

# The Dialectic between Creation and Crucifixion

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## KEY WORDS

| Creation and Crucifixion | Dialectical Theology | Theology of the Cross |  
| Attributes of God | Martin Luther | Karl Barth |

## ABSTRACT

Previous conceptions of the attributes of God describe Him as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. These conceptions are based upon the human traits of ability, knowledge, and presence, extended *ad infinitum*. They are thus unacceptable by Luther's theology of the cross. Drawing upon the Psalmist's idea of creation being the handiwork of God and Luther's assertion that God reveals Himself at the cross of Christ alone, I suggest a different attribute of God, one based upon the chasm between the gloriousness of creation and the lowliness of the crucifixion, utilizing the two as extremes of a dialectic between which God is to be known.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Von Loewenich states that "the knowledge of God derived from the works of creation [is] opposed to that which arises at the cross of Christ."<sup>1</sup> According to Martin Luther's theology of the cross, the cross is where God chooses to reveal a part of himself.<sup>2</sup> It is not in creation that He chooses to do so and we cannot understand creation as a proper locus of God's revelation.<sup>3</sup> Despite creation arguably leading to the realization of order and design, it merely points to God while, according to Luther, only at the crucifixion is God truly revealed.<sup>4,5</sup> Psalm 19 supports this notion: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork,"<sup>6</sup> thus affirming the awe and

admiration one may feel when confronted with astrophysical findings of the cosmos and theories about its beginning. However, Luther reminds us that God chooses to convey knowledge of Himself in a completely different environment, one which induces completely different feelings and impressions, and is rooted in pain, misery and suffering.<sup>7</sup> He names several reasons for God choosing to reveal Himself solely at the cross of Christ:<sup>8</sup>

A. The creature could not survive a full disclosure of the nature of God. Recalling the story of Moses on mount Sinai, the cross functions as "God's back," which He revealed to Moses.<sup>9</sup> God alone can know who and what God is. This knowledge cannot be understood naturally by the creature, but only as God

1 Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 21.

2 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 204,213.

3 Luther, *Luther Works*, 31:41.

4 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 203.

5 Von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 113.

6 Psalms 19:1, ESV.

7 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31:52.

8 McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 214.

9 Exodus 33:18-23.

bestows it.<sup>10</sup>

**B.** The true theologian needs to depend upon God for the location of divine disclosure. God needs to direct the theologian to the cross of Christ as the place where this knowledge of God is revealed indirectly, solely through Jesus Christ and His suffering on the cross.<sup>11</sup>

**C.** The crucicentric position that the knowledge of God is made available only by the cross of Christ means that the cross is “the final, decisive and normative locus of the revelation of God.” The crucifixion is to receive precedence over all other Christian events, including Christ’s resurrection and incarnation.<sup>12</sup>

**D.** By adhering to the revelation on the cross, the true theologian can distinguish between the times he or she encounters real knowledge of God as opposed to when presented with false knowledge produced by the world.<sup>13 14</sup>

This dialectical gap between God’s observed creation and the place where He chooses to reveal Himself, according to Luther, is the topic of this essay. I intend to argue that the disparity between the appearance of order in creation, which points to God and His handiwork, and God revealing Himself in misery and suffering in Christ’s crucifixion, constitute an attribute of the divine nature of God which is more appropriate for the crucicentric worldview as described by Luther. I shall explain how this dichotomy emerges by describing the magnificence of creation versus the lowliness of the crucifixion (parts 2 and 3), followed by

10 McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 203.

11 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 31:53.

12 McGrath, *The Enigma of the Cross*, 107.

13 Bradbury, *Cross Theology*, 62.

14 Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 20.

an explanation of why the attributes of God currently held by theologians are insufficient according to Luther’s theology of the cross (part 4), and how the disparity mentioned above constitutes a dialectic better suited to be understood as an attribute of God (parts 5 and 6).

## 2. THE SPLENDOR OF CREATION

The well-known account of creation in the book of Genesis has inspired awe in men and women’s hearts for thousands of years. It describes how God has shaped our universe into what we see today and inspires us to see in creation the handiwork of the Lord. In the creation process, God wills the universe into existence, a feat that underscores His tremendous capabilities.

I would like to utilize scientific findings as a more accurate portrait of the power involved in creation. When speaking of creation in a scientific context, I shall henceforth refer to the universe’s entirety, its formation, and its history as creation. However, I by no means wish to imply that the process is complete. We now have a chance to integrate knowledge gained by scientists with this essay’s thesis to strengthen and enrich conclusions reached via our belief system. Such a reference to scientific data underlines the tremendous disparity between the place where God reveals knowledge of Himself and where, as the Psalmist writes, His handiwork is well observed.

Most scientists call the process of the beginning of the universe the theory of the Big Bang. It stipulates the mode in which the current universe has begun. At the same time, some scientists go as far as to describe a variation thereof in which the universe continually oscillates between periods of

inflation and deflation (creation and ultimate destruction).<sup>15</sup> Scientific findings describing the big bang illustrate its magnificence in numbers. For instance, at Planck time ( $10^{-43}$  seconds) following the initial creation, the universe’s temperature was about  $10^{32}$  degrees Celsius, 3.7<sup>24</sup> times hotter than our sun’s core.<sup>16</sup> The universe expanded at an astounding growth factor of  $10^{35}$  during its first  $10^{-10}$  seconds. One hundred seconds following the Big Bang, the temperature was one billion degrees, by which time electrons and positrons were annihilated, creating photons.<sup>17</sup>

These findings show us that God’s handiwork is magnificent and enormous. We need to remember, however, that that is only God’s work and not God himself. In order to stress the gap between God’s handiwork and the place where He chooses to reveal Himself according to Luther’s theology of the cross, we now turn to a description of the crucifixion of Christ.

### 3. DEATH BY AN INSTRUMENT OF TORTURE

The crucicentric mystic Johannes Tauler (1330-1361) believed that by meditating on Christ’s suffering on the cross, the soul enters into the darkness where God’s light most brightly shines. Following Tauler, Luther believed that the cross is the source of all knowledge of God, embedded in it and Christ’s passion. There is a sameness between the two: Christ’s suffering and humiliation is the essence by which God reveals Himself, and He cannot be known separately

15 P. J. Steinhardt, N. Turok, “A Cyclic Model of the Universe”, 1436–1439.

16 <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/solar-system/sun/in-depth/> retrieved September 13, 2020.

17 <http://www.astro.ucla.edu/~wright/BBhistory.html>, retrieved September 13, 2020.

from them.<sup>18</sup> In the Heidelberg disputation, Luther further agrees with Tauler and states that “God can reveal Himself only ... in the humility and shame of the cross.” Elsewhere, he says that “true theology and the knowledge of God are in the crucified Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

The cross was a Roman instrument of torture,<sup>20</sup> and to realize that we can perceive the Lord at such an event as the crucifixion negates all of our preconditioned perceptions of God. Luther noticed that the world does not expect that of God; in its vanity and materialistic adoration, the world imagines a god similar to itself.<sup>21</sup> When we see the cross, we see disgrace, poverty, death, and the suffering Christ; it is not a place where we expect God’s revelation to occur.<sup>22</sup>

After noticing His handiwork in creation, we would expect to continue seeing His magnificence wherever He may choose to present Himself, but instead we become aware of Him at a very low point: the cross conveys messages of pain and suffering, misery and humiliation. That is precisely the place where we would not expect God to present Himself, but He does, incarnated in human form so He can be subjected to the misery of crucifixion.<sup>23</sup> We turn now to a description of how Luther’s concept of God’s vulnerability impacts the traditional reckoning of God’s attributes.

18 Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 20.

19 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 31:52-53.

20 Kittel, Gerhard, et al., *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7, 572.

21 Bradbury, *Cross Theology*, 63. Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 50.

22 Forde, *Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 28-29.

23 Hebrews 2:9-10,14.

#### 4. GOD'S INFINITE ATTRIBUTES

Luther would not have agreed with today's commonly held assertions about God's nature. Loewenich remarks that "Affirming [the] omnipresence and omnipotence of God is very pointedly described as a characteristic of the theology of glory,"<sup>24</sup> where the 'theology of glory' refers to a type of theology deemed sinful by Luther.<sup>25</sup>

Our discussion will illustrate Luther's point using only three of God's traditional attributes, for these are sufficient to establish a pattern of characteristics attributed to God. The reader should bear in mind that more attributes of this sort are available in theological literature.<sup>26</sup>

A. Omnipotence is understood as:

- God has absolute power over everything, and nothing can resist Him.
- God can perform every deed, large as well as small.
- God can do whatever He wishes, and nothing can impede Him.
- Once He has performed an act, no one can judge Him or ask Him to justify His doings. This absolute power is also the source of all creaturely powers and abilities, and some believe even of creaturely authority.<sup>27</sup>

B. Omniscience is defined by Oden as complete knowledge of the entirety of space and time. He adds that God's knowledge:

- Encompasses the entirety of time and is actual, rather than merely potential.
- Is constant in its broadness. It does

not change, does not increase or decrease and

- Is always complete, never partial.
- Always pertains to subjects directly, rather than being mediated by a third party.
- Encompasses wisdom alongside factual knowledge: "The wisdom of God is God's incomparable ability to order all things in the light of good, to adjust causes to effects, and means to ends; so that the divine purposes are firm and never thwarted."<sup>28</sup>

C. Omnipresence is defined as "God's mode of being present to all aspects of both space and time. Although God is present in all space and time, God is not locally limited to any particular time or space."<sup>29</sup>

These attributes correspond to the human traits of ability, knowledge, and existence. When used to describe human beings, those traits are always partial and incomplete: a person cannot do all possible deeds, does not know everything, and does not exist in all of space-time at once. In describing God's attributes, theological thought has taken these human attributes to their maximal extent – to infinity. Theologians try to describe an infinite being by using those attributes without their human limitations: infinitely potent, infinitely sentient, and present everywhere. Describing such an entity by other means would be very difficult, for we would have to use a kind of language which is currently unbeknownst to us and which does not stem from our everyday experience.

Using human language to describe God's infinite characteristics is an idea to which Luther did not subscribe. Luther rejected the medieval

24 Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 30.

25 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31, 225f.

26 See for example Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 168, 177, 178, 197, 205, 267.

27 Bradley, "Randomness and God's Nature", quoting from Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 246.

28 Bradley, "Randomness and God's Nature", quoting from Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 46, 49.

29 Ibid, 43.

scholastic view that, looking back at Aquinas, attempted to combine Christian faith and ancient Greek philosophy. This view included the idea of *analogia entis*, which assumed a strong commonality between creature and Creator and drew analogies between them. This assumption of commonality enables an epistemology based upon the creature knowing God using analogies drawn upon itself.<sup>30</sup> However, Luther utterly denied that the human creature is anything like The Divine: “God who is the subject of this sort of Theology is not the living God of the bible. It is an abstract entity, a theoretical postulate which may be needed to secure the coherence of a metaphysical system.”<sup>31</sup> He also rejected *analogia entis* as a creaturely attempt at assuming the glory of God. *Analogia entis*, said Luther, speaks nothing of the Fall and does not mention Christ, and since there is no direct knowledge of God for man, we cannot dispose of the cross in the higher structures of thought; the knowledge conveyed by the cross is not just additional knowledge alongside that from other sources – it is the only source of knowledge about God.<sup>32</sup>

In summary, according to Luther’s theology of the cross, one cannot attribute God with the notion of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence because they are based on human traits of potency, *scientia*, and immanence, respectively. They constitute an understanding of God based on human nature, belittle God, and raise the creature and its existence to the level of God’s existence – a prideful and sinful exercise. Furthermore, since their definition does not include an examination of Christ’s crucifixion, labeling those attributes as part of a Christian theology would be difficult. They are

“theoretical postulates,” to use Luther’s words. A better understanding of the Divine is possible using 20th-century dialectic theology, which I will outline in the following part.

## 5. DIALECTIC THEOLOGY

Since this article’s thesis is rooted in dialectical theology, I shall summarize the way dialectical arguments are utilized and provide a brief historical background of its inception.<sup>33</sup>

The fundamental premise of dialectical theology is the grappling with opposites. It deals with the proper approach to a contradictory duality in a way which furthers understanding of the Divine. The process involves reflecting upon such a contradiction under a specific conceptual framework that guides an open-ended discussion. It directs the outcome and conclusions, but allows for multiple understandings of the contradiction, i.e., does not demand a consensual agreement upon a definite answer. Edwards quotes Warren as saying that “What separates a dialectical theory of knowledge and reality from other variants of historicism and relativism is a particular kind of radical ‘openness’ – a dialectical openness which preserves the tension between the relative and the absolute.”<sup>34</sup> Dialectical theology does not strive to arrive at absolute truth, but eschews it by emphasizing “necessary counter truths.”

The dialectical method is based on a conversational relationship, whether as a conflict or a resolution, between two polarities that must be related, even if that relationship is

30 Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 113.

31 Dalferth, “The Visible and the Invisible”, 24.

32 Von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 21, 51.

33 This chapter is based upon Aaron Edwards’ excellent treatment of the subject in “The paradox of dialectic: clarifying the use and scope of dialectic in theology,” pages 3-9.

34 Warren, *Emergence of Dialectical Theology*, 16.

merely conceptual and the polarities themselves are radically different.<sup>35</sup> While dealing with such opposing polarities, the theological dialectic does not try to resolve the contradiction or ease its tension. Instead, it strives to utilize it for the benefit of a creative process. The very essence of the dialectic exercise lies in this contradictory polarity, whether we are trying to reconcile the differences between the polarities or maintain them as contradicting. Within theological dialectics, the theologian tries to reveal the ultimate goal or meaning of those contradicting polarities, without necessarily trying to understand how those relate to each other. This kind of reasoning is essential to dialectic theology's aim, while at the heart of it stands the distinction between creator and creature. This qualitative chasm that lies between God and man favors any discussion thereof to form a dialectical exchange.

Dialectical theology emerged following WWI among theologians who opposed anthropocentric liberal theology. The dialectical theologians included Karl Barth as well as Brunner, Gogarten, Bultmann and Thurneysen.<sup>36</sup> The new theology they developed was called the "Theology of Crisis," for those theologians believed their predecessors had taken a wrong turn in theological thought by grounding it in anthropocentric and societal terms and conceptions. The theology they developed opposed the "idealism of the *Zeitgeist*" and referred to human thinking as limited, flawed and broken. This thinking, they claimed, cannot reconcile opposing statements but only articulate them.

The theology of crisis distrusted any statement placed "outside of God." It contended that any theological position could not be

authentically theological, and any fundamental contention had to deny the very possibility of there being fundamental contentions. This position was a reaction against the theological claims of the liberal theologians who based their statements on the assumption that human thinking is capable of direct knowledge of God, and that God affirmed statements based on such knowledge. For Karl Barth, God was wholly other, foreign to the human mode of existence.<sup>37</sup> A different method of thinking was in order – the dialectical method, which represented the 'the final security of insecurity.'<sup>38</sup> This method had to rely on the tension between human and divine existence, and refrain from arriving at clear "Yes or No" conclusions. Edwards cites McCormack's definition, who defined the dialectic method as "A method which calls for every theological statement to be placed over against a counter-statement, without allowing the dialectical tension between the two to be resolved in a higher synthesis."<sup>39</sup> The dialectical method, says Edwards, attempts to perceive that which cannot be perceived and describes God's divine and infinite revelation to a finite humanity. He quotes Barth and Thurneysen, who summed the aim and goal of the dialectic approach thus:

"Precisely this is necessary, that only with human lips we pronounce and with human ears we hear the contradiction – God's wrath and God's mercy, God's dominion and God's help, God's majesty and God's love, God's law and God's gospel. This enigma in the external words of God must ever again overwhelm us and convince us, witness to us that God's goodness and faithfulness are new every morning,

37 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, 186.

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 293.

39 McCormack, *Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 11.

35 Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, 10–11.

36 Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians*, 120.

lead us to repentance, raise us up, and so prepare us to let God actually speak and listen to Him.<sup>40</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION: THE DIALECTIC BETWEEN THE BIG BANG AND THE CRUCIFIXION

As evident in the Psalmist's words cited above, no doubt exists about the awe and admiration one should feel when watching creation. However, another dimension needs to be added to it if we are to use it to gain knowledge of The Divine.

If we are to properly understand God's nature (albeit partially, for no complete understanding of Him is possible for us), the other element which we need to add to the Psalmist's words is the event of Christ's crucifixion. This main event described by the Christian Gospels adds a dimension to God the Saviour, one which is the antithesis to the magnificence portrayed by God's act of creation.

The reason for paring the beauty of creation with an act conveying misery and pain is the dialectic space it creates. In this very contradicted dichotomy, we are allowed a limited understanding of God's nature through both His tremendous feats and His enormous ability to love, evident in the crucifixion and its atoning effect. This understanding does not constitute a further revelation of God. Instead, it includes the human derivation of knowledge about the mode of existence of the Divine from the state of the observed universe coupled with the locus where God, whose deeds are astronomical and beyond our imagination, has

chosen to interact with us – in the same limited realm and magnitude He had created us in.

This apparent contradiction allows us to see God the way prescribed to us by Paul, Athanasius, Luther, and others.<sup>41</sup> Although God created the universe, an ability reserved for Him alone, He meets us in the most fragile of situations, in one of the lowest points our kind can take – humiliated on a cross. These two extremes create a gap through which God's nature can be understood: by contemplating the two opposites and the dialectic created between them, we can better understand God and our place in creation.

God's infinite attributes described above offer very little in the way of knowing The Divine. These attributes describe a generic, descriptively unidimensional entity composed of characteristics laid upon it by a human mind. They claim God is merely infinite and, leaving aside paradoxes such as God's ability to create a stone He cannot lift (or His inability thereof),<sup>42</sup> describe God as a blank infinity out of which no specific characteristics can arise; a clear canvas comprised of the sole description of an ultimate perfection which, much like a blank sheet of paper, offers no specifics.

The Christian Bible describes a God who asks different groups of people for different covenants at different times and treats them differently.<sup>43</sup> The described God is a vibrant one, with personality complexities that add to His image multiple dimensions and angles and convey more complex characteristics than the simple traits of infinity. By anchoring God's handiwork with the crucifixion described by the Gospels, we can describe God more profoundly, describe complexities presented

40 Barth and Thurneysen, *The Eternal Light*, 58–9.

41 Bradbury, *Cross Theology*, 3.

42 Savage, C. Wade. *The Paradox of the Stone*, 74–79.

43 Jeremiah, 31:30–33.

by the Bible and avoid the shallowing of God's description. Furthermore, the attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience do not mention Christ's crucifixion. To fully understand humankind's place in God's creation and our relation to Him, it is necessary to mention man's Fall from grace when we speak of God. That is what we do when we anchor God's attributes with the crucifixion: it is God's response to man's Fall from grace. Without it, we merely describe the detached god of deism who has no involvement in human history.

Any attribute of God produced by Christian thought needs to revolve around Christ's crucifixion or risk being a mere general understanding of God, perhaps overly relying on a semantic analysis of the word 'god' and not derived from the Christian tradition.

An example of using the dialectics between creation and crucifixion would be explaining the wrath of God referenced in both the new and the old testaments:<sup>44</sup> God demands that humankind lives by the laws He sets out for them and punishes them when they do not, for example by an all obliterating flood. When the Israelites disobey His commandment and build a statue they worship, He punishes them by delaying their arrival at the promised land for forty years.

Can this trait of the Divine be explained using any of the infinite attributes? The ability to perform all deeds without impediment, or omnipotence, does not explain the Lord's motivation for doing any deeds at all. It is devoid of any explicatory meaning and cannot describe why God had created the universe, why He chose a people to serve Him or why He chose to be incarnated in human form.<sup>45</sup> Similarly,

44 See for example Nahum 1:2-6, Isaiah 13:13, 2 Kings 17:18, Psalm 78:49, Romans 1:18.

45 Scripture hints at the reasons for this in Colossians 2:15.

His ability to know all that is knowable does not explain why He prefers His people to act in a certain way, or why He becomes angry when they do not. The third attribute discussed in this paper, omnipresence, adds no information about the way God acts and reacts throughout the Bible. Those infinite traits pertain to divine attributes that do glorify God as the One who is enormous and magnificent but shine no light on why He is also loving, angry, or merciful, traits which the Bible describes as some of His key personality characteristics.

The dialectic between creation and crucifixion, far from being a perfect explanatory tool, can somewhat explain God's personality as described by the Bible. In the case of God's wrath, we can understand that God had created humankind out of sheer love. He then wanted humanity to behave in a certain way, which He deems appropriate. Still, God wanted them to retain their free will (and thus does not use His omnipotence to force them to behave in a certain way) and develop a sense of communal and personal responsibility. He acts as a father to them, and while infinite adjectives cannot explain this, adding the dimension of a mighty God who created the universe and His "children" does give us a limited sense of why He acts wrathfully (or lovingly and mercifully in other occasions<sup>46</sup>).

To conclude, describing God's attributes in the traditional way fails to infuse any meaningful content into our image of the Lord and that to describe God better, we need to incorporate the crucifixion as a Christian event into our understanding of Him. I, therefore, suggest that we leverage the gap between God's enormous deed – the creation of the universe, and the low point where He chooses to convey knowledge

46 See for example 1 John 1:9, 1 Peter 1:3, Titus 3:5, Ephesians 2:4-5, Micah 7:18-19.



of Himself according to the crucicentric tradition – Christ's Crucifixion, to better understand God not as a unidimensional being described solely by the notion of infinity but as a complex being who exists in both magnificence and utter misery, a trait which also defines His relation to humanity.

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