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978-1-107-08848-1 - Paul's Political Strategy in 1 Corinthians 1–4: Constitution and Covenant: Volume 163

Bradley J. Bitner

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION: CONSTITUTING THE ARGUMENT

### Constituted Colony

In the aftermath of Julius Caesar's violent death, in his name and in accordance with his drafted plans, several transmarine colonies were founded *de novo*. Among them were Corinth in Achaia, Carthage in Africa Proconsularis, and Urso in Baetica (Spain).<sup>1</sup> The founding of a Roman colony required a constitution. Caesar, at Rome, appointed the constitution that formed these three colonies.<sup>2</sup> Their charters linked them firmly to Rome and its law and erected a framework for public life within which local and regional traditions were adapted.<sup>3</sup> Graeco-Roman historians refer to the foundation of *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis* in 44 BC as a "restoration."<sup>4</sup> Some hold up Corinth as a paradigm of Caesarian colonial foundation.<sup>5</sup> Corinth's constitution – publicly granted, and later physically displayed on bronze tablets – was a crucial element in the ritual foundation that called the community into existence.<sup>6</sup>

More than a symbol, the Corinthian constitution continued to shape the form of civic life. Law and life were interrelated in complex and far-reaching ways: privilege and status, land use, construction and labor, commerce, litigation, and inheritance were among the constitutionally framed aspects of colonial life. More than a century after Roman Corinth's foundation, an official letter penned on behalf of neighboring Argos complains that Corinth was wielding its colonial (i.e., constitutional) status invidiously in the region.<sup>7</sup> In this and other evidence, we see the ongoing effects of the constitution on notions of civic and individual identity

<sup>1</sup> These three are consistently grouped in Roman (and modern) historiography.

<sup>2</sup> For Caesar as οἰκιστής of Roman Corinth, see Paus., 2.3.1; cf. 2.1.2. For Caesar's interest in law, see Suet., *Iul.* 44.2.

<sup>3</sup> On the charter and public life in Carthage, see Rives (1995).

<sup>4</sup> Strabo 8.6.23; Diod. Sic. 32.27.1.

<sup>5</sup> Plut., *Caesar* 57.5; Paus. 2.1.2. Cf. Appian, *Pun.* 136; Dio Cass. 43.50.3.

<sup>6</sup> Walbank (1997: 95–130); Gargola (1995: 80–2).

<sup>7</sup> Ps.-Julian, *Letters* 198, 409c–d.

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and praxis in the first two centuries AD. Within this constitutional framework, Roman law – applied and adapted to different domains of life, both in Latin and Greek – shaped attitudes and assumptions about rights and obligations across a variety of social groups. Magistrates and slaves; itinerant merchants and agricultural laborers in the surrounding *territorium*; participants in public banquets; suppliants of Asklepios, Demeter, and Kore; visiting spectators and competitors in the Isthmian Games – all came into vital contact in a variety of ways with the dynamic form of life, the *politeia*, generated by the Corinthian constitution. Birthed from Caesar's unsystematic and privately composed memoranda,<sup>8</sup> the *lex coloniae* therefore provides an indispensable frame of reference for understanding life in early Roman Corinth, the colony named in his honor. For this reason, it is also crucial for the interpretation of the Pauline epistle known as 1 Corinthians.

**Covenanted Community**

In the wake of Jesus's violent death and resurrection, in his name and in accordance with his wishes, a “minister of the new covenant” arrived in Corinth and planted a new community.<sup>9</sup> That minister, the apostle Paul, described the *ekklēsia*'s structure and life in legal-political terms: it was an assembly,<sup>10</sup> a temple,<sup>11</sup> an irruption of the divine kingdom,<sup>12</sup> its members individually new foundations.<sup>13</sup> Among its reasons for gathering were quasi-judicial matters,<sup>14</sup> covenant meals,<sup>15</sup> and the collection of funds.<sup>16</sup> In his correspondence, Paul presupposes certain covenantal regulations as normative for the community,<sup>17</sup> and he paradigmatically

<sup>8</sup> Cic., *Phil.* 2.39.100 records the confirmation, championed by Antony, of Caesar's *acta*. Cf. Frederiksen (1965); Scarano Ussani (1992: 29–31).

<sup>9</sup> Paul as minister of the new covenant: 2 Cor 3:6; as planter-builder of the *ekklēsia*: 1 Cor 3:6, 10; 2 Cor 12:19; 13:10; as commissioned apostle and ambassador of Jesus: 1 Cor 1:1–3, 16; 2:1–2; 9:1–2; 11:23–26; 15:1–11; 2 Cor 1:1–2, 18–22; 2:17–3:6; 5:11–21; 13:3–4.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor 1:2, *passim*. Important contributions on *ekklēsia* include Judge (2008); Miller (2008); Trebilco (2011); Van Kooten (2012). To evoke the political resonances of the term in a diaspora, Graeco-Roman context, we translate *ekklēsia* as “assembly” throughout.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Cor 3:16–17; cf. 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor 4:20; 6:9, 11.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Cor 5:17.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor 5:1–13; 6:1–9; cf. 14:24–25; 2 Cor 13:1–10.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor 10:1–22; 11:17–34.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–24; 9:1–15.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Deut 19:15 in 2 Cor 13:1.

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aligns the Corinthian assembly with the Israelite covenant community.<sup>18</sup> Thus, although the term appears only infrequently in the Corinthian correspondence, we are justified in taking “covenant” as the operative name for such a pattern of Pauline communal construction.

Within a century of its founding, the *ekklēsia* was again addressed in civic terms as “that most confirmed and ancient assembly of the Corinthians.” Its members were called on to prove themselves as “those who live as citizens the unwavering *politeia* of God.”<sup>19</sup> Paul’s initial testimony to the merits of the crucified and risen Jesus as patron and lord of the assembly called the community into political existence. To that foundational teaching were added his subsequent epistles, the entire complex forming an incomplete charter concerning vital aspects of the community’s form of life.<sup>20</sup> According to the Pauline evidence, by audacious and asymmetrical analogy, the Corinthian assembly was formed with reference to its larger colonial setting. It too was a kind of constituted-covenanted community.

**Argument and Aims**

This investigation contributes to scholarship on both Roman Corinth and 1 Corinthians; however, its principal focus is the interface of two distinct *politeiai* in the text of the epistle. In introducing our argument earlier, we have juxtaposed the political notions of constitution and covenant in the early Roman colony and its early Christian assembly. Our hypothesis is that both constitution and covenant are necessary categories for the interpretation of Paul’s letter. Although a series of steps is involved in testing this hypothesis, the essence of the entire argument may be stated simply: in 1 Corinthians 1:1–4:6, we witness a collision of constitutions. This clash is the result of Paul contending for a specifically ecclesial *politeia* with reference to the larger colonial *politeia*.<sup>21</sup>

In 1992, John Barclay argued that highly permeable social boundaries between the assembly and the larger colony at Corinth were a major factor in shaping the ways the Corinthians heard and responded to (or resisted) Paul’s teaching. This meant, according to Barclay, that the

<sup>18</sup> E.g., 1 Cor 10:1–22.

<sup>19</sup> *1 Clem.* 47.6 (cf. pr.); 54.4. Translations adapted from Ehrman (2003).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *1 Clem.* 47.1.

<sup>21</sup> The exigence of 1 Corinthians was related to “weak” boundaries between the ecclesial and colonial communities; see Barclay (1992); repr. in Barclay (2011: 181–203). Cf. Horrell (1996); De Vos (1999); Adams (2000).

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“correlation between the harmony of the Corinthians’ social context and their particular theology is evident at a number of levels.”<sup>22</sup> Among the levels Barclay did not explore in detail were the legal and political notions and practices underlying the “religious ethos” of some in the colony and assembly.<sup>23</sup> Others have pursued the influence of colonial politics on members of the community. A number of studies have fruitfully investigated the letter as a species of deliberative discourse, both with reference to ancient rhetorical conventions<sup>24</sup> and modern feminist-rhetorical theory.<sup>25</sup> However, for the most part, these have made use of literary sources that attest principally to elite ideology and social conventions. Few have drawn significantly on the epigraphy relevant to Roman Corinth.<sup>26</sup> Many of these “political” studies assume a closer correlation with a Graeco-Roman rhetorical genre than the evidence of 1 Corinthians perhaps warrants, particularly given the many ways in which Paul appeals to the Jewish scriptures at key points in his argument.<sup>27</sup>

This latter issue draws us into the larger question of the Judaism/Hellenism divide that persists in Pauline scholarship. In many cases, this seems to be driven not only by the necessity of scholarly focus but also by assumptions about Paul, his “allegiances,” and the interpretive stance one takes with respect to his letters and communities.<sup>28</sup> What is clear is that Paul’s letters must be interpreted at the intersection of Jewish, Greek, and Roman influences. The challenge, of course, is in getting the balance just right. An appeal to the Corinthian constitution is necessary but not sufficient for the interpretation of the Pauline text and community. Covenant is the Jewish analog underlying Paul’s discourse and animating the social and theological collision that is inscribed in 1 Corinthians.<sup>29</sup> Constitution and covenant, with their attendant political

<sup>22</sup> Barclay (1992: 67; 2011: 199).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Winter (2003).

<sup>24</sup> See esp. Welborn (1987: 109–11); Mitchell (1991); Litfin (1994); Winter (1997); Dutch (2005).

<sup>25</sup> Many in the “Harvard school” have built on Schüssler Fiorenza (1987). See, e.g., Miller (2008); Kim (2010).

<sup>26</sup> Notable exceptions are the works of Winter and the recent study by Concannon (2014). For the use of inscriptions in this manner for 2 Corinthians, see Welborn (2011).

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., Lampe and Sampley (2010); Malcolm (2013).

<sup>28</sup> On the so-called divide, see Engberg-Pedersen (2001). For more recent challenges to traditional author- or text-centered interpretations, see Macdonald (2004); Cameron and Miller (2011).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Rosner (1994); Christiansen (1995); Blanton (2007); Metso (2008).

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theologies<sup>30</sup> or *politeiai*,<sup>31</sup> move us closer to understanding the exigence, structure, and force of Paul's argument.

When we come to Paul's text with both constitution and covenant in view, we see that in 1 Cor 1:4–9 his testimony to the new covenant Messiah (τὸ μαρτύριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 1:6) bears within itself the blueprint of a distinctive politics and ethics for the nascent Corinthian community (κοινωνία, 1:9). To grasp the shape of that design, we must attend to the text of 1 Corinthians within the framework of ancient comparative politics. This, in itself, is not a novel approach for investigating Paul's pastoral strategy.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, our aim, and what has not been attempted before, is to give an account, with reference to both constitution and covenant, of those elements of political theology that characterize Paul's pastoral and rhetorical strategy in 1 Cor 1:1–4:6.

To do so requires preparatory work, especially on the constitutional side. A growing number of studies in recent decades have suggested that the use of extant colonial and municipal charters is productive for reading 1 Corinthians.<sup>33</sup> Extant evidence from these constitutional documents has been applied to Paul's response to litigation in 1 Cor 6:1–8 (Winter) and to the structure of magisterial authority and status in 1 Cor 1–6 (Clarke, Goodrich) and 11:17–31 (Walters), with illuminating results. However, these studies have assumed, rather than proven, that such a use is warranted. B. W. Winter argued in 2001 that on the basis of the available evidence, the Corinthian constitution might be effectively "reconstructed" as a fruitful context for reading Paul's letters to Corinth. That the evidence from two constitutions from first-century Roman Spain has become more readily available than ever in recent years means that the time is ripe for us to go

<sup>30</sup> Political theology broadly signifies a vision of privileges, obligations, and social relations emerging from assumptions about the basis and exercise of sovereignty. In this sense, the phrase closely approximates *politeia*, the Greek term used for a constitution and for the form of public life it engendered. We argue that 1 Corinthians marks the site where the political theologies of the Corinthian colony and the Pauline assembly collide. On political theology in relation to Pauline studies, see Taubes (2004). See further Chapter 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Politeia* as a primary category for the analysis of early Christianity: Judge (1960: 18–29); Winter (1994: 2). For *politeia* as "citizenship," "civic activity," "civic duty," or even "territory," see Robert and Robert, *Bulletin épigraphique* 1960.202; 1966.238; 1968.325; cf. 1971.621. On the Jewish *politeia*, see Rajak (1984); Troiani (1994).

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Barclay (2011: 81–106) who argues that political philosophy, civic constitutions, and the "elastic" term/concept *politeia* may be "useful analytical tools."

<sup>33</sup> Notably Winter (1991); Clarke (1993); Winter (2001); Walters (2010); Goodrich (2012: 64–9).

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beyond previous studies.<sup>34</sup> This study applies the contours of a well-known Julio-Claudian constitutional template to Roman Corinth and then relates this evidence to 1 Cor 1:1–4:6. In doing so, it lays the foundation for a new and significant line of research into the Corinthian correspondence and its colonial context.

As we have ventured into largely uncharted territory, we proceed carefully. For our appeal to the constitution for the interpretation of Paul's letter to set up a convincing comparison, we must contend with the methodological questions involved in the combined use of such ancient texts and related evidence. This preparatory work of restoring the constitution to Corinth lies at the heart of Part One. Moreover, for our appeal to covenant as a category in counterpoint to constitution to be persuasive, we have had to examine the evidence for the Jewish synagogue experience in Corinth and the traces of new covenantal discourse in the epistle. Only after constructing such a comparative framework do we turn to the primary task and object of inquiry: the exegesis of the Pauline text, particularly 1 Cor 1:4–9 and 3:5–4:5.

### Methodology

As with most contemporary studies, this is an eclectic methodology shaped by necessity and by the evidence we handle. Each chapter in Part One is methodological at its core. Here, it suffices to give a brief account of the full articulation and bibliography that we defer until we reach those successive chapters. Because we are engaging in a comparative analysis, we must establish an analytical category and stance. We do so in Chapter 1, establishing the integrative category of *politeia* and situating the present study in an established stream of social-historical investigations. Since we draw heavily on “legal” inscriptions, we argue in Chapter 2 for a critical use of Roman law to illumine first-century life. Chapters 3 and 4 draw on a range of epigraphical, archaeological, and literary sources to anchor constitution and covenant in Roman Corinth. Chapter 5 deals with important hermeneutical issues by describing our differential comparative method and the positive communicative assumptions that bind Paul to the Corinthian community. This includes a case study on βαβαίω in 1 Cor 1:6, 8 illustrating semantic and social conventions preparatory for Chapter 6; it also delineates a theory of

<sup>34</sup> The publication of the *lex Irmitana* by González with Crawford (1986) and the critical edition of the *lex Ursonensis* by Crawford in *RS I* 25 (1996) form the basis for our template in Chapter 3.

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metaphor adequate for our exegesis of Paul's building metaphor in Chapter 7.

### Scope and Structure

If an understanding of the collision of *politeiai* in Paul's text is the aim of our argument, how do we set about constructing an adequate framework for the exegesis we wish to undertake? We approach the problem in two major movements, reflected in the two parts of the study. In Part One, we address the methodological issues at stake in constituting such a comparison. Then, in Part Two, we turn to the text of 1 Corinthians. Because of the work required to lay out the method and the critical textual basis of our comparison in Part One, and patiently to infer as much as possible from exegesis, we have limited our scope in Part Two to a focus on two rhetorical units within 1 Cor 1:1–4:6.

Part One ("Constitution and Covenant in Corinth") begins, in Chapter 1, to situate our constitutional comparison in the larger stream of antecedent studies of Paul and politics. We demonstrate that our interest in attending to the shape of Paul's political theology in 1 Corinthians is not merely a contemporary concern but one that has ancient precedent. We also trace the various and somewhat conflicting political interpretive approaches to Paul in contemporary scholarship – according to their methods and aims – to establish our own pattern of inquiry and to connect it with the underdeveloped intuition concerning the use of the Corinthian constitution by scholars of early Christianity. As the contextualization of the extant Spanish charters for Corinth raises questions about the fit of legal evidence and everyday life, we argue briefly in Chapter 2 for the validity of such a use of evidence and outline the conditions for its effectiveness. In Chapter 3, we come to the matter of the Corinthian charter itself in light of the relevant comparanda. By a close examination of the features, contents, and function of the Spanish charters, we offer two hypotheses for where the Corinthian constitution may have been displayed in the first-century colony. More importantly, we trace its effect, by means of a case study, on the lives and labor of a variety of figures in early Roman Corinth to demonstrate decisively the nexus between law and life for many of those who may have participated in the Pauline assembly.

In Chapter 4, we begin to pivot toward Paul's text through a consideration of the evidence for a Jewish synagogue community in Corinth. In considering the elements comprising Second Temple covenantal discourse, particularly in its Deuteronomic forms, we trace the marks that

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Paul's conception of his *new covenant* ministry left on the Corinthian correspondence. Finally, in Chapter 5, we complete our turn toward 1 Corinthians by outlining our comparative methodology and communicative assumptions, concluding with an impressionistic portrait – of the colony, the apostle, and the community – that serves as a backdrop to our exegetical explorations in the following chapters.

Part Two (“Constitution and Covenant in 1 Cor 1:1–4:6”) consists of two exegetical chapters in which we begin to apply the comparative framework of Part One. Our work in detailing the contents and relevance of the charter evidence to Roman Corinth is repaid in these chapters. Each exegetical investigation draws on the Corinthian constitution as, alternately, an anchor, a frame, a filter, and a foil. That is, the constitutional evidence allows us to anchor certain social and political categories and to frame certain questions in first-century Corinth that are suggested by the language of Paul's text. Furthermore, the constitution acts as a filter through which other evidence from Graeco-Roman and Jewish sources must pass if it is to be convincingly connected to Paul's Corinthian epistle and its auditors. Moreover, the constitution fulfills the role of a foil in terms of the political theology emerging in 1 Cor 1:1–4:6, allowing us to perceive more clearly the dynamics of the collision between colony and assembly.

In Chapter 6, we begin with a selective history of scholarship on Paul's opening thanksgiving in 1:4–9. This directs us to legal and political features that interpreters have perceived in Paul's text. It also reveals neglected epigraphical evidence that provides critical insight into social conventions relevant to Paul's thanksgiving. With the help of the constitution, we discover that Paul's politics of thanksgiving, centered on the logic of the testimonial, has both resonance and dissonance with a broader social pattern observable in Roman Corinth. Within this pattern sit competing conceptions of community and privilege that rest on a sovereign oath. Because our interpretation takes its cue, in part, from the meaning of μαρτύριον in 1 Cor 1:6 and interprets that term in light of 1 Cor 2:1, we deal, in the *Excursus* to Chapter 6, with the difficult textual variant of 2:1 (μαρτύριον vs. μυστήριον) to argue that μαρτύριον is the preferred reading.

In Chapter 7, we turn to the central, integrative rhetorical unit of 1 Cor 1–4, namely, Paul's argument related to himself, Apollos, and the community in 3:5–4:5. Because Paul's formulation in 1:4–9 raises questions that it does not answer about the shape that authority, loyalty, and glory might take in such an ecclesial *politeia*, we follow the intuitions of those who have connected 1:4–9 to 3:5–4:5 to take the measure of his

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unfolding political theology. Once again, a selective history of scholarship on 3:5–4:5 leads us to insights that suggest it is a carefully constructed unit that focuses on the matter of a properly wise evaluation of ministers, ministry, and the assembly. Again, too, we see that certain epigraphical sources, surfacing momentarily in earlier scholarship, have been subsequently ignored. We give them full attention to uncover the relevant social pattern they reveal. Within a category opened and anchored in Roman Corinth by the constitution, we perceive Paul's strategy as he reconstructs the politics of public building, centered on the logic of evaluation, to cast a new vision for the assembly. We argue that constitution and covenant (particularly with reference to Jeremiah's covenantal commission in Jer 1:10) provide Paul with the metaphorical materials for his rhetorical reconstruction of the nature of authority, the message and manner of ministry, the eschatological nature of evaluation, and the proper focus of glory. Because 1 Cor 4:6 reveals much that is important for our understanding of 3:5–4:5, and because it is beset with exegetical difficulties, we apply, in the *Excursus* to Chapter 7, the paradigm of the rhetoric of reconstruction to offer a new interpretation of its meaning.

In the Conclusion, we draw together the findings of our investigation and highlight the strength and productivity of our comparative method. We contend that constitution and covenant further our understanding of Paul's culturally accommodating pastoral strategy, his interaction with Roman law, and the resulting collision of political theologies visible in the text of 1 Corinthians. Finally, we suggest directions for future research that might build on the groundwork laid in the study.

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