

CHAPTER 12

ON THE EXIGENCY OF A MESSIANIC ECCLESIA: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH PHILOSOPHICAL READERS OF PAUL

Theodore Jennings, Jr., in an essay titled “Paul and Sons,” a title that plays on Jacques Derrida’s reflections on proprietary rights to Marx, suggests that there is currently a battle being waged over inheritance rights to Paul.¹ This continues his repeated claim in his earlier book *Reading Derrida / Thinking Paul* (2006), that Paul must be liberated from the imprisoning clutches of his ecclesiastical, theological, and exegetical readers, Paul’s so-called “friends.”²

To be sure, we have the recent claim of Giorgio Agamben that Walter Benjamin has effected the *Aufhebung* of Paul, fulfilled and thereby nullified in a moment of *tornada*, recapitulation—taken out of, even away from, his original context. Agamben’s *The Time That Remains* “originates in the conviction that there is a kind of secret link, which we should not miss at any price, between Paul’s letters and our epoch. From this perspective, one of the most often read and commented texts of our entire cultural tradition undoubtedly acquires a new readability which displaces and reorients the canons of his interpretation.”³

For his part, Slavoj Žižek concludes his *The Puppet and the Dwarf* with this claim:

In what is perhaps the highest example of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, it is possible today to redeem this [subversive, emancipatory] core of Christianity only in the gesture of abandoning the shell

of its institutional organization (and, even more so, of its specific religious experience). The gap here is irreducible: either one drops the religious form, or one maintains the form, but loses the essence. That is the ultimate heroic gesture that awaits Christianity: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself—like Christ, who had to die so that Christianity could emerge.⁴

At the beginning of the book he asserts: “my claim is not that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience.” The first thesis of Benjamin is turned around: the puppet called theology can win all the time, if it enlists the service of historical materialism, which today has to stay underground.⁵

Žižek and Agamben, along with Alain Badiou and Jacob Taubes,⁶ are examples of recent thinkers who have appropriated Paul into their theoretical undertaking, none on specifically Christian grounds. But their contributions are not just interesting or provocative. They in fact provide considerable potential for Christian theological reflection, offering numerous points of insight, illustration, and even inspiration. That is, Christian readers of Paul need not make any counter territorial claims on Paul. Indeed, the more substantial divide among readers of Paul is one between historicist readers of Paul, who would like Paul imprisoned within the first century, and all those readers who wish to place Paul in the midst of contemporary political and theological discourse, whether interested ecclesially-theologically and/or theoretically-philosophically (even non-theistically).⁷

What makes dialogue with these four post-Marxist thinkers particularly interesting is that they share with post-Christendom Christian theology some crucial points of fundamental convergence: (a) a radical critique of the present world order, including some form of resistance and dissent, and (b) some notion of the strongly utopian and interruptive, yet non-progressivist hope at the root of the tradition. In this essay my focus will be on just one aspect of their thought, namely, ecclesial theory. I will be treating the notion of an ecclesial community not so much as a midpoint between individual subjectivity and society in general, even less as an aggregate of those caught up in a new messianic subjectivity. Rather, it is the question of some midpoint existing in the tensive polarity between what now exists in the wake of the new revelation and what will or must obtain in the eschatological utopia to which the revelation witnesses.⁸ What, then, is the exigent necessity

of the notion of an ecclesial community, whether founded on a new subjectivity of radical unplugging (Žižek), a truth procedure toward a universal singularity evident in the militant figure (Badiou), a vision for the coming community, a community of messianic callings, a messianic form of life (Agamben), or a messianic community that is “free of rule,” with which all oppressed groups can identify (Taubes)? Given this limited scope, I will be reading these theoreticians as they read Paul, and as Paul reads his own sacred texts: schematically, selectively, typologically, and without complete contextual and genealogical regard.

To anticipate our results, the ecclesial thinking of these theorists can be placed into a three-fold typology, representing options which continue to entertain radical Christian ecclesial theorists. (1) For Agamben the messianic community is primarily an abstract aggregate of messianic callings, a somewhat serendipitous and certainly non-institutional, or non-boundable reality, a remnant that through auto-suppression only knows itself as the not-all, conscious of existing only to lose itself in the fullness (redemption) of the all. (2) In Taubes we find a messianic ecclesia which, as an apparently socially identifiable entity, has primarily a representational function, alongside its fundamental task of counter-imperial delegitimation. (3) In Žižek and Badiou the messianic movement or impulse has a more transformational vocation relative to the whole of society, even as it refuses to be characterized by bounded markings other than fundamental fidelity, and even as it seeks to resist both institutionalizing, self-preoccupied, dogmatic or undemocratic betrayals and faulty utopian dreams, while still nourished by utopian notions.

AGAMBEN ON THE MESSIANIC COMMUNITY: THE ANARCHIC-NIHILISTIC MESSIANIC CALLING

Agamben’s *The Time that Remains* is an erudite discourse on numerous themes in Paul’s writings, especially in the treatment of the analogous (or homologous) afterlife of these themes in later political-philosophical writers. But while displaying considerable sensitivity to the particularity of Paul’s thought itself, the book ultimately paints a Paul assimilated to the thought of Walter Benjamin. As the conclusion to the book makes clear, in Benjamin Paul’s messianism has found its “canonic moment,” its truest “time of legibility” (pp. 144-45)—Paul is the actual invisible (and un-cited) hunchback for Benjamin’s historical materialist puppet (pp. 138-39).⁹

Agamben’s ecclesial thinking in *The Time That Remains* continues his earlier treatment of “the coming community,” his glad tidings that

provide a counterpart to his more pessimistic analysis of the current state of biopolitics, with its foundational violence that separates “naked life” from “form of life” and operates in a perpetual state of exception. “Naked life” must become “form of life” (the good life, the happy life, *eudaimonia*) in “the coming community,” the coming politics. Crucial elements of this vision include: (a) an emancipation from the division between naked life and form of life, (b) an “irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty,” (c) “pure mediality [means] as the field of human action and of human thought,” (d) release from the “figure of the law” as the sole orientation of politics, and (e) a conception of community that does not presuppose commonality, common property or identity as a condition of belonging, but rather allows for the “co-belonging” of “whatever singularities.” The “coming community” cannot be a retreat to mystical communion, nor does it entail a nostalgic return to some location of *Gemeinschaft* (community). Rather “form of life” emerges in the very process of exclusion and inclusion that constitutes the biopolitical exception (e.g. enclosures like the detention camp), and designates an exemplary life through “the impotent omnivalence of whatever beings.” It will emerge not in the struggle between states, but in the struggle between the state and humanity as such, heralded by events of “whatever singularity” such as Tiananmen.¹⁰ *The Time That Remains*, then, represents an articulation of “form of life” in “the coming community” specifically on messianic terms.¹¹ The messianic life, life in Messiah, is the answer to the naked life of biopolitics.

Special interest in the notion of a messianic community appears explicitly from the opening pages of *The Time That Remains*. Seeking to restore Paul as a fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition, he charges that “anti-messianic tendencies were doubtlessly operating within the Church as well as the Synagogue” (p. 1). Both have had an interest in expunging or muting Paul’s Jewish messianic thought. He observes: “a messianic institution—or, rather, a messianic community that wants to present itself as an institution—faces a paradoxical task” (p. 1): to have Messiah either perennially ahead of you, or always behind you, is equally discomfiting. The question that is raised, then, is whether or not a messianic community can take on concrete, institutional form without betraying its messianic character and vocation.

Agamben identifies the following problematic features that beset “a messianic community that wants to present itself as an institution”:¹²

(1) as an institution, a messianic community becomes preoccupied with a new identity for messianic life, seeking a replacement, not a fundamental transformation (re-vocation), of all worldly vocations, estates, and identity;

(2) it begins to claim rights and prerogatives for itself, as the thing in itself;

(3) it organizes itself around codified systems of laws, creating a new law; as such it merely replaces or emulates existing institutions of power;

(4) it is disciplined around systems of right doctrine, exclusively denotative systems of thought for what it believes, hopes, and loves, losing the performative immediacy of these;

(5) it loses its character of auto-suppression and its true vocation of mere instrumentality (pure means, use) for the sake of the all, ultimately betraying its mission on behalf of the all.

Agamben applies this critique in two directions: on the one hand to the Church, but also to the Party, its secularized double. As for the church: this is what happens when Messiah is entirely seen in the past, as founder, and not as a critical principle that shatters boundaries in a new constellation (the “Bild” of Benjamin). As he puts it in *Means without End*:¹³ “The church has frozen the messianic event, thereby handing the world over to the power of judgment.” That is, by losing its true vocation for the all, it has damned the rest of the world. A serious indictment indeed.

The related question is whether or not a political theology can only be negative, negating both a statist political theology (against Carl Schmitt) and its double, an institutionally constituted positive revolutionary political agency or program. Is there any room for a (socially) identifiable, not merely abstract ecclesia under that negation? Is the answer only in a purely “anarchic-nihilistic” messianism, the form of messianism which Agamben articulates?

Messianic Time

For Agamben the crucial framework for conceptualizing a messianic community is in “the very structure of messianic time and the particular conjunction of memory and hope, past and present, plenitude and lack, origin and end that this [messianic time] implies” (pp. 1-2). Only after Paul’s understanding of messianic time has been appreciated “can we raise the question of how something like a messianic community is in fact possible” (p. 2). Distinguishing sharply between messianism and apocalypse, then, Agamben argues that Pauline messianic time is not the end of time, but the time of the end.

What interests the apostle is not the last day. . .but the time that contracts itself and begins to end (1 Cor. 7:29), or if you prefer, the time that remains between time and its end. . . . Messianic time, the time in which the apostle lives, the only time that concerns him, is. . .neither

chronological time nor the apocalyptic *eschaton*. . . . [It is] the time that remains between these two times, when the division of time is itself divided (p. 62).

A key feature of this time is its form as “recapitulation”: “the messianic. . . . is a caesura that divides the division between times and introduces a remnant, a zone of undecidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended into the past” (p. 74). Thus it is less oriented to the future, as to the “contraction of past and present,” to “the present as the exigency of fulfillment” (pp. 76-78).

Features of the Messianic Community

Within this understanding of messianic time, what then are the specific features of the messianic community, the messianic “form of life?” Three critical aspects can be identified.

First, taking his cue from the linguistic correspondence between *klēsis* (“calling,” thus “vocation”) and *ekklēsia* (“assembly,” that which is “called out”), Agamben argues that the Pauline ecclesia “is a community of messianic vocations,” with an emphasis on the multiplicity of individual messianic subjectivities (31-33). The crucial text for Agamben is 1 Cor 7:17-22, 29-33a, which brings together the notions of *klēsis* (“calling,” thus “vocation”), living *hōs mē* (“as not”), “remaining in a calling,” and *mallon chrēsai* (“rather make use”). The messianic “as not” constitutes a revocation (in a double sense) and transformation of all juridical and social conditions (identities, estates, vocations, etc.), by undermining them and hollowing them out without altering their form, expropriating them under the form of “usage” and “pure praxis” without possession and ownership (22-42). “The messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity; rather, it is a generic potentiality that can be used without ever being owned” (26). The paradigmatic case is Onesimus, who, while remaining a slave, is *hyper doulon* (“more than a slave”), for Agamben a “super slave” (Phlm 16; pp. 13, 29).

Furthermore, aware of the arbitrariness and gratuitousness of one’s condition (p. 31), the subject (and thus the messianic community) lives by auto-suppression, in that the subject’s complete redemption coincides with his/her complete loss (Rom 6:6; 8:11; p. 31). The entire subject is both dislocated and nullified in the messianic vocation (Gal 2:20; p. 41). In connection with this notion, and in response to the possible charge that his conception of the messianic calling may imply nothing more than a “mental reserve,” a “Marranism,”¹⁴ Agamben (following Benjamin) emphasizes that the prime modality of the messianic vocation is “exigency,” in particular the exigency of the lost, oppressed,

and defeated (pp. 39-42). This “weak” messianic modality involves an “assimilation to what has been lost and forgotten” (1 Cor 1:26-28; 4:13) “on both the collective and individual levels,” and is expressed as a “groaning” along with the caducity (*mataitēs*) of all creation (Rom 8:20-22, 28; pp. 40-41): “the capacity to remain faithful to that which having perpetually been forgotten, must remain unforgettable” (p. 39). Insofar as this especially backward-looking assimilation is absolute, the question of “presumed identities and ensuring properties” is finally settled. Indeed, any move to organize or institutionalize a messianic community, even (and especially) for purposes of constituting a vanguard, is to create something “distinct” from the real “community of messianic vocations” (even though pretending to coincide with it) and constitutes one of its most serious betrayals (p. 33).¹⁵

Second, the messianic community is marked by a separation that fundamentally negates other separations, including its own, through the notion of the remnant, which is ever situated as a “not-all.”¹⁶ Applying this to the concepts of a people, democracy, and the proletariat (pp. 57-58), and sharply critical of Badiou’s universalism,¹⁷ Agamben emphasizes that the remnant is in constant tension with the all:

[T]he remnant is closer to being a consistency or figure that Israel assumes in relation to election or to the messianic event. It is therefore neither the all, nor a part of the all, but the impossibility for the part and the all to coincide with themselves or with each other. *At a decisive instant, the elected people, every people, will necessarily situate itself as a remnant, as not-all* (p. 55, emphasis original).

Drawing especially on Romans 11, Agamben asserts that the remnant is “not any kind of numeric portion or substantial positive residue;” it is rather a division “without ever reaching any final ground” (pp. 50-52). Moreover, the remnant “functions as a very peculiar kind of soteriological machine. . . , not so much the object of salvation as its instrument.” It “is precisely what prevents divisions from being exhaustive and excludes the parts and the all from the possibility of coinciding with themselves.” Nevertheless, the remnant “only concerns messianic time and only exists therein. In the *telos*, when God will be ‘all in all’ (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 15:28), the messianic remnant will not harbour any particular privilege and will have exhausted its meaning in losing itself in the *plērōma* [fullness]” (p. 56).

Third, the messianic life and vocation, and thereby the messianic community, is marked by the de-activation (*katargēsis*, *Aufhebung*)

of *nomos*. The messianic “state of exception” is never an occasion for assimilation to state power (pp. 107-09), and is instead characterized by a “tendentious lawlessness” (p. 111). The messianic state of exception returns to the conditions of pre-law, and entails (a) a contraction of the law, marked by an indeterminacy between inside and outside, an unobservability, and an unformulability; (b) a recapitulation in the figure of love (p. 108); (c) an orientation toward gratuity, with fidelity as the instance of the justice of the law; and (d) a “form of life,” a community, not a new text with dogma, as the instantiation of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:2; p. 122). Taking an analogy from Franciscan thought, Agamben observes that what mattered was “to create a space that escaped the grasp of power and its laws, without entering into conflict with them yet rendering them inoperative. . . . They implicitly put forth the idea of a *forma vivendi* that was entirely subtracted from the sphere of the law” (p. 27).

As a counterpart to the *Aufhebung* of law, the messianic community is marked by a recovery of “faith” in its performative, not denotative functions (pp. 113-37). This means a rejection of “codified systems of norms and articles of faith,” and of the “juridicizing of all human relations,” whether in law or in religion (p. 135). It is in the performative dimension of what we may believe, hope and love that “language suspends its own denotation” (p. 133). In the experience of the “nearness of the word,” a divided faith is re-established, restored (p. 135). Just as importantly, in the experience of “pure word” we have (through revocation and usage) “the act of a potentiality that fulfills itself in weakness.” As oriented to the pure power of saying, “messianic power finds its *telos* in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9-10; 1 Cor 1:27), against all formulation of dogma, accumulation of knowledge, denotative propositions, and desire for efficacy (pp. 136-37).

Assessment

Agamben’s construction of Paul is particularly insightful for Christian ecclesial reflection in the caution against betrayals implicit in “institutionalizing,” the emphasis on messianic weakness evident in the assimilation to the lost and forgotten (in both an intellection and socio-political sense), and the notion of the *ecclesia* primarily as a remnant aware of itself only as “not-all” and as mere instrument for the redemption of the all through which it ultimately loses itself (in the same manner as for Christian reflection the church is ultimately absorbed into the reign of God).

But one should also identify some significant demurrers, beginning with Agamben’s notion of messianic time, which is crucial for his

understanding of the ecclesial calling and community. It is quite true that contracted time is the time in which the apostle claims to live: to use terms of J. Christiaan Beker, it is the proleptic realization of the telic triumph of God inaugurated in the resurrection.¹⁸ But it is certainly mistaken to suggest that this is the only time that “concerns” or “interests” him. There remains in Paul an undeniable eschatological passion, for the imminent, inexorable, and universal arrival of the reign of God, as discomfiting as that may be. There is a polarity in Paul which precludes a favouring of the contraction of time between resurrection and *parousia* over against the vision of the arrival of the *telos* itself. The notion of the *telos* (end/goal) itself is crucial to Paul’s messianism and apocalypticism in general. And as J. Taubes puts it, “apocalypticism is revolutionary because it beholds the turning point not in some indeterminate future but entirely proximate.”¹⁹

Clearly what is at stake for Agamben, and many others since the big non-event of the *parousia* (or the communist utopia), is that any focus on the final *eschaton* immediately signals a perpetual deferment of the messianic, “in which nothing can be achieved” (p. 69, citing G. Scholem’s disenchantment with utopian messianism).²⁰ The inevitable and implicit delay in any future-oriented eschatological hope “renders unreachable the end that it supposedly produces” (p. 70).

This matter of coming to terms with Paul’s eschatological vision continues to cause stumbling. As many before him, Agamben is forced to come up with a form of iteratively realized eschatology, via Benjamin. He embarks on a significant reinterpretation of *parousia* as messianic “presence,” against any implicit deferment: messianic time is “operational time pressing within the chronological time,” a time that “may even interrupt secular time here and now” (p. 73). Thus the *parousia* simply becomes “each instant” when Messiah might pass through the door, an assimilation to the last thesis of Benjamin.²¹

Certainly the notion of the realization of an eschatological moment should be harnessed, as should the notion that the reign of God appears in moments little recognized, outside the social or temporal boundaries of what is supposed to be, or supposed to happen. Yet, to lose hold of a firm grasp toward the final, exigent vision of cosmic re-creation is also troubling. But there is a crucial nub here: Agamben is not the only one who hesitates in the face of the millennial utopian anticipation. Indeed, the true scandal of Paul’s thought for us is not just its cruciform character, but the unrealized and apparently unrealizable *eschaton* (at least for Western thought, whether Christian or Marxist).²²

To anticipate remarks below, in contrast to Agamben, J. Taubes maintains a more robust consistent apocalyptic eschatology as the framework for his delegitimation of sovereignty and law and his world-

nihilism,²³ and Žižek resists the collapsing of the “not yet” into the “actualizable” (claiming to favour a Christian eschatological version compared to the Judaic); and even Badiou maintains a more positive attitude toward Paul’s thoroughgoing eschatological comportment. Meanwhile, among Christian theologians, J. Christiaan Beker proposes that Paul’s thoroughgoing apocalyptic must be embraced in the midst of its mythological and apparently obscurantist character, resisting a collapsing of eschatology into Christology, via spiritualization and/or by institutionalization (and salvation-history solutions).²⁴

Furthermore, by privileging 1 Corinthians 7:29-32 as Paul’s “most rigorous definition of the messianic life” (p. 23), an assertion which surely can be contested, Agamben is able to sustain the argument that the messianic vocation can never constitute a new identity, but instead only hollows out existing ones (by both destroying and using them). Thus in Agamben, not only does the messianic absorb eschatology, but in addition the notion of the messianic vocation absorbs any notion of an ecclesia with any concrete shape. Even the discussion on justice as a prime marker of the ecclesia is very much muted (pp. 107, 120). Not surprisingly, Žižek complains that in Agamben’s Pauline theory we have little more than formalism.²⁵

For Agamben, the messianic calling does not have its own positive content, but is what happens in the revocation of all worldly, secular conditions, especially those determined juridically. Agamben emphasizes that the messianic vocation can never constitute any new identity (other than a nullification of existing ones), because otherwise one immediately goes down the path of the pursuit of privilege, prerogatives, and rights. But as a result of the privileging of the messianic primarily as a form of negation, and by limiting himself to 1 Corinthians 7, not only does the messianic vocation have no specific positive content. In addition, there is no vocation for the messianic community as a corporate body, apart from being in general an “instrument of salvation.” Agamben does not know of the Pauline “calling” to be a consecrated and distinct people of character (“holy”: Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:12; cf. 1 Thess 4:7), the “calling” to an alternative dominion (1 Thess 2:12; Phil 3:14; cf. 1 Cor 1:9) and a mental transformation toward its imperatives (Rom 8:28; Rom 12:1-2) and toward the animation of justice (Rom 6:13, 15-23), the “calling” to express the realities of freedom and peace (Gal 5:13; 1 Cor 7:15), the “calling” to be in one body (Col 3:15), nor finally the “calling” that involves being known (identified) by attachment to Messiah Jesus in particular (1 Cor 1:7, 9; cf. Rom 9:24-26).

It should also be observed that Agamben’s use of the Onesimus paradigm does not correspond with Paul’s own imperative to Philemon

in regard to Onesimus. Onesimus is not a model of the one who is to “remain” in a hollowed out juridical condition as a “super slave.” Paul actually uses the phrase “more than a slave” (*hyper doulon*) to describe how Onesimus will be valuable to his present owner in his new status “no longer as a slave,” precisely “in the flesh” (Phlm 16), that is, as a consequence of his manumission, which Paul clearly advises while not saying so directly in the letter. The letter to Philemon thus stands in a certain tension with 1 Corinthians 7, not as providing its paradigmatic case.

It is certainly a significant corrective to 2,000 years of Christian history and identity formation to emphasize that Paul promotes the displacement of all identity privileging through the messianic. But what is missing is at least a counterpart acknowledgement that in Paul the messianic vocation fundamentally involves a loyalty that necessarily involves some form of positive corporate politics. For instance, Paul’s thesis in Philippians is this: “collectively practice your citizenship, practice your politics, singularly according to the glad announcement [*euangelion*] of Messiah” (Phil 1:27). This thesis is then unpacked decisively in terms of the corporate life of the assembly, both in its kenotic-cruciform aspects (1:27–2:9; 3:2–10) but also in its corresponding universal-cosmic dimensions (2:9–11; 3:11–21). The Messianic fidelity is thus oriented to a “dominion in heaven” (3:20), which undermines identity formation both via ethnic particularities (3:2–14) and via a consumerist, ascendant, triumphalist, coercive, and statist universalism (3:18–21), since the orientation of a heavenly dominion means immediately that the one loyal to the messianic announcement is a global, cosmic citizen (3:21–21; 2:9–11). Fidelity is not simply hollowed out of identity, but redirected in God’s love story of reclaiming a creation toward the establishment of full justice, peace, and *eudaimonia*,²⁶ that is, toward the good life, as embodied proleptically in a community of those whose fidelity is founded gratuitously on the fidelity of Messiah himself (with messianic fidelity being the prototype of all subsequent fidelity).²⁷

JACOB TAUBES: A REPRESENTATIONAL ECCLESIA

While Agamben claims Taubes as the prime exemplar of his “anarchic-nihilistic” appropriation of Paul’s messianism, some elaboration of Taubes’s own views is appropriate to nuance this matter. While Taubes rightly rejects the sovereignty of the historical reading of a text, the legacy of Spinoza, his own reading of Paul as expressed in his 1987 Heidelberg lectures, now published as *The Political Theology of Paul*, but also in his earlier work,²⁸ is certainly the most historically sympathetic and plausible among the so-called philosophical readings of Paul. He quite naturally

understands Paul both within his Judaic context, and in the context of the legacy of imperial assault on that community. In other words, he naturally thinks from below, worried more about any chaos from above than chaos from below (p. 142).²⁹

There are two distinct aspects to Paul's political theology according to Taubes: on the one hand, what can be described as a "negative political theology,"³⁰ and on the other, a positive form, focused on an alternative community formation. Taubes specifically reads Romans "politically" as opposed to "existentially," as evident from the syllabus title for a course on Romans: "On the Political Theology of Paul: From Polis to Ecclesia." He interprets Romans "as the legitimation and formation of a new social union-covenant [*Ver-Bund*], of the developing ecclesia against the Roman Empire, on the one hand, and on the other hand, of [against] the ethnic unity of the Jewish people" (p. 117).

Thus Taubes does not reject political theology as such, only a positive political theology (along with K. Barth, against C. Schmitt). According to M. Terpstra and T. de Wit, Taubes recognizes that Paul seeks a more radical intervention than either establishing a sound political system or attempting to replace one through revolution. Rather, Paul seeks "a theological *delegitimation* of all political power [including that of the church] as a *political* attitude."³¹ In *The Political Theology of Paul*, Taubes argues that Romans opens and closes with a messianic declaration of war on Caesar (pp. 13-16), and that Paul's attack on the law is not anti-Judaic polemic, but part of his assault on the use of law as ordering power in any sovereignty, whether political, churchly, or natural (23). According to W-D. Hartwich, A. Assmann, and J. Assmann (the editors of his lectures on Paul), Taubes understands that because Paul's political theology has no positive form as such, it can be claimed and identified with by all oppressed groups.³²

At the same time, a crucial issue for Paul is "the establishment and legitimation of a new people of God" (pp. 28, 40). Paul's apocalyptic anarchism is of a particular sort: messianic sovereignty can only be represented in a people, and a crucial mark of the alternative community is that it must be "free of rule" (*Herrschaftsfrei*), oriented sociologically as opposed to cratologically.³³ Taubes rejects both a privatization of the messianic, and a supposed Pauline quietism that endorses the prevailing political order. Romans 13 has a purely pragmatic occasion—that of mere survival; its apparent acquiescence is a function of an apocalyptic nihilism that refuses to engage in open warfare but also refuses to grant legitimacy and ultimate obedience to any political regime (p. 54).³⁴ The ecclesia is thus a third type of community formation alongside and in

opposition to both the ethnic community and the Roman imperial order. He calls this a “new union,” a “new intimacy” (p. 52), a “community of solidarity” (*Solidaritätsgemeinschaft*), or a “kinship of the promise” (p. 28). An alternative conception of universalism emerges with the messianic, one that signifies “the election of Israel,” but nevertheless an Israel “transfigured” as an inclusive “all Israel” that is open to all who obey the commandment to love the neighbour (pp. 24-25, 41, 52-53). This universalist orientation for a transfigured “all Israel” is based on fidelity to and “faith in” Messiah, a paradoxical faith that is contradicted by the evidence and yet brings “a total and monstrous inversion of the values of Roman and Jewish thought” (pp. 6-10).

The two primary constituting principles of the ecclesia are *pneuma* and *agapē*, in both its forms as love of neighbour (Rom 13:8-10) and as love of the enemy (Rom 11:28-32; pp. 25, 41-49).³⁵ *Pneuma* is completely contrary to Hegel’s notion of the immanent *Geist* (pp. 38-43), but is instead “a force that transforms a people and that transforms the text” (p. 45). And, as Taubes’s editors put it, *Geist* represents a logic that goes beyond the natural order of the given and is “the decisive category for transcending the continuity and the normative claim of the tradition and the ethnic limits of the people of God.”³⁶

J. Gold observes that these themes are already evident in Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology* (*Abendländische Eschatologie*), his doctoral dissertation of 1947. In that work Taubes claims that Paul envisions a collective whose members “have severed all of their natural, organic allegiances to nature, art, worship, and the state, and thus their feelings of emptiness and alienation from the world and separation with secularism have reached fever pitch.”³⁷ Paul sees a hitherto unknown spiritual nation coming into existence, one based on “the *pneumatic We*,” a community that rejects all legal-political determinations of identity (state, law, etc.). “In contrast to the old, organic allegiances, the Christian community (*Gemeinde*) is an inorganic, subsequent togetherness (*Zusammensein*) of individuals based on ‘pneuma.’”³⁸

In general terms, one might observe that in contrast to Agamben (and Benjamin) Taubes admits to Paul’s consistent, thoroughgoing eschatology, and does not seek to absorb it completely into the messianic;³⁹ nor does he collapse the messianic community completely into the aggregate of messianic callings. Taubes’s ecclesia in fact looks much like that of John Howard Yoder, in its primarily representational function and in the refusal to grant it much of a transformational role (relative to society’s public politics) other than that of “witness” (cf. the primacy of delegitimation of all rule in Taubes).⁴⁰

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK AND ALAIN BADIOU: A (CAUTIOUSLY) VANGUARD ECCLESIA

Similar to Taubes, and also in contrast to those who read the Pauline “not yet” as denoting eschatological “indifference” to the world, there are those who not only emphasize the apocalyptic-eschatological component in Paul’s thought, but also refuse to understand this as resulting necessarily in a passivity that pre-empts some form of political presence in the world. Indeed, it is proposed that active working is sustained precisely by this very eschatological passion. Žižek and Badiou (for different reasons) represent such a view, analogously very close to the ecclesial reading of Paul by Pauline scholar J. Christiaan Beker, who likens the Pauline ecclesia to the “avant-garde” in service of (and modelling) the “reign of God.”⁴¹ Thus in contrast to the “anarchic-nihilistic” appropriation that appears to be Agamben’s own, and to the more purely representational notion of an ecclesia in Taubes, the ecclesial theory of these interpreters comes closer to the Marxian notion of the coincidence of the political and the subjective, and its consequential vanguardism. That is, they display a much more optimistic view of the transformative role and power of the messianic community relative to the all or the utopia. Not surprisingly, then, both Žižek and Badiou are quite comfortable with the Paul-Lenin analogy.⁴² At the same time, however, they observe grave dangers when any vanguard ceases to see itself as provisional and contingent.

I will not seek to contextualize fully Žižek’s ecclesial thinking, except to say he is certainly interested in making radical Christianity and historical materialism allies on the same side of the barricade. Against Badiou’s formalism, he wishes any historical materialist also to go through the “Christian experience,” that is, to reckon with its substantive logic. He similarly finds Agamben’s messianism not sufficiently engaged with the substance of Christian (Pauline) thought, and leaning toward a formalism.⁴³ And while he invites Christianity to heroically lose itself in order to save its treasure, he does appear to offer some positive role for certain forms of Christianity.⁴⁴ It is in the subversive form of Christian thought and practice that he has some hope, and he finds considerable homology between Christian messianic thought and revolutionary process.⁴⁵

In further contrast to Agamben, Žižek emphasizes the more activist strain of Christian apocalyptic messianism: the arrival of Messiah implies “the urge to act”; messianic “arrival functions as a signal which triggers activity,” in accordance with the conclusion, “we must help God.”⁴⁶ As such Christian messianism is to be distinguished, in his view, from passive

forms in Judaism (echoing Scholem's admission that in Judaism, forms of messianism tend toward the passive variety). Moreover, he appears unsatisfied with the anarchic-nihilistic version of politics, especially with any posture that does not exhibit a clear positive political project.⁴⁷ Indeed, Žižek appears to accept some notion of vanguardism more readily than Agamben, although the true revolutionary needs equally to be concerned about the cure of the soul through Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁴⁸

The Community of the “Holy Spirit”

Žižek's ecclesial thinking is expressed succinctly at the conclusion of *The Fragile Absolute*. In opposition to both the “ghost of the past” (whether fundamentalisms, traditionalist religion, or communitarianism, all metaphored by the Balkans) and to the “spectral ghost of the capitalist present” there still comes

the brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness to which every authentic revolutionary stance should cling. . . . the third modality of ghosts is none other than the Holy Ghost itself, the community of believers *qua* ‘uncoupled’ outcasts from the social order – with, ideally, authentic psychoanalytic and revolutionary political collectives as its two main forms.⁴⁹

Crucial to Žižek's ecclesiology, then, is the Lacanian notion of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ For Žižek, the Holy Spirit replaces God as the transcendent big Other. Through divine self-limitation God in effect assures the reality of the Holy Spirit as the symbolic community immanent in the world. “The ‘Holy Spirit’ is the community deprived of its support in the big Other.”⁵¹ This means that the subject is deprived of all structures of social legitimation or support, including overtly theological ones. For Christianity, this includes the repudiation of its “institutional organization”: in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself.⁵²

The Gesture of Separation: Uncoupling

Christian logic as exemplified by Paul, then, calls for the emergence of an “alternative community”: a subjectivity and a collectivity “unplugged” and “uncoupled” from the social order, from the balance of the All, from the organic community, from the domain of established social mores, and from the social structure of our being.⁵³ And this unplugging assumes a radical subjective conversion: this unplugging involves the freeing of subjects from superego, libidinal, and spectral-ideological domination, and thus from the commodity-fetishism associated with the political

and economic order. The unplugging can never be reduced to an “inner contemplative stance” which nonetheless supports participation in the social game. The uncoupling from the hierarchy of the social order means that it will be treated as fundamentally irrelevant; indeed, it moves the subject in an Other space, but is nevertheless not escapist.⁵⁴ Žižek certainly sides with Agamben in asserting that 1 Corinthians 7 is by no means a “legitimation of the existing power conditions”; rather, it represents an ignoring of distinctions not relevant to the struggle, as characteristic of any “thoroughly engaged fighter.”⁵⁵

In particular, it is the “the active *work* of love which necessarily leads to the creation of an *alternative* community.”⁵⁶ It is love that enjoins the gesture of separation, calling us to “unplug from the organic community into which we were born.”⁵⁷ The alternative community is founded on the prototypical act of love in the event of Jesus, through its primordial and disruptive violence. Yet, this uncoupling contrasts with a Fascist carnivalesque unplugging from the established symbolic rules: “*the proper Christian uncoupling suspends not so much the explicit laws but, rather, their implicit spectral obscene supplement.*”⁵⁸

The All and the Part

This alternative community (the part) has a complex relationship with the all: the alternative community exists only for the all, the whole that it longs for. Hence crucial to the separation is also the gesture of recognizing the insignificance of the part relative to the whole. While this may sound similar to Agamben’s criticism of vanguardism, Žižek is not entirely comfortable with Agamben’s notion of dividing the division. He queries in response to Agamben: “What if the only way to invest a new universality is precisely through overcoming the old divisions with a new, more radical division which introduces an indivisible remainder into the social body?”⁵⁹ Taking up the notion of the “remnant,” he promotes the motto of the proletarian revolution: “We were nothing, we want to become All.” From the perspective of Redemption, the remnant counts as nothing within the established order: “it is irrevocably lost, thrown into nothingness.” Yet “the remainder of this order, its part of no part, will become All.”⁶⁰

Eschatological Passion: “the brief apparition of a future utopian Otherness”

Žižek argues further, in homology with Christian messianic apocalypticism, that the revolutionary (ecclesial) process must retain an

eschatological passion. True eschatological messianism has an activist strain. He cites Rosenzweig approvingly: “The future is no future without this anticipation and the inner compulsion for it, without this ‘wish to bring about Messiah before his time’ and the temptation to ‘coerce the kingdom of God into being’; without these, it is only a past distended endlessly and projected forward.”⁶¹ Moreover, this action cannot wait for the “right moment,” but involves constant risk-taking on its behalf. Revolutionary time proper cannot be translated into objective historical time, with clearly identified phases and transitions between phases. It is only through premature attempts that the subjective conditions for the right moment might come. As a result, “in an authentic revolution, predestination overlaps with radical responsibility”; the real, earnest work begins after the initial eschatological event.⁶²

ALAIN BADIOU: EVENTAL TRUTH OF UNIVERSAL SINGULARITY AND PAUL THE MILITANT FIGURE

In contrast to the three previous authors, Badiou’s *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* displays no overt interest in ecclesial theory. What interests Badiou is Paul as the exemplar of his theory of universalism, and the subjective figure of the true militant. Paul is the prime and foundational illustration of a “truth procedure” toward universality in an “evental site” (p. 22).⁶³ Nevertheless, he still offers some explicitly ecclesial comments, and moreover, as I will argue, there is an ecclesiology implied in his presentation of modes of discourse and subjective positions appropriate to them (albeit, certainly a purely formal one, as is his figure of the militant individual).

The Foundation of Cells: Admiration for Paul’s Activist-Organizational work

Badiou emphasizes with considerable admiration that the founding of communities, groups, cells, was the focus of Paul’s life’s work (pp. 20-21, 95). His letters, while displaying the agility of a superlative theoretician, are nevertheless “interventions. . . possessed of all the political passion proper to such [political] interventions.” His letters point to the fundamental “concerns and passions of collective intervention.” Badiou thus praises Paul’s impressive Lenin-like combination of theoretician and activist-community organizer (pp. 20-21, 31-33).

According to Badiou, these cell groups were “envisioned in terms of a small group of militants”; they represented a “small core of the constituted faithful,” “enclaves of the faithful.” Members addressed each

other as “brothers [and sisters],” “an archaic form of our ‘comrades’” (p. 20). Playing midwife to these cells, Paul ascribed to them the special status of “the real” proper to any location (in the way he addressed them as Corinthians, Philippians, or Galatians). But by favoring interruption over preservation, and pure fidelity over the stabilization of external or secondary “markings” of fidelity, Paul displays a “universal and de-centered vision of the construction of Christian enclaves” (p. 34).

“Co-workers” and “Son-subjects”: Shared Egalitarianism

Badiou goes further than this, emphasizing that the correlate of Paul’s theoretical universality is practical “equality”—the occasion for naming all fellow militants as “co-workers.” Furthermore, he explains that the “evental declaration filiates the declarant,” just as the “resurrected Son filiates all humanity” (p. 59). Paul, according to Badiou, thus rejects “filiation” via the “disciple-subject” (which implies mastery) and instead embraces filiation via the “son-subject.” “All post-evental universality equalizes sons through the dissipation of the particularity of the fathers” (p. 59), which would be otherwise impossible through disciple-subjects and consequential structures of mastery. Thus “all equality is that of belonging together to a work” and “those participating in a truth procedure are co-workers in its becoming.” The figure of the law too is relieved for the sake of a “shared egalitarian endeavour” (p. 60).

Eschatological Universality Mediates Identity: Local Victories as Universal

Badiou defines the messianic community in Paul as one that embraces the modalities of fidelity, agape and hope. Badiou gives the last a special emphasis. Paul’s apocalyptic universalism is not, however, one that is preoccupied with some “satisfaction that feeds on the punishment of the wicked.” Rather, it is hope as the subjective modality toward the victory of a universal by which Paul can say, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25-26). “Each victory won, however localized, is universal.” And the economy of salvation is truly universal: Paul knows that he himself is justified only insofar as everyone is: “I identify myself in my singularity as subject of the economy of salvation only insofar as this economy is universal” (p. 96).

Hence “for Paul, universality mediates identity. It is the ‘for all’ that allows me to be counted as one. Wherein we rediscover a major Pauline principle: the One is inaccessible without the ‘for all’.” From this perspective, hope does not simply have to do with the future:

“It is a figure of the present subject, who is affected in return by the universality for which he works” (p. 97).

This apocalyptic universalism in the mode of hope also means, therefore, that there can never be a contentment with any (historical) realization of that hope, nor with any preoccupation in a new identity apart from the hope for the universal. Paul’s “clearest conviction is that the eventual figure of the Resurrection exceeds its real, contingent site, which is the community of believers such as it exists at the moment. The work of love is still before us; the empire is vast. . . . Paul’s universalism will not allow the content of hope to be a privilege accorded to the faithful who happen to be living now. It is inappropriate to make distributive justice [which focuses on the punishment of the wicked] the referent of hope” (p. 95).

A Community of Weakness? Badiou and the Path of the Cross

One might also say that Badiou’s figure of the militant implies or demands the formal figure of a militant community that can lead what he calls for, namely a new “cultural revolution” between the polarity of “abstract homogeneity of capital” and “identitarian protest.” His notion of the “diagonal cut” would appear to imply a militant community founded on that very subjectivity.⁶⁴ Badiou does in fact correlate the diagonal cut ecclesially in connection with the notion of separation and remnant. One would expect further that this remnant community would be of the same order as the messianic mode of discourse that he presents, and the new subjectivity appropriate to it. That is, his argument would appear to imply a form of militant community marked by folly, scandal, weakness, and humiliation in contrast to that of mastery, power, glorification, or worldly status.

But here Badiou stops short. Badiou cannot fully embrace the close interrelationship of cross and resurrection in Paul, appearing especially worried about the spectre of some Nietzschean resentment, hatred of life, as a driving force in Paul’s life and thought.⁶⁵ For Badiou, eventual truth declaration in the modality of weakness does not correspond to one of lived weakness. At that point, only the triumphant path of resurrection holds. Unlike Taubes, he cannot appreciate Paul’s emphasis on true solidarity with the world’s outcasts as the prime mode of messianic existence. Badiou cannot distinguish between, on the one hand, the embrace of the path of the cross as a mode of messianic being, and on the other hand, a masochistic embrace of suffering, which extols the virtues of suffering in and of themselves or ascribes to suffering an intrinsically redemptive function. The cross can be the focal point and feature of a

mode of discourse, but not a true subjective path, never mind an ecclesial one (p. 73); death is merely a mode that helps to define the divided subject. Death is only on the side of flesh and law, and “cannot be the operation of salvation” (pp. 66-68). At this point, Badiou has seriously misunderstood Paul.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In 1902 Alfred Loisy propounded his famous dictum: “Jesus announced the kingdom, and what arrived was the church.”⁶⁶ Despite his conflict with the Roman Catholic hierarchy (while also rejecting the solutions of liberal Protestantism), he truly believed that Jesus did intend to form some kind of society or community; it was the aping of civil government in its institutionalization that he doubted Jesus intended.⁶⁷ Around the same time, Vladimir Lenin published his classic pamphlet *What is to be done?* (1901-02), promoting organizational vanguardism as a way to assure the necessary arrival of the communist utopia.⁶⁸

But the project of the vanguard has not brought the dream to realization. Christianity and Marxism have had to confront a similar ghost: the non-arrival of the *telos*. Christianity survived by reorienting its foundational messianism, by spiritualizing messianic glad tidings and by institutionalizing itself. For a while, it looked like Marxism might also survive in institutional, statist forms that, while claiming a heritage in Marx, were for many a betrayal of the vision. But now it would appear that, in contrast to Christianity, it no longer has significant institutional form in its classic statist realizations (Russia, China), and in the North it is only represented by small conventicles of thinkers and activists seeking to arouse the faithful.⁶⁹ It may be that Christianity will also have to return to its foundational messianic form and messianic fidelity in the coming generations, and may also only exist among small, outcasted conventicles of the faithful.

In the meantime, there is much that Christians can take from these politico-philosophically oriented interpreters of Paul. Proponents of radical messianic fidelity in Christian terms will continue to wrestle with the relative merits of the three forms of ecclesiology articulated by these philosophers: the anarchist-ethical version (Agamben), the primarily representational version (Taubes), and the more activist-vanguard version (Badiou, Žižek). In particular, as these interpreters suggest, when the church forgets or refuses to admit that it is “a purely contingent historical figure,” a merely “strategic identification,” in the drama of the reconstitution of a new people of God, in which all humanity becomes “all Israel,” it is in danger of losing its true vocation and instrumentality

(pure use) toward the fulfillment of the cosmic drama, God's love story with all creation. It loses its character of necessary "auto-suppression" relative to the vision of the reign of God. It forgets that it ultimately has identity only in the universal, eschatological economy of salvation when God will be all in all. When the church seeks to maintain an absolute church-world distinction, despite the *telos* of the universal-eschatological-messianic drama, it is in danger of becoming a mere obscurantist haven for the (self)righteous.

This is not to say that the church as seeking to establish itself as a messianic community cannot have some institutional form. But in its self-conscious preoccupation with its own reality and identity, it walks a never-ending tightrope. In the very gesture of separation founded on messianic love and fidelity, there must be a corresponding embrace of all that is lost, that is other. And it still seems more appropriate to try to stay on the tightrope, than to seek to remain on the apparently firm ground of the alternatives, whether basking in the security of mystical or individualist subjectivity, or retreating into identitarian communal havens, or embracing the coercive universalisms of Christendom or the state, or acquiescing to the niceties and comforts of liberalism and global capital, or being content with reality reduced to the merely historical-material.

38. For an accessible and articulate rendering of 2 Cor 4:16–5:10 along these lines, see G. Shillington, *2 Corinthians*, 105-112; similarly Wright, *Resurrection*, 361-71.

39. M. Bockmuehl (*The Epistle to the Philippians* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998], 91-93) helpfully explains that to seek a final answer to this question of an intermediate state is to demand the impossible—to describe transcendence and eternity in immanent and temporal terms. Paul, he argues, does not directly address this question, and to focus on it misses the point of the passages in which hints are found. Wright, *Resurrection*, 226-27, 267, says that all we can gather is that Paul posits some experience of “consciousness” in the presence of the one who loved us.

40. Dunn, *Theology*, 489-90.

41. See Doug Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003). For this rendering of Paul’s theology primarily in “apocalyptic” terms, see esp. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997); Douglas Campbell, *The Quest for Paul’s Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), who calls this “pneumatologically participatory martyrological eschatology,” over against justification by faith or salvation history models of Paul’s theology.

42. For a resistance to any reading of Paul that assimilates him into modern immanentist terms (philosophically or politically), see the Jewish scholar J. Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. D. Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

43. E.g. 1 Cor 1-2; see Chapter 12 in this volume.

44. Murphy, *Bodies and Souls*, 28.

45. See N. Murphy, section on “Integration from a Radical Reformation Perspective,” in *Why Psychology Needs Theology*, eds. A. Dueck and C. Lee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 3-76.

Chapter 12

1. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., “Paul and Sons: (Post-modern) Thinkers Reading Paul,” in *Reading Romans with Contemporary Philosophers and Theologians*, ed. David W. Odell-Scott (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007), 85-114.

2. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Reading Derrida / Thinking Paul: On Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 2-4.

3. As cited in Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 107, from the back cover of the French edition, which Žižek suspects must have been written by Agamben since it “provides such a precise résumé of the book.” Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 144-45: “this orientation toward the past characteristic of Benjamin’s messianism finds its canonic moment in Paul”; “these two fundamental messianic texts of our tradition, separated by almost two thousand years, both written in a situation of radical crisis, form a constellation whose time of legibility has finally come today.”

4. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 171.

5. *Ibid.*, 3, 6.

6. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. R. Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. D. Hollander (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

7. This was illustrated at the 2005 Syracuse University conference on “Saint Paul among the Philosophers,” where Badiou and Žižek were in attendance. My impression is shared by Alain Gignac, “Taubes, Badiou, Agamben: Contemporary Reception of Paul by Non-Christian Philosophers,” in *Reading Romans with Contemporary Philosophers and Theologians*, ed. David Odell-Scott (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 155-211, esp. 200-201, n. 5.

8. For a similar concept, see Barbara Epstein, “The Politics of Prefigurative Community: The Non-violent Direct Action Movement,” in *Cultural Resistance: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (New York/London: Verso, 2002), 333-346.

9. Here and in the remainder of this section on Agamben, parenthetical page number references refer to *The Time That Remains*.

10. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. M. Hardt and A. Bove (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1-4, 11, 44, 85-86, 107; and *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3-11, 57-58, 116-17. An interesting treatment of the figuration of humanity at the end of history, in which “form of life” will not be possible to isolate bare life as the biopolitical subject, appears in his *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), a reflection on an image of the messianic banquet of the righteous on the last day (preserved in a thirteenth century Hebrew Bible) in which the righteous are pictured with animal, not human heads. This opens a reflection on the enigma of the ultimate reconciliation of humans with their animal nature, taking up a Pauline theme of Romans 8:19. The righteous, however, “do not represent a new declension of the man-nature relation,” but indicate a zone of non-knowledge that allows them to be outside of being, “saved precisely in their being unsavable” (*Open*, 92).

11. This is anticipated in his essay “In This Exile,” in *Means without End*, 135-36: “The task that messianism has assigned to modern politics—to this human community that would not have (only) the figure of the law—still awaits the minds that might undertake it.”

12. Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 1.

13. Agamben, *Means without End*, 135.

14. In this connection, Agamben, in *Time That Remains*, identifies three non-messianic interpretations of the Pauline “as not”: (a) as eschatological “indifference” to the world (as proposed by Max Weber; pp. 20-22); (b) the model of Christendom, in which the “as not” is merely a mental reserve, a spiritualist indifference that is really an affirmation of dominant politics (p. 33); and (c) various philosophical modes of discourse in modernity (including Heidegger, Adorno, Kant, Forberg, Hegel, structuralism, deconstructionism, and Derrida) that imply some form of Stoic mental reserve and detachment, and at worst suggest an acquiescence and accommodation to the world as it is (pp. 33-39). Agamben is especially antagonistic to the transformation of the “as not” into an “as if,” the reduction of religion and ethics into the mere embrace of fiction. Agamben is not so much worried about the matter of whether or not the messianic claim might be fiction as such; rather, he is more concerned about the ecclesial-political consequence of such a position. Such an approach is unable to “conceive of restoring possibility to the fallen,” and contrasts with Paul’s own

claim that “power is actualized in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9) (p. 38).

15. In this framework, Agamben, in *Time That Remains*, admits that Marx’s original rendering of the Pauline “as not” is truly messianic, in that it rejects the individual-political disjunction, positing the coincidence of individual revolt and political revolution through the vehicle of the proletariat. In this case, the fulfillment of individual and egoist need coincides with a political revolution. Crucial is the idea of the redemptive function of the proletariat, which in itself incarnates the split between the individual and his social figure under capitalism; the revolution aims toward the dissolution of all estates, but only through the auto-suppression of the proletariat. But this view necessarily founders by the aporia created by the party, namely in the notion of the working class or of the vanguard, as the embodiment or vehicle for the dictatorship of the proletariat (pp. 31-33): (1) The identification of the proletariat with the working class is a most serious betrayal of Marx; for Marx this is only a strategic identification, “a historical figure contingent on the proletariat.” (2) There is the theoretical problem of the party as identical to the working class while simultaneously different from it: that is, if ego need and social revolution coincide, why is a party needed? (3) There is the problem of organization, with the inevitable introduction of rule and its discipline. The party acknowledges that it is distinct from the messianic community, and yet pretends to coincide with it. (4) The organization inevitably succumbs to “right theory” as its criterion for inclusion, with resulting claims of infallibility, and necessary purges. (5) As a true and proper social identity which claims prerogatives and rights for itself, it is no longer a “historical figure contingent on the proletariat” and loses its revolutionary vocation. It establishes a rule and a law, that emulates the very rule of that which it seeks to oppose. For Agamben, then, any form of organizational vanguardism inevitably betrays the messianic.

16. According to Agamben, Paul negates other separations “in the name of another separation that is no longer a separation according to the *nomos*, but a separation according to the messianic proclamation” (*Time That Remains*, 46). Insofar as the law operates primarily in instituting divisions and separations, the messianic community is comprised of the division of the division (p. 47).

17. Agamben rejects Badiou’s conception of Paul that there is a universalism above the cuts and divisions; for Agamben the universal will always be a remnant in messianic time (*Time That Remains*, 51-53).

18. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 135-81, 303-49.

19. Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. D. Ratmoko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 10.

20. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 1-36.

21. Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 70-71, 100.

22. The disenchantment with thoroughgoing eschatology seems closely correlated with a comfortable political-social location, but also with a concomitant capitulation to a progressivist, immanentist consciousness of nature’s necessity and cycles. For an appropriation of the Pauline (Christian) millennial vision in Filipino theology of struggle, see Gordon Zerbe, “Constructions of Paul in Filipino Theology of Struggle.” *Asia Journal of Theology* 19/1 (April 2005): 188-220; reprinted in *The Colonized Paul: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes*, ed. C. Stanley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 236-55.

23. Taubes, *Political Theology*, 53.

24. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 135-81, 303-49.

25. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 109-13.

26. Cf. Rom 14:17; Paul's word for *eudaimonia* is *chara*, joy.

27. E.g. Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

28. Taubes's basic line of approach to Paul is already evident in his 1947 doctoral dissertation, *Occidental Eschatology*; see Joshua Robert Gold, "Jacob Taubes: Apocalypse from Below," *Telos* 134 (2006): 140-56, n. 48 for citation of essays which discuss influences on Taubes's reading of Paul.

29. Here and in the remainder of this section on Taubes, parenthetical page references refer to *The Political Theology of Paul*.

30. Marin Terpstra and Theo de Wit, "No Spiritual Investment in the World As It Is': Jacob Taubes's Negative Political Theology," in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, eds. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens Ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 320-53.

31. *Ibid.*, 324 (emphases original); they argue that Taubes is equally against an imperialistic secularism, which resists the incursion of political theology in the world, and against a political theology on behalf of the ruling order [Schmitt], but not against all political theology.

32. Wolf-Daniel, et al., "Afterword," in *Political Theology*, 121-22.

33. *Ibid.*, 140-41.

34. On this two-fold refusal, see further Gold, "Jacob Taubes," 142-50.

35. For Paul there is only *one* love commandment, "an absolutely revolutionary act" relative to the powers that be, not a dual commandment as in the Jesus tradition; Taubes, *Political Theology*, 53. See also Hartwich, et al., "Afterword," 128-31.

36. Hartwich, et al., "Afterword," 128.

37. Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 64.

38. *Ibid.*, 64-65.

39. Gold, "Jacob Taubes," 142, 144, 148-51, shows that in his earlier *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes includes as chief marks of (Pauline) apocalyptic (a) a modality of interpretation—reading (the signs of the times) and speaking (witnessing); (b) the interiorization of the Messianic via *pneuma* (in a manner parallel to, but distinct from Gnosticism); (c) the conferral of significance to the act of decision in the context of distress, versus capitulation to necessity, cycle, and inevitability; and (d) an eschewing of both the temptation to force the course of events, and the retreat to a passive comportment, against the self-immolating flames of eschatological intensity.

40. E.g. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). For Yoder's treatment of Paul's ecclesial themes, see also Doug Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 105-49.

41. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 135-81, 303-349. Crucial to Beker's approach to Paul is the thoroughgoing embrace of Paul's apocalypticism as the critical carrier and centre of his thought. If there is a problem of social conservatism in Paul, it is not one of fundamental theory, but instead, one of failure of nerve. There is certainly in Beker a more heightened interest in the "transformative vocation" of the messianic community in the rest of society than in pure alternative community formation and the delegitimation of all sovereignty (as compared

to Taubes and Agamben). Beker specifically resists the collapsing of futurist eschatology in the church into either spiritualization and/or a salvation-history oriented ecclesiologicalizing and institutionalizing, as occurred especially under the influence of Origen and Augustine, (p. 139) though admittedly underway already in the NT: “The vocation of the church is not self-preservation for eternal life but service to the created world in the sure hope of the world’s transformation at the time of God’s final triumph” (p. 313). “If God’s coming reign will establish an order of righteousness that encompasses the created order (Rom. 8:19-21), and if the Pauline hope is not to be identified with a Gnostic discontinuity between the material and the spiritual (so that the material will simply perish and is therefore ‘indifferent’), then one would expect that the church as the blueprint and beachhead of the kingdom of God would strain itself in all its activities to prepare the world for its coming destiny in the kingdom of God. . . . If the world is to be the scene of the “worship” of the Christian, then the church exists for the world in the world. Unless this is true, the sighing of the Christian for the redemption of the world (Rom. 8:19-21) is simply reduced to a faint ecclesial whisper” (pp. 326-27).

42. E.g. Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute – or, Why is the Christian legacy worth fighting for?* (London/New York: Verso, 2000), 2.

43. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 108.

44. E.g. *ibid.*, 3: “One possible definition of modernity is: the social order in which religion is no longer fully integrated into and identified with a particular cultural life-form, but acquires autonomy, so that it can survive as the same religion in different cultures. This extraction enables religion to globalize itself. . . ; on the other hand, the price to be paid is that religion is reduced to a secondary epiphenomenon with regard to the secular functioning of the social totality. In this new global order, religion has two possible roles: *therapeutic* or *critical*. It either helps individuals to function better in the existing order, or it tries to assert itself as a critical agency articulating what is wrong with this order as such, a space for the voices of discontent—in this second case, religion *as such* tends toward assuming the role of a heresy” (emphases original). That is, “heresy” especially related to state- or society-demanded orthodoxy.

45. *Ibid.*, 133-34.

46. *Ibid.*, 136.

47. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 171-72; he expresses an equal distaste for traditionalist communitarians (Taylor), universalists (Rawls, Habermas), and postmodern “dispersionists,” all of whom share a reduction of the political.

48. While Žižek is sympathetic to Badiou’s attempt to argue for a conception of universality in opposition to both a capitalist globalism and communitarian logic, he rejects Badiou’s claim that Lacanian psychoanalysis is unable to provide the foundation for a new political practice. See *Ticklish Subject*, 3, 127-244. For his engagement with Agamben, see esp. *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 107-21, 134.

49. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 160.

50. For a definition, see Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 9-10.

51. *Ibid.*, 171.

52. Žižek does not resolve the problem of how the immanent Holy Spirit can keep itself from becoming merely another big Other. While certainly suspicious of the Marxian notion of the communist utopia (insofar as it is founded on the notion of unbridled productivity and the notion of a balanced, self-restrained

society), and certainly wary of the possible co-opting of the revolution by the party, he still maintains a decisive place for the transformative vocation of an emerging revolutionary community.

53. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 118-21; *Fragile Absolute*, 128-29.

54. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 120, 158-59.

55. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 111-12; *Fragile Absolute*, 129.

56. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 129-30 (emphases original).

57. *Ibid.*, 121.

58. *Ibid.*, 130 (emphasis original).

59. Žižek, *Puppet and the Dwarf*, 108.

60. *Ibid.*, 133.

61. *Ibid.*, citing F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. W. Hallo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 227.

62. Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 135.

63. Here and in the remainder of the essay, parenthetic page references refer to Badiou's *Saint Paul*. For the notion of eventual truth, see further Badiou, *Being and Event*. "Truth procedures" apply to the domains of politics, art, science, and love, but not to religion-theology.

64. See Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 11-14, 55-64, 98-107.

65. See the lengthy analysis of this theme in Badiou by Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 145-58. In my view, when it comes to understanding Paul's politics, it is indeed crucial not to understand Paul's counter-imperial perspective as deriving from some envy or resentment. Paul's approach derives from his articulation of the messianic glad tidings, not from a reflex of discontent (as in the Nietzschean version); Paul refuses to make Rome as such the singular enemy or particular target.

66. Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. C. Home, ed. Bernard B. Scott (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 166.

67. *Ibid.*, 165-69.

68. Vladimir Lenin, *Essential Works of Lenin: "What is to Be Done?" and Other Writings*, ed. H. M. Christman (New York: Dover Publications, 1987). Lenin argues for the establishment of an organization (party) at the centre of the revolution: to direct the efforts of the working class (identified as the proletariat) in the socialist revolution, to help achieve the dictatorship of the proletariat, and eventually the communist society. He posits a central organization to establish discipline according to "the most advanced theory," and rejects the more anarchist voices that favoured "spontaneity," "freedom of criticism," and "democratic" process. As a result, the document created a split in the international socialist movement, leading to the formation of the Third International in 1919, which was in turn eventually co-opted by its statist, Stalinist incarnation.

69. See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defence of Lost Causes* (London/New York: Verso, 2008).