

Nathan Runham

# On Becoming a Theologian of the Cross

Revisiting Luther's *theologus crucis* from the  
Heidelberg Disputation to the Genesis Lectures



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112



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## Abbreviations

- LD Härtle, Wilfried, ed. *Lateinisch-Deutsche Studienausgabe*. Vol. 1–3. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006.
- LW Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. American Edition. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. 55 vols. Saint Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1955–86.
- WA *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Edited by J. F. K. Knaake et al. 65 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–.
- WA Tr *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden. 6 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–21.
- ESV English Standard Version. Wheaton: Crossway, 2000.
- KJV King James Version. Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995.
- CSB Christian Standard Bible. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017.



## Preface

This book started its life as my PhD thesis where I investigated the nature of Martin Luther's *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) and researched whether he held to this theology in his later years. The importance and relevance of this study relates more to a recent twentieth-century debate about the longevity of this expression in his theology. Some have argued that Luther's theology of the cross permeates his entire theology. Others have argued that the theology of the cross is only representative of Luther's earlier years and is more pre-reformational than his more "mature" reformational theology. Additionally, there is some confusion as to what Luther's theology of the cross is, as evidenced by the variegated applications of this theology of the cross in scholarly and popular literature. Thus, even if one holds to a continuation of Luther's theology of the cross, it seems that it has been misunderstood or misapplied. To offer a contribution to this disagreement and confusion, this book provides a brief overview of notable proponents, opponents and other appropriations that are representative of this problematic situation. Next, the *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518) itself is revisited to clarify the background and substance of what Luther described as a theology – or the theologian – of the cross. This revisitation finds that Luther's theology of the cross is an expression wielded to combat a pelagianised scholastic theology which had distorted the gospel. As such, understanding the gospel is core to Luther's *theologia crucis*. Finally, given the impact this finding has on arguments that claim the theology of the cross is a pre-reformational theology, it was then necessary to investigate Luther's *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545) to ascertain whether the theology of the cross could be found taught in Luther's later years. The conclusion is that, while Luther's use of the phrase "theology of the cross" diminished in the mid 1530s, the substance of the anti-Pelagian and anti-Aristotelian but pro-cross and pro-gospel expression did indeed continue to be taught to direct the hearts and minds of Christians to the grace of God so typified in the cross of Jesus Christ.

This study only progressed because of several key people whose wisdom, support, and encouragement moved me – and kept me moving – towards the end goal. In the very least I am indebted to: Peter Hastie – for encouraging me to pursue Luther's *theologia crucis*; Felix Chung – for enabling me to pursue Luther's *theologia crucis*; Robert Kolb – for guiding me in your kind wisdom as I sought to understand Luther's *theologia crucis*; Michael Bräutigam and Rowland Ward – for your patience, persistence, encouragement, critique, and grace in helping me become a *theologus crucis*; Georgiana Runham – for your love,

encouragement and sacrifice; Martin Luther – for being a *theologus crucis* and writing about it; and most of all Jesus Christ – in whom this study finds its beginning and end.

*Crux sola est nostra Theologia*

Ipswich, QLD 2025

## Introduction

Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* (*Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*) is probably the most well-known writing to come from the pen of the Wittenberg reformer. Familiar by name – not necessarily by content – the *Ninety-Five Theses* are forever tied to the wonderfully fateful moment when they were nailed to the Castle Church door in Wittenberg Germany, on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1517.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there remains an almost romantic affection for the *Ninety-Five Theses* because of its role in initiating the Protestant Reformation. However, one needs to be aware that the development of Reformation history did not really start, nor finish, on that day. Luther's theology had already been through substantial development in the preceding years – prior to posting these theses. Moreover, the following four years were an even greater period of development for Luther, because his theology was now to be forged into clarity, in the heat of the battles prompted by his attack on indulgences. This theology was then tried and tested further by the Papal Bull – *Exsurge Domine* (1520) – and the summoning before Charles V, at the Diet of Worms (1521).

It is worth contemplating then – if Luther's subsequent theological development did not continue in these following years – whether the posting of the *Ninety-Five Theses* would have achieved little more than an argument between Augustinians. It was not the first time that issues concerning reform, including penance, repentance, and indulgences, had been raised.<sup>2</sup> In hope of reform, Andreas Karlstadt (1486–1541) posted 151 theses six months before Luther, but this seemed to achieve little.<sup>3</sup> Of course, Luther's attack on indulgences proved to be a matter of impeccable timing – something that even he could not have planned.<sup>4</sup> Luther's timing and situation was unique because it would strike – albeit unintentionally at first – at the heart of Papal authority while simultaneously raising questions over the financial integrity, by way of indulgences including the role of Albert of Brandenburg (1490–1545), in fundraising for

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1 Noting however, the questions that have arisen with regard to that event, see the lengthy discussion in Peter Marshall, *1517: Martin Luther and the Invention of the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

2 See the editor's comments in LW 31:22.

3 Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 45–46.

4 An "accidental conflict" in the words of Lohse, in Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to his Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 30.

St. Peter's Basilica. Yet, the reality remains, the heat caused by the disputation at Heidelberg (1518), the diet at Augsburg (1518), the debate at Leipzig (1519), and the diet at Worms (1521) – not to mention the concurrent written debates and treatises during this period – allowed Luther to hammer out and develop his theology. Thus, one does not seek to remove the *Ninety-Five Theses* from their pride of place in Reformation history. However, one cannot forget that the subsequent years also, were crucial to Luther's "evangelical maturation" and development. It was in this process Luther drew some significant conclusions – and made some significant enemies – which were to have profound, and lasting consequences.<sup>5</sup>

Less than six months after posting the *Ninety-Five Theses*, Luther penned forty more theses which were to be debated at Heidelberg in April 1518.<sup>6</sup> This disputation has – in many ways – been overshadowed by the romantic grandeur of the *Ninety-Five Theses*.<sup>7</sup> It has also been less captivating to scholars than the more matured writings of 1520, like: *The Treatise on Good Works*, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*. Thus, the *Heidelberg Disputation* has not enjoyed the attention that it deserves, even though it contains a significant development in Luther's theology. Accordingly, Heinrich Bornkamm argues that the *Heidelberg Disputation* is theologically more important and influential than the *Ninety-Five Theses*.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Mark Harris asserts:

It is worth noting that the Heidelberg Disputation was, in many ways, of greater significance than the more familiar Ninety-five Theses in that it reflected a further development in Luther's realization that the theology of late medieval Roman Catholicism was fundamentally at odds with his own understanding of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

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5 For example, at the Leipzig Debate (1519) Luther made profound theological admissions (i.e., on Papal authority) and confirmed a lasting theological enemy in Johann Eck.

6 The *Heidelberg Disputation* will be shortened at times to HD.

7 Michael Plathow notes the lack of commemorative events held for the *Heidelberg Disputation* when compared to other significant events in the life of the Reformation, see Michael Plathow, "Martin Luthers 'Heidelberger Disputation' und das Reformations-Gedenken 2017," *Lutherjahrbuch* 82 (2015): 241–42.

8 Quoted by Forde in, Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 19.

9 Mark Harris, "Hidden Behind its Opposite: Suffering and Hope through a Pastoral Theology of the Cross," *Touchstone* (2019): 57. Cf., "Though far less known than the theses nailed to the church door, these theses are the most important text during this period of development."

R. C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols, *The Legacy of Luther* (Sanford: Reformation Trust, 2016), 25.

This is why it has been suggested a scholarly commentary on the *Heidelberg Disputation* is well overdue.<sup>10</sup> In 1972, writing in a Reformed journal, the Lutheran Hermann Sasse would encourage a wider audience to receive this theology:

If this theology [the *theologia crucis*], as it claims, is not the theology of a great Christian thinker, but the faithful reproduction of a great New Testament doctrine, then it must be of importance not for one section of Christendom only, but for the whole Church. And I think this theology of the cross has a message for all Christians in this time of ours.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, Michael Bräutigam has laid down the gauntlet, “[...] rescuing Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation from oblivion is vital for the health of both church and academia today.”<sup>12</sup> If we recognise that the years 1517 to 1521 contain significant developments in Luther’s thought, it is important to investigate how the *Heidelberg Disputation* contributed to Luther’s overall theological development.

The disputation at Heidelberg was part of the triennial meeting of the Augustinian Order. In response to the growing controversy following the posting of his *Ninety-five Theses*, Johann von Staupitz (c.1460–1524) requested Luther to present his ‘new theology’ to his brother Augustinians. Thus, Luther drew up forty theses, and Leonhard Beier (c. 1495–1552) defended them. Of note is that there were two – soon to be famous – attendees present who were to have major roles in the Reformation; one for good, and one for ill. Martin Bucer (1491–1551) and Johann Eck (1486–1543) were the two attendees in question. Bucer, it has been said, had his “evangelical conversion” at the Heidelberg Disputation,<sup>13</sup> while Eck would become a long-lasting bitter opponent of Luther and his developing theology – first engaging in a debate with him at Leipzig in 1519. Worth noting:

So it was that during one of Luther’s first attempts to deal with the dispute outside of Wittenberg, he met and made one of his most important converts, as well as one of

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10 Forde laments, “Indeed it is regrettable that in spite of its importance, the Heidelberg Disputation has never received the sort of comprehensive commentary it deserves.” See Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*, 20.

11 Hermann Sasse, “On The Theology of the Cross,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 31, no. 3 (1972).

12 Michael Bräutigam, “Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation and Identity Formation,” *Dialogue*, no. 58 (2019): 70.

13 See D. F. Wright, “Bucer, Martin (1491–1551)” in Timothy Larsen, David Bebbington, and Mark A. Noll, *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 91.

his most bitter rivals [...] Many, like Martin Bucer, went away convinced that Luther was right and were determined to speak about God and salvation in this new way. Others, however, like John Eck, left Heidelberg convinced that Luther must be stopped at all costs.<sup>14</sup>

The *Heidelberg Disputation* consists of forty theses that are divided in two main sections: theses 1–28 are theological theses, and theses 29–40 are philosophical theses. The theological theses can be further sub-divided into theses 1–12 on law and good works, theses 13–18 on the will, theses 19–24 on being a theologian of the cross (*theologus crucis*), and theses 25–28 on righteousness and faith. It seems that it was the younger generation who were generally more open to the theology presented at the disputation. The older generation, including some of Luther's former scholastic<sup>15</sup> teachers like Bartholomäus Arnoldi von Usingen (1465–1532) and Jodocus Trutvetter von Eisenach (1460–1519), were not impressed.<sup>16</sup>

It remains, even today, that there are those who, like Bucer, are impressed with Luther's theology which was expressed at Heidelberg. And there are those like Usingen, Trutvetter, and more importantly – Eck, who are not at all captivated with Luther's Heidelberg theology. It must be acknowledged that there are differing reasons as to why one would object to the formulation of Luther's theologian of the cross at Heidelberg. It may be that, like Eck, they fundamentally disagree with the theology behind it (e.g., the criticism of free will and scholastic theology etc). It might be that with the passing of time, they are not quite sure why Luther formulated it in the way he did and are confused as to how relevant it is today. Or it might be that having understood Luther's theology and his theologian of the cross/glory distinction, they prefer to think of it as a pre-reformational/pre-evangelical formulation of Luther, and as such, are con-

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14 Mark Worthing, *Martin Luther: A Wild Boar in the Lord's Vineyard* (Northcote: Morning Star, 2017), 48–50.

15 For an overview and definition of scholasticism, the term that variously describes the Aristotelian based “method and content of formal education in the High and Late Middle Ages”, see Paul W. Robinson “Scholasticism, Late Medieval” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 667–69.

16 Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 119–23. For their influence on Luther see, Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 21–27. For some Roman Catholic sympathisers of Luther as exceptions, see Franz Posset, *Unser Martin: Martin Luther aus der Sicht Katholischer Sympathisanten* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2015). Cf., “Our Martin: Catholic Sympathisers of Martin Luther Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” in *Luther@500 and Beyond: Martin Luther's Theology Past, Present and Future*, ed. Stephen Hultgren, Stephen Pietsch, and Jeffrey Silcock (Adelaide: ATF, 2019), 61–63.

vinced it carries little or no weight today. There are, however, numerous modern day ‘Bucers’ who regard Luther’s formulation of the theologian of the cross as being as relevant today as it was in 1518.<sup>17</sup>

If Robert Kolb is correct in asserting that “Luther’s theology of the cross reproduces for every age the biblical message regarding who God is and what he does – and regarding the characteristics his human creatures have – beneath the superficial fluctuations of history and culture”,<sup>18</sup> then the theology of the cross touches on the very heart of the gospel. And if the theology of the cross touches on the heart of the gospel, then revisiting this topic is not merely of historic value but of eternal importance and consequence. Moreover, and more particularly, Kolb and Arand suggest “the term ‘righteousness’ is no longer a part of our everyday vocabulary, it is a basic and in some ways an indispensable concept if we hope to grasp the message of the Bible.”<sup>19</sup> Given that the *Heidelberg Disputation* has much to say about this righteousness surely one cannot, therefore, be quick to dismiss Luther’s theologian of the cross.

Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to revisit Luther’s *Heidelberg Disputation* to clarify what Luther was communicating at Heidelberg. For example, can one drive a wedge between the theologian of the cross and the theses on free will, works and righteousness etc? Is the cross merely a liberation or identification symbol for victims, or should the cross event be that which helps us to hold a gospel that is consciously accountable to God’s revelation in Scripture? Predicated on the results of these questions is then the need to observe Luther’s lectures on Genesis – which he delivered in the last ten years of his life – which will be investigated to discover whether Luther kept true to his formulation of the Heidelberg theology in his later years. This purpose will be achieved under four broad sections: First, a sample of the literature on Luther’s theology of the cross will be highlighted, paying particular attention to a select number of notable proponents and some recent critiques. Second, the brief background to the disputation will be highlighted in order to put it in a more understandable context. Third, the Heidelberg disputation itself will be studied in an attempt to identify the substance of the theology of the cross. Fourth, and finally, Luther’s *Lectures on Genesis* will be investigated in order to confirm whether we can identify if Luther still held to the substance of the theology of the cross as he lectured to his students in his later years.

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17 See, for example, the proponents in chapter one.

18 See, Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (2002): 445.

19 See Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther’s Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).



## Chapter 1

### The Literature

If scholars today have any knowledge of this disputation held at Heidelberg, their knowledge is normally limited to the phrase *theologia crucis* – the theology of the cross.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Lutherans are more conversant with this phrase, however, the phrase is not altogether lost on other denominations. Yet, it often remains true that the ‘where’, ‘when’, and ‘why’ of this phrase is evidently less known. Because of this lack of context and purpose, it can now be said – regrettably – that the theology of the cross has become somewhat a “magic and fashionable expression” used in popular and scholarly literature.<sup>2</sup> No lack of ink has been spilt by authors and scholars seeking to acquire the brand of Luther’s theology of the cross by applying it to their own theological system and philosophy. Evidently, however, the result is a product which often does not look like what Luther originally intended by the *theologia crucis*.

#### Notable Proponents

##### Walther Von Loewenich

It is probably not too far from the truth to assert that today’s modern ‘revival’ of the phrase *theologia crucis* is largely the result of Walther von Loewenich’s early twentieth century work entitled, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*.<sup>3</sup> First published in German in 1929 – the fruit of his PhD studies under Paul Althaus<sup>4</sup> – it

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1 In fact, for Luther, the emphasis is actually on the *theologus crucis*, the theologian of the cross, “It must, however, already be pointed out that Luther prefers speaking of the *theologus crucis* or *gloriae*, i.e. of the concrete man holding such a theology, rather than of the content of this theology. This preference confers a greater straightforwardness and involvement of what is stated.” Jos E. Vercruyse, “Luther’s Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation,” *Gregorianum* 57, no. 3 (1976): 532. Cf., Bräutigam, “Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation and Identity Formation,” 73.

2 Vercruyse, “Luther’s theology of the cross at the time of the Heidelberg Disputation,” 525.

3 Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976). For the German see Walther von Loewenich, *Luthers theologia crucis, Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus* (München: Kaiser, 1929).

4 Anna Madsen notes, “The seeds for his interest in the theology of the cross were sown as early as 1926, when he attended a course held by Paul Althaus.” Anna M. Madsen, *The Theology of the*

has gone through a number of editions and one major revision in English. We are able to call it a ‘revival’ because the discussion on this topic is limited prior to 1929 compared with the scholarly chatter that has resulted from Loewenich’s publication. Additionally, in 1954 Loewenich himself would admit that following the horrors of World War Two, the theology of the cross now had wider relevance.

Gordon Rupp, writing in 1975, identified that the publication of the Weimar Edition of Luther’s works – which began in 1883 – was that which led to the wider renaissance of Luther interest and scholarship.<sup>5</sup> This scholarship, “in the course of almost a century [has] become a concentration of international scholarship almost without parallel in the learned world.”<sup>6</sup> With many scholars now concentrating on Luther, many influential studies have been produced. One of the most important and influential studies that have arisen from this ‘Luther renaissance’, according to Rupp, is Loewenich’s *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*. Writing the foreword in the fourth edition of this work, Rupp writes:

One of the most important of such influential studies has been Walther von Loewenich’s *Luthers Theologia Crucis*. It is a work which should long ago have been turned into English, for it is almost indispensable for anybody studying Luther’s doctrine of salvation in the context of modern critical scholarship. This theology of the cross which von Loewenich rooted in the famous Heidelberg Theses of 1518 represents constant stresses in Luther’s thought, discernible in his first lectures on the Psalms but no less in his last sermons and in his final great course of lectures on the Book of Genesis.<sup>7</sup>

Loewenich recognised that Christian theology – for it to be Christian – must not lose sight of the fundamental event and meaning of the cross. That is, the

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*Cross in Historical Perspective*, Distinguished Dissertations in Christian Theology (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 172. Cf., the influence of Althaus in Philip Ruge-Jones, *Cross in Tensions: Luther’s Theology of the Cross as Theologico-Social Critique*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 11–14.

5 Writing in the 1960s Harold Grimm believed the three causes of this renaissance (or revival) were “(1) the writings of Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Karl Holl (1866–1926); (2) the decline of liberal theology and the rise of the ‘dialectical’ theology of Karl Barth; and third, German national interest in one of its outstanding historical figures.” Certainly, the publishing of the Weimar Edition also contributed significantly. See, Harold J. Grimm, “Luther Research since 1920.” *The Journal of Modern History* 32, no. 2 (1960): 105. For a more recent overview which details the varying streams within the renaissance and Holl’s particular place in it, see Heinrich Assel, “The Luther Renaissance.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. 29 Mar. 2017; Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

6 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 7.

7 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 7.

cross reveals to us data that makes Christian theology – Christian. The cross is more than just a mere symbol, it is a particular point of revelation as we learn from God revealed through it. Thus, ‘Christian theology is a theology of revelation. And this is not merely a formal criterion. Not only the ‘that’ of revelation, but also the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ have essential significance. This means that the Word (*logos*) to which all theology must be related is the word of the cross.’<sup>8</sup>

Loewenich, however, does not see Luther as the inventor of such a theology. Loewenich observed in the Apostle Paul – the ‘first’ theologian of the cross – the foundation for Luther’s understanding and expression at Heidelberg in 1518. It was no accident that Paul labelled the Christian message the “word of the cross” Loewenich wrote. From a “great offense” in the eyes of a Jewish Paul to a “completely new understanding of God” in the Christian Paul, the word of the cross and the knowledge of God have now moved “into the closest relationship.” This means that God manifested His wisdom in the foolishness of the cross resulting in implications for how God governs His revelation.<sup>9</sup>

The wisdom/folly distinction of Paul is therefore crucial to Luther’s theology of the cross and the meaning of revelation. Theology must be re-evaluated in the light of the cross and its revelation to us. Loewenich can even say that the cross rules the knowledge of God and the revelation of God to the extent that, “the entire thought of Paul is controlled by the thought of the cross; *his is a theology of the cross.*”<sup>10</sup> This grounding of the theology of the cross in the Apostle Paul, is thus a grounding of this theology in God’s authoritative revelation to us. It has always been there, but we have not always appreciated the meaning and substance of the cross in Christian theology.

This is where the importance and uniqueness of Luther is recognised. This teaching of the Apostle Paul made it back into Christian theology through the mind and teaching of Luther. While one does not want to over-exaggerate here, it does seem somewhat appropriate – given Luther’s Augustinian heritage spurred on by Staupitz’s influence and followed by the crystallisation of the gospel in lecturing on Pauline epistles – to concur with Loewenich’s assertion that Paul’s theology has not experienced such a revival as in Luther. Certainly, from one perspective all the reformers were rediscovering Paul. But what Loewenich seems to be emphasising is the paradoxical nature of Pauline theology which Luther so expertly used at Heidelberg. These theological paradoxes were the

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8 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 11.

9 Loewenich sums up, “God reveals himself in concealment, God’s wisdom appears to men as foolishness, God’s power is perfected in weakness, God’s glory parades in lowliness, God’s life becomes effective in the death of his Son. But this means, furthermore, that a direct knowledge of God is impossible for man.” See, von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 11.

10 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 12. Italics mine.

tool not only to treat but to expose a theology of glory. Luther “openly employed this formula because in it he found the distinctiveness of the gospel characterized most crisply and pertinently over against the official theology. It is the heritage of Paul that Luther holds aloft with his theology of the cross against a church that has become secure and smug.”<sup>11</sup>

Loewenich’s aim then, was to clarify the question of what Luther means by this ‘formula’. In his time, Loewenich recognised that the then current research generally regarded Luther’s theology of the cross as a pre-reformational concept. Moreover, it was rare to find clear definitions of what the theology of the cross really was. Scholars would name the theology of the cross thinking no explanation was required. “Otto Ritschl”, Loewenich argues, “gave the clearest expression to this view by devoting a separate chapter in his *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus* [...] to this pre-Reformation theology of Luther. Ritschl claims that the theology of the cross bears a typically monkish stamp and thereby proves to be only a preliminary stage of the real Luther.”<sup>12</sup>

This is where Loewenich identifies where scholarship on the theology of the cross has fallen short. Since the ‘Luther renaissance’, where scholars had interacted with the theology of the cross, often it would be considered a hangover of mysticism, or leftover from Luther’s time in the monastery – or a mix of both.<sup>13</sup> Loewenich understood that in dating Luther’s “evangelical breakthrough” and thus distinguishing between pre-Reformation and post-Reformation thought in Luther’s development, a framework was established which became key to determining how scholars would relate to the theology of the cross. As will become apparent later, this framework is still applied by scholars today in determining the relevance of Luther’s theology of the cross. Loewenich, however, would disagree

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11 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 12.

12 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 12. See the chapter, Luthers vorreformatorische Anschauungen als Theologia crucis in Otto Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus: Orthodoxie und Synkretismus in der altprotestantischen Theologie* (Leipzig: J.C Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1912), 40–84.

13 This, of course, is one of the perennial difficulties in studying history. A simple straightforward answer is rarely the outcome because one is speaking of a human’s understanding and their influences. How much an influence has on someone can never be completely understood because humans are complex beings. Sometimes humans do not even always understand their own influences, let alone historians seeking to trace these influences separated by the barriers of time, culture, and language. Leppin’s chapter on Luther’s development of *Solus Christus* in relation to medieval piety and mysticism in view of the *Heidelberg Disputation* is yet informative. See, Volker Leppin. *Sola: Christ, Grace, Faith, and Scripture Alone in Martin Luther’s Theology* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2024).

and famously so, not wanting to limit the theology of the cross to a particular period of Luther's thinking, "In opposition to this view we defend the thesis that the theology of the cross is a principle of Luther's entire theology, and it may not be confined to a special period in his theological development. On the contrary, as in the case of Paul, this formula offers a characteristic of Luther's entire theological thinking."<sup>14</sup>

On what basis does Loewenich come to this conclusion? First, Loewenich does not believe that the Heidelberg Disputation can or should be attributed to the pre-Reformation Luther, "This disputation belongs to the clearest and most basic statements of Luther in our possession." Second, Loewenich is convinced that the task required is the one that has been neglected, that is, we need to study Luther's statements on the theology of the cross more carefully in order to get "a reasonably correct picture of the concept of the theology of the cross." And third, he argues that we are missing the point if we attribute the theology of the cross to the pre-reformational – and therefore monkish ideal of humility – at the expense of understanding the connection of the *theologia crucis* to revelation and knowledge. Loewenich sums up, "It follows then that in Luther's theology of the cross we are not dealing with paraphrases of the monkish ideal of humility, but with a distinctive principle of theological knowledge that corresponds exactly to the apostle Paul's theology of the cross."<sup>15</sup>

It is appropriate to make the point here, that the theology of the cross is neither merely about the atonement, nor the person and work of Christ. Yes, it includes these vital elements, but it is not solely focused on them. When Luther coined this phrase as a young man at Heidelberg, he was using this as a framework to distinguish between a true and false theology, a true and false church, a true and false gospel. Importantly, for Luther, the theology of the cross was not only about getting the gospel right – something he was absolutely concerned to do. But Luther knew that to get the gospel right, he had to get the basic principle of epistemology right. Without the correct epistemology, it does not matter what 'gospel' one comes up with, it is necessarily going to be wrong, it is necessarily going to be a theology of [self] glory. Epistemology is important in Luther's context because of the influence that Aristotle and other human-centred

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14 von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 12–13.

15 Loewenich continues, "Once one has recognized this and then reads a later writing of Luther's (e.g. *The Bondage of the Will*), one notices that the same principle of knowledge is applied there, too, consciously or unconsciously, hiddenly or openly." See von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 13.

philosophies would have on the gospel.<sup>16</sup> When and how did/does God reveal Himself? This then leads to the question of authority. We can only speak from any authority when we can know what we know, is true. This is why, as Loewenich points out, the work of Christ for Luther is only part of the theology of the cross:

The doctrine concerning the work of Christ is [...] the Innermost sanctuary of theology for him. Yet this is not what Luther had in mind in his early years when he chose to label his theology the theology of the cross. For Luther the cross is not only the subject of theology; it is the distinctive mark of all theology. It has its place not only in the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, but it constitutes an integrating element for all Christian knowledge. The theology of the cross is not a chapter in theology but a specific kind of theology. The cross of Christ is significant here not only for the question concerning redemption and the certainty of salvation, but it is the center that provides perspective for all theological statements. Hence it belongs to the doctrine of God in the same way as it belongs to the doctrine of the work of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Loewenich makes a bold assertion that as the theology of the cross is not limited to a particular point of time for Luther, likewise it is not limited to a particular topic of theology. This seems to be the case, in Loewenich's mind, because the theology of the cross relates fundamentally to revelation and thus has epistemological implications for all theology. If understood in terms of revelation this of course makes sense but if understood in terms of the cross one is immediately drawn to the event of the cross (i.e., the work of Christ) rather than what the cross says about God. Yet, if one gets God's revelation wrong, then the doctrine of salvation is necessarily on shaky ground. In order to address the gospel of the pelagianising scholastics, one must first address their epistemology otherwise both sides of the debate will be arguing their case from different pages. Of course, revelation does not just inform the gospel, revelation informs all theology. This means it has to have a broader impact on all theological undertakings without limiting it a few topics here and there, thus, "There is no dogmatic topic conceivable for which the cross is not the point of reference."<sup>18</sup> However, it should not be forgotten in the recognition of this point that arguably in Luther's mind the reason to get the epistemology correct in the first place – while recognising its impact on all theology – was to get the gospel

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16 Whether one is reacting to a form of semi-Pelagianism or to the negative influence (misapplication) of Aristotle's *Ethics* in theology, the question of 'how do we know what we know' remains crucial to determining the truth of any gospel claim.

17 von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 17–18.

18 von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, 18.

right.<sup>19</sup> The evident correlation here should not be missed, the material and formal cause of the Reformation are present. The debate over the gospel (material cause) inevitably led to the debates over authority, Scripture and revelation (formal cause).

Loewenich would lament that the theology of the cross has been ignored or even deliberately pushed aside in the Lutheran church. In fact, the Lutheran church had surrendered this theology “all too quickly.” Thus, “the theology of glory that Luther opposed has made a triumphal entry also into his church. One occasionally wonders whether the doctrine concerning the cross has not even been forced to pay tribute to this theology of glory.”<sup>20</sup>

This conviction is thus the impetus for Loewenich to assert the relevance of the theology of the cross and why he argued for its applicability throughout Luther’s life and the necessity for it in the church of his own day. He sought to rescue the theology of the cross from the abyss of time and ignorance. He knew, probably too well, the paucity of the exact phrase in Luther’s later writings. But this did not stop him initiating the ‘revival’ of the theology of the cross he was keenly seeking. He refused to throw the theologian of the cross out as a product of mysticism or monasticism while acknowledging their influence, “Neither the mystical doctrine of salvation nor the monkish ideal of humility provides an explanation for the distinctiveness of Luther’s theology of the cross. Though it may have been affected by them, it stands as his own structure in direct antithesis to both sides.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, he refused to dismiss the theology of the cross as a pre-reformational construct, “The result of this investigation is for us an indirect proof that the theology of the cross does not constitute the pre-reformation first stage of Luther’s real theology, but that, on the contrary, it must be reckoned as a mark of Luther’s total theological thought.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, his early twentieth-century conclusion was this, “We have designated the theology of the cross as something that impinges on Luther’s total theology [...] ‘The cross puts everything to the test. Blessed is he who understands.’”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Loewenich can be rightly credited for bringing the theology of the cross into the focus of twentieth-century theologians. Many theologians then

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19 This point cannot be overemphasised. Loewenich was right to assert that the theology of the cross is not *just* about the doctrine of the work of Christ, but it nevertheless was about getting the work of Christ right. Forgetting this point might explain some of the aberrations of the theology of the cross if it only becomes about revelation.

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

21 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 166.

22 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 166.

23 von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross*, 167.