

The Wisdom and Foolishness of God

First Corinthians 1–2 in Theological Exploration

Christophe Chalamet and
Hans-Christoph Askani, editors

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THE WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

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the divine light" and "not itself the light"—so long as the distance between the wisdom in God's foolishness and the wisdom of the age are not collapsed—then the Reformed tradition has the freedom to "reason, moralize, and historicize."⁵⁹ And this is the case when the Reformed tradition takes its guidance from the catechetic Calvin, for whom "life . . . is about *questions* [that] are raised," in which the "*answer for human knowing*" is found only in "*one kind of knowledge*," namely, "that we may *know the majesty of our Creator*."⁶⁰

In light of this, *AT* is an example of this in action, where Barth interprets Paul's notion of "wisdom" and "foolishness" as precisely the way in which those questions about the moral-epistemic task are raised and, indeed, answered in the "one kind of knowledge": knowing the majesty of the crucified Christ. That the *loci* raised by the notions of "wisdom" and "foolishness" in chapters 1–2—namely, knowledge, morality, and eschatology—could provoke unique insights is something that captivated Barth as he contemplated Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

59. *Ibid.*; ET, 83.

60. *Ibid.*, 131–33; ET, 93–94, 97.

The Word of the Cross in the Conflict of Interpretive Power: On the Genealogy of Theology Deriving from the Spirit of Pauline Rhetoric

Philipp Stoellger

To begin: whenever "Paul" is mentioned hereafter, a distinction is being made between the *historical* Paul, who can be reconstructed by historians, the *biblical* Paul of the canonical texts of the New Testament, and the *imaginary* Paul, who is being constituted in interpretations as well as in religious and institutional use, as the saint, cult figure, official and theological *norma normans*. Therefore, the differentiation of Paul is threefold, and it is impossible to ascribe

a unity of being to these three figures. What follows is thus *not* concerned with the presentation of results derived from the textual sources, but merely with systematic questions and their discussion—in particular with the problematization of the imaginary Paul's momentum in his interpretive power (*Deutungsmacht*) and his potential impact.

Faith in the Word's Power of Interpretation

One of the most astonishing common ways of thinking is to believe that the mere naked word possesses power and efficacy—theologically speaking, to argue, believe, hope, and love "*solo verbo*." That is the case, first and foremost, of the Word of God, derived from Christ as *the* Word incarnate, but it is also true of the word of the cross as a basic formulation of Pauline theology—and so on. For the genealogy of theology it simply means: In the beginning was the word—namely in every moment of the beginning, when someone begins to speak, opens his mouth, and dares to say something. The long chain of the *logos* runs from the beginning of the world via incarnation, cross, and resurrection past Pentecost up to the "*hic et nunc*." This (apparently) uninterrupted continuity of "the" *logos* serves as genealogy of interpretive power, which lays claim to a word "in the name of God." Whoever dares to speak truly, worthily, and fittingly in the name of God places oneself in this continuity, claims it as an authorization in order to say something, to let it be heard and seen in the manner it is said. But *who* is then speaking is far from obvious. Ultimately, the one who should be speaking is the one who is brought to speech; but this one can only speak through the voice of others, the voice that is being lent to the one who dares to speak in his name. Without such a seemingly absurd audaciousness there would be no *verbum praesens*.

Christianity, therefore, is not a scripture- or book-religion but a

word-religion that trusts in and relies on the interpretive power of the "*viva vox*." Thus, the rule "*sine vi humana, sed verbo*," or more precisely, in English, "not by *human* force, but *only* by the Word of God" (*Augsburg Confession*, art. 28), applies to the Christian proclamation. Within Protestantism this has become the normative creedal statement and theologically a critical principle: to rely, without any force or power, on the Word, in faith, love, and hope that it will be efficient *ubi et quando visum est Deo*, "where and when it pleases God." The ecclesiastical as well as the theological renunciation of force is based on the belief in the power of the word (*Wortmacht*).

Christianity, therefore, is the rhetorical religion *par excellence*, insofar as it puts its trust in the word alone—and thus not "only" in Christ alone but in every word that someone dares to speak in his name. It can only depend on the word's interpretive power.¹ Therefore, it should not be overlooked that from Scripture through confession (*Bekennntnis*) to proclamation and sacrament, the power of the word (*Wortmacht*), the interpretive power of the word, meaning this *medium*, is relied upon without ceasing. What this means, and how it is to be understood, remains to be seen—despite any hermeneutics of suspicion targeting rhetoric or religion. In order to clarify that, a hermeneutic of rhetoric—here, more precisely, of Pauline rhetoric—is needed. *In the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh and became word of the cross and proclamation and theology—in sum: rhetoric*. What else does it become? Theology, including Paul's theology, forms itself from the start using the wisdom of the world; more precisely, using the word-wisdom (*Wortweisheit*) called rhetoric. The same is true of Jesus' words, as the parables indicate. But Jesus as rhetorician would be a different topic.

1. Images and visual aspects would deserve to be studied as well.

"Interpretive Power": Towards a Definition

Faith in the word relies on its *interpretive power*. That is my opening thesis. A clarification, even a provisional one, of what I mean by "interpretive power" or "power of interpretation" (*Deutungsmacht*) is in order. As a first approximation, I will say this: interpretive power means letting something be seen through speaking and showing, letting it be seen in *such* a way that the addressees see it in the same way as it was said and shown. It ultimately aims to *make* them see so that they, too, may act, feel, think, and live accordingly. The unfathomable question is then: Can interpretive power go as far as enabling belief or even producing faith?

In a second step, let me express things differently, moving toward a definition: interpretive power is, on a *personal* level, the *capacity* to interpret and, in addition, to wield power through interpretation; at a *nonpersonal* level, it is the power or the possibility to interpret or to gain power through interpretation, furthermore it is, *medially*, the *possibility* and the *potential efficacy* of an interpretation and, *structurally* (or *modally*), the power to *enact or realize an interpretation* (or the power to negate it, in analogy with the concept of power). From the standpoint of the originator of the interpretation, it embraces everything from the power to present all the way to getting the point across. From the standpoint of the addressee, it is the power to recognize (interpretive power is here understood using the *genetivus obiectivus*). The power to interpret does not clarify how an interpretation can *itself* become powerful (going *against* already recognized ones). And so this needs to be added: interpretive power is also the power of an interpretation in the *genetivus subiectivus*—it may depend on the addressee's attention or recognition, on the media and technologies (speech, picture), or on how convincing arguments are. The power to interpret usually depends on a recognized institution

or order (i.e., a church, science, a constitutional court). But an interpretation can also, exceptionally, have extraordinary effects that go against recognized institutions, disturbing, expanding, reforming, or revolutionizing them (to the point of a genesis of a new order: e.g., the New Testament, the Reformation).

Interpretive power, specifically, has the capacity to enable and realize (or to negate) through interpretation, not through enforcement, domination, and force. Interpretation may at times occur using enforcement, violence, and for the sake of domination, of course, and it may render necessary the *critique* of interpretive power. Furthermore, we may note that interpretive power may also have weakening effects; it may open things up or seem powerless, which may call for support, encouragement, and promotion of interpretive power. Because of that intrinsic ambiguity, a decision can only take place in specific social, cultural, historical, and other similar situations.

Faith in the word trusts in its *interpretive power*, that is, faith relies on the coherence of the chain of logos—beginning with God via Christ in the Spirit on to Paul, Luther, and in all eternity. Certainly, not everybody bets on this, but all those who work with and subsist on words do. Even God did not wish, or was not able, to act in any other way than to create the world through God's Word, to reveal God's will in the words of the law, to let God's Word become flesh and to let us be justified "*solo verbo*," by the word alone.

Thereby enters the *power* of the word, which hermeneutically is usually kept latent—its interpretive power is where interpretation and power intersect. In this light, the conflict in Corinth appears as a conflict over interpretive power (*Deutungsmachtkonflikt*). This places a heavy burden on hermeneutics: the chiasm between the power of the word (*Macht des Wortes*) and the word of power (*Wort der Macht*) needs to be addressed, as does the power of semantics and

the semantics of power. Like power, God is not readily, immediately accessible, otherwise God would be unable to act, speechless, or ineffective. Therefore, neither God nor cross nor Paul can relinquish the word—with the consequence that they each have to rely on the power of the word. But does this mean that whoever has the word has the power (and vice versa)?

The Source of the Word's Power

That raises a curious question: Who or what empowers "the word," originally the Word of God? The classical answer, following the logic of the origin, is: it is empowered by its originator, God, thus also, eventually, by the king, the pope, the president, and the preacher. The wager on the word is then: *the word became spirit, and the charisma became ministry*. "Strictly speaking," it should be always the origin or originator whose power becomes effective in the word, as long as the continuity of this chain is not being disrupted, be it Roman in the form of the ministry, or Protestant in the form of doctrine. But such a chain of interpretive legitimation (*Deutungsermächtigung*) does not provide lasting reassurance. It presumes that everything is in order and that whoever adheres to this order will be all right. Whoever speaks *rite ordinatus*, ordained ritually, must speak rightly and truthfully. Here there can be no simple talk of the origin, since there is a derivation and dissipation of power coming out of the *order* or *institution*. This is so prevalent and powerful, even as a dissipation and derivation. As the questions become more specific, the power of the word (as well as of the other media) becomes more noticeable. It should be unsettling that in the power of the word that has been given by God (or, as the case may be, that has been attributed to God), the power that is *intrinsic* to the word as well as to language is always simultaneously at work.

It is by no means certain that "God" and "word" always work together peacefully, as the usage of the "Word of God" shows. Part of the intrinsic dynamic of the medium "word" has to do with its *how*, considering how "available" it is (in rhetoric, performance, staging) and how unavailable it also is (contingency, interpretation by others, other interpretations). Thus the "Word of God," to which some refer as a charismatic, "powerful word" (*Wortmacht*), is understood by others only as a spiritless "word of power" (*Machtwort*) that must be criticized accordingly.

The Inescapability of Rhetoric

Nevertheless, in a conflict, and in a conflict over *interpretive power*, referring to the long chain of *logos* going from God to the current word is of little help because *everyone* can refer to it, for good or for ill. Therefore, all that remains is to trust in the power of the word (*Wortmacht*), instead of claiming a divine word of power (*Machtwort*). Whoever expects "signs and wonders" will be disappointed and will find *sola verba*, only words. But the *power* of the word is mostly preserved in a latent way from too many inquiries. For whoever is asking questions here raises questions about the crucial basic trust of faith, that is, about the Word of God *as word*. A hermeneutics of rhetoric therefore cannot allow the *rhetorical* form of the power of the word (*Wortmacht*) to remain latent; it needs to make manifest and explicit what is supposed to remain hidden. The medium known as rhetoric has to make its own mediality invisible in order not to crash. Here hermeneutics becomes critical: it allows something, which otherwise would be stable, to become unstable.

This should not to be confused with a hermeneutic of suspicion, as if rhetoric were an indecent matter *per se* and whoever talks of Paul's rhetoric would declare the apostle to be a sophistic libertine.

Such fallacies have been spread by the Enlightenment as well as by dialectical theology—and, surprisingly, in their suspicion toward rhetoric, cultural-protestants as well as dialectical theologians and certain Lutherans are strikingly similar. Whoever distances oneself (using rhetoric) from rhetoric can confidently place it under a general suspicion. However, such misconceptions are not shared anymore among exegetes, church historians, practical theologians, or people interested in religious pedagogy. And yet systematic theologians often continue to hold on to it. One reason for this could be the presupposition that whoever speaks of rhetoric loses sight of the truth-question, as if one were bound to follow a (half-understood) Nietzsche and let sophism triumph in the end, perhaps even in its revenant form of deconstruction. *Res, non verba!*, “the thing itself, not words!,” is the battle cry, the “power of truth” or “of love” is the other, instead of mere power of word (*Wortmacht*), which smacks of rhetoric. The simple answer to this would be: *rhetoric shows what is the matter* (“*was Sache ist, zeigt die Rhetorik*”). Therefore, it is unavoidable to rely on the power of words—theologically, this is perfectly legitimate if the *word of the cross* is being discussed.

Eberhard Jüngel writes: “The merciful God who justifies godless man is a *speaking God*.”² The background metaphor of this thesis (a thesis related to creation as well as soteriology) is thus as discreet as it is sure to be heard: God as rhetor—just as in the forensic word of justification the sinner is declared righteous. Jüngel’s way of grounding this thesis (a thesis that is anything but self-evident) and that theological *hyperbolè* is remarkably profane: “Speech is the original unity of sensation and spirit.”³ Does this mean God is a

2. Eberhard Jüngel, *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), 169; ET, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. Jeffrey Cayzer (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001).

3. *Ibid.*, 173.

rhetor because God’s spirit cannot be without the body of the Word? Or that, were there no spirit, God would be without senses? Is the power of God originally the power of the sense-related Word? Did God become Word because, without it, God could not be God? Did God become Word because God had to be such in order to be discerned, effective, and powerful among us? Would a wordless God not be God—and would a godless word not be word? God and word become disturbingly indistinguishable.

The Powerlessness of the Cross and the Power of the “Word of the Cross”

In any case, what sort of power is at work here becomes ambiguous and is in need of clarification. The first answer was: interpretive power, and so a chiasm between power and semantics as well as between word and power. But *whose* interpretive power is at work here? The power of the “word alone,” meaning the power of this medium? If this is already problematic with regard to God and the word—that is, knowing whether that power is possibly derived, a loan from the power of the word—then it is no less important to ask the same question about the relationship between the cross and the word. If the cross was the climax of powerlessness, it became powerful in the *word* of the cross, so that in the judgment (the justification judgment) it would become powerfully effective. Is thus the apostolic word of the cross a word of power, an overpowering of the powerless cross, or is it the empowerment, authorized “by God himself,” of the cross as event of salvation? If this were the case, would the word of the cross not be contradicting the event of revelation in powerlessness? Is what became apparent *sub contrario*, in all powerlessness, to be attested *sub contradictione*, with all the power of the apostolic word of power? Or is any competing between

powerlessness and power sublimated in the medium of the word's interpretive power?

This should be the crucial hope, namely, that in the word of the cross the claim to power vanishes for the sake of the crucified one. But whoever says "word" is already entangled in the agon of the powers. The conflict in Corinth is the paradigmatic manifestation of that fact. To envision power as the medium of the "princes" and powers of this world would be an unfortunate simplification. The question is more complex: How is, and which, power is used by whom, and for what purpose—and who, by following them and their pretension, empowers those claiming power? Put simply: whether the word of the cross occurs as word of power or just as the power of word that is genuinely open to being contradicted, remains exposed to the objection: *Ecce verbum*, "here is the word." Whoever seeks, using words of power, to eliminate the possibility of contradiction and the semantic fragility misses the main point.

In Paul's conflict with his opponents it becomes clear how not only God and the crucified one, but also theology, lives from the power of the word—with a latent deeper meaning where it leans on the power of God's Word, if not more. And that can lead to deceit. As Gerhard Ebeling put it: "Talking about God, something from which a particular measure of power should be expected due to the object one is talking about, is on the one hand uncommonly susceptible of distortion, which can be endowed with the fascination for domination, or on the other hand with a defencelessness and weakness in which the specific power of speaking about God is hidden. How difficult it is, however, to trust in this hidden power!"⁴ With that the problem concerning what renders a religious or theological interpretation "in the name of God" powerful is by no

4. Gerhard Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 1:163.

means resolved, but it has been discerned and named (without being subsequently banned). The contours of an aspect that belongs to Christology appear: since the Pauline rhetoric, "defenselessness and weakness" are a special form of religious as well as theological speech that *can* be accompanied by an immediate accreditation *sub contrario*.

The Temptation of Claiming Divine Validity for One's Word

The model of a rhetorical *mimesis* or *imitatio Christi* has been defining for the Christian rhetoric, albeit in an ambivalent way and thus never without *sic et non*. The authorization of preferably "simple" speech operates with the criterion of the conformity with its "object," which in accordance with its lowliness is represented as "poor," and only thus is it actually adequate. From there lies, concealed under the guise of *humilitas*, a claim to interpretive power on the basis of the proposition that (only) this form conforms to the content, so that the subject is really present (in the Spirit) in the speech. The tradition of contempt for rhetoric manifests itself in a rhetoric of obedience in which the will to power manifests itself in powerlessness. One's own claim to interpretive power is being delegated ("*propter Christum*") and at the same time derives from the (self-made) delegation. That is a precarious ambivalence. We find it in Luther's theology as well as in the Word-of-God theology. Even Ebeling's invitation to "trust in this hidden power," meaning Christ's power under its opposite (*sub contrario*), that is, the cross, appears to be pointing in this direction: that with this the always-still-greater power of God remains involved in the interpretive game.

The more difficult task would be *not* to trust in this power, so as to not claim it for one's own speech—be it ever so indirectly. For it is necessary to resist the theological temptation to present one's

own interpretation as that of God or as "authorized by God." For that would mean gaining theological capital out of what has been and is strictly withheld from theology. No validity can be derived from God. It can only be claimed for oneself, without proxy and argumentatively. In questions of validity each one is responsible for oneself.⁵ Not even a God can help here.

Talking about Powerlessness While Claiming Power

Ebeling continues: "That way the focus is put on the shocking discrepancy between the claim and the success of the speaking about God."⁶ This discrepancy is part of the fundamental experiences of religious and theological discourse: talking about the power of the word, about God's Word as word of the cross, and yet remaining largely powerless—and at the same time in the midst of conflict claiming all the more power, as Paul did facing his Corinthian adversaries in the conflict over interpretive power. This leads to a *rhetorical split*: however great the powerlessness, one makes an even greater claim to power. This split becomes even wider as, for theology, the almighty God's real presence is intended or implied. Against this we need a reticence or reserve with regard to interpretive power and a *capacity to differentiate*, which does *not* "entrust" itself to God's power, claiming the power of the one to whom one is entrusting oneself, but which sees and exposes oneself as responsible for one's own interpretation. The Corinthian conflict over

5. "The summons of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. We can shout into another's ears, but everyone must himself be prepared for the time of death, for I will not be with you then, nor you with me." Martin Luther, "Eight Sermons at Wittenberg (1522)," in *Sermons I*, ed. John Doberstein and Helmut T. Lehman, *Luther's Works*, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 70; *WA* 10,3:1,7-2,2 (1522) and Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), II/3:463.

6. Gerhard Ebeling, *Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens*, 163.

interpretive power shows how difficult it is to do that during a conflict.

The Conflict of Interpretive Power in Corinth

First Corinthians is the document of a conflict of interpretation that developed into a conflict of interpretive *power*. The dimension of power in this conflict is not to be grasped merely semantically, particularly at a theological-semantic level, for the social groups involved and certain individuals also had an impact on it. But since, with regard to the subject matter, it is "only" the conflict of power that is thematized, the focus remains directed toward it. *What* is being argued about is in turn a question that has to do with conflicts of interpretive power in the exegetical debate.⁷ Apart from the older theories concerning a supposed Antinomianism, Judaism, Gnosis, or *Proto-Gnosis* on the various topics at hand (Lord's Supper, resurrection, ethics, etc.), the reasons for the theological divergences remain debatable. Here I assume it was a matter of:

- *wisdom*, which is evidently contested between Paul and his "opponents," that is, its interpretation and relevance, and, connected to that, pneumatology;
- *eschatology*, as far as there is an indication in 1 Cor. 4:8, that the opponents are concerned with a realized eschatology, which Paul is criticizing;
- *Christology and soteriology*, insofar as the interpretation of the resurrection (Christ and "all") is being debated;
- the *relation* between the cross and the resurrection points to the

7. Cf. on this Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, EKK VII/1 (Zürich: Benzinger-Neukirchener, 1992), 1:38-63.

quaestio; this relation was severed in the reception history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).

What became important in the history of interpretation was whether the cross or the resurrection was the true salvific event, and, concomitantly, whether faith is faith in the crucified one or in the risen one. This makes sense, since it is obviously “the word of the cross” that was being debated, and so the interpretation of the crucified one and the claims to interpretive power by various interpretations. We see that again in the later questions about theology: whether it is *theologia crucis* or *theologia gloriae*. Thus becomes patent what was already contentious between Paul and his opponents: the controversy over the interpretive power of the Word or, more precisely, the apostolate as authorization, or, rather, as ground for the legitimation, of Pauline theology.

The claim to interpretive power, in Paul’s argument, seeks to assert the “word of the cross” as *foolishness in the medium of wisdom* or, to put it differently, to express it *in rhetoric against rhetoric*. Paul’s problem was already known since Plato: to engage the sophists sophistically in order to win the contest and be the better sophist—in the name of truth and wisdom. It is thus a matter of *interpretation*, not “merely” of exegesis (of Scripture) or of (methodical) interpretation; it is a matter of the prescientific, concrete, basically *sapiential* way of seeing and speaking “*quod res est*” – that is how the crucified one is painted before people’s eyes so that people see him as shown and believe as indicated. Here we see the limit, for is it the case that the apostolic speech can lead to faith and make its listeners believe?

We may speak here of “interpretation” (*Deutung*), because in the conflict over the “word of the cross” it is not “only” a matter of methodical, disciplined interpretation, or of professional scriptural interpretation. “Painting Jesus before their eyes” or the christological

way of creating a paradox out of wisdom and foolishness—all of that is not “simply” scriptural interpretation, methodical interpretation, or exegesis, but a rhetorical practice with all its *enargeia* and *energeia*. It is a speaking and a showing, a speaking that shows and a showing that speaks, which cannot retreat to what has been said and its methodical interpretation. In such speaking and showing something singular and infinitely complex is being expressed in utter conciseness: “Christ has risen,” or the “word of the cross.” But in the debate with the opponents, such dense formulae are no longer irenic expressions of consensus but polemic, conflictual ones. Had they been undisputed, these formulae would have been *topoi* and shared viewpoints on the basis of which consensus could be found. But once they themselves have become the object of conflict, their status changes; they become battlegrounds on which the conflict of interpretive power about Christ, faith, the cross, and the apostolate is being played out.

In this conflict, the word of the cross is being asserted with a claim to power, the crucified one is entangled in a conflict of power—in which the right or true word of the cross is being invoked against a *different* Christology (at least according to the Pauline construct, in which the opponents’ Christology centers on the glory of resurrection as the salvific event).⁸ The performative sense and purpose of such daring conflictual speech is to say and reveal what one sees and how one sees it and how it is seen in the right way. In the present case: to let the listeners see Jesus as the crucified one; to let him be seen in *the way* Paul shows him; to *make* them see in such a way—in order to *let* them *believe* and *make* them *believe* that salvation can only be found in the crucified one. Rhetorically speaking, this is persuasion technique. Put more broadly, the point is to interpret something as something so that those who hear it

⁸ Cf., by contrast, Hansjürgen Verweyen, *Gottes letztes Wort. Grundriss der Fundamentaltheologie* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2000), 338ff.

will follow, share, and pass it on. When its impact is maximal, it means that they interpret everything else—that is, God, self, world, and life—in the light of *that* interpretation.

In the Corinthian debate it is about “all or nothing”: about the interpretation of Christ as the crucified one, about the cross as God’s wisdom—and therefore about the master of the interpretation of that “master interpretation,” of that interpretation of all interpretations, whereby the experience with all experience will begin to be “made.” Paul’s claim concerns no less than the normative master interpretation—with the corresponding will to interpretive power: the conflict of interpretation about the word of the cross, so that a conflict of power is taking place over interpretation, a conflict that is manifest as a conflict of interpretive *power* with others who interpret differently. The apostolic pretense lies in this: the one who is interpreted actually is the one who interprets because Christ revealed himself as a crucified one, the wisdom of God is revealed in the cross. And yet the apostolic rhetoric cannot but interpret in such a way that the crucified one interprets himself; all it can do is show him and let him be seen in such a way that belief in Christ as the crucified becomes reality. That is the deep paradox of the master interpretation which seeks to master this conflict of interpretation.

Making Paul’s Claim to Power Visible

Paul thus develops, in connection with interpretive power, a theorem that has become “canonical.” He operates with the long chain of the logos, where the continuity with God’s power is claimed as origin and authorization of his own interpretive power, while simultaneously making his *own* (claims to) power invisible, in order not to have to decide the question of power by himself; the idea being to let God decide, God who actually has already decided.⁹ Thus, what

Paul states in 2 Cor. 12:11 becomes clear: “I am being very foolish, but it was you who drove me to it.” Paul’s word claims for itself the full power of the apostolic ministry, in christomorphic mimesis, from the word of the cross and finally from God’s Word itself. The apostolate therefore functions, unwittingly, as legitimation through God, so that the apostle is the only legitimate interpreter (speaker, preacher) as God’s *delegate*. In the word of the cross, God himself interprets the cross—and so there can be no more contradiction. Whoever still contradicts this “foolishness of the impossible” (*folie de l’impossible*) would only end up in hell, in definitive exclusion.

The problem is that Paul, too, can interpret *solo verbo*, only through the word. Between divine power at the origin and the claim to power in the word of power (*Machtwort*) of the apostle, there is a third player, namely the powerful word (*Wortmacht*), that is, the word’s own intrinsic dynamic—whose power of conveying and convincing is bet upon: on the word’s interpretive power. The critical question for any theology is, therefore: Does one stay with the powerful word’s weakness, or does one claim more in order to secure it further, be it with words of power or on the basis of an original power (with a final explanation seemingly free from interpretation)?

Paul’s Use of Paradoxes

The exegetic as well as dogmatic analyses of semantics and philology are very helpful to the hermeneutical perspective on this conflict of interpretive power. They follow simultaneously the strategy of rendering things invisible as well as the paradoxes present in Paul’s text. Its claim to interpretive power and, with it, its connection of

⁹ Cf., however, 1 Cor. 7:40: “But she is better off as she is; that is my opinion, and I believe that I too have the Spirit of God”; 1 Cor. 10:15: “I appeal to you as sensible people; form your own judgement on what I say”; 1 Cor. 11:13: “Judge for yourselves: is it fitting for a woman to pray to God bareheaded?”

power and semantics operates in a structure that needs to be clarified and which becomes manifest in the *creation of various paradoxes*. The structure of Paul's argument is a transvaluation of all values—with a considerable amount of "will to power." (It thus becomes noticeable that Nietzsche basically competed with Paul when it comes to God, and also when it comes to the word's power, of which Nietzsche made such virtuosic use.)

Paul operates with the following paradoxes:

- with power he asserts the *opposite* of power, that is: powerlessness mediated by power;
- with the "word of the cross" he expresses the powerlessness of Christ as the highest power as well as, in a precarious analogy, the powerlessness of the apostle as the superior power over his opponents;
- using rhetoric, he brings to expression the opposite of rhetoric—he asserts in his interpretation the opposite of interpretation, namely what is "not just an interpretation";
- with wisdom he represents foolishness, so as to refute wisdom by means of that foolishness.

The paradox centers on the question: How can the foolishness of the cross be brought to expression in the medium of the wisdom of this world? Or: How can the Christian pathos be expressed in the medium of the Greek logos? Without letting the license to foolishness (*genus humile*) get out of hand; without simply asserting it (with a gesture of superiority) as the higher wisdom; without bearing witness to it in the absence of any argument for it, so that all that is left is faith in the witness; without transforming the upending with an adversarial attitude, using dualism and exclusion; without asserting

a claim to power, which puts the word of power (*Machtwort*) in the place of the powerful word (*Wortmacht*)? How to express it in such a way that, by way of the opposite, what is by no means one's own, what is other with regard to everything, comes to expression? One *could* get the impression that Paul is stumbling between the word of power and the powerful word—with the ever-recurring temptation to ultimately make recourse to a word of power, instead of relying on the weak powerful word—even though he knows that would be "foolish."

Powerful Word Versus Paul's Word of Power

The power of the word means that it lets *see* and *makes* seeing possible; it regulates, orientates, and enlightens; it opens up horizons, new realities, and possibilities, and sometimes lets even impossibilities become real; it brings into motion, stirring up affects and motivation; it converts through confession; it frees through encouragement; it claims; it fosters peace; and in the beginning, first of all, it declares free or righteous, as if the word were not only the most dangerous possession but above all the most powerful one. A word can let see, it can let see something in a *specific* way, enabling the addressees to see it in such a way that it makes them believe. This is the interpretive power of the word: saying something in such a way in order to show it in that way, and as a consequence letting us see and making us believe in that way. Even if it sounds hyperbolic, that was precisely Paul's goal, namely that the listeners not only believe in Christ, but believe in him in the *same way* as *he*, Paul. In order to achieve that he has to *let and make them believe in the same way* in which *he* interprets Christ—with the claim that this is God's interpretation (which was opened up to him, in analogy with the prophets).

To let and make see means to "adjust" what has been shown, to

turn it into what it is being shown as: therefore, to “adjust” the crucified one, to “adjust” Jesus into Christ, the cross into the word of the cross, the foolishness into wisdom, and the like. This triggers the critical impulse versus religion and versus rhetoric. But this would, once again, be too quick. For “adjusting” him in a particular way means presenting him in *such a way* that others may also see, hear, and imagine, and believe him in that way. Such possibility becomes real in speech and imaginative hearing—that is, the wager on the interpretive power of rhetoric, on its power in the weakness of the word, on its revelatory potential in letting Jesus appear as the Christ, in letting the cross become, in the word of the cross, the salvific event that awakens faith, in enabling listeners to believe, in letting them take part in suffering, death, and resurrection, and by making them “eyewitnesses” who pass on what they have seen.

The word of the cross as a rhetorically produced image¹⁰ of the cross seeks to enable faith and to make the listeners or readers believe *in that way*. Contradiction comes up against such a claim in the name of unavailability. The transition from letting and making see to making believe (it is as it is shown) is easily said, but impossible to grasp and to produce—it is an “impossible.” To show something in a particular way and to make it into something that is believed, those are hyperbolic formulations. Those things might be said and are at times said of God’s Word: what God says happens and is as it is spoken (Ps. 33:9), so that God may be believed. But such a transition from word to faith is a tremendous pretense. As from the side of the addressees, *understanding* can at best only be made possible and easier, something is *given* to be seen and understood, nothing more. It is impossible for the word to also make the addressees take it: it

10. The word *image* is polysemic here. It is an image in the mind of the speaker, an abstract image in the medium of the word, and it affects a self-created image in the listeners’ imagination. The identity or at least convergence of these various meanings is by no means assured.

cannot “produce” comprehension, and even less faith. But doesn’t the rhetorical production of evidence bet precisely on that (and isn’t that one of the reasons for the phobia with regard to rhetoric)? When it succeeds, it *makes* us believe, *volens volens*, better: it meets us, it “speaks to us” in a way which is prior to all knowing, willing, and choosing. The affirmation of the word always precedes our choosing. And that also means: in power and efficiency the word is irresistible—*when it succeeds*.

But that only applies to the *powerful word*, not to the *word of power*.¹¹ Both are as different as saying something and *really* having to say something.¹² Whoever “has the say,” through one’s office or position, is one thing. The question remains, always: Does that person *really* have something to say? Max Weber would have spoken about office and charisma. Paul claimed both simultaneously, as we see in the debate with the Corinthians. Jesus, on the other hand, was more modest: to trust only in the word and the act, without any apostolic mandate—and thus to fail before the eyes of the world. The more astonishing it is, then, when his interpretations are being recognized retrospectively, *without* having been authorized through any mandate, for instance, when a parable, such as the “good Samaritan,” is so convincing that it becomes an interpretive framework in a given culture. When it goes well, the person who has the interpretive power indeed has something to say and to show. The original gesture of interpretive power is: “But I say unto you . . .” It seems as if interpretive power has something to do with the illusion of being, and the illusion lets the world appear in *this or that way*—or it lets Christ appear *this or that way*, as the crucified one.

11. As an analogy, one could distinguish between image of power (*Machtbild*) and the image’s power (*Bildmacht*), or the body of power (*Machtkörper*) and the body’s power (*Körpermacht*).

12. This (calculated) shortening to a “who” is owed to conciseness and not without problems. It does evoke the fact that interpretive power is related to people’s capacity to act.

When a powerful person speaks, that person speaks a *word of power* (*Machtwort*),¹³ in which the power of the powerful is present and effective in the word, as with God's Word, in the judge's sentence, in the speech of a president or a pope. The power of the agent or the institution is present and effective in the "representative" word. This model reaches its limits when the representative loses credibility or speaks nonsense. The extreme case "*Roma locuta, causa finita*" with the claim to infallibility of certain papal words (*ex cathedra*) shows, in its extreme dimension, that such things do not usually apply, but that even the word of power remains dependent on recognition (or agreement).

The *powerful word* (*Wortmacht*), on the other hand, is not the power of the agent, the office, or the institution, but of the medium, for instance, the speech (or the image). Nietzsche said: "I fear we can't get rid of God because we still believe in Grammar . . ." ¹⁴ Wittgenstein's model of language games and also the speech-act theory assume that speech has its *own* power, of which we make use (or by which we are being dominated) every time we speak: "That's just how we speak." Speech makes many things possible and other things impossible, so that in speaking those parameters are inevitably used. In the actual act of speaking, another power manifests itself, the power of speech, which is effective by virtue of the way of speaking (the rhetorical tradition knows that particularly well): as they are performed, the saying or speaking, in contrast to what has been said, reveal a different power than language or the system of signs.¹⁵ This

13. For a good example, see *Angela Merkel—Machtworte. Die Standpunkte der Kanzlerin*, ed. Robin Mishra (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 2010).

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert*, Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. Giorgio Colli and Massimo Montinari (München: W. de Gruyter, 1988), 6:78.

15. In media science, the power of the medium (over its "users") is the guiding model; the same is true in the history of science and of technology; we find similar methods in discourse theory and system theory.

is why declarations of love as well as insults have been taken as (precarious) analogies for the *verbum efficax* and *visible*.

The Cost of Paul's Recourse to Words of Power

What becomes visible in this discrepancy is a precarious *ambivalence* in Paul's argumentation against his Corinthian adversaries. Naturally, he wishes to have something to say (the word of the cross), he wishes to deploy a powerful word (*Wortmacht*); but as he says this he intimates that he has the say (as apostle and founder of communities), and so with words of power (*Machtworten*). This is precarious; it undermines what he *really* has to say. In the urgency of the conflict, the powerful word reaches for the word of power. The word of power's claim is supposed to strengthen the powerful word, but it does the opposite. The problem becomes even more acute as the word of power claims one singular, exclusive authorization, namely apostolicity. Then the gesture of the word of power is reinforced by the claim that God himself is authorizing this—and whoever stands against Paul stands against God, and God against that person.

This reveals a sad powerlessness: the word looks for power, for *more* power than it has on its own, but it gets lost in gestures of power that lead to an escalating self-authorization. The unconditional "will to power" as the form of the "will to truth" leads astray, so that all that remains is an escape into a hyperbole of authorization. Whoever wishes to let the word of the cross, as God's Word, come to expression in such a way that, from first to last, the word of power prevails, would let power have the final say.

Consequently, the *ultima ratio* is the exclusion of those who do not bow to this claim to power. The genealogy of the process of "hereticizing" (*Häretisierung*) or anathematizing in the name of orthodoxy is thus only too understandable—and in vain, or should

one say: "for nothing"? Under the banner of the "Word of God," we can arrive very quickly at a word or power, when the powerful word, the word's power, does not yield by itself the desired recognition. One of the things we may see in the conflict in Corinth is a pathology of theology—without insinuating that such pathology was already present *with Paul*.

Real Impossibility: Paul's "*folie de l'impossible*"

Jacques Derrida wrote, with regard to the desire for forgiveness: "Pure and unconditional forgiveness, to name its most proper meaning, must not have a 'meaning,' it does not require any finality or any intelligibility. It is a folly of the impossible."¹⁶ John Caputo followed him with his "desire to *experience the impossible*" and his "apology for the impossible."¹⁷ The "*folie de l'impossible*": that is wonderfully thought up and wisely said. But what makes one trust and be sure that this is not an *impossible folie*, an impossible foolishness?

Paul's transvaluation of all values of wisdom and foolishness seems, at first sight, to be paradoxical: the wisdom of this world is mere foolishness before God, and God's wisdom is mere foolishness to the world. But this is not yet a paradox, it is simply a contrast, which goes back to a difference of perspectives: what some consider wise is foolish to others—and vice versa. This is a normal disagreement, more precisely, a contrasting opposition which does not rule out that there might be a third or fourth possibility.

The contrast that is decisive is rendered more acute by Paul: the world's wisdom is blind to God, since God has made it "foolish"

16. "Le pardon pur et inconditionnel, pour avoir son sens propre, doit n'avoir aucun 'sens', aucune finalité, aucune intelligibilité même. C'est une folie de l'impossible." Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Le siècle et le pardon," *Le Monde des débats* 12 (1999): 10–17.

17. Cf. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 3.

(does that mean that God has made it, or that God has shown it to be inferior and useless compared to God's wisdom?). Paul continues the contest with a *comparative* that *sounds* paradoxical: the foolishness of God is *wiser* and his weakness *stronger* (1 Cor. 1:25). Just as the cross inscription INRI, the polemical exonym for Christ (foolishness) is taken up polemically and recast, *this* foolishness (if "you" choose to call it that) is the *true* wisdom. And, as in Anselm's ontological argument (*quo maius*), we find here a comparative ("wiser," "stronger"), not a superlative. This suggests a wisdom that is "always greater, higher, wider" than the entire world.

The basic paradox of a foolish wisdom and a wise foolishness falls apart into a contrasting opposition. The Pauline use of language is thus spoken clearly in a partisan and "one-sided" way, *coram Deo*. It is clear that he has already removed the paradoxical dimension of the paradox: what is true wisdom and true foolishness needs no explanation but has always been clear and unambiguous. The unfortunate side effect of that is that "foolishness of God" and "weakness of God" are no "absolute paradoxes" (as well as no absolute metaphors); they only appear to be paradoxes. The polemic of the adversaries is taken up and, once recast, surpassed. A *genuine* foolishness of *God* does not exist in the flow of this rhetoric. As a consequence, the "weakness of God" that has been built up in a parallel move is in fact not a weakness at all, either.

And so, with the use of the comparative, a simple contrast is presented: there is a wiser wisdom (and a more foolish foolishness). Foolishness has three meanings:

1. What the wisdom of the world considers as foolish;
2. what God considers as foolish;
3. what Paul proclaims as the *wiser* wisdom: the *more foolish* foolishness according to the wisdom of the world, thus an even

more *impossible folie* which, by virtue of the powerful word, framed christologically, is smarter than the wisdom of the world. What appears to be even more impossible is the most impossible "*folie*," namely that of the crucified one. And so Paul's speech of wisdom about the *wiser wisdom* becomes the figure of the third party, the "mediator" in the conflict between God's foolishness and the wisdom of the world. It is *he* who, with *his* powerful word, shows a wiser wisdom to the world, who shows the foolish wisdom of the world to God. He represents one before the other—and vice versa, whereby both see differently and can see each other differently than before. It is not God's power or the apostolic word of power but the Pauline powerful word that effects the transvaluation of *all* values: God's wiser wisdom appeared initially as a *more impossible "folie"*; but as the speech continues it shows itself as suffering and passion of the one who is more than impossible: the crucified one.¹⁸

Paul's Rhetoric: Wisdom or Foolishness?

The resulting query is this: Is Paul's rhetoric a wisdom or a foolishness before God? And is it a foolishness before the world, or a wisdom—until it becomes debatable whether the *wiser wisdom* exists

18. It is therefore understandable that Otfried Hofius and Cilliers Breytenbach disagreed on whether the word of the cross has reconciled the world once and for all or if it continues to reconcile (see 2 Cor. 5:19a), that is, if *katallassein* (in the *contugatio periphrastica*) presently continues and will continue to do so in the future, or if it has taken place and is completed. Grammatically, it is located in the past. Rhetorically, it continues. *Paul* does not become the (self-appointed) mediator. Cf. Cilliers Breytenbach, *Versöhnung. Eine Studie zur paulinischen Soteriologie* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989); Otfried Hofius, "Rezension von Breytenbach, *Versöhnung*," *ThLZ* 115 (1990): 741–45; Cilliers Breytenbach, "Abgeschlossenes Imperfekt? Einige notwendig gewordene Anmerkungen zum Gebrauch des griechischen Imperfekts in neutestamentlichen Zeiten," *ThLZ* 118 (1993): 85–91; Otfried Hofius, "2Kor 5,19a und das Imperfekt," *ThLZ* 118 (1993): 790–95; Ferdinand Hahn, "Streit um 'Versöhnung': Zur Besprechung des Buches von Cilliers Breytenbach durch Otfried Hofius," *VerFor* 36 (1991): 55–64.

by the grace of Paul's rhetoric—hoping to be grounded in the crucified one, rather than merely be something invented in the midst of the difficult conflict of interpretive power. The risky wager in this powerful word is that in Paul's rhetoric of the cross both perspectives are being conveyed in such a way that the wisdom of the world is not only excluded and defamed, but also sublated and pushed beyond its boundaries, attracted by the wiser wisdom, which comes to expression in the form of rhetoric. The price for such risky speech is that it becomes a constitutively ambivalent figure. Nothing is easier to understand than the fact that opinions differ on Paul. To that extent, he carries the burdens of the world *and* of God. The sad powerlessness and escalation of power gestures, which I analyzed above, is the price of the wiser wisdom, a price he cannot avoid. What he bears witness to must appear to be preposterous—and in this very preposterousness a calculation can be seen.

On first hearing one might get a spell of dialectical dizziness, which might return during the first closer reading. But that does not last long, because it only appears to be dialectical. Paul is trying very hard with his rhetoric, but everything is and remains clear and unambiguous. There is nothing doubtful or really controversial. Toward Greeks and Jews alike the transvaluation of all values is being made unambiguously clear. This fosters and encourages consent among the Christian addressees of the rhetorical argumentation. With regard to the inner-Christian opponents, it creates a serious debate concerning the correct understanding of the wise foolishness and the foolish wisdom. *About that*, namely about the wiser wisdom, there is a real contest—with an open ending. Distinguishing himself from Greeks and Jews, Paul creates (topically and inventively) approval in the Christian community in order to attack his adversaries (those who are too wise, always wiser) and to place them before an alternative: going with him, or being excluded. Once the contest

about wisdom has been opened up toward the Greeks and the Jews (with an indisputable winner, thus a rigged contest), the inner-Christian contest can be treated.

The higher, greater, broader wisdom was probably claimed first and foremost by the opponents, who have contradicted Paul and sought to "overtake" his theology. We are not only of Paul, we are not of the devil; we are of Christ! We are wiser than Jews, Greeks, and Paul put together! Paul takes up this comparative and plays along with it, so that he must bear the consequences. The race against the opponents cannot be won anymore by further appeals to wisdom. How then?

The contest in the *dromos* (the running race) is transvaluated by Paul, through a surprising change of direction. *The dromos becomes a palindrome*: on the open road of the race in the theological arena, Paul suddenly makes a U-turn, from wisdom to foolishness, and then from foolishness back to wisdom. If that were to happen at the Olympic Games, it would be something truly astonishing. As mediator he must go back and forth between God and the world and between the world and God, between wisdom and foolishness, between foolishness and wisdom, so that, in this rhetorical contest, the wiser wisdom appears in Paul's speech of wisdom.

From *dromos* to *palindrome*, back and forth, and to and fro, he walks back and forth in an always-smaller circle, finally turning on one spot. Is this the point where he unhinges the wisdom of the world, or is he revolving around himself?

For outsiders it must look more than absurd. Paul "staggers" back and forth, as I put it provisionally above. "He has lost it," would be the expected reaction. Has he become totally insane? "Not at all," Paul would answer. On the contrary, for, according to the presupposition he might have in mind, his opponents got off to a false start, or as we might put it nowadays, they are doped. In

all their wisdom, they have, somehow, forgotten the foolishness, bypassing the cross in order to go straight to the resurrection. They lack the burden of God's life on earth, Christ's powerlessness and the embodied dimension of Christian existence. One could call this kind of bypassing of the old for the sake of the new a sort of soteriological impatience. The desire of completion bypasses work on what is old. They are not just wise, they are "far too wise."

Wolfgang Schrage named the position of the opponents a "hypertrophy of wisdom."¹⁹ The opponents are not being excluded along with the Jews and the Greeks, but "reeled in and caught," their parole taken up but paradoxically upended: wisdom yes, as well as wiser wisdom. But the comparative of wisdom is grounded in the *christological* accent—and that cannot be won with *pneuma* and resurrection, but only with the cross. Whoever bypasses it or loses it in the race for wisdom has missed the proper start.

What Paul is doing here, by all available means of the powerful word, *can* be called, with Derrida, "*folie de l'impossible*," or, with Erasmus, a praise of folly. But Derrida does not know a crucified Messiah, and Erasmus does not know a dead God or a mortal soul. The actual difficulty remains unthinkable or impossible, for both of them. *From that perspective*, even Derrida's "*folie de l'impossible*" appears still soft-footed and a little bit too (worldly) wise. Most would agree that these characteristics apply to Erasmus. Ultimately, they are both "easily digestible," and therefore harmless. Paul's point is *la folie la plus impossible* ("the most impossible foolishness"), the impossible reality of the crucified one.

If even Derrida's *folie* can appear almost harmless, when "seen from that perspective," then in that other way of seeing the interpretive power of Paul's argumentation shows itself: it lets and makes see,

19. Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, 1:150.

in a particular way and differently than before, and in such a way that not only the showing, but also what is being shown, involve interpretive power, namely the crucified one in the mode of the powerful word of the word of the cross. It is not self-evident at all, it is in fact unintelligible, that the crucified one is understood and ultimately recognized as the norm-setting thrust reverser, as sapiential palindrome. In his speech of wisdom, Paul wagers on the real presence of the proclaimed in the proclamation. Thus it is understandable that *his speech*, solidified as text, later came to be construed sacramentally. But, just as with God's powerful word, the power of the word can only be interpretive power (*Deutungsmacht*), which must be attributed and handed over to what is being interpreted and at the same remain a simple word.

Handing over this word to the one who is being interpreted is a paradoxical gift: Paul interpretatively bestows interpretive power on what has been interpreted, and from which he believes to have received it, so that the listeners can see the wiser wisdom at work in Paul's speech of wisdom. This wager on the *Christus praesens* is and remains *open* and can only be won through the readers or listeners—but not on the basis of their strength or reason. It is a wager “à fond perdu,” or “in the open.” Because whoever would wish to decide the outcome of the wager with a word of power would already have lost.

If the interpreted one were to become really present in the interpretation as interpretation, it would “in-deed” (or more precisely “im-passionately”) be a persistent paradox. It is vexing to say it, but as Paul brings up “foolishness” more and more forcefully, this “word-event” (*Wortereignis*) is threatened, more than it is presented, by Paul in the race for the wiser wisdom. He switches directions, back and forth, and must show the others, who continue to run,

that *they*, not him, are running in the wrong direction. To do that, only a word of power can help, namely an apostolic rhetoric of authorization *pro domo*, and at the same time a polemical rhetoric of disempowerment that targets the opponents. The economy of this rhetoric is well known: universalization of inclusion (cf. Badiou), accompanied simultaneously by the production of the absolute remnant (cf. Agamben). To put it more simply: inclusion through exclusion, and exclusion through inclusion, carrying the dangerous outcome of an apocalyptic dualization, in which whoever is not with us is against us. God and world stand *against* each other, just as the apostle and his opponents until the world becomes dualized as inimical. John is known to have chosen a path of that kind, until the proto-Gnostics in the Johannine community took it too far. Such *dualizing* is not very wise, theologically as well as rhetorically, for it not only produces more problems than it seems to solve. It also undermines the role of apostolic rhetoric, which amounts to being a mediator, not an inquisitor.

Seizure of Interpretive Power: Escape Into the Apostolic Office

One consequence of this rhetorical escalation is the subsequent institutional policy of the apostolic office: the hardening of the powerful word as word of power and furthermore as institutional power, which can do without any semantic. The office serves to secure the charisma all the way until the extreme, late-Augustinian thesis according to which the institution as well as the office guarantee salvation without the need of charisma. The risk of such a development is that form may exist without spirit.

But Paul is still far from that. What is being “invented” here is only the basic contours of the later development (it functions at

least retrospectively as etiology of the office). Phenomenologically, it would be called the "primal foundation" (*Urstiftung*). At the powerful word's limit, the word of power appears reasonable to the apostle. At the crossroads between the powerful word and the word of power, the "interpretive community" could obviously not resist the temptation to ground the power of the word on a "higher authority," with an absolute, ultimate justification: apostolicity. The "apostle Paul" thus became a "fictional character" (*Kunstfigur*), a product of rhetorical technique, in order to produce always-more interpretive power through what appears as a self-interpretation of power.

The person of "the apostle" is thus portrayed as the "chosen one," miraculously "called" to his office—and who since then pursues an independent existence with regard to interpretive power. To be clear: first, this does not concern the historical Saul named Paul; second, it concerns the biblical, canonical Paul, who is taken as rule of the symbolic order of the canon in the canon—and who thus becomes the "center of Scripture." Third, as a consequence of all that, a "more" is made out to be Scripture, namely an imaginary Paul, the apostle as meta-historical fictional character who, in the historical reception, evolved from proclaimer to proclaimed: from missional preacher to *norma normans* (*non normata?*) of all preaching, and so not only to the object of preaching but, fourth, *per impossibile*, to the apostolic deployment of any preaching that may appear as wisdom of God.

How did it come to this? And which "textual signposts" (*Textsignale*) provide that possibility? The preacher in the midst of a crisis claims a charisma that obviously has *not* been recognized self-evidently and indisputably. And so his interpretive power is *not* established; in the midst of conflict it is available to others who seek to grasp it. That, in itself, is a precarious position: *Ecce apostolos*. The interpretive power, which is not being accrued "from below," has

to be *built up*. In the case of a conflict, the assertion of this claim *may* use the opposite of charisma, namely total power of one's office through an external commissioning as a pneumatological para-theory for the sake of seizing interpretive power. The claim with regard to the powerful word shifts to the word of power; it shifts to the office as a function of the charisma, with the exclusiveness and singularity of the office.

Later on, in 2 Corinthians, in the rhetorical contest with the opponents, the argumentation goes down a slippery slope, as the claims for recognition escalate: "my credentials should have come from you. In nothing did I prove inferior to those super-apostles, even if I am a nobody. The signs of an apostle were there in the work I did among you, marked by unfailing endurance, by signs, portents, and miracles" (2 Cor. 12:11b-12, REB). This sounds like the apostolic Olympic games: higher, faster, stronger—more whole, complete, and wiser. This should perhaps not be heard without a certain irony. As it sounds like a competition of salvation, which always yearns for more—and therefore produces its own shortage.

Is it really still *God's* foolishness, *God's* wiser wisdom, which is expressed and asserted? What happens in such a competition of interpretive power? To be able to produce power from words, just like sparks and fire from stones, is a wondrous dimension of interpretive power. That pretension characterizes each word. But that it also "ignites," this is only conceivable with the kindling of the listeners. And in order not to leave it to them alone, a pneumatological reserve occurs here. Interpretive power that really ignites is effectively "*acheiropoietic*"; it is never made by hands of man: it is due to God's Word, not to any human word.

But this claim to interpretive power, too, can only be rendered effective through ratification on the side of the addressees. And apparently Paul failed to achieve this in Corinth. In the course of

time the community disappeared, as if it had been shattered and been destroyed. The decisive ratification happened later, and all the more powerfully. The imaginary fictional character of the apostle became—not without imaginary exuberance—the canonical model for validity beyond its historical and rhetorical genesis. The rhetorical production of the apostolic word had to be erased from memory so that its validity, detached from its genesis, would always endure. The divine genesis of the apostolate as ground of validity of the institutional word of power replaced the rhetorical genesis of his powerful word.

Interpretive Power as Power of Truth?

Paul—here, the apostolically authorized text—finds himself in an *aporia* that can be explicated with the theory of interpretive power: with the simple difference between “saying something” and “really having something to say,” thus between a word of power and a powerful word.

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. Whoever claims more than really having something to say ruins everything. Conversely, whoever has the say *qua* office does not really have something to say, exactly *because* he has the say. There is relief and reassurance in that but also, at the same time, an escalation and a capitulation in the contest over interpretive power.

The official constitution of the office in the third century might have occurred against Gnosticism, but the model was invented with Paul's apostolic office in the first century, an “institution” that was named as such only by the subsequent institution. What remains appears as constitution theory of the office by virtue of the

authorization theory. The Protestant thesis, as is well known, is *not* defined via the institution and the office as a historical succession in the office; apostolic succession is a succession of “teaching,” thus the argumentatively plausible powerful word. And so “what is apostolic” must be identifiable without participating in the authorization theory and claiming it “for oneself.”

The text's interpretive power (in the sense of its own momentum of interpretation, of what it really has to say) has reasons relating to the history of effects and the history of reception: in the institutionalization of the office with its etiology via the apostolic office, in the reception of Paul by Augustine, and in Luther's way of emphasizing the *theologia crucis*. Thus, the “incorporation” of the text by the ecclesial institutions (tradition, hierarchy, teaching office, theology) is an empowerment *ex post*. A question that creeps up in this history of empowerment would be the one regarding the inherent power of Paul's interpretation—in other words, regarding its argumentative power, textual form, rhetorical plausibility, performance, and, not least, its truth.

The biggest temptation, however, would be to treat the question of interpretive power as a Gordian knot, attempting to deny interpretation and power, and considering the question of truth without taking into account interpretive power. Then the incredibly simple answer would be: it is the truth that authorizes the text. It is powerful (it became and remained so) because the text is true. But who determines that? Is this being claimed or attested? And when, where, for whom? Had this to be claimed for all times and places, one would be dealing with an analytically *necessary* truth, true in all possible worlds and at all times. This is certainly not the case, and it would mistake the word of the cross for a plus and minus. It would also not correspond to the contingency of the cross (which is neither “randomness,” nor “necessity,” nor “even more than necessity”).²⁰

To decide the question of interpretive power in such a "Gordian" fashion would let "truth" (in the place of science and exegesis or dogmatics) to take the place of God and function as God's pseudonym (or as metonymy). One would follow the same (?) model of empowerment. God's power creates the apostle—God's truth verifies his interpretation—and the power of his truth legitimizes this interpretation: a powerful word legitimized by a word of power. Similarly, this would mean *etsi Deus non daretur*: the power of truth authorizes the interpretation. That is as beautiful as it is plain, and reassuringly simple.

What is complicated and disconcerting is that all these aspects can only be *relationally* (perspectively and diachronically) determined: as strength for, as power over, as truth for, and so forth. Power is continuously late in its effect; it is effective power *ex post*. A similar thing applies to truth. If power is not understood from its logic of origin and of operation as someone's (or as God's or the apostle's) attribute but *modally*, then the question has to do with what *enables and establishes* this power.

What would have to be called true is the kind of interpretive power (or powerful word) that enables what is *per se* impossible; that includes what could not be included; that forgives what cannot be forgiven, and the like. Truth is a "*folie de l'impossible*." To consider truth as "ready at hand" or as "real possibility" would leave truth underdetermined. Paul's wager has to do with truth being a real and effective impossibility, meaning that it establishes a new heaven and a new earth. But this claim is not simply "true or false," it is true when it becomes *effective* truth. This, however, cannot happen

20. Cf. Philipp Stoellger, "Die Vernunft der Kontingenz und die Kontingenz der Vernunft. Leibniz' theologische Kontingenzwahrung und Kontingenzsteigerung," in *Vernunft, Kontingenz und Gott. Konstellationen eines offenen Problems*, ed. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger (Tübingen: Mohr, 2000), 73–116.

independently of any interpretation. And so the shortcut about the question of truth leads back into the complexities of interpretation and the entanglement in questions of power. It is thus necessary to distinguish and see that interpretation is not all there is, even though everything is given only in, with and under interpretations. Analogously: even if truth is given and accessible only in, with and under interpretations. In order to orientate oneself in the conflicts over interpretive power, truth is a critical regulative. But to trace the power of an interpretation simply back to its truth would be phenomenally blind. And so the *question* of truth does not resolve the complexities that exist between interpretation and power (power with its conflicts).