

CHAPTER IV

“CHRIST CRUCIFIED”

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OUTSIDE OF THE GOSPELS THE WORDS “CROSS” AND “CRUCIFY” APPEAR in the New Testament almost exclusively in the Pauline literature.¹ There, the latter term is found only in Corinthians and Galatians, the former additionally in Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians. They are used primarily as theological concepts.² This is not to say that the historical event of the crucifixion has become less important, much less that the theological concept has displaced it. In accordance with Paul’s thought generally the theological meaning arises out of and remains united with the historical occurrence, the “salvation history,” to which it refers. Nevertheless, the meaning is more specifically determined by Paul’s historical situation and by a somewhat unusual expression, *χριστὸς ἐσταυρωμένος*.

I

The phrase “Christ crucified” is found in two Pauline passages, I Cor. 1-4 and Gal. 3. In I Corinthians, the concern of this essay, it appears initially in I Cor. 1:18-31, a set piece of exposition:³

For Jews seek signs and Greeks seek wisdom (*σοφία*)
But we proclaim Christ crucified
To Jews an offense (*σκάνδαλον*)
and to Gentiles foolishness (*μωρία*)
But to those who are called – Jews and Greeks –
Christ, God’s power and God’s wisdom (*σοφία*)

I:22-24

The phrase occurs once more in the application of the exposition to Paul’s Corinthian mission:

¹ Elsewhere, they occur only with a literal sense: Heb. 12:2 (“cross”) and Acts 2:36; 4:10; Rev. 11:8 (“crucified”).

² The theological meaning also occurs in the Gospels, e.g., Matt. 10:38; Lk. 9:23 (“daily”).

³ That is, theme and proem text (1:18 f.) + exposition + concluding text (1:31). Cf. W. Wuellner, “Haggadic Homily Genre in I Corinthians 1-3”, *JBL* 89 (1970), pp. 199-204.

... I did not come in excellence of word or of wisdom (*σοφία*)
 when I proclaimed to you the testimony of God
 For I decided to know nothing among you
 except Jesus Christ, that is (*καὶ*), him as the crucified one.¹
 ... And my word and proclamation
 were not in persuasive words of wisdom
 but in a demonstration of spirit and power
 in order that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men
 but in the power of God

2:1-5

The phrase "Christ crucified" is clarified in a number of ways by the context. It appears to be an elaboration or explanation of the earlier phrase, "the word of the cross" (1:18), that opens the section. Like that expression it is equated with God's power. Specifically, it represents the present mediation of God's power in two ways, in prophetic wisdom and in miracle (*δύναμις*; 1:24), both of which have been manifested at Corinth in Paul's inspired utterance and miraculous works (*πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμεως*; 2:4).² It is the former, "God's wisdom", that is the primary concern in I Cor. 1-4. As such, "Christ crucified" is set in opposition to the "wisdom of the world" (1:20; cf. 3:18) or "of men" (2:5) or "of word" (1:17; 2:4). It is not just a concept nor, as it is for unbelievers, just a past reference to a crucified person. It refers primarily to the exalted Lord who, in his exaltation, remains the crucified one. This contextual understanding is confirmed grammatically by the use of the perfect participle, *ἑσταυρωμένος*.³

In sum, "Christ crucified" is not only the message or "word" of Paul's proclamation but also the one who speaks through and in that "word", not only the historical content of the message but also the "wisdom" that is active in it. That is, the term expresses the perspective from which the risen Christ presently works and, thus, the perspective from which "God's wisdom" is presently manifested.

II

I Cor. 1-4 begins with a thanksgiving for the Corinthians' rich charismatic endowment, especially in the pneumatic gifts of inspired speech and discernment (1:5-7).⁴ It then appeals to the Corinthians to put an end

¹ Cf. H. Conzelmann, *An die Korinther* (Göttingen, 1969), p. 69. On the explanatory *καὶ* with *ὄψος* cf. Blass-Debrunner, p. 229 (§442, 9).

² For this interpretation of I Cor. 1:24; 2:4 cf. E. E. Ellis, "Christ and Spirit in I Corinthians", *Christ and Spirit, Essays for C. F. D. Moule*, ed. S. S. Smalley and B. Lindars (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 262-70. Cf. Rom. 15:18 f.; II Cor. 12:12.

³ Rightly, W. C. Robinson, Jr., "Word and Power," *Soli Deo Gloria, Essays for W. C. Robinson*, ed. J. M. Richards (Richmond, 1968), p. 71.

⁴ Cf. E. E. Ellis, "Spiritual gifts in the Pauline Community", *NTS* 20 (1973/74), forthcoming.

to their dissensions and to "be united in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1:10). The relation of the two motifs is confirmed by the subsequent expository section (1:18-4:21) in which wisdom, one of the pneumatic gifts,¹ is a governing motif. The exposition presents a contrast between human wisdom and the wisdom that is "from God" (1:30; cf. 2:12) and leads to the conclusion that the Corinthians not go beyond "what stands written" (4:6), that is, in the Scriptures that Paul has expounded to them.² On the one hand the exposition is an attack on human wisdom, not merely on wisdom as a way of salvation³ but on the inherent structure of "the wisdom of men" as such. As he shows in Romans (1:22) Paul regards human thought and human conduct to be not only bound together but also under sin and innately warped. For this reason Paul can infer that, since the Corinthians' claim to "wisdom" (cf. 3:18) is accompanied by "fleshly" ethical aberrations, their wisdom proceeds not from a wisdom "taught by the spirit" but only from words "taught by human wisdom" (2:13; 3:1 ff.).

The wisdom from God is "not fleshly (*σαρκική*) wisdom but God's gift" (II Cor. 1:12). Furthermore, it has a cruciform manifestation, for it proceeds from the one who as the exalted Lord remains "Christ crucified." Thus it appears both as "power" and as "cross" in Paul and Apollos, the stewards of God's mysteries (2:7; 4:1). By their perceptive teaching they "build" God's temple (3:9 f., *ἑποικοδομεῖ*) but also, like Christ, they manifest this wisdom of God in weakness and

when reviled, we bless
 when persecuted, we endure
 when slandered, we try to conciliate.⁴

Such conduct is the ethical corollary, and indeed the proof, of the wisdom "that is from God".

¹ Cf. I Cor. 2:6-16; 12:8.

² Otherwise: M. D. Hooker, "Beyond the things which are written . . .", *NTS* 10 (1963/64), pp. 127-32.

³ Otherwise: Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 f. The parallel with Galatians, which Robinson invokes, is attractive. (1) In both Corinthians (1:23) and Galatians (5:11) "Christ crucified", or the cross, is the indispensable *skandalon* of the Christian message. (2) In both it is associated with charismatic workings of the Spirit in the Church (I Cor. 1:26; 2:4; Gal. 3:5). (3) In both it is set over against the "fleshly" attempt to become mature Christians by human achievement, either by the wisdom of men (I Cor. 3:1 ff., 18 f.) or by the works of the law (Gal. 3:2 f.). (4) In both Paul condemns the attempt because it nullifies the "cross" of Christ (I Cor. 1:17; Gal. 2:21). And in both he does so by a biblical exposition that is similar to the midrashic patterns of Philonic and rabbinic exegesis. Cf. I Cor. 1:18-31; 2:6-16; Gal. 3:6-29; P. Borgen, *Bread from Heaven* (Leiden, 1965), pp. 47 ff.; see p. 74, n. 10. (5) In both Paul appears to identify or associate the "spirit" active in the two aberrations, *viz.* "the spirit of the world" and "the elemental spirits", with demonic powers (I Cor. 2:6, 12; Gal. 4:9). Nevertheless, even if there are important parallels, the problems addressed are different. In Galatians it is a question of the wrong use of something that is good (the law of God). In Corinthians it is the confusion of something that is good (the wisdom of God) with something that is at root perverse (the wisdom of men).

⁴ I Cor. 4:12 f. Cf. I Pet. 2:23.

The basic problems in the Corinthian church manifest themselves in ethical attitudes: divisiveness (*σχίσματα*), strife, envy and, especially, conceit (*φυσιώσις*; cf. I:10 f.; 3:3; 4:6, 18 f.; 5:2; 8:1; II Cor. 12:20). Such problems are specifically in the foreground in I Cor. 1-4. In responding to this deplorable situation, Paul is not content merely with exhortation.¹ He will not allow a separation of ethics and theology.² For he perceives theological ignorance and even misunderstanding to be an underlying cause of the unethical practices: faulty ethics reflect poor theological perception, even as bad theology corrupts good moral habits.³ Therefore, Paul addresses the ethical problems with theological instruction.

III

What is the theological error in I Cor. 1-4 that Paul discerns beneath the faulty ethics of the Corinthians? Its general character, a wrong kind of "wisdom" (I:17; 2:4; 3:18), may be inferred from the theme of the section. But what, precisely, was its content? (1) According to some recent studies the Christians at Corinth espoused a "wisdom of men" that denied any soteriological significance to Christ's crucifixion; in the face of such teaching Paul set forth the message of the cross.⁴ If the above analysis is correct, this view of the situation is mistaken in interpreting "the word of the cross" and "Christ crucified" primarily of the past fact of the crucifixion. Also, it is inconsistent with I Cor. 1:13 (cf. I Cor. 15:3) which presupposes that the Corinthians have, in fact, a positive view of the crucifixion. In the perceptive comment of W. C. Robinson, Jr., "Paul would hardly have sabotaged his whole argument by beginning it with the statement that (the Corinthians) would ridicule."⁵

(2) Is the Corinthians' error perhaps "a misunderstanding of the mode of possessing God's gifts"?⁶ The opening thanksgiving (1:5) and the later section on the pneumatic gifts, I Cor. 12-14, lend some support to that interpretation. The gifts, including "the word of wisdom" (12:8), should be used above all for "edification" (*οἰκοδομή*, 14:26) so that there might be "no dissension (*σχίσμα*) in the body" (12:25). In the "hymn to love"

¹ Paul knows, of course, that in its concrete expression the Church is a *corpus mixtum*, containing both elect and reprobate, and that dissension and factionalism are in some measure inevitable "in order that those who are genuine among you might be recognized" (I Cor. 11:18 f.). Cf. II Cor. 13:5; Gal. 4:11.

² Cf. V. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville, 1968), pp. 224-27.

³ Cf. I Cor. 15:33; Rom. 1:21 ff., 24 with I Cor. 3:20 (*διαλογισμός*). Paul does not use the Johannine idiom "to do the truth" (I Jn. 1:6), but the same implicit bond between thought and conduct is reflected in the phrase "obey the truth" (Rom. 2:8; Gal. 5:7).

⁴ U. Wilckens, *Weisheit und Torheit* (Tübingen, 1959), pp. 20, 214.

⁵ Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁶ So, Robinson, *ibid.*, p. 75.

that is a "hymn to Christ"¹ the gifts, including "knowledge" (*γνώσις*), are declared to be of no effect if they are not manifested in the context of a love that is not envious (*ζηλόω*) or conceited (*φυσιώω*).² In I Cor. 12-14 the wrong attitudes apparently are occasioned by a lack of understanding about spiritual gifts (12:1). They bear a striking similarity to the attitudes condemned in I Cor. 1-4, and it is probable that the underlying causes are not unrelated. However, Paul's different response to the symptoms in I Cor. 1-4 suggests that something more is involved than just a misunderstanding or misuse of the gifts.

(3) Somewhat similarly, it has been suggested that the Corinthians reflect "an over-realized eschatology". They suppose that the victory over sin and death has been consummated:³

Already you have been filled
Already you are rich
Without us you have reigned.

This is the other side of the same coin that has been examined above: if the Corinthians have not discounted the crucifixion, they at least think that it is totally in the past. It remains for them only to share Christ's "reign". Indeed, according to this view they can in I Cor. 15 even deny a future resurrection because, like Hymenaeus, they think that "the resurrection is past already" (II Tim. 2:18).⁴

There are, however, certain problems with this understanding of the situation in I Cor. 1-4. First, the error in I Cor. 15 offers doubtful support for an eschatological interpretation of I Cor. 4:8. Even if it is a precursor of the teaching of Hymenaeus, it probably reflects more a Platonic anthropology than a "realized" eschatology: the immortal soul, released to eternal life at death, has no need of resurrection.⁵ Secondly, in Paul's own teaching - and very likely in his teaching at Corinth - the Christian already has been (corporately) raised with Christ to resurrection life. Having come "alive to God in Christ Jesus", he is to "walk in newness of life".⁶ As II Cor. 13:4 shows, because Paul himself "shares in Christ's

¹ I Cor. 13; cf. N. Johansson, "I Cor. xiii and I Cor. xiv", *NTS* 10 (1963/64), 386 f.

² I Cor. 13:1, 2, 4.

³ E.g. F. F. Bruce, *I and II Corinthians* (London, 1971), pp. 49 f.; J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond, 1959), p. 165; E. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London, 1964), p. 171.

⁴ This view appears later in Gnostic theology. Cf. Tert., *de res.* 22 (perhaps alluding to I Cor. 4:8); Iren., *Against Heresies* 1, 23, 5 (re Menander).

⁵ This also is part of later Gnostic thought. Cf. W. Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth* (Nashville, 1971), pp. 157 f.; Justin, *Dial.* 80.

⁶ Rom. 6:4, 11, 13; cf. Gal. 2:19 f.; II Cor. 6:9; 13:4. The expression "raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1; cf. 2:13; Eph. 2:6) is essentially no different, for this conception is presupposed in the phrase "to walk in newness of life" (cf. R. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (Berlin, 1967), p. 11). Cf. E. E. Ellis, *Eschatology in Luke* (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 15 n.; W. D. Davies, "The Moral Teaching of the Early Church", *The Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. J. M. Efrid (Durham (N.C.), 1972), p. 318 n. Otherwise: E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia, 1971), p. 180.

resurrection life, he also shares in the power which is manifest in that life".¹ It is unlikely, then, that he would criticize the Corinthians merely for appropriating an eschatological perspective that he himself has taught and, indeed, has earlier applied to them: "in Christ you have been made rich" (I Cor. 1:5).

A mistaken eschatological perspective may indeed be involved in the false wisdom of the Corinthians. But the error is not in affirming the *reality* of a present participation in Christ's resurrection life and power, but rather in misconceiving the *way* in which that reality is presently to be manifested. In Paul's teaching Christ's followers have in the past been (corporately) "crucified with" him and "raised with" him.² And they are destined to actualize individually this corporate reality. But they will actualize the "resurrection with Christ" only at the parousia when, having been "found in him", they shall "attain to the resurrection from the dead" and shall "put on immortality".³ In the present life they are called to actualize the "crucifixion with Christ". As imitators of Paul⁴ they are to seek not their own benefit but that of others,⁵ to endure suffering

as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing
as poor, yet making many rich
as having nothing, yet possessing all things.⁶

In imitating Paul they are, in fact, imitating Christ,⁷ completing "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church."⁸

This *imitatio Christi* is, moreover, the context in which Christ's resurrection power is presently manifested. For Christ's "power is made perfect in weakness."⁹ The Corinthians have not followed this path. They have engaged in competitive wrangling.¹⁰ Having "been made rich" in Christ's gifts of words and knowledge, they "boast" as though the gifts were

¹ Tannehill, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

² Gal. 2:19 f.; Rom. 6:4; Col. 3:1; cf. E. E. Ellis, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, 1961), pp. 37-40 (= *NTS* 6 (1959/60), 212-16).

³ Phil. 3:9, 11; I Cor. 15:53; cf. II Cor. 5:3 f. There is, of course, a present *ethical* imperative "to walk in newness of life" that is related to the Christian's identification with Christ's resurrection.

⁴ Cf. I Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Gal. 4:12 f.; I Thess. 1:6; II Thess. 3:9.

⁵ I Cor. 10:33 f.; cf. 15:31; Rom. 12:1.

⁶ II Cor. 6:10.

⁷ I Cor. 11:1; I Thess. 1:6. On the primacy of the Christological motif in Paul's ethic cf. Davies, *op. cit.*, pp. 314-32.

⁸ Col. 1:24; cf. I Cor. 3:9-17; Gal. 2:20 (*συνεσταύρωμαι*!).

⁹ II Cor. 12:9 f.

¹⁰ Perhaps along the lines of the Jewish practice of "discussions with associates [and] argument with disciples" (Pirke Aboth 6:6) about the meaning of Scripture. So, Wuellner, *op. cit.*, p. 203, who follows D. Daube and S. Liebermann in identifying *λόγος σοφίας* (I Cor. 2:4) with the *debar hokmah* in rabbinic discussions. Cf. Rom. 2:17-24; Acts 18:15; I Clem. 45:1.

their own attainment.¹ Having been endowed in order to "build" God's temple, they are instead destroying it by their boasting, envy, strife, and dissension. In consequence, their cherished wisdom, in a subtle transformation that even they have not discerned, has become mere cleverness, a manifestation of human words rather than of divine power.² And, apparently, they have failed to distinguish the resulting "wisdom of this age" from "the wisdom from above."³ The apostle wishes to call them back from this disastrous course. To do so, he invokes among other things an image of Christ that he has used earlier in his letter to the Galatians. In a word he reminds them that the Christ who manifests God's wisdom and God's power is the one who in his exaltation remains "Christ crucified," the serving and the sacrificing one. And this exalted Christ manifests these divine gifts among his followers only under the sign of the cross.

¹ I Cor. 1:5; 4:7. Since this attitude would be equally wrong after the parousia, I Cor. 4:8 cannot refer merely to a mistaken eschatological perspective. It is primarily an ethical aberration that Paul addresses.

² I Cor. 3:18 ff.; 4:19 f.

³ Cf. Jas. 3:13-15, 17, where the same kind of critique of "wisdom" is made.