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The Paradox of the Cross: Divine Wisdom, Life Transformation, the Call to Faith, and Societal Transformation

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Abstract

Salib merupakan pusat teologi Kristen, mewujudkan paradoks ilahi di mana kelemahan menjadi kekuatan, kehinaan berujung pada kemuliaan, dan kematian mendatangkan kehidupan. Kajian ini menelaah Salib sebagai sarana keselamatan sekaligus model kehidupan Kristen, dengan menekankan hikmat ilahi, transformasi pribadi, iman, dan dampaknya terhadap masyarakat. Melalui analisis isi terhadap teks-teks biblika dan literatur teologi, penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa penyaliban Kristus tidak hanya membawa penebusan, tetapi juga menuntut pembaruan pikiran, kasih, dan pengorbanan diri. Salib menentang nilai-nilai duniawi, menegaskan bahwa kebesaran sejati terletak pada kerendahan hati, pelayanan, dan keadilan. Lebih dari sekadar keselamatan individu, Salib menyerukan pembaruan masyarakat, mengajak setiap orang percaya untuk hidup dalam ketaatan, kasih, dan tanggung jawab terhadap sesama.

Abstrak

The Cross is central to Christian theology, embodying the divine paradox where weakness becomes strength, disgrace leads to glory, and death brings life. This study examines the Cross as both the means of salvation and the model for Christian living, highlighting divine wisdom, personal transformation, faith, and societal impact. Through content analysis of biblical texts and theological literature, it reveals that Christ's crucifixion not only redeems but also demands renewal of the mind, love, and self-sacrifice. The Cross subverts worldly values, affirming that true greatness lies in humility, service, and justice. Beyond individual salvation, it calls for societal renewal, urging believers to live in obedience, love, and responsibility towards others.

INTRODUCTION

At the very center of the Christian faith stands the Cross—*ho stauros* (ὁ σταυρός)—an enduring emblem of salvation, yet also a profound theological paradox. It embodies divine wisdom that subverts human expectations: transforming weakness into strength, suffering into redemption, and death into life. As the apostle Paul boldly declares, *ho logos ho tou staurou mōria estin tois apollymenois, tois de sōzomenois hēmin dynamis Theou estin* (ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ μωρία ἐστὶν τοῖς ἀπολλυμένοις, τοῖς δὲ σωζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις Θεοῦ ἐστίν) – "the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). This statement unveils the central tension this article aims to address: the paradox between the apparent absurdity of the Cross in the eyes of the world and its place as the very locus of God's redemptive wisdom and transformative power.

The central problem explored in this study concerns how a brutal instrument of Roman execution can serve as a divine revelation and a catalyst for both personal sanctification and social renewal. How can *ho stauros* (ὁ σταυρός), viewed as *mōria* (μωρία, "folly") or *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον, "stumbling block") by its first-century audience (1 Cor. 1:23), be proclaimed as the wisdom and power of the living God? This paradox, rather than weakening the Christian proclamation, becomes its very strength and uniqueness, compelling a reconsideration of what it means to live by faith, to be transformed, and to bear witness to divine truth in a broken world.

Christian theology affirms that Christ's crucifixion—far from being a tragic defeat—is the means by which God accomplishes reconciliation. As Isaiah prophesied concerning the 'ebed YHWH (עֶבֶד יְהוָה, "Servant of the LORD"), *mechōlaleinu hū' meholal* (מְחֹלָל מִפְּשָׁעֵנוּ, "he was pierced for our transgressions") (Isa. 53:5), so Christ embodies this suffering role through voluntary self-offering. Stott (2006) affirms the penal substitutionary atonement model, in which Christ bears the divine penalty on behalf of sinners, thereby satisfying both justice and mercy. Ridderbos (1975) sees the Cross not only in individualistic terms but also as the inauguration of cosmic renewal. Wright (2013) further argues that it marks the enthronement of Christ as King, establishing God's kingdom not through domination but through humility, sacrifice, and resurrection.

This article employs content analysis of biblical and theological texts to explore how the Cross informs Christian faith, personal transformation, and societal engagement. Paul urges believers to present their bodies as *thysia zōsa* (θυσία ζῶσα, "a living sacrifice") and to be transformed (*metamorphousthe*, μεταμορφοῦσθε) by the renewing of the mind (*anakainōsei tou noos*, ἀνακαινώσει τοῦ νοός) (Rom. 12:1–2). This sacrificial posture reflects a radical reorientation of thought and practice, grounded in the logic of the Cross.

Furthermore, the Cross summons the Church to embody its message not only in private piety but in public witness. It calls for a society shaped by *chesed* (חֶסֶד, "steadfast love"), *mishpat* (מִשְׁפָּט, "justice"), and *diakonia* (διακονία, "service or ministry"). The self-giving nature of the crucified Messiah reframes worldly values, asserting that greatness is found not in status but in servanthood (Mark 10:43–45).

In a world grappling with existential confusion, moral fragmentation, and spiritual hunger, the Cross stands as *sophia Theou* (σοφία Θεοῦ, "the wisdom of God"), revealing a divine logic that redefines life, power, and purpose. This study contends that the Cross is not merely a symbol of past atonement but a present and ongoing call to discipleship, transformation, and cultural engagement rooted in the self-emptying love (*kenōsis*, κένωσις) of Christ (Phil. 2:6–8; Mawikere, et. al, 2024).

The novelty of this study resides in its holistic theological synthesis, which explores the paradox of the Cross not merely as a doctrinal point of atonement, but as the guiding principle of divine wisdom (*sophia Theou*, σοφία Θεοῦ), transformative faith (*pistis*, πίστις), and redemptive praxis within both the life of the believer and the wider society. Distinct from conventional approaches that treat the crucifixion predominantly within soteriological or ecclesiological boundaries, this research elucidates *ho stauros* (ὁ σταυρός) as the pivotal axis through which divine logic reorients human understanding, renews ethical identity, and reshapes communal life. By foregrounding the paradoxical nature of *mōria* (μωρία) and its role in unveiling God's power and purpose, this article offers an original theological framework that links the Cross to ongoing life transformation, vocational discipleship, and socio-cultural renewal. Thus, it proposes that authentic Christian witness in the contemporary world must recover the cruciform pattern not only in belief but in being, in ecclesial mission as well as public engagement, thereby advancing a paradigm of faithfulness rooted in kenotic love and cruciform wisdom.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach through content analysis of theological literature, examining the paradox of the Cross, divine wisdom, life transformation, faith, and societal renewal in Christian theology. This method enables an in-depth exploration of biblical and theological perspectives, drawing from Scripture, commentaries, and works by scholars such as John Stott, N. T. Wright, D. A. Carson, Herman Ridderbos, Thomas Schreiner, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

Primary sources include biblical texts central to the doctrine of the Cross, such as 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, Romans 12:1–2, and Philippians 2:6–11. The study also incorporates theological discourse on salvation, Christ's suffering, and the broader implications of His sacrifice beyond personal redemption to societal transformation.

A dual descriptive and interpretative analysis is employed: descriptive analysis identifies key themes such as the paradox of the Cross, the contrast between divine wisdom and human reasoning, and the Cross as a foundation for transformation. Interpretative analysis then situates these themes within systematic theology, assessing their practical significance for Christian life.

To ensure academic rigour, a comparative approach evaluates diverse theological perspectives, integrating biblical, historical, and systematic viewpoints. Finally, an interpretative synthesis addresses core research questions: how the Cross embodies divine wisdom, fosters transformation, and shapes Christian living. This synthesis, grounded in scriptural exegesis and theological scholarship, underscores the Cross's profound significance in Christian thought and practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Theological Significance of the Cross in Christianity

The Cross (σταυρός/*staurós*, צֶלֶב/*tsalav*, *crux*) stands at the heart of Christian theology, representing the foundation of salvation. Christ's sacrificial death fulfilled God's redemptive plan, as foretold in Isaiah 53:5–6 and affirmed in Romans 5:8 (Carson, 1994, p. 231; Morris, 2001, p. 121). More than a historical event, the crucifixion is the means by which humanity is reconciled to God, as Hebrews 9:22 declares that without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins (Grudem, 1994, p. 579).

New Testament theology presents redemption through three Greek terms: ἀγοράζω/*agorázō* (1 Corinthians 6:20), denoting purchase from sin's bondage (Louw & Nida, 1989, p. 486); ἐξαγοράζω/*exagorázō* (Galatians 3:13), signifying complete liberation (Bruce, 1982, p. 151); and λυτρόω/*lutróō* (1 Peter 1:18), highlighting Christ's blood as the price of freedom (Marshall, 2004, p. 417). Penal substitution further clarifies this, wherein Christ bore divine wrath in place of sinners (2 Corinthians 5:21; Stott, 2006, p. 202; Schreiner, 2015, p. 213), fulfilling the Old Testament sacrificial system (John 1:29; Ridderbos, 1975, p. 289).

Salvation, rooted solely in divine grace, is not the result of human effort (Ephesians 2:8–9; Piper, 2011, p. 94). Martin Luther encapsulated this in *Crux sola est nostra theologia*—"The Cross alone is our theology" (Luther, 1535, p. 32). However, the message of the Cross remains a paradox: while the world deems it foolishness, it is the power of God to those being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18; Wright, 2007, p. 167).

Christologically, the Cross affirms both Christ's humanity and divinity—His suffering as a man and His authority over life and death (John 10:18). Ethically, it demands discipleship through self-denial (Luke 9:23), shaping Christian life beyond mere salvation to imitation of Christ's sacrifice. Historically, it has been a source of hope amid suffering, demonstrating God's strength in weakness. Eschatologically, Revelation 5:12 presents the slain Lamb as the center of heavenly worship, signifying that Christ's work extends beyond history into eternity.

Thus, the Cross is not merely a symbol of suffering but the culmination of God's salvific plan, embodying His justice, love, and transformative power. It calls believers to abandon self-interest, embrace divine grace, and reflect Christ's love in daily life. True Christian living is not driven by worldly ambition but by obedience to God, self-sacrificial love, and the proclamation of the Gospel to the world.

The Mystery of the Cross: God's Wisdom Beyond Human Logic

The Cross, while appearing irrational to the natural mind, reveals the supreme *sophia Theou* (σοφία Θεοῦ)—the wisdom of God that transcends and subverts conventional human expectations. The apostle Paul proclaims that the *kērygma tou staurou* (κήρυγμα τοῦ σταυροῦ, "proclamation of the Cross") is a *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον, "stumbling block") to the Jews and *mōria* (μωρία, "foolishness") to the Greeks; yet to those who are called, it is both *dynamis* (δύναμις,

"power") and *sophia* of God (1 Cor. 1:23–24). This theological paradox challenges all anthropocentric notions of religion, justice, and divine-human interaction (Fee, 1987, p. 82).

Contrary to ancient sacrificial systems that sought to appease the divine through human-initiated offerings, the Cross inverts this trajectory: it is God Himself who provides the atoning sacrifice. The Epistle to the Hebrews declares that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10), indicating that the priestly work of Christ supersedes the Levitical sacrifices. He enters the heavenly *hagion* (ἅγιον, "sanctuary") not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood, securing *aiōnian lytrosin* (αἰώνιον λύτρωσιν, "eternal redemption") (Heb. 9:12–14; Beale, 2011, p. 412).

This sacrificial act is not a matter of appeasing divine wrath in the pagan sense, but a demonstration of God's justice and love. Paul writes that God set forth Christ as *hilastērion* (ἱλαστήριον, Rom. 3:25)—a term that evokes the mercy seat (*kappōret*, כַּפֹּרֶת) in the Holy of Holies. While traditionally rendered "propitiation", the term here is best understood as "atoning sacrifice" or "place of reconciliation", wherein divine justice is not nullified but fulfilled through grace (cf. Packer, 1973, p. 174; Schreiner, 2015, p. 213).

Furthermore, divine pleasure in the redemptive act is not arbitrary nor sadistic. Isaiah 53:10 declares, *"the LORD was pleased to crush him"* (*vaYHWH chāfētz dakkō*, וַיהוָה חָפֵץ דַּכְּאוֹ), using the Hebrew *chāfētz* (חָפֵץ)—meaning "delighted" or "willed". This pleasure does not denote emotional gratification in suffering, but rather God's sovereign resolve to redeem through the self-offering of the Servant (Harris, 1999, p. 145). The corresponding Hebrew term *ratsah* (רָצָה, "to be pleased, to accept") expresses divine acceptance of the sacrifice within the covenantal framework.

In theological terms, this act reveals God's moral coherence: justice is satisfied, but through love rather than retribution. The crucified Christ simultaneously bears the cost of sin and unveils the depths of divine mercy. The wisdom of God is thus not abstract but incarnational, embodied in the suffering Saviour who redefines what it means to be powerful, righteous, and divine.

The Cross also subverts worldly conceptions of power and status. While human empires dominate through violence, the Messiah—being *en morphē Theou* (ἐν μορφῇ Θεοῦ, "in the form of God")—chooses *kenōsis* (κένωσις, "self-emptying") and embraces *tapeinōsis* (ταπείνωσις, "humiliation") (Phil. 2:6–8). The *kenotic* path is not a loss of divinity, but its perfect expression. As the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, Christ is described as *mechōlaleinu hū' meholal* (מְחֹלָל מִפְּשָׁעֵינוּ, "he was pierced for our transgressions")—a substitutionary bearing of sin that redefines glory as vulnerability and leadership as service.

This paradoxical exaltation through humiliation is the very heart of Christian discipleship. Philippians 2:8–9 underscores that Christ was exalted *because* He humbled Himself, even to death on a Cross—a form of execution associated with shame (Silva, 2005, p. 184). Isaiah 55:8–9 further affirms the incomprehensibility of divine logic: *"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways"* (Bird, 2014, p. 329). The Cross is not anti-logic, but trans-logic—it transcends and redeems flawed human reasoning.

In juridical terms, the Cross satisfies the moral order of the universe. Sin is neither ignored nor dismissed but dealt with decisively. Christ, as *hilastērion*, is both the one judged and the

justifier (Rom. 3:26). Simultaneously, its eschatological import is evident in Revelation 5:12, where the *arnion esphagmenon* (ἀρνίον ἐσφαγμένον, "slain Lamb") is worshipped in heaven. This indicates that the Cross is not a transient historical anomaly, but an eternal revelation of divine character.

Historically, this message has remained offensive to both Jewish and Hellenistic audiences. The expectation of a militaristic, conquering Messiah clashed with the reality of a crucified Christ, just as the Greek admiration for philosophical coherence was affronted by the scandal of divine suffering. Nevertheless, Paul insists, *"the word of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"* (1 Cor. 1:18; Wright, 2007, p. 167). It is a wisdom that dismantles pride and unveils a kingdom founded not on coercion, but on cruciform love.

Accordingly, the Cross is not a static relic of the past but an ever-present summons to *pistis* (πίστις, "faith"), *hypakoē* (ὑπακοή, "obedience"), and *agapē* (ἀγάπη, "sacrificial love"). Christ's words, *"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily"* (Luke 9:23), invite a lifestyle of kenotic discipleship. The Greek *arneisthō* (ἀρνησάσθω, "let him deny") connotes a decisive break with ego-driven ambition, while *airatō ton stauron autou* (ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ, "let him take up his cross") signals a radical commitment to the cruciform path.

To follow Christ in this manner is to embrace a new epistemology. True strength is discovered in acknowledged weakness (2 Cor. 12:9–10); true victory emerges through obedience (Phil. 2:8); true life is unveiled in the death of self (Matt. 16:25). The *sarx* (σάρξ, "flesh") must be crucified, that the life of Christ may be formed in the believer (Gal. 2:20). This is not metaphorical alone but transformative, involving the renewal of mind, affections, and social imagination.

Ultimately, the Cross is God's enduring wisdom—*sophia mystēriou* (σοφία μυστηρίου), "the wisdom of the mystery" (1 Cor. 2:7)—discerned not through intellectual prowess but through faith and Spirit-enabled perception. It is a paradox that confounds yet redeems, offends yet liberates. It is both a historical act and an existential invitation—calling humanity into the redemptive logic of divine love.

The Paradox of the Cross from a Theological Perspective

The crucifixion of Christ presents profound paradoxes that challenge human notions of power, wisdom, and salvation. A striking example is the confession of a Roman centurion at the cross: "Truly, this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39; France, 2002, p. 658). This contrasts with Peter's earlier declaration of Jesus as the Messiah (Matthew 16:16; Nolland, 2005, p. 673), yet Peter opposed Christ's path to the cross and was rebuked (Matthew 16:21–23; France, 2007, p. 631). The paradox lies in a disciple resisting the cross while an executioner comes to faith, illustrating that true understanding of Christ goes beyond verbal confession (Carson, 1995, p. 374).

Those most familiar with God's law—the Pharisees and scribes—were the very ones who rejected Him (Bock, 1996, p. 143). Meanwhile, former enemies of Christ, such as Paul, were transformed into His greatest witnesses (Acts 9:1–5; Dunn, 2006, p. 210). Paul later proclaimed

that the cross, seen as foolishness by the world, is the power of God for those being saved (1 Corinthians 1:18; Thiselton, 2000, p. 143).

Many Jews rejected Jesus because they expected a political liberator, not a suffering servant (Isaiah 53:3–5; Goldingay, 2006, p. 242). Thus, the cross became a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23; Fee, 1987, p. 93). Yet, in suffering, Christ achieved ultimate victory—His humiliating death triumphed over sin and death (Colossians 2:14–15; Beale, 2011, p. 410). The cross, an instrument of shame, became the means of glory and salvation (Marshall, 2004, p. 417).

Ironically, Jesus was mocked as "King of the Jews" (Mark 15:26; Witherington, 2001, p. 398), yet He truly reigns as the sovereign King (Philippians 2:9–11; Silva, 2005, p. 185). The cross overturns human expectations—true strength is revealed in weakness, true victory in suffering, and true life in death (John 12:24–25; Bauckham, 1998, p. 276).

God's wisdom, as Isaiah 55:8–9 affirms, surpasses human understanding (Bird, 2014, p. 329). Salvation comes not through human power but through Christ's self-giving (2 Corinthians 12:9–10; Harris, 1999, p. 153). To follow Christ means embracing this paradox: losing one's life to gain it (Matthew 16:25; Moo, 1996, p. 372).

The cross is not merely a past event but a call to faith, obedience, and sacrifice. It demands more than verbal assent—it requires a life aligned with Christ's redemptive mission. What the world sees as failure is, in reality, God's ultimate triumph.

The Paradox of Jesus: The Perfectly Humiliated King

Mark's Gospel presents the crucifixion as a paradox: the sovereign King endures utter humiliation. Jesus is mocked by four groups—Roman soldiers, passersby, religious leaders, and even the crucified criminals—each unknowingly affirming His true identity (Mark 15:16–32; 1 Corinthians 1:23–24; Fee, 1987, p. 93).

The Roman soldiers initiate the mockery, staging a cruel parody of a royal coronation. They clothe Jesus in purple, crown Him with thorns, and sarcastically hail Him as King (Mark 15:17–19; Beale, 2011, p. 410). Though intended as ridicule, their actions ironically affirm His true kingship (Philippians 2:9–11; Silva, 2005, p. 185). Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry the cross, an act resembling royal processions, yet here, it accompanies a condemned man (Mark 15:21; Isaiah 53:3–5; Goldingay, 2006, p. 242). Even the soldiers' division of His garments **aligns with** prophecy (Psalm 22:18; Marshall, 2004, p. 417).

Passersby take part in, distorting His words about the temple and challenging Him to save Himself (Mark 15:29–30). Their scorn mirrors Satan's temptation, which Jesus had already rejected (Matthew 4:3, 6; France, 2007, p. 631). The religious leaders mock Him, declaring, "He saved others; He cannot save Himself" (Mark 15:31–32), failing to grasp that His very refusal to escape death secures salvation (Isaiah 55:8–9; Bird, 2014, p. 329). Even the criminals crucified beside Him partake in the derision, highlighting the completeness of His rejection (Mark 15:32; Psalm 22:6–8; Harris, 1999, p. 145).

Yet, this humiliation is precisely what accomplishes His mission. Jesus had foretold this suffering (Mark 10:34), and Paul later affirms its paradox: the cross, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Greeks, is God's wisdom and power (1 Corinthians 1:23–24; Stott, 2006, p. 202). The cross, once a symbol of shame, becomes His throne. Through suffering, Christ reigns, offering salvation to all who believe.

The Cross and the Paradox of the Messiah

The cross stands at the heart of Christianity, yet it remains a stumbling block for many (1 Corinthians 1:23–24; Fee, 1987, p. 93). It defies human expectations, revealing victory through suffering and glory in humiliation. This paradox is evident in the Emmaus narrative (Luke 24:13–35), where two disciples, disillusioned by Jesus' crucifixion, fail to grasp that His suffering was essential to His mission (Luke 24:21; France, 2002, p. 950).

Their disappointment stems from a limited view of the Messiah as a political liberator, not the suffering servant foretold in Scripture (Isaiah 53:3–5; Goldingay, 2006, p. 512). When Jesus joins them, they do not identify Him, as 'their eyes were kept from recognising Him' (Luke 24:16), representing spiritual blindness. He rebukes them as 'foolish' (anoētoi), a term denoting an inability to grasp divine truth (Luke 24:25; Bock, 1996, p. 1221). He then explains that the Messiah's suffering and resurrection were prefigured throughout the Law, Prophets, and Writings (Luke 24:26–27; Marshall, 2004, p. 1228).

True understanding comes when Jesus breaks bread, recalling the Last Supper (Luke 22:19–20), at which point "their eyes were opened" (Luke 24:30–31). This encounter not only reveals Christ's identity but compels them to proclaim His resurrection (Luke 24:33–35; Wright, 2013, p. 176). Their journey illustrates that faith is not based on human expectations but on divine revelation through Scripture (John 16:13; Carson, 1995, p. 674).

The Emmaus account affirms that discerning Christ requires embracing the cross, not as defeat but as the path to redemption. Salvation is entirely God's initiative—Jesus seeks the disciples, explains the Scriptures, and opens their eyes (Ephesians 2:8–9; Piper, 2011, p. 94). This truth remains relevant today: only through faith can one understand the mystery of the cross. Those who embrace it live not in disappointment but in the certainty of the risen Christ, compelled to proclaim His victory.

Life Transformation in the Light of the Cross

Pauline theology extends beyond justification by faith to encompass the transformative power of God's grace. In *Romans* 1–11, Paul expounds salvation through faith in Christ (Romans 3:23–24; Dunn, 1988, p. 214), and in *Romans* 12–16, he sets forth its practical implications. Central to this is *Romans* 12:1–8, where Paul calls believers to present themselves as "living sacrifices" in response to God's mercy.

True worship, Paul argues, is not ritualistic but a total surrender of life (Romans 12:1; Schreiner, 1998, p. 642). This entails rejecting worldly conformity and undergoing renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2), which enables discernment of God's will (Barrett, 1991, p. 301).

Transformation is not simply moral improvement but a reorientation of identity, shaped by Christ's self-sacrifice.

Paul warns against pride, urging believers to think with "sober judgment" according to the faith God has allotted (Romans 12:3; Hodge, 1886, p. 412). He likens the church to a body, where each member has distinct but complementary gifts (Romans 12:4–5; Calvin, 1540, p. 215). Spiritual gifts—prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and mercy—must be exercised with humility and diligence (Romans 12:6–8; Lloyd-Jones, 1973, p. 487).

A transformed life finds meaning not in personal ambition but in serving God and others. Worship extends beyond the church into daily life, reflecting Christ's love in every sphere. The church, in contrast to the world's individualism, is called to unity and mutual edification.

Paul's teaching affirms that salvation is not merely forgiveness but a call to a life of sacrifice, service, and spiritual renewal. The cross is both the means of redemption and the model for Christian living. In embodying its principles, believers grow spiritually, strengthen the church, and become a witness to the world. Transformation in the light of the cross is a lifelong journey—one marked by obedience, love, and a steadfast commitment to God's perfect will.

The Paradox of the Cross and Life Transformation: The Call to Faith in God's Wisdom

The Cross stands as the definitive symbol of divine paradox: an instrument of death transformed into the wellspring of life, humiliation transfigured into glory, and apparent folly revealed as ultimate wisdom. Paul's bold proclamation—"For the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18)—highlights this tension. The term rendered "foolishness" is the Greek *mōria* (μωρία), which does not merely denote lack of intelligence or absurdity, but connotes something scandalously offensive, even contemptible, to conventional rationality and cultural expectations (Thiselton, 2000, p. 161). In its classical usage, *mōria* was reserved for what was irrational or debased; yet Paul repurposes the term to expose the chasm between human wisdom and divine revelation (Fee, 1987, p. 82).

This is no incidental linguistic flourish. The apostle's rhetorical strategy juxtaposes ho logos tou staurou (ὁ λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ, 'the word of the cross') with both Greek sophia (σοφία, 'wisdom') and Jewish expectation of sēmeion (σημεῖον, 'sign') (1 Cor. 1:22). To both audiences, the idea of a crucified Messiah is a contradiction in terms—either offensive (skandalon, σκάνδαλον) or nonsensical (mōria). Yet Paul asserts that this very contradiction is the key to God's saving power (dynamis Theou, δύναμις Θεοῦ). It is not that God's ways are unintelligible, but rather that they operate on a plane that subverts and transcends the world's categories of greatness, power, and logic (Ridderbos, 1975, p. 203).

To embrace the Cross, then, is to adopt an epistemological and ethical realignment—a reorientation through pistis (πίστις, 'faith'), which in the Pauline corpus encompasses trust, allegiance, and obedience. This faith is not a leap into irrationality but an assent to divine logic—sophia Theou (σοφία Θεοῦ)—that stands in critique of human autonomy and pride. As Paul declares, 'the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men'

(1 Cor. 1:25), not to assert divine deficiency, but to expose the inversion of worldly paradigms (Wright, 2013, p. 176).

This paradox is not merely theological but transformational. The Cross reconstitutes the believer's identity and vocation. In Romans 12:1–2, Paul exhorts believers to become *thysia zōsa* (θυσία ζῶσα, "a living sacrifice"), indicating a mode of existence marked by surrender, not self-assertion. This living sacrifice entails the *anakainōsis tou noos* (ἀνακαίνωσις τοῦ νοός, "renewal of the mind"), enabling discernment of *to thelēma tou Theou* (τὸ θέλημα τοῦ Θεοῦ, "the will of God") (Schreiner, 1998, p. 642). Transformation is not an abstract ideal but the outcome of embodied faith—faith that manifests itself in a cruciform life.

Christ exemplified this path through *kenōsis* (κένωσις, "self-emptying"), becoming *hypēkoos mechri thanatou* (ὑπήκοος μέχρι θανάτου, "obedient unto death") on the Cross (Phil. 2:8). His obedience redefines discipleship as a journey of surrender rather than ambition. For believers, to live is to echo this obedience—to be *synestaurōmai tō Christō* (συνεσταύρωμαι τῷ Χριστῷ, "crucified with Christ")—as Paul asserts in Galatians 2:20. Christian life is thus not about self-realisation but about death to the self in union with the risen Christ.

Faith in the Cross is therefore not passive assent to doctrine but active *martyria* (μαρτυρία, "witness"). The imperatives in Luke 9:23—*arneisthō heauton* (ἀρνησάσθω ἑαυτόν, "let him deny himself") and *airatō ton stauron autou* (ἀράτω τὸν σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ, "let him take up his cross")—suggest not one-time acts but a lifelong posture of self-denial and allegiance to Christ's mission. As Bonhoeffer famously observed, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die" (Bonhoeffer, 1959, p. 89).

This continual renewal (*anakainōsis*) unfolds within a communal context. The believer is not isolated but incorporated into the *sōma Christou* (σῶμα Χριστοῦ, "body of Christ"), where each member contributes through divinely given *charismata* (χαρίσματα, "gifts") to the flourishing of the whole (1 Cor. 12:4–27). The paradox of the Cross thus extends to ecclesiology: strength is made perfect in weakness, unity arises from diversity, and leadership is exercised through humble service (Calvin, 1540, p. 215).

Consequently, the Cross does not only mark the historical axis of salvation but also the ethical blueprint for Christian life. As John Piper aptly notes, salvation "is not the end but the beginning of continual renewal" (Piper, 2011, p. 94). This process of sanctification is dynamic and progressive—a daily dying and rising that conforms the believer to Christ's image, not by force of will, but by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:29; Titus 3:5).

Furthermore, the Cross reorients one's telos (τέλος, 'end' or 'goal') away from self-interest toward Christlikeness. This is agapē (ἀγάπη)—divine love—not merely as sentiment but as enacted fidelity. As Paul states, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Cor. 5:17), a reality inaugurated at the Cross and fulfilled in ongoing transformation (Wright, 2013, p. 152)

In sum, the *mōria* (μωρία) of the Cross is not an unfortunate misperception but a deliberate divine strategy. Its power lies precisely in its paradox: through shame comes glory, through weakness, strength, and through death, life eternal. Faith in this paradox is the beginning of a lifelong journey—a continual *metanoia* (μετάνοια, "repentance") that redefines not only belief,

but being. It is a call to embody the Gospel in a world that still finds the Cross absurd—yet it is precisely through this *logos tou staurou* that God's wisdom is made known, not just to the Church, but to the world (1 Cor. 1:21).

The Cross of Christ and Societal Transformation

At the heart of Christian theology stands *ho stauros* (ὁ σταυρός)—the Cross of Christ—an event and symbol that not only accomplishes reconciliation with God but also inaugurates a radical redefinition of power, wisdom, justice, and communal life. Far from being a merely personal or abstract theological concept, the Cross embodies a paradox that calls for deep ethical and societal implications: *mōria* (μωρία, "foolishness") to the world, yet *dynamis Theou* (δύναμις Θεοῦ, "the power of God") to those who believe (1 Cor. 1:18). As Stott (2006, p. 77) observes, the Cross subverts human expectations and becomes the divine strategy through which suffering yields victory, weakness reveals strength, and death gives way to eternal life.

The Cross reshapes the Church's engagement with society by offering an alternative vision of justice and leadership, rooted not in dominance or coercion but in *kenōsis* (κένωσις, "self-emptying") and sacrificial love (Phil. 2:6–8). As Wright (2013, p. 145) argues, the crucifixion is not simply the means of personal redemption, but the very center of God's redefinition of power and kingdom rule. The ethical outworking of this cruciform logic summons believers to a life of humility, solidarity with the oppressed, and active participation in societal renewal.

In Pauline theology, the Cross critiques worldly systems of hierarchy and exclusion. Paul insists that through the death of Christ, the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down, creating *hen kainon anthrōpon* (ἕνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον, "one new humanity") (Eph. 2:14–16). This vision calls the Church to be a reconciled and reconciling community that transcends ethnic, social, and economic boundaries (Bruce, 1982, p. 156). The early Church demonstrated this by living out a communal ethic of generosity and equity, where none were in need (Acts 2:42–47; Bird, 2014, p. 289), an example that challenges modern societal structures governed by consumerism, individualism, and systemic inequality.

Furthermore, the Cross redefines leadership as service. Jesus declared that true greatness lies in becoming *diakonos* (διάκονος, "servant") and that the Son of Man came *ou diakonēthēnai alla diakonēsai* (οὐ διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι)—"not to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). In contrast to Roman imperial notions of *exousia* (ἐξουσία, "authority"), Christ models a cruciform authority grounded in humility and compassion (Ridderbos, 1975, p. 89; Packer, 1973, p. 215). This has significant implications for Christian public engagement, calling for leadership marked by integrity, justice, and empathy.

The transformative power of the Cross also extends to ethics and public morality. Romans 12:1–2 urges believers to present themselves as *thysia zōsa* (θυσία ζῶσα, "a living sacrifice") and to experience *metamorphōsis* (μεταμόρφωσις, "transformation") through the renewal of the mind (*anakainōsis tou noos*, ἀνακαίνωσις τοῦ νοός), resisting conformity to secular ideologies (Morris, 2001, p. 202). This inner reorientation manifests outwardly in concrete actions of mercy, peacemaking, and advocacy for the vulnerable.

Moreover, the Cross offers a theological response to suffering and injustice. Rather than inciting retribution, it calls believers to embody forgiveness, reconciliation, and love for one's enemies—principles vividly expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Lloyd-Jones (1973, p. 145) highlights that these teachings emerge directly from the cruciform ethic of Christ, forming a foundation for genuine societal healing.

Crucially, the Cross functions as a divine critique of oppressive powers—both political and religious. Jesus' execution, while salvific, also exposes the corruption and violence inherent in unjust systems. As Carson (1995, p. 112) notes, the crucifixion unmasks the façade of worldly authority and invites believers into a new order shaped by truth, grace, and sacrificial action.

Throughout history, the cruciform vision has animated Christian movements advocating for human rights, abolition, education, and care for the oppressed (Hodge, 1886, p. 178). These movements reflect the ongoing power of the Cross to inspire societal transformation rooted in the Gospel.

Theologically, this article advances the understanding that the Cross is not merely a historical act of atonement but an ongoing paradigm of divine wisdom σοφία Θεοῦ (*sophia Theou*) shaping Christian identity and social ethics (Beale, 2011, p. 333). The Church, therefore, is summoned not only to preach the Cross but to embody its paradoxical logic in all spheres of life—personal, ecclesial, and societal (Schreiner, 2015, p. 241). In doing so, believers participate in God's redemptive mission, becoming instruments of transformation in a fragmented world.

In sum, societal transformation through the Cross is not an ancillary theme but a vital expression of its theological depth. It challenges power structures, reforms ethical practices, and reimagines communal life in light of divine justice and mercy. By embracing the paradox of μωρία/ *mōria*, the Church manifests the wisdom of God to a world still captivated by the illusions of power and pride.

The Cross and the Tri Dharma of Higher Education

The proclamation of the Cross must inform and animate the entire vocational framework of Christian higher education—particularly within the Indonesian **Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi**, comprising *teaching* (pendidikan), *research* (penelitian), and *community service* (pengabdian kepada masyarakat). At the heart of Christian academic vocation lies the apostolic conviction in what Paul terms the *logos tou staurou* (λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ, *the message of the cross*), which to the perishing is *mōria* (μωρία, *foolishness*), but to those being saved is *dynamis Theou* (δύναμις Θεοῦ, *the power of God*) (1 Cor 1:18).

In the dimension of teaching, Christian higher education must be governed not by the prevailing philosophies of the age but by the divine *sophia* (σοφία, *wisdom*) which has been redefined by the Cross. This wisdom is not according to the *sophia tou kosmou toutou* (σοφία τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, *wisdom of this world*) nor of the rulers of this age (1 Cor 2:6), but a *mystērion* (μυστήριον, *mystery*) long hidden and now revealed in Christ crucified. This reorientation leads to the *metamorphōsis* (μεταμόρφωσις, *transformation*) of the learner (cf. Rom 12:2; Heb: שִׁנּוּי, *shinui*)—not merely toward academic excellence but toward character and vocation formed by the

cruciform life (cf. Phil 2:5–8). The ultimate goal is *phronēma Christou* (φρόνημα Χριστοῦ, *the mind of Christ*), which produces humility, sacrificial leadership, and a life given for others (O'Brien, 1991, p. 217; Moo, 1996, p. 256).

Within the sphere of research, Christian scholarship is summoned to a radical critique of all epistemologies rooted in autonomous human reason. True knowledge flows not from *autarkeia* (αὐτάρκεια, *self-sufficiency*) but from *apokalypsis* (ἀποκάλυψις, *revelation*)—especially the paradoxical *glory* revealed in the Cross (cf. Isa 53:2–3; Heb: תִּפְאֶרֶת נִבְזָה, *tiferet nivzah*). The Cross, then, becomes both the epistemic foundation and ethical compass for research—calling Christian academics to reject the idolatry of control and efficiency (*techne*) and instead to embrace a cruciform posture of truth-seeking, marked by humility, integrity, and doxological wonder (Barth, 1956, p. 234; Beale, 2011, p. 333).

As for community engagement, the Cross offers the deepest theological rationale and ethical imperative. Jesus came οὐ διακονηθῆναι ἀλλὰ διακονῆσαι (ou diakonēthēnai alla diakonēsai)—not to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45)—and to give his life as a lytron (λύτρον, ransom) for many. The Church and Christian academy must follow this same kenotic (cf. Phil 2:7: ἐκένωσεν, ekenōsen) trajectory, not seeking dominance but embodying chesed (חֶסֶד, loving-kindness) and mishpat (מִשְׁפָּט, justice) in public life. Here, the diakonia (διακονία, ministry/service) of the academy must take the form of advocacy, peacemaking, and transformational presence among the poor, the oppressed, and the wounded (Stott, 2006, p. 82; Hodge, 1886, p. 178).

In summary, when the logos tou staurou (λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ, the word of the cross) becomes the guiding principle of teaching, research, and service, Christian higher education does not simply speak about Christ but actively participates in His agapē (ἀγάπη, love), sophia (σοφία, wisdom), and dynamis (δύναμις, power). It creates a community of scholar-disciples, not shaped by the logic of empire but by the scandalon tou staurou (σκάνδαλον τοῦ σταυροῦ, the scandal of the cross)—a community that bears faithful witness both in the academy and in society. This witness must be unwaveringly focused on the proclamation of Iēsous Christos Kyrios (Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Κύριος, Jesus Christ is Lord) and sōtēr (σωτήρ, Saviour)—the one and only hope (tiqvah aḥat, תִּקְוָה אַחַת) for societal transformation and cosmic restoration. Only in Him will all things be reconciled (Col 1:20), and only through Him will creation reach its fulfillment at His Parousia (παρουσία, coming), when He will make all things new (Rev 21:5).

CONCLUSION

The paradox of the Cross is central to Christian theology, revealing divine wisdom beyond human comprehension. While it appears as weakness and defeat in worldly terms, it embodies God's ultimate love, justice, and power. Through Christ's crucifixion, God redeems humanity and redefines true strength—demonstrating that power lies in humility, life emerges from death, and honour is found in sacrifice (Stott, 2006, p. 88).

Faith in the Cross demands more than belief; it requires a transformed life. Paul exhorts believers to offer themselves as living sacrifices, undergoing renewal by God's Spirit (Romans

12:1–2; Moo, 1996, p. 256). This transformation is not merely ethical but a fundamental reorientation of values, calling believers from self-interest to devotion, service, and love.

Beyond personal renewal, the Cross shapes the Church as a community embodying Christ's sacrificial love. It is not a gathering for personal gain but a fellowship committed to unity and mutual edification. In the light of the Cross, believers reject competition and self-exaltation, striving instead for collective growth and social justice (Lloyd-Jones, 1973, p. 165; Wright, 2013, p. 172).

The Cross also redefines greatness. In a world that prizes dominance and status, it declares that true power is found in servanthood and obedience to God. Faith in the Cross is not merely about receiving salvation but about becoming a living testimony—actively pursuing justice, peace, and compassion, reflecting God's kingdom in every aspect of life (Ridderbos, 1975, p. 103).

Ultimately, the Cross calls believers to a radically different way of life, not conforming to worldly wisdom but transforming it. Those who embrace its message become both recipients of grace and agents of change, embodying Christ's love through sacrifice, service, and obedience (Schreiner, 2015, p. 289). The Cross is not merely a historical event but an enduring reality, shaping lives, transforming communities, and bearing witness to God's redemptive power in the world today.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Christian theology, education, research, and ministry must be firmly rooted in the Cross of Christ, which redefines conventional categories of *sophia* (σοφία, "wisdom"), *dynamis* (δύναμις, "power"), and *diakonia* (διακονία, "service"). The *logos tou staurou* (λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ, "message of the Cross") stands not only as the foundation of soteriology but also as the epistemological and ethical center of all Christian vocation (1 Cor. 1:18–25; Ridderbos, 1975, p. 203).

In theological education, the Cross must not remain an abstract doctrine but must shape the entire curriculum, ensuring that theological formation results in *metamorphōsis* (μεταμόρφωσις, "transformation") of character and practice. Instruction in dogmatics, ethics, and pastoral theology must be oriented toward Christ's kenotic (κένωσις) example—fostering humility, cruciform spirituality, and sacrificial service (Phil. 2:5–8; O'Brien, 1991, p. 217). The goal is not merely intellectual mastery but the formation of disciples who embody *Christos morphōthē en hymin* (Χριστὸς μορφωθῇ ἐν ὑμῖν, "Christ formed in you") (Gal. 4:19).

Academic research, similarly, must engage with the paradox of the Cross as central to Christian thought, exploring its implications for faith, ethics, and social praxis. It should critically interrogate modern and postmodern assumptions through the lens of divine wisdom as revealed in the crucified Christ—challenging anthropocentric models of power and offering theological insights grounded in the *sophia Theou* (σοφία Θεοῦ). Such research should not shy away from public discourse but contribute constructively to pressing global concerns such as justice, reconciliation, and human dignity (Thiselton, 2000, p. 175).

Christian ministry, whether pastoral, missionary, or social, must likewise be shaped by the Cross. Rather than pursuing institutional success or worldly acclaim, the Church is called to reflect *agapē* (ἀγάπη, "divine love") through humble service, hospitality, and advocacy for the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19). The mission of the Church is inherently cruciform—marked by solidarity with the suffering, unity amidst diversity, and the pursuit of righteousness and peace (2 Cor. 5:18–20).

Christian engagement in public life must therefore reject triumphalist models of influence and instead embody *diakonia* (διακονία) in the pattern of Christ the Servant. *Archōn* (ἄρχων, "ruler") is redefined by the Cross: authority is expressed not through domination, but through foot-washing love (John 13:14). Believers are called to be *light* and *salt* (Matt. 5:13–16), bearing witness to the σοφία/*sophia* of the Cross in ways that confront injustice and nurture hope.

Ultimately, it is only by placing theology, education, and ministry at the heart of the Cross that the Church can faithfully participate in the unfolding of God's redemptive mission. The Cross is not merely a symbol of the Christian faith but its very foundational principle—regarded as mōria (μωρία, "foolishness") by the world, yet revealed as dynamis Theou (δύναμις Θεοῦ, "the power of God") to those who believe (1 Cor. 1:18; Piper, 2011, p. 94). In embracing this divine paradox, the Church is called to become a transformative presence in the world—renewing minds, restoring broken communities, and bearing faithful witness to the wisdom and grace embodied in the crucified and risen Christ.

In this light, the *Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi*—education, research, and community service—must be consciously reoriented around the paradox of the Cross. Christian higher education is not an arena for intellectual pride or utilitarian outcomes, but a sacred vocation under the lordship of the crucified and risen Christ. In teaching, the Cross forms learners into disciples with renewed minds (*nous anakainoumenos*, νοῦς ἀνακαινούμενος); in research, it challenges prevailing epistemologies with *sophia Theou* (σοφία Θεοῦ, "the wisdom of God"); and in community service, it redefines power through *diakonia* (διακονία, "service") and *agapē* (ἀγάπη, "divine love"). Thus, the ultimate telos of Christian academic engagement is to proclaim *Iēsous Christos Kyrios* (Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Κύριος, "Jesus Christ is Lord") and *sōtēr* (σωτήρ, "Saviour")—not merely as doctrinal confession but as the only foundation for societal transformation and the healing of creation. Only in Him—crucified, risen, and returning—does humanity find true hope (*tiqvah*, תִּקְוָה), and only in the anticipation of His *Parousia* (παρουσία, "coming") will the academy, the Church, and the world be brought to their consummation in new creation (Rev. 21:5).

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