles. The greatest sign of all is the crucifixion. As we will see, it tells us that miracles are not what humans need most deeply.

Jesus is very explicit about this in the parable of the beggar Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man is in torment begging for Lazarus to return from the dead to warn his brothers. Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them" (Luke 16:29). "No, father Abraham," the rich man responds, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." Finally, Abraham declares, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Perhaps it is non-believers that need the cross, whereas believers need miracles. Not according to Jesus. When the seventy-two got very excited by the demons submitting to them, Jesus responds, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). They were evidently struck by the power of the miracle. Jesus redirects their attention to their eternal destiny. After his resurrection, he tells Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20: 29). Later, we will look into why this is so.

Even while the gospel writers are recording the miraculous, the focus is still on Christ's death. For instance, before Jesus is born the angel of the Lord declares that he "will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). During the transfiguration, when Jesus' appearance became a dazzling white, the subject under discussion wasn't the transfiguration, but

something greater - his death (Luke 9:30-31). Archbishop Desmond Tutu placed the prominence appropriately when he said, "I doubt that we could produce a more spectacular example of transfiguration than what God did with the Cross."¹²⁹ We have already seen that miracles are not simply ends in themselves, but serve greater ends such as pointing to God's glory (John 11:40), Christ's identity (Romans 1:4), our salvation (Hebrews 2:3-4), the forgiveness of sins (Mark 2:10) and creating righteousness in the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12: 10-11).

The cross exposes thaumatolatry

Again, what Jesus says audibly on a subject is lashingly exposed in the events of the Passion Week culminating in Calvary. As we will see, rather than converting the wicked, miracles all too easily merely frighten them temporarily. Miracles do not redeem their witnesses, for that we must look to Calvary.

Recall that mysterious encounter between Jesus and the arresting party. With just a few words, he gets an entire cohort of unbelievers to fall down spectacularly, but not a single one does so, suddenly converted, *in worship* of the "I AM." And the miracle, far from inspiring the believer Peter, in Christlikeness, to pray for the soldiers, instead inspired him, as we saw, to cut off the ear of Malchus. Neither does Jesus' restoring of the ear incline any of the party towards worshipping him. They continued with his arrest.



Rather than drawing people towards Jesus, miracles tended to scare even the disciples away. Philip Yancey¹³⁰ notes that the calming of the storm (see accompanying painting by Ernst Bartsch¹³¹) did not foster intimacy between Jesus and his disciples; rather it terrified them (Mark 4:37-41). The miraculous even terrified the Apostle John, the disciple closest to Jesus. Even *this* disciple whom Jesus loved, when encountering a vision of the

glorified Christ, as he recounts in the book of Revelation, “fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17) much like the Roman cohort. John desperately needed reassurance not *through* an encounter with the glorified Christ, but *because* of that encounter. No wonder when his “eyes were like blazing fire” (Revelation 1:14) and his face “like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Revelation 1:16).

How does Jesus reassure John? He reminds him that he was once dead and is the Saviour. He says, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:17-18). Jesus did not tell John anything he didn't know before. John just needed to remember and believe.



Those guarding at the cross, including the centurion, became terrified at the darkness, the earthquake and the opening of the tombs, but this did not prompt them to remove Jesus from the cross and try to revive him (see accompanying painting by Emile Bernard in 1896). When the Roman soldiers saw a glimpse of the power of Jesus they all *drew back* and fell down. It was “when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he *died*” (italics mine) that he was *drawn towards* him, saying, “Surely

this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). Fleming Rutledge calls this statement “the climactic christological statement in Mark's Gospel” noting that it “is not uttered until the moment of Jesus' death on the cross” since the gospel is arranged “to leave no doubt that the passion is the main event.”¹³² The miracles of Jesus reveal just that he is the Almighty Incarnate. It is his death that reveals that he is the Saviour. New Testament scholar James Edwards notes that before Calvary, Jesus “stifled speculation about his identity because all such pronouncements were premature. Not until his death on the cross can anyone rightly understand who Jesus is ...”¹³³ Humans long to look on the glorified Jesus because they do not realise that it is there where his holiness is terrifyingly displayed, while angels long to look on the crucified Jesus (see 1 Peter 1:12) because they glimpse that it is there where his love is reassuringly displayed.

Humans long to look on the glorified Jesus because they do not realise that it is there where his holiness is terrifyingly displayed, while angels long to look on the crucified Jesus because they glimpse that it is there where his love is and reassuringly displayed.

Surely, if the miraculous could have won for us our redemption, Jesus would not have needed to go to the cross. That Christ went through with the agony of the great non-miracle on Calvary puts miracles in their place. God calls us to a relationship with him, not with miracles, and if we are going to worship him for anything he has done, it is what he has done in Christ crucified that surely tops the list.

There is this joke about the Lord saying to John, “Come forth and enter with me into eternity.” He came fifth and won a toaster. The joke is so funny because it plays so ridiculously on FOMA, the Fear of Missing Out. The worry is that we might only be second class citizens and not go to heaven. But the Apostle John reassuringly says, “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the

Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5: 11-13). The Apostle Paul says Christ crucified “is the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24).¹³⁴ Between these Apostles the very clear implication is that if you have the Spirit of the crucified Christ, you have all that you will ever need for salvation. Eternal life is not something we look forward to when we are in heaven. Eternal life is a relationship we have with God now.

Getting high on heaven

On the other hand the sub-text in miracle-mongering is that Christ crucified is not enough. This is a slap in the bloodied face of Jesus. One particular expression of this genre is Christian publishers tripping over themselves to publish books by people who claim to have been to heaven. If you are into the miraculous, then a trip to heaven has to be the greatest venture. When last have you been? You haven't? Feeling left out? That is quite understandable. Trips to heaven are quite the rage considering the spate of books coming out on the subject. There is *Heaven is for Real*, *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven* and *90 Minutes in Heaven* to name just a few. By 2014, the first sold 10 million copies.¹³⁵ It tells of the near-death experience of the then four-year-old Colton Burpo. This is what the General Superintendent of the Wesleyan Church had to say about it, “Colton's story could have been in the New Testament-but God has chosen to speak to us in this twenty-first century through the unblemished eyes of a child, revealing some of the mysteries of heaven. The writing is compelling and the truth astonishing, creating a hunger for more.”¹³⁶

Those who know Jesus and have had children should know that there is only one unblemished Child in whom we can put our unreserved trust. Indeed, Colton's lively imagination has gotten the better of him. Take the following exchange between Colton and his father.

“Colton, which side of God's throne was Jesus sitting on?” I asked. Colton climbed up on the bed and faced me on his knees. “Well, pretend like you're in God's throne. Jesus sat right there,” he said, pointing to my right side ... Wow. Here was a rare case where I had tested Colton's memories

against what the Bible says, and he passed without batting an eye. But now I had another question, one I didn't know the answer to, at least not an answer from the Bible.

“Well, who sits on the other side of God's throne?” I said.

“Oh, that's easy, Dad. That's where the angel Gabriel is. He's really nice.”¹³⁷

According to Scripture Gabriel is merely an angel (Luke 1:19). If you are going to put an angel on God's left hand side should it not be the *archangel* Michael? (see Jude 1:9). But if anyone should be on the left, it should be the third member of the Trinity!

Consider what Jesus says. “... to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father” (Matthew 20:23) How can the Father be preparing a place for Jesus' left side when God the Father should be there? Remember that the writer to the Hebrews says, “ Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). We can avoid getting into a tizzy about who sits where by remembering something else Jesus said, “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Since God is spirit, he does not have a left and right hand side. Nor does he need a throne to sit on. The writer to the Hebrews is simply affirming the high position of Jesus.

It is understandable that at four years old, Colton does not understand metaphor. It is his pastor father that should know better. Instead of hanging onto his son's words, he should have smiled to himself and in time gently explained to Colton the nature of God. What is extraordinary is not the vivid imagination of children (Colton says Jesus rode a rainbow-coloured horse and people had wings and halos), but the naivety (this is the charitable interpretation) of the parents that would believe them. The unfortunately named Kevin Malarkey even says to his son, Alex, (whose book alleges that he, also, has been to heaven), “You are my hero and the person I most want to be like when I grow up”!¹³⁸

Alex would later retract his claim in an open letter to the publisher, saying, “I did not die. I did not go to Heaven. I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention. When I made the claims that I did, I had never read the Bible. People have profited from lies, and continue to. They should read the Bible, which is enough ...It is only through repentance of your sins and a belief in Jesus as the Son of God, who died for your sins (even though he committed none of his own) so that you can be forgiven may you learn of Heaven outside of what is written in the Bible...not by reading a work of man.”¹³⁹

Alex’s letter has more spiritual value than his entire book. It is striking that those who, at best, have only had a few minutes of heaven have inspired entire books about the details, whereas Jesus, the real expert (he said, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man”(John 3:13.) said so little. The contrast is revealing. We are not called to trust someone who went through a miraculous *near-death* experience, but a Person who went through a natural *clear-death* reality.

We are not called to trust someone who went through a miraculous near-death experience, but a Person who went through a natural clear-death reality.

The trouble with near-death experiences is that they confirm nothing either way. We need not assume that all claimants are lying. Scientific research is revealing that the brain becomes flooded with natural chemicals during a near-death experience. The effect is similar to a drug trip and explains why the experience is so vivid. Neurologist Jeffrey Saver and psychiatrist John Rabin explain, “Religious experience is brain-based. This should be taken as an unexceptional claim. All human experience is brain-based, including scientific reasoning, mathematical deduction, moral judgment, and artistic creation, as well as religious states of mind. Determining the neural substrates of any of these states does not automatically lessen or demean their spiritual significance. The external reality of religious percepts is

neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by establishing brain correlates of religious experience"¹⁴⁰ (italics mine).

So, brain-based religious experience establishes nothing. All experience is brain-based. It may or may not be grounded in reality. If there is an elephant coming towards me, it is my brain that causes my perception of it. The elephant also plays a role - a vital role. My experience is grounded in the reality of the elephant. If the lion is pink then my experience is merely brain-based and not grounded in reality. Experience does not determine external reality. External reality may or may not determine experience. This is true for all kinds of experience including spiritual experience. Reality is primary to experience.

Mere experience is untrustworthy. As we have already seen, from a human experiential point of view, Good Friday was Bleak Friday. Apparently Jesus was being destroyed along with all he stood for. The disciples were, to a man, downcast and dejected. But from the Father's point of view that Friday, as we have already seen, is the centre-point of history. While men were executing Jesus, the Father was executing justice and redemption. While men were broadcasting their evil nature, God was broadcasting his nature - his holiness, mercy, love and wisdom. It has been said that those with an argument are at the mercy of those with an experience. But those grounded in the crucified Christ are at the mercy of no-one.

If anyone had a miraculous experience such that there might be at risk of thaumatolatry, it was the Apostle Paul, who was "caught up to the third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2). He says that if he spoke about it, he "would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, or because of these surpassingly great revelations" (2 Corinthians 12: 6-7). Instead of basking in any glory that might have rubbed off on him, he brings up his third heaven experience just once, saying that he would rather boast in his weaknesses! And those who long for such an experience, would do well to remember that it came with a cost to Paul. He says, "Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Corinthians 12: 7). We do not know what that thorn was, but

whatever it was, he was much better off having it than having the thorn of thaumatolatry.

[The Nemesis of Naturolatry](#)

The Son of God believed that living things could point us to the Father. He said birds “do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matthew 6:26-27). This does not mean that Jesus believed that nature alone could unambiguously reveal God. He presumed a background of special revelation. Birds point us to Jehovah-Jireh - God as provider. So much for birds. But not all things are bright and beautiful. What about the creatures that we see as more loathsome than lovely?

A Monty Python song puts the matter in blunt relief:

“All things dull and ugly,
All creatures short and squat,
All things rude and nasty,
The Lord God made the lot.”

Theologian Ted Peters has a ditty that puts another perspective on God’s provision:

“There once was a lady from Hyde,
Who was carried away by the tide.
A man-eating shark
Was heard to remark,
“I knew the Lord would provide.””¹⁴¹

It’s relatively easy to relate birds to our loving heavenly Father. Predators and parasites are more baffling. It has been said, “If there's anything in nature that might call God's plan into question, it's the guinea worm”¹⁴² and “Are you carrying around some vestigial conviction that God is good, or that Nature loves you? We guarantee that our newest Schopenhauer Award

nominee, the Guinea Worm, will fix that in one easy lesson.”¹⁴³ Imagine a parasitic nematode worm of up to a metre in length living inside you (see accompanying image).¹⁴⁴ As they emerge a blister forms causing an excruciatingly painful, burning sensation.¹⁴⁵ The name for the disease it causes, dracunculiasis, means “affliction with little dragons.”¹⁴⁶ Symptoms of the disease include fever, nausea, and vomiting.



How do we square Benevolence with the bedbug, the Lord with the leech? It is vital to notice that the natural theologians above are jumping *directly* from God’s creatures to God’s character whereas biblical scholars have pointed out that “God feeds the birds *indirectly*”¹⁴⁷ (emphasis mine). Oliver Barclay summarises it, “This title ‘the living God’ is often used by the biblical writers to stress that God is active in the world ... To the biblical writers the processes of ‘nature’ that science is exploring today are as much the work of God as the existence of the world itself. It is he who sends the

seasons, as he has promised, so that when he is thanked for the harvest it is not just for the fact that there is the cycle of life that gives a crop, but that in his goodness this has happened once more. God is the Great Provider; hence the word providence.”¹⁴⁸

Jesus himself stressed this day-to-day providence of God, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working” (John 15:17). And the living God’s work is not *around* but *through* natural processes. Donald Mackay comments, “When Jesus asserts for example that God feeds the sparrows, he does not seem to imply anything extra to, or incompatible with, a physical explanation of sparrow-feeding. He rather suggests that when we have finished analysing it in mechanical terms, there is fresh sense to be made of the same pattern of events in a complementary way...”¹⁴⁹

As readers of creation, the natural theologians above are literalists - they infer from the existence of parasites that God, if he were to exist would have to be malevolent. They are naively reading the character of the Creator from his creation as if for God to be Creator he has to directly design each creature. If bibliolatry makes too much of the Bible as revelation, naturolatry makes too much of nature as revelation. All creation is God-breathed, but not all creation reveals God equally. Nature is not worthy of worship, only the Creator is. True, there is the repeated refrain over creation, “And God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1), but Jesus said, “No one is good—except God alone” (Mark 10:18). “Natural” does not mean an unmitigated good since an asteroid collision is perfectly natural as is a porcupine turd!

The cross exposes naturolatry

One of the most important biblical doctrines is that God is Creator. However, because the Bible also teaches that God is unfathomable, understanding him as Creator from simply looking at the world has its pitfalls and many fall into them. ““For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”” (Isaiah 55:8-9). Our concept of God as

Creator needs to be informed by his *clearest* revelation of himself. Though creation certainly reveals God ((Romans 1:20)), it is not his greatest self-revelation. Christ crucified tells us that we need to look beyond nature to really see the Creator.

““For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.””
(Isaiah 55:8-9)

This point is put into stark relief by asking the question, “Would it be possible for God to create something designed to slowly torture someone to death?” Bear in mind what the Apostle Paul said of God Incarnate, "for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities - all things were created through him and for him" (Colossians 1:16) Let us get very specific. Did the Father make that wooden cross on which his Son died? God seems to be in a dilemma. He cannot have made the very thing he must have made! God's creatorship would be diminished if he did not make the cross, but his holy character would be diminished if he did! Forget bedbugs, leeches and Guinea worms, the challenge to God's character is most acute here at the cross.

**God indirectly created the cross using wicked men.
They intended it for evil. God intended it for good.
We know this not because of human prowess in a
natural theology of the cross, but because it has
been specially revealed to us by God.**

We know that God in his wisdom has found a way to redeem us that fully satisfies both his love and his justice. So, should it surprise us that God in

his wisdom would find a way to make a wooden cross that fully satisfies both his creatorship and his holiness? God the Father has both created and resolved the dilemma through the cross. To see how, recall Acts 2:23, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." God *indirectly* created the cross using wicked men. They intended it for evil. God intended it for good. We know this not because of human prowess in a *natural theology* of the cross, but because it has been specially *revealed* to us by God.

Instead of deriving our theology from nature, we need to let the revealed theology of the cross shed its light on nature.

Instead of deriving our theology *from nature*, we need to let the *revealed theology of the cross* shed its light *on nature*. Theologian Ted Peters says, "What the theologian needs to do here is make a move from history to nature, actually to the history of nature. When we speak of the crucifixion of Jesus, we ordinarily think of it as a historical event. It is a human event, a political event. But, in dealing with evolutionary theodicy, we might ask, could the cross be a natural event as well? Could we apply what we learn about God from the cross to how we understand the natural world, and even how we understand human nature?"

Theologian-scientist George Murphy says it well, "Now if God is hidden in his supreme revelation [the cross], should we perhaps expect God to be hidden in the everyday occurrences of the world."¹⁵⁰ The trouble with reading design willy-nilly from nature, as Christian palaeontologist Peter Dodson points out, is that "If the Designer gets credit for all the good things, then the same Designer should be condemned for all the bad design and just plain malevolence in nature."¹⁵¹

**“Now if God is hidden in his supreme revelation [the cross], should we perhaps expect God to be hidden in the everyday occurrences of the world.”
(George Murphy)**

To see where reading off God’s designs from nature gets you, consider the case of a former atheist and minister of religion who came to faith after reading a National Geographic article on the exquisite co-adaptation between an orchid and a wasp-pollinator. To the minister it appeared wonderfully designed. It must have had a designer. That designer is God. If this sounds positive, consider that evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins writes, “My clerical correspondent of the previous chapter found faith through a wasp. Charles Darwin lost his with the help of another.”¹⁵² The trouble is the countless organisms that appear exquisitely designed to cause pain, horror and death. The wasp parasite *Odynerus* has one of the most grisly life-styles. The mother creates a cement cell, fills it with two dozen or so caterpillars and suspends her egg in mid-air from a thread. Unlike other wasps, she does not paralyse the prey caterpillars. Upon hatching the larva hangs from the thread. It takes a bite from the caterpillar and then shoots up the thread to avoid the thrashing of the victim. When all is quiet the larva will descend again for a second bite. The caterpillar is slowly eaten alive.¹⁵³ Surely death by myriads of army ants is a mercy by comparison!

Parasitism is not a fringe life-style. There are more parasites than free-living forms and they are very widely distributed in animal and plant groups. This indicates that they are ancient and not a recent consequence of the moral fall of humans. Far from being degenerate organisms, they are extremely well adapted and successful in their lifestyle. How do we reconcile parasitism with design? Charles Darwin in his characteristic sensitivity to the suffering of even the littlest creatures (he wouldn’t allow a worm to die a lingering death on the end of a fish hook) wrote, “I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God

would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae [parasitic wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.”¹⁵⁴

It has been said many times, and recently by evolutionary biologist Francisco Ayala in his *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion*, that evolution comes to God's rescue. Ayala says, the “design of organisms need not be attributed to the immediate agency of the Creator, but rather is an outcome of natural processes.”¹⁵⁵ Just as God used wicked men in achieving his salvation plan, so he has used evolutionary processes in making the extraordinary diversity of life and that includes parasites. Just as God cannot be held culpable for the torture and death of his Son and yet is our redeemer, so God cannot be held culpable for all the suffering and death in the evolutionary process and yet is our maker. Whether it is bedbugs, sparrow-feeding or human-redeeming, there is consonance between God's creative activity and his redemptive mission in Jesus at Calvary. The cross is both the model and the culmination of God's providential care. How can our loving heavenly Father allow Guinea worms to feed on us? The creature is certainly incompatible with the idea that God directly designed it for our good. But God didn't. It evolved from free-living forms.¹⁵⁶ As we will see, the Benevolent Creator revealed in Jesus had a plan for the demise of the Guinea worm.

The rot of religious naturolatry

It is by reading into isolated passages taken out of context that natural theologians manage to defend their program. Favourite verses include Romans 1:20, “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” and Psalm 8:3-4, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them ...”¹⁵⁷

This defence flounders for several reasons. First, these verses presume special revelation. The Apostle Paul presumes prior knowledge of Christ.

Paul says immediately prior, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”” (in Romans 1:16 -17). And Paul does not tarry with reasoning from the created order, but turns to the righteousness that “is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” (Romans 3:22). Similarly, David begins and ends with what the readers already knew about God from revelation, “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, 9). How pale the direct designer looks next to the Lord of Lords!

Second, Paul mentions creation in the context of judgment not salvation. Romans 1:18 says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,” The very best that religious naturolatry could do is to heap condemnation on those so persuaded. The creator arrived at through a theology of glory is, as Edward Schroeder says, “... the God of law, of judgment, of wrath, of condemnation, finally, of death.”¹⁵⁸ This is bad news. The good news is that the gracious Creator revealed in Jesus brings redemption.

Third, Paul is actually criticising the natural knowledge of God because it leads to idolatry. He says, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (Romans 1:22-23). As theologian-scientist George Murphy says, “Paul argues in Romans 1 that sin causes people to misinterpret evidence for God in creation and to attribute it to idols.”¹⁵⁹

On parasites and providence

Jesus seems to intimate something about the connection between parasites and providence. Before looking at what he said, let us examine the Old Testament passage to which he refers (see accompanying painting by Esteban March (1610 - 1668)).

“They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

Then the LORD sent venomous [actually fiery] snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.”” So Moses prayed for the people.

The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived” (Numbers 21:4-9).



What exactly were those fiery serpents? Based on the symptoms and geographical location, most parasitologists accept that these "fiery serpents" were not reptiles at all, but Guinea worms.¹⁶⁰ Humans contract the parasite by drinking unfiltered water containing larvae-infected copepods. The juveniles burrow into intestinal tissues and reproduce. The offspring are the

final-stage worms. It is the females that migrate to the skin. When the ancients used the term serpent or snake, we should not make the mistake of thinking they were being zoologically particular. The Greek Agatharchidas in the second century BC, long after the incident recorded by the Israelites, gave a description matching the symptoms of Guinea worm, but called the creatures "little snakes."¹⁶¹ Remember too that the Israelites lumped bats with birds (Leviticus 11:19). Since they are up to a metre in length, Guinea worms are longer than many snakes. We can understand if the ancients had trouble classifying it.

Attempts have been made to absolve the Guinea worm on the grounds that dracontiasis is unlikely to cause such a high mortality.¹⁶² But the "fiery serpents" had little accomplices. Guinea worms cause secondary infections such as tetanus and gangrene that are a grave risk particularly in a world untouched by the benefits of modern medicine. Also, the parasite may well have been less evolved and more dangerous in the past. (Parasites often become more benign since they do not benefit from killing off their host). And in defence of snakes, they do not typically go after people en masse. Parasites do.

A worm on a pole

If the Israelites were plagued by Guinea worms, then the bronze serpent on a pole suggested a treatment.¹⁶³ It was a revolutionary idea. The ancients would have felt despairingly helpless against the creature. The serpent wrapped around the pole gave people a simple way to deal with the parasite; you coiled it up using a stick. The serpent on the pole worked as a visual aid showing that humans could do something about disease. Unlike using say snake oil against gout, the stick is a demonstrably effective treatment. Through Moses, God in his mercy inspired the people against the disease and sanctified the use of medical tools to eradicate parasites. Though simple, the stick has successfully treated dracunculiasis since antiquity.

**“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”
(John 3:14-15)**

If Guinea worms did plague the Israelites, then what was Jesus doing allowing a parasite to symbolise him! He said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15). Is a parasitic worm really any worse than a snake as his representative? The traditional serpent represented Satan himself in the Garden of Eden. So how could a serpent represent the Son of God? It has been said, "...calling Christ our "healing serpent" offends us royally."¹⁶⁴ Either way we have a demonstration of the incredible humility of God. Martin Luther was able to say of Christ, "He must have the form of a serpent; but even if He were still more repugnant to the eye and resembled a devil or vile worm, ... I look upon Him as my Savior."¹⁶⁵

The parasite on a pole points us towards the work of Jesus on the cross. Jesus allowed the human race to treat him like a worm as prophesied, “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads. “He trusts in the Lord,” they say, “let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him”” (Psalm 22: 6-8). Jesus revealed once and for all that God is not impervious to human suffering, but was prepared to go through it himself. Just as the parasite was wrapped around the pole and died for the sake of the patient, so Jesus was tied to the cross and died for his spiritual patients.

But why on a cross? If God let Jesus die of old age, would his death have been any less efficacious for our redemption? In his wisdom, God chose Christ on the cross, a very public visual aid of the power of God's plan of redemption and the extraordinary extent of his sacrificial love. It worked.

To this day Christ on the cross persuades many, many to come to him to be forgiven, to find spiritual life and to do something for others. One person that was so persuaded was former USA president, Jimmy Carter, who said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "I worship Jesus Christ."¹⁶⁶ He and his wife Rosalynn founded the centre that has led the global campaign to eradicate Guinea worm.¹⁶⁷ It has been amazingly successful. The Guinea worm scourge is on the verge of being relegated to history. Cases of Guinea worm infection have been cut "from more than 3 million cases per year in the 1980s to just a handful per year"¹⁶⁸ in 2018! The remarkable thing about this story is that it has come about with a very limited budget and very largely by persuading people to use simple technologies and changing their behaviour.¹⁶⁹

Extracting God's plan simply from the origin of the Guinea worm or from nature in general is naive. It is trying to do too much without the cross. When Jesus mentions the serpent on a pole in the desert, it is to point us to a Great Plan. It is a plan that cannot be deciphered by merely scrutinising nature. And his plan did not begin and end with the origin of the fiery serpents, but continues right through to their demise. It most especially includes the demise of his very own Son so that we might have eternal life. Is a parasitic worm on a stick really any more ugly than a tortured man on a cross? Yet our loving heavenly Father has achieved our redemption out of the crucifixion. God is working to this day to make all things bright and beautiful and uses the ugly to do so.

The Scourge of Scientolatry

In a cartoon strip a husband, spanner in hand, is kneeling on the kitchen floor and looking under the sink. His very pregnant wife says, "Ok, stop for a minute and really listen. My water broke." You can see how this happens. The husband does not know too much about midwifery, but does know about plumbing. He uses his plumbing mindset to filter his experience.

Philosopher Mary Midgley says, "When the concepts we are living by work badly, they don't usually drip audibly through the ceiling or swamp the kitchen floor. They just quietly distort and obstruct our thinking. We often don't consciously notice this obscure malfunction, any more than we

consciously notice the discomfort of an unvarying bad smell or of a cold that creeps on gradually.”¹⁷⁰ To this philosopher, plumbing is about as mysterious as a plumber might well find philosophy. In stressing the need for philosophy, she takes for granted the necessity for plumbing. This is the interdependent outlook. To the independent, whatever one has in one’s toolkit will suffice for all things. It was aptly described by psychologist Abraham Kaplan when he said, “Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he encounters needs pounding.”¹⁷¹

**Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that
everything he encounters needs pounding.”
(Abraham Kaplan)**

The outlook can also be seen in Rodney in a Wizard of Id cartoon. Gwen sidles up to Rodney, presumably fluttering her eyelashes.

Gwen: “Look into my eyes, Rodney ... tell me what you see.”

Rodney replies, “The conjunctiva, the cornea, the iris, the sclerotic, the anterior aqueous chamber, the...”

Gwen (walking off in a huff): “Forget it.”

I have to confess lapsing into overtones of Rodney, the husband with the spanner and the boy with the hammer. In my enthusiasm for science, I have sometimes given my daughter, Sharon, more science than she wants or needs. She then complains that I am being “scientific.” She is not anti-science. I’m not sure whether she sees the earth as millions or billions of years old, but she is not fussed either way. For her it is, “Whatever.” She has other interests such as music, art, culture, language and, especially, caring for people. Scientolatry is to take the scientific outlook to

extremes. It is to presume that science is the only game in town or the most fundamental game in town to which everything else is subservient.

When my son Nathan was little, I once made a birthday-card that had him riding atop a *Tyrannosaurus rex* and which said “We love you, from Dad and Mom.” Now as dinosaur-crazed as Nathan was, he did not let knowledge about dinosaurs get in the way of knowing his parents. He did not say, “Sorry parentals. I'd like to believe you but there is far more evidence of the existence of dinosaurs than there is of your love for me. By my standards, I find the evidence of your love for me inadequate. By the way, *T. rex* was never contemporaneous with humans.” Fortunately, my son did not inappropriately bring his know-how into our relationship and was not too affected by it. Far from superciliously dismissing the card's sentiments as empirically sub-standard, he revelled in the attention that he and his interests were getting. If we value knowledge in terms of sheer quantity of evidence, then yes, the evidence for the existence of our love for Nathan pales next to the evidence of the existence of dinosaurs. But that is not the only way to value knowledge. There is evidence of our love for Nathan in the time and effort in making the card, but it is not the quantity of evidence that is so telling, but that it was lovingly communicated between persons.

Sadly, some adults do not get what my son understands. Evolutionary biologist Jerry Coyne wrote, “if one applies the same empirical standards to Christianity as scientists do to Darwinism, religion suffers: we have far more evidence for the existence of dinosaurs than for the divinity of Christ.”¹⁷² This is a strange comparison. There were many dinosaurs, but only one Jesus Christ. Dinosaurs merely existed; Jesus came to demonstrate God's love for us.

Scientolatri isn't humanly practical. Romance is vital for the human species to continue! By the way, to presume that romance is the same thing as sexual reproduction, is to fall into the same trap as Rodney and possibly the same consequences! Natural selection is so effective. It is going to seem

very weird, but as we will see, there are those that slip towards both bibliolatry and scientolatry at the same time.

A scientific sermon on the mount?

They would even try to extract science from the words of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount! Jesus said, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:22-23).

Physician David Demick correctly recognises that these verses warn against selfishness and greed, but then he goes on to say that this moral instruction depends on a natural phenomenon. “ ... the higher truth has no meaning unless the natural truth is also sound. Jesus' words specifically mention light in the eyes “filling” the whole body, implying a systemic physiologic effect for light perceived through the eyes ... developments in neurophysiology have shown that light sensation in the eye is indeed important for the healthy functioning of the entire body.”¹⁷³ Demick does not merely see the simple but profound words of a humble carpenter; he sees the discourse of a physician-scientist. The spiritually profound sermon of the Nazarene (see accompanying painting by Carl Bloch (1834–1890)) becomes the lecture of a physiology professor.



Demick is making Jesus into a type of Rodney saying, “Jesus Christ with the all-seeing eyes of the Creator, knew centuries in advance of modern science the incredible microtechnology that is involved in the mere opening of a flower, and the formation and coloring of its petals. Thus, he was able to say with truth and confidence concerning the flowers that “even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”” Demick thinks that one needs scientific knowledge to properly appreciate the beauty of a flower, but that fortunately, Jesus, being omniscient, had oodles of it. Demick may be cognisant in physiology, but he needs to yield to biblical scholarship. Commenting on the Matthew text, Dale Allison says, “The picture is not of light going in but of light going out. This accords with the common pre-modern understanding of vision, according to which the eyes have their own light (so e.g. Plato and Augustine).”¹⁷⁴ Demick has glimpsed not so much Jesus, but a projection onto him of his own scientolatriy. And by trying to extract more scientifically, Demick ends up with less for the soul.

The words of Jesus are no longer allowed to stand alone, independent. Instead, they must be undergirded by neurophysiology. He distracts the eyes of faith from a focus on Jesus towards a focus on a contemporary scientific field. Neurophysiology is a fascinating and successful field, but what a benighted place to look for light for the soul! Jesus says in the very next verse, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). He is calling us to focus our eyes on God. The Sermon on the Mount is about humans in relation to God, not physiology.

Good luck trying to tell David Demick, Jerry Coyne or Rodney that they are missing something. They have all these facts are on their side!

It looks ridiculous to us now, but here is what a certain church leader said at the time of Copernicus, “The opinion of the earth’s motion is of all heresies the most abominable, the most pernicious, the most scandalous; the immovability of the earth is thrice sacred; argument against the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and the incarnation should be tolerated sooner than an argument to prove that the earth moves.”¹⁷⁵ Notice the extreme bibliolatry coupled to the scientolatry. And notice how easily this unholy alliance can lead to atheism. Tell people often enough that the God’s Book requires them to believe that the earth is immobile, and is it any wonder that the scientifically astute come to reject him?

Another church leader, Cardinal Baronius, had a wiser outlook. He taught that the intention of Scripture, “is to teach us how one goes to heaven and not how heaven goes.”¹⁷⁶

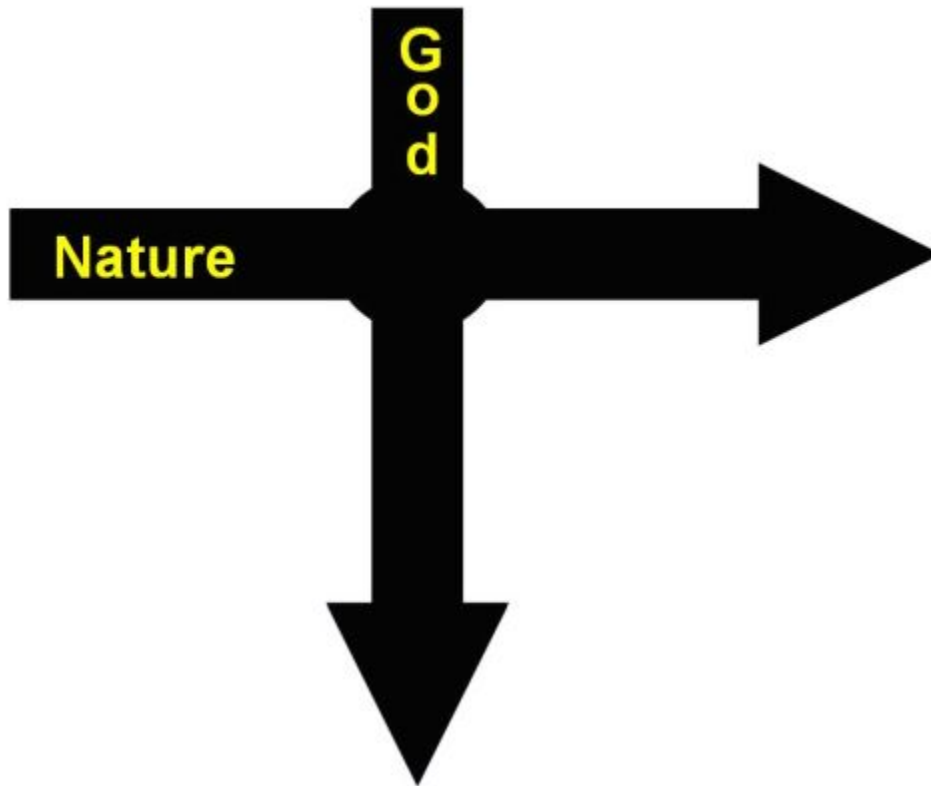
The cross endorses science

Perhaps it is scientolatry that is abominable and pernicious! As we will see, the clearest exposé of scientolatry, along with an endorsement of science, is at the cross as I have discussed more fully elsewhere.¹⁷⁷ To see why, imagine that the Bible was silent on exactly how Jesus died and we had to turn to a forensic scientist to establish the cause of death. (We know from the Bible that Jesus died at the hands of wicked men by the foreordained plan of God (Acts 2:23)). Let us give this scientist a name - Professor Richard. He goes

away, returns later and states, “We have carefully examined the cause of the death of Jesus and have located the spear that was thrust into his side. DNA on the spear matches the DNA of Jesus. Fingerprints on the spear match those of a certain Roman soldier. Other Gentiles have been implicated as well as Jews. Jesus was the victim of homicide.” Are you happy with Professor Richard's explanation? Have you noticed anything missing?

He hasn't said anything about God. Did I mention that Professor Richard is an atheist? He adds with glee, “I find no shred of forensic evidence that God was involved in the death of Jesus.” Are you still happy with his explanation? You should be. If God’s name appeared on the death certificate, the Father would be culpable for the death of his own Son.

The cross requires that forensic scientists be *unable* to find God as a natural cause and be able to find a total, complete, fully naturalistic (i.e. scientific) account of the death of Jesus. It is the cross that most acutely reveals both God's *concealment from* science and his endorsement of science. Allow me to put this as explicitly as possible. *There has to be an explanation for the death of Jesus that leaves God so utterly superfluous as a natural cause of it that his holiness remains thoroughly untainted by even the slightest hint of sin.*¹⁷⁸ There is, if you like, a cross-shaped pattern to Christ’s death. The cross compels us to radically distinguish the horizontal or natural axis from the vertical or supernatural one. Not the slightest deviation from the perpendicular will do. The horizontal axis is amenable to scientific investigation. Unless God chooses to reveal it, his vertical action remains forever concealed from mere human creatures.



Theologians have made this point repeatedly. For instance, philosopher of theology Thomas Tracy says that Schleiermacher insisted “that these two orders of causation can and must be kept distinct; it is always a mistake to offer explanations of events that mix or cross them. On the horizontal level, our explanations must exclude reference to God and appeal only to other events in the created order. ... On the vertical axis, by contrast, we must ... attribute all events to God's direct creative agency”¹⁷⁹ It is important to recognise that it is not that God was partially involved and humans were partially involved. To put it in the words of Thomas Aquinas, “The same effect is not attributed to a natural cause and to divine power in such a way that it is partly done by God, and partly by the natural agent; rather, it is wholly done by both, according to a different way, just as the same effect is wholly attributed to the instrument and also wholly to the principal agent.”¹⁸⁰ Theologian Louis Berkhof also warns against “the notion that the two [God and humans] divide the work - God doing a part and man doing a part. The

same deed is in its entirety both a deed of God and a deed of the creature.”¹⁸¹ Does this mean that the cross endorses atheistic science? In an important sense, emphatically yes! This is why the Christian historian Richard Hooykaas could claim that there is a “proper secularisation” of science.¹⁸² To use philosophical language, the cross requires that forensic scientists be methodological naturalists. When investigating natural causes scientists should never consider God as if he were a rival hypothesis.

Biophysicist Douglas Spanner said it very well, “The Bible provides itself, in effect, with a naturalistic explanation of the death of Jesus Christ - priestly jealousy, an individual's resentment, social unrest, foreign domination. Given these (and a few other common circumstances) the secular historian would be quite satisfied that he knew why events took the course they did.”¹⁸³ We should be far from surprised that a coherent naturalistic picture emerged. Indeed, for the events at Calvary to even happen the Creator has to make a world that operates consistently and intelligibly and it is that which makes forensics even possible.

There is a very common view among Christians that goes like this, “There are two kinds of events in the universe. There are events such as a flower blooming that are caused by natural processes and then there are miracles such as the resurrection that are caused by God. My ordinary life belongs to the first category, unless I happen to experience a miracle.”

Can you see how the cross shows what a very unbiblical view this is? Nature is what God does ordinarily. Miracle is what he does extraordinarily. Don't get me wrong. The death of Jesus is unique because here is God Incarnate dying. But death itself is common to all God's creatures. The cross shows that God participates in the ordinary even when that ordinary is full of pain and horror and death. If a flower were to bloom for the very first time this morning we might jump up and down celebrating an extraordinary miracle. Because it happens so often we do not give it much thought. We are too affected by the extraordinarily spectacular and so we think that God is absent in the regularity and ordinariness of life. There is a cross-shaped pattern to your life and mine. Even when we are in dire straits or dying, God is sovereign and accomplishing his good purposes. The difference

between Christ's death and ours, is that we can die in the loving embrace of the Father. "What a bitter thing is death! And yet how much easier is it for us sinners to die, than it was for that Holy One,"¹⁸⁴ says August Tholuck.

The cross exposes scientolatry

Now Professor Richard is not just a scientist who happens to be an atheist - he tries to use science to defend his atheism. So he adds, "God was not involved in the cross." Now he is going outside his expertise as a scientist and far beyond science's legitimate scope. He has left the horizontal axis and is trying to speak about the vertical one on the basis of his expertise in the former. Scientific methods are incapable of penetrating the deep things of God. To think otherwise is to make God less than he is and science more than it is. And in so doing, it is to lapse into the scourge of scientolatry. Professor Richard is being like a Rodney, a husband with a spanner or a boy with a hammer. He is implying that the only reality that exists is the one to which science has access.¹⁸⁵ He is doing a kind of inept theologising in the guise of science.

How do we know Professor Richard's statement is false? Not because science says so, but because the Bible does. After acknowledging the Bible's naturalistic account of the death of Jesus, Douglas Spanner continues, "Yet, the Biblical writers robustly affirm that there is a truth taking precedence over any naturalistic explanation - that this happening was both in broad outline and in fine detail God's doing, the central act of his plan for 'reconciling the world to himself.'¹⁸⁶ "What appeared to be a free concerted action by Jews and Gentiles," says Barrett, "was in fact done because God foreknew it, decided it, and planned it." As we have seen, Jesus was handed over to his murderers by "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). God's involvement in the cross has not been discovered by us through science, but revealed to us through Scripture.

Now with a cross-shaped view of things, let us consider a statement made by George Gaylord Simpson, the eminent palaeontologist, that is of the sort that upsets some Christians. He said, "Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind."¹⁸⁷ There is no need to be

appalled. His statement is theologically equivalent to saying that Jesus died at the hands of wicked men. It just does not tell the whole story. It only tells the horizontal side.

Forget about our creation for a moment. Is our *redemption* the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have us in mind? Your gut reaction may well be to say no, but the Bible says yes. The wicked agents that caused Christ's death did not have a clue about what they were doing. The Apostle Paul said, "None of the rulers of this age understood [God's secret wisdom], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). That God used blind agents to achieve our redemption takes nothing away from our redemption or from him as redeemer or that this was all planned from the beginning. To say otherwise is tantamount to worshipping a mere process rather than the Person behind the process. It is to lapse into scientolatriy. God, not his human instruments, sees the beginning from the end. From the human standpoint, the horizontal process leading to our redemption was a blind mechanism. From God's vertical standpoint, Jesus is the Lamb "chosen before the creation of the world" (1 Peter 1:20). God provides the meaning behind that mechanism.

Similarly, that God used the blind natural process of evolution to create takes nothing away from our creation or from him as Creator or that this was all planned from the beginning. To set up the truth of evolution as a potential threat to the Creator as the creationists do, is to make far too much of it and to lapse into a form of scientolatriy. What the spermethcal openings in the grooves of segments 9 & 10, and 10 & 11 of the earthworm are to evolution, evolution is not even to the crucified Creator. You can say that the openings are *through* evolution, but you cannot say that they are *for* it. In contrast, evolution, and everything else, is through Christ and for him. The Apostle Paul says, "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him" (Colossians 1: 15-16, Cf Romans 11:36). Similarly, the Apostle John speaks of Jesus as the One who is behind everything, " All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made."

(John 1:3). It is very clear that John's preoccupation was far beyond mere facts, even facts about Jesus. In "the Johannine view," says David Rensberger, "knowing the obvious facts about him is only the beginning of understanding his reality."¹⁸⁸

Evolution is merely a factoid next to the Truth Himself. Who knows how many universes he has created with different laws and constants! And, wonder of wonders, Christ is prepared to participate in the process as an evolutionary failure! He suffered and died prematurely without reproducing himself physically. While evolution allows us to make sense of a great deal of biological factoids, Christ crucified, as the centre of all reality is the meaning behind evolution, the Old Testament and everything else. So, so-called creationism is a species of scientolatriy because it makes the Creator a rival to evolution, whereas he is above it, beyond it, for it and a participator in it.

"The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." (Colossians 1: 15-16)

The cross speaks both to our creation and our redemption, showing that we do not need to choose between the vertical and horizontal axes, between wicked men and foreordination, between meaning and mechanism, between God and science or between creation and evolution. The choice is between science and scientolatriy and between creationism and the Creator.

But Simpson did not stop there. He added, "He [Man] was not planned." If God has concealed himself so effectively in our redemption, why should he have not done so as effectively in our creation? The methods of science, forensic or otherwise, are just not up to the task of penetrating whether humans were planned by a Creator. Science cannot speak to this one way or the other. A telescope is a wonderful instrument for peering into the

heavens. It is a terrible instrument for peering into heaven. The cross teaches us the place of science before God. An ant crawling across the surface of the Mona Lisa painting would have a better chance of determining whether the pigment patterns under its feet are planned. At least the ant and Leonarda da Vinci have in common that they are fellow creatures. Simpson is no longer speaking as a scientist, but as a theologian - a poor one. He is no longer teaching the science of evolution, but preaching evolutionism. And in trying to collapse the vertical axis into the horizontal one he has fallen for the scourge of scientolatry.

A telescope is a wonderful instrument for peering into the heavens. It is a terrible instrument for peering into heaven.

To some extent it even affected the theologian and paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin. Christian historian Reijer Hooykaas had to take him to task saying, "Teilhard becomes so excited about evolution that he even forgets that, according to his Christian belief, the greatest event in history is the coming of Jesus Christ, and not the discovery of evolution."¹⁸⁹

We saw earlier the comically sad case of Rodney's scientific foibles keeping him from romance. How sad it is when the condition keeps human beings from spiritual romance. I recall recounting the Gospel to a colleague with a distinctly scientific bent. He responded with a single word, "Fascinating." His reply indicated that he was so overtaken with the scientific frame of mind that he could not see Love before him. I do not recall the details of our conversation, but my dread is that his besottment with science mirrored my own. Perhaps in a vain recklessness I had tried in some way to make Calvary more appealing to his scientific disposition. Would that I had read George Herbert's poem "The Agony" earlier.

"Philosophers have measured mountains,
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,

Walk'd with a staff to heaven, and traced fountains
But there are two vast, spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behove:
Yet few there are that sound them; Sin and Love.
Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man, so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
His skin, his garments, bloody be.
Sin is that Press and Vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through every vein.
Who knows not Love, let him assay,
And taste that juice, which on the cross a pike
Did set again abroach; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like.
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I, as wine."

When the godless measure mountains, we should be quick to commend not object and not try to measure better in the defence of God. To do so is to fall into the trap of religious scientolatriy. Rather measure the span of Christ's love across the beam upon which he died.

The rot of religious scientolatriy

I am not the only one who has struggled with scientolatriy. Far from giving Christ crucified due prominence, some Christians seem to ignore him by design. Years ago, as coordinator of a fellowship of Christian academics, I received an email from a visiting Christian professor from overseas. He had a very impressive CV, longer than your arm. He offered to give a three hour-long seminar on "a Christian defense of God." I asked him for the manuscripts. He managed to mention the name of Jesus once in the final paragraph of the final seminar. The cross never came up once. It seemed to me that he was using the name of Jesus to rubber stamp his offering. We declined to make use of his services.

Then I discovered that he was giving the seminars at a local church. I attended. It was a barrage of science of very mixed quality in which

“intelligent design” was mentioned a lot, but the name of Jesus, nevermind the cross, was not mentioned even once! What message does this send to the seeker? Is it not “Jesus may be the founder of the Christian faith, but it's real foundation is science and reason?” What you have here is religious scientolatriy. The impression he created was that he was far more against evolution than he was for the God who revealed himself in Christ. I spoke to a smattering of people after each seminar. Every single person I spoke to was positive about the presentation. Some raved.

The Intelligent Design movement is only one contemporary expression of religious scientolatriy, but it has a great deal of public appeal and it is spiritually dangerous. Christian evolutionary biologist Joan Roughgarden said it well, warning that the phrase ““intelligent design” is pretentious. Who are we to give God an intelligence test, to measure his IQ? Saying that God is “intelligent” invites the sin of idolatry.”¹⁹⁰ She adds, “If intelligent design succeeds as a movement, Christianity will be hurt. Intelligent design says the facts of nature offer a better testimonial to God than the Bible does. It will substitute science for the Gospels. The weekly sermon will be about new data on the biochemistry of flagella, not on Jesus’ parables.”¹⁹¹ As I have written elsewhere, “The wooden cross of Calvary demonstrates that it is entirely possible for humans to intelligently design something without character - without, for instance, compassion or wisdom. And would you call the Mona Lisa intelligently designed? This is hardly fair to the artist who poured so much of his whole being into his painting. How much more does God do what he does with all of his being? We see this commitment most clearly at the cross - the bloodied God Incarnate was not some dispassionate intelligence. At the cross we see most clearly - in action - an integration of God's attributes and character.”¹⁹²

The bloodied God Incarnate was not some dispassionate intelligence.

*Mere Creation*¹⁹³ is the published proceedings of a conference on Intelligent Design at Biola University. With twenty mostly Christian academics as contributors and nearly 500 pages, the phrase “intelligent design” came up 95 times. 'Jesus' appeared merely five times and 'the cross' appeared only once – again to assert that intelligent design poses no challenge to it. The index had an entry for Chief Inspector Clouseau and crop circles, but none for Christ or the crucifixion. ‘Mere’ is right and ‘Creation’ should be in lower case. Without Christ, scientolatriy, including religious scientolatriy is merely a recipe for spiritual impoverishment.

The Epidemic of Epistemolatriy

It is all too possible, especially for the intellectually endowed, to fall in love with the knowledge of God at best, rather than in love with God himself. The danger is to lust after knowing as God knows rather than loving the One who knows it all. Now epistemology, the theory of knowledge, is a perfectly noble branch of philosophy, but to make mere knowledge the highest goal of human endeavour is to fall into epistemolatriy, or cognitive idolatry, as it has been called. As is the Bible and the Bronze Serpent, knowledge itself is a good thing and a gift from God. Even though Daniel and his friends were taught under the Babylonian system, the Bible says their “knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature” was given to them by God (Daniel 1:17). And the Bible stresses the importance of knowledge saying, for instance, “How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?” (Proverbs 1:22). Disparaging knowledge is unbiblical. However, the pursuit of knowledge is extolled in the context of choosing to “fear the Lord” (Proverbs 1:29). Choosing knowledge, even Christian knowledge, over the Person behind that knowledge is epistemolatriy. Theological knowledge is knowledge about God. While this is indispensable it is not sufficient,” said A.W. Tozer, “... It is not intellectual knowledge about God that quenches man's ancient heart-thirst, but the very Person and Presence of God Himself. These come to us through Christian doctrine, but they are more than doctrine. Christian truth is designed to lead us to God, not to serve as a substitute for God.”¹⁹⁴

“It is not intellectual knowledge about God that quenches man's ancient heart-thirst, but the very Person and Presence of God Himself.” (A.W. Tozer)

It is arguable that, as knowledge in general has increased, humans have increasingly succumbed to epidemics of this malaise. The palaeontologist, Stephen Jay Gould, said, “With copious evidence ranging from Plato's haughtiness to Beethoven's tirades, we may conclude that the most brilliant people of history tend to be a prickly lot.” The philosopher Bertrand Russell is additional evidence for this conclusion and worse. The historian Paul Johnson described him as, “an intellectual aristocrat who despised, and sometimes pitied, the people.”¹⁹⁵ For all his moral fervour, Russell true colours came out, when, in a candid moment he announced that “Darwin was worth more than 30 million ordinary people.”¹⁹⁶ All the indications are that Darwin would never have had this view of himself. For Gould adds, “Charles Darwin must have been the most genial of geniuses. He was kind to a fault, even to the undeserving, and he never uttered a harsh word – or hardly ever, as his countryman Captain Corcoran once said.” By Russell's presumption, a renowned expert on human development should have more value than a great many unaccomplished babies. And by his presumption, Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi experimenter, was justified in valuing the results of his research over the lives of his Jewish subjects. This is where loving knowledge over knowing Love takes you.

Actually, it takes you into cataclysm. The most cataclysmic person of the 20th century wasn't Josef Mengele, and it wasn't even Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, or Mao Tse-tung. As I document elsewhere,¹⁹⁷ the story of this most destructive individual is the story of genius and technical knowledge coupled to autolatry and a failure to love others. It is the story of intellectual egotism. He had six public schools and a university named after him. He graced the cover of Time magazine. He was an extremely intelligent man, served as president of a prestigious scientific body and was the recipient of many awards including more than a dozen honorary Doctor's degrees.

On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday he was appraised thus: “As symbol of progress ... as creator of ideas and builder of industries and employment— as inspirer of men to nobler thoughts and greater accomplishments— as foe of ignorance and discouragement— as friend of learning and optimistic resolve— [he] stands among the great men of all time.”¹⁹⁸ One biographer described him as the “last hero.” Another fawned that his impact “was so great that he became a sort of 'institution’” that “will live, even though often anonymously, as long as civilization endures.”¹⁹⁹ His name, Charles F. Kettering.

So much for the positive spin. His autolatry was evidenced in his incapacity to defer to others outside of his domain, having been described as “a man who did not believe in experts.”²⁰⁰ This was not quite true. There was one expert he believed in - himself. His biographer wrote approvingly, “An important aspect of his courage and confidence is the quite unusual tenacity with which he holds to, and stands up for his ideas whenever he thinks he is right.”²⁰¹ The sentiment was echoed by Alfred P Sloan, CEO of General Motors, “... his courage, his tenacity, his belief in the soundness of his deductions and his work have been essential ...”²⁰²

He has also been aptly described as “the man that poisoned us all” having “put his mark on our blood and bones, and within our cell structures and genetic material. I am referring to the burden of lead we all carry within ourselves, in quantities many times the natural background level... .” He “turned base lead into golden wealth and power. He used science against humanity. He feathered his nest by poisoning his fellow man.”²⁰³ He made many millions of dollars, lived to the ripe old age of 82 and set into motion the death of many, many millions of people - more than Hitler, Stalin or Tse-tung.

The cross exposes epistemolatry

That Christ came into history, suggests that Love Incarnate blesses the pursuit of historical knowledge. What the cross does not endorse is our coming to know God through that knowledge or through any humanly acquired knowledge at all.

It is striking that God Incarnate did not come with any of the props associated with great learning. He was born in a stable and worked as a carpenter. He spoke in Aramaic, the language of the common people, with a country-bumpkin accent, and not in high Hebrew. When he spoke, it was with simple barnyard parables even saying, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do” (Matthew 11:25-26). Jesus says this in the context of knowing the Father. The very next verse says, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). It makes about as much sense to say that one comes to know God through great learning as to say that it comes through great carpentry! The Apostle Paul was emphatic about this saying, “Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:20-25). Knowing God through the Son *excludes* knowing him through great learning. As we will see, nowhere is this more clearly seen than through the cross. It is the cross that decisively exposes epistemolatry.

The wooden structure itself is a product of attested knowledge. It is the Tree of Technical Knowledge. It is a diabolically clever design for prolonging suffering as much as possible. Jesus was caught between exhaustion and asphyxiation. If he used his legs to lift himself up, he could breathe but would tire. If he relaxed, his lungs would become pressed in and he couldn't breathe. What a preposterous idea that technical knowledge will be the saviour of humanity! Too those who can see it, the tree takes on something of the outline of a mushroom cloud. In a great irony, humans

have invented an instrument for penetrating into heaven and into the heart of God, but they were not trying to reach towards him. They were trying to defy him. Little did that carpenter who cut the beams of the cross know that his device would be used by God to redeem the world. That human knowledge was *unwittingly* instrumental in God's salvation plan, is this not a very illustrative repudiation of human attempts to know the Ultimate? The cross declares that we cannot reach up to God through our knowledge. God Incarnate condescended to reach down to us by limiting his knowledge and himself even to the point of death. "It is not a case," says theologian P.T. Forsyth, "of our limited mind reaching God, but of an infinite God reaching us soul to soul."²⁰⁴ The cross teaches us the place of our knowing before God.

**"It is not a case of our limited mind reaching God,
but of an infinite God reaching us soul to soul."
(P.T. Forsyth)**

A dictum popular in skeptical circles goes, "An extraordinary claim requires extraordinary proof."²⁰⁵ The One who sees the beginning from the end, could surely have accommodated these skeptics. Why didn't he? As we have seen, the death of Jesus is unique because here is God Incarnate dying, but death itself is common, even ordinary, to all of God's creatures. Furthermore, Historian Martin Hengel says "Crucifixion as a penalty was remarkably widespread in antiquity."²⁰⁶ executions by cross were relatively common in the Roman Empire. Why then, as we already saw, did God provide so much more evidence for Christ's death than for his extraordinary resurrection? P.T. Forsyth asks concerning the purpose of the New Testament, "Was it simply to convince the world that Christ had risen from the dead? If that were the grand object of the New Testament we should have a very different Bible in our hands, one addressed to the world and not to the Church, to critical science and not to faith; and there would not be so much argument amongst scholars as there is."²⁰⁷

Hengel says, “On this single point, even in research today, there is still a consensus: Jesus was executed as a result of a ‘political decision’ by the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.”²⁰⁸ Theologians Paul Eddy and Gregory Boyd agree saying, “... if there is any fact of Jesus's life that has been established by a broad consensus, it is the fact of Jesus's crucifixion” even among non-Christians²⁰⁹ New Testament scholar James Dunn says that the historicity of Christ’s death commands “almost universal assent”²¹⁰

So, between the crucifixion and the resurrection, it is the former’s historicity that is most firmly established. Why is this? Is it not because God is far more interested in how well we know *him* than how well we know? Since love edifies whereas knowledge puffs up (1 Corinthians 8:1), is there not a message in this that it is better to be conversing with the one who died to show us his love than to be conversant with all the proof of that love? He has provided the evidence and we can express our love to God by doing justice to that evidence. But, there is the danger that we fall in love with the evidence rather than with Emmanuel. He is not Omniscience analysed, but the self-emptying God who is with us. To return to an earlier question, this is surely one reason why, after his resurrection, Jesus tells Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20: 29). Earlier Thomas had just asked Jesus, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” (John 14:5). Thomas wanted to *know that*. The crucial matter is *knowing him* since Jesus replies, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

Many apologists, such as Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland, love to quote “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15) without bothering to quote the beginning of the verse, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.” The New Testament does not know of any apologetic outside of an emphasis on knowing Christ and him crucified.²¹¹ Moreland’s book *Love your God with all your Mind: The Role of Reason in the Life of the Soul* manages to mention the name ‘Christ’ a mere five times! ‘Crucifixion’ comes up even less.

Theologian Donald Bloesch laments that “The idea that reason is capable of proving the existence of God and many other truths of faith permeated both Catholic and Evangelical apologetics. It was not the reconciling action of God in biblical history but the universal idea of God or the design of God in nature that occupied the attention of the apologists. The miracles and biblical prophecy also played a large role in the apologetic enterprise, particularly among the more orthodox theologians. Here again it can be seen that the defenders of the faith compromised the faith by basing their case on the presuppositions of their opponents, that is, on the sole sufficiency of reason and natural law.”²¹²

It is striking that the Gospels provide no argument for how God’s love and justice are satisfied at the cross. God simply acts. Why is this? Is Christ crucified not saying that a final theology of the cross is beyond us? Is the cross not declaring that it comes before theology? With our creaturely limitations, it may well take an eternity to figure out all that happened through the cross. What is very plain is that dejected Figure on the cross loving the very creatures who put him there. As P.T. Forsyth says, “Our faith is not that one day we shall solve the riddles of providence, and see all things put under us, but that now we see Jesus ...”²¹³ Elsewhere he says, “Jesus was not a professor of theology. He did not lecture the people. He did not come with a theology of the Cross.”²¹⁴ Similarly, David Rensberger writes, “Thus the Gospel writer does not specify precisely how Jesus accomplishes his mission to reestablish a lifegiving relationship with God. And this is typical of John. This Gospel happily offers us stark contradictions: the Word was with God and was God (1:1); Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate (10:7-18). The purpose is not that we solve the puzzles, but that we live with them and among them, abiding in him.”²¹⁵ Indeed, we see Jesus facing his death as one deprived of knowledge, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). That cry of dereliction is such a far cry from a declaration of erudition. Could there be a more acute denunciation of mere knowledge as a route to the Father?

“Our faith is not that one day we shall solve the riddles of providence, and see all things put under us, but that now we see Jesus ...”

(P.T. Forsyth)

“Neither religious philosophy nor existence can provide the criterion for the genuineness of Christianity,” says theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.²¹⁶ Gerhard Forde goes so far as to say, “It is quite impossible to write ‘the’ or even ‘a’ theology of the cross. The attempt to do so would no doubt be just another attempt to give a propositional answer to Jesus’s cry from the cross, ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’ We can’t answer Jesus’s question. We can only die with him and await God’s answer in him. To claim such an answer would simply be to leave the actual cross behind for the sake of the theology in our books. It would be just another theology *about* the cross, not a theology *of* the cross”²¹⁷ (emphasis his). Philosopher Brian Gregor says, “The word of the cross is a scandal for philosophy because it is a limit that philosophy cannot surpass, an excess of meaning it cannot contain, and a power it cannot reduce to human capability.”²¹⁸

And it is noteworthy that Jesus never wrote a book. Wouldn’t it have been grand if he had left his memoirs? Would his autobiography not have topped even the Bible in sales? Is that not the problem? Would it not have given sustenance to the idea, so ubiquitously implied in books, even in theology books, that it is knowledge that will save humanity? There are two very different kinds of knowing. Christ crucified is a call to *know God* over knowing *about him*. The sermon on Golgotha, as propositional knowledge, is paltry, but to those who see Christ dying for them, he means everything. The essentials of what happened on the cross can be stated in a simple sentence composed almost entirely of monosyllabic words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). For Charles Spurgeon’s sermon “The heart of the Gospel”²¹⁹ he chose as his theme verse, “ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might

become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). All but two of its words are monosyllables. But the deep significance of the Gospel cannot be contained in all the books in all the world. It is “a subject,” says Edgar “that runs out into eternity in its vast consequences and meaning.”²²⁰ As we have seen, “Even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:12). And the impact of the Christ crucified on countless individuals can also not be contained in all the books in all the world. No-one can do justice to Christ crucified on paper. We have to leave Jesus on the cross as the supreme revelation. P.T. Forsyth

Two kinds of knowing

Our situation in trying to know God Almighty is a little like Shakespearean experts trying to know William Shakespeare (see accompanying image²²¹), the person. There are literary experts today who know Shakespeare's plays in great detail. It is conceivable that there may be those who know them even better than he did! For all that, do they know him personally? No, indeed they cannot. Did you know that Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, was likely illiterate? She probably could not compete with today's experts in knowledge about her husband's plays. But did she know her husband? Indeed, despite her relative ignorance, she knew him personally and intimately. One may be astute enough to understand the distinction between knowing Shakespeare's plays and knowing him personally. This does not, in itself, enable one to know the great author personally. Would you call Anne Hathaway a *learned* person because she knew her husband, William Shakespeare, personally? She had faith in her husband not because she has acquired knowledge of him through her noteworthy intellectual faculties, but because he loved her and she responded to that love.



To use another illustration, it is conceivable that a great geneticist could know in detail the entire genome sequence of a man. She has a great deal of knowledge, but that does not mean, of course, that she knows *him*.

That there is a distinction between knowing a person such as Jesus or a parent and knowing stuff has long been stressed by philosophers and theologians. The former is called “personal knowledge”²²² of “persons, their thoughts, feelings, and intentions” and the latter, “objective knowledge” of the “impersonal objective world with which the natural sciences are largely concerned.”²²³ The former is often considered inferior to the latter, but philosopher of science Michael Polanyi has argued compellingly that what we know in science is mediated through others and cannot be stated explicitly.²²⁴ P.T. Forsyth, to take another instance, writing in the early

1900's says, "The knowledge of a person who knows us back and acts on us is very different from that of a mere object of our knowledge. And the difference is still greater when it is a case of His knowledge of us being the source of all our knowledge of Him; of our finding Him being but our reaction to His finding us."²²⁵ Philosopher Paul Moser said it well, "So even devout theism can be idolatrous. For our own good, we cannot master God as just another undemanding object of human knowledge, as a manipulable possession, or as a meritorious reward. As we should expect, God is not ours to control; similarly for proper knowledge and evidence of God. God as known reveals God's knowledge of us and thereby seeks to transform us in love, with respect for our freedom. Our knowledge about God and our quest for it threaten to become idols if divorced from reconciling, filial knowledge of God as Lord."²²⁶ "Filial knowledge of God," he says, "would give us volitional knowledge of a supreme personal subject, or agent, worthy of worship and obedience, not of a nonpersonal object for casual reflection."²²⁷

**"Nothing in this life that could be imagined or received and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means of union with God."
(St. John of the Cross)**

We can know *that* God created the universe and *how* he did it - through natural processes such as evolution. We can even know something of the deep mysteries of divine action. And we can know all this without knowing in the most important sense of all - knowing the Creator himself as Redeemer. We all have to face our Maker and when we do, the question will not be how much we know, especially when we are standing before Omniscience. This is our situation as mere creatures trying to know an unfathomable God. It is worse than this because we are sinners trying to know a Holy Creator. "Nothing in this life that could be imagined or

received and understood by the intellect can be a proximate means of union with God,”²²⁸ said the Carmelite priest, St. John of the Cross, in the 15th century (see accompanying image²²⁹). The problem is so huge, that it cannot be solved by us. No amount of human prowess - intellectual, scientific, philosophical, theological, religious or moral would get us anywhere close. God can only be known by him revealing himself to us and he did through Christ and him crucified. If we could somehow prove God through our own intellectual faculties, God would be less than he is and we would become more than we are. Instead, God chose to be less even to the point of death on a cross.



Consider the following experience I had with a pair of street evangelists. I'm not sure what came over me. I was in an experimental and mischievous mood. As they thrust their tract towards me, I said, "Oh, but I am an evolutionist." They were quite taken aback and blurted out, "What about all those missing links?"

It was clear to me that they had never heard of the *Pelycosauromorpha*, or *Tetraceratops*, *Thrinaxodon*, *Cynognathus*, *Probainognathus*, *Diathrognathus* or *Morganucodon*. They made two statements by their response.

First, they were proclaiming that the primary issue is how much one knows not who one knows. Second, their statement told me that they did not know very much. If our conversation had ended there and I was a non-believer, I might have gone away reinforced in the belief that the most important thing is how much one knows. And I might have fluffed up my feathers in my superior knowledge and ended up further from God than when I started. It would have been much better if they had said, "We don't know about evolution, but may we talk to you about Someone we know."

Philosopher Laura Garcia avers that God's primary concern is that we know him rather than that we know stuff, "There are at least two things that God is after ... – that we should know Him and love Him – so it doesn't seem obligatory for Him to grant us knowledge ... the point is not simply that we should acquire some set of information, but that we should learn to deny ourselves, take up the cross of Jesus, and follow after Him, abandoning ourselves wholly into the hands of God. Religious experiences, or any other sort of evidence, that convinced us of the gain for ourselves of the religious life would not suffice here, since they could well lead to a self-seeking and calculating attitude toward God rather than the union of our wills with His that is our true good."²³⁰

Knowing through the Spirit of the crucified Christ

The Shakespearean analogy does not even begin to suggest the radical difference between knowing God *through the Spirit of the crucified Christ* and merely knowing about God through our own means. It is conceivable

that you could know in such intricate detail the political and religious machinations that lead to the death of Jesus of Nazareth to the extent of precisely and correctly apportioning culpability between Pilate and Caiaphas and between the Jews and the Gentiles. You could know all that without knowing that you yourself are culpable or knowing God is dying for you. Bishop John C. Ryle said, “You may know a good deal about Christ, by a kind of head knowledge. You may know who He was, and where He was born, and what He did; you may know His miracles, His sayings, His prophecies, and His ordinances; you may know how He lived, and how He suffered, and how He died: but unless you know the power of Christ's cross by experience,—unless you know and feel within that the blood shed on that cross has washed away your own particular sins,—unless you are willing to confess that your salvation depends entirely on the work that Christ did upon the cross,—unless this be the case, Christ will profit you nothing. The mere knowing Christ's name will never save you. You must know His cross, and His blood, or else you will die in your sins.”²³¹ August Tholuck says, “We stand and cry out against the wickedness and obtuseness of the Jews beneath the cross, and we do not recollect that, unto this very day, everything they did is repeated and acted over again by those who call themselves Christ's disciples. For to this day. Christians nail their Saviour to the cross, and if they pierce not his hands and his feet, still they pierce his heart. Do you inquire, who does this ?Ye do it”²³²

”

**“Therefore, when you see the nails piercing
Christ’s hands, you can be certain that it is
your work.”**
(Martin Luther)

Luther was emphatic about how to truly know God. Theologian Alister McGrath says, “For Luther, the sole authentic locus of human knowledge of God is the cross of Christ, in which God is to be found revealed, and yet paradoxically hidden in that very same revelation.”²³³ Theologian Rosalene Bradbury concurs, “Only in him is there true knowledge of God in Godself, and of the creature in relation to God. Only in him is salvation already worked out” and “the knowledge of God and the salvation of God are each hidden in and disclosed by Jesus Christ, supremely at the point of the cross ...”²³⁴ Martin Luther (see accompanying portrait) said it piercingly, “Therefore, when you see the nails piercing Christ’s hands, you can be certain that it is your work. When you behold his crown of thorns, you may rest assured that these are your evil thoughts ...”²³⁵ As Edith Stein said, “The only way of winning a knowledge of the Cross is by feeling the whole weight of the Cross.”



These are two very different ways of knowing, indeed. As Bradbury says, “The *theologian of glory* learns from natural methodologies that the knowledge of God can be reached speculatively; the *theologian of the cross* learns from the cross that God ultimately reveals the knowledge of himself in the crucified Christ. The theologian of glory looks towards the invisible things of God with the eyes of the intellect; the theologian of the cross looks towards the visible things of God with the eyes of faith”²³⁶ (emphasis mine). Moltmann says, “To know God in the cross of Christ is a crucifying form of knowledge, because it shatters everything to which a man can hold and on which he can build, both his works and his knowledge of reality, and

precisely in so doing sets him free ... It is not an ascending, exalting knowledge, but a descending, convincing knowledge.”²³⁷ “Man seeks to know God in the works and ordinances of the cosmos or the course of world history, in order to become divine himself through knowledge. If he sees and believes God in the suffering and dying Christ, he is set free from the concern for self-deification which guides him towards knowledge.” So, the theologian of the cross is set free from trying to use mere creaturely human intelligence to know the Creator. There is now no need for anxiety over whether one’s theology or science will be found to be suspect because knowing God has a completely different foundation.

Martin Luther explains why the cross works this way, “For because men put to wrong use their knowledge of God which they had gained from his works, God determined on the contrary to be known from sufferings. He sought to condemn that sort of knowledge of the things invisible which was based on a wisdom from things visible. So that in this way those who did not worship God as made known in his works, might worship him behind his sufferings.”²³⁸

To know God, not merely know about him, I need to know that it was me that put Jesus on the cross and I need to know him as the One dying for me. I need to know Christ crucified *because* of me and *for* me. It is my own epistemolatriy that put Jesus on the cross. Unless Jesus deals with my epistemolatriy, I will end up despising those I consider ignorant instead of nurturing, loving, teaching *and learning* from them. As mere creatures, we are all infinitely ignorant, just in different matters. Knowledge, as we saw, is a gift from God, but as Paul Moser points out, the lesser gift can get in the way of the greater Gift. “Thin theism, focusing on theoretical knowledge that God exists, can obscure the importance of knowing God as the personal Lord who calls us to a change of lordship, mindset, and moral direction.”²³⁹

Knowing through the cross is doubly God’s work of grace since it is both through Christ’s condescension to die for us and through the Holy Spirit who opens our ears to hear that silent voice. “Thus it is above all the Spirit,” says New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer, “that reveals to faith that

the “power of God” is to be found in the Crucified.”²⁴⁰ For theologian J. Louis Martyn, the fundamental contrast between the two kinds of knowing is knowing through the flesh and knowing through “the Spirit of the crucified Christ.”²⁴¹

The Apostle Paul is crystal clear on this point saying,

“Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, “Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, And which have not entered the heart of man, All that God has prepared for those who love Him.” For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:6-14).

The Apostle Paul was once that natural man. Festus took Paul’s great learning for granted when he said, “You are out of your mind, Paul! ...Your great learning is driving you insane” (Acts 26: 24). Paul had been proclaiming the Gospel in his defense before King Agrippa when Festus interrupted him. But Festus, as a natural man, got it wrong. Paul’s great learning was unable, through itself, to lead him to the “insanity” of appreciating the wisdom of Christ crucified. That “insanity” came through the grace of the Spirit of God.

The cross is indeed insane or foolish to the natural man. “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,” says Paul, “but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside”” (1 Corinthians 1: 18-19).

This is why Paul sets aside his great learning when he came to Corinth saying, “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Knowing through intellectual glory

What a travesty when God’s followers invert the divine order! J.P. Moreland, for instance, quotes the prophet Hosea “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). So far so good. But then he adds, “Note carefully that Hosea does not say the people have rejected faith. It is far worse than that. They have rejected the only appropriate ground for faith - knowledge.”²⁴² It is a very revealing comment. Knowledge is emphatically *not* the ground for faith. Grace is the ground for faith. What you have here is a very learned person, selling the mind and learning as the centre of gravity in the kingdom of God. If this were so, Jesus would not have said, as we have already seen, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do” (Matthew 11:25-26). Note carefully, that Jesus is referring to people who were very informed *about God*.

**“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,
because you have hidden these things from the wise
and learned, and revealed them to little children.
Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do”
(Matthew 11:25-26)**

Moreland then collects verses, postage-stamp style, that contain the term ‘know’ or ‘knowledge’ to support his claim. But one verse he collected, in particular, works completely against his claim. “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them” (Matthew 13:11). Why would God actively inhibit our acquiring knowledge if that was the grandest thing? Well, he is not inhibiting the acquiring of knowledge in general. He is inhibiting the acquiring of knowledge of *the secrets of the kingdom of heaven* in particular. And he does so because he requires that we do not earn that knowledge on our own terms. That knowledge is earned by Christ crucified and given to us on his terms and those terms are “by grace through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). The crucifixion, says J. Louis Martyn, is “the uncontingent invasion of God's grace on God's own terms.”²⁴³ Or as Paul Moser put it, “Filial knowledge of God is by grace, not by earning.”²⁴⁴

And why, if erudition was the grandest thing, would Jesus use the most unschooled, the little child, as the model for entry into the kingdom of heaven? “And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”” (Matthew 18:3-4)? The Gospel is deeply radical in providing absolutely no basis for salvation in ourselves. Our deeply ingrained pride in ourselves resists this as we saw in the immature Peter.

Another way to promote the theology of glory is to redefine faith to give it a distinctly intellectual flavour. Elsewhere Moreland writes “...biblically, faith is a power or skill to act in accordance with the nature of the kingdom of God...”²⁴⁵ To see where he has gone wrong take the term 'faith' in Ephesians 2:8-9 and substitute his definition for it. We get, “For it is by grace you

have been saved, through a power or skill to act in accordance with the nature of the kingdom of God--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.” We have a contradiction. Either we are saved by some prowess we have - then we can boast. Or, we are saved by grace - then we cannot boast. He cannot have it both ways. What he has done is that he has redefined faith so as to make performance a requirement for salvation and sanctification. For him, intellectual performance is particularly important. Trusting in one’s own intellect to live according to the kingdom of God is a species of epistemolatry. Moreland should have used his good mind to pick up the contradiction - that is the correct use for it. He should not have made it integral to living in the kingdom of God. And the philosopher should have wisely deferred to appropriate scholarship such as the *New Bible Dictionary* on the biblical understanding of faith that we saw earlier, “Faith is an attitude whereby a man abandons all reliance in his own efforts to obtain salvation, be they deeds of piety, or ethical goodness or anything else.”²⁴⁶

The cross on credulity

Now the call to faith is not a call to credulity and Scripture does not support anti-intellectualism. Some use the Bible’s call to faith to excuse credulity. But the Bible commands us, “Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding...” (Psalms 32:9) and Jesus himself commanded his disciples to “love God with all their minds” (Matthew 22:7) and to be as “shrewd as snakes” (Matthew 10:16). On the other hand Jesus praised God when the learned struggled with the kingdom of heaven, saying, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do” (Matthew 11:25-26). Is Jesus being inconsistent? How can the mind be a good thing when it can keep us from the kingdom of heaven? How can it be a bad thing when we are commanded to use it? What is going on?

I once got chatting to a camel-owner. He had some memorable stories about people falling off his camels. You might think that those with horse-riding experience would be the most likely to stay on the camels. It turns out that they were the least likely. Camels are not like horses. They behave

differently and unexpectedly for the horse-rider. Is horse-riding experience a good thing? Yes, ... for riding horses. For camel-riding it puts you at a disadvantage. A shrewd mind is like the ability to ride a horse. It is good for some things, bad for others. Those who try to achieve salvation through themselves and their shrewd minds end up falling on their behinds. Unless we have the wisdom of Christ crucified, we are just too egocentrically sinful to see that putting our faith in ourselves for our salvation is the most credulous thing to do in heaven and on earth. The cross declares that the human race is ridiculously credulous about the capacity of the human mind. It was human scheming that led to the murder of God Incarnate!

And so, as we have seen, the cross emphatically declares that we are saved, not through ourselves but through Christ. God has done it this way expressly so that no one can boast. This is why Jesus says, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). We are to use understanding but not make it ultimate. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). Faith comes first, then understanding in the kingdom of God.

**“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 18:3)**

However, to get on in the world a shrewd mind is imperative; now is not the time to be childlike. Jesus commanded his disciples to be shrewd straight after telling them He was sending them out as sheep among wolves (Matthew 10:16). We need our minds for many things such as to contend against evil (1 Peter 5:8), for prayer (1 Corinthians 14:15) and to correctly interpret Scripture (Revelation 17:9). The Bible expressly warns against being childish in such matters (Hebrews 5:11, Ephesians 4:13-14). I have heard it said that God is not looking for intelligent people to be his labourers but humble people. Actually, he has called us to be as humble as pie and as shrewd as a serpent. God has called us to be both. But most

importantly for entry into the kingdom of heaven, he has called us to have the trust of a child in Christ and him crucified.

Epistemology in the Old Testament

The insight over the spiritual recklessness of making one's ambition the knowledge of God rather than knowing God did not originate with the New Testament. It is as old as Genesis. The Old Testament both warns us against pursuing knowledge of God independently of knowing him and it foreshadows knowing him in Christ crucified as the way to truly know him. What exactly was the sin of Adam and Eve? Now someone might say, "It is the disobeying of God by eating the fruit." This is true, but does not get to the heart of the matter. Recall that God had said, "but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die" (Genesis 2:15) and the serpent had said, "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:4). What could possibly be wrong with being like God and knowing the difference between good and evil? And does the Apostle Paul not say that we are "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness?" (Ephesians 4: 24). What is going on?

Look closely at the two passages and you will notice that the serpent tempted the couple to become like God in an *attribute* (knowledge) whereas for Paul we are to be like God in his *character* (righteousness and holiness). Secondly, Satan tempted the couple to obtain that knowledge independently of their relationship with God whereas Paul says that God is the one who creates us to be like him. The couple's sin was twofold. They were headed in the wrong direction and they were trying to get there the wrong way! These distinctions were lost on the tele-evangelist I once heard endorsing greed by exhorting his congregation to be imitators of God in his possessions! I kid you not.

We are to aim to be like God in his moral qualities not his almighty powers, and we are to depend on him not our own efforts in doing so. We are to be *Christ-like* and to be so *because* of Christ. His grace is crucial. It is a grace ultimately achieved for us by Jesus on the cross and alluded to from the

very beginning. The apostle Paul explains (Galatians 3:16) that the Lord is speaking of Jesus when he says to Satan, “he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). The choice is between going it alone in eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or depending on God in eating from the tree of life (Genesis 2:9) that prefigures the cross of Christ. “Christ Himself is the real Tree of Life;” says theologian Otto Zoeckler, “the prototype of that wondrous tree from Whose salvation-bringing sight and enjoyment mankind had been removed in consequence of sin, without ever being able to lose the memory of it.”²⁴⁷

Sigmund von Birken similarly picks up on the foreshadowing in a poem (see accompanying image of a copper engraving from Catharina von Greiffenberg’s ninth meditation).

“In Eden, the first garden, a snake and a tree
deprived us of our life.
The serpent, armed with the might of venomous sin,
to slay us left the tree.
The sins, its brood, they glitter, bright from fiery hell:
to torment and to bite
the Christian company, the camp of Israel,
their souls grimly to smite.
What then would God’s Son set out to do? From this tree
He thus a cross does fashion.
Like a worm, he hangs on this wood for all to see:
just think! ’Tis no illusion.
In the heat of God’s anger He was cast like ore
to make the purple worm.
The nature of the serpent, all our sins, fl owed o’er
Him in His martyr’s storm.”²⁴⁸



The thread is there throughout the Old Testament. For instance, the prophet Jeremiah says, “This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom ... but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 9: 23-24).

Apart from being ridiculously impossible to emulate an infinite God in say his omniscience and omnipotence and possessions, such ambitions have a corrupting influence both on us and on angels. Even pursuing biblical knowledge, as good as that is, does not, in itself, bring eternal life as we

have already seen. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5: 39-40). So, those who substitute knowledge about God for knowing him are not pursuing spiritual life, but death. And they are the most spiritually dangerous people on earth. Jesus says of them, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15). Loving knowledge over knowing Love is a rampant and extremely debilitating spiritual disease. The cure is in Christ crucified. How can I possibly hang onto my humanly acquired knowledge of God when I hear God Incarnate cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). And that cure in the Physician was long foretold. “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5).

**“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.”
(Matthew 23:15)**

[The Cruciality of the Cross](#)

The cross, as we have seen, is the measure of the world, including us, and it is the measure of God. The cross is crucial. This cruciality is illustrated by the story of the cross-eyed judge.

The story of the cross-eyed judge

The cross-eyed judge faced the defendant in the dock and said with a withering look, “guilty.” The defense counsellor to the defendant's right sees the judge looking at him, hangs his head, accepts the verdict and is led

away to be executed. The defendant is released scot-free. The prosecutor looks on, aghast. The cross-eyed judge is God the Father. The defense counsellor is Jesus. The prosecutor is Satan. The defendant is you. When you put your faith in Jesus, the cross-eyed Father only sees Christ crucified and that the penalty for your sin was paid for by his Son. He cannot see your guilt. He only sees the imputed guilt of his Son. He does not hear the railing accusations of Satan against you. He only hears the silent voice of the cross declaring that you have been made innocent of all charges. Far from being impartially blindfolded, the judge was prejudiced against the defense counsellor from the very outset! It was all arranged by the Godhead in eternity past.

The story of the cross-eyed judge is merely an illustration. There is no intention to lean towards any particular “theory” of the atonement. It only hints at an aspect of the grandeur of what Christ crucified did. Nevertheless, that God is cross-centred is not some new-fangled development. God has always been staurocentric to use the theological term. He has always been looking upon Christ and what he would do through the crucifixion for the human race. As the old adage goes, “The New Testament is in the Old Testament contained, and the Old Testament is in the New Testament explained.” And God has pointed towards the cruciality of the cross throughout the Old Testament as we have already seen in Genesis 22.

Consider, to take another instance, what the prophet Zechariah says,

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?”

Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, “Take off his filthy clothes.”

Then he said to Joshua, “See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.”

Then I said, “Put a clean turban on his head.” So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by” (Zechariah 3: 1-5).

Who is the Angel of the Lord or, as some translations have it, the messenger of YHWH. Old Testament scholar Eugene Merrill says, “the messenger of YHWH is YHWH as He discloses Himself to human beings.”²⁴⁹ In other words, he is the pre-incarnate Christ. Old Testament scholar Mark Boda says that this “vision of God’s grace in Zechariah 3 foreshadows the work of Christ to provide cleansing for all and access to God’s holy presence.”²⁵⁰ The scene is of a court-room in the divine council (Cf Isaiah 6). Old Testament scholar Meredith Kline explains what is going on in what he calls the Christological Climax. “Here at the center of the visions stands the Christ-figure, present as the Angel of the Lord and typified by Joshua in his reinvestment as royal highpriest. And here Messiah's mission of salvation is set forth in the radical terms of its hidden, underlying dimension as a decisive encounter with Satan. The contention revolves about the Lord's claim to the sinful but chosen people represented by Joshua (the Joshua still in his defiled garb at the outset of the vision). And the outcome of the ordeal between the messianic Servant and the diabolical serpent turns on the question of Joshua's fate in the divine judgment: will this representative sinner be condemned and abandoned to the dominion of the devil or will he be justified and consigned as a holy minister to the service of the God of glory?”²⁵¹

Later in the same chapter the Lord Almighty says, “Listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch” (Zechariah 3: 8). Who is this Branch? Rex None says that “the term Branch has messianic significance in the prophetic literature.”²⁵² He is described elsewhere, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit

of the knowledge and fear of the Lord - and he will delight in the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1-3). The Branch is another reference to Jesus Christ.

Still later in Zechariah the Lord Almighty says, “See, the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone, and I will engrave an inscription on it,” says the Lord Almighty, “and I will remove the sin of this land in a single day”

(Zechariah 3: 9). What is this stone? As we have already seen, and as Merrill avers, “Stone as a messianic symbol is also well known throughout the Bible, for the foundation upon which God's future Temple of redemption and dominion is none other than the messianic figure of whom this scene provides a foreshadowing.”²⁵³ The Stone is yet another reference to Jesus Christ.

Kline says, “Comparison of Zechariah 3 and Revelation 12 constrains recognition of their common rootage in Genesis 3.” Recall that in the beginning God says to Satan “he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). In Revelation a loud voice from heaven says, “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony ...” (Revelation 12:10-11).

So, the question that Kline raised is answered in the affirmative. The King who comes

“righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9) will indeed triumph over Satan. Joshua *will* be justified and not only him, but all the people of the land that he represents. Says Merrill, “Joshua, “snatched from the fire” by divine grace, is a prototype of the whole nation, the “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6), that will also finally achieve cleansing and forgiveness.”²⁵⁴ This foreshadows the cleansing of all of us who are children of God through faith.

A bloody contract

Yet another foreshadowing of the cross in the Old Testament is found in a very ancient, strange and portentous ritual. Everything about the occasion declared that it was a serious and solemn affair. Under God's command Abram (see accompanying illustration²⁵⁵), who will be later renamed Abraham, kills some animals, cuts them in half and separates the pieces. Then,

“As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land ...” (Genesis 15:12-18).



What is happening? What we have here was the making of a bilateral contract or covenant in blood between two parties in ancient near Eastern style. Whereas we would use a pen to sign a contract, Akkadians such as Abram would use a knife and “cut a covenant.” Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser explains that the “two persons entering into the agreement would ceremonially walk between the pieces, saying in effect, “If I fail to keep the parts of this agreement, may it happen to me what has happened to these animals.””²⁵⁶ It was as if the parties were walking a gauntlet of foreboding warnings about what would happen if any party broke the agreement. The prophet Jeremiah describes the stringently binding nature of

the covenant, “Those who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, I will deliver into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals” (Jeremiah 34:18-20).

Is there any way of avoiding the dire consequences of violating this covenant? There is! And it is apparent right there between the bloody pieces in the ritual. Kaiser’s book is pointedly entitled *The Christian and the “Old” Testament* (note the inverted commas). As we will see, this old covenant is very much about the grace of the “New” Testament.

Just as the bloody contract with Abram was not in words, so Christ signed his contract with the world in blood and silence.

The smoking furnace and the flaming torch are the two parties in a bilateral agreement. Fire is a common motif for God in the Old Testament. The smoking furnace represents God, but who is the flaming torch? It should be Abram, but it cannot be because he is in a deep sleep. The flaming torch is surely the “Light of the world,” yet another pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. The pre-incarnate Christ (or Yahshua to use his Jewish name) is walking down the aisle instead of Abram and the human race. As David Perry explains, “Yahshua was Abraham's substitute. His proxy. Yahshua was willing to take on himself the death penalty for Abraham and his descendants if they ever broke this Genesis 15 covenant.”²⁵⁷ The pre-incarnate Christ walks down the aisle knowing full well that if Abram reneges on the covenant (and he will), he himself will have to pay the price and be sacrificed in Abram’s stead (and he will). If there is any dying to be done, God is declaring, “then I will do it!” Just as the flaming torch was surrounded by darkness, so the Light of the World would be surrounded by

darkness at his crucifixion. “When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (Mark 15:33). Just as the flaming torch walked down the aisle, the Light of the World would walk the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha. Just as the bloody contract with Abram was not in words, so Christ signed his contract with the world in blood and silence. Just as the animals were cut in sacrifice, Christ was “pierced for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5) as the once and for all sacrifice (Hebrews 10:10). Surely Jesus must have quoted Isaiah to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus,

“He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;” (Isaiah 53: 3-5).

The covenant is only bilateral between the cross-eyed Judge and the Defence Counsellor. Between God and the human race, the covenant is *unilateral* since the defendant is fast asleep. The Jewish Christian theologian Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains why, “It was not God and Abram that walked between these pieces of the animals, but it was God alone Who passed between the pieces of the animals, which rendered the covenant unconditional. Abram’s lack of participation emphasizes the unconditionality of this particular covenant. So Abram did not become an active participant in the signing and sealing of the covenant as such; he was only the recipient of the covenant and the covenantal promises. It meant that no matter how often Abram failed (and he will fail in the next chapter), and no matter how often his seed, the Jewish people fail, the Abrahamic Covenant cannot be rendered null and void.”²⁵⁸ Kaiser concurs, “The

agreement that God makes—with regard to salvation, with regard to Abraham's son, with regard to the land, and with regard to the gospel itself—is not based upon if we keep up or if we do or if we maintain our side of the bargain. That would not be grace; that would be merit.”²⁵⁹

The cross is the measure of God

The cross sheds light on many things, but most importantly, it sheds light on God himself. We can know about God's power through miracles. We can know about him through the Bible, but for us to know God required the cross. Jesus said in his self imposed limitations, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). But it wasn't possible. The cross was necessary, both for us and for God.

**If the cross is the measure of the world,
it is even more the measure of God.**

If the cross (see accompanying sketch by St. John of the Cross) is the measure of the world, it is even more the measure of God. Even while God was redeeming us, he was providing, as Jesus declared and as we have already seen, the greatest revelation of himself. The cross tells those who have ears to hear it, that he who is all-powerful is helplessly in love with us. It tells those who have ears to hear it, that he who is all-loving is all-demanding in justice. It says that the King of Kings is the Prince of Peace. The Lord of Lords is as humble as pie. The all-wise one is as innocent as a dove. The God of all-knowing wants to sup with us. “So when we look at the cross,” says theologian John Stott, “we see the justice, love, wisdom and power of God. It is not easy to decide which is the most luminously revealed, whether the justice of God in judging sin, or the love of God in bearing the judgement in our place, or the wisdom of God in perfectly combining the two, or the power of God in saving those who believe. For the cross is equally an act, and therefore a demonstration, of God's justice,

love, wisdom, and power. The cross assures us that this God is the reality within, behind and beyond the universe.”²⁶⁰



If you are merely looking to have the intellect massaged, the self celebrated or the ear tickled, you are spoilt for choice in the current age. There are myriads of voices clamouring for attention to give you what you want - for a price of course, but there is only one truly significant voice not even reaching a whisper. It is raised not in volume, but on a cross in suffering. If you are searching for something deeper that will truly satisfy, then hear the voice of the cross saying, in effect, “be still and know that I am God.” Jesus said this many times, but he said it most clearly through the cross.

And so it is that countless through the ages who have heard the last gasps of God dying for them, have had their souls breathtakingly overwhelmed. Thomas Dekker heard the gentleman. He writes, “The best of men that e'er

wore earth about Him was a sufferer; A soft, meek, patient, humble, tranquil spirit; The first true gentleman that ever breathed.”²⁶¹ Bernard of Clairvaux heard love, “To shame our sins He blushed in blood; He closed His eyes to show us God; Let all the world fall down and know that none but God such love can show.”²⁶² Frederic Huntington likewise heard love, “What is the real triumph of Calvary? Is it not the triumph of that love wherewith he loved us before we loved him? “God so loved the world.” We cannot hurt God’s holiness. We cannot crucify his love.”²⁶³ Edward Young heard justice, “Thou, rather than thy justice should be stain’d. Didst stain the cross.”²⁶⁴ Edward Seelye heard inspiration, “We challenge the universe to produce a set of motives suited to move and stir the very depths of man’s whole moral nature, like those which emanate from the doctrine of salvation by the Cross.”²⁶⁵ Richard Crashaw heard the sure hope of the resurrection, “O strange mysterious strife, Of open death and hidden life! When on the cross my kind did bleed. Life seemed to die, death died indeed.”²⁶⁶ Simone Weil heard the presence of God, “... come into the very presence of God. It is at the intersection of creation and its Creator. This point of intersection is the point of intersection of the arms of the Cross.”²⁶⁷

“We cannot hurt God’s holiness. We cannot crucify his love.” (Frederic Huntington)

The cross is crucial for you

If the all-sufficient One denied himself to the point of death for us, how can we respond by worshipping self? If the Priest of priests went unceremoniously to his death, how can we respond by trusting in our own religiousness? If the all-knowing One limited himself in Christ so that we could know him, how can we respond by worshipping knowledge? If the all-wise One was prepared to look foolish for us to the point of humiliation on a cross, how can we respond by trusting in our own wisdom? If the all-powerful One is prepared to be disabled for us so as to be unable to remember our sin (“Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more”

(Hebrews 10:17)), how can we respond by trusting in our own strength? If the Holy One became sin on our behalf, how can we respond by trusting in our own attempts at sinlessness? We do all these things despite what Jesus has done for us. Grace moves us and it is always to grace of the cross that we must return. As we mature in our walk with Christ it is crucial to go back to original grace since a little knowledge easily goes to our head, a little accomplishment easily boosts our ego and a little holiness easily affects our spirit.

The crucial issue for you is not, "Do you believe that there is a God? The demons believe so and shudder" (James 2:19). The crucial issue for you is not, "Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?" Peter believed so and still denied his Lord three times. The crucial issue for you is, in the words of Horatius Bonar, "What think you, then, of the blood of Christ?" (p. 41) More precisely the issue is, "Do you believe that *you* put Jesus on the cross?"

Did Peter's idolatry not put Jesus on the cross as much as the Sanhedrin's religiolatry did? Did your idolatry not put Jesus on the cross as much as the Roman's idolatry did? The cross is silently declaring it. Do you hear it? Your idolatry may come in guises that differ from the ancients, but it is idolatry nevertheless. It may have a Christian veneer, a scientific aspect and an intellectual demeanour, but it puts Jesus on the cross no less than our forbear's idolatry did. Do you hear the cross declaring your guilt? If so, do you hear the cross redeeming you? We have seen that God the Father has his eyes on the cross. What about you? The very cross that convicts you also saves you. God wants the cross to convict you in order to save you. Is your faith in Christ and him crucified? Faith in anything else is idolatry and a bitter curse as Peter experienced deeply whereas faith in him is life and it eternal! These words of Peter are true of these who have put their faith in Christ. "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1: 8-9).

Disciples of Christ and him crucified will see this book for what it is. It is a hack by a hacker. It is a klutzy attempt at cobbling together something towards fathoming the deep meaning of the cross. There are more things and more than things in Christ crucified than are dreamt of in my rambling attempts to penetrate the significance of that deepest of mysteries and most profound of revelations. My soul has met Someone doing something that I cannot begin to articulate adequately in words. If you are not a disciple of Christ and him crucified, all I can hope is that you have been drawn towards the foot of the cross to consider becoming one yourself.

May the shadow of the cross be a great light to us over all things. May the Holy Spirit keep us ever listening to the silent voice of the cross exposing our numerous idolatries. May he give us an ever deepening awareness of the complete forgiveness we have been given for all of them and keep us ever growing in dependance on our Lord and Saviour. And may he express the character of Christ in our being to the honour and glory of our Father. Amen.

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Notes

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