

# *Theological Wisdom and the "Word About the Cross"*

## *The Rhetorical Scheme in I Corinthians 1—4*

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Aware of the party strife that plagued the church at Corinth, Paul addresses it briefly and then begins a discourse on wisdom that seems unrelated to the problem of parties—but perhaps not so unrelated after all.

### THE EXEGETICAL PROBLEM TO BE TREATED<sup>1</sup>

THE SITUATION in Corinth was not pretty. Competing groups had plunged the community into strife (3:3–4; 1:10–11). The members of one group were boasting, "I belong to Paul"; those of another group were bragging, "I belong to Cephas"; still others were saying, "I belong to Apollos" (3:22; 1:12). Each group praised its own apostle (3:21; cf. 1:29, 31) and correspondingly disparaged the respective apostles of the other parties (4:6; cf. 4:3, 5).<sup>2</sup>

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1. Only *one* problem of the disputed I Cor. 1—4 chapters will be approached with a new solution in this article. I offer a detailed discussion of I Cor. 1—4 and the corresponding exegetical literature in my forthcoming book *Ad Ecclesiae Unitatem*. The material of the article in hand was presented as a guest lecture in Wuppertal-Barmen in May 1989.

2. "I belong to Christ" (1:12) hardly represents a Corinthian slogan but a rhetorical formulation by Paul himself, exposing the absurdity of the party slogans. See the reasons listed, e.g., by Philipp Vielhauer, *Geschichte der urchristlichen Literatur* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), pp. 135–37.

Why did each party praise its "own" apostle? Because they apparently valued his "wisdom." The frequent occurrence of *sophia* in I Corinthians 1—3 (sixteen times), which otherwise appears just three times in Paul's usage, is best explained by the assumption that Paul picked up on a key word of the Corinthians here: They clearly believed themselves to be wise (3:18–20; 4:10; cf. 1:5). To link the Corinthians' arrogance about their wisdom with their party disorder is within reason, because both elements are treated in chapters 1—4 (mentioned together, e.g., in 3:18–22). Let us spell out this link: The party members praised the wisdom, the theological perception of "their" apostle. As epigones identifying themselves with "their" apostle and his wisdom, they praised their own wisdom; they praised their own theological perception that they had taken over from their own apostle.

Paul's reaction to the party strife is surprising. He allots just eight verses (1:10–17) to the party dispute and does not return to speak about this unrest until 3:3. In between, in 1:18—3:2, the party strife is no longer mentioned. Here a surprising silence about the previously addressed problem of factions reigns for two pages—a silence to which the Corinthians must have "listened" with growing wonder. Not before 3:3–4 does the suspense end with a forte, the Corinthians now being openly scolded for their party strife. Their factionalism uncovers that they are still "babes in Christ"—which sarcastically contradicts their own self-understanding (cf. 4:8).

With what do the "silent" two pages deal? The fundamental theological text of 1:18—2:16, at first glance, has *nothing* to do with the Corinthian parties. Rather, in its first section especially (1:18–25), it only speaks generally about "God" and "the world," and about non-Christian "Jews and Greeks." "What is the point of this fundamental theological text in regard to the specific problem of Christian parties?" the Corinthians might ask. Here lies the problem that I would like to approach with a new solution.

The serious nature of a research problem often becomes evident in extreme solutions. One such solution was put forward by V. P. Branick, who sees little relation between the homily of 1:18–31, 2:6–16, 3:18–23 and the Corinthian party strife. For that reason, he applies the source-critical scalpel.<sup>3</sup> Such surgery is unnecessary if one can establish the relationship of this fundamental theological text to the context of the party quarreling, but is that possible? Since Hans Conzelmann's commentary, we have been accustomed to speaking of a "ring composition"<sup>4</sup> when viewing I Corinthians 1—

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3. "Source and Redaction Analysis of 1 Corinthians 1—3," *JBL* 101, 1982, 251–69. "The homily was very probably written for another group" (p. 267). It "was a coherent unit before its insertion into the letter to the Corinthians" (p. 269). There is only a "general relevance of the homily to the conditions at Corinth" (p. 269).

4. "Ringkomposition." "Cycle" in the English translation (*1 Corinthians* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975], p. 79).

3. Yet Conzelmann's commentary is not quite clear about why Paul inserts 1:18—2:16 into the discussion of the party strife and why 1:18—2:16 represents a necessary building block in the argument against the party disorder. What rhetorical function does this "insertion" have? Is it only the interesting digression of an absent-minded apostle? Conzelmann's commentary is not interested in rhetorical technique. For Conzelmann, Paul does not knowingly employ any sort of rhetorical device. This picture has changed in more recent studies. Wilhelm Wuellner, for example, sees Paul consciously inserting rhetorical digressions in the course of his arguments, with specific argumentative goals in mind.<sup>5</sup> According to Wuellner, one such digression is I Corinthians 1:19—3:20, for which the purpose is "to highlight how 'faithful God is' (1:9) to those who wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ and as such keep or hold themselves 'to the end guiltless in the [last] day' (1:7-8)" (p. 186). For Wuellner, the digression fits well into the argumentative unit of 1:1—6:11 which elaborates the alternatives of damnation and salvation. Party strife, however, plays little role in this interpretation. According to Wuellner, the main point of Paul's argument in 1:1—6:11 is something totally different.<sup>6</sup> As questionable as this exegesis may be, Wuellner took an important step by interpreting Paul's digressions as a *deliberate* rhetorical device. More recently, M. Bünker also asserted that Paul consciously employed rhetoric in I Corinthians 1—4.<sup>7</sup> 1:18—2:16 are characterized by Bünker as a rhetorical *narratio* between the *exordium* of 1:10-17 and the *probatio* of 3:1-17. Nevertheless, in Bünker's work the relationship between the content of 1:18—2:16 and the context of the parties remains unclear.

Thus, the riddle is posed to us: How is the general theological text of 1:18—2:16 related to the specific party context? We must first look at this passage by itself.

I CORINTHIANS 1:18-25: THEOLOGICAL WISDOM AS WISDOM OF THE WORLD—AS THE OPPOSITE POLE TO THE "WORD ABOUT THE CROSS"

"The word about the cross"—so the theological text begins in 1:18. The word about the cross speaks about the cross as the place where *God* meets

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5. "Greek Rhetoric and Pauline Argumentation" in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, in honor of R. M. Grant, ed. W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken, *ThH* 54 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1979), 177-88.

6. I have trouble following Wuellner at this point, just as I have trouble stretching out the complete argumentative unit to 6:11 or the digression to 3:20. For the discussion, see my forthcoming book (n. 1).

7. "Briefformular und rhetorische Disposition im 1. Korintherbrief," *GTA* 28 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), esp. pp. 51-59. Whether the characteristics of *narratio* indeed hold true for 1:18—2:16, and whether the *probatio*, the proving part of the speech, lies only in 3:1-17, needs further exploration.

humanity, saving them, or sentencing them in case they do not acknowledge God's presence at this place of contempt (1:18, 20–21). Thus, the word about the cross speaks about God's self, which is exactly the reason why "Jews and Greeks" shake their heads. To connect the powerful God with the weakness of the cross, thus to announce the power as weakness and, consequently, the weakness as power (1:18, 24–25) is offensive and foolish in the eyes of the world (1:23).

Paul's text now establishes an absolute contrast between God and the word about the cross on the one hand and the wisdom of the world on the other hand. God has made this wisdom a folly (1:20). The world is perishing with its wisdom (1:18–19). Exegetically, there is no dispute so far. The problem is: What does the text mean by "wisdom of the world"? A further step is to ask why this "wisdom of the world" fails so radically.

What does the text mean by "wisdom of the world"? In spite of all the exegetical disagreement about verse 1:21, this verse defines more precisely what kind of "world wisdom," rejected by God, Paul has in mind in 1:20. Not every human knowledge about any given topic—physics or medicine, for instance—is under debate in our text (at least not primarily). Paul has something more specific in mind: "The world did not know *God* through wisdom" (1:21). Paul aims specifically at the human wisdom *about God* as "wisdom of the world," at "theo-logy" as "wisdom of the world."

That the theological endeavor of the world is the focus of the debate is also demonstrated by 1:22, where the Jews demand signs. One asks, "For what?" They are hardly signs to assist physical or arithmetical comprehension. The Jews demand that *religious* claims be legitimized by powerful proofs "from above." The issue for Paul is that the Jews demand forceful evidence from God whenever anyone stands up and asserts something about God in the name of God. The examples are numerous.<sup>8</sup>

By targeting the theological endeavor of the Jews in 1:22 and then setting up the Jews and Greeks as parallel, Paul shows he has something analogous in mind about the Greeks: They too "search for wisdom" about *God*. Paul focuses on their theo-sophy. Indeed, many texts demonstrate that the Greek search for wisdom often enough peaks in theological perception.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Cf., e.g., Mark 8:11–12; Matt. 12:38–39; 16:1; Luke 11:16; John 6:30–31; II Kings 20:1–11/Josephus *Antiquities* 10.28–29; Judg. 6:36–40; Exod. 4; cf. 4:30–31/Philo *De Vita Mosi* 1.76; Josephus *Jewish War* 6.285, 295; 1.331–32; *Antiquities* 20.167–70; Sifre *Deuteronomium* 18.19, par. 177 (108a); *The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 98a; 93b; *Pesiqtha Rabbathi* 36 (162a); *Exodus Rabba* 9 (73b); *The Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 59b.

9. In the thought world of the first and second centuries A.D., in which an academic-peripatetic mixture formed the basis for the general Greek-philosophic education, the interest in the afterlife and in the immortality of the soul was rekindled. The decidedly religious goal of middle Platonism, e.g., is well known: Attikos in Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica*

A further indication that Paul aims primarily at the *theological* wisdom of human beings in I Corinthians 1:18–25 is offered by the *grammateus* in 1:20, the Jewish scribe, thus somebody who thinks he knows something about God. Just this theologian is questioned: Where are you? God will make you ashamed.

Paul now diametrically opposes the word about the cross to human theological wisdom—the latter being condemned by that word. The text illustrates this power of the word about the cross in several places (1:19, 20, 25). There is only enough space to illustrate one example here: In verses 1:22–25 the shattering of human religious expectations is brought forward clearly. Jews and Greeks are treated by Paul in a parallel manner. Let us first look at what he states about the *Jews*. One can paraphrase: Since (*epeidē*) the Jews demand signs, that is, powerful proof from above (22), the Christians offer them a sign from above, namely, Christ's cross (23a). Yet *this* "sign" is something completely different from what the Jews had expected. This sign is no powerful proof from above; it is a weak display from above (25), and therefore a *skandalon*. It is scandalous to link God with weakness (23).

Thus, the Jewish expectation of signs is met by the kerygma of the cross—the Jews, in fact, get their "sign"—but this expectation is met in a way that paradoxically falls short of their expectation. The contradiction of the word about the cross over against human expectations can hardly be expressed more strongly than Paul does it here. The word about the cross shatters the Jewish expectations.

Certainly, the word about the cross does not only condemn, it also saves: When the (Jewish) people in the church accept the weak and crucified Christ, he becomes the power of God for them (24). That is, after their human theological categories are struck down, the word about the cross turns out to be the power of life for them (18b).

Only now, after arriving at what is in total opposition to their expectations, do the Jews come to know what they originally had awaited: the *powerful* proof from above, but a proof totally different from what they had awaited. Therein lies the dialectic and the paradox.

Paul's statement about the Greeks is analogous. To paraphrase again: Since (*epeidē*) the Greeks search for wisdom (22), the Christians offer them wisdom, namely, the wisdom called Christ, and him crucified (23a + 24b); but *this* wisdom proclaimed to the Greeks is something completely different from what they had expected. This wisdom is not wise; it is folly (23). It makes God a fool in human eyes (25a).

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15.13; Albinus *Didascalia* 27; Celsus *Fragment* VII.45; VIII.63.B (ed. Bader); Justin *Dialogus* 2.6: Seeing God is the "*Telos* of Plato's philosophy." Cf. also, e.g., Plutarch *De Iside et Osiride* 351.C.E.; Justin *Dialogus* 1.3; Alexander of Aphrodisias *In Aristotelis metaphysica commentaria* 171 (ed. Hayduck).

Thus, the Greek longing for wisdom is met by the kerygma about the cross. The Greeks, in fact, *get* “wisdom,” but their expectation of wisdom is met in a way that paradoxically falls short of that expectation. To human eyes, where wisdom was expected, foolishness is offered. The word about the cross shatters the Greek expectations.

The fascinating thing is that by identifying Christ, the crucified one, with wisdom (*sophia*, 1:24, 30), Paul wrests from the Greeks one of their most cherished terms. Taking over the term *sophia* as a vessel, he empties it of the associations that the Greeks have with “wisdom.” For them, it is clear: God cannot want to effect salvation by means of a despised cross—that is nonsense. The Greek theological search for truth does not know what to do with the word about the cross. This word thwarts their expectations.

But again, the word about the cross does not only condemn, it also saves: When the (Greek) people in the church accept the foolishness of a crucified savior, he becomes the wisdom of God for them (24 + 30). After their human theological categories were struck down, the crucified Christ turns out to be *sophia* for them.

Only now, after arriving at what is in total opposition to their expectations, are the Greeks granted what they originally had expected: wisdom (24), but a wisdom totally different from what they had expected. The thought rings so paradoxically because Paul, in verse 24, wrests the *sophia* term from the Greeks in the same way as he deprives the sign-demanding Jews of the *dynamis* term: God’s power (*dynamis*) is not displayed in forceful signs from above; it shows its strength in the word about a weak cross (1:18).

In summary, the word about the cross as God’s power (1:18) is fundamentally critical for human knowledge and expectations; in this Logos the saving *and* condemning God is met. Or in other words, precisely *because* God is absolute, the human speech about God cannot be. According to the text, any human theology is moved into a constant crisis by its own subject for discussion—by God. This subject in its power (*dynamis*, 1:18, 24) constantly withdraws itself from human theology, putting up resistance against domestication. Trembling (2:3) would be the correct attitude of the theologian. The theologian does not possess absolute dogmas but is ready for constant revision and discussion, being aware that he or she may repeatedly have to start from scratch and that even thirty volumes of dogmatics do not permit one to know anything definitive which would allow one to brag triumphantly, “I am a Paulinist, a Lutheran, a Calvinist, or a Barthian.”

*Why* does God reject human theological endeavors? We saw that the text targets *theological* wisdom as wisdom of the world. We saw, secondly, that according to the text God destroys this theological wisdom of the world with the word about the cross. What then is so objectionable in human theological striving? Is it only that for the world the word about the cross is scandalous nonsense (1:18, 23)? Is it only that in the theological categories of the

world there is no place for a God who acts in such a disgraceful event as the cross? Is the fault of the world, therefore, only that its categories do not suffice? Or is there more to it for Paul?

The parallel discussion in Romans 1:18–25 interprets our text to some extent. The knowledge about God inherent in people (Rom. 1:19–21*a*, 28*a*) was distorted by them when they did not gratefully praise the living God (1:21, 23) but rather worshiped images of people or animals. They confused the creature with the Creator (1:23, 25), considering themselves "wise"—but in God's eyes becoming fools (1:22). Paul here touches on the same terminology as in our Corinthian text (the wise becoming fools), thereby inviting us to consult Romans 1:18–25 as a Pauline commentary on I Corinthians 1:21.

According to Romans 1:18–25, the knowledge about God inherent in people becomes perverted for at least two reasons: People think they are able to "domesticate" the sovereign God (1:23), capturing God in images of creatures (Rom. 1:23, 25); and having done this, they even fancy that this "act of domestication" was "wise" (1:22). The domestication of God, this objectification of God when God is no longer allowed to be God, *this* is the sin of the fools. It is the sin against the First and Second Commandments.

That we are on the right track with this borrowing from Romans is demonstrated by the phrase *ouk egnō o kosmos* in I Corinthians 1:21, which does not aim at knowledge alone but also at the obedient acknowledgement of God as Lord. So also in Galatians 4:8, "not knowing God" is paralleled with "you served the gods." Again in I Thessalonians 4:5, with its ethical context, "knowing God" includes the acknowledgement of God's lordship expressed in specific conduct.

Clearer still is I Corinthians 1:22: The Jewish demand for signs and the Greek demand for wisdom evidently have in common that they call for proof supporting divine truth. With that, Jews and Greeks "set themselves up as an authority that can pass judgment upon God. . . . They expect God to submit himself to their criteria. This, however, would mean that revelation would have to present itself as a factor belonging to the world."<sup>10</sup> God would become a mere object of human, worldly thoughts. God would be in our pocket.

Likewise, I Corinthians 1:18 leads in the same direction. In this verse, the emphasis on the powerful character (*dynamis*) of the word about the cross is conspicuous. The symmetry of the sentence would lead us to expect *sophia*. That this expectation is surprisingly not fulfilled shows that Paul attached importance to the term "power." "Power" signals that this Logos is not open to human mastery. On the contrary, it powerfully masters human beings.

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10. Conzelmann, *I Corinthians*, p. 47.

Such wisdom is not a possession that human beings can get hold of, manipulating it, and being proud of it. Rather, this Logos itself takes possession of human beings. Both Romans 1:18–25 and I Corinthians 1:18–25 denounce a sinful type of theology delivered up to God’s wrath (Rom. 1:18): a way of speaking about God that degrades the Creator to a manageable creature.

At this point we can note a first connection between the fundamental theological unit of 1:18–25 and the Corinthian situation. What does all of this mean for the Corinthians in their party strife?

God is taken hold of not only by the idolatrous heathen in Romans 1:18–25, by the Jews demanding signs, and the Greeks searching for proof, but also by the Corinthians, thus by Christians pursuing a *Christian* theology. The Corinthian Christian theologians do not allow God to be God anymore either! Where, in Paul’s view, do they get hold of God as an “object”? Where do they leave out the condemning God in their speech about God? The answer is: at the point where they boast of a Pauline, Petrine, or Apollonian position—in the party strife.<sup>11</sup> The Corinthian perception of God becomes human wisdom by being praised as Pauline, Petrine, or Apollonian wisdom, and not as a gift totally from God (cf. also 2:5). The Corinthians act as if these three apostles could command Christian theological wisdom as a possession or quality of theirs and as if the apostles, consequently, should be revered for it. In this manner, human beings are put in the limelight (1:12; 3:3–4) where the honor is proper to God alone (3:21; 1:31).

Furthermore, the epigones boast (4:6–7) about their positions (“I am a Paulinist . . .”). Every boasting about a Christian position, however, whether this position is correct or not (e.g., the one of the Pauline party), is already godless for Paul, because it hardens the respective positions as if they were never susceptible to challenge. An absolutizing of one’s own theological position fixes God like an object, for it fails to take into account God as the powerfully (*dynamis*) acting subject who plunges the human speech about God into a permanent crisis, preventing the theologian from bragging (“I am a Paulinist . . .”) but making him or her tremble (2:3).

In other words, what Paul in a covert way reproaches the Corinthians for in 1:18–25 is that their Christian theology is not one ounce better than that of the world, that of the Jews, or that of the Greeks. Paul does not say this explicitly but in covert form, as a hidden meaning. This rhetorical device will occupy us more closely below.

The exegetical justification for applying the fundamental theological text of 1:18–25 to the Corinthian party strife in this way is found in chapter 3 where the parties are openly targeted and where the world’s striving for wisdom (1:18–25) is put on the same level as the *Corinthian* striving for

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11. For the possible contents of these positions see my forthcoming book (n. 1).



wisdom. Let us look at 3:18–19. The Corinthians (in their parties) fancy themselves “to be *wise in this age*” (3:18 = 1:20) with their Christian theology, but God turns such “*wisdom of this world*” into “*foolishness*” (3:19 = 1:19–20). The Corinthians must first become “*foolish*” before they can become “*wise*” (3:18 = 1:23–24). In 1:18–25 and 3:18–19 Paul uses the same terminology, which shows how much 1:18–25, in fact, may be read with the Corinthians and their parties in mind. 3:18–19 makes the general theological reflections of 1:18–2:16 clear in regard to the party situation. In other words, and this is the rhetorical finesse, the Corinthians, at first, can accept the fundamental theological text of 1:18–2:16 as agreeable and even enjoyable, for the text in its foreground does not criticise them but the “world.” They can enjoy the “we” who are being saved (1:18), at least initially, until suddenly, from 3:1 on, the implications of the fundamental theological passage are shockingly turned against the Corinthians themselves. 1:18–2:16 is a “Trojan horse” with which Paul thrusts himself into the middle of the Corinthian party situation. With the Corinthians lulled into security after 1:18–2:16, Paul can attack them openly with the discussion beginning in 3:1. We will return to this point in a moment.

In summary, the parallel between I Corinthians 1:18–25 and 3:18–19 demonstrates this surprising equation: The Christian theology of the Corinthians, being so enthusiastic and so proud of possessing wisdom about God, stands on the same level as the wisdom of the rest of the world. Both are driven *ad absurdum* by the word about the cross. Both are equally godless. The wisdom of the theologians of Corinth is in no way superior to that of the rest of the world.

That we are on the right track with this interpretation is illustrated also by I Corinthians 3:1–4. In their “jealousy” and “strife” (3:3), in their pride as apostle epigones (3:4), the Corinthians are not one step ahead of mere “human beings” (3:4). In regard to the wisdom-arrogance of their party strife, they stand on the same level as the “people of the flesh” (3:1, 3).

#### I CORINTHIANS 1:26—2:5

After all this antithetical language from Paul, a theological question emerges. It sounds as if the word about the cross is detached from human theological positions, as if God spoke this word directly “from heaven,” yet even the word about the cross exists only in the mouths of human beings. The word about the cross proclaims that God is absolute and sovereign over human theology; it bursts open human theological expectations. On the other hand, the word about the cross is also a human theological word and, as such, unable to claim anything absolute. In other words, the theological proposition that God is absolute is, for its part, not absolute! “Fine,” the Corinthians may say, “then we do not have to take the critical and shattering

power of the word about the cross as absolutely as you, Paul, want us to believe.” Has Paul entangled himself in an intellectual dilemma? Must he now introduce absolute revelatory propositions “dropped down from heaven” in order to extricate himself?<sup>12</sup>

The following context (I Cor. 1:26—2:5) indicates Paul’s thoughts ran in the opposite direction. 1:26—2:5 do not represent the word of the cross as irrefutable revelation which the Corinthians could only “swallow” or decline. Rather, Paul steps down from the level of fundamental theological propositions (1:18–25) to the level of the everyday life of the church, searching there for *empirical* traces of the power exercised by the word about the cross. In place of (Schlier’s) revelatory *axioms*, Paul presents an *empirical* attempt! Whether we are inclined to approve of it or not, this effort by Paul is astonishing. Evidently, Paul takes seriously the fact that the judging word about the cross is itself a questionable human word, open to critical scrutiny even by the Corinthians who are criticised by it. In other words, the word about the cross, which relativizes the positions made absolute by human beings, is itself *not* presented as an absolute. Rather, Paul hands it over to the empirical judgment of the Corinthians. By empirical means, he tries to persuade the Corinthians to acknowledge this word and then revise their self-satisfied party positions. Paul does not decree revelatory axioms; he tries to convince by pointing to experiences the Corinthians shared.

Which experiences? Let us look at 1:26–31 first. There we see that the word about the cross is a power (*dynamis*) that leads human wisdoms, strengths, and expectations into a crisis. It overturns the positions of which human beings are proud. “Look,” Paul says in 1:26 (and I paraphrase), “when this word about the cross was proclaimed in Corinth for the first time, it did not call the socially strong and wise but, with a few exceptions, left them alone. It passed them by in order to deliver them up to destruction” (1:27–28; cf. 1:18). According to Paul, that provides an empirical proof that the strength and wisdom revered by human society are rejected and convicted by God. Through the proclamation of the word about the cross, God repudiated the ones who are considered strong and wise by the world.

Thus, Paul appeals to the Corinthians’ own experience with the proclamation of the cross. He entreats them to recognize the convicting power of this proclamation which judges human positions, and therefore to put an

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12. Paul’s exegete Heinrich Schlier did, in fact, draw this conclusion—and converted to Roman Catholicism. “Kerygma und Sophia,” in *Die Zeit der Kirche*, 4th ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), pp. 206–32: God reveals God’s self in language, in the kerygma. The kerygma comes in the form of formulas by which the self-revelation of God is fixed. The human being can only acknowledge, without stipulation, these specific propositions of the kerygma—and then unfold the kerygma in the dogma of the church. In this way, Schlier, based on I Cor. 1–2, arrives at a N.T. foundation for the church dogma.

end to their veneration of human leaders. They can boast only about God (1:31), not about human apostles.

In 2:1–5 we find the second empirical paradigm: Paul's actual founding of the church in Corinth. He established that church by preaching nothing else but the word about the cross (2:2), and he did this in weakness, fear, and much trembling (2:3). Paul invites the Corinthian community to study their own foundational experience and to learn from it that the gospel about the cross did not have its community-forming power because of "persuasive words of wisdom" (*peithois sophias logois*), "excellent speech" (*uperochē logou*), or "human wisdom" (*sophia anthrōpōn*), the things about which human beings could be proud and for which they could praise human leaders. When the cross is proclaimed and through this act a community is founded, human wisdom and strength do not contribute anything to it. God rejects them as legitimate tools. Therefore, this is the final point of this argument—the Corinthian parties cannot praise any apostle for these qualities.

#### I CORINTHIANS 2:6–16

While 2:1–5 is about the way in which the apostle *preaches* the gospel, 2:6–16 deals with the way in which the preacher *comes to know* the gospel. Here, too, the Pauline argument covertly targets the party strife. The argument's goal can be described in this way: One comes to know the gospel through *God's* spirit (2:10–13, cf. v. 6), not through the human mind; and that implies not through the apostles' human mind either, which otherwise could recommend these preachers for partisan praise. In opposition to the wrong Corinthian attitude, 2:6–16 points out that "we preach *God's* wisdom, which *God* predestined" (2:7); "*God* revealed" (2:10) . . . and so forth. The word "God" occurs ten times in 2:6–16. Here we encounter the argument's point, and the polemic against the Corinthians. Facing the veneration of apostles, Paul calls out "God, God," not "Paul," not "Apollōs," not "Cephas"! In genuine theology God speaks. Therefore the glory is all God's (1:31) and not the theologians'. With this we have already summed up the basic message of 2:6–16, space not allowing us to expand on this text so vehemently debated by exegetes.<sup>13</sup>

Only one question still needs to be touched upon briefly. According to 2:6–16, God reveals true theology. Has Paul therefore arrived at revelatory axioms after all, justifying Schlier and contradicting his own empirical attempt in 1:26–2:5? This conclusion would be mistaken. Of course, the word about the cross is revealed by God and is not a product of the human mind; therefore, human apostles cannot be praised for this Christian wis-

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13. See my forthcoming book (n. 1).

dom. On the other hand, however, this revelatory character of the word about the cross does not imply that Paul in the course of his argument has to treat it as a truth that only can be “swallowed” or declined. It is part of the humility of this word that it is delivered up to the empirical judgment of the Corinthians in spite of its revelatory character. The Corinthians need to decide for themselves whether they want to acknowledge the power of this word, which in the process of founding the Corinthian church overturned worldly wisdom and strength (1:26—2:5). The content of this word, God’s Christ untriumphantly delivered up to a human cross, corresponds to the way in which Paul uses this word in his argument—as delivered up to human empirical scrutiny and not as an axiom which triumphantly overrides every question.

#### THE RHETORICAL SCHEMA

Let us repeat: In 1:18—2:16 Paul nowhere refers to the party strife *directly*. Nevertheless, I have asserted that this whole section not only produces general theological statements but, on a second level, also targets in covert form the specific problem of party disorder. I sum up our previous exegesis: 1:18—25, bolstered by two empirical supports in 1:26—2:5, argues that the word about the cross does away with the human theological wisdom of the world. At first, the Corinthian readers probably enjoyed this, listening to a criticism of “Jews and Greeks,” until they are surprised to discover (3:18—19) that they, too, with their partisan boasting about Christian wisdom, had already been denounced in 1:18—2:5. In other words, by criticizing “Jews and Greeks,” Paul at the same time accused a Christian misbehavior in Corinth.<sup>14</sup>

Just as 1:18—2:5 covertly addressed party disorder, so do 2:6—16. In these verses Paul identifies the divine spirit, not the human, as the source of genuine theological knowledge, thus covertly pointing out that the apostles were not led to their theological statements by the human mind but by God’s spirit. For that reason, every boasting about (human) apostles becomes absurd.

This, then, is the concealed argument of 1:18—2:16. Like a Trojan horse, it at first pleases its listeners until they are shocked to discover that they themselves are criticized by the same text. 1:18—2:16 has two dimensions: On one hand, it is general and theologically fundamental. On the other hand, the reader is invited to move from the general foreground to the background of a text, where the specific party disorder is attacked. This background is not openly displayed in 1:18—2:16; it is concealed, in a kind

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14. This point provides an important hermeneutical impetus for Jewish-Christian dialogue: The Pauline criticism of the Jews in 1 Cor. 1:18—25 is inseparable from a Christian self-criticism; in fact, it is a disguised Christian self-criticism.

of covert speech. Paul does not stand alone with this type of covert speech. Especially around the middle of the first century, this method was extremely well liked by both speakers and listeners. The audience had to puzzle a little before it got behind the (second) true meaning of a statement. This covert mode of speech was called a *schēma* by the rhetoricians.

We may see how this was understood by looking at Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 9.2 as an example. Under the "figures of thought" which "differ from the method of simple statement" (*simplici modo indicandi*, 9.2.1), Quintilian subsumes *emphasis* (9.2.64) and *schēma*; they can be considered as being related or even identical (65-91). (1) The *emphasis* is a figure according to which "some *hidden meaning* is extracted from some phrase" (64). Quintilian cites an example from Virgil. In the foreground of the text Dido complains about marriage: "Might I not have lived, from wedlock free, a life without a stain, happy as beasts are happy?" In addition to the lament about marriage, however, in the background of the text the statement can *also* be found that Dido supposes a life without marriage is brutish. (2) The same structure is valid for the *schēma* (65):

Similar, if not identical with this figure (i.e., *emphasis*) is another, which is *much in vogue at the present time*, . . . which is of the most common occurrence. . . . It is [the figure] whereby we excite some suspicion to indicate that our meaning is other than our words would seem to imply (*quod non dicimus accipi volumus*); but our meaning is not in this case contrary to that which we express, as in the case of irony, but rather a hidden meaning which is left to the hearer to discover (*aliud latens et auditori quasi inveniendum*). . . . Modern rhetoricians practically restrict the name of figure (*schēma*) to this device, from the use of which figured controversial themes (*controversiae figuratae*) derive their name.<sup>15</sup>

The information contained in the background is not given directly (*recta*, 65), but with ambiguity (*ambiguitate*, 68). The contemporary audience does not consider this thought figure as dishonest but, on the contrary, listens to

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15. Disguised speech = *oratio figurata* = *logos eschēmatismenos*. Thus, we deal here with the narrow meaning of *schēma*, not with the general "figure of speech." Paul's disputed *metaschēmatizo* in 4:6 fits in well at this point, meaning "to hint at something in a disguised speech without saying it *expressis verbis*" (cf. Philostratus *Vitae Sophistarum* 2.597, 2.561, 1.519; PseudoDemetrius *De Elocutione* 287, 292-94, 298). In a paraphrase I Cor. 4:6 reads like this: "For your sake I have clothed the thoughts of 3:5-4:2 in—metaphorically—disguised speech about planting and watering, about preparing a foundation, building on it, and about examining a steward's housekeeping. And I have applied these disguising metaphors to me and Apollos (in the sense that Paul planted, Apollos watered, etc.), that you may learn by us not to be puffed up in favor of one (apostle) against another." Consequently, not only 1:18-2:16 but also 3:5-4:2 is a *schēma* for Paul, the unspoken background message of 3:5-4:2 being that not only Paul and Apollos are unworthy of Corinthian praise but also Cephas (who did not even water the plants in Corinth!). After the vigorous disagreement with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2), Paul apparently avoids hurting this apostle's feelings directly, the *schēma* of 3:5-4:2, nevertheless, allowing him to relativize Peter's importance in a diplomatic way.

it with a favor (*nemo non illi furto favet*, 68).

Further, according to Quintilian (68; cf. also 66, 76, 79), the thought figure of the *schēma* is employed and favorably received particularly when the speaker is “hampered by the existence of influential personages” whose feelings he or she does not want to hurt by messages directly conveyed. “Powerful personages” (*personae potentes*) being in the way, the speaker is confronted with this kind of forced silence (*silentii necessitas*). Whoever has ears, let them hear! In fact, Cephas and Apollos were such influential personages. The *schēma* in I Corinthians 1:18—2:16 excludes any confrontation with these two co-missionaries, but at the same time it enables Paul to argue against the party disorder. 1:18—2:16 represents a fortunate rhetorical choice on the part of Paul: In the text’s background disguised by the *schēma*, Paul argues against the Corinthian parties which absolutize the wisdom of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas; however, thanks to the *schēma*, he manages to avoid stepping openly on the toes of these two other apostles. In other words, criticising the Corinthians’ praise of Apollos and Cephas, Paul nevertheless avoids hurting the feelings of these two with any direct statement—a genuine masterpiece.

Thus, as the rhetoric suggests, the *schēma* of I Corinthians 1:18—2:16 hides a “ticklish” message behind a seemingly “harmless” text. The seeming harmlessness of *emphasis* and *schēma* usually is attained by replacing a specific thought which is potentially dangerous in the situation with a general thought (*infinitum*) not necessarily related to the situation.<sup>16</sup> Paul fulfills this rhetorical rule exactly. The two main *general* thoughts (*questio infinita*) of I Corinthians 1:18—2:16 are: (1) All human wisdom of the world is bound to perish (1:18–25), and (2) all Christian wisdom is exclusively *God’s* gift through the spirit (2:6–16). The specific issue (*questio finita*), however, is the parties’ adoration of the apostles and their wisdom. Applying both general thoughts to the specific issue, one arrives at the following conclusion: Either the wisdom of the apostles is a human quality and therefore a reason for praising them—but then it is also bound to perish—or the wisdom of the apostles is exclusively a spiritual gift from *God*, justifying *God* alone as the object of praise. In both cases, the way is obstructed for praising apostles, which sums up the whole thought figure of 1:18—2:16.

We may, however, go still further with Quintilian: “If a figure is perfectly obvious, it ceases to be a figure. . . . Such devices are totally repudiated by some authorities, whether the meaning of the figure be intelligible or not” (9.2.69). Here Quintilian addresses the double problem of the *schēma* which also holds true for the Pauline text: (1) If a figure is too obvious, it can be

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16. See H. Lausberg, *Elemente der literarischen Rhetorik*, 3rd ed. (München: Hueber, 1967), par. 419.

safely dropped. (2) If a figure is too veiled, it runs the risk of not being understood. This fate befell the Pauline text at least in the scholarly exegesis, but was this also the case in Corinth? We already saw that the ears of the Pauline contemporaries were trained for the *schēma* (65). It was even known to ordinary people (*vulgo*, 9.1.14)! When Quintilian started out teaching in Rome in A.D. 68, the *schēma* enjoyed widespread popularity (9.2.77).

The speaker has to find a stance somewhere between both dangers (1 + 2) by observing moderation (*modum adhibere*, 69). Quintilian advises: The double-leveled text should not advertise its figure loudly, but it should rouse suspicion (*suspicio*) in the hearers' mind that behind the foreground of the text a background is lurking which wants to be puzzled over (71). Quintilian describes the psychological advantage of the *schēma* in this way: The hearers accept what they think they have found out for themselves, whereas they might not accept it as true if it were told them directly. It is helpful, indeed, for the speaker's purpose that the hearers take pleasure in detecting the concealed meaning, applauding their own cleverness and regarding the speaker's eloquence as a compliment for themselves (78).

That Paul at least aroused suspicion, if not perplexed wonder, with the text of 1:18—2:16 is quite likely: After a paranetical prelude in 1:10–17, a long "silence" followed in which nothing more was said directly about the party disorder—not until the beginning of chapter 3. It is precisely this suspicion-causing "silence" that prompted us, as it almost surely prompted the Corinthians, to ask the question about the real meaning of these opening chapters in First Corinthians.