Requisitioned by the Word for the Word

In the first of his recent collection of wonderful “sermons from Oxford,” The Word in Small Boats, Oliver O’Donovan introduces the organizing metaphor for the volume with a characteristic creativity and craft. The word in question is, most simply, the apostolic one of Acts 2:42, “the apostles’ teaching,” which is “the universal word of the apostolic gospel . . . common to all believers in all times and places.”

“The word of God is not chained,” writes St. Paul from prison (2 Tim. 2:9); rather, it and its ministers are always on the move, forming a network of “local communities, each giving concrete and enduring witness in its one place to the power of the gospel to give life in all places.” The word thus “travels in small boats,” namely, “the thought and speech of human beings.” And because “few vessels are less capacious than the mind of a single person, . . . the word requisitions many of them rather than relying on one or two big preachers.”

O’Donovan is speaking primarily of the church’s ordained ministers who are, in a special way, “set aside for this ministry” of navigating the word on the world’s waters by their own speaking. His subsequent description of “fitting out” the vessel in each case could, however, just as well apply to the proper preparations undertaken by theologians—and all teachers, including the church’s priests and bishops—who would wish, or otherwise are called, to undertake the equipping of the Christian community in the twenty-first century, as in other centuries. Certain measures cannot be skirted if the craft in question is to be

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made seaworthy. Among the needed measures, O’Donovan lists the following:

a discipline of living constantly with, and out of, the text of Holy Scripture; a discipline of bending the mind to the question, of focusing the point of intersection where Scripture sheds its light upon our living concerns; a discipline of patient dialectic and argument, teasing out each aspect of a question carefully and justly, for difficulties lying unresolved in the hold will make the boat list and divert it from its straight course; a discipline of studying the journeys Christian preachers have made before them, learning of shoals and currents; a discipline of speech, carefully clothing the Word with our words, not saying the first thing that comes into our head, riding the dangerous current of rhetorical fashion or polite observation, but searching and wrestling to find the apt word, the fitting word, the word that glorifies and adorns the Word of God itself.2

I’d like to take the foregoing as an initial methodological supposition for a proper framing of the question of theological priorities for our day—not as an abstractly “universal” scheme (perhaps uncontroversial so far as it goes, but on that count not especially interesting), but as an encouragement to a well-articulated engagement of the particulars we are called to here and now, even as Anglican Christians amid a larger divine economy. In this way, I recognize the inseparability, and simultaneity, of what O’Donovan calls the “twofold service that supports the church,” based on the description of Acts 2:42, the service of tables and the service of the word. As he writes: “The inward horizon of charity links us in neighborhood and mutual service; the outward horizon of proclamation reaches to the ends of the earth.” And each in its way must be both local and universal, as “the intensive care of the gathering community” maps onto, and helps to shape, a larger, specifiable pattern in Christ, while “the extensive outreach of missionary communication,” as communicative, drives the minister of the word back to particular persons and places and problems, however recurring or capable of generalization.3

2 O’Donovan, Word in Small Boats, 4.
3 O’Donovan, Word in Small Boats, 2.
No better instance of convergence of the “inward” and the “outward” may be found in the New Testament than St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, where the crisis of communal dysfunction is placed at the feet of a universal word in order to describe the concrete form of love, ready to hand and practicable. Read in this way, St. Paul’s theological articulation and situation of the Corinthian church provides a divinely revealed “story” not only for the Anglican family but for “the universal Church wherein all have died,” as Archbishop Ramsey keenly observed at the end of The Gospel and the Catholic Church. Here, in the apostolic word addressed to a disheveled Corinth, we find an utterly unsentimental agenda and itinerary for reconciliation in Christ, in his death and resurrection in which the church’s holiness consists. Thus the Corinthian experience becomes a pattern for all subsequent Christian ecclesiology: we are all Corinthians, and called to be so, especially as Paul places sacramental problems and solutions at the center of the text, more than in any other of his letters (as baptism, marriage, and Eucharist are taken up successively and interrelated).

In what follows, I can only present the outline of an appropriation of 1 Corinthians for contemporary ecclesial purposes. Heeding O’Donovan’s injunction to study the journeys other Christian preachers have made with the word, my interpretation of the text follows, in part, Thomas Aquinas, the celebrated saint of the Order of Preachers. I admit, however, that my presentation of Thomas is itself a “reading” influenced by prior formation in ecumenical theology, which enjoins a wrestling with the res and signa of sacraments among divided Christians and a return to the source texts of the faith for guidance in resolving various problems (several of which I pose, at least, in the final section of the present paper). On this score, I have found no better

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guide than 1 Corinthians, which Wayne Meeks describes as “the richest example of Christian parenesis [i.e., moral exhortation] that survives from the first century.”

First Corinthians anticipates—historically, by its date of composition, and canonically, by its ordering in the Pauline corpus—the well-known grammar of humility of Philippians by putting it into practice, showing us what it looks like. The kenotic hymn of Philippians 2 glosses Paul’s exhortation several verses prior to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3), humility being the effective form of “encouragement in Christ,” “consolation from love,” “sharing in the Spirit,” and “compassion and sympathy” (2:1). 1 Corinthians sustains and enjoints this same pattern of argument in order to change the way that the faithful, wracked by division, think and speak and therefore live. And it is vital to see that, in both cases, the function of Christian language follows its form in Christ, the one identified elsewhere in Scripture and in the subsequent tradition as Word of God—the first speaker, in creation and Incarnation.

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1 Cor. 1:1), that is, confronted and summoned—requisitioned—by Christ, “in the Hebrew language,” as Luke reports: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” “Who are you, Lord?” And “the Lord answered, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’” (Acts 26:14–15). “But get up and stand on your feet,” continued the Lord, “for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify” (26:16). Here therefore is Paul’s testimony, at the start of 1 Corinthians as elsewhere: the credential of the call from God in Christ the suffering Word, reviewed by the apostle as an emblematic reminder of the conversation that, pray God, has likewise claimed the hearts and minds and tongues of the Corinthians. For they too were summoned into a universal community of “sanctified” speech “in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2; see 1:9). In this way, Paul’s “thanksgiving” for the “communion”—koinonia—of Corinth centers on a circularity of conversation, initiated by God’s call in Christ and imitated by the saints in their “speech and

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6 Meeks, Moral World, 130.
7 See further suggestions in my column “Function Follows Form,” The Living Church 239, no. 23 (2009): 14.
knowledge of every kind,” as themselves a “testimony of Christ” (1:4–6, 9). “Lord, open our lips / And our mouth shall proclaim your praise,” in a polyphony of speakers and homophony of language, at once divine and human.8

All of which frames the presenting problem and anticipates its solution. For the communion of “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” in Corinth has been divided by verbal dissonance, that is, a lack of harmonious “mind” and “purpose” amid a quarreling cacophony of proud parties (1 Cor. 1:10; see 1:11–12). We know, however, that the crucified Christ cannot be divided, and Paul proves the point with reference to baptism, by which the Corinthian faithful already pledged their troth in the name of Christ (see 1:13). In this sacrament they subjected the rebelliousness of false witnesses to a symbolic death: “I renounce them,” and clung instead to a covenant of codified belief and binding promise: “I will, with God’s help.”9 Thus, Paul concludes, “the cross of Christ” and its “word,” “the power of God” (1:17–18), stands as the singular criterion of Christian truth against which all divided witness, lies, and misinformation must be measured and contradicted.

Non-repeatable but perpetually defining and refining, baptism serves as the continuing education curriculum for the fullness of Corinthian/Christian communion, the school of pride’s humiliation by which human wisdom is transformed into divine foolishness, or vice versa. Here is the beginning (not the end) of wisdom, the cornerstone of truthful speech, upon which the whole of “the gospel” is built: “Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23–24; see 1:17).

And here, too, is the commissioning word for the remainder of 1 Corinthians, according to which “the mind of Christ” may be measured and finally fulfilled (1 Cor. 2:16). Thus the baptismal lesson of 1 Corinthians I sets up a full-blown course of instruction that is the

8 For a fuller explanation of word in Christian theology around a christological center, see Christopher Wells, “The Word and Literalism,” The Living Church 242, no. 3 (2011): 23. Compare Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 91, 153–155; and Anthony C. Thiselton, 1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 36: “God-given speech is primarily speech from God rather than merely speech about God; and, we may add, it also includes Spirit-prompted speech to God, of which many of the Psalms offer a model.”

sustainedly sacramental remainder of the letter, according to which Paul will unfold an argument to communion, the way of communion. Near the end (chapters 10–11) comes the most intensive treatment of the Eucharist in all his correspondence, a final crucible of communicative restraint. Given the gravity of this final test, chapters 1–9 serve as preparatory exercises in the formation of virtue, without which the Corinthian Christians cannot hope to claim the prize of unity in diversity—truly one body with many members, the perfection of love (chapters 12–13).10

Testing the Reading: Thomas Aquinas on 1 Corinthians 1–3

Before advancing to later chapters of 1 Corinthians, it will pay to test the foregoing, and fill it out, in an idiom that may seem foreign for its infrequent use in modern theology and religious studies: synthetic reading of Scripture by placing the whole within the parts. According to this older style, the “story” of 1 Corinthians may be constructed with the generous use of non-Corinthian, including non-Pauline, material. Of course, lectionaries lead preachers to do this all the time; and the notion that all of Scripture “echoes” with a sustained intertextuality seems clear enough simply on text-critical grounds, however amplified by the rule of faith.11 It should go without saying that allowing such a style to inform our reflection is not the same as suggesting that our only or principal task is “honorific imitation of the great forms and virtues of the past that stand out as heroic and are invested with a kind of monumentality.”12 Surely mastery of these forms and virtues remains necessary, however, particularly as we find our forbears bent

10 See Thiselton, 1 Corinthians, 26: “Paul sets everything in the light of the cross and of a crucified Christ. . . . Although some writers have suggested the contrary, the unity and integrity of the epistle is inescapable. It fits together as a single, coherent exposition of God’s grace and the centrality of the cross and the resurrection. Throughout the epistle love is a unifying theme. Love builds (8:1).”


over the same Scriptures, striving to make sense of their “use in Christian worship and life.”

Aquinas introduces his commentary on 1 Corinthians with an epigraph from Wisdom: “I will hide no secrets (sacramenta) from you” (Wis. 6:22), which he takes to indicate the sacramental form that knowledge of God’s truth takes in the created economy. The seven sacraments are “signs of a sacred thing, in the sense of being its image and cause,” and so are “secret” vehicles for the work of divine power, as Augustine says. And yet “these sacraments of God should not be concealed but laid bare to Christ’s faithful by their teachers and bishops,” on three counts: so that honor may redound to God, in the confession of his works (see Tob. 12:7); to the end of human salvation, since we “are purified by the sacraments and prepared for receiving the wages of justice”; and because “this is a duty of teachers and bishops,” as Paul testifies: “Though I am the very least of the saints, this grace was given to me, to make clear to all what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God” (Eph. 3:8). For all of these reasons, Thomas suggests, St. Paul fittingly takes the sacraments as his subject matter in 1 Corinthians.

Similar to the prologue and first article of his great Summa of theology, Thomas here emphasizes the urgent need by the faithful of knowledge of God’s saving revelation, borne by teachers in the church. Where there he only gestured at “experience of divine things,” however—also in a Corinthian key, with reference to the “spiritual

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14 Thomas Aquinas, Super Primam Epistolam ad Corinthios Lectura (hereafter In I Cor), prologue, in Super Epistolae S. Pauli Lectura, vol. 1, 8th edition, ed. Raphael Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1953). The commentary has not been published in an English translation. I follow (and occasionally adjust in light of the Latin) Fabian Larcher’s unpublished English translation, available online at http://dhspriory.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm. Since the commentary moves verse by verse through Paul’s letter (with several lectures on each chapter), it will be simplest, when quoting from the text, simply to cite the chapter and verse upon which Thomas is commenting and then the paragraph number (following Cai’s divisions, also followed by Larcher) from which the quotation is drawn. Hence “1:6, § 14” means 1 Corinthians 1:6 at the fourteenth paragraph.
15 Aquinas, In I Cor, prologue, § 1.
16 Aquinas, In I Cor, prologue, § 2.
17 Aquinas, In I Cor, prologue, § 2. See likewise the general prologue to the Pauline commentary, preceding the lectura on Romans (at § 11).
person” (1 Cor. 2:15)—here he specifies the primacy of the sacraments for human salvation, following Paul’s understanding of baptism and the Eucharist as means of sanctifying grace.\textsuperscript{18} “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus,” starts the apostle (1 Cor. 1:2), and Thomas adds: “in the faith, passion, and sacraments” of Christ, citing the similar but more specific 1 Corinthians 6:11: “You were washed, you have been sanctified,” and Hebrews 13:12: “Jesus suffered outside the gate, in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.”\textsuperscript{19} To be washed in Christ’s blood is to receive a “call to be saints,” as Paul says, that is, a call to join with all those “who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2) in a confession of “the true faith.”\textsuperscript{20}

For this reason, Christian sacramental experience and Christian doctrine share a passional character, the end of which is sanctification. Of course, God had already enriched the Corinthians “in Christ Jesus, in every way,” in “all speech and knowledge” (1 Cor. 1:4–5), “because they spoke in all manner of tongues or because they abounded in the utterance of doctrine,” notes Aquinas, and “because the word was not uttered properly unless it proceeded from . . . the understanding of all Scriptures and, in general, of all things pertaining to salvation.”\textsuperscript{21} But in the latter respect Paul placed a condition on Corinthian doctrine and knowledge, namely, that it would not be correct if it “disagreed with the testimony of Christ or if Christ’s testimony did not have a firm hold on their hearts by faith.”\textsuperscript{22} While Christ will surely “sustain you to the end” by grace (1 Cor. 1:8), therefore, this should be understood in the sense of 1 Peter 5:10: “After you have suffered a little while, he will restore, establish, and strengthen you.”\textsuperscript{23} Likewise, “God is faithful” and on this account “calls” us “into the fellowship of his Son” (1 Cor. 1:9)—to “walk in the light as he is in the light” (1 John

\textsuperscript{18} See Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologiae} I.1.6 ad 3: “The spiritual person judges all things’ (1 Cor. 2:15), and Dionysius says: ‘Hierotheus is taught not by mere learning, but by experience of divine things’ (\textit{non solum discens sed et patiens divina}).”

\textsuperscript{19} Aquinas, \textit{In I Cor} 1:2, § 7. See the elaborations at \textit{In I Cor} 3:17, § 175: “in Christ’s faithful is the holiness of grace, which they acquired at baptism” (quoting 1 Cor. 6:11) and \textit{In I Cor} 6:11, § 257: “by the power of Christ’s blood in baptism, as it says in Revelation 1:5: ‘He freed us from our sins in his blood.’”

\textsuperscript{20} Aquinas, \textit{In I Cor} 1:2, § 8.

\textsuperscript{21} Aquinas, \textit{In I Cor} 1:5, § 13.

\textsuperscript{22} Aquinas, \textit{In I Cor} 1:6, § 14.

\textsuperscript{23} Aquinas, \textit{In I Cor} 1:8, § 17.
1:7) and “to share in his glory”—“provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:17).24

This explains why Paul “deals with doctrine along with baptism” at the very beginning of his letter. To be sure, treating the two together accords with “the example of the Lord, who gave the disciples the injunction to teach and to baptize in one command” (see Matt. 28:19).25 Right teaching and sacramental initiation are also tied together, however, because baptism serves as a point of confrontation and humiliation in the person of Christ that imposes an ascetical order upon Christian doctrine. The Corinthian church was, after all, fraught with strife, borne of disagreements between various parties who had been “baptized and instructed” by different leaders—Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and others.26 But baptism derives its power “from Christ alone,” from both his passion and his name, and on this account “has the power to sanctify.”27 Thus the faithful are “baptized in his death” (Rom. 6:3) and enjoined to suffer for a corporate purpose, as Paul says elsewhere: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, the church” (Col. 1:24).28 Christ’s suffering is both meritorious (see again Heb. 13:12) and exemplary (see 1 Pet. 2:21).29 And this places the second part of Christ’s command in Matthew 28 in a new light as well, for “in the preaching of the gospel the wisdom and virtue of the preacher contributes a great deal.”30

Thomas’s third lecture on 1 Corinthians 1, and subsequent lectures on chapters 2 and 3, develop the thesis that the humility of God in Christ the Word forms the pattern of Christian life and learning, a pattern that remains perpetually sacramental. The argument may be organized in several stages.

1. “Christ did not send me . . . to proclaim the gospel with wise words,” insists Paul (1 Cor. 1:17; see 2:1), and Thomas comments: “Some of the Corinthians gloried in the doctrine of false apostles, who corrupt the truth of the faith with elegant words and reasons born of human wisdom,” a “verbose” wisdom that inclines human beings “to

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24 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:9, § 18.
25 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:10, § 20.
26 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:12, § 24. Compare In I Cor 4:6, § 199.
27 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:13, §§ 30 and 34.
28 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:13, § 31–32.
29 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:13, § 32.
30 Aquinas, In I Cor 1:17, § 39.
employ many vain reasons” (see Eccl. 6:11 and Prov. 14:23). Paul cau-
tions the Corinthians about the dangers of rhetoric, however, “by
which people are sometimes drawn to assent to error and falsity.” “By
fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded”
(Rom. 16:18), like the harlot from whose “smooth words” the faithful
are promised deliverance (Prov. 2:16).31

The fact that Paul’s term is the Greek *logos* indicates that he is
not objecting to reason or words in themselves, notes Aquinas, but a
merely human version of these, the *sapientia verbi* that would seek
improperly to reduce the faith to human reason.32 A distinction should
thus be drawn between “teaching in” wise words, where the human
words are the main source and condition of one’s doctrine, and “us-
ing” them in order to build upon the “foundation of the true faith.” In
the latter instance, “any truths in the teachings of the philosophers”
may be employed

in the service of the faith. Hence Augustine says in *On Christian
Doctrine* that if philosophers have uttered things suited to our
faith, they should not be feared but taken from them as from an
unjust possessor for our use. And in the same book he says: “Since
the faculty of eloquent speech has great power to win a person
over to what is base or to what is right, why not use it to fight for
the truth, if evil persons misuse it for sin and error?”33

At the same time, continues St. Paul, Christian wisdom resists the
“wisdom of this age” and its “rulers . . . who are doomed to perish” (1
Cor. 2:6; see John 14:30 and 12:31). They “have vanished and gone
down to Hades” (Bar. 3:19), and so “should not be relied on.”34 In-
stead, “we speak God’s wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:7) which is God and is from
him, imparted by revelation (see Wis. 9:17).35 Indeed, “who has
known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” (Isa. 40:13, quoted
at 1 Cor. 2:16). For “God’s wisdom transcends all human ability” and
he “is the source of all knowledge.”36

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31 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:17, §§ 40–41.
32 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:17, § 42. See similarly *In I Cor* 2:1, § 74.
33 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:17, § 43.
34 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 2:6, § 84. Compare *In I Cor* 2:8, § 89.
35 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 2:7, § 85. See *In I Cor* 3:18–19, §§ 178–179 on the “true wis-
dom of God” (*vera sapientia Dei*), contrasted with the foolish “wisdom of this world.”
36 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 2:16, § 120. Compare *In I Cor* 2:7, § 86.
2. Paul also avoided the *sapientia verbi* of human wisdom in his preaching “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (1 Cor. 1:17). In this locution he indicates that Christian teaching is oriented properly around “the chief element in the doctrines of the Christian faith,” namely, “salvation effected by the cross of Christ.” The effect is borne to the faithful by “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18), “the announcing of the cross,” whereby the very character of wisdom as a “knowledge of divine things” takes the form of Incarnation and passion, notwithstanding the protestations of those who “because of their lack of wisdom suppose that it is impossible for God to become man and suffer death in his human nature.” “Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, . . . endured the cross, disregarding its shame” (Heb. 12:2). Where, then, “is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” (1 Cor. 1:20; see 1:27–29). On this account, Jesus himself thanks the Father “because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them to little ones” (Matt. 11:25). God “is like a teacher who recognizes that his meaning was not understood from the words he employed, and then tried to use other words to indicate what he meant,” and Christ’s disciples in turn “reach an understanding of the teacher’s wisdom by the words [they] hear from him.” For this reason, Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24) by “appropriation,” since the Father “does all things through him” (see John 1:3), and “the Word, which is the Son, is nothing less than begotten or conceived wisdom: ‘I came forth from the mouth of the Most High’ (Sir. 24:5).”

3. In this Word “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3), “both in terms of the fullness of his Godhead and the fullness of his wisdom and grace and in terms of the profound reasons of the Incarnation,” explains Aquinas. Paul does not begin with this

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37 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:17, § 45. See similarly *In I Cor* 1:26, § 63.
38 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:18, § 47. Compare *In I Cor* 4:10, § 212.
39 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:19, §§ 49–50. See the similar illustrative use of Proverbs 10:23 at *Summa Theologiae* I.1.6 c.
40 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:20, §§ 51–52. Thomas connects this verse with Isaiah 33:18: “Where is the learned?” Compare *In I Cor* 1:27, § 65: “Where then are your wise men?” (Isa. 19:12).
41 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:20, § 54.
42 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:21, § 55.
43 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:24, § 61. See *In I Cor* 2:2, § 75.
astonishing fact, however, which is hidden, as Colossians says. Instead, he begins with what is “more obvious and lowly in Christ Jesus,” hence he adds: “and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2), “as if to say: I have presented myself to you as though I know nothing but the cross of Christ.” Indeed, “far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14).

Paul’s decision is not accidental but pedagogical, with far-reaching consequences. As we know, Christian teaching will not proceed in “plausible” or persuasive “words of wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:4), nor in any way imply that it “rests on philosophical reasoning.” The word of Christian teaching can only be confirmed by “the Spirit and power,” as Paul says, and in this sense it is a wisdom, a “profound doctrine,” for “the mature” (1 Cor. 2:4, 6; see 2:13). Thus “solid food is for the perfect, for those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). And “since the teachings of the faith are aimed at making faith work through love (Gal. 5:6), it is necessary that a person instructed in the teachings of the faith not only be well-disposed in intellect for accepting and believing the truth but also well-disposed in will for loving and doing good works.”

Here is the scriptural source and syntax of the Dionysian ideal of “suffering divine things” (patiens divina), in the cradle of Paul’s spiritual challenge to the Corinthians, repeated by Thomas in the prologue of the Summa: “as infants in Christ, I fed you with milk, not solid food” (1 Cor. 3:1–2). Previously, at 1 Corinthians 2:13, Paul “had said that the apostles delivered spiritual things to spiritual persons.” The Corinthians, however, were “barely introduced to the perfect teachings of the faith,” for “everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness,” as a child (Heb. 5:12), “not ready

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44 Aquinas, In I Cor 2:2, § 75. Compare Super Epistolam ad Colossenses Lectura 2:3, § 82, in Super Epistolæ S. Pauli Lectura, vol. 2, 5th edition, ed. Raphael Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1953), for the reverse procedure: “Let us suppose that a person has a candle that is covered; he would not look then for another light, but wait for the light he has to become uncovered. And in the same way we do not have to look for wisdom anywhere but in Christ: ‘For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified’ (1 Cor. 2:2).”

45 Aquinas, In I Cor 2:4, § 77.

46 Aquinas, In I Cor 2:6, § 81.

47 Aquinas, In I Cor 2:6, § 81. Compare In I Cor 3:15, §§ 157 and 160.

48 See note 18, above.

49 Aquinas, In I Cor 3:1, § 123.
to grasp spiritual words.” This need not imply culpability: Jesus re-
marked to his disciples that “I have many things to say to you, but you
cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). But Paul laments that the Cor-
inthians are still “not ready for solid food . . . , for you are still of the
flesh” (1 Cor. 3:2–3),
as if to say: it was not strange that in the beginning you were un-
able to grasp a fuller teaching, because this was expected of your
newness: “As newborn babes, desire the rational milk without
guile” (1 Pt. 2:2). But it seems sinful that in spite of the time dur-
ing which you could have made progress, you still show the same
incapacity: “For though by this time you ought to be teachers,
you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God’s
word” (Heb. 5:12).

Accordingly, the initial stages of Paul’s argument serve as an as-
scetical curriculum of divine wisdom, the following of which prepares
the disciple for a particular end in and after Christ the Word. The
method of teaching is the word of the cross (see 1 Cor. 1:18)—by bap-
tism, and then by other sacraments in turn (see 2:7). The method suits
Christian doctrine as revealed because it is spoken “in a mystery,” “in
secret words or signs,” the spiritual mysteries of 1 Corinthians 14:2.
These are the mysteries that the apostles are called to steward as “ser-
vants of Christ” (4:1), namely, “his spiritual teachings” or “the sacra-
ments of the Church, in which divine power secretly works salvation;
hence in the formula for consecrating the Eucharist it is said: ‘a mys-
tery of faith.”’ And the eucharistic mystery exemplifies the method
in a special way, as an end of Paul’s argument; “for as often as you
eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death un-
til he comes” (11:26). God “made” him our wisdom, righteousness,
sanctification, and redemption (1:30) so that we may “adhere to” and “partake of” him, and so be “joined to God.”

*The Form of Love: Against Ecclesial Distractedness*

If the presenting problem of 1 Corinthians was the baptized having allowed their minds to wander from the signifying form of Christian speech, “the word about the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18), then Paul’s mission was to draw their attention back to where they began in the font—in a confession of helplessness if left to their own devices: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and consequent turning and surrender: “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” These utterances of the Word’s passion, symbolically made our own in the death and rebirth of initiation, are not meant to occasion misunderstanding and misspeaking, as for others, but rather to prevent these errors by reorienting our thought and language altogether. “To us who are being saved” (1:18)—who have been “called to be saints” (1:2) and so begun to “proclaim Christ crucified” (1:23)—the word about the cross is spoken as the already-not-yet pattern of our common life, setting forth the necessary exercises without which we cannot continually learn to speak the Lord’s language fully and properly.

This work-in-progress, *semper reformanda* character of Paul’s pedagogy in 1 Corinthians—addressed to the baptized, who still have serious problems to tend to—has made the letter ideally suited for a pilgrim church on the road. We have gotten off to a good start; but certain matters cannot be ignored . . . as a man moves in with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1–5), and division is introduced on the way to a debauched Supper (11:18–22). In the face of these failings, 1 Corinthians remains the original and authoritative hands-on guide for sorting them out on the way to a restored order of love.

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55 Aquinas, *In I Cor* 1:30, § 71. Thus Thomas-cum-Paul comes to the Eucharist at chapter 8 (and following) via matrimony in chapter 5: “In the sacraments three things should be considered: first, the sacrament itself, as baptism; secondly, the reality signified and contained, namely, grace; thirdly, the reality signified but not contained, namely, the glory of the resurrection. First, therefore, [Paul] discusses the sacraments themselves; secondly, the graces (chap. 12); thirdly, the glory of the resurrection (chap. 15). In regard to the first he does three things: first he determines what pertains to baptism; secondly, what pertains to the sacrament of matrimony (chap. 5); thirdly, what pertains to the sacrament of the Eucharist (chap. 8)” (*In I Cor* 1:10, §19).
In lieu of a full-blown commentary, several principal paths within the extended network of chapters 10–13 may be marked as heuristic to further study within the foregoing frame.

Chapters 10–11 present a fascinating ecclesiology in miniature, tied to Old Testament precedents and grounded in the Eucharist as the end of communion, its final exercise and fullest expression. Eucharistic communion is never a given but must be worked at, as Paul says: the sacramental strivings of “our ancestors . . . occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:1, 6; see 10:11). God is the teacher, and because he “is faithful, . . . he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (10:13). Similarly, at the end of the very difficult chapter 11, Paul explains that “when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world” (11:32). In each case the word of grace is not easy but conforms to a providential pattern, within which to make sense of our problems as susceptible of some resolution, marking a spiritual advance.

Of course the center of the pattern is christological, focused on the Eucharist as a sharing in Christ’s blood and body (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24–27). And these are the terms that Paul employs in chapter 11 to sort out the problem of Corinthian “coming together (synerchesthai) not for the better but for the worse” (11:17). Eucharistic division in the body, not “waiting for one another” (11:33), presents a contradiction in need of resolution because the meal’s communicants are bound to the Lord’s sacrifice, his passion and death. Keeping in mind the “realism of Paul’s approach,” as Jerome Murphy-O’Connor suggests, we are forced
to go behind the sacramental gestures to the disposition of the participants. The attitude of those who eat and drink is essential to the proclamation because if their imitation of Christ (11:1) is defective, then, as Paul expressly insists, “it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat” (11:20). Only if the participants have truly put

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on Christ (Gal. 3:27), which is equivalent to putting on love (Col. 3:14), is there an authentic Eucharist.\textsuperscript{57}

In turn, Murphy-O’Connor continues, the implication of 11:27 that one who eats and drinks unworthily “will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” suggests most naturally that one will have joined the ranks of “those responsible for his death.” In this case, body—as also in 11:29: eating and drinking judgment against oneself for not “discerning the body”—may be understood as “an allusion to the community as the body of Christ.”\textsuperscript{58} Thus, the Corinthians’ acceptance of divisions is a sign that the “body” character of the community has not been understood. The organic unity that should bind the believers together has been neither recognized nor affirmed. Hence, anyone who dares to participate in the Eucharist without adverting to the body is guilty of perpetuating the divisions which make the Lord’s Supper impossible (11:20), and in consequence eats and drinks to his own condemnation.\textsuperscript{59}

If this reading of Paul’s argument in chapter 11 holds up, then what it means, and looks like, to “put on love” (Col. 3:14) is indeed the question, and explains why Paul guides his readers into the constructive application and resolution of chapters 12–13. Within the lexical world of 1 Corinthians, these chapters seek to describe the shape of hard-won victory should the Corinthians achieve it, a discipline of mature virtue. For the church’s members confess together that “Jesus is Lord” by the one Spirit, given “for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:3, 7). Christians, formed by the sacramental word, know that “just as the body is one and has many members, . . . so it is with Christ,” the ecclesial body in question being Christ’s own, “into” which “we were all baptized” (12:12–13). From this fact—as the whole of the letter has maintained—flows the most extraordinary community of mutuality, arranged by God to give “the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the


\textsuperscript{58} Murphy-O’Connor, “Eucharist and Community,” 27 and 28.

\textsuperscript{59} Murphy-O’Connor, “Eucharist and Community,” 29.
members may have the same care for one another” (12:24–25). If this still seems a ways off from our present reality, then we can be sure that chapters 1–11 are tailor-made for us—for the conversion of our imagination, “putting an end to childish ways” (13:11).60

Conclusion

First Corinthians sets forth a framework for communion (koinonia) by describing something of its contour and structure in a unique way. Speaking theologically, as Paul does unstintingly, the form of communion is Christ, a point that may be drawn as easily from Romans or Colossians as 1 Corinthians. The great gift of the Corinthian correspondence, however, is its allergy to abstraction, as it delves into the details of communion, seeking to identify real problems and advance original solutions that may be practicable. Given this fact, it is puzzling to see the persistence, in countless pulpits and convention resolutions—no doubt unconscious in many cases, but ascriptural all the same—of partial appropriations of chapters 1, 12, and 13 that yield vague bids for Christian unity-and-diversity-in-love while the hard work of actual life together is set aside. This is ecclesiology by evasion or elimination, where one’s brother or sister is conveniently tolerated or avoided rather than loved, a Christian unity of live-and-let-live amounting to live-and-let-die. In this case, according to the Corinthian calculus, it won’t just be our brother’s parish, diocese, or denomination that suffers but our own as well, since the words “I have no need of you” are impossible in the church—nonsensical, incomprehensible (12:21). So much the worse for our addiction to autonomy and clean-cut separation, no-fault divorce; unless we decide to put the habit to death, in which case—rinse and repeat—the curriculum returns to the initial lesson of chapter 1, the outset of the itinerary, in a mode of truth-telling: “It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you” (1:11).

There’s no escape from waiting for one another (1 Cor. 11:33), however and wherever it takes place, “so that we may not be condemned” (11:32). This is a clear warning for all parties and peoples in our, or any, day, who would hope to go their own way. No such wide

60 “Conversion of the imagination” is borrowed from Richard Hays; see note 11 above, and also his commentary, First Corinthians (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1997), 221: “Such a conversion is the aim of Paul’s letter, and it should be the aim of our teaching and preaching as well.”
and easy road exists within the body (see Matt. 7:13), nor is there an
easy exit; just this “more excellent way”: patience, kindness, rejoicing
in the truth, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things,
enduring all things (1 Cor. 12:31; see 13:4–7). This is the communion,
and the word, of love.