

THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS IN MARTIN LUTHER AND FYODOR
DOSTOYEVSKY: THE ONLY SOLUTION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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CONTENTS

PART I. IVAN KARAMAZOV—MAN IS THE SOLUTION TO GOD.....	1
“The Strength of the Karamazov”—Man Makes a Better God	3
Brain Fever—Man as His Own God Is Self-Destruction	9
PART II. ALYOSHA KARAMAZOV—THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST IS THE SOLUTION FOR MAN.....	15
The Crucified Christ...	16
... Is the Solution for Mankind	22
PART III. A MORE BEAUTIFUL TRUTH—THE STORY OF THE CROSS BROUGHT TO THOSE IN OUR CULTURE.....	33
The Story of the Cross	33
How Do We Bring It?	35
To Those in Our Culture	36
CONCLUSION.....	46
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	48

ABSTRACT

Fyodor Dostoyevsky was a Russian author and Christian apologist living in the nineteenth century. Martin Luther was a German monk, Christian pastor, and theologian living in the sixteenth century. Both emphasized the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ in the lives of ordinary Christians as an answer to the problems everyone must face in life. The purpose of this paper is to explore how similar Dostoyevsky and Luther are in their focus on the cross and how they use the cross to answer such problems. The conclusion reached is that both are almost identical in terms of the importance they place on the cross, that the cross is the *only* solution for the problems mankind faces in life, and that this is of vital importance to every single person living in the twenty-first century. This paper will use examples of people you might meet in life to demonstrate this point.

PART I: IVAN KARAMAZOV—MAN IS THE SOLUTION TO GOD

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian linguist and Dostoyevsky scholar, argues that Dostoyevsky employs a “polyphonic apologetic” in *Brothers Karamazov*.¹ This unique method gives two or more viewpoints equal voice and representation. The viewpoints are assumed by certain characters in the novel to such a degree that Bakhtin prefers even to call such characters “character-ideas.”² Over the course of the novel, the varying character-ideas are in dialogue with one another, each proposing and defending their own philosophy. These character-ideas are seen most prominently in Alexei Karamazov,³ the Christian, and Ivan Karamazov, the atheist. Detrick writes that in these two characters, “Atheism and Christianity participate equally in the dialogue of the text”⁴ of *Brothers Karamazov*. Although the two brothers love and care for each other, they couldn’t be ideologically further apart.

Ivan Karamazov, the “learned atheist,”⁵ becomes “anti-God” in the fullest sense. He’s not just another misconstrued atheist argument; he is the most powerful atheist argument Dostoyevsky could create. This is done so well that many atheists claim Dostoyevsky must be

1. Tyler Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Apologetic: Dialogue and Defense of Christianity in The Brothers Karamazov,” *English Seminar Capstone Research Papers*, 2015, https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/english_seminar_capstone/29, 15.

2. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 9.

3. Typically referred to as “Alyosha” in *Brothers Karamazov*, the shortened version of “Alexei.” This paper will follow this shortened version.

4. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 13.

5. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: Heron Books, 1967), Project Gutenberg edition, 33.

arguing for unbelief instead of faith.⁶ Over the course of the novel, Ivan contends for the idea that man himself can be his own god.

Alexei Karamazov, the “man of God,” becomes the “hero” of the text, as Dostoyevsky himself describes. the one whose very character argues for Christianity, but not as an unassailable, unconquerable idea. Rather, “Alyosha is prone to doubt and often struggles to defend his faith against Ivan’s formidable arguments.”⁷ Alyosha believes in the crucified, suffering Christ as the only real savior for mankind.

How will the “hero” of *Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha, prevail against the strength of Ivan Karamazov and his solution to God? This struggle between Ivan’s atheism and Alyosha’s Christianity as the foundational truth in life will serve as the focus for this paper. Specifically, my paper will defend this thesis: **The apologetics of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and the theology of Martin Luther teach the same thing with reference to the theology of the cross: the joy Christians have through the cross of Christ. That is the essential core for true life and provides the only solution for the problems that face mankind. This remains true in the twenty-first century, as it has in all past ages of this world.**

The entire corpus of Martin Luther and Fyodor Dostoyevsky are instructive to twenty-first-century apologetics and evangelism. However, this paper will draw chiefly from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* and will include reference to other works as well. The three big works used from Martin Luther include the “Heidelberg Disputation,” *The Bondage of the Will*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*.

6. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 12.

7. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 11.

In Part I of this paper I will examine Ivan Karamazov and his arguments against Christianity. Then I will demonstrate how his arguments and philosophy crumble when confronted with the realities of life. In Part II I will examine how Dostoyevsky builds the theology of the cross through Alyosha's character. I will compare this to what Luther teaches and prove that both Dostoyevsky and Luther teach the same in this respect. After that I will show that the theology of the cross is the only solution for the problems mankind faces in life. In Part III I will construct modern, twenty-first-century versions of characters from *Brothers Karamazov* and exemplify how a Christian can use the theology of the cross to reach specific people in our culture.

“The Strength of the Karamazov”—Man Makes a Better God

“Rebellion”—God Has Failed Mankind

Ivan states his case for rebellion against any concept of god in Book V, chapter 4 of *Brothers Karamazov*, titled “Rebellion.”

Are you fond of children, Alyosha? I know you are, and you will understand why I prefer to speak of them. If they, too, suffer horribly on earth, they must suffer for their fathers' sins, they must be punished for their fathers, who have eaten the apple; but that reasoning is of the other world and is incomprehensible for the heart of man here on earth. The innocent must not suffer for another's sins, and especially such innocents!⁸

According to Christianity, sin is brought to all mankind by Adam's fall. The consequences of sin, suffering and death for all, come along with it. But how can that be fair for such innocents as children?

Ivan adds weight to his words with real examples. He says, “I am fond of collecting certain facts, and, would you believe, I even copy anecdotes of a certain sort from newspapers

8. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 297-298.

and books, and I've already got a fine collection.”⁹ What follows in this chapter is example after example of horrible sufferings children and infants have experienced. In one example, a baby is made to laugh and then has his brain blown out before his mother's eyes.¹⁰ In a second example, a kennel boy is torn to death before his mother's eyes for injuring the paw of his master's favorite hound.¹¹ In a third example, a little girl of five is beaten, has her mouth filled with excrement, and is locked in a privy outside in winter by her cruel parents.¹² Are these real examples Dostoyevsky found? Perhaps. One only has to walk the killing fields of Cambodia, stand in the concentration camps of the Nazi regime, or see any of the countless American children who have been neglected and abused by their “guardians” to ask, “Can God really allow such suffering?” The cruelty Ivan describes is not hard to spot when looking at a portrait of mankind.

This cruelty is the reason for Ivan's rebellion. His mind cannot comprehend the reason behind the needless suffering of such innocents. “Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted?... All I know is that there is suffering, and that there are none guilty.... I must have justice.... And not justice as some remote infinite time and space, but here on earth so that I could see it myself.”¹³ Even if there was some incomprehensible reason behind all the suffering, Ivan does not want to be a part of it. It is not worth the tears and the hurt to those innocents who suffer. For this reason, Ivan speaks his words that are well-known to many who have read

9. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 299.

10. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 298-299.

11. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 304.

12. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 303.

13. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 303, 305-306.

Brothers Karamazov, ““And so I hasten to give back my entrance ticket, and if I am an honest man, I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It’s not God that I don’t accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket.’ ‘That’s rebellion,’ murmured Alyosha, looking down. ‘Rebellion? I am sorry you call it that,’ said Ivan earnestly.”¹⁴ Ivan sees the system of unpunished injustice that God supposedly created, and he wants no part of it.

To Ivan’s human reason, suffering is incomprehensible. ““I understand nothing,’ Ivan says, ‘I don’t want to understand anything now. I want to stick to the facts. I made up my mind long ago not to understand.’”¹⁵ If one sticks to just the visible facts, there is no God. How could God, if he existed, allow such suffering? Clarence Manning writes, “Ivan piles up these outrages and he points out what is all too clear, that if a single child is allowed to suffer innocently in this world, the laws of God are lies and there is no moral order in the universe.”¹⁶ Alyosha calls this attitude what it truly is: rebellion against God. If God does not work for mankind, what solution does Ivan propose?

14. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 308.

15. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 305.

16. Clarence Augustus Manning, “The Grand Inquisitor,” *Anglican Theological Review* 15,1 (1933): 16-26,
17.

“The Grand Inquisitor”¹⁷—Man Must Replace God

“He came softly, unobserved, and yet, strange to say, everyone recognized Him.”¹⁸ That’s how Ivan begins the most famous chapter of *Brothers Karamazov*, “The Grand Inquisitor.” The scene that unfolds before the reader would, at first, be right at home in one of the Gospels—except set in Seville, Spain. Christ returns, raises a dead girl, and restores joy and happiness. But the Grand Inquisitor sees everything. “He is not dressed in his gorgeous cardinal’s robes, as he was the day before, when he was burning the enemies of the Roman Church—at this moment he is wearing his coarse, old, monk’s cassock.”¹⁹ He commands his soldiers to seize Christ. So great is his power and terror that both the soldiers and the people obey without question. The Grand Inquisitor has arrested Christ and leads him away to face condemnation.

Christ is no stranger to standing “in the dock”; Christ on trial by the Sanhedrin is a well-known portion of Scripture. So the Grand Inquisitor now puts Christ on trial and accuses him. In this chapter the Grand Inquisitor makes the case that Christ has failed as mankind’s savior and proposes that man bring happiness to mankind himself.

The three temptations of Christ in the wilderness demonstrate how he has failed mankind. The Grand Inquisitor claims that Christ did not have anything to do “with the fleeting human intelligence, but with the absolute and eternal.”²⁰ He ignored earthly happiness, refused the temptations, and kept his eyes on his eternal goal. However, the secret to human happiness lies in

17. Anytime “The Grand Inquisitor” appears with quotation marks, the chapter in *Brothers Karamazov* is meant. Anytime the Grand Inquisitor appears with no quotation marks, the character of the Grand Inquisitor in the chapter is meant.

18. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 312.

19. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 274.

20. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 316-317.

actually *giving in* to those temptations: to have hunger and desires satisfied, to put trust in an obvious miracle, and to be united under one authority, so wars and conflicts might cease. But Christ refused to grant this earthly happiness. The Grand Inquisitor “proves with unfailing logic that Christ did not wish to compel the loyalty of any man.”²¹ Christ did not come to bring temporary happiness but to achieve eternal life for all.

The result of this? “And behold, instead of giving a firm foundation for setting the conscience of man at rest forever ... you chose what is utterly beyond the strength of men.... You desired man’s free love so that he should follow you freely, enticed and taken captive by you.”²² Christ’s atonement is universal, but many will reject this message and suffer the consequences. Christ denied the earthly happiness of so many millions of people so that a couple thousand might be with him. To the Grand Inquisitor this is unjust. He says, “Can you have simply come to the elect and for the elect? But if so, it is a mystery, and we cannot understand it.”²³ Yes, Christ’s work brought salvation for a few, but so many more face unhappiness both now and in eternity. Thus Ivan, as Detrick summarizes it, “finds [Christ] guilty of dooming humanity to suffering”²⁴ when he could have at least given mankind what he wanted here on earth.

Instead of Christ, Ivan presents “the strength of the Karamazov” as mankind’s only savior, which many scholars agree represents mankind itself.²⁵ Ernest Gordon writes, “In

21. Manning, “The Grand Inquisitor,” 20.

22. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 320.

23. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 323.

24. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 15.

25. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 15.

rejecting the deliverance offered to them in the God-man they [Ivan and the Grand Inquisitor] have chosen to be the man-God.”²⁶ Ivan “implies that unaided human reason is the best foundation for truth in Russia,”²⁷ and that man needs to set up a “regime without God.”²⁸ Ivan says earlier he wants to “stick with the facts.” Therefore, mankind should ignore any “eternal or absolute” in life and listen to the “wise and dread spirit,” Satan. This means “meekly acknowledging [mankind’s] feebleness, lovingly lightening their burden, and permitting their weak nature even sin with our sanction.”²⁹ This means doing anything possible to make mankind as happy as possible here on earth. Man, with his own reason and intellect, is a better savior than God and can set up a better system than God. What does this look like?

“The Sensualists”—What This New Order Looks Like

The resulting society can simply be summed up by the maxim “everything is lawful.” This is something Ivan repeats throughout the novel. Ivan no doubt echoes the ideals of Nikolay Chernyshevsky and Vissarion Belinsky, both radical, socialist atheists who insisted that Russia should look to man alone for her salvation. Both were contemporaries of Dostoyevsky. What Ivan advocates, echoing those radical figures, is utilitarianism. “If God and the afterlife are myths, then morality becomes whatever action provides the best scientific outcome for the individual, a philosophy [Chernyshevsky] coined as ‘rational egoism.’”³⁰ The system of morality

26. Karl Nötzel, ed., *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky: Selections from His Works*, intro. J. I. Packer et al. (Walden: Plough, 1988), xv.

27. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 15.

28. William van den Bercken, “The ‘Legend of the Grand Inquisitor’ Reconsidered: Literary Irony and Theological Seriousness in Its Representation of Christ,” *J ECS* 59,1-2 (2007): 103–21, 113.

29. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 323.

30. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 7.

that Ivan promotes is “everything is lawful.” What does this philosophy look like, when carried out to its logical conclusion? Does Ivan’s rebellion work? Can man be his own god and savior? Is the maxim “everything is lawful” a viable moral basis for society?

Brain Fever—Man as His Own God Is Self-Destruction

Spoiler alert! The end of *Brothers Karamazov* can be summarized like this: Fyodor Karamazov, the father of the brothers Karamazov, is murdered. Dmitri, the eldest brother, is falsely accused of his father’s murder. Although he plainly expressed his wish to kill his father, he did not do so. The real killer is Smerdyakov, Ivan’s half-brother, who idolizes Ivan and the philosophy he promotes. He senses Ivan’s desire also to kill Fyodor³¹ and carries this out. This is the driving force behind the action in the second half of *Brothers Karamazov*.

However, a curious thing happens to Ivan during this time—he is diagnosed with brain fever. This brain fever isn’t just a *deus ex machina* to make sure Ivan fails and Alyosha wins; rather, through it Dostoyevsky proves a point. Ivan’s solution to God, mankind, doesn’t work. This is foreshadowed in “The Rebellion.” Ivan says, “I must have justice [for all this suffering], or I will destroy myself.”³² And that’s exactly what happens. The “strength of the Karamazov,” man as his own god, is not able to stand against the problems of life. There are four chief problems Ivan discovers that man cannot answer: suffering and death, injustice, guilt, and morality. These problems still persist today in the 21st century, for they are problems not

31. Dmitri and Ivan were far from the only people who would want Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov dead.

32. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 305.

confined to one era or unique to one culture. Mankind of every age must face these four “unanswerable” problems. And Dostoyevsky brilliantly brings this out in *Brothers Karamazov*.

Nikolai³³ Ivanov Krasotkin—No Answer for Suffering and Death

One can almost see it in Kolya’s name, Nikolai ‘Ivanov’ Krasotkin. He is a little Ivan. “Like Ivan, he is a ‘learned atheist’ dedicated to the power of autonomous reasoning. He chastises his schoolmates for believing in God, and he flaunts his knowledge of atheistic literature by quoting writers like Belinsky and Feuerbach.”³⁴ But Dostoyevsky confronts Kolya, and thus Ivan, with a problem. Kolya’s friend, Ilusha, is diagnosed with a terminal illness and dies at the end of the novel. Thus, Kolya and his philosophy are faced with the death and suffering of a loved one.

But there is nothing Kolya can do for the family’s suffering or for Ilusha’s death. Kolya’s “faith in rationality appears trivial because his intellectualism offers little comfort to those mourning the loss of their child. Kolya’s character, like Ivan, reveals man’s inability to serve as Russia’s liberator.”³⁵ The most Kolya can manage is to belittle the doctor who treats Ilusha and promise to visit Ilusha later with his dog. As Kolya and Alyosha leave, “[Kolya] ran out into the passage. He didn’t want to cry, but in the passage he burst into tears. Alyosha found him crying.”³⁶ Man can offer no solution to suffering or death.

33. More commonly called by his abbreviated name, “Kolya.”

34. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 17.

35. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 18.

36. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 725.

Dmitri Karamazov—No Answer for Injustice

Dmitri Karamazov is a case of dramatic irony. There is no reason for the reader to assume Dmitri is innocent. He physically assaulted his father, threatened to kill him, and competed with him for the love of Grushenka, a young woman of twenty-two over which both were infatuated.

However, the reader knows Dmitri is innocent only because Dostoyevsky reveals this.

Smerdyakov was the one who killed Fyodor Karamazov. And no one else knows except Ivan, because Smerdyakov confesses only to Ivan. Then Smerdyakov hangs himself.

But Ivan is in a dilemma. He has two options. One: He could fight for Dmitri's innocence and reveal Smerdyakov as the real killer. But there is no advantage for Ivan in this. Why would Ivan accuse Smerdyakov and possibly bring blame back on himself, as he was the reason Smerdyakov killed Fyodr? This would go against his philosophy only to do what is personally beneficial. Two: He could remain silent and let Dmitri be unjustly accused. But then he, the rational man who ought to be Russia's savior, would allow injustice to exist, the very thing of which he accused God. This racks Ivan's conscience with guilt.

Ivan Karamazov—No Answer for Guilt

In a way, it is Ivan's fault that Fyodor was murdered.

Smerdyakov had been firmly convinced after an exchange with Ivan before the murder that in committing it he would be acting according to Ivan's wishes. Ivan cannot possibly doubt the sincerity of these confessions. Accordingly, he suddenly sees himself as his father's murderer. To escape despair, he now needs God, whom he was unwilling to recognize before.³⁷

Smerdyakov killed Fyodor, but he was only following Ivan's wish and philosophy: "everything is lawful." Ivan cannot help but feel guilty. The night before Dmitri's trial the Devil appears to

37. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 38.

Ivan, to further agitate him and push him to madness. Detrick writes, “[Ivan] is overwhelmed by both the guilt of his own failures and the burden of resolving the conflict” and is unable “to forgive himself and others for the death of his father.”³⁸ Ivan’s conscience is wracked with guilt. With no God, there is no way to deal with this. Although Ivan has spent the whole novel denying God, at one point in his conversation with the Devil he cries, “Is there a God or not?”³⁹ The Devil only mocks him. “To escape despair, [Ivan] now needs God, whom he was unwilling to recognize before.”⁴⁰ Throughout this exchange, Ivan’s brain fever becomes unbearable.

Ivan “suppresses these thoughts of God and intends to restore order to the Karamazovs, the microcosm of humanity, at the courthouse the next day.”⁴¹ However, his defense is gibberish. Ivan loses his mind and succumbs to brain fever, failing to answer both guilt and injustice.

The Sensualists—Dmitri and Fyodor Pavlovich

The logical outcome of Ivan’s philosophy runs its course most obviously not in Ivan, but in Dmitri, Ivan’s brother, and Fyodor Karamazov, Ivan’s father. Rakitin, a friend of Alyosha, describes Dmitri’s sensuality: “A man will fall in love with some beauty, with a woman’s body, or even with a part of a woman’s body (a sensualist can understand that), and he’ll abandon his own children for her, sell his father and mother, and his country, Russia, too. If he’s honest, he’ll steal; if he’s humane, he’ll murder; if he’s faithful, he’ll deceive.”⁴² Ippolit Kirillovitch, a

38. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 17.

39. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 833.

40. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 38.

41. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 17.

42. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 95.

Russian lawyer in the trial at the end of the novel, describes Fyodor: “He saw nothing in life but sensual pleasure, and he brought his children up to be the same.... The old man’s maxim was *après moi le deluge*. ‘The world may burn for aught I care, so long as I am all right.’ He swindled his Dmitri and spent that money, Dmitri’s maternal inheritance, on trying to get Dmitri’s mistress from him.”⁴³ If the basis for morality is “everything is lawful,” that means also “nothing is forbidden.” Instead of establishing a utilitarian utopia, this philosophy will only lead mankind to descend into madness as each man follows his own personal view of happiness.

Ivan’s proposed morality, “everything is permitted,” brings about the ultimate unhappiness of man. Dmitri is falsely condemned to the Siberian wilderness, Fyodor is murdered, Smerdyakov has hung himself, and Ivan is insane.

In the end, Ivan’s plan fails dramatically. His guilt and skepticism drive him mad, and his speech in the courtroom is so “confused” and “incoherent” that the judge dismisses his testimony. Dialogue has revealed Ivan’s weakness, and, consequently, has exposed radicalism’s trust in human rationality as indefensible. Significantly, Ivan’s madness at the end of the novel is called “brain fever,” demonstrating that the central problem with the atheist theory lies within man’s limited reasoning. Humanity, this phrase suggests, is too corrupt and frail to serve as its own liberator.⁴⁴

Who is able to be mankind’s Savior? How can he answer the “unanswerable” problems of death and suffering, of injustice, of guilt, of morality? Through Ivan and his polyphonic apologetic, Dostoyevsky demonstrates the failure of man as his own God. But that’s just one side of the dialogue. The other side is Alyosha and what he represents: the crucified Christ. Can Christ overcome these terrible, unassailable forces?

43. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 903.

44. Detrick, “Dostoyevsky’s Polyphonic Approach,” 17.

PART II: ALYOSHA KARAMAZOV—THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST IS THE SOLUTION FOR MAN

“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24 NIV). This verse serves as the epigraph for Dostoyevsky’s book, *Brothers Karamazov*. The argument of Alyosha’s character, the hero of *Brothers Karamazov*, can be summarized in that one passage: In suffering and misfortune there is joy and life. Father Zossima, Alyosha’s mentor at the monastery, tells Alyosha always to keep this verse before him in life. “Remember that [verse].... You will have many enemies, but even your foes will love you. Life will bring you many misfortunes, but you will find your happiness in them, and will bless life and will make others bless it—which is what matters most.”⁴⁵ Through the death of a seed, many seeds and blessings sprout up. This theme plays a prominent role in *Brothers Karamazov* and in Dostoyevsky’s other books. J. I. Packer writes, “His constant theme is the nightmare quality of unredeemed existence and the heart-breaking glory of the incarnation, whereby all human hurts came to find their place in the living and dying of Christ the risen Redeemer.”⁴⁶

Although Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Martin Luther were centuries separate, continents apart, and theologically distinct, they were unified in this respect: They taught the blessings and joys of suffering and misfortune. Luther called this the *theology of the cross*. Dostoyevsky, while he had no specific term for it, illustrated this concept through story, and no story so beautiful as

45. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 359.

46. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, vii.

Brothers Karamazov. Luther and Dostoyevsky were also united in this point: The crucified Christ is the solution for man.

Part II of the paper will explore this theme. First, I will study both Dostoyevsky's and Luther's teaching regarding the crucified Christ. Second, I will examine the impact the crucified Christ has on the life of man. The reader will see just how powerful Alyosha's Christianity is to Ivan's atheism, and just how powerfully the crucified Christ reigns when compared to the *might* and *glory* of man.

The Crucified Christ...

Dostoyevsky and the Horrible, Beautiful Mystery of the Crucifixion

The theme of joy and blessing in the midst of suffering is a major theme of *Brothers Karamazov*. And while the cross as the source of this belief is never explicitly mentioned, it is implicitly beyond refute, as this paper will demonstrate in the coming pages. However, the most obvious place to learn about the cross in Dostoyevsky's worldview is in his own reaction to a painting by Hans Holbein the Younger, titled, "Christ Taken Down from the Cross." His wife Anna described his reaction to seeing the original.

The painting overwhelmed Fyodor Mikhailovich,⁴⁷ and he stopped in front of it as if stricken.... On his agitated face was the sort of frightened expression I had often noted during the first moments of an epileptic seizure. I quietly took my husband's arm and led him to another room.... Little by little, he calmed down, and when we were leaving he insisted on going to take another look at the painting that had made such an impression on him.⁴⁸

47. "Mikhailovich" was Dostoyevsky's middle name.

48. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, x.

His wife goes on to describe the painting, telling of the decomposition of Jesus's body and his agonized face, with half-open, unseeing eyes. She was horrified. But this is the precise reason why Dostoyevsky loved the painting: It showed Christ in a state of decomposition.⁴⁹ For Dostoyevsky, this was beautiful. A body that decayed meant it was a human body. Christ had to be a man like other men in order to die for man.⁵⁰ The crucifixion, though horrible and terrifying, was a beautiful event for mankind.

Dostoyevsky emphasizes the hidden good news behind the crucifixion in another book, *The Idiot*. Ippolit, a young, consumptive protégé of the protagonist Prince Myshkin, announces to a group of people the effect this painting, "Christ Taken Down from the Cross," had on his own faith. Then he tries unsuccessfully to shoot himself. Ippolit says that most pictures of Christ on the cross "usually paint Christ with an extraordinary beauty of face.... It's the face of a man *only just* taken from the cross."⁵¹ However, he observes that "in the picture the face is fearfully crushed by blows, swollen, covered with fearful, swollen, and blood-stained bruises, the eyes are open and squinting."⁵² With such a picture, the question instinctively arises, "If death is so awful and the laws of nature so mighty, how can they be overcome?"⁵³ What can one do in the face of such death, when death itself overcame the one who spoke "Lazarus, come forth!" or "Maiden, arise!" Ippolit cannot help but feel terror over this picture.⁵⁴ However, while Ippolit tries to kill

49. The writer acknowledges the mistaken theology behind the decomposition of Christ's body. He would like to remind the reader 1) about artistic license to make a point and 2) that the theological opinions in this picture are not his own.

50. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, x.

51. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 146.

52. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 146.

53. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 146.

54. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 146-147.

himself in terror, the unspoken answer to his doubt stands in opposition, demonstrated by the life of Prince Myshkin: Christ did overcome death, and that victory is promised and given to all mankind.

Dostoyevsky wrote as his epigraph for *Brothers Karamazov*, “But if [the seed] dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24). The cross of Christ is the central focus of Dostoyevsky’s life, and its message of joy and blessing through suffering is the central point of *Brothers Karamazov*. This theme is the very thing Martin Luther called the *theology of the cross*. Though Dostoyevsky was no learned theologian like Luther was, the similarities between the two will become evident once we look at Luther’s theology of the cross.

Martin Luther and the Theology of the Cross

The theologians gathered at Heidelberg in 1518 had every right to expect dull, boring lectures. Perhaps some, who knew that Luther planned to present a number of theses at Heidelberg, expected him to recant some of the more controversial ideas he had shared the previous year. This hair-splitting and back-walking was typical. Instead, Luther proposed a number of radical paradoxes in his twenty-eight theses at Heidelberg that again rocked the world. This system of paradoxes Luther introduced revolves around the cross and Christ crucified. It has been called the *theology of the cross*.⁵⁵

The core of this theology starts in thesis nineteen. “That person is not worthy to be called a theologian who thinks the invisible things of God are observable from events which have actually happened.”⁵⁶ As Luther explains, the invisible things of God are virtue, godliness,

55. Caleb Keith and Kelsi Klembara, eds., *Theology of the Cross: Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation & Reflections on Its 28 Theses*, trans. Caleb Keith (Irvine: 1517 Publishing, 2018), 1.

56. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 29.

wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth. However, these are not obvious. A Christian cannot observe the visible things of this world, whether past or current events or personal experiences, and claim to see God's invisible qualities. Such a claim does not make one a theologian.⁵⁷ What does make someone worthy of the title *theologian*? Luther explains this in thesis twenty.

“Conversely, a person is worthy of being called a theologian who understands the visible and ordered things of God after fixing his sight on the passion and cross of Christ.”⁵⁸ What exactly are the visible things of God? Luther adds this in his explanation. “The observable and visible things of God, that is His humanity, weakness, and foolishness, are the opposite of the invisible.”⁵⁹ How then does a Christian properly understand God? “God desired to be known in suffering and to reject wisdom of invisible things by means of the wisdom of the visible things, so that those who did not cling to God as present in his works should cling to Him as He is hidden in His suffering.”⁶⁰ God reveals himself to mankind in weakness and suffering, not in glory and majesty. This happens through the humility, weakness, and foolishness of Christ, the Son of God, suffering and dying on the cross.

What a paradox! Rather than looking for God in his glory and majesty, the invisible things of God, a Christians looks for God in his visible things, in how God has chosen to reveal himself: Jesus Christ. God showed himself to mankind wrapped in humanity, weakness, and foolishness, by his suffering and death on the cross. Anyone who wishes to cling to and be with God must cling to his suffering. Luther explains more, “Therefore, it is not enough for anyone,

57. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 29.

58. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 30.

59. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 30.

60. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 20.

and it has no benefit to know God in glory and majesty, unless that person knows Him in the humility and shame on the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isaiah 45:15 states, ‘Truly, thou art a God who hides Himself.’”⁶¹ True wisdom is to know the passion and cross of Christ.⁶² This is the only way to truly know God.

Justification is the result of the cross. Thesis twenty-five reads, “He is not justified who does many works, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.” This is the foundation of the Christian faith. Luther’s words in his explanation to this thesis are plain and simple; salvation comes through faith in Christ. “Therefore, man knows that works which he does through faith are not his but God’s. For this reason, he does not strive to be justified or glorified through them but seeks God. His justification by faith in Christ is enough for him. Christ is his wisdom, righteousness, etc.”⁶³ Jesus allowed himself to suffer and die for this sole purpose: forgiveness and justification for all people.

This justification is free. Luther writes in thesis twenty-six, “The law says, do this, and it is never done. Grace says, believe in this, and all things are already done.”⁶⁴ Forgiveness, justification, and eternal life are given to all mankind purely because of God’s grace through the work of Christ on the cross. Professor Daniel Deutschlander writes, “Christ’s cross bearing was unique because it accomplished what no other cross bearing could accomplish, namely, the

61. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 30.

62. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 20.

63. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 35.

64. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 36.

redemption of the world.”⁶⁵ The one who seeks God only through the cross of Christ truly knows God and all the blessing and joy God gives through the cross of Christ.

Dostoyevsky and Luther

Luther was a theologian, not a novelist. Dostoyevsky was a novelist, not a theologian. They expressed truths in different ways. However, the truth they express is the same: the theology of the cross; joy through suffering; peace in Christ alone. As the book *Brothers Karamazov* ends, the boy Kolya is happy. This is odd, because he stands at the fresh gravesite of his friend, Ilusha.

“Karamazov,” cried Kolya, “can it be true what’s taught us in religion, that we shall rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha too?” “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!” Alyosha answered, half-laughing, half-enthusiastic. “Hurrah for Karamazov!” Kolya cried once more, and once more the boys took up his exclamation: “Hurrah for Karamazov!”⁶⁶

In death, there is joy, because through death a Christian enters into glory and life. Luther writes, “A theologian of glory says that evil is good and good is evil. A theologian of the cross says that a thing is what it actually is.”⁶⁷ In suffering, there is hope, because suffering draws one closer to Christ. Deutschlander writes in a similar way:

So the cross is a symbol of suffering and yet dear. It is painful and yet precious. It is a sign of weakness and yet a forerunner of victory. The mystery and the paradox are evident and resolved even in the passion of Christ.... Thus Jesus links the joy and the suffering. The cross and the crown are inseparable. Where there is no cross, there is no crown.... The seed must die to bear fruit. The Son of God must endure the cross to redeem the world. The Christian must die with him to rise with him.⁶⁸

65. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2011), 22.

66. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 877.

67. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 31.

68. Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Cross: Reflections on His Cross and Ours*, 41.

In the cross, there is glory, for through the cross a Christian is united with Christ. And this theology of the cross, the joy that comes through suffering, has a profound impact. Contrary to what Ivan taught, that man can be his own god, Christ crucified can be the only solution and Savior for mankind.

... Is the Solution for Mankind

Death. Injustice. Suffering. Guilt. Immorality. These five stand against all the philosophers, scientists, social warriors, and leaders of mankind's history. And they remain unconquered. No matter what formula, program, or platform man constructs, he is powerless. This is what Ivan Karamazov realized as his brain fever slowly and surely settled in, as his vision of the Grand Inquisitor as mankind's god crumbled and faded. Man is frail, brittle, and weak. But where man fails, Christ succeeds.

Your Majesty looked, and there before you stood a large statue—an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were all broken to pieces and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth (Dan 2:31-35).

Like a rock hurtling from the heights, Christ crushes the power of those five unconquerable forces, but not in the way one expects. They are crushed with a cross, by a dead man, hanging limp, swollen, and bruised. They are crushed with weakness, humility, and foolishness, so that glory and honor might be all the more given to God. This is how Dostoyevsky presents Alyosha. He's not impressive or grand or persuasive. But the message he brings, the cross and glory of Christ, is the only real solution for mankind.

The Joy of the Resurrection Defeats Death and Injustice

In the middle of the novel tragedy strikes the hero, Alyosha. Father Zossima, Alyosha's mentor, dies. Instead of resisting decomposition, as Alyosha expected him to,⁶⁹ the body decomposes faster than usual, much to the delight of all Zossima's enemies and critics in the monastery. This crushes Alyosha to the point where he almost loses his faith. After he wanders about and dances with grievous sin,⁷⁰ he returns to the monastery and sits at Father Zossima's side. There a monk is reading the Gospel of John.⁷¹ While the monk reads the Wedding Feast of Cana, Alyosha has a vision.

Alyosha sees the wedding feast and all the joy of the people in his mind's eye. He sees the happy couple, the master of the feast, the mother, and others enjoying themselves. Then he sees Father Zossima get up from the coffin and join the festival, laughing and smiling.

“We are rejoicing,” the little, thin old man went on. “We are drinking the new wine, the wine of new, great gladness.... Do you see our sun, do you see him?” “I am afraid...I dare not look,” whispered Alyosha. “Do not fear him. He is terrible in his greatness, awful in his sublimity, but infinitely merciful. He has made himself like unto us from love and rejoices with us.”⁷²

This is the turning point for Alyosha in the novel. This is where he gains the strong faith in Christ to meet the problems of the second half of the novel. He is reminded that through the resurrection of Christ, through the pain and torment of death, there is an eternal feast of joy and gladness. There is joy in suffering. When the kernel of wheat dies, it produces many seeds.

69. This resistance to decomposition was one of the signs pointing toward sainthood. Alyosha was fully expecting his beloved Father to be a saint. This makes the scent of death all the more bitter for Alyosha. Cf. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 419.

70. Alyosha travels to Grushenka's house where he knows she may try to seduce him.

71. A common practice was to read through Scripture at the graveside of an esteemed monk or religious figure.

72. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 461.

This joy and confidence in the face of death, in the joy of Christ crucified, is the theology of the cross Luther wrote about in *Freedom of a Christian*. One of Luther's two major premises in this tract is this: "A Christian individual is a completely free lord of all, subject to none." As Christians, we are free from sin, guilt, death, and thus all the powers those exert over us. So Luther writes:

The presence of Christ's righteousness swallows up every sin. As noted above, this is a necessary consequence of faith in Christ. So the heart learns with the Apostle to scoff at death and sin and say: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." For death is swallowed up in victory—not only Christ's but ours—because through faith it becomes our victory and is in us and we are conquerors."⁷³

The theologian of the cross sees death and calls it good, for in Christ it is exactly that. The theologian of the cross has conquered death through Christ. That which was the final defeat and sign of mankind's mortality is now the gateway to eternal life and the triumphal victory fanfare. This is the unopposable might and power of the cross of Christ, that death itself now serves the Christian and can only in reality be joy. This is the theology of the cross.

What, then, concerning injustice? All face death, but not all face the same horrible suffering. Not all see their children impaled and killed, their families burned and brutally murdered. But some do. Some face starvation, violence, and then death with no reprieve or windfall. This is the point Ivan brought up in the chapter "Rebellion." He says that there is an unimaginable pile of punishment that is due for the suffering man causes. "They must be atoned for, or there can be no harmony. But how? How are you going to atone for them? Is it possible?"⁷⁴ Alyosha answers with simple, unimpressive words.

73. Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Freedom of a Christian, 1520: The Annotated Luther, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 509.

74. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 307.

You said just now, is there a being in the whole world who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all and for all, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything. You have forgotten Him, and on Him is built the edifice, and it is to Him they cry aloud, “Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed!”⁷⁵

Dostoyevsky sees the question of injustice answered only in Christ. The weight of punishment that is due for all the suffering mankind has caused is placed directly on Christ. Injustice is answered in the cross of Christ alone.

Luther makes a similar point, though he takes a slightly different path. This problem of injustice is answered only in Christ and in the resurrection that Christians have.

Yet all this, which looks so very like injustice in God, and which has been represented as such with arguments that no human reason or light of nature can resist, is very easily dealt with in the light of the gospel and the knowledge of grace, by which we are taught that although the ungodly flourish in their bodies, they lose their souls. In fact, this whole insoluble problem finds a quick solution in one short sentence, namely, that there is a life after this life, and whatever has not been punished and rewarded here will be punished and rewarded there.⁷⁶

This is the point Asaph makes in Psalm 73. God’s way doesn’t make sense to us now. The wicked flourish, injustice increases, and there is no end. But Christians hope for the salvation found in Christ alone that answers all this injustice.

Luther offers a useful limit for mankind’s reason as well. “But since God is wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that God’s righteousness also should be incomprehensible.... What is a human being compared with God?... In a word, what is our all compared with God’s?”⁷⁷ God has given mankind reason, but we use it

75. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 308.

76. Volker Leppin and Kirsi I. Stjerna, eds., *The Bondage of the Will, 1525: The Annotated Luther, Study Edition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 254.

77. Leppin and Stjerna, *The Bondage of the Will*, 252.

up to a certain point, and no further. He is God, and there are some questions God has simply chosen not to answer. Mankind must be content with that. “To the extent, therefore, that God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, it is no business of ours. For here the saying truly applies, ‘Things above us are no business of ours.’”⁷⁸ The exact reason that God allows injustice, then, is unknown.

Both Dostoyevsky and Luther are content with this: Injustice is answered in Christ and in his work on the cross alone. All the punishment that is built up from injustice is put on Christ. The final destination and blessed reward for those who believe in Christ crucified is heaven; the final destruction and cursed agony for those who reject is hell. Injustice is answered only in the cross of Christ.

What better answer is there? Is there an alternative? Can atheists offer something more attractive? Ivan tried. But he failed to solve injustice; his innocent brother was unjustly convicted. This remains the case for all mankind. No matter what effort, sweat, or tears are expended, injustice never goes away. In fact, if one looks too closely into this matter, he might start to sweat. He will soon realize his own sins and the punishment that is due him from God. In reality, every human incurs punishment from their own injustice. Man cannot give an adequate answer for injustice. It is solved and answered only in Christ crucified, because the cross of Christ takes the suffering that comes from injustice and death and forces it to serve Christians.

Suffering Serves the Kings under Christ

Dmitri had every right to be angry at God. After finally winning his beloved Grushenka’s heart, he is unjustly condemned to twenty years of forced labor in Siberia. Reason would expect anger

78. Leppin and Stjerna, *The Bondage of the Will*, 209.

and rage to flare in his heart towards God. Instead, “Precisely through this terrible fate he found the way back to God. He had never actually denied God; his sinful passions had only kept him far from him.”⁷⁹ This suffering serves Dmitri and pushes him back towards God.

Now Dmitri sees the joy of God even in the midst of suffering. He realizes the joy of the cross of Christ. “Oh, yes, we shall be in chains and there will be no freedom, but then in our great sorrow, we shall rise again to joy, without which man cannot live nor God exist, for God gives joy: it’s his privilege – a grand one.”⁸⁰ Again, Dmitri expresses his attitude towards suffering: “And what is suffering? I am not afraid of it, even if it were beyond reckoning. I am not afraid of it now. I was afraid of it before.”⁸¹ In the cross, in the joy that God gives, Dmitri is able to face insurmountable suffering and come out victorious. This victory and joy are found only in the cross of Christ.

And this same beauty of suffering Luther highlights as well. In thesis twenty-one of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther says, “The allies of the cross say that the cross is good, and works are evil, for through the cross, works are torn down and with them the Old Adam, who is constructed by works, is crucified.”⁸² The cross, the sufferings which come to mankind, is wonderful. It is the highest good, for it destroys any pride and self-reliance on man’s part and pushes him back, again and again, into Christ. That is exactly what happened with Dmitri in *Brothers Karamazov*. Suffering served him.

79. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 124.

80. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 766.

81. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 766.

82. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 31.

And suffering serves every single Christian as well, for they are all kings and queens in God's court. "All things are subject and forced to serve for salvation.... In this way, the cross and death are forced to serve me and to work together for salvation.... There is nothing so good or nothing so evil that cannot 'work together for good.'"⁸³ Reason cannot understand this. One cannot precisely point and say, "See, *this* is how God is working it out for you!" Rather, "because faith alone suffices for salvation, I do not need anything else except for faith exercising its power and sovereignty of freedom in these things. Look here! This is the immeasurable power and freedom of Christians."⁸⁴ God doesn't always open a door or unlatch a window so that the "good" is obvious. Sometimes he drives a Christian into a corner so that by faith alone he trusts in the promise of Christ. This is the answer the cross of Christ gives to suffering. This is the joy of a Christian. What freedom Christians have to face any suffering and come out with joy and hope!

Dostoyevsky digs this chasm between atheism and Christianity in *Brothers Karamazov*: Either one believes in God or in man. Where does one go for comfort and assurance, to make sense of suffering? In the end, man can give no answers and has no solution. That is found in the cross of Christ alone. Suffering is, as C.S. Lewis calls it, God's megaphone.⁸⁵ It reminds mankind of the reality: Suffering is solved only in Christ and his cross. In fact, suffering serves those under Christ.

83. Wengert, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 505.

84. Wengert, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 505.

85. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 11.

Christians Are Free from Their Guilt and from Satan

Ivan had a problem: He couldn't absolve his brother, Dmitri, from the false accusations of patricide. Ivan even blamed himself for the murder of their father, for he had unintentionally allowed Smerdyakov to commit the act. Weighed down with this guilt and the attacks of the Devil, Ivan eventually goes insane. Man has no legitimate way, ultimately, to justify himself.⁸⁶

Kolya has a similar problem: He and his friend, Ilusha, have a ruined friendship, even as Ilusha lies on his deathbed. However, with the encouragement of Alyosha, Kolya and the other children soon make up with Ilusha and become friends again. The past sins are forgiven. These two divergent paths—Ivan to guilt and anguish, Kolya to forgiveness and joy—demonstrate the power of Christianity. Only in Christ can guilt and the accusations from Satan be quieted and forgiven.

The theology of the cross answers guilt and Satan in the same way. Luther writes in thesis twenty-five, "He is not justified who does many works, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ."⁸⁷ Thesis twenty-six reads, "Grace says, believe in this, and all things are already done."⁸⁸ Elsewhere Luther says, "One thing and one thing alone is necessary for the Christian life, righteousness, and freedom, and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ."⁸⁹ Again Luther writes, "Believe in Christ, in whom grace, righteousness, peace, freedom, and all things are promised to you."⁹⁰ There is nothing man has to do. Through the

86. Book suggestion: I would recommend reading *Seculosity* by David Zahl for an outstanding, in-depth application of this concept to our culture. This is one area I do not explore in Part III of this paper.

87. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 35.

88. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 36.

89. Wengert, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 490.

90. Wengert, *The Freedom of a Christian*, 495.

cross of Christ and God's grace, Christians now enjoy freedom from guilt and Satan. What a gracious blessing! Man doesn't need to compare himself to others, be prideful like a Pharisee, or despair like the tax collector. He is justified and forgiven through Christ's cross alone.

For both Dostoyevsky and Luther, the answer is the same. Guilt and Satan are answered only in the cross of Christ. Only there does one receive forgiveness and righteousness from God. This is the freedom and forgiveness every Christian has, which Ivan rejected, which Kolya learned from Alyosha. The cross of Christ gives true freedom and forgiveness.

Freedom for the Love of the Cross

"Everything is lawful," said Ivan, and Dmitri followed. But true freedom eluded them. Both found themselves subject to all the effects of sin and Satan. And Luther teaches this as well in thesis thirteen, "After the fall, free will exists only a concept, and as long as it acts in accordance with itself, commits a deadly sin.... You say the will is free, but in reality, it is a slave."⁹¹ On his own, man is never truly free, but a slave to sin and Satan.

But man is not on his own. The cross of Christ and the grace of God have set him free from sin and Satan. Paul writes, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Phil 5:1). But what is a Christian free for? It cannot be just for a cheap grace or "everything is lawful" attitude. A Christian has been set free *for* the love of the cross.

What is that love of the cross? It is the same love God has towards mankind, a love that reaches out even to those who hate and reject it. Luther says in thesis twenty-eight of the Heidelberg Disputation, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is loveable."⁹²

91. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 24.

92. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 37.

And this love of God, the love of the cross, now lives in Christians. “This is the love of the cross, and that which is produced by the cross, which turns towards the direction where it cannot find the goodness in which it delights, but where it may transfer goodness onto the wicked and the destitute.”⁹³ Dostoyevsky, through the perspective of Father Zossima, says, “Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of divine love and is the highest love on earth.”⁹⁴ The love of the cross loves even when such love is uncomfortable, unappreciated, or unwanted. Why? Because a Christian’s love is built solely off the cross of Christ and God’s love for us. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Man without God rebels at this idea. Ivan says, “I could never understand how one can love one’s neighbor. It’s just one’s neighbors that one can’t love.... Why won’t he admit it, do you think? Because I smell unpleasant, because I have a stupid face, because I once trod on his foot.”⁹⁵ And that is why any system for morality built on anything else besides the love of the cross will fail; mankind is by nature stubborn, selfish, and callous. He is in slavery to sin. The cross of Christ is the only answer to the hate and division in society. Nothing else can give such a freedom for the love of the cross.

93. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 38.

94. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 406.

95. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 297.

PART III: A MORE BEAUTIFUL TRUTH—THE STORY OF THE CROSS BROUGHT TO THOSE IN OUR CULTURE

The Story of the Cross

While Fyodor Dostoyevsky's book might have resonated in nineteenth-century Russia, is it useful for a twenty-first-century American? Christians live in a society that doesn't just question God and Christianity's usefulness; they live in a society that rejects and denounces Jesus Christ and everything in Scripture. Many today might agree with James Randi's words.

To make sure that my blasphemy is thoroughly expressed, I hereby state my opinion that the notion of a god is a basic superstition, that there is no evidence for the existence of any god(s), that devils, demons, angels and saints are myths, that there is no life after death, heaven nor hell, that the Pope is a dangerous, bigoted, medieval dinosaur, and that the Holy Ghost is a comic-book character worthy of laughter and derision. I accuse the Christian god of murder by allowing the Holocaust to take place – not to mention the "ethnic cleansing" presently being performed by Christians in our world – and I condemn and vilify this mythical deity for encouraging racial prejudice and commanding the degradation of women.⁹⁶

Does the story of the cross reach those in an anti-Christian culture? Does this cross make any real impact to people living in twenty-first-century America?

Dostoyevsky, through the character Father Paissy, answers with a resounding *yes*. The story of Christianity is the solution for every culture because every culture since Adam and Eve has sought to overthrow God. This effort is like pushing water uphill with a rake: useless. It brings no true and lasting peace in life.

“Remember, young man, unceasingly,” Father Paissy began, without preface, “that the science of this world, which has become a great power, has, especially in the last century, analyzed everything divine handed down to us in the holy books. After this cruel analysis, the learned of this world have nothing left of all that was sacred of old. But they

96. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/James_Randi.

have only analyzed the parts and overlooked the whole, and indeed their blindness is marvelous. Yet the whole still stands steadfast before their eyes, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”⁹⁷

Father Paissy, the monk to whom Elder Zossima entrusted Alyosha’s mentorship, spoke these words to Alyosha early in the book. With these words, Dostoyevsky makes a point: The story of Christianity, the story of the cross, remains the best solution and hope for mankind in spite of any attempt to dismantle or discredit it. What Dostoyevsky does here is what modern apologetic scholars call *narrative apologetics*. He testifies to the power of Christianity when taken as a whole. And it’s nothing new.

Augustine (AD 354–430) mirrored this same thought in his *Confessions*: “Our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.”⁹⁸ Only Christianity can give people a true and lasting peace. Josh Chatraw describes narrative apologetics like this: “The grand narrative of the Bible plays out in four movements: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Apologetically, the Bible claims that this grand narrative is better than any other prevailing cultural narrative. In fact, it isn’t just a story; it’s the *best* story.”⁹⁹ Alister McGrath writes, “I came to realize that Christianity offered a better way of making sense of the world I observed around me and experienced within me.”¹⁰⁰ C.S. Lewis notes, “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen—not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.”¹⁰¹ As this whole paper has built up and proven,

97. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 212.

98. Augustine, *The Confessions* (New York: New City, 2001), 14.

99. Joshua D Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 60.

100. Alister E. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 28.

101 C.S. Lewis, “Is Theology Pottery?” *Essay Collection* (London: Collins, 2000), 21.

as Luther and Dostoyevsky have demonstrated, Christianity is the only real solution for mankind and all the problems that face him.

And this matters as much in the twenty-first century as it has in centuries past. Alister McGrath writes, “Back in the eighteenth century, it was important to show that Christianity was *true*; in the twenty-first century, it has become important to show that it *works*.”¹⁰² Although Dostoyevsky might disagree with McGrath’s analysis of what was important in the eighteenth century, the second half of McGrath’s observation hits the nail on the head: The story of the cross is the best solution for mankind *in all ages*, including the twenty-first century. Part III of this paper will demonstrate how to apply the story of the cross to specific people in twenty-first-century America, using characters from *Brothers Karamazov* as a basis for these caricatures.

How Do We Bring It?

Before I dive into these caricatures, we must examine the *how*. This is a crucial cog in the system. If you take it out, everything falls apart. The *how* is simple: with love, humility, and respect. This is so crucial not because our actions somehow trump Christ crucified; rather, Christians are the mask of God. If someone has a certain view of Christians, they will hold that same view toward their God. So as a Christian spreads this beautiful, good story, he clothes himself with love for others, humility as he considers himself last, and respect towards all people. These actions are to be directed towards everyone from our beloved parents to the most detestable and hated people in the world.

Luther describes this selfless, humble love of the cross like this: “This is the love of the cross, and that which is produced by the cross, which turns towards the direction where it cannot

102. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 17.

find the goodness in which it delights, but where it may transfer goodness onto the wicked and the destitute.”¹⁰³ Dostoyevsky also talks about this selfless love: “Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth.”¹⁰⁴ Josh Chatraw notes that a Christian’s very life is an apologetic: “Today, we are living between redemption and the new creation. Yes, that’s right; we are a part of the story. Thus, to help skeptics make sense of the Bible’s grand narrative, we must live in and live *out* the story. Again, our lives are an apologetic.”¹⁰⁵ The Word of God alone changes hearts of stone into living hearts of flesh; God is the one who causes the seed to grow; it is an absolute miracle beyond our comprehension that we who are blind might see God. But God promises to us that he works through means. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom 10:17). It is our mission as Christians to speak this Word to others. And the best *how* for this task is selfless love.

To Those in Our Culture

Grushenka – The Hardened Sinner
Your Coworker Who Talks Openly about Her Sinful Lifestyle

Grushenka was not a model of chaste living. She played the father, Fyodor, against the son, Dmitri; she wanted to seduce Alyosha. On top of all that, she would not have admitted anything about this to be wrong! That can be a tough pill for a lifelong Christian to swallow: that

103. Keith and Klembara, *Theology of the Cross*, 38.

104. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 406.

105. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 61.

sometimes sinners don't want to change. Maybe you or a friend has met someone like that: a Grushenka, a coworker who lives and talks openly about her sinful lifestyle. And as you listen and talk to them, it becomes evident that they are completely content and happy with their lifestyle! This probably grates on the ears and causes a certain level of internal tension at work. How in the world can a Christian share the story of the cross with someone like that?

But Alyosha didn't leave Grushenka. He didn't think to himself, "Oh, I just can't stand her, so I'll ignore her." Even as she *tried to seduce him*, Alyosha loved and respected Grushenka. And the application we can learn from that is good practice for Christians.

A good starting point for any evangelistic talk, one that will be brought up again in this section, has three parts: 1) love, 2) listen, and 3) engage with this thought, "How is the story of the cross more beautiful?"

Love her. This doesn't just mean a lack of ill will. It is an active show of actions and words. This might include asking her how her day is, being interested in her family, wondering how her weekend went, and respecting her opinions. Yes, she might hold vastly different political, economic, or family values and opinions. But that doesn't mean you can't respect her, love her, and most importantly, pray for her!

Listen to her. Americans tend to put themselves into echo chambers, to hear only what they want to hear and respond in anger when a different viewpoint comes up. Throw that habit in the trash and instead *listen*. Listen as she talks about her opinions, her family, her hopes, her fears. This is a good strategy even for someone who is decidedly anti-Christian, because they want a Christian to judge them. When you love and listen with respect, it takes away that edge. This is exactly what happened with Grushenka and Alyosha. She thinks Alyosha despises her,

which secretly makes her feel ashamed. Instead, when Alyosha actually loves, listens to, and respects her, that is precisely when her barriers are torn down.

Engage. Once you have someone's respect, which only comes *after* you love and listen, then you can challenge in a courteous manner. And challenge with this, "How is the story of the cross more beautiful?" Don't get caught up in evolution, or politics, or even whether or not the Bible is 100% inspired. But challenge their story. That question, "How is the story of the cross more beautiful?" will take on a different shape for each person, because each person is different. But the more you listen and learn about someone, and the more you grow in your own knowledge of God's grace and that wonderful story of the cross, the easier this might be.

For this woman, this Grushenka, it might look something like this. Even Epicurus, the philosopher who was all about being happy, didn't advise living like your coworker. "The voice of the flesh cries, 'keep me from hunger, thirst, and cold!' The man who has these sureties and who expects he always will would rival even Zeus for happiness. He who is not satisfied with a little, is satisfied with nothing."¹⁰⁶ So her sinful lifestyle, where she wants to drink however much, sleep with whomever, and appease every desire, is even rejected by pagan philosophers! And one doesn't need a philosopher to tell him this; common sense might suffice. Then challenge her again: What is her purpose in life? What about her goals? What comes after death? These questions plague even the most combative of atheists—how much more the average Joe! Challenge her, with respect, with the same love and listening you have always shown her. Be her Alyosha, and then share.

Share with her the more beautiful truth: Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. She has an identity in Christ. Christ died for her and gives her life, purpose, meaning, and a goal.

106. Darren M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 56-57.

This is the crucial story every single person in our culture needs. “Everyone finds themselves searching intensely for self-worth. As Jewish anthropologist Ernest Becker observes, ‘There is a universal search for cosmic significance.’”¹⁰⁷ To fill this lack of self-worth and significance, perhaps your coworker has turned to sex, liquor, or godless living. Is the answer to shun her? Is the answer to look down your nose at her? No! The answer is to remind her, every day, that you love her, that you will respect and listen to her, and to tell her a more beautiful story. It starts with your love for her. And that opens up the door to talk about Christ’s love for her.

Kolya – The Stubborn Atheist
Your Friend Who Doesn’t See Why He Should Believe in God

Maybe you have a friend in your life who resembles Kolya: well-liked among friends, outspoken in his views, and stubborn in his atheism. You’ve tried and tried, but no luck; he seems to have an answer or comeback every time religion comes up. He’s not a bad fellow, though perhaps a little cocky sometimes. People like him. How do you take the story of the cross to your friend?

Perhaps you are starting to know the drill: Love him! Build him up and respect him. Make efforts to get to know him more and more. And as you’re doing this, listen to him! Perhaps he thinks Christianity is bogus because it is just that, foolishness to those without the Spirit. But maybe there are deeper reasons: Past abuse or bad experiences with some kind of church or religion would not be uncommon.

This would be a good time to keep in mind what Alister McGrath writes: “One of the difficulties facing an apologist is that demonstrating the reasonableness or truth of Christianity does not always lead people to embrace it.”¹⁰⁸ For every logical point you bring up, your friend

107. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 230.

108. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 15.

might pull out a logical counterpoint. In fact, apologetic arguments will never lead someone to faith. The gospel alone does that. But what if they reject the gospel? Do you then reject them? Not at all! Instead, throw yourself into the relationship all the more.

This love and listening, this respect and relationship, then gives an opportunity to witness to the more beautiful truth. This is what happens between Kolya and Alyosha. Towards the end of the novel, Kolya says concerning Alyosha, ““Oh, how I love you and admire you at this moment just because you are rather ashamed! Because you are just like me,’ cried Kolya, in positive ecstasy. His cheeks glowed, his eyes beamed.”¹⁰⁹ This friendship came because Alyosha made intentional efforts to befriend Kolya and his friends. It gave Alyosha an opportunity for hope in the midst of death. And from inside this relationship with your friend, you can challenge and engage them on why the story of the cross is the more beautiful story in life. One possible avenue for this discussion is death.

Death will come. Death is one of the best apologists in the world because it reminds people, with terrible clarity, of their own mortality. “A terror of death seems to haunt us all—so much so, according to cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, that we try our best to ignore the reality of our own mortality.”¹¹⁰ Death destroys whatever shaky foundation mankind has built for themselves. And this is true of your friend as well. As nice and pleasant of an atheist or agnostic he might be, his life is built on sand. But by God’s grace, God has placed you in his life.

So, when death comes with all its sadness and brutality, whether through cancer or terrible accident, you’re there too. Through the love of the cross you’ve embedded yourself into

109. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 721.

110. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 243.

his life and proven that you care. And now, when he's at his lowest, you share the cross, the joy and peace Christians have in spite of death and because of death. And by God's grace, he will repent, just as Kolya did, and believe in the good news of Christ crucified.

Dmitri – The Therapeutic American
Your Brother Who Only Wants to Enjoy Life

Chatraw observes in his book, *Apologetics at the Cross*, “In 1966 Philip Rieff composed a seminal work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, in which he foresees an age when the pursuit of feeling better will overshadow the quest for justice, forgiveness, and redemption. In this new cultural context, he asserts, the main core value of society will be happiness.”¹¹¹ The new person in this age will be “born to be pleased.”¹¹² This could accurately be applied to Dmitri, the eldest brother in *Brothers Karamazov* whose motto was “everything is lawful.” However, as people shoot more and more for the “moon” of happiness, they fall into the abyss of anxiety. People just want to be happy, but where does that lead them?

This phrase wouldn't be out of place in America: “Why can't we all just get along and be kind?” But precisely because this seemingly simple goal of happiness, so longed for, is ultimately unattainable through our own efforts, because injustice and suffering are rampant, people grow more anxious and tense. Now think about someone you might know who lives in this culture.

What about your brother, who just wants to be happy? Maybe he's not as bad as Dmitri; he's not carousing and drinking every day. But as one without Christ, he believes something

111. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 245.

112. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 245.

similar to the philosophy, “I just want to be happy, and whatever makes someone happy is their religion.” How do you share the story of the cross with someone like that?

Love him! Throw yourself into it. Don’t shut him down, don’t stop talking to him, but prove to him that you care and are concerned about him. This love is one of the Christian’s most powerful tools for outreach and opening a hearing for the gospel. Then listen! Listen as he opens up more and more and talks about the buried anxiety and fear that he might have, the search for a happiness and contentment that just seem to elude him. Then you share the more beautiful truth: the cross. The cross of Christ gives lasting happiness and joy in our life. The cross conveys a contentment that answers the anxiety we feel over injustice and suffering.

What if he keeps rejecting this story? One might observe that many people appear perfectly happy on their own, without God. Then you keep in mind the hammer of God, the power of the Spirit working through the Word to break down enemy hearts and kindle life and faith. Their life seems fine now, true. But will it always remain so? It won’t, because that is how God chooses to work: through suffering and trouble, to bring sinners to him. So you wait.

Wait for the suffering, the tragedy, or maybe the slow increase of his personal anxiety. For Dmitri, it was 20 years of forced labor for a crime he didn’t commit. Whatever it is, it will come. “Despite the enormous prosperity of the West and the vast resources poured into the medical industry to help us ‘feel better,’ there is a restlessness and anxiety that characterizes the modern world.”¹¹³ There is a “strange melancholy which oftentimes haunt[ed] [its] inhabitants in the midst of their abundance.”¹¹⁴ These words are from Alexis de Tocqueville, a French diplomat and philosopher in the nineteenth century. How much more is this true in twenty-first-century

113. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 249.

114. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 248.

America! People run after earthly happiness. They think they can find it on their own, that it looks different for each individual. But the cruel mistresses of life and fate can dish out some serious hurt.

But when that happens, you'll be there because you loved him, because you reached out in humility and put his needs above your own. You won't be alone; the story of the cross will flare out from your mouth and the hammer of God, the Word, will strike through your words. You will proclaim to him, maybe for the umpteenth time, the story of the cross. He'll hear about the beautiful purpose and meaning God gives even in the midst of suffering. He'll know the happiness that is his in Christ, in this more beautiful truth.

Alyosha – The Doubtful Christian
Your Church Sister Who Struggles with Her Faith in an Agnostic Culture

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). This cry of a father struggling with his possessed son tugs at my own heartstrings, and maybe yours as well. Why would God do such a thing? Does God even have the power to fix this? Doubts just like this plague the heart of every single Christian. It is not that a Christian is an unbeliever. That would be silly. But every Christian is 100% saint and 100% sinner. Every Christian doubts and questions his faith. Thus apologetics, which is at its core simply answering questions, is just as much a ministry of care for a doubting believer as it is a ministry of outreach to an unbeliever. Apologetics isn't saying all atheists are stupid or Christianity is the most obvious logical choice in the world. It's dealing with the doubts and questions of people in the pews. Every Christian doubts.

That makes this caricature a little different. Here we deal with a fellow Christian. Maybe you have a close church friend. You've known her for a while. You sit next to her in Bible class. Your kids play together and hang out at every church function. But she's struggling. How can

Christianity be true when so many say it's not? Are we right and everyone else wrong? Or fill in any such doubt a Christian might have.

The steps do not change. You love her and listen to her. Maybe respect could even be built by sharing some of your own personal doubts or questions! As brothers and sisters in the same family, you build up and encourage her. With patience and kindness, you search and pray with her as she struggles through such doubts. Then you engage her with the more beautiful truth, a truth that must be repeated again and again our whole life, the truth of our forgiveness of sins and eternal life through the cross of Christ. As Peter says, "So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body" (2 Peter 1:12-13). Bring her back to the water of life, the stream of righteousness: the good news of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Any power and strength that Christians have comes from that promise of life and forgiveness.

But another aspect of the cross can also help your friend in the midst of her doubt: the mystery of the cross itself. Mystery actually melds well with human experience. G.K. Chesterton emphasizes the importance of mystery.

Mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health. The ordinary man has always been sane because the ordinary man has always been a mystic. He has always had one foot in earth and the other in fairyland. He has always left himself free to doubt his gods; but (unlike the agnostic of to-day) free also to believe in them. If he saw two truths that seemed to contradict each other, he would take the two truths and the contradiction along with them. He sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for it.¹¹⁵

Chesterton highlights something that the twenty-first-century American would do well to hear: the beauty of mystery. There are many things science and technology will never discover: where

115. Chatraw and Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross*, 160.

we came from, what our purpose is, why things like beauty, truth, and goodness exist. Instead of ignoring such questions, a healthy Christian, or any mentally stable individual, wrestles with these questions head-on.

These are mysteries solved only in the greater mystery of the cross. Dostoyevsky writes through Makar, a character in *Talks with an Old Friend of God*, “And if there’s mystery in the world, it only makes it even better; it fills the heart with awe and wonder, and it gladdens the heart. Do not repine, boy, mystery makes it even more beautiful.”¹¹⁶ The mystery of the cross, and thus of God, is actually a great comfort. The unknowns of life, the matters we can’t grasp, lie hidden in God, in someone far more powerful and wiser than we. And our salvation, wrapped in a manger and dying on a cross, is beyond our understanding. What a comfort this mystery is that we share with all people!

We don’t turn hearts. We don’t bring people to faith. That is a matter above our pay grade. However, as Christians we wield the most powerful weapon here on earth: the Word of God. “Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jer 23:29). We trust in the Spirit that fills the Word. We wield it with love, humility, and respect. And we take our stand at the foot of the cross, the mystery of God’s love and grace.

116. Nötzel, *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, 207.

CONCLUSION

The Revelation of John declares the ultimate triumph of Christ over sin, death, and Satan. However, this happens through many trials and much suffering. John wants every single Christian to read his prophecy (Rev 1:3) for a reason: The Christian life mirrors the pictures in Revelation. The seed must die. But once it dies, it produces many seeds. The joy of Christ crucified on the cross belongs to every Christian. But it comes through suffering. This was the sure foundation for Martin Luther. This was the constant theme of Fyodor Dostoyevsky. And this story of the cross is the only solution for people living in twenty-first-century America.

And this solution is as applicable now as it always has been, because every day mankind wages a war against God and his kingdom. This war doesn't just consist of persecution and killings. It is the temptations to put ourselves first, to imagine that we must win some cultural or political war, to think that we can solve whatever problems face us. We pray for the heart of Alyosha. A heart that rests on the cross of Christ for deliverance. A heart that looks honestly at the doubt and uncertainty every person struggles with. A heart that reaches out with love and respect, that listens, and that shares the more beautiful truth of the cross of Christ.

“Karamazov,” cried Kolya, “can it be true what’s taught us in religion, that we shall all rise again from the dead and shall live and see each other again, all, Ilusha too?” “Certainly we shall all rise again, certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened!” Alyosha answered, half laughing, half enthusiastic. “Ah, how splendid it will be!” broke from Kolya. “Well, now we will finish talking and go to his funeral dinner. Don’t be put out at our eating pancakes—it’s a very old custom and there’s something nice in that!” laughed Alyosha. “Well, let us go! And now we go hand in hand.” “And always so, all our lives hand in hand! Hurrah for Karamazov!” Kolya cried once more rapturously, and once more the boys took up his exclamation: “Hurrah for Karamazov!”¹¹⁷

117. Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 877.

John 12:24, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

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