



Texts in Context

“Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified”: Epiphany Texts from First Corinthians

TERRANCE L. DINOVO

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

IN MY FIRST PARISH, A NEIGHBORING PASTOR STOPPED BY TO VISIT WITH ME IN MY study at the church. He looked around and wondered why there were so many books, especially so many biblical commentaries. These, I said, were the people I dialogued with as I prepared my sermons each week. It wasn't always possible for me to attend a lectionary study group, so each week I discussed the texts with Bultmann or Barth or von Rad or Harrisville. Some such discussion seems essential to sermon preparation.

What follows is an edited version of a conversation with five people who gathered to discuss the Corinthian texts for Epiphany, Series A.* It is our hope to draw the reader into a discussion that will be useful for preaching as we delve into Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Second Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 1:1-9

Jim: One of the things that always fascinated me about the opening of 1 Corinthians is not so much the salutation as the way in which Paul begins v. 4. Given the tone of the whole letter, what does he mean when he says, “I give thanks

**Participants: James Boyce (professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary); John Henrich (chaplain, North Memorial Hospital, and graduate student); Sarah Henrich (assistant professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary); Ray Olson (public services librarian, Luther Seminary); and Terry Dinovo (curator of special collections, Luther Seminary library).*

to my God always for you because of the grace that has been given you”? If he is describing the same people that we read about later in this letter, there’s something very important here about what it means to be people endowed by the grace of God. It certainly doesn’t have to do with their external activities!

Ray: In v. 2 Paul calls them sanctified.

Jim: And he says, “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” How can he say all these things about the Christian community, while still being honest about all its problems?

John: It’s like walking into an out-of-control confirmation class and saying, “I’m really glad that you have so much energy.”

Sarah: I used to read all this as ironic, and I refuse to do that now. But it does raise interesting issues, one of them being why he doesn’t write about all the good stuff that is going on.

Terry: This text comes up in January when many congregations are holding annual meetings. I remember preaching on this text in the midst of that kind of conflict. I tried to write the sermon in the form of a letter from a former pastor to the congregation I was serving. I didn’t explain from the beginning that this was a literary gimmick, but started with the salutation of a supposedly actual letter to the

congregation. It was a way to get at some hard issues, but I don't think I was diplomatic enough to make it work.

Jim: One of the places where Paul is not being ironic is in vv. 8-9. The reason he can talk so positively about this community is that he speaks from the perspective of the end. "[God] will also strengthen you to the end" (v. 8). The verb there could also be translated "will *continue to* strengthen you until the end." Paul is confident that God is not done with them yet, that God will continue to work so that people will be blameless when Jesus finally arrives at the last day. The key does not lie in their hands; it is trust that God is going to be faithful. God is the one who called the Corinthian believers into this fellowship. That's where the argument tends, and it's on that basis that Paul can say, I give thanks for you because of what God is doing among you.

Sarah: There is a future sense here as well as a sense of continuity. God has staying power into the future. Yet, they have already been called. They have been called into this *koinonia* of Christ, and they *are* somewhere different. There is a connection between their having been called into the *koinonia* of Jesus Christ and God's faithfulness.

John: From a pastoral care perspective, it is interesting to me that Paul approaches the very things that turn out to be divisive, and affirms them. Paul affirms spiritual gifts before he goes on to try to shape and define and re-direct what they do with those spiritual gifts.

Jim: I was also struck by v. 2: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus." The whole church are the ones that are sanctified and called. It is the whole church that he gives thanks for, not just the ones who agree with him. All of them who are called and sanctified—unless Paul is being two-faced and saying something he doesn't really believe. But I don't think that's the case.

Sarah: Especially not since he goes on to say your body is a temple for the Holy Spirit. There is nothing ironic about that. In fact, he uses it as a warrant for ethical behavior.

John: So he's taking the high road. He's saying, you guys are saints. Now I want you to live up to what you're supposed to be.

Terry: I tried to make that point in my sermon on this text. I sensed in my congregations a negative congregationalism; they saw themselves existing apart from the rest of the Christian community, instead of serving a mission within the broader community.

Sarah: In v. 7 Paul notes that, although people are enriched in every way and are lacking in no spiritual gifts, they are still awaiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the Pauline determination to keep a foot in both worlds. We don't have it all yet, folks. But we do have it all!

Terry: But as you read through the rest of Corinthians, you find there are those who don't have a foot in each world. They want to be squarely in the spiritual world.

John: So you could probably struggle with a sermon about what it means to

EERDMANS AD #E-5534

be a saint, particularly the fact that Paul is calling these folks who are such troublesome saints.

Jim: When you talk about this as an epiphany text, what is it that is being revealed here about the nature of God's elect? What it is that creates the kingdom? It certainly does not hinge on people's own personal characteristics. The text says something much more about what God is like.

Ray: God reveals his own faithfulness. It's a different life under Christ, but in Christ we live right in the middle of the marketplace. The marketplace in Corinth was a lively place, no doubt, and there was fellowship there; but Paul says we've been called to more.

Terry: John, could you get up in the pulpit on Sunday with a straight face and call the members of your congregation saints?

John: I've done that. But you always have to define what it means. Saints are people called to a particular commitment, who are working toward or being brought toward an understanding of faith or life in Christ, but who aren't themselves perfect. They are declared saints whether or not they think they are saintly.

Jim: When you say something is sanctified, I wonder if that isn't just another way of saying that it's set apart or dedicated. That kind of language might work better for us. People are quite ready to talk in that way in our culture. Athletes set themselves aside. They dedicate themselves toward particular ends. There is a sense in which Paul is saying, "You are a dedicated people; you have been set apart."

Sarah: It's the matter of what or to whom they were dedicated that drove this congregation in so many different directions. I don't think the people in Corinth thought they were sinning or were sinful. They were dedicated. They knew what they were about. The question Paul is interested in is "dedicated to or for what?"

Third Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 1:10-17

Terry: What does Paul mean when he says, "'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ'"? Would it be similar to students who claim to be a student of Bonhoeffer or Bultmann or Forde, etc.?

Ray: Paul seems anxious somehow to get the gospel pried loose from personalities, so the message comes through.

Jim: You have this "I...I..." here. It's not the leader who is exalted but rather the people making the claim to belong to the leader. The function is not to hold up Christ, as Paul would like to do, but rather to hold up the individual who claims to belong to a certain party. "I'm a card-carrying Democrat." That doesn't hold up the Democratic party; it holds up the self. I wonder if this isn't simply part of the experience of the Corinthian people. They are used to identifying themselves as belonging to some philosopher's party as a way to gain importance. Paul won't buy into that way of understanding what it means to be important. It's not defined by whom you belong to.

Sarah: Paul wants to say, "I'm not going to do anything magical here; it's the work of gospel." There was already baptism in the ancient world. Paul may want

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to counter a misunderstanding of it. He brings in the wisdom thing here too, so neither doing a lot of baptisms nor being eloquent is what counts for Paul; rather, it is the cross of Christ.

John: How do you decipher the words “eloquent wisdom”? Is it a technical term?

Terry: One commentary suggests that, at this time, education served basically to produce orators. Orators were highly regarded by the people. Paul doesn’t seem to see himself in that light at all.

John: Paul seems to be defining people’s ministry. When we are baptized, we enter a particular kind of ministry, with particular gifts – whether lay or ordained. Paul says he won’t be using eloquent wisdom to understand his ministry.

Sarah: “Wisdom of word” or “wisdom of argument” would probably be a better translation here. Paul is not going to engage in that kind of argumentative proof or development of a thought, lest the cross of Christ be emptied.

John: So no debate with Eck for Paul!

Jim: I think the phraseology of eloquent wisdom is somewhat misleading too. Paul says this is not a wisdom that takes shape in words but wisdom with a different shape. I think he is contrasting a wisdom of words with the wisdom that resides in the cross – a different kind of wisdom. He goes on in the next section to talk about God’s wisdom, the wisdom of the cross. He picks this up in v. 18, where he says: “For the message about the cross is foolishness.” What interests Paul is the logos of the cross. This is the word of the cross as opposed to a wisdom of speech.

John: So a word to the wise is not to trust your own wisdom.

Sarah: The other thing that is contrasted with that word of wisdom is the evangelical word. Both baptizing and the word of wisdom are contrasted with evangelizing. Yet evangelizing requires words. It’s important not to say that words are not to be trusted. But it is a particular use of words that Paul will not engage in.

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 1:26-31

John: This is a tough passage. How do we address it, say, to the suburban folks in our congregations who are relatively wealthy, well educated, and who aspire to wisdom and nobility – maybe not noble birth, but the sort of high society folks admire? Does this mean, if you are one of the powerful, you can’t be one of the saints?

Sarah: Wilhelm Wuellner suggests that the right way to read this is, “Are not many of you wise? Are not many of you powerful? Are not many of you well born?” The expectation is that many would say, “Yes.” Paul goes on to deny that all those positives are cause for boasting. The denial is more powerful when people have just been led to affirm the best things that could be said about themselves.

Terry: However you look at it, the meaning of v. 29 is that whether you are wise or noble or rich, or you come from a more common background, no human being can boast. Something is being done *to* you.

Jim: In v. 26 Paul says, “Consider your own call.” I think he is referring back to the call in the opening salutation of the epistle. Now he says something like,

EERDMAN'S AD #E-5534

“Keep your eye on your call. Pay attention. Don’t let your eye wander from the fact that you have a calling. Don’t let your own situation, whatever it is, distract you from keeping ‘your call’ in front of your eyes at all times.” I think that’s what Paul is saying here. Don’t let anything else take your attention away from the fact that you are called people.

Sarah: Your call is into the *koinonia* of God’s son. This is about preserving the *koinonia*, not letting either your low or high opinion of yourself suggest that the call is about something else. It reminds me of C. S. Lewis’s *Screwtape Letters*, where Wormwood is to go tempt a new convert, who has aristocratic pretensions, to have distaste for the grocer in the pew next to him. Should he do that, he will have succeeded in subverting that person’s call.

John: I wonder what the people in the pews hear when they hear this stuff about the foolishness of God. I remember hearing a TV preacher once say, if you read something in the Bible and it goes against your common sense, you can be pretty sure it is God telling you to do something. Does the preacher have to address what wisdom and foolishness are, and make a distinction between humility and self-destructiveness?

Sarah: Stan Stores worked on that. He says that what is being inveighed against here by Paul is the standard wisdom of Greek philosophy. That would be the kind of wisdom that is meant to give one such strength and internal fortitude that one becomes invulnerable to the slings and arrows of ordinary life and can march straight through it untouched. Paul says that is not the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God is still a kind of a wisdom, but one that doesn’t make you invulnerable to the realities of life. The cross becomes the primary example of how God’s wisdom still leaves you tender to the dangers of real life and the pains of other people. This makes sense with Paul’s insistence on the task of building up the community and being tender to the places where others might suffer, even if they don’t necessarily speak of it as “suffering.”

Jim: Your caution is particularly appropriate in this letter because, although it’s not part of these particular lessons, Paul eventually says that the only recourse you have to solve your problems is common-sense wisdom. That’s really what he means by saying all things are lawful but not everything is helpful. How do you decide what’s helpful? The only resource for that is rational consideration. The same thing is true for his proverb-like comparisons of the community to the parts of the body. That’s a very rational, common-sense way of construing the world.

Ray: And then the spiritual gifts, following in that common sense, get put to work properly.

Jim: There *is* a lot of reversal language. For Paul, the cross completely overturns the ways of the world. In vv. 27-29, I don’t think Paul is putting down the weak or the strong. The point is that God’s wisdom upsets what commonly passes for wisdom. Wisdom and strength come from the cross of Christ. This is a whole different source of wisdom. That’s why the only “valid” boasting is boasting in the Lord.

Sarah: Note the use of “shame” (v. 27). Shame is strong in their lives. The

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view of wisdom really does get overturned, because surely Jesus would look like the ultimately shamed one. So, if we belong to Christ, there is a complete reversal in the way we behave toward each other. That new way of looking at things comes from the cross, not common sense.

Terry: Paul is at his most radical here.

Jim: Paul ends by talking about righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. These must have been defining terms for that community, what they held dear. If Greek philosophy described a way to walk through life with no encumbrances, then Paul professes a very different kind of wisdom. It is Christ who is your righteousness; sanctification and redemption define what it means to be a person in Christ.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 2:1-5

Jim: Paul doesn't say here, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." What he says is, "I did not decide to know anything among you except..." which is a little different. "I didn't decide I was going to be a know-it-all." But neither did he decide to know nothing. "The only thing I decided to know among you is Jesus Christ."

Terry: Harrisville's commentary says the key to understanding Corinthians is chapter 15, the resurrection narrative. If that is the case, then here perhaps Paul is speaking over against those who would deny the crucifixion, the spiritual individuals who want to have it all right now. Paul says here, "You can't have just the resurrected Christ by himself; you must start from the One crucified."

Jim: This text has exactly the same juxtaposition of wisdom and words as the last one. So Paul's "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" was apparently not lofty preaching, but an experience of the power of the Spirit. He doesn't say exactly what that was, but there was some demonstration of the power of the Spirit in the community. It wasn't, Paul says, because of my great words; it was something mysterious, but not eloquent, something where the power was clearly God's, not mine. Preachers on this text should try to discern what demonstrations and experiences of the power of the Spirit can be named in their own communities, showing how that power doesn't reside in or depend on what we normally take as the marks of power in the community. These demonstrations are the mysteries Paul talks about. Where are those hidden mysteries, those signs of the power of God at work in our communities?

John: And how connected are they to the person of the preacher? This demonstration didn't happen as a result of Paul's dramatic preaching, which is so often what seems to impress congregations: "Wow, she is a great preacher." "I really came out with something today." Somehow, something happened within the community at Corinth that wasn't totally dependent on Paul's rhetorical skills.

Jim: So, Paul is trying to get this community to be attentive to the power of the Spirit at work among them and to make sure they don't locate that power in the wrong places. Paul is trying to relocate and identify that power in the crucified Christ.

EERDMANS #E-5021

John: It's interesting that he picks the *crucified* Christ as the focus of power rather than the transcendent, triumphant, powerful, risen Christ, dispensing power from on high.

Sarah: The crucified Christ reshapes your idea of glory. The idea, if I'm successful God must be with me, is not the point. Glory looks different here.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany: 1 Cor 2:6-13

Jim: In this section Paul doesn't back away from asserting his own role as a person of wisdom. There are secrets that are hidden, and there are some people who don't get the picture. He says, in essence, I'm one who has gotten the picture; and he concludes in v. 13: "We speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual." There is a discernment granted to some, and Paul is claiming that discernment. He assumes a teaching role. After establishing a few ground rules about the nature of wisdom, now he wants to talk some common sense about it. There are things one needs to discern about the way God works. As I read this, I thought of Luther's theme in the *Heidelberg Disputation*—where he defines a true theologian, a theologian of the cross, as one who rightly divides law and gospel. The theologian of the cross names a thing for what it really is.

John: V. 7 makes me very nervous: the "secret and hidden" wisdom of God. I work on a unit where people come in convinced that God has revealed to them that the end of the world is next week. "Secret, hidden wisdom" can lend itself to much abuse. I'd love to know what Paul was talking about, but I suppose it is secretly hidden!

Sarah: I think it is. I mean, Paul talks about going up to the third heaven! He's had an experience. You're right, it is dangerous.

Jim: I agree. Ultimately he says that some people are spiritual and understand spiritual things and some people don't.

John: Is he gently chiding them for being babes by saying, "Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom"? We've gone from being called saints to being called immature.

Jim: I don't think Paul wants to chuck wisdom. He wants to deal with wisdom under the proper ground rules. Wisdom is all over the place in Corinthians; I don't think Paul wants to deny that there is room for it.

Terry: We could go on, but our time is up. Our discussion may be at an end, but those who will take up these texts during the Epiphany season will carry on the conversation. Isn't that what Paul is doing in this letter, continuing the conversation that began with his first visit? Epiphany is a good time for the people of God to discuss where they have been and, more important, where they are going. It is a time for the church to celebrate the presence of the Spirit in its midst. Faith is not the end of the conversation, it is only the beginning. ⊕