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Introduction: Philosophy and Cruciform Wisdom

Paul K. Moser and Michael T. McFall

WISDOM FROM SOCRATES AND PLATO

Western philosophy originated with the concerns of Socrates and Plato about wisdom (*sophia*). Socrates launched a perennial discussion of wisdom as follows:

I shall call as witness to my wisdom, such as it is, the god at Delphi. . . . I am only too conscious that I have no claim to wisdom, great or small. So what can he mean by asserting that I am the wisest man in the world? He cannot be telling a lie; that would not be right for him. . . . The truth of the matter . . . is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless. (*Apology* 20e, 21b, 23a–b, trans. H. Tredennick; cf. *Phaedrus* 278d)

Wisdom, according to Socrates and Plato, leads to happiness (*Meno* 88c) but requires a kind of human “purification” (*Phaedo* 69c), because it provides an escape from evil (*Phaedo* 107c–d). In the *Laws*, Plato portrays the Athenian as stating the following: “righteousness, temperance, and wisdom [are] our salvation, and these have their home in the living might of the gods, though some faint trace of them is also plainly to be seen dwelling here within ourselves” (10.906b, trans. A. E. Taylor).

True wisdom, in Plato’s portrait, belongs to God (not humans), counters evil, and contributes to human happiness and even “salvation.” Platonic salvation through wisdom includes the deliverance of the human mind/soul from the vicissitudes of change into stable acquaintance with the immutable constituents of reality (see *Phaedo* 79). Contemporary philosophers largely

reject Plato's portrait of wisdom because most contemporary philosophers aim to avoid reliance on God in their philosophical explanations. In any case, Plato offered a distinctive approach to wisdom that merits comparison with a later Christian approach. If "real wisdom is the property of God," as Plato claimed, then real wisdom is unavoidably theological. We shall ask whether Plato was on the right track, and if so, what God's exact role in wisdom is.

WISDOM FROM PAUL

The distinctively Christian approach to wisdom outlined by the apostle Paul is significantly different from Plato's portrait, but Paul also acknowledged God as the source of human wisdom. Here we find a neglected analogy between Paul's view of wisdom and his influential understanding of righteousness, or justification (*dikaïosunē*). We can use his approach to righteousness to introduce his view of wisdom.

Paul thought of the salvation of humans as their being reconciled to God, ultimately by means of a powerful manifestation of God's moral character in Jesus. As he states, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19). According to Paul, Jesus is God's representative and innocent victim (of human sin) who offers divine forgiveness and companionship instead of condemnation to wayward humans. We may call this *the divine manifest-offering* approach to salvation, in keeping with Romans 3:21–26 (which uses talk of manifestation repeatedly). What is being made *manifest* in Jesus is God's moral character of righteous and forgiving love, and what is being *offered* in Jesus, in keeping with God's character, is life-giving companionship with God as a gracious divine gift.

The divine gift for humans, in Paul's story, is anchored in both (1) the forgiveness offered and manifested via God's self-giving sacrifice in Jesus, and (2) God's resurrection approval of Jesus as Lord and as Giver of God's Spirit. The manifestation of God's self-giving character in Jesus reveals a God who is thereby offering forgiveness and lasting companionship to humans for the sake of their salvation. The death of Jesus does not bring about full divine–human reconciliation by itself, but it does aim to provide God's distinctive means of implementing salvation by divine manifestation and offering. For actual divine–human reconciliation, humans must *receive*, or *appropriate*, the manifest-offering of forgiveness and companionship through grounded trust, or faith, in the God who extends the offer.

According to Paul, Jesus as divinely appointed Lord and as Giver of God's Spirit (1 Thess. 5:10) came from God to identify with us humans in our weakness and despair, while he represented his divine Father in righteous

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and merciful love. As God's salvific mediator for humans, Jesus thus aims to represent, and to serve as a personal bridge between, God *and* humans. Specifically, he seeks to reconcile humans to his Father with the divine gift of companionship anchored in merciful, forgiving love as the distinctive power of God's intervening Spirit.

Jesus' obedient death on the cross, commanded of him by God (Rom. 3:25, 1 Cor. 5:7, Phil. 2:8; cf. Mark 14:23–24), aims to manifest how far he and his Father will go to offer salvation (including divine forgiveness and companionship) to humans. By divine plan, Jesus gives humans all he has, from his Father's self-giving love, to manifest that God mercifully and righteously loves humans to the fullest extent. Jesus thereby offers humans salvation as the gracious gift of unearned forgiveness, companionship, and membership in God's everlasting family by reception of God's Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:8, John 3:16–17). This is the heart of the Good News of salvation that Paul preached to Greek-speaking audiences, including philosophers, in the first century.

Paul proclaimed the cross of the obedient Jesus as the place where selfish human rebellion against God is mercifully judged and forgiven by God. This does *not* mean that God punished Jesus, a reportedly innocent man before God. No New Testament writer teaches otherwise, contrary to some subsequent, more speculative theologians. According to Paul, God sent Jesus into this rebellious world to undergo, obediently and willingly, gruesome suffering and death at human hands, for God, mercifully, to deem this adequate for dealing justly and under divine righteousness, with selfish human rebellion against God and God's unselfish love. In this respect, Jesus paid the price on behalf of humans for the righteous divine reconciliation of sinners. In manifesting and offering divine forgiveness, he thereby offered an alternative to selfish fear, condemnation, shame, and guilt among humans in relation to God (Rom. 8:1).

Paul identified the ultimate motive for the crucifixion of Jesus as (the manifestation of) God's *righteous love* for humans. Unlike many later theologians, Paul definitively linked God's righteousness, or justice, with God's love: "God manifests his own love (*agapē*) for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us . . . Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath [of God] . . . [W]hile we were enemies [of God], we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son . . ." (Rom. 5:8–10). According to Paul, God takes the initiative and the crucial means through Jesus in offering a gracious gift of divine–human reconciliation for human salvation. As suggested, Paul took the self-sacrificial death of Jesus to manifest divine forgiving love and righteousness, and he thought of divine gracious love as *righteous love*.

In Paul's story, the mere forgiveness of humans by God would fail to counter adequately the wrongdoing that called for divine forgiveness, namely, human neglect of divine gracious authority (on which see Rom. 1:21, 28). In exposing and judging the basis of human wrongdoing, God upholds perfect moral integrity in the divine salvation of humans, without condoning any evil. Through the self-giving sacrifice of Jesus, according to Paul, *God* meets the standard of morally perfect love *for us* humans, when we could not and would not. God then offers this gracious gift of divinely provided righteousness to us, as God's Passover lamb for us (1 Cor. 5:7), to be received by trust in God and Jesus as our salvific Gift-Givers. Otherwise, our prospects for meeting the standard of divine perfect love and thus for salvation would be bleak indeed.

Paul's message has at its center the idea of *gift-righteousness* from God to receptive humans, in contrast to *earned* human righteousness by the law (see Phil. 3:9; Rom. 3:21–26, 10:3–4, Gal. 3:11–12). Because humans have failed by the standard of divine perfect *agapē*, they are in no position to *earn*, or *merit*, a standing of right relationship with God. If that standing is going to be realized, then, it must come by something other than human earning, because human merit has failed. The needed alternative, according to Paul, is the divine *gift* of salvation by grace (*charis*) offered to undeserving humans. Humans still need to struggle to *appropriate* this unique gift, through the stresses of trust and obedience toward God, but this struggle does not involve our earning or meriting God's approval. Acts of obedience to God, accordingly, should not be confused with works of earning or merit before God. (See Rom. 4:4 for Paul's linking of "works" in the relevant sense with an earning, or a paying a debt, from God.)

We now can make sense of Paul's distinctive approach to wisdom. Here too the idea of a gracious gift from God is central. Paul drew from the claim of Isaiah 29:14 that God aims to "destroy the wisdom of the wise" (1 Cor. 1:19; cf. 3:18–20) to undermine human boasting in humans rather than God (1 Cor. 1:29–31; cf. 3:21). Paul's main lesson was that for a lasting good life humans need to rely on God's wisdom and power instead of an inadequate human alternative. As he stated regarding himself: "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, *so that* your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:4–5, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], *italics added*). Paul then contrasted "human" wisdom with "God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (1 Cor. 2:7, NRSV). The key difference between the two is that God's wisdom has the *power* (*dunamis*) to give a lasting good life to humans, whereas human

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wisdom does not. In short, only God's wisdom can empower human salvation as a lasting good life anchored in good relationships.

We can begin to see the important role of human weakness, or impotence, in relation to God's distinctive power. Paul remarked, "we have this treasure [of salvation from God] in clay jars, *so that* it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not belong to us" (2 Cor. 4:7, NRSV, italics added). The power and wisdom needed by humans, according to Paul, must come from God, because God alone has such power and wisdom. In writing to Christians at Colossae, Paul described the power and wisdom in question as follows:

We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong [=empowered] with all the strength [=power, *dunamis*] that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father. . . . (Col. 1:9–12, NRSV)

Paul's "spiritual wisdom" is not mere knowledge that a claim is true; instead, it is directed toward "lead[ing] lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him." More specifically, it welcomes God's distinctive power for the sake of joyfully enduring the difficulties of this life with patience. This is the rare power to endure life while honoring and thanking God, come what may.

We now have a sharp contrast between "spiritual wisdom" and mere knowledge and even any kind of "human wisdom." Going beyond mere knowledge, spiritual wisdom welcomes God's power for the sake of living a lasting human life that is good ("worthy of the Lord"), pleasing to God. Suppose I know that I cannot save myself if I must meet God's standard of perfect love, because I have obvious deficiencies on this front. This knowledge of my inadequacy might be above reproach as genuine knowledge, but it still could be accompanied by a defective volitional (or, will-involving) attitude of mine toward the reality in question. In particular, suppose I hate, genuinely despise, that I cannot save myself by God's standard, perhaps because, desiring full personal autonomy, I strongly wish that I could have saved (and even created) myself, without any divine help. Perhaps many people privately share the latter wish in their longing for self-sufficiency or full autonomy.

In Paul's story, the reality that I cannot save myself is not hate-worthy at all, but is genuinely good and truly valuable. By this standard, I hate something good, and this violates the kind of spiritual wisdom under consideration.

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Even a grudging or largely indifferent reception of something good would be a deficiency in spiritual wisdom. Accordingly, genuine spiritual wisdom, unlike mere knowledge, must be suitably attuned to what is good in virtue of *welcoming* what is good when the opportunity arises. We may proceed now with the *Oxford English Dictionary* characterization of *to welcome*: “to receive gladly and hospitably; to accord a friendly reception to.” Accordingly, if God offered salvation as a good gift to humans, my wanting to earn my salvation would be misplaced relative to what is good and thus would not fit with spiritual wisdom.

WISDOM, GETHSEMANE, AND CRUCIFORMITY

Paul anchored spiritual wisdom not in an abstract principle or Platonic Form, but instead in a personal agent who manifests God’s power without defect. He referred to “Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24) and to “Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God . . . and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). The immediate question is which particular features of the human person Jesus Christ constitute his being the power of God and the wisdom of God. Part of Paul’s answer included the following:

... Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:5–8, NRSV)

A key feature here is the willing conformity of Jesus to God’s will, even when the result is self-sacrificial death. Paul relied on the idea of Jesus’ *humble obedience* to God to capture the feature in question. This kind of obedience differs from *grudging* obedience and even *mere* obedience; instead, it is the kind of obedience that ultimately welcomes God’s perfect will, even if one is initially ambivalent and faces severe consequences. In his willing conformity to God’s perfect will, Jesus exemplified the power and wisdom of God as a personal agent humbly cooperating with God.

We find a striking example of humble cooperation in the Gospel reports of Jesus in Gethsemane. Mark’s Gospel, the earliest New Testament Gospel, offers the following portrait: “[Jesus and his disciples] went to a place called Gethsemane. . . . He said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death. . . .’ [H]e threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour [of his arrest and crucifixion] might pass from him. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup [of suffering and death] from

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me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'” (Mark 14:32–36, NRSV). The Gethsemane crisis, then, begins with a humanly experienced conflict between a human want and a divine want but ends with a decisive resolution: a human plea by Jesus to God in resolute favor of God's will. His plea welcomes the fulfillment of God's will. The lesson is that the proper human approach to God willingly puts God's perfect will first, even if a serious human want must yield to God in the process.

We now can illuminate Paul's talk of “the message about the cross [of Jesus]” as “the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). God's wisdom supplies the power of a lasting good life for humans and hence far exceeds the value and the power of any wisdom produced by humans. The heart of God's wisdom is eager conformity to God's perfect will, come what may, and this conformity is found paradigmatically in Jesus, specifically in his Gethsemane attitude of humble obedience to God. This attitude led to his death on a Roman cross, but according to Paul, God was working in his obedient death to manifest the power of God's self-giving love for wayward humans.

Cruciform wisdom is the kind of spiritual wisdom manifested by Jesus in Gethsemane on his path to the cross and his subsequent resurrection. It comes in a person rather than merely a principle, because it inherently involves an engaged personal will and not just claims about a will. God's wisdom comes from a personal agent who seeks to engage other personal agents at the level of their wills, where intentional action can emerge. Genuine spiritual wisdom does not reduce to talk about such wisdom, because it includes *power* from God to welcome and to obey God's perfect will. Talk is too cheap and easy to supply this powerful wisdom.

God's cruciform wisdom, according to Paul, is hidden (1 Cor. 2:6–7), because it has a specific redemptive purpose for humans. It aims to engage humans at a level deeper than mere observation, speculation, or reflection; in particular, it aims to encourage an initially resistant human will to welcome God and God's self-sacrificial will. Casual, easy inspection or reflection is, accordingly, not a fitting option for human consideration of God's wisdom and power. Instead, this wisdom and its power put humans under a divine challenge to undergo an extreme volitional makeover in accordance with God's perfect will. This makeover calls for a welcoming reception of our need of and dependence on God's perfect, life-giving power rather than our own alternative power. Such a volitional makeover includes a shift in our priorities regarding power, from self-power to the power of divine *agapē* as exemplified in Jesus. If we are opposed or indifferent to such a makeover, divine wisdom and power might be hidden from us, given that we are not in a volitional position to receive it.

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PHILOSOPHY AND CRUCIFORM WISDOM

Western philosophy has tended to occupy itself with analyzing and debating concepts and propositions. In contrast, cruciform wisdom attends to the kind of divine power exemplified in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, and then welcomes and conforms to it. We shall identify some differences between cruciform wisdom and the kind of wisdom often sought by philosophers.

Cruciform wisdom is not primarily about debating ideas; instead, it mainly concerns welcoming and conforming to divine power of the kind found in Jesus as God's representative. Debate about matters concerning the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus can have some value, but its ultimate value for humans resides in their welcoming and conforming to the powerful divine wisdom exemplified in Jesus. Accordingly, Jesus repeatedly issued this simple command: "Follow me" (see Mark 1:17, 2:14, 8:34, 10:21; cf. John 1:43, 8:12, 12:26, 21:19, 22). Cruciform wisdom is borne of welcoming and obeying God's commands, as Jesus demonstrated in Gethsemane and elsewhere.

The foundation of cruciform wisdom is not a philosophical idea, but instead is God's power as exemplified in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, humans are called to welcome and conform to this life-giving power for the sake of a lasting good life. Cruciform wisdom, unlike much of traditional philosophy, makes deep existential and practical demands on its recipients. It aims not simply to stir the mind or prompt ideas but also to move people to welcome and conform to the divine power manifested in Jesus. In short, it calls people to receive such power to will and to act as Jesus willed and acted in his self-giving obedience to God.

Philosophers tend to seek wisdom by reflecting on their ideas and engaging others in arguments. They seek to become wise by sharpening their cognitive skills and formulating fruitful concepts and theories. Wisdom, in this philosophical perspective, can be found if people think and attend hard enough by their own powers. There are no insurmountable obstacles to attaining wisdom if people are sufficiently intelligent and seek hard enough. In contrast, as suggested, Paul portrays cruciform wisdom as hidden and available only through God's revealing the power of divine *agapē*, paradigmatically in Jesus Christ crucified (see 1 Cor. 1:30, 2:1–10; Col. 2:3–4). Both Jesus and Paul affirm that God chooses to hide divine wisdom for a redemptive purpose, and they welcome this (see Matt. 11:25; Luke 10:21; cf. Eph. 3:7–13). In their perspective, mere intellectual skill and effort, including argument with others, are insufficient to yield true wisdom.

The goals of philosophical wisdom and cruciform wisdom differ significantly. A key goal of traditional philosophical wisdom is an improved

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understanding of reality, and this goal is arguably commendable as far as it goes. Cruciform wisdom, however, does not stop with an improved understanding. It aims to provide a transformed existence for humans in relation to divine power, as represented in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This book explores cruciform wisdom by means of philosophers who carefully engage topics important for lives conformed to divine power. If philosophy is inherently the pursuit of wisdom, as Socrates and Plato suggested, philosophers should have something to say about genuine wisdom, including the kind of wisdom that promises to deliver a lasting good life.

CRUCIFORM WISDOM PERSONIFIED

Cruciformity might be thought of, in briefest summary, as “the imitation of Christ.” Christ crucified is arguably at the heart of Christian belief and life for several reasons. He reveals God’s will for humans while demonstrating God’s self-giving love of humans. Specifically, Jesus manifests his love and obedience toward God by putting God’s perfect will first, and this demonstrates God’s merciful love of humans. His obedience, suffering, and sacrifice through the crucifixion are anchored in his trust in the God who raises his people from the dead. Cruciform wisdom, accordingly, does not view the crucifixion in isolation but understands it in relation to God’s desired resurrection of his people (see 1 Cor. 15:12–28).

According to cruciform wisdom, Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection provide a paradigm of moral character (and spiritual) formation for humans. People are called to be servants of God and others, as was Christ, and they are called to die (at least spiritually) to the selfish world, as was Christ (see Mark 8:34–35; Matt. 10:38–39; Luke 9:23–24, 14:27, 17:33). If humans are to follow and even suffer for Christ in a way similar to how Christ followed and suffered for God, then humans will need assistance beyond their own powers. In this connection, Paul remarked: “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20, NRSV). Paul thus gave credit to Christ as his source of needed power for a life pleasing to God; he referred to him as a “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45).

Paul rejects human self-sufficiency on another front, as follows: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit”

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(Gal. 5:22–25, NRSV). In being called to die to the selfish “flesh,” we are called to live in the power of Christ, as characterized by Paul’s talk of “the fruit of the Spirit.” Because the selfish world is full of temptation and is difficult to die to, humans need the assistance of God’s power. Human power, accordingly, must give way to God’s distinctive power as represented by Christ crucified and by Paul’s list of the fruit of God’s Spirit. The latter power is noncoercive toward human wills and thus allows for genuine human agency.

Jesus modeled God’s power in his obedience to God’s perfect will, and this led to his crucifixion and resurrection. The apostle Paul also sought to model a cruciform life after the model of Jesus. He held that humans are to be servants and slaves of God, just as Jesus was a servant and slave of God. This is a serious demand, even with the assistance of God’s power, and therefore we should ask what accounts for it. One New Testament writer observes that “people are slaves to whatever masters them” (2 Pet. 2:19). If we can serve only one master, and if many masters abound for humans, God could have a specific redemptive purpose in demanding wholehearted obedience from humans. We can shape our lives in many different ways, but cruciform wisdom demands that our lives be shaped by the divine power exemplified in the crucified Christ. This demand calls for putting God first, the rightful place for a God worthy of worship. Mere human powers will not deliver the kind of lasting good life underwritten by divine power.

Cruciform wisdom cannot be learned and retained once and for all simply by one’s being exposed to it or convinced of its value. Having cruciform wisdom is not like one’s having an insight and then settling on being, for example, a rationalist, an empiricist, a capitalist, or a socialist. Instead, it typically involves personal character formation by means of volitional resolve in favor of God’s will over time; it is thus diachronic rather than synchronic in its characteristic form. Accordingly, we should not simply *die* to the selfish world; instead, we should constantly *be dying* to it. As a result, we might say that the power of cruciform wisdom seeks appropriation not just in special or occasional episodes of life, but in all of life. It seeks to be personified without exception throughout human life. God, in other words, seeks to manifest divine power at the center of human life and not just at the edges.

Times of human suffering can be special opportunities to personify cruciform wisdom. Paul announced the following: “we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 5:3–5). This perspective clarifies the relationship between the self-sacrificial suffering of the crucifixion and the hope (in God) manifested by the resurrection.