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**A Story to Think With**  
**From Crucifixion to Metaphor**

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## **A Story to Think With: From Crucifixion to Metaphor**

Yesterday I described one aspect of that complex *interpretive* process by which Jesus becomes who he is. I focused on some of the ways the early followers of Jesus found in their scriptures images and patterns and stories with which they could make sense of Jesus. Most of those early interpreters are, for us, anonymous. But there is one whom we know rather well—though the more we know of him, the more puzzling he is—the apostle Paul.

One of the reasons Paul has been so puzzling is that we have tried so often to confine him in the straitjacket of the systematic theologian. Then we become upset about his apparent inconsistencies and self-contradictions. For the properly trained historical critic, Paul's use of scripture is particularly appalling. He rips verses out of their contexts and insists that they mean something they could not possibly have meant to their original audiences. Where scripture speaks clearly of the Torah, Paul announces without a wink that it is really talking about Christ. Where the prophet speaks of an Israel that has temporarily become a non-people by its disobedience but by God's grace will again become God's people, Paul tells us he was really talking about the gentiles to whom Paul has been preaching. There is no way Paul would ever pass a course in OT Interpretation at Candler.

Of course, we have also seen that the sect at Qumran were doing very similar things in interpreting scripture. In many ways, Paul was simply using the kinds of interpretive strategies typical of his time and place. Recognizing that fact is a starting point for looking afresh at what he is doing, but only a starting point. We cannot interpret scripture the way Paul did, but by seeing what he is doing in all its complexity, we do perhaps begin to suspect that there are other ways of thinking about scripture and using it in the church than those that have dominated modern theology. Today, however, I'm not going to focus on that side of Paul's interpretive activity. A lot has been written about that subject of late; I commend to you especially two excellent books, one by Dietrich-Alex Koch, the other by Richard Hays. I am going to focus rather on the way Paul uses the story of Jesus' death and resurrection to interpret life and the world. We will see

Paul not as a systematic theologian, but as a master of metaphor.

Trying to make Paul into a systematic theologian is a prime instance of that “Cartesian anxiety” that Ron Thiemann discerns behind much theology as well as much literary criticism today. Its hallmark is the assumption that a text must either be absolutely clear, with one univocal meaning, or it is absolutely indeterminate. The quest for the systematic single meaning represents one pole of that dilemma. The flip side is that “hermeneutical relativism” of the postmodern critic, which finds all narratives “unfollowable,” as Frank Kermode puts it. Neither one is realistic, and neither one will work on Paul. The really interesting narratives are the ones that engage us to follow them into complexity and paradox. If there are tensions and contradictions in such a narrative, it is because there are tensions and contradictions in this fallen world. The truth that such a narrative wants to tell us is not a single and uncomplicated doctrine, but a reality that always lies beyond our grasping. That’s the kind of narrative that Paul helped to construct. To do that, he became a master of metaphor.

In everyday speech “metaphor” gets a bad rap. Speaking at another university a few years ago, I said that Paul’s great contribution to emerging Christianity was to transform the cross of Jesus into a metaphor of almost unlimited extension. Immediately one of my esteemed colleagues objected. “The Cross for Paul is not a mere metaphor! It is a literal fact!” The giveaway in his response, of course, was the word “mere.” “*Mere* metaphor,” as if metaphor were always *less* than a literal description. My answer was, “Without metaphor, the Cross is just two timbers nailed together.”

### **The *Logos* of the Cross**

The word Λόγος in the Greek of antiquity was one of those wonderful chameleons of words, whose semantic range is so rich in possibilities. In rhetoric as in philosophy, it was a word to conjure with. NT scholars and theologians have written thousands of pages about the meaning of that first line in the Fourth Gospel, “In the beginning was the Λόγος.” The word could refer to everything from a speech, to a volume of a multivolume work (like the Gospel of Luke), to the

human capacity to reason, to that invisible, divine fluid that, for Stoics, was the rational structure of all reality. You can be sure that when Paul contrasts the *logos* of the Cross with human wisdom, at the beginning of his first extant letter to the Corinthians, he does not mean just talking about the cross. To that young congregation, hungry for rhetoric and status, squabbling among themselves over whose apostle had more buzz and who among themselves had greater spiritual gifts, Paul says:

As for me, when I came to you, brothers and sisters, it wasn't with an effusion of rhetoric or of wisdom that I came declaring to you the mystery of God. For I had decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ—and him crucified. (1 Cor 2:2–3)

There is another place in this letter where Paul reminds the new converts in Corinth of his first preaching to them, at the beginning of chapter 15. There he calls the message, as the earliest followers of Jesus habitually did, “the news,” τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, “the gospel,” and he sums it up with a tight formula that he specifically identifies as a tradition he gave to them “among the first things”:

Christ died for our sins  
according to the scriptures  
and he was buried  
and he was raised on the third day  
according to the scriptures  
and he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve ... (15:3–5)

That's the story. Not very elaborate, when reduced to its bare essentials as in this formula, but the plot is direct, shocking, and powerful. Paul could cite a more developed version of it, in that chant we noted in my first lecture:

Hymn the anointed Jesus,  
who had the very shape of God  
but did not count it windfall  
to be God's equal,

but emptied himself,  
taking shape of slave:  
becoming of human likeness  
and found in human guise,  
he humbled himself—  
obedient to point of death:  
yes, of the cross's death.

Therefore God has raised him high,  
conferred on him the name  
that's higher than every name,  
so at the name of Jesus  
every knee must bend:  
heavenly and earthly and infernal all,  
and every tongue must loudly own  
the Lord is Jesus Christ,  
to the glory of Father God. (Phil 2:6–11)

How much of the narrative of the Passion, as we know it from the later Gospels, did Paul know and how much of it did he recite to the congregations he founded? Certainly more than these summaries. In his reminder of the Last Supper, he mentions “the night in which [Jesus] was betrayed” (1 Cor 11:23), so the Christians in Corinth must have known a sequential narrative of some extent. Most often, however, a single phrase is enough in Paul's arguments to remind his audience of the “*logos* of the Cross.” To the Thessalonians, how “you turned from idols to serve the living God and to await God's son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who saves us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:11f). Even briefer, “We believe that Jesus died and rose” (4:14). To the Galatians, how “before your eyes Jesus Christ was portrayed as crucified” (Gal 3:1). What is significant is how pervasive these phrases are in all parts of Paul's writing, and

how central they are to his vision of the form of life that the believers in Messiah Jesus ought to inhabit. Let's look at a few examples.

### **Living Joyfully in a Nasty World**

We begin with Paul's earliest letter that has come down to us—indeed the oldest Christian document of any kind that we can be sure of—the first Letter to the Thessalonians. Unlike most of the later letters, this one does not respond to a specific crisis. It is a letter of friendship. Like many letters to friends, it includes a note of consolation, a good bit of advice, some warnings, and a lot of reminders of things said and done between the friends when they were together. More than half of the letter recounts their first meeting, the things that have happened since, and Paul's own thoughts and feelings about them. Paul says that he has been worried about them since he left, wondering how their faith has stood up under the social tensions that inevitably follow from conversion to a cult. Eventually, when, as he says, “I couldn't stand it any longer,” he has sent Timothy to check on them. In the letter, when Paul recalls Timothy's return and his happy report about the Thessalonians, he uses the verb that elsewhere we translate, “to preach the gospel”—*εὐαγγελίζεσθαι*. “But now Timothy has just returned from his visit to you, bringing good news of your faith and love. He tells us that you always think kindly of us, and are as anxious to see us as we are to see you. So amid all our difficulties and hardships we are reassured, my friends, by the news of your faith.” (3:6–7, REB) It was “the good news,” “our gospel” as Paul says earlier (1:5), that created this friendship. And the flourishing of this friendship is good news, too. Paul uses the noun six times in this short letter. And now he seems to be saying that this peculiar friendship itself, with all its anxieties as well as its reliefs and joys, is part of that good news, that gospel.

It has a shape to it, this gospel. There is a recurring antinomy in Paul's account of his preaching it and their receiving it and the life in fellowship that follows: “And you became imitators both of us and of the Lord,” says Paul, “as you received the *logos* in much affliction, with joy of the holy spirit” (1:6). *Θλίψις* and *χαρά*—affliction and joy. He had sent Timothy to

them, he says further on, because he was concerned lest the affliction had been too much for them. And Timothy was to remind them of what he had told them from the beginning: “that we are destined to be afflicted” (3:3–4). We’ll not take time this evening to debate just what kind of “affliction” the Thessalonians had experienced. The NRSV translates “persecution,” but that is clearly an overtranslation, and I don’t see anything in the letter that requires us to think of some kind of pogrom against the Christian group in Thessaloniki. What we do see, in 2:14, is that they have suffered at the hands of their συμφολέται, their own kinsfolk or extended “tribe.” And that is just what we would have expected. Whenever some members of a kinship group are converted to a foreign cult, typically their people become upset and may shun or attack them.

Whatever the extent of the suffering, it is the model Paul gives them for thinking about it that interests us. He defines their experience by setting it into a chain of imitation: in receiving the *logos* of the cross “with much affliction and with joy,” they became imitators of Paul himself and of the Lord. Paul says a few words about his own afflictions: it was after having suffered and being assaulted in Philippi that he came to Thessaloniki in the first place, but nevertheless by God he was given the bold speech that enabled him to speak to them “the gospel of God” (2:1–2). The subsequent stress they endured from their kinsfolk also made the Thessalonian converts imitators of the congregations in Judaea (2:14). And in turn, they became a model, a τύπος, for “all the [new] believers in Macedonia and in Achaëa” (1:7). Joy as a gift, in the midst of the suffering that inevitably comes to those who are enabled by faith to look directly into the face of the fallen world: that is the *logos* of the cross.

So is Paul’s gospel after all just a variation on themes of sado-masochism? No. Neither Paul nor the converts in Thessaloniki went looking for suffering; it happened because they exercised παρρησία, boldness of speech in a world that resists truth in all its forms. The joy they were given by the spirit had nothing to do with the pleasure, if that’s what it is, of watching eyes gouged out and flesh flayed by whips. The *logos* of the cross is the rationality of the God who raised Jesus from the dead. It is the cross of the one who is *resurrected* that becomes the metaphor of life in the world.

## The Old is Dead; Freedom Lives

The language of imitation that Paul uses in 1 Thessalonians is dangerous. It tempts us to think that *we* do the imitating, that we can be like Jesus, and, if we are, God will take care of us and life will be just wonderful. It tempts us to think that the moral life can be summed up by such simple nostrums as, “What would Jesus do?” It tempts us to think that, if we take the pain, we’ll get the gain. Paul, most emphatically, did not want to say that. The point he was making to the Thessalonians was that being like Jesus, being like Paul, being like the congregations in Judaea in discovering joy in the midst of stress was not an accomplishment—it was a gift.

Later, when Paul wrote to the congregations in Galatia, he faced a crisis in those churches, which revolved, as he saw it, precisely around the question, What must *we do* to be right with God? After Paul had left Galatia, some other apostles had come into those remote towns in Anatolia’s central highlands to finish, as they said, the job he had started. All well and good, they said, that these gentiles should now accept Jesus as Messiah, that, as a result of God’s exceptional grace, these gentiles should be incorporated into the people of God. They had taken the first step; God’s spirit had manifested God’s approval. Now they must complete their conversion: every male among them must be circumcised. It’s the law. That’s not our rule, it’s God’s rule. It’s in the book.

Paul says, I know all about the book. I was a specialist. I know all about the law and the traditions and the rules and the righteous judgment against all those who don’t keep them: I was a zealot. But something happened. Now “Neither circumcision nor a whole foreskin is anything: there is a new creation.” Yes, a new creation, which Paul did not find or make, but which *happened* to him, because “through [Jesus Christ] the world was crucified to me and I to the world” (Gal 6:14–15). Extravagant language, but not careless. Paul is being quite deliberate, repeating here in his hand-written summary at the end of the letter a slightly different formulation that was a key to his argument earlier. There he had said:

For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. In Christ’s crucifixion I

was crucified. I live—but no longer *I*; rather Christ lives in me. The life I now live in flesh I live by the faith of God’s son, who loved me and gave himself up for me.” (2:19–20)

Paul, we would say, had a traumatic experience. Paul, we would say, was “born again.” But it is not his experience that he is talking about. It is not his experience that the Thessalonian converts have imitated. After centuries of our modern subjectivism and individualism, immersed as we have been in sweet Pietism, heirs as we are to the Great Awakening and the tent meetings and the revival preachers and their commercial successors the televangelists, it is hard for us to hear what Paul is saying. Of course he was changed. Of course his life turned 180°. But those are merely symptoms of the real change: Paul’s change is only a response to his discovery that the world has changed. There is a new creation. And that new creation was made by God through the dying and rising again of his son, the Messiah. In that new creation, the rules God himself had given, the traditions for which Paul was zealous to the point of persecuting all who did not keep them, the very Book of God meant something quite new. The same Book of God that said, “Every male among you must be circumcised,” also said “A curse of God is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” The notion of a crucified Messiah was absurd. The crucified was a curse, and either one must with all one’s zeal try to stamp out that crazy idea, or one must acknowledge that God himself has rewritten the rules of his own Book. The absurd story of the crucified Messiah becomes for Paul the wedge by which the utterly New is driven into our world.

### **God’s Foolishness in a Winner-take-all World**

In Corinth the converts to Paul’s gospel had taken to the *novelty* that he preached with some enthusiasm. They were filled with the spirit. They prophesied. They received revelations. They worked miracles. They spoke in tongues. They sang new songs. Their weekly meetings were pretty noisy affairs, as Paul describes them. Not everyone, of course, was pleased. The householders in whose homes these meetings were taking place, for example, may not have been completely happy when their slaves started declaring new revelations and even *women* had the

audacity to prophesy. The normal hierarchy of the social order was being upset. At the meetings for the Lord's Supper, some of those normal distinctions of rank were reinforced by the hosts, and the resultant tensions were not pretty. The breakdown of Family Values threatened. Some were even saying that really spiritual people should live together without sex, while others said, "No, no, everything is allowed now—after all we're *spiritual* and sex only has to do with bodies: 'Food's for the belly and the belly for food, and God will destroy both.'" Some, the better off among them, kept up their social obligations by accepting invitations to dine in the temples of the numerous gods of Corinth; others were horrified: "That's idolatry!" they said. "Nonsense," said the temple-goers, "don't you *know* anything? Didn't you hear what Paul said? The news is, these gods aren't even real; we can do anything we want." To make matters worse, some people even objected to asking Paul's advice. They had met Apollos in the meantime, and *he* had charisma! What a speaker! What wisdom! They chose up sides: "I'm Apollos' man." "I'm Paul's." "Well, Cephas for me!" It was a mess.

In response, Paul wrote another letter to them. The first one, which has gone lost, was not very successful in straightening things out—they wilfully misunderstood it and the divisions only got worse. So Paul wrote the long, carefully crafted letter we call 1 Corinthians. As Margaret Mitchell has shown (not Atlanta's Margaret Mitchell—the other one), he adopts the tried and true rhetorical model of the speech for civic harmony. Harmony: central value of ancient Greek city life. The main square in Athens today, you know, is called "Omonoia Square," "Harmony Square," "Place de la Concorde." That's the word the ancient orators used for that proper order of things in the *polis*, when all the citizens and slaves knew where they belonged, all classes knew their place, those who naturally ruled and those who were naturally ruled. Like a body in which none of the organs was jealous of the others. Paul made his letter on that model; he even used some of the clichés, like that thing about the body. But something was different; and what a difference.

The motive that drove Greek and Roman society was *philotimia*, "ambition," literally "love of honor." It was a very stratified society, and honor went with status. Honor was public. Rich

people gave money for public works and in return they got big inscriptions on the buildings they paid for or the courtyards they paved and, sometimes, even a statue in a public place. They got elected to office, and they made more donations in return, and got more honor. Corinth was a little different from most of the older cities. It had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE and lay desolate for a century before Julius Caesar refounded it as a Roman colony. We are told that many of the new colonists were freedmen—former slaves or children of slaves—and we can see in the surviving inscriptions how they rushed to assert themselves in this rare situation lacking the usual aristocracy above them. They made money and gave it away for big public buildings and placarded their names on them. One of them got promoted to one of the four highest offices of the colony, *aedile*. In return, he paved the plaza in front of the Theatre. His name was Érastos, and he was probably the same Erastos who, as treasurer of the city earlier, was one of the converts Paul was writing to.

The point is, status was really important to the people who belonged to the little house churches of Jesus-followers in Corinth. And some of them, ordinary folks by the usual standards, had found in that *new thing* that Paul preached a new way of getting status—at least within the Jesus cult itself. They had the Spirit—and of course some had more Spirit than others. “My *charisma* is better than your charisma. *I can speak in tongues!*” “Your patron is Erastos? or Chloe? Well, mine is Paul.” “But mine is Apollos.” “*Mine is Jesus!*” No wonder Paul was exasperated; no wonder he resorted to sarcasm. “Look at your calling, brothers and sisters! Not many were wise according to flesh; not many big shots; not many of the aristocracy. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, the weak things of the world God chose, to shame the powerful. God chose the vulgar things of the world and those despised, the nothings, in order to take down the somethings.” (1 Cor 1:26-28)

The Corinthian Christians had understood that the gospel was about something new. They understood that that newness affected the very way they lived their lives, that it mattered in the houses and workshops, the streets and temples and the agora of Corinth. It mattered in

relationships; it mattered in status; it mattered in the longing for honor. Paul doesn't want to take any of that newness away from them. But their vision of the new is not yet new enough. They are taking the glory of the gospel as a way to get ahead in the old, winner-take-all world. What Paul wants them to see is that there is another world, a new creation. In that new world, the winner is the one who was crucified, who is glorious in his humility, who triumphs only in order to hand his kingdom finally over to God.

Not only do they have things to learn—especially those among them who are so proud of their spirit-given *gnōsis*, their “knowledge” and their “wisdom”—Paul is learning things, too, as he wrestles with their misunderstandings. He, too, is still living in the old world, as everyone of us must do. He is using all the tools he knows of Greek language and rhetoric and philosophy to put into words that new thing that has happened in this old world.

We see a sign of Paul's own struggle in that exasperated topic sentence with which he introduces the theme of the letter: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing and that there not be schisms among you, that you be established in the same thought and the same opinion!” Now wouldn't that be wonderful! Everyone saying the same thing and everybody having the same opinion! Harmony indeed. Do I hear some of you pastors silently echoing Paul? Don't you just wish your congregations could be like that, always agreeing, never a dissenting voice? No, you really don't wish that, and neither did Paul! Take, for example, the matter of the meat sacrificed to idols, which occupies chapters 8-10 of the letter. Everyone who reads this part of the letter honestly is likely to conclude that Paul couldn't make up his own mind. First he agrees with the Knowing Ones, that, of course, none of those images in the temples are real gods. Then he sides with the ones they call “weak.” Idols may not be real, but demons are, and you can't eat at both God's table and the table of demons. Then to the smart folks, Yes, everything is now allowed. You have authority to eat or not to eat. But not everything builds up the community. Talk about authority, he says, look at the authority I have as an apostle to collect a salary and travel expenses—I'd rather die than *use* that authority, because it is in *giving up* that authority, slaving away with my hands, that I show

my freedom. Yes, free from everyone, I became everybody's slave (as the ancients said of the demagogue!) in order to win over multitudes. Then he turns again and backs up the "weak" Christians' attack on idolatry by quoting the key passage on idolatry from the Torah and giving them a little midrash on it. Only at the end to agree with the Knowing Ones that you can eat anything that's sold in the meatmarket, and backing *that* with a proof-text as well.

What is going on? Far from making everyone say the same thing, Paul has helped both sides speak up more clearly—especially those "weak" who, we may guess, were a lot less articulate than those who prided themselves on wisdom and knowledge. And he adds to the conversation a number of other voices as well: the voice of scripture, the voice of tradition, the voice of convention, the voice of the community's own experience. But most of all, the strong voice of that central narrative that he called the good news, the *logos* of the cross. So we are not surprised that, at the end of his complex but masterful orchestrating of their many-voiced argument, he comes back to the motif that was so prominent in 1 Thessalonians: "Become imitators of me, as I myself am of Christ" (11:1).

## Conclusion

The *logos* of the cross, for Paul, means more than just talking about Jesus' crucifixion. It means that, for those who have been seized by "the faith of Jesus Christ," the very logic of reality has changed. It is a new creation. That change can be expressed only by indirection, by metaphor.

The pivotal story for Paul was simple and astounding: God's son and anointed one was the very Jesus who was most shamefully crucified, dead, and buried, but whom God then raised from the dead, exalted to share his own throne and very name in heaven, to sit at God's right hand as Lord until all things would be subjected to him and God alone would reign in righteousness over all his people and creation. The drama of Paul's career turns on his recognition that that story shattered and recreated his own conception of a life lived in obedience of God's will. For him it equally shattered and recreated—but preserved!—Israel's fundamental reason for existing in the

world as God's people. When Paul writes to the various communities that he founded, it is invariably to suggest, cajole, argue, threaten, shame, and encourage those communities into behaving, in their very specific situations, in ways somehow homologous to that fundamental story. In the process, Paul uses older stories and older rules, maxims, customs, and moral commonplaces to interpret the Christ-story—but simultaneously uses the Christ-story to transform those older stories, rules, maxims, customs, and commonplaces. That led to a certain polyphony in Paul's discourse: he lets many voices speak, and through that “dialogic imagination,” to use Bakhtin's phrase, brings the master metaphor to bear on life.

Paul's most profound bequest to subsequent Christian discourse was his transformation of that reported event into a multipurpose metaphor with vast generative and transformative power. Above all he saw revolutionary import for the relationships of power that, in every society, control human relationships. He works out this import not in a social theory but in his response to specific crises of leadership and dangers of schism within the Christian house-communities, especially at Corinth. If God's power is manifested in the weakness of the Cross, and God's wisdom in the foolish claim that the crucified was the Messiah, then it is no longer obvious that the highborn, wealthy, well-educated, rhetorically sophisticated should always have their way, while those who are socially “nothing,” those who are “weak,” the women, the slaves, the poor, the uneducated are simply to obey. To underscore the point, Paul hints at the story of his own life since his conversion, which God has made to conform to the story of the cross, forcing him to live by hope of the resurrection. “For I think,” he says, “God has publicly displayed us apostles as the last, as people under death sentences, as a theatrical spectacle to the world of both angels and humans. We are fools for Christ's sake; you are clever in Christ. We are weak; you are strong. You are glorious; we are dishonored” (1 Cor 4:9-10). Yet he makes it plain that he is not talking about a simple inversion of values. Those who have no status or prestige in the households and assemblies of Corinth but only the ecstatic power given by the spirit of God may nevertheless also be guilty of being “inflated” by their own pseudo-knowledge and windy, tongue-speaking power. Thus Paul's use of the metaphor of the Cross resists its translation into simple slogans. Instead he

introduces into the moral language of the new movement a way of seeking after resonances in the basic story for all kinds of relationships of disciples with the world and with one another, so that the event-become-metaphor could become the generative center of almost endless new narratives, yet remain a check and control over those narratives.

If Paul is right, then the task of Christians to figure out what it is that God is calling us to do at a particular time and in a particular situation is not a simple one. On next Wednesday we'll take a look at the claim that all the answers are in the Book, that "The Bible clearly teaches" all the things we need to know.