Apocalyptic Transformation in Paul's Discourse on the Cross[1]

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I. THE DISCOURSE ON THE CROSS AS PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCE

WHEN PAUL WRITES HIS DISCOURSE ON THE CROSS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 1-2, HE IS addressing a church divided by competing ideologies and ego struggles. The issues that divide the Corinthians are familiar enough in our own day: in chapter 1, it is baptism; in chapters 9-11, the Lord's supper; in chapters 12-14, ministry and worship. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 reveal that Paul's hearers are divided about sexual ethics and that they are prone to resort to civil lawsuits rather than church negotiation to settle their disputes. Throughout the letter, class distinctions and the divisions they engender seem to hover just beneath the surface of

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*P*aul's discourse on the cross works as an apocalyptic "speech-act," the agent of a perceptual shift that transfers the believer from a false reality to the authentic reality characterized by having the "mind of Christ."

every social and religious problem. Into this context Paul aims his apocalyptic "Word of the Cross," a word designed to breach the barriers of ego and ideology that divide believers at Corinth and to liberate them for reconciled life in God's new creation. Wielding the Word of the Cross, he invades the perceptual landscape of his hearers, cutting through their accustomed (and, he believes, false) ways of knowing with the sharp expression of a new reality. The effectiveness of his campaign, the letter suggests, rests in the power of the Word he preaches to liberate both minds and bodies from the grasp of the false world to which he elsewhere refers as the "present evil age" (Gal 1:4).

The apocalyptic force of Paul's cross discourse, however, is seldom felt in the church, even when its apocalyptic motifs are noted. Consequently, its most radical implications for changing the mind and relocating the whole self of the believer in the realm of reconciled obedience to God are often missed. In this essay, I wish to offer a way of realizing the apocalyptic effects of Paul's Word of the Cross in 1 Cor 1-2 by seeing it as an instance of "performative utterance." This linguistic category is the invention of the British philosopher J. L. Austin, who demonstrated the capacity of some words to *do* what they *say* within certain cultural and linguistic conventions that allow language to act in this way. Austin's most celebrated example of such "speech-acts" is the pronouncement of the marriage vow, "I do." When one speaks these words in the context of conventional marriage, one is, in fact, married; the words do what they say. Paul's Word of the Cross, of course, does not demonstrate exactly the kind of correspondence between word and act that we observe in Austin's example. And yet, I will argue, it has a related potential to do what it says. Within the conventions of Paul's language, the Word of the Cross may act so to subvert the dominant structures of conventional thought that the situation it speaks, namely the experience of salvation or destruction, may be *accomplished* by the proclamation of the Word itself.

In what follows, then, I propose to (1) set the conventional framework within which Paul's message is empowered to act "performatively"; (2) demonstrate the collision of conventions that destabilizes and thus prepares hearers to enter the new perceptual structures of a new reality which Paul calls the "new creation"; (3) show how Paul narrates the movement from perceptual collision to reconciliation in the "mind of Christ" by reference to the Spirit as mediator of the mystery of the cross; and (4) briefly address the implications of this analysis for contemporary Christian ethics of reconciliation.

II. The Conventional Setting of Paul's Discourse

Austin's speech-act theory rests above all on the governing presence of linguistic conventions, that is, rules agreed upon by the users of language about how language works in particular cultural and linguistic contexts. In Austin's example, the marriage vows "work" only if certain conditions are met. In conventional civil law marriage, for example, the vow cannot legally perform the act if either party is already married to someone else. In a related sense, in Paul's cross discourse, certain conventions about how the world is ordered must be in place for

the Word of the Cross to perform its task. Here, I will argue, it is Paul's creative re-working of two conventional systems of perception, wisdom and apocalyptic, that allows the discourse to move his hearers first toward destruction of what he takes to be a false, enslaving world and then toward reconciliation in God's new creation.

One way to reconstruct the situation Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians is the following: Paul has heard some in Corinth boast of their superior knowledge and of their exclusive access to its spiritual source (1:11-12; 3:18; 4:8; 6:12; 8:1, etc.). He has watched as they lifted their words of wisdom, expressed not least in doctrinal disputes, above all other concerns of the community (1:10; 5:1ff.; 6:1-20; 11:17-22; etc.); he hears in their rhetoric the claim to have attained through *gnosis* (knowledge) a sort of "instant eschatology" whereby they are already resurrected, already free of the bondage and responsibility of bodily life (8:1; 15:12-19, 35). He is certain that in their spiritual and intellectual enthusiasm, they have devalued the cross of Christ (2:1-5).

Evidently, the Corinthians were fascinated by the epistemological question, i.e., the question of knowledge itself, *how* we know *what* we know. Indeed, Paul punctuates his discourse with pointed references to key Corinthian epistemological terms and slogans, now turned to the service of his own argument—e.g., in 8:1, "We know that 'all of us possess knowledge,'" to which Paul replies, "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him" (8:1c-2).

There is evidence in the letter that the Corinthians ground their way of knowing in appeals to certain Hellenistic philosophical traditions that combine with Jewish and Christian ideas. Chief among the traditions they call upon are those associated with wisdom and the order of the cosmos. In these traditions the world is ordered in discernible patterns—e.g., paired opposites—that are everywhere evident.[2] The wise person, following the cosmic order, leads a good life by choosing good over evil, life over death, law over sin. Both evil and right action have predictable rewards. This is a sage's view of reality.[3] It functions best where life is coherent and manageable, where those who define reality for the culture are in consensus about what really matters. It is a compelling view, especially today amidst the chaos of competing values, the seeming collapse of all consensus.

But not every ancient accepted this definition of reality. At times of crisis in Israel's history, for example, as Walter Brueggemann has shown, the conventions of wisdom broke down. Epistemological consensus collapsed.[4] At these times,

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[2]On the ubiquity of this way of seeing the world in antiquity and for the implications of this fact for Pauline apocalyptic hermeneutics, see J. Louis Martyn, "Apocalyptic Antinomies in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *New Testament Studies* 31/3 (1985) 410-424, especially footnote 12, 422-23.

[3]On the epistemological history of Israel, see Walter Brueggemann's essay, "The Epistemological Crisis of Israel's Two Histories (Jer. 9:22-23)" in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. J. G. Gammie, W. A. Brueggemann, W. L. Humphreys, and James W. Ward (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978).

[4]Ibid., 86-87.

there rose up in Israel two other figures, namely, the prophet and the apocalyptic visionary, who saw things very differently. For them, the center claimed by the traditioners of wisdom did not hold. God was free to invade and disrupt the status quo on behalf of the outsider, the dispossessed, all those whose inexplicable trage-dies find no place in the cosmic order.

Paul shows himself to be the inheritor of such prophetic and apocalyptic (i.e., counter-culture) traditions throughout his discourse on the cross. In 1 Cor 1:19, for example, he draws upon Isaiah's critique of the wisdom tradition as he quotes that prophet, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." The same point is made in a more expansive way by his use of Jer 9:22-23, quoted directly at 1 Cor 1:31, but echoed through his entire exposition on wisdom and folly: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; let not the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches...but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows that I am the Lord who prac-tices love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight" (Jer 9:22-23).

The apocalyptic tradition, too, arises in times of crisis and testifies to God's sovereign freedom to act against the old order of things, only now the order is con-trolled not by Israel, but by her enemies. It is Syria or Rome that God will vanquish in order to bring in the new creation. Unlike the prophet, the visionary does not translate his visions or auditions directly into political messages or programs for this world. Where the prophet calls for reform, the visionary calls for a transforma-tion of perception born of the conviction that the present world with its illusory powers is giving way to God's new creation. Here the dominant images are often unearthly or bizarre, and as such perform the sort of function the writer Flannery O'Connor assigns to her grotesque characters. A writer of grotesque fiction, she says, looks for "one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in firmly by him." Possessed of this unique vision, O'Connor creates in her characters combinations of realities so disparate as to appear wild, comic, im-possible.[5] In her stories these characters, whose narrative function is analogous to the destabilizing of conventions in Pauline rhetoric, are the ones who shock us into seeing what we might otherwise deny about who we really are and to which pow-ers we really give allegiance.

What the apocalyptic seers offer, then, is a vision that confirms God's sover-eign power especially in the *absence* of negotiations with the world. It is hardly a literature of despair, for in the martyrdom of the saints it sees the final desperate blows of the Evil One enraged by the certainty of defeat; in the suffering of the

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[5]Flannery O'Connor,"The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" in *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Far-rar, Straus and Giroux, 1961) 42-43. For insight on Flannery O'Connor as an apocalyptic writer, I am in-debted to J. Louis Martyn, "From Paul to Flannery O'Connor with the Power of Grace," *Katallagete* 7 (Winter, 1981) 10-17.

faithful, it sees the birth pangs of the new world. In images wild and impossible, apocalyptic literature is full of hope.[6]

III. PAUL'S APOCALYPTIC OUTLOOK

It is fairly easy to demonstrate that Paul typically articulates his understanding of the Christ event in language and images drawn from the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, shaping these ideas to the new circumstances obtaining in the world since the advent of Christ. Indeed, certain of Paul's rhetorical strategies seem designed to make his hearers aware of their precariously apocalyptic position between the shifting ages. Among these we can place the strange juxtapositions of the "already" with the "not yet" in 2 Cor 5:16-6:2 and the unconventional treatment of conventional paradigms in Gal 3:28, "In Christ there is no male or female, slave or free, Jew or Greek," or again in our present letter, "Let those who rejoice live as though not rejoicing...for the form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:29-31).

In these examples and elsewhere throughout his letters, the new apocalyptic reality is linked to the perception of the believer. The new creation is something that can be seen, but this seeing depends on a new set of perceptual criteria brought into being by the death and resurrection of Christ "who died for all" (2 Cor 5:15): "Even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ , he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:16-17). In emphasizing perception, therefore, I am following Paul's own lead, for it is his habit wherever he mentions the cross to link it with the terminology of seeing, knowing, change of mind, transformation. And nowhere is perception itself more at issue than in the Corinthian correspondence.[7]

Perceptual criteria are once again linked to the cross, now as active agent of God's apocalypse, in the theme sentence of the discourse on the cross in 1 Cor 1:18. Here, the perception of the Word of the Cross as either folly or power separates the perishing from the ones being saved:

> "For the Word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

[6]Other scholars of Pauline apocalyptic have perceptively brought to mind in this context certain powerful moments in the civil rights movement in America. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, "I See the Promised Land," is an especially apt example of apocalyptic rhetoric with power to change perception. "Like anybody I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will....I've Seen the promised land...and I'm happy tonight." James M. Washington, ed., *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) 279. The speech is cited by Katherine Grieb, "Sacrifice at the Turn of the Ages: Applied Apocalyptic, or Paul's Use of Cultic Metaphor in Romans 12:1-2," unpublished paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 22, 1992. See the similar reference to civil rights rhetoric in J. Louis Martyn, "From Paul to Flannery O'Connor with the Power of Grace," 14-15.

[7]For a careful discussion of the epistemological proclivities of the Corinthians, see J. Louis Martyn, "Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages: 2 Corinthians 5:16," in *Christian History and Interpretation: Essays Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967) 269-287.

In this remarkable declaration is inscribed in short-hand the whole of Paul's revolutionary gospel, so stated as to jar the careful observer into a startling new way of knowing. If we listen closely to this first sentence we begin already to hear in its strange turns and reversals, its unfamiliar constructions, the de-centering force of the cross against the falsely centered mind. But to hear clearly, we must follow Austin's advice and consider it first in the context of Corinthian conventions.

IV. USING CONVENTIONS TO OVERTURN CONVENTIONS

In the Corinthian world, we are now prepared to see, Paul's sentence would have struck several dissonant chords. First, of course, there is the troubling image of the cross itself, the tree that bore the cursed body of God's Son. As Paul presents it, it is scandal for the Jews because crucifixion invokes the law's curse (Deut 21:23 and Gal 3:13); for the Greeks, who knew and accepted the idea of vicarious death for one's own, it is folly in that the sacrifice has the intent to save the enemy.[8]

Then there is the odd construction of the phrase, "*Word* of the Cross" (*logos tou staurou*). For Jews, the *logos* was the law and Wisdom, two terms which by the first century had become closely identified. For Greeks, the *logos* signified the reason behind the cosmic order and the advances of philosophy in understanding that order. By this time in Jewish-Gentile relations, there had been a fair degree of convergence between learned Jews and Greeks (as there would later be between Christians and Greeks) on the philosophical quest. Each group produced representatives who recognized some in the other group as philosophical colleagues. But for neither Jew nor Greek does the death by crucifixion of God's Son conform to that cosmic order. In neither system can what is antithetical to reason, to law, that is, to *logos* itself, confer salvation. This "logos of the *cross*" constitutes a contradiction in terms offensive both to the reasoned and to the religious mind.

Finally, the Corinthian ear is offended by Paul's odd pairing of opposites here. The Jew or Greek who heard "folly" in the first half of the sentence would expect its customary partner, "wisdom," to follow; language, and hence the world, the structuralists tell us, is thus arranged in binary opposites. But Paul will not describe the cross by means of this conventional pair. Instead he inserts, in place of wisdom, "God's power," thus imbuing the cross with an unexpected dynamism. To the Jew or Greek of the first century, and perhaps to some in the twentieth century as well, Paul is saying something very strange indeed about the Word of the Cross as an active agent of God.

Hearers of this strange sentence, then and now, recognize its eschatological tone. It is about the end-time, a time already beginning, at which the cross divides the perishing from the saved. Paul renders the thought more obviously apocalyptic and at the same time gives it more significance for the present by replacing folly's conventional opposite "wisdom" with "power." Here again, the prophets and apocalyptic visionaries are not far from view. When Paul calls the Word

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[8]See the discussion of the cross as scandal in Martin Hengel, "The Expiatory Sacrifice of Christ," *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 62/2 (1980) 454-475.

"power of God," he must surely have in mind the Word of Yahweh in Isaiah that goes out to accomplish Yahweh's purpose and will not return empty (Isa 55:1-11); or again, Jeremiah's Word "like a fire" that breaks rocks in pieces (Jer 5:14; 23:29). Or from his apocalyptic heritage, the Word in 4 Ezra that created the world in the beginning and now prophesies its end (4 Ezra 6:15). In these contexts, too, the Word of God is an active agent whose power belongs to God and whose effect is to cause human beings to discern their true relation to God.

If we take the apocalyptic impact of the sentence to heart, and do not allow its words to drift under the spell of our old perceptual criteria (most people quite naturally recall the verse as being about folly and *wisdom*, not *power*), we will begin to be disoriented by it, put off balance, as I believe Paul intended his Corinthian hearers to be. We will begin to see the cross as the powerful strike of God that destroys the world of sin and death (the world of the "perishing"), freeing its captives, and at the same time creates a new world (the world of the "ones being saved") through the self-giving love of God in Christ. Paul does not ask in this context that his hearers choose folly or wisdom, the old world or the new world; he shows by pointing to the cross how *God's* own gracious and loving choice *for them* frees them from the hostile powers of the old world and draws them into the new creation. It is perhaps because he has seen this new creation—in fact, been drawn into it involuntarily by the revelation (*apocalypse*) of God's son (Gal 1: 13-17)—that Paul construes the world in such strange ways.

One who continues to hear Paul's discourse in the unbalanced condition created by its odd first sentence is pulled by his strange rhetoric deeper and deeper into the paradox it narrates until finally, he may be seized by it, not as by reason or logic but as by mystery.[9] After a restatement of the mystery of God's decision to save through the folly of the cross, Paul turns the argument toward the concrete situation of the Corinthians:

> For consider your call. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

This real life example calls the Corinthians to recognize the foolishness of their claims to spiritual and social ascent in light of God's choice to create *ex-nihilo*, effectively nullifying the structures of the old order, including the privileges attached to human wisdom, power, and status, either social or spiritual. The strategy that began in a disruption of the language and ideology of ascent now leads the perceptive reader to acknowledge his own non-being before God. God's act of generous descent to elect those who are in the world's sight "nothings and nobod-

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[9]Paul describes his message to the Corinthians as a "mystery" in 2:1. There is a text variant here for "testimony" instead of "mystery" (*martyrion* instead of *mysterion*), but "mystery" seems the more coherent reading. For the characterization of what happens in 2:6-16 as "seizure" see Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 352.

ies" can only now begin to have its recreative effect. From the rubble left by the destruction of the conventional world and conventional notions of the self within that world arises a unifying image of the One who graciously calls and creates *ex nihilo*. This is a restatement of the divine mystery of the cross, now made concrete for the human community.

V. The Spirit as Mediator of Divine Mystery

The second half of the cross discourse in 2:1-16 begins by establishing the role of the Spirit in the apocalyptic economy. As Paul orders the transforming "moments" of his discourse, the Spirit now functions to re-orient the destabilized hearer. It is as if the Spirit, like a wind, rushes in to fill the void left by the destruction of the old world. I do not mean to suggest a "magic moment" of spiritual transformation just as the reader gets to this section of the discourse. Surely Paul believes that the Spirit is active throughout the discourse, especially in its destabilizing earlier sections. I am suggesting, rather, that his introduction of the Spirit at this point as mediator of the mystery of the cross is part of a rhetorical strategy which enhances the performative qualities of the argument. Just as a story enhances our ability to imagine and even act out the meaning of an idea, Paul's narrative structure in 1 Cor 1-2 allows the hearer to imagine, and thus possibly also live out, the liberating movement from captivity to new life in the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ.

It is at this point in Paul's argument that he is most vulnerable to misinterpretation at Corinth, for here he faces the enthusiasm of spiritualists who tend to disconnect their spiritual gifts from both the cross of Jesus and their own life in the body. Therefore, Paul must keep the Spirit he means connected to the preaching of the cross. What the Spirit reveals, he is careful to say, is the "depths of God" (2:10) and "God's hidden wisdom" (2:7), both expressions of the cross kerygma preserved for the "mature" (2:6). Now, instead of the spirit of the world, says Paul, whoever has received the hidden wisdom from God has received the Spirit that comes from God and is thereby empowered by the Spirit to teach in the way the Spirit teaches, imparting spiritual things spiritually (2:13). One wonders, perhaps, if at this point Paul has simply replaced one sort of spiritualism with another, thereby confirming a kind of body-spirit dualism that seems already to hinder authentic and unified community life in Corinth. One safeguard against this interpretation is Paul's linking of the true Spirit with the cross of Christ. Another follows in the last two sentences of the discourse where Paul significantly shifts the emphasis from Spirit to "mind," a term which is especially linked for him, as we will see, to the body.

VI. The Mind of Christ: Embodiment of the Reconciling Word

Paul brings the discourse to a close at 2:16 by citing Isaiah 40:13 and then making a bold claim to be in (corporate) possession of the "mind of Christ":

> "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

The shift of focus from "Spirit" to "mind" (*nous*) brings the discourse full circle to Paul's beginning appeal in 1:10, "I appeal to you...be united in the same mind (*nous*) and the same knowledge." It also requires one more transformative move by calling his hearers into active united service through their corporate possession of the mind of Christ.[10]

A survey of Paul's use of the term *nous* (mind) and its cognates reveals that by "mind" Paul typically means more than the intellect; for him the mind is the orientation of the whole self including the body toward or away from God. A few examples from other letters will serve to illustrate the point: When the thoughts (*noemata*) are "captive" to Christ, obedience to God results (2 Cor 10:5). When the mind is renewed, bodily service to God follows (Rom 12:1-2). When the mind of Christ is embraced, unity in the Body of Christ, the church, is regained (Phil 2:5; 4:2). Likewise, in 1 Corinthians, possession of the consciously cruciform mind is what makes possible the unity Paul calls for in 1:10, the mindful servanthood out-lined in chapters 3-4, the recognition that the body is the Lord's in 6:19-20, and the mindfulness of prayer and praise to which he appeals in chapter 14. Here at last is the most explicit link of the discourse between transformed perception and trans-formed behavior.

To have the mind of Christ, therefore, is to complete the apocalyptic transfer to the new creation and, thus relocated, to find oneself no longer under the powers of the world but liberated for a life of obedience to God. Clearly, if the discourse really acts to "do what it says," like Austin's performative utterances, it must not only de-stabilize and re-orient the hearer, but establish her in cruciform love and service to the community, that is to say, in that state of "being saved" to which Paul refers in his opening declaration. Whoever leaves the discourse without per-ceiving the cross as God's power to save in this way has not yet, in Paul's terms, been freed from the illusory powers of the "present evil age."

VII. PAUL'S CROSS THEOLOGY AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The challenge of 1 Corinthians 1-2 to traditional notions of ethics rests in Paul's insistence that the experience and behavior of "being saved" result not from choices available within the world, but from the apocalyptic (and therefore di-vinely initiated) relocation of the believer in the realm of free obedience to God. For Paul, this obedience is both initiated and sustained by the divine love exempli-fied in the cross through which all human strivings for salvation ended. To per-ceive that one is thus saved from oneself and from the false gods to whom one once offered allegiance is, in Paul's terms, to enter into the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5; 16:26). And since obedience is for Paul always embodied, his theology is explicitly ethical; it demands that believers take sides with their bodies in the bat-tle of the Spirit against the false powers of the world. Paul was not a gnostic—the

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[10]Paul cites Isaiah in the Septuagint version where the relevant term is *nous,* or "mind." Had he wished, he might have kept the Spirit in focus by citing the Hebrew text where *ruach* (=spirit) is used in-stead.

creation matters immensely to him as it "groans in travail" for liberty and redemption (Rom 8:22-23). But he was an apocalyptic visionary, endowed with the visionary's gift of seeing, beyond the programs of the world, the ultimate truth that God is not subject to the world's wisdom. The challenge for modern interpreters, especially those who as ministers of Christ would bring Paul's Word of the Cross to a divided and suffering world, is to find ways of translating his vision of the cross as apocalyptic power for our own times without promoting the body-spirit dualism he works so hard to avoid. Whether in preaching, in traditional liturgical acts, or in other images "wild and impossible," the apocalyptic message must sound out lest we also fall back under the powers of the world, claiming by their authority to be wise. ⊕