

Introduction

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“It would be very unfortunate for us if, because of distraction or cowardice, we no longer heard the three most fateful expressions which will determine the future of Christianity even more than they determined its past: Logos of the Cross—God’s foolishness—God’s Power.” –Stanislas Breton¹

“Claiming to be wise, they became fools.”–Rom. 1:22

The present volume gathers most of the papers presented at an international theological conference held May 23–25, 2013, at the University of Geneva and organized by the *Faculté de théologie protestante* and the *Institut romand de systématique et d'éthique* (IRSE) of that university. The conference’s main purposes were to examine the first two chapters of Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, (aspects of) the reception of these chapters in the history of theology, and, in a constructive approach, their potential meaning today. The fact that two systematic theologians and a historian of early Christianity were the main organizers of the conference probably has something to do

1. Stanislas Breton, *Unicité et monothéisme* (Paris: Cerf, 1981), 156.

with the fact that the last two purposes (the history of interpretation and the constructive engagement with Paul's text) overshadowed the first (the actual exegesis of the text), despite the contribution of John M. G. Barclay, one of the most distinguished scholars of Paul today, as a keynote speaker. But the conference signaled something very clearly, namely that one is never finished thinking about "the word of the cross" and the foolishness and power of God's ways as manifested, "crucially" according to the Christian faith, in Jesus of Nazareth's passion and death. What does it mean that, according to Christianity, the one who is confessed to be God's emissary, God's own Son, suffered such an atrocious end, a "death by torture" which is the fate of blasphemers according to Deut. 21:23 ("anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse,"), a verse of course well known to Paul and the earliest communities ("Christ bought us freedom from the curse of the law by coming under the curse for our sake; for scripture says, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree'" Gal. 3:13)?

Right from the beginning of what would eventually become known as "Christianity"—that is, as a religious movement distinct from Judaism—the disciples of the crucified Galilean named Jesus had to wrestle with that massive, shocking event. In the history of reception of Paul's text, one encounters moments when its shock value was acknowledged and even magnified—the name of Martin Luther immediately comes to mind, but Friedrich Nietzsche's call for a "transvaluation of all values," as well as certain passages in his works, in the midst of his deeply adversarial position with regard to Paul, certainly owe much to Paul's text as well.² We, on the other

2. "Obtuse to all Christian terminology, modern people can no longer relate to the hideous superlative found by an ancient taste in the paradoxical formula 'god on the cross.' Nowhere to date has there been such a bold inversion or anything quite as horrible, questioning, and questionable as this formula. It promised a revaluation of all the values of antiquity." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44. Anders Nygren adds: "Nietzsche can well be described as the modern exponent of Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 1.23."

hand, are now so accustomed to commemorating and celebrating Jesus' crucifixion, and have seen so many deep or superficial artistic depictions of it (including pendants and earrings), that the shock is incomparably smaller, indeed, almost nonexistent. Similarly, in various periods of Christian history, the "edge" or the "radicality" of Paul's text was somewhat smoothed, as claims about divine power in connection with imperial politics overshadowed Paul's dialectics of weakness and power—but where and when, and how exactly, did that happen? We better leave the answer open at this point, noting, however, that radical interpretations of the "word of the cross" coexisted simultaneously with marginalizations of it. In many respects, the various interpretive options in the history of (especially Western) Christian theology reflected, and had an impact on, diverging decisions with regard to theistic notions of divine omnipotence and majesty. The Eastern tradition, for its part, has at times read 1 Corinthians 1–2 through its apophatic lens—that is, through its acute sense that human language is utterly unable to grasp who God is in God's very being (see Andrew Louth's contribution to the volume, ch. 4), not just because of the inadequacy of human words and language, but also and above all because of who God is.

The question Paul's text raises does not simply concern the figure of Jesus, confessed as the crucified Christ, but also the community, where few "were wise by human standards," few "were powerful, ... of noble birth." God "chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:26b, 28). The two keynote lectures of the conference, with which the present volume opens, both address what Paul calls τὰ μὴ ὄντα ("things that are not," 1 Cor. 1:28), in exegetical–sociological–theological perspectives (see John Barclay's contribution,

Agape and Eros (London: SPCK, 1953), 202n2. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2013), 135.

“Crucifixion as Wisdom: Exploring the Ideology of a Disreputable Social Movement”) as well as in philosophical-theological perspectives (John D. Caputo, on “The Weakness of God: A Radical Theology of the Cross”). These two distinguished scholars signal the importance of Paul’s opening sections in 1 Corinthians for our understanding of earliest Christianity and of Paul’s “message of the cross,” not just as an idea or a thought but also as a physical and social phenomenon (Barclay), and for further reflection about divine power and weakness, where weakness and power are not simply two successive moments (the cross followed by Easter Sunday) in which the resurrection reverses divine weakness in a Hollywood-like final triumph or, worse even, revenge (Caputo). Whether contemporary theologians, not to mention biblical exegetes, can embrace Caputo’s “weakness-trip”³ remains to be seen. His challenge to Christian theology and Christian proclamation, however, must be heard.

In “On a Road Not Taken: Iterations of an Alexandrian Paul,” Kellen Plaxco examines Clement, Origen, and Didymus the Blind’s interpretations of 1 Corinthians 1–2, wondering why the Alexandrian school is so different from the Western, and especially the modern and late-modern, emphasis on the opposition between worldly wisdom and the word of the cross. The beginning section of 1 Corinthians barely appears, for instance, in Didymus’s writings. In the process of his study, Plaxco uncovers some of the diverging interpretations of “Wisdom” in these thinkers, showing how Origen relates it exclusively to the Son, whereas Didymus links it to the Son *and* the Spirit.

Andrew Louth, an eminent scholar of the Eastern theological tradition, studies the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1–2 in three of its greatest thinkers: John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor,

3. Philipp Stoellger’s expression, in the discussion that ensued following Caputo’s paper; see below, ###.

and Pseudo-Dionysius. The results, as with Plaxco's contribution, confirm how different the Eastern tradition of scriptural interpretation often has been from the Western one. Whereas Chrysostom underlines the link between what appears as divine foolishness and the incarnation, in Dionysius the themes of divine foolishness and wisdom are embedded in a broader interpretation that combines cataphatic and apophatic moments: playing foolishness against wisdom contributes to the strategy of pointing out the alterity and transcendence of divine wisdom. In his *Ambigua*, Maximus the Confessor combines these two interpretive strands before suggesting that divine foolishness can be understood in terms of a divine "play with the Word": God's Word dwells among human beings, expressing puzzling parables and stories.

Turning to medieval Scholastic theology, more precisely to Thomas Aquinas, and painting a different picture than is commonly known, Adam Eitel suggests we use caution when we conceive of the great Scholastic thinker as a "philosopher" or as a "philosophical theologian." Such characterizations are closer to Pope Leo XIII's vision of Aquinas than to Aquinas's own perception of himself and his works. Studying closely Aquinas's commentary on 1 Corinthians 1–2, Eitel shows the rather limited role of human wisdom may play, according to the Scholastic theologian, in doctrinal reflection. The *Summa theologiae*'s first pages ("Prologue" and first question) and his commentary on 1 Corinthians converge in showing that inadequate use of philosophical resources risks "emptying the cross" or rendering it void (1 Cor. 1:17). Also focusing on Thomas Aquinas as biblical scholar, and making similar points, Michael Dempsey focuses on the theme of divine sovereignty and government over and in the world (divine providence), as well as the question of the objects in creation of God's election: Who does God elect? In Dempsey's reading of Aquinas, and with an emphasis on the great

Scholastic thinker as a mendicant theologian, it is the “*abjectus* or the destitute that stands as the end of God’s election in Jesus Christ” ([###]). Human wisdom thus finds itself radically challenged and undermined, as God’s government of the world “subvert[s] human arrogance and the domination of the powerful over the powerless” ([###]).

In his contribution, Günter Bader examines the “epidemic of paradoxes” that characterizes the Renaissance and Luther’s theology, comparing and contrasting Erasmus’s and Cusanus’s uses of paradoxes. Erasmus was notoriously adverse to paradoxes, but that doesn’t mean paradoxes are absent from his works. Several types of paradoxes may be identified: the “rhetorical paradox,” which is indirect, implicit, nameless, its explicit version having been banished from discourse. The “rhetorical paradox” comprises a “first-degree” paradox, which upends everything and, as a result, reveals the wisdom of the fool. The “second-degree” paradox arises when a “second level of speaking comes through, saying the exact opposite of what has been said, effectively canceling it” ([###]). The logical paradox, especially prized by Cusanus as a mathematician-logician, seeks to respect the law of non-contradiction, for the sake of the scientificity of discourse. Finally, something which may be called the “theological paradox” is at hand when another voice and another language is—and *must* be—heard, as may be the case in the occurrence of *prosopopeia*. In his dense and learned contribution, Günter Bader uncovers instances of these various paradoxes in the writings of Erasmus and Cusanus.

Recalling Anselm’s interpretation of the “fool” (*insipiens*), Anthony Feneuil delves into the ambiguities of the decision, still frequent in many quarters of modern theology, to reject apologetics. In what name do we reject apologetics? In the name of a sort of fideism,

which postulates that the theme of theology lies beyond what can be demonstrated by reason, or in the name of skepticism? Taking a closer look at Anselm's supposed "proof" of God's existence, and following Karl Barth's interpretation, Feneuil argues that the true *insipiens* is the one who, convinced of the possibility of proving God's existence, thereby reveals the foolishness of his or her own "wisdom." And yet, Anselm wrote a proof in order to show the *insipiens's* foolishness. Feneuil concludes that "it is just as foolish to deny apologetics in an absolute manner as it is to engage in apologetics on purely rational ground, through a bracketing of faith," and that the *insipiens*, who is a biblical and, indeed, a faith character, is not simply the "other," for the theologian is always already exposed to unbelief ([###]).

How did one of the great theologians of the twentieth century, namely Karl Barth, interpret 1 Corinthians 1–2? Andrew Hay seeks to answer that question by focusing on Barth's commentary of Paul's epistle, published in 1924, which Rudolf Bultmann warmly, if not uncritically, recommended. Placing this commentary in the context of Barth's works in those years (a course on the Reformed confessions, the first full cycle of lectures on the main *loci* of systematic theology), Hay shows how 1 Corinthians 1–2 confirmed Barth in his rejection of natural theology and his attempt to think theologically ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ (literally, "from God").

In "The Word of the Cross in the Conflict of Interpretive Power: On the Genealogy of Theology Deriving From the Spirit of Pauline Rhetoric," Philip Stoellger develops a complex and fruitful reflection on how a powerful word (*Wortmacht*) may become distorted into a word of power (*Machtwort*), and how Paul's first chapters in 1 Corinthians reveal a deep-seated conflict over the interpretation of the gospel. Paul was not immune to the desire to legitimize his

interpretation of the gospel through recourse not just to rhetorical and interpretive power, but to his God-given authority as apostle of Jesus Christ. That is unfortunate, for “whoever has something to say wishes also to have the say but should not wish to have it, because by so doing that person undermines what she has to say” ([###]).

What about Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith, which is certainly not present at the forefront in the Corinthian correspondence? Shifting from the “word of the cross” to modern transformations and reductions of “justification” and the contemporary lack of relevance of that key Protestant doctrine, Matthias D. Wüthrich reflects, using Martin Walser’s book on justification as a springboard, on the place and meaning of “justification by faith” in Christian soteriological discourses, advocating that theology move “beyond” justification so as to recover the breadth of the scriptural witness and attempt to reconnect it with our modern world. In another significant shift, away from the central *locus* of reconciliation to the doctrine of creation, Kathryn Tanner explores the ways in which Christian theology sought (and seeks) to make sense both of God’s transcendence and of God’s involvement in the world, “raiding” and twisting categories it finds in many different fields of discourses, repudiating “all ordinary canons of sense making” ([###]). The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the Christian attempt to express God’s radical otherness and involvement simultaneously, beyond emanationist or pantheist interpretations of creation.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur as well as on philosophical and theological reflections on the notions of “witness,” “word,” and “symbol,” Henning Theissen distinguishes “the cross” from “the word of the cross.” Whereas the cross itself is “soteriologically mute” (Ingolf U. Dalferth), the word of the cross is at the beginning of soteriological discourses in Christian theology; the christological word of the cross grounds the apostolic word of the cross. The word

of the cross, as wisdom of the cross, “teaches those who bear witness to it new understandings of God’s wisdom and makes them forget the old ones” ([###]). What that means, in relation to God’s grace and freedom, is that God’s freedom, far from signifying “unlimited sovereignty,” means in fact God’s readiness to repent and to show mercy.

But it is not just divine “freedom” that finds itself recalibrated by the word of the cross. The same goes for divine power, as Marc Vial shows. Divine omnipotence needs to be thought about, not just in relation to the presence of evil in our world, not just in connection with theodicy, as is often the case (Vial mentions the example of Hans Jonas), but also and above all in relation with the event of the cross. Then theologians will learn to think about divine power without reducing it to a “capacity to intervene in history in order to change its course” ([###]). Following Eberhard Jüngel, Vial suggests we consider the notion of omnipotence not in an abstract way but as a predicate with a specific subject: God, whose Son is the crucified and the risen one. Along similar lines, Christophe Chalamet explores some of the ways in which Calvin interprets 1 Corinthians 1–2, particularly Paul’s boldest claims concerning divine power and weakness, as well as divine wisdom and foolishness. Are there Docetic tendencies in Calvin’s interpretation, and more broadly in his Christology, as some have suggested? Was Calvin, as a theologian focused on divine majesty and glory, “deaf” to Luther’s *theologia crucis*? An affirmative answer to that question does not seem warranted.

Hans-Christoph Askani seeks to retrieve the radicality of Paul’s assertions in the first chapters of 1 Corinthians, in critical conversation with several translations and commentaries of Paul’s text. Where many are intent on finding a resolution of Paul’s paradoxes and a harmonious conclusion to his conflicting claims

about human wisdom and divine foolishness, Askani, pondering the reversal of human through God's altogether different logic, aims to show that such reconciliations are too hasty. The text bothers and disturbs us, because something comes to expression in the text that Paul himself was unable to control or master.

Last, but not least, Edwin Chr. van Driel raises the question of the compatibility between his own supralapsarian Christology, whereby the event of the incarnation is not simply a response to sin ("plan B") but, rather, is part of God's overall plan, and what he calls "cross theologies." In several ways, supralapsarian Christology can be seen as an ally of some of the theologies of the cross, for both approaches seek to interpret the cross not as conditioned by sin, but within a broader narrative of God's unconditional, gracious, and prevenient relation to the world. But a supralapsarian approach contests what theologians of the cross at times seek to defend, namely that forgiveness follows from an acknowledgment of sin, that despair is the first step toward being reconciled with God, and it also contests J. Louis Martyn's apocalyptic interpretation of Paul's theology, an interpretation which presupposes that the incarnation is contingent upon sin.

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Throughout the book, the abbreviations generally follow Siegfried M. Schwertner, *Abkürzungsverzeichnis*, 2nd ed., *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1994).

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